Zero Waste Movement in Context:
Understanding Sustainable Lifestyles in Urban China

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Introduction
In September 2016, a young woman working a white-collar office job in Beijing read an article on social media about zero waste girl Lauren Singer, a New York University graduate who only produced a mason jar of waste in the past year. The next day, she recorded her own waste production and was appalled by the amount. Determined to make a change, she started a WeChat\(^1\) public account “GoZero Waste” to write about waste reduction and lifestyle change, attracting more and more followers. The initial group expanded to a national level social media network that provides online groups and in-person events across 21 cities in China, and by 2019 the GoZero Waste WeChat account had attracted more than 27,000 followers (China Development Brief 2019).

The story of GoZero Waste founder is an example of citizens in China and around the globe who deliberately change lifestyle in response to concerns over waste management (Spiteri 2021). According to World Bank, municipal solid waste has grown faster than the rate of urbanization, reaching 2.2 billion tons globally each year by 2025 (Hoornweg and Bhada-Tata 2012). Zero waste lifestyle, a form of sustainable lifestyle\(^2\), is much needed to mitigate this environmental crisis (Newell et al. 2021). Citizens in the movement adopt daily behaviors such as reusing items, curtailing consumption, using secondhand items over buying new, and bringing their own utensils instead of relying on disposable ones. Nevertheless, adopting these behaviors is challenging as it counters the norms of consumption (Elfick 2011) and convenience (Liu and Chen 2021) in urban life. According to a Chinese survey in 2019, only 20.4% of respondents said they always or frequently make use of or exchange used items (Environmental and Economic Policy Research Center 2019). For middle class citizens, the ability to consume and possess personal goods are symbols of status (Elfick 2011), so using secondhand or curtailing consumption can be negatively perceived as lack of status or prestige. The emergence of GoZero Waste community thus presents an interesting empirical puzzle about how Chinese urbanites practice sustainable lifestyle.

Secondly, as a grassroots environmentalist network, GoZero Waste sheds light on the role of citizen actions in environmental sustainability in China’s context. Multiple theoretical discourses have addressed the role of citizen actions in environmental sustainability, including ecological citizenship (Dobson 2003), sustainable lifestyle (Evans and Abramse 2009), and lifestyle movement (Spiteri 2021). All these discourses provide a normative argument for citizens’ involvement in environmental sustainability through lifestyle change, but its efficacy in terms of meaningful environmental impact, and its relationship to ongoing political change are contested (Newell et al. 2021; de Moor et al. 2017; Seyfang 2005).

In this article, I will explore the two main questions as laid out above: what does the study of the GoZero waste movement tell us living a sustainable lifestyle in contemporary urban China, and what does this movement reveal about civic involvement in environmental sustainability in China? My research is based on 500 survey, 41 in-depth interviews, and participant observations during 2021 and 2022 in China’s largest social media-based sustainable lifestyle

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\(^1\) WeChat is a Chinese messaging and social media mobile app like Facebook. It is the largest social media platform in China now.

\(^2\) I will use the term sustainable lifestyle in this article because it serves as an umbrella term for zero waste lifestyle and other lifestyle practices aimed at reducing one’s environmental impact advocated by GoZero Waste. GoZero Waste also uses the term sustainable lifestyle more often to describe its vision and activities than zero waste lifestyle or zero waste movement.
community\textsuperscript{3} GoZero Waste. I will present quantitative findings from the survey in part one and qualitative analysis based on interviews and participant observations in part two.

In part one, I find that sustainable lifestyle practitioners in GoZero Waste community are disproportionately female, well-educated, between age 18-39, and above average income-level. These demographic characteristics resonate with the high cultural capital citizens in online gifting communities found in literature, who tend to be upper middle class and well-educated (Peters 2020; Bargain-Darrigues 2022). The job status and martial status are quite diverse, reflecting sustainable lifestyle practitioners from various walks of life and biographical availability. Similar to other lifestyle movement, the group develops mainly through social media promotion: almost half of the members join through reading public account articles or searching the account. Most people become interested in sustainable lifestyle because of awareness of environmental problems, simplicity, and one’s life habits. Green transportation, resource conservation, and reduction of consumption are the best practiced aspects of sustainable lifestyles. The top three challenges of sustainable lifestyle mentioned are lack of time and energy, constraints of economic and living conditions, and lack of external conditions’ support.

In part two, I find that sustainable lifestyle is a fusion of global trend of post-materialistic lifestyles and traditional values of frugality that have historically been central in many Chinese household. The rapid economic change within generations in China facilitates this fusion but also leads to difficulties in accepting some aspects of sustainable lifestyle across generational divides. In addition to providing insight into the changing nature of Chinese citizen’s engagement with environmentalism, this article also contributes to theoretical discussion of sustainable lifestyle movement and ecological citizenship. I argue that sustainable lifestyle in China is best understood as a form of ecological citizenship that transcends state-oriented citizenship and avoids the political activist framing often associated with the literature on social and environmental movements in the USA and Europe (Dunlap and Mertig 1991; Hicks 2004; Dono et al. 2010). The de-politicized expression of sustainable lifestyle is not only a pragmatic strategy in China but also a reflection of nuanced state-civil relationship in environmentalism in the current political opportunity structure. In China, state and citizens act in different domains, but avoidance of state-oriented politics by citizens doesn’t mean downplaying the importance civil action. Non-activism citizenship becomes a main aspect of ecological citizenship beside individual lifestyle change.

My article also contributes an empirical understanding of sustainable lifestyles in China, which has important practical applications for sustainable transition. Lifestyle with rising consumption level leads to spike in carbon emissions in China during the post-reform economic growth (Feng et al. 2009). It is critical to steer lifestyles in the sustainable direction as more citizens in China and other developing countries move toward consumption patterns that mirror those found in the developed countries (Anantharaman 2014).

The Case: GoZero Waste in China

I will use GoZero Waste community\textsuperscript{4} as a case study of zero waste movement and the broader

\textsuperscript{3} Community refers not a place-based neighborhood but an abstract network of people who share interests and provide mutual support.

\textsuperscript{4} Community refers not a place-based neighborhood but an abstract network of people who share
sustainable lifestyle practices in China. As described in the opening paragraph, it is founded in 2016 as a social media-based network that promotes sustainable lifestyle practices. Figure 1 below features the banner that shows GoZero Waste’s introduction of their mission: to promote awareness, provide solution, and build community. It is registered as a company and operates as a social enterprise. I choose it as the case study because it is currently the largest sustainable lifestyle community in China. It also reflects the zero waste movement in China (China Development Brief 2019) and is similar to the global social media-based zero waste movement started by Bea Johnson around 2013 (Spiteri 2021). There are other grassroots zero waste organizations in China, such as the Zero Waste Alliance founded in 2012 (Lu and Steinhardt 2020), but it focuses more on policy advocacy and public education of waste sorting rather than citizen action. GoZero Waste, with its focus on individual lifestyle change, is thus the best case for examining sustainable lifestyle.

Figure 1. GoZero Waste’s banner with their mission. Picture credit to the author taken during field work at an in-person event in Beijing

GoZero Waste community consists of the WeChat public account, WeChat discussion groups, and in-person events (China Development Brief 2019). The WeChat public account publishes articles and information about events that are open to all subscribers and the general public. The WeChat groups include seven national group chats, 21 cities’ group chats, and activity-based group chats such as 365-day zero waste blogging. Each group chats holding 500 members maximum. Figure 3 below shows a screenshot of the Beijing group chat that the author is in where secondhand item swapping happens everyday. There is no exact count of total GoZero Waste members, but the author counts around 12,000 people in their WeChat group chats, not including people who follow their WeChat public account but not in group chats. The national group chats are mainly sites of sustainable lifestyle discussions while the city group chats have the additional function of online secondhand swapping. The city groups also hold in-person events including secondhand swap parties, crafts workshops, zero waste picnic, environmental film watching, etc. Figure 2 below shows a secondhand swap party in Beijing in August 2022. According to the founder, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, interests and provide mutual support.

5 Social enterprise is an organization that operates on a business model but has serving social or environmental well-being as its main objective. It is different from non-profit or NGO.
and Chengdu are among the most active city groups. 

**Figure 2.** GoZero Waste Beijing group chat 3 with 485 members. The screenshot of group message shows secondhand book gifting going on between the group members. Everyday people post secondhand items they don’t want for others who need them and also request for items.

**Figure 3.** A secondhand swap party with a DIY herbal bag crafts table on the left. Picture taken by the author during fieldwork in Beijing in August 2022.

It is important to note that GoZero Waste represents Chinese sustainable lifestyle practitioners of some particular demographic profiles. As I will review in the literature below, sustainable lifestyle is a very broad concept and it is hard to study sustainable lifestyle practitioners as a homogeneous group. The sustainable lifestyle practitioners represented in GoZero Waste are disproportionately urban, young, well-educated, and female. I will elaborate more in the findings. While there is diversity within GoZero Waste community, it generally
represents a group of high cultural capital urbanites who are pursuing sustainable lifestyle. My study thus depicts the sustainable lifestyle pursuits of Chinese urbanites with certain characteristics and there is vast diversity of sustainable lifestyles or environmental actions to be studied.

**Methodology**

My research takes a mixed-method, grounded theory approach following an exploratory sequence, combining participant observation, in-depth interview, and survey. Since October 2021 I have been a participant observer in the GoZero Waste WeChat public account, Beijing group, and national group. Throughout my field work period from May to August 2022, I continued to participant observation in online groups (two national groups, one Beijing group, one Shanghai group) and three in-person city group events (Changsha, Fuzhou, Beijing). The in-person observations were restricted by Covid policies I have been an active member in the group and participated in group discussion, online activities, and in-person second-hand item exchange with group members. The participant observations help reveal how GoZero Waste is organized and establish contacts for my interviews.

In the interview stage from May to July 2022, I conducted 41 semi-structured interviews with GoZero Waste city group leaders and active group members. Table 1 below shows the demographic information of interviewees that I was able to obtain during the interviews. For the full list of interviewees, please refer to the appendix A. I chose to interview city group leaders and using snowball sampling strategies I connected to active group members because they are the specialized informants (Bernard 2017) who are knowledgeable of sustainable lifestyles and group activities. Interviewees also included key informants who I established contacts with through participant observation in group activities. Interviews were all conducted in Chinese and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. Most interviews were conducted online via video conferencing due to spread of interviewees across cities in China and Covid restrictions, but I was still able to conduct seven interviews in-person. The interview guide included among others questions regarding the “why and how” of sustainable lifestyle change as well as commitment to and opinions on change for environmental sustainability beyond individual change. Verbatim transcription of interviews was taken for thematic qualitative content analysis using ATLAS Ti. The quotes used in this paper are translated by the author. Consent form was presented to each interviewee before the interview and the founder of GoZero Waste acknowledged my research in the group through a support letter.

The survey (n =500) was conducted in August 2022 after the interview, following an exploratory sequence in mixed method. The survey consists of 25 multiple choice questions and three open-ended text response questions that were designed to research a larger sample of the population than I could through interviews alone. Furthermore, I conducted an initial round of coding of the interviews to come up with categories of motivations, practices, and challenges of sustainable lifestyles in the survey that I could then explore with this larger sample. Please refer to appendix B for the full translated version of the survey. A previous survey conducted by GoZero Waste internally also served as a source of reference in my survey making and ideas for survey questions were sought from my interviewees. The survey was anonymous, in Chinese, and was distributed in all GoZero Waste online group chats only to be answered by members within GoZero Waste. The sample is a non-probabilistic sample as no master list of
members or demographic information is available for probabilistic sampling. Consent form was presented before the survey and a monetary reward was offered to respondents with valid responses. R and excel were used for data visualization and statistical analysis.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics of Interviewees (n = 41).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Count (n=41)</th>
<th>Percent (n=41)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role</td>
<td>Group leader</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group member</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>Not married</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Married with kids</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Status</td>
<td>Full-time job</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Part-time or self-employed</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Homemakers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Part One: Findings from the Survey**

*Sustainable Lifestyle Practitioners in the GoZero Waste Community*

Who are the people pursuing sustainable lifestyle in China, as represented in GoZero Waste community? Demographic results are summarized in table 2 below. Most sustainable lifestyle practitioners in the GoZero Waste live in cities (94%), which resonates with GoZero Waste’s city-based development. This makes it a sample most representative of sustainable lifestyle practitioners in urban China. 81% are female, which is corroborated by information from city group leaders during interview. This disproportionate female representation can be explained by several factors. First, women are predominantly in charge of household consumption and household items. A main activity of GoZero Waste groups are secondhand item gifting and request, which are alternative form of consumption and item disposal that women are disproportionately in charge of. Women also tend to have more items for exchange such as clothes and beauty products. Second, women have been found to have stronger environmental and sustainable consumption concerns. In this study, 80% of the members are aged 18-39, with members aged 18-29 being the largest group (42%). This age composition can be a bias of access to WeChat, but in general reflect the post-material pursuits of younger generations of consumers (Nast 2022) which I will analyze more in part 2. The extremely high percent of members having Bachelor’s degree and above (91%) is an intriguing finding. Some have used the analytical perspective of high cultural capital group to describe members in online gifting communities with strong ecological awareness (Bargain-Darrigues 2022), which highly resonates with GoZero Waste community. High cultural capital group is not only measured by wealth or education but by overall social position determined by one’s upbringing, occupation,

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6 Literature on the gendered aspect of sustainable concerns are beyond the scope of discussion here, see examples such as Stern et al. 1993, Brough et al. 2016, etc.
and social circles. Previous findings of sustainable lifestyle practitioners show that they are not necessarily in the top economic quintile and might earn less than the average expected according to their education level, but their income is above national average (Holt 2014). Indeed, based on the monthly income level, 22% of GoZero Waste members belong to middle income bracket and 52% belong to high income brackets according to national quintile of urban citizen income level distribution (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2021). Nevertheless, there are other factors beyond what can be captured in upper middle class or economic privilege that portray the sustainable lifestyle practitioners, such as value orientations toward mental and spiritual pursuit of self-growth, meaning, and interpersonal connections. My further analysis of interviews will illustrate this finding that cannot be sufficiently explained by survey statistics.

Biographical availability, which means the absence of personal constraints due to job or marriage responsibilities, is an important factor of social movement participation (Kim-Marriot 2021). The GoZero members demonstrate wide range of biographical availability, with 40% married and 59% not married. 55% have a full time job, 17% have a part-time job or is self-employed, and 17% students. Among these, I further asked if their job or major is or was related to environmental sustainability, and three quarters say it is not related. This shows that members of diverse job status and marital status are all pursuing sustainable lifestyle. In the interview analysis I will demonstrate that each person has different understanding and emphasis of sustainable lifestyle. Sustainable lifestyle is not a singular concept or a set of behaviors but has varied and individualized expressions. The commonality is an overarching goals and narratives with sustainable themes that guide daily life (Lorenzen 2012).
Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of GoZero Waste Members (n = 500)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>472</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suburban/rural</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prefer not to say</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>18 and under</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19-29</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50 and above</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>High school and below</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bachelor degrees</td>
<td>339</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate and above</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prefer not to say</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>Not married</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Married with kids</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Status</td>
<td>Full-time job</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Part-time or self-employed</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Homemakers</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly Income (in RMB)</td>
<td>2000 and below (low income)</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2000 - 5000 (middle income)</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5000 - 10,000 (high income)</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10,000 - 50,000</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50,000 - 100,000</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100,000 and above</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prefer not to say</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conceptualizations of “Sustainable Lifestyle”
While I use the singular form “sustainable lifestyle” as an umbrella term for a host of lifestyle choices that are aimed at reducing environmental impacts, there is no unanimous definition of the term. Individuals’ conceptualizations of sustainable lifestyle are diverse. Word frequency and thematic analysis of the 500 responses to “what’s your understanding of sustainable lifestyle” show that interpretations surround four themes: 1) maximize the use of materials; 2) environmental protection and earth care; 3) humans’ long-term thriving; 4) simple and healthy life. These themes are interrelated and lots of responses touch on multiple themes, but they still emerge as distinct approaches to understanding sustainable lifestyle.

The first theme of maximizing the use of materials is the most popular, with 262 responses referring to this idea. This interpretation of sustainable lifestyle emphasizes concrete small actions that prevent waste and maximize the utility of materials resources. Sustainability is closely tied to keep material resources in cycles of use and the ideal of frugality. As shown in table 3 below, terms frequency support this theme, such as “maximize the use of things” (this term in Chinese directly used 82 times), make use of (107 times), circulation/recycle (86 times), things/items (84 times), waste/squander (66 times), secondhand exchange/share (31 times), multiple times (16 times). A response from a young mom in Chengdu demonstrates this approach well:

Try to produce as few trash as possible and find the right owner for every item. My
understanding of sustainable lifestyle is to make the utility of limited items to the fullest. If there are things you already have that you can use, there is no need to buy new things and cause the waste of resources. (Niuniu, Chengdu)

The second theme on environmental protection is intertwined with reducing waste but has a more explicit emphasis on earth or ecological impact. 123 responses that refer to this theme, not including responses in the first category that touch upon environmental protection. As shown in table 3 below, terms that are frequently used including environment\(^7\) (93 times), environmental protection (85 times), the earth (49 times), nature (36 times), harmony/balance (28 times) support this theme. This interpretation of sustainable lifestyle is based on high environmental awareness that ties personal life with ecological responsibility. For examples, respondents state that “a sense of responsibility for the earth, our common homeland that shares wealth and woe with humanity”; “No action that is at the cost of harming our homeland can be taken”; “A healthy, eco-friendly lifestyle that is good for myself, the humanity, the environment, and the mother earth”. The last response touches on a sub-theme around lifestyle that is also good for oneself. Several respondents emphasize that sustainable lifestyle should be viable and not cause burden on oneself. For example, “a lifestyle that lessen burden on myself and the earth, that can be sustained for a long time”. A female college student from Xi’an further illustrates that:

it feels like a lifestyle that balances between earth care and self care...I consider if this behavior is sustainable to practice. We see some zero wasters who are pioneers. But I wouldn’t choose zero waste lifestyle (in the literal sense), because zero waste lifestyle is not sustainable for me...My understanding of sustainability is not asking people to give up something to protect the earth. Everyone choose behaviors in daily life that are convenient, affordable, and eco-friendly. This is already good enough. Choose a lifestyle comfortable to me and try to be eco-friendly as much as possible is very good already.

This quote shows that sustainability is both environmental sustainability and personal sustainability in terms of time, energy, capability. Sustainable lifestyle, while with the overarching background of environmental awareness, is first and foremost a lifestyle that can be sustained by one in a given time and place.

Table 3. Word List of High Frequency Words Used in 500 Responses to “what’s your understanding of sustainable lifestyle”

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\(^7\) The word frequency is a general count across responses, so “environment” might be used in responses that have to do with other themes as well. But the overall frequency reflects a pattern.
The third theme on humans’ long-term thriving is the most related to the second theme. This interpretation of sustainable lifestyle emphasizes humans’ thriving in a broader timescale (“long-term” used 18 times), with particular attention to well-being of “future generations” (26 times). It also reveals high ecological awareness as thriving together with non-human environment is frequently mentioned, as the terms both/thrive together (31 times). 48 responses directly address this theme, such as “a lifestyle that can develop in the long-term and supports future generations as well as other species’ long-term survival”; “a lifestyle that is responsible for humans’ future and creates a perspective of connectedness”; “sustainable lifestyle is about meeting one’s need without impacting others’ benefits and future generations. It is different from extreme environmentalism - it can’t restrict human’s development”. Sustainability is emphasized as the environment’s life-supporting ability in the long-term, and sustainable lifestyle is emphasized as current humans’ efforts toward strengthening the environment’s ability.
50 responses address the fourth theme on simple and healthy life. Terms related to simplicity are used 15 times and health 30 times. Some of them overlap with the theme on environmental protection but some are without explicit reference to environmental concerns or waste and more focused on a good life. For example, respondents state sustainable lifestyle as “a healthy and a happy life”; “a pure life that is not impacted by change in time, space, or money”; “a friendly lifestyle that shares beauty and love”; “reduce desires and improve life quality”; “love life and pay attention to the real life. Treat everyday well and be responsible to consumption”; “doesn’t feel bored in the daily rhythms and gradually accumulate values and meanings”. These responses reveal personal life pursuits beyond environmental sustainability. It resonates with previous themes that incorporate self-care but also transcends sustainable lifestyle to mental and spiritual sustainability.

In summary, conceptualizations of sustainable lifestyle are diverse across a spectrum of earth care, self care, material, and mental, surrounding four themes of 1) maximize the use of materials; 2) environmental protection and earth care; 3) humans’ long-term thriving; 4) simple and healthy life. Sustainable lifestyle has an overarching attention to environmental protection but has different emphases and embodiment based on individual understanding. The different conceptualizations of sustainable lifestyle provide valuable insights into how this fuzzy term is construed by citizens practicing it on the ground. The findings also reveal the diverse potential for promoting it.

Motivations of Sustainable Lifestyle
What gets people interested in sustainable lifestyle, if defined as an overarching lifestyle that reduces environmental impact? Liu et al. (2016) summarize that motivations of environmental behaviors can be summarized into economic rationality, socio-psychological (values, social comparison, perceived norms, and perceived behavioral control), and structural factors in place. Guided by these findings, I took an inductive approach to explore motivations of sustainable lifestyle. I summarized motivations of sustainable lifestyle based on the interview data and examined the broader patterns within GoZero Waste members through survey. Since GoZero Waste is a multi-function community beyond environmental sustainability, I first asked respondents of their motivations joining GoZero Waste, and if interest in sustainable lifestyle is a factor, I continue to ask their motivations of sustainable lifestyle. Respondents can choose multiple choices. As shown in figure 4 below, the majority of respondents (408, 81.6%) indicate that interest in sustainable or zero-waste lifestyle is a motivation, and 211 (42%) respondents indicate it as the only motivation. This shows that involvement in GoZero Waste can be a proxy for sustainable lifestyle interest. The second most frequently mentioned motivation is to giveaway and get second-hand items (198, 39.6%) and 33 (6%) respondents indicate it as the only motivation. This shows that involvement in GoZero Waste can be a proxy for sustainable lifestyle interest. The second most frequently mentioned motivation is to giveaway and get second-hand items (198, 39.6%) and 33 (6%) respondents indicate it as the only motivation. The third motivation is to seek meaningful community and friendship (139, 27.4%) and 16 (3%) respondents indicate it as the only motivation. 213 (42.6%) respondents choose more than one motivation for joining GoZero Waste.

Figure 4. Motivation of joining GoZero Waste
Figure 5 below shows motivations of sustainable lifestyle. Two thirds of the respondents say (324, 64.8%) they are driven by awareness of environmental problems and wish to act. This reflects that interest in sustainable lifestyle can be a proxy of environmental concerns and intention to act as it is the dominant reason. Environmental theme is the main understanding and motivation of sustainable lifestyle. The second most frequently mentioned is minimalism and simplicity (235, 47%). These two concepts are related to reduction of material possession and Dan-Sha-Ri\(^8\) originated from Japan. This reflects growing trend of post-material pursuits and anti-consumerism after over-consumption. It also reflects foreign cultural trend as a source of inspiration for sustainable lifestyle. The third most frequently mentioned is consistency with one’s personal life habits and beliefs (229, 46%). This is based on interview informants’ description of having a lifestyle that is frugal and simple, which naturally matches sustainable lifestyle, or having family upbringing that emphasize sustainable lifestyle. This reveals that lots of people have pre-existing lifestyle and values before they know concept of “sustainable lifestyle”. This shows that there are citizens who are practicing sustainable lifestyle but not connecting it to the concept before. I will also explicate more on the tradition and social memory of frugality as sources of sustainable lifestyle in China. The motivations that follow are interest in second-hand items (195, 39%), health (184, 36.8%), the economic aspect (148, 29.6%), related topics such as vegetarianism/compost/eco-farming (72, 14.4%), and family upbringing (41, 8.2%).

Figure 5. Motivations of Sustainable Lifestyle

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\(^8\) A life philosophy that emphasizes decluttering, or getting ride of unnecessary things, time, connections, etc.
I further examined if demographic variables are correlated with environmental/simplicity/secondhand/economic motivations of sustainable lifestyle. First, the linear regression model shows that some demographic groups are significantly correlated with economic and (getting) secondhand items motivation. Being in the age group 30-39 is both negatively correlated with having economic motivation ($\beta = -0.20, p = 0.00$) or getting secondhand items ($\beta = -0.25, p = 0.00$) motivation of sustainable lifestyle. This means that respondents aged 30, 38% of the total respondents, are less likely to be driven by economic and getting secondhand items compared to respondents in all other age groups. Respondents with education level “Graduate and above” are also less likely to be driven by economic motivation ($\beta = -0.14, p = 0.01$) compared to all other education levels. However, there is no significant correlation between income level and economic motivation ($p = 0.7219$ at alpha level of 0.05). Being in monthly income bracket “100,000 and above” does mean significantly less driven by getting secondhand items compared to other income levels ($\beta = -0.535685, p = 0.04$). These findings indicate that income is not necessarily correlated with economic motivation, but the highest education level group and 30-39 age group are less driven by economic motivation. The wealthiest group and 30-39 age group are less likely to adopt sustainable lifestyle because of interest in secondhand-items.

None of the demographic variables are significantly correlated with environmental motivation except male respondents are less driven by environmental motivation ($\beta = -0.17, p = 0.004$) and simplicity motivation ($\beta = -0.219, p = 0.000$) compared to female respondents. Respondents with full-time job are significantly more likely to be driven by simplicity motivation compared to students ($\beta = -0.245, p = 0.0009$) and respondents who job/major are related to environmental sustainability ($\beta = -0.009, p = 0.027$). Respondents with strong belief in personal responsibility (statement 26c in survey) of sustainable development through personal lifestyle ($F_{1,422} = 17.9, p = 0.000$) and personal efficacy (statement 26d in survey) of contributing to sustainable development through lifestyle ($F_{1,422} = 6.23, p = 0.01$) have significantly higher environmental motivations. A caveat would be the uncertainty of temporal precedence between environmental motivation and believes.
Word frequency and thematic analysis of an optional short response question in the survey (n = 260) further illustrates how people embarked on sustainable lifestyle journey. In response to “experiences or events that get you interested in sustainable lifestyle”, 90 responses are themed on concerns of environmental degradation and waste pollution, as also shown in the word list in table 4 below. Waste/trash (53 times), plastic (32 times), pollution (15 times), problem/issue (10 times), destroy/destroy (7 times), the environment (51 times), the earth (16 times), animals (14 times), ocean (12 times), ecology (11 times), environmental protection (39 times), conserve/protect (11 times) are among the most frequently mentioned terms in responses. These terms point to the awareness and concerns of environment, particularly ecological repercussions of plastic pollution, as the number one triggering experience of sustainable lifestyle. One response from a female college student in Xiamen exemplifies this story of embarking on sustainable lifestyle:

Only when I saw someone shared the documentary *A Plastic Ocean* on a social media platform did I realize that human’s behaviors can have such a huge impact on earth and other creatures. I then watched a lot about the environment, plastic, and sustainability documentaries. I reflected on my past behaviors and started to intentionally reduce single-use products. Later I joined lots of organizations, such as volunteer beach clean-up.

This response is not alone as documentaries and news emerge as the most influential information sources. Table 4 shows that saw/watched (27 times), documentary (20 times), and news reportage (9 times) as the most frequently repeated terms. Specifically, environmental documentaries such as *Plastic China* and *A Plastic Ocean* is frequently mentioned. A thematic analysis shows that 47 responses mention seeing environmental issues through media content (eg. films, news, social media articles, websites) as the cause of their attention. This is a proof that media and social media content are increasingly important in environmental communication.

**Table 4. Word List of High Frequency Words Used in 260 Responses to “experiences or events that get them interested in sustainable lifestyle”**
The second theme that prompts sustainable lifestyle change is one’s awareness of the overflow of material possessions. Table 4 above shows that things/items (33 times), a lot/too many (30 times), consumption (12 times) are frequently mentioned. The thematic analysis shows that 43 responses theme on noticing having too many items in their households and the wish for simplicity as the motivation. In particular, moving (7 times) is an experience that triggers this awareness. One female respondent in Guangzhou questioned about consumption and overflow of material possession that “when I moved, I found myself with a lot of things. Do people really need so many things to live? Are some consumption upgrades really necessary?”. This reveals that simplicity and reflections over consumption are another motivation of sustainable lifestyle, different from the conceptual theme of environmental awareness. This theme points to the potential of promoting sustainable lifestyle from the aspect of material possession and simplicity concern, which is relatively independent of environmental awareness. Other themes that trigger sustainable lifestyle change include participation in environmental organizations or their activities (22 responses), interest in second-hand items as the hook (16 responses), and the influence from a family member or others around (13 responses).

In summary, the motivations of joining GoZero Waste and adopting sustainable lifestyle are as diverse as the conceptualizations of sustainable lifestyle. The predominant reason of joining GoZero Waste is interest in sustainable lifestyle/zero waste/environmental protection, while seeking meaningful community or exchanging secondhand items remain secondary.
GoZero Waste participation serves as a good proxy of interest in environmental sustainability. Awareness of environmental problems and wish to act is the top motivation of adopting sustainable lifestyle, followed by interest in simplicity/minimalism, consistency with one’s lifestyle habits, and interest in secondhand items. Short responses of experiences that get people interested in sustainable lifestyle reflect the motivations: experiences that awaken one’s awareness of environmental problems, particularly through new media such as documentaries about plastic waste are most frequently mentioned, while realization of one’s overflow of material possessions comes the second. These reveal two main understandings of “waste”, with one emphasizing human’s environmental impact/burden and the other emphasizing underused or excessive material resources.

**Practices of Sustainable Lifestyle**

Sustainable lifestyle consists of a host of daily environmental behaviors, so what exactly are they practicing the different aspects and how well are they doing them? Based on interviews and GoZero Waste’s research, I divide environmental behaviors into ten themes and measured respondents’ self-reported frequency of practice for each on a 5 point Likert scale. These behaviors cover the domains of personal items, food, living, and travelling and are also commonly measured items in environmental behavior research (Oreg and Katz-Gerro 2006). Figure 6 shows the percent of respondents who choose on the scale, where 1 represents no practice and 5 represents always practice. Green transportation is the most achieved environmental behavior (mean = 4.2), followed by saving resources (e.g. conservation of water, electricity, food, no waste) (mean = 4.07), minimizing consumption (i.e. buy only when needed) (mean = 3.87), reuse or giveaway unwanted items (instead of just throwing away) (mean = 3.79), and reducing takeaway food and other food packaging waste (mean = 3.74). The mean behavior score of green transport is significantly different from all other environmental behaviors, which suggest that respondents are pretty good with taking green transport regardless of practices with other environmental behaviors. The high achievement in green transportation could be a result of well-developed public transportation in Chinese cities and concentration of infrastructure in living circles in China. High score in saving resources resonates with the theme of frugality, which is a central understanding of sustainable lifestyle in the Chinese context (Liu et al. 2019). The minimization of consumption resonates with the strong motivation of minimalism and simplicity in driving sustainable lifestyle. Similarly, reuse or giveaway unwanted items instead of just throwing away resonates with the motivations on second-hand items and GoZero Waste’s function as a secondhand item exchange platform.

The least practiced environmental behaviors are reducing meat consumption or vegetarianism (mean = 2.9), using secondhand items instead of buying new (mean = 3.43), buying eco-friendly products (mean = 3.45), classifying waste (mean = 3.54), refusing single-use products (i.e. bring your own) (mean = 3.59). Each of these aspects worth further explorations and multiple reasons could serve as challenges. For example, some respondents elaborate on the difficulties in their responses to support needed for sustainable lifestyle that “some waste recycle stations are not convenient”; “I classified waste, but the residential community’s waste disposal doesn’t classify - they mix everything up again”. The behavior on refusing single-use receive the most attention, such as “it needs great determination and long-term habit to change consumer ideas that are cultivated in this consumeristic society”; “sometimes I want to refuse
single-use but the stores don’t provide such service”; “there are few bulk stores without single-use food packaging. We need more convenient services”. They are related to the biggest in sustainable lifestyle such as lack of energy and time as well as lacking external conditions’ support, which I will analyze in the next section.

**Figure 6.** Aspects of Sustainable Lifestyle Practiced. On 1 - 5 scale, with 5 represents highest frequency of practice.

I further examine if demographic factors and environmental values, beliefs, norms are correlated with environmental behaviors. I calculate an average environmental behavior score from the mean of ten environmental behaviors to reflect overall environmental behaviors comprehensively in one response variable. The multiple regression model with all demographic and social psychological variables as predictors shows that gender (being male), job relatedness to environmental field(related), personal efficacy (high efficacy, i.e. my behavior can have an effect on environmental issues), willingness to sacrifice living standards, and sustainable lifestyle as important to self-identity are significant and positively correlated to environmental behaviors. These several factors account for 26% of the variability in average environmental behavior score. A simpler model is shown as below.
The gendered effect of positive correlation between male respondents and average environmental behaviors is intriguing. I run a t-test comparing female and male respondents behavior, which shows no significant difference (p value = 0.3769). This could be due to the male respondents are a sample size too small and the unequal sample size affects statistical power. It could also indicate that gender is not significant factor on its own but plays a role in conjunction with other factors. I also used a non-parametric test to compare if respondents with environmental motivations for pursuing sustainable lifestyle have different behavior outcomes than those with not. It turns out not (p = 0.0911). Education or age don’t emerge as significant predictors, but interestingly having job or major related to environmental sustainability is consistently significant in various models. Beliefs that personal lifestyle has a contribution to environment, willingness to change living standards for sustainability, and sustainable lifestyle is a very important part of one’s self-identity and value emerge as significant factors for average environmental behaviors among all environmental beliefs.

In addition to the ten environmental behaviors in the private sphere, I asked if the respondents take actions in the public realm or talk about sustainable lifestyle with others. 369 (third quarters) of respondents say that they are involved in public realm actions such as environmental organizations’ events, awareness and education activities at one’s community/school/workplace, reporting environmental problems/policy advocacy/ petitions, donation, volunteer activities, public gatherings/activism. 239 respondents, almost half of all respondents, participate in more than one form of public realm action. Environmental volunteer activities (199), environmental organizations’ events (184), and awareness campaign at one’s community/school/workplace (137) are the most popular public realm actions. public gatherings for environmental issues (96) and reporting environmental problems/policy advocacy/ petitions (80) are relatively less popular. The findings show that respondents are actively involved in non-activist citizenship behaviors for the environment in addition to personal sphere actions. I didn’t include public protest or contentious grassroots movement activities given their bare existence in China.

**Challenges of Sustainable Lifestyle**
Findings from practices of environmental behaviors shows that even respondents in GoZero Waste community fall short on multiple behaviors. Based on categories summarized from thematic coding of challenges of sustainable lifestyle from interviews, I asked a multiple choice (more than one responses allowed) question on challenges. As shown in figure 7 below, the top three challenges are lack of time and energy (178, 35.6%), constraints of economic and living conditions (166, 33.2%), and lack of external conditions’ support (160, 32%). Following challenges are feeling frustrated about not doing well enough (135, 27%), and that people around don’t support (114, 22.8%). Inconvenience, related to lack of time and energy, is also considered a challenge by 104 respondents (20.8%). Other challenges include lack of information or methods (99, 19.8%), impulsive consumption (82, 16.4%), and feeling powerless (46, 9.2%). The findings suggest that the top barriers deal with the feasibility of a sustainable lifestyle that entail behaviors such as refusing single-use products and purchase eco-friendly products. Besides technical and external barriers, frustration with not doing good enough and feeling powerless are internal challenges for sustainable lifestyle change. This resonates with navigating daily uncertainties of choices and sustainable lifestyle’s effectiveness as found by Lorenzen (2012).

**Figure 7. Challenges of Sustainable Lifestyle**

In an optional short response question, I further ask respondents what support they think is needed for sustainable lifestyle change. Thematic coding and word frequency of the 401 valid responses show that policy and government actions as well as awareness and education campaign on a wide societal level are the most needed. As shown in table 5 below, terms that refer to awareness or way of thinking are used 98 times along with the verb promote used 83 times. 145 responses refer to this theme of awareness and education campaign, such as “especially to popularize the concept of environmental protection and sustainable life, from top to bottom to the community”; “make more people aware of the social and environmental problems we have now through promotion activities, so that they would be willing to change
their way of life, form a social milieu that is sustainable, and facilitate the commitment to pro-environmental behaviors”; “a change in social environment of thoughts, awaken the majority of people that making oneself too comfortable is uncomfortable for the environment”; “vigorously promote (sustainable lifestyle) on a societal level, especially in schools; to change personal opinions and habits”. The emphasis on educating the young and promotion activities in schools is strong, supported by frequent use of terms such as educate (28 times), children/since young (18 times), and school (13 times).

Table 5. Word List of High Frequency Words Used in 401 Responses to “what support do you think is needed for sustainable lifestyle change?”

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<tr>
<td>支持</td>
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<tr>
<td>意识/观念/理念</td>
<td>awareness/way thinking</td>
<td>98</td>
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<td>政策法律</td>
<td>policy/law</td>
<td>96</td>
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<td>宣传指导普及</td>
<td>promote/propaganda</td>
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<td>个人自己</td>
<td>individual/myself</td>
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<td>生活</td>
<td>life</td>
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<td>政府国家制度</td>
<td>government/state</td>
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<tr>
<td>环保</td>
<td>environmental protection</td>
<td>56</td>
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<tr>
<td>社会</td>
<td>society/societal</td>
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<td>大众/公众/公众</td>
<td>everyone/the public</td>
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<tr>
<td>变化/改变</td>
<td>change</td>
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<tr>
<td>可持续/可持续</td>
<td>sustainable</td>
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<td>物质经济</td>
<td>material/economic foundation</td>
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<td>strengthen/enhance</td>
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<td>分类/回收</td>
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<td>组织</td>
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<td>塑料</td>
<td>plastics</td>
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<tr>
<td>方便</td>
<td>facilitate/make convenient</td>
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<td>包装</td>
<td>packaging</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>生产/工业</td>
<td>manufacturing/industry</td>
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<tr>
<td>清洁</td>
<td>reduce/less</td>
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<td>时/时长/耗时</td>
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<tr>
<td>技术/科技</td>
<td>technology</td>
<td>12</td>
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</table>

A related sub-theme is more acceptance of sustainable lifestyle as a social norm and a more friendly social environment toward sustainable lifestyle (38 responses). This relates to the challenges of “people surround don’t understand” and “feeling powerless”. Some respondents claim that “if what I do is not recognized by the bigger environment and people around, I would feel frustrated and undermine my activeness”. Others emphasize changing negative perceptions or stigma toward sustainable lifestyle, such as “an opinion change of the whole society, that sustainable lifestyle is not about being stingy”; “I think more people need to come out and share about sustainable lifestyle and don’t get mocked at. Sustainable lifestyle is not out of
poverty but it’s beneficial to the earth”. The desire for recognition in mainstream societal values and the fear of negative perceptions show that sustainable lifestyle practitioners don’t want to remain a sub-cultural group. They call for change in social environment and cultural norms that accept sustainable lifestyle. Instead of choosing a lifestyle because of low economic wealth, they advocate for flipping the cultural script into one of earth care. This problem is more conspicuous given China’s recent economic growth and status acquisition in a consumer society. Two respondents illustrate the point on social environment and economic wealth:

As a kid grow up in the 80s, frugality, saving resources, recycle and reuse are everyday norm for me. As I grow up I feel the wider social environment is not the same, the societal-level, state-level, no longer act as it says. I feel frustrated. I don’t want propaganda of sustainable lifestyle or the tag on myself. The social environment is not as good.

Everyone can rethink “new/old items” on a mental level. Material resources are not easily accessible and endless. Cherish what you have and you will feel more happiness. In a consumer society, everyone can show status, taste, and class with consumer goods. One can choose eco-friendly products, or resource-extractive and destructive products. The difference between these two choices are huge and need more exposures.

The emphasis on change in social environment is closely related to government actions, because most respondents identify the government or the state as the actor for running awareness and education campaign on a societal level. In addition to responses such as “popularize the concept of environmental protection and sustainable life, from top to bottom” and “government-led awareness campaign to guide the public”, respondents also identify policy/law (used 96 times) as one of the biggest support needed. 132 responses mention some kind of institutional power and mandatory legal enforcement as support needed for sustainable lifestyle: “involvement of legislative body. Individual power is really not that big”; "policy support is needed, such as reducing the use of plastic products”; “restrict manufacturing of single-use plastics. For example, policies that require a minimal percent of recycled plastic in production”; “legal restriction, forceful execution, and penetration into every residential communities”. The respondents’ concerns of policy change are very high and a third of all respondents actually perceive it as more effective than lifestyle change, as shown in the figure 9 below.

**Figure 9. Multiple choice of effectiveness of lifestyle change (n = 500)**

![Image of pie chart showing effectiveness of lifestyle change]
Business actions that facilitate consumers’ sustainable lifestyle are mentioned 23 times, which relates to external conditions of support. One respondent reflects that “when I go to buy bread, merchants habitually use plastic bags to pack. When I take out my container, they ask "how do you use that?" The current consumption chain is new to non-disposable purchasing choices. Urban infrastructure is mentioned by 19 respondents, particularly “corresponding waste classification facilities”. Other support needed include a material or economic foundation for sustainable lifestyle (terms used 48 times) and group support from like-minded people (terms used 20 times):“like-minded friends around make me more determined and persistent in pursuing sustainable lifestyles that can be inconvenient”. GoZero Waste community is affirmed as a source that provides support from like-minded people, with a third of the respondents saying that it provides a sense of belonging and partnership. The most influential activity on sustainable lifestyle change of GoZero Waste is in person events, followed by social media account articles and city group chats. Beside providing a sense of belonging, GoZero Waste serves a stronger role in sharing the possibilities and diversity of sustainable lifestyle (309, 62%), strengthening environmental awareness (292, 58%), providing sustainable lifestyle tips (285, 57%), and exchanging secondhand items (271, 54%). A third of the respondents also state that GoZero Waste has promoted their actual behavior change for sustainable lifestyle.

Summary of Findings

The survey findings above shows the demographic of sustainable lifestyle practitioners in GoZero Waste, their conceptualizations of sustainable lifestyle, their motivations, practices, and challenges of sustainable lifestyle. Overall, GoZero Waste members are disproportionately female, well-educated, 18-39, and above average income from various marital and job status, characteristics of the high cultural capital group (Bargain-Darrigues 2022). They represent a segment of sustainable lifestyle practitioners who are highly environmentally conscious and anti-consumerism. Their conceptualizations of sustainable lifestyle center around maximizing the use of materials to prevent waste, caring for the environment without compromising self-care, caring for humanity in the long-term, and a simple, healthy lifestyle. Their involvement in GoZero Waste is a good proxy of environmental commitment. Environmental awareness to act for problems and simplicity/minimalism pursuits are top two motivations of sustainable lifestyle. Income level and education level are not significantly correlated with environmental or economic motivations of sustainable lifestyle, except that the top education level and extremely high income group are significantly less likely to be driven by economic motivation or interest in secondhand items. Male respondents are less driven by environmental motivation and simplicity motivation compared to female respondents, while respondents with full-time job are significantly more likely to be driven by simplicity motivation compared to students. This indicates that simplicity and anti-consumerism could be a compelling motivation of sustainable lifestyle for mid-aged, female, full-time professionals.

In terms of environmental behaviors, having job or major related to environment as well as other values including high efficacy of sustainable lifestyle, willingness to change living standard, and strong self-identity with sustainable lifestyle are significant. Green transportation, saving resources (frugal use of water, electricity etc.), and minimizing consumption are the best practiced behaviors, while reducing meat consumption, replacing purchase new with secondhand items, and buying eco-friendly products are the least practiced. Refusing single-
use products and waste classification also have low performances, mainly due to inconvenience and lack of external conditions’ support. Policies and societal-wide awareness campaign that change social norms are the most called for support for sustainable lifestyle change. My interviews with 41 city-group leaders and active members in GoZero Waste below provide more qualitative data that elaborate on the aspects examined in the survey.

Part Two: Findings from the Interview and Fieldwork

Sustainable Lifestyle as a Fusion of the Global and the Traditional

The motivations and practices of sustainable lifestyles among GoZero Waste members are a fusion of the global trend of post-materialistic sustainable lifestyles and traditional values. Many informants recalled reading social media content such as zero waste influencers in the US and simplicity ideals from Japan that prompted them to embark on the lifestyle change journey. Their practices and process of lifestyle change are similar to those described in foreign lifestyle movements (Lorenzen 2012; Cherry 2015). Meanwhile, many informants state that sustainable lifestyle is a return to older generation’s frugal habits and has strong cultural roots, such as Zhuangzi’s philosophy “unity between human and nature”. Sustainable lifestyle in contemporary China is thus a bricolage of resources from the foreign and the traditional, and the two inspire each other. This bricolage of the global and the traditional are especially salient due to the stark socio-economic change within one or two generations in China. The coexistence of generations that grow up in drastically different social context in Chinese families provides opportunities and challenges for sustainable living.

Reflection of Global Post-materialist Lifestyle Pursuits

While GoZero Waste is not officially affiliated to international zero waste alliance, the members get inspirations from foreign social media content, as the story of GoZero Waste founder in the beginning shows. Social media plays a central role in diffusing zero waste movement through the global circulation of culture. GoZero Waste members, disproportionately belonging to the high cultural capital group, are well-connected to foreign zero waste information. One mid-aged, single female interviewee who used to be a translator describes that:

I learned German in college and translated articles on freeganism. In the beginning I searched a lot about minimalism and simplicity in oversea bloggers and TED talks. I read Hideko Yamashita’s book on Dan-Sha-Ri and India yoga’s ideas on back to simple wear. These are all related to sustainable lifestyles. (Aizhijian, Shanghai)

Nine other informants mentioned foreign sources of inspiration for their sustainable lifestyles, including posts about Lauren Singer or freeganism movement, Japanese books on Dan-Sha-Ri (simplicity), interactions with foreign sustainable lifestyle activists, and lived experiences in foreign countries. A female Chinese teacher recalls that

I read articles and TED talks of foreign sustainable lifestyle practitioners. I might not be able to do as radical as them, but I can change in that direction and influence people around. I spent some time in New Zealand and the clean environment is what I miss the most. I wish Chinese cities can also be like that, and that motivates me to engage in environmental protection (Qiqi, Zhengzhou).

In addition to foreign sources of inspirations, sustainable lifestyle practitioners parallel the global trend of post-materialist pursuits. Ecological awareness is an important aspect of post-
materialism (Inglehart 2016), and its expression in daily actions is the most frequently mentioned theme by interviewees. Similar to Lorenzen (2012)’s findings, the lifestyle change is a long, gradual process filled with deliberations of environmental impact of all aspects of life. A mother working a full-time job in Beijing states that:

The process is long. The first small step I took was reducing plastic bags - I bring my own bag to shopping. The plastic bag reduction lasted for eight to ten months. Now I always bring my own containers for shopping. If one seller doesn’t allow me to use my own container, I would go to a different seller. (Liyan, Beijing)

Other interviewees describe the same process of starting with one small action and gradually take on other sustainable behaviors through trial and error. Sustainable lifestyle not only consist of these habitual sustainable behaviors but also a methodical way of thinking about consumption. The principle of “5R” - reject, reduce, reuse, repurpose, recycle - is central when Bea Johnson first started zero waste lifestyle, and same do the Chinese sustainable lifestyle practitioners:

I would think more about my behaviors, about where my products come from and where they will go. I have a hierarchy for consumption: first maximize the use of what I have, then look for second-hand items from peer zero wasters, then borrow, then buy at second-hand stores, and buying new comes as the last choice. (Shenbaise, Nanjing)

A Wuhan group member also shared an expanded version of 5R with me, which is “9 questions before buying”. The questions are a series of “interrogation” of the product such as “why do you buy”, “is it necessary”, “where to put it”, “is there an alternative” etc. The 9 Qs circulate inside GoZero Waste community as a guidance to consumption. The goal of asking oneself 9 questions before buying a new item is to prevent compulsive or unnecessary consumption. The extreme deliberation with consumption reflects the trend of anti-consumption (Black and Cherrier 2010) in post-material society. Rather than consumer activism through buying green products, informants prioritize not buying and claiming personal agency in the consumer culture. The prevalent use of anti-consumerism language by informants reflect their solidarity in a global movement against the hegemonic economic system that drives consumerism. A young female journalist articulates her position as below:

I am strongly against the impact of consumerism on my life. I want to change the indulgence in material pursuits and the heavy burden from it. Whether it’s called zero waste or sustainability or environmentalism, it is about a powerful discourse against consumerism. (Lingcheng, Shanghai)

Some informants take a more introspective lens in their anti-consumption discourse. The anti-consumerism disposition goes beyond antagonism to a particular polity or economy to quest for life’s meaning. A mid-aged male member who is interested in sustainable tourism and leave-no-trace city walks reflects that:

I read lots of articles about consumerism after the journey to Tibet. In modern society the most important identity of people are consumers. We should have other identities such as father, teacher, son, but now these identities are far less important than the consumer identity. I start to reflect who I am if consumer is not my most important
identity. How can I actualize my values? Can I still achieve a sense of identity? (Xinghui, Chengdu)

His quote points to another major theme in post-material lifestyle pursuits: mental and spiritual growth of the self. From newly graduated college students to mid-career woman to white-collar professional moms, sustainable lifestyle practitioners perceive “sustainability” as intertwined with self-growth. Xinghui even quit his previous job and goes unemployed to seek self-growth. He embarks on a journey searching the meaning of life, which he sees as interconnected to environmental sustainability commitment:

When I was at work, I didn’t know where my values were. It was not the company’s values. I wanted to seek the direction of life and my value....Last year I walked to Tibet from Chengdu. During the trip I saw lots of environmental issues, my personal issue, etc. My past outlook on life led to a direction of anxiety and hopelessness. When I changed my outlook and take on a more sustainable mindset, my internal values change. This is nuanced from environmental sustainability but related. (Xinghui, Chengdu)

The connection between material sustainability and non-material satisfaction is most vividly shown through secondhand exchange. A core activity of GoZero Waste is swapping secondhand items in-person. Similar to other gifting communities among high cultural capital groups (Bargain-Darrigues 2022), economic constraint is not the driving reason for getting secondhand. Interpersonal relationships cultivated through the exchange are the most rewarding part. As an informant claims, “China has developed at high speed to this stage. There will be less dependency on materials with more mental fulfillment from interpersonal interactions.” (Xiangcai, Shanghai) A mother working in an insurance company in Beijing articulate the meaning of exchange as below:

We can do goods exchange, and the interactions in the process of exchange are not just material. We communicate on mental level...After exchange of goods, we would chat, and learn about their stories. Sometimes I chat with them on wechat, and deeper level of communications. This is what I find fascinating...Through these activities I gradually see that not everything needs to be obtained by money. (Zhenzhen, Beijing)
Satisfaction from interpersonal links apply more broadly to aspects of sustainable lifestyles beyond secondhand exchange. Previous studies have proved support network and community of like-minded people to be key factor in moral actions (Cherry 2015; Kim-Marriot 2021). GoZero Waste group not only provides such a network of relational exchange but also inspires members to pursue interpersonal relationships more. As the leader of Chengdu city group, a young, single freelancer describes:

Before I was more introverted and didn’t want to actively establish relationships with others. Sustainable lifestyle gives me a perspective to wish for more intimate relationships with people around...For example, I discussion more with my family and established a deeper relationship with my mom. This is an unexpected illumination of sustainable lifestyles. I now intentionally establish relationships with others. (Shunshun, Chengdu).

Other informants describe sustainable lifestyles “make their interactions with the world more friendly” (Bulin, Changsha) and “make friends who can exchange on a mental level” (Zhenzhen, Beijing). Social sustainability thus becomes a key aspect of sustainable lifestyle more so than environmentalism, as the founder of GoZero Waste affirms that “the community is built upon relationships. Lifestyle advocacy needs to begin with exploration of individuals and link between individuals” (Laotang, Beijing). I will discuss whether the implications of these accumulated social capital for potential public sphere actions in a later section.

**Traditional Values and Frugal Lifestyle**

In addition to the global trend of post-materialist pursuits, sustainable lifestyle is also rooted in Chinese traditional culture and the value of frugality. The founder of GoZero Waste summarizes this point as below:

Sustainability is not imported from overseas that requires certain knowledge or education level to get in touch with. Domestic culture has deep roots of sustainability...Generations before us practice this lifestyle naturally, and they are so accustomed to it that they don’t have to give it a name. (Laotang, Beijing)

One domestic culture root in Chinese society are traditional values such as Buddhist morality and philosophies such as harmony between nature and human. As Zeng et al. (2016) summarize, Chinese philosophies that emphasize non-anthropocentric human-nature relation is used to support a theory of ecological citizenship. The group leader of Chongqing states that Taoist philosophy of “live according to nature” is an important background factor for her sustainable lifestyle. Furthermore, lots of sustainable initiatives that GoZero Waste members engage in are related to Buddhist values. A mid-aged female ecological farming entrepreneur states that multiple ecological farms in Luoyang started because of Buddhism that advocate “equality of all creatures”. She was inspired by this perspective and supports ecological farming with this rationale. She also claims that a big percent of group members in Luoyang come to sustainable lifestyles from Buddhist vegetarianism or a group on bio-enzyme started by Buddhists (Lanshen, Luoyang). The influence of Buddhist morality and Chinese philosophies illustrate a unique resource of domestic zero waste movement.

Chinese society’s recent change in economic wealth also facilitates the inter-generational or even intra-generational legacy of frugality. Before the economic reform in 1978, the majority of households live below poverty line (Feng et al. 2009). The lived experience and social memory of material deficiency for those born in the 60s and 70s inherently leads to frugality.
Not being wasteful and maximizing resource use are natural to them even before the popularity of “sustainable lifestyle”. A female informant in her 40s says that:

The time when I was born was an age of deficiency and my family was always frugal. Not wasting food and consuming with limits are values in my bone - I can never think of wasting. There is a historical background to it. (Liyan, Beijing)

Informants who grow up living with the older generations reflect that this upbringing provides motivations of sustainable lifestyles. A male informant in his 30s recalled living with his grandparents for five years where their lifestyles are inherently sustainable. “All items used are natural, without any plastics. They are very economic with resources and instill the values in me” (Xin, Beijing). A female teacher in her 40s also states that her dad’s habits of shopping with baskets and reusing provide a vivid example for her to follow since she is young (Yuxi, Changsha). The inter-generational legacy of frugality provides valuable resources for sustainable lifestyle and there are a huge potential base of zero wasters in Chinese society.

Nevertheless, the motivation of frugality can also be a threat to sustainable lifestyle once the consumption power is available. First, economic cost is the main drive of sustainable actions, so “as long as economic price is eliminated, the frugality goes away. For example, they would ask for more plastic bags and don’t care” (Banxia, Kunming). Measurement of values by monetary amount also leads to lack of understanding from families. A female artisan in her 40 articulates the clash of values in monetary price as below:

My cousins find it funny that my lifestyles in terms of clothes, food, housing, and transportation are like my grandmas. They don’t understand it and see me as eccentric. For example, when I used water from laundry to clean toilet, they didn’t understand: water is very cheap, why bother? I told them that it was not about cheap or expensive. (Hewang, Beijing)

Second, the lack of purchasing power before can lead to even more acute desire for commodities and the corresponding symbolic status once the purchasing power becomes available (Elfick 2011). Sustainable lifestyles practices that give up the right to perceived better life become a source of conflict. A female master student in Shanghai recalls acute conflicts with her parents because her mom despises secondhand clothes as not fashionable and vegetarianism as irrational because they have gone past the age where meat was not affordable. “There were several times that I burst into tears and cried: there is something wrong with this society!” (Xiangcai, Shanghai). Another newly graduated college student who is now working in GoZero Waste states that:

My family doesn’t understand (my choice). They have some stereotypes of environmental protection industry and non-profit industry. They thought environmental protection is the job for janitors and street-sweepers. I am a college graduate, why do it? We are not a rich family. They are concerned that I need to have some financial wealth before going into environmental protection. Lots of their ideas are entrenched, such as getting plastic bags from the supermarket every time they go shopping. (Guyu, Luoyang)
The two quotes above illustrate the double-edged legacy of frugality and points to broader question about sustainable lifestyle and growing wealth. Similar to the environmental kuznet curve, the most advanced stage of sustainable lifestyle can be a habit of sustainable living driven by internalized non-material motivation. One female informant who recently rejoins a managerial job in Beijing illustrates this well:

I quit job in 2020 and my income dropped. This prompted me to leave with a smaller budget. I read books about simplicity and zero waste living... Sustainable and zero waste behaviors can become habit. Once the habit is formed, it’s like muscle memory that cannot be forgotten. Now I am back to work and my income level resumes, but I have formed the sustainable lifestyle habit and I am eager to influence others. (Liyan, Beijing)

De-Politicized Zero Waste Movement and Ecological Citizenship

Non-Activist Expressions as Pragmatic Strategies

If zero waste lifestyle is a movement, how do Chinese zero wasters promote it, and does it spill over to public sphere actions or political change? My findings show that GoZero Waste’s environmentalism through the expression of sustainable lifestyle is high de-politicized. While some members are actively influencing others, as shown in Liyan’s quote above, they avoid activism or social movement framing. Influence through personal actions and being non-confrontational are the major characteristics of zero wasters’ influence strategy. The first reason is that appearance of extreme activism can be counter-productive to spreading sustainable lifestyles. Liyan explains that:

“If I insist on a certain way, my husband might think I am too extreme. Does it has to be that way? You need some techniques, be a little more gentle, and don’t tag yourself as an “environmentalist”. You need to convince others with multiple benefits and stand in their shoes. In this way, others will buy your sustainable actions, and your impact is achieved” (Beijing).

Another zero waster in Shanghai similarly states her rationale against an ostensible “environmentalist” movement framing:

For example, my boyfriend is averse to sustainable or environmentalist discourse, but he practices even better than me. He hears the discourse so much and every time he hates it. Maybe aversion to grand narratives is part of his characteristics, but if everyone can live like him, environmental problems can be alleviated. (Lingcheng, Shanghai)

A third of the interviewees express reluctance to “environmentalism” framing like Liyan and Lingcheng, and none of the interviewees use any language of activism or movement. More than half of the interviewees appeal to non-environmental rationale in their attempts to influence others. These reveal that choosing to avoid environmentalist discourse can be a strategic move for social and cultural reasons, as environmentalism can be seen as extreme or cliched. Mobilizing rationale beyond environmentalism can better serve the purpose. Tracy, the GoZero Waste leader in Shenzhen who manages three active zero waste groups, argues that:

Everyone knows environmental protection is good, but it is always associated with government responsibilities or companies’ responsibilities. This concept scares people and is counter-productive. The most important thing (of sustainable lifestyle) is fun/happiness, a lifestyle that you enjoy, that is comfortable and self-coherent. Then it comes the environmental aspect. It attracts others to follow when they see that it gives
more freedom for family budget and improves life quality. (Tracy, Shenzhen)

To avoid framing of sustainable lifestyle as environmental activism or movement is thus a pragmatic strategy.

The second reason for de-politicized expression is the political sensitiveness of “activism” or “movement”. This is apparent and tacit in China’s limited political space for the civil sphere. GoZero Waste staff Guyu, a recent female college grad, states that:

Structural change is a bit sensitive, and we don’t want to spearhead initiatives like that. If there is a local environmental issue, group members might pay attention, but I don’t know the specific format. Before the Covid quarantine in Shanghai we don’t allow posting contents unrelated to zero waste living. (Luoyang)

Some leaders speak of negative experiences where political content got backfired:

I once showed a documentary on city pollution. A group member who works for government institutions warned me that these kind of negative portrayals can be somewhat sensitive, especially under the current social atmosphere. (Fengxia, Chongqing)

We suggest that people don’t post on political topics. Even when it’s political, don’t be too progressive. A group member was once sharply critiquing the government’s failure in waste recycling and asked group members to demonstrate on street. He got kicked out from the national zero waste group. (Ivy, Fuzhou)

Ivy and Fengxia’s quotes show that group leaders and group members self-censor for the survival of GoZero Waste. To avoid state-oriented politics is a pragmatic strategy to sustain the sustainable lifestyle movement. Yet, I argue that sustainable lifestyle should not be only understood as a survival strategy, but also a form of ecological citizenship where rights and duties are broader than state-oriented politics. Furthermore, my informants almost all engage in non-activist citizenship activities beyond individual lifestyle change. The informal networks of sustainable lifestyle practitioners spur community-based actions and social entrepreneurship that generate wider influence. Sustainable lifestyle practitioners’ perceptions of individual action and social change reflect a complex and nuanced reality of state-civil relationship.

**Sustainable Lifestyle as Ecological Citizenship**

Responsibility to the earth and the world is a central framing in informants’ narratives of relationships between sustainable lifestyle and social change. The ecological citizenship that emphasizes duties through reducing ecological footprint in a political space broader than state-oriented politics can best capture sustainable lifestyle practice. The informants emphasize the responsibility of individuals toward the whole humanity and particularly future generations given limited total ecological space. It is the systematic thinking of ecological impact on a large scale of time and place that makes individual acts meaningful:

There is certainly positive contribution- at least I can influence my kid. I think of the law of conservation of matter. The less waste I produce, the less burden the earth has. The life of future generations will be a little better, and a better situation can be prolonged. (Niuniu, Chengdu)

What I do for good might have an effect on another person or humanity as a whole. Maybe it doesn’t bring me benefits, but it’s flowing in the system. (Sun, Shenyang)

Everyone acts a small step and the society would progress. Be the change you want to
I believe that big things can change. We have to put it on a longer time scale, maybe a hundred year or two. At that time people will look back and find what we do meaningful. Someone has to act. (Ivy, Fuzhou)

I think about trash’s afterlife. Everyone produces a little bit, but there are so many people in China and in the world. This awareness makes me think a little bit more before buying and trashing. (Laowang, Nanjing)

When practicing ecological citizenship, informants navigate through uncertainties of the impact. Some are more optimistic about the efficacy of individual actions, while others are more pessimistic. What carries them through the uncertainties and non-reciprocal ecological duties is the reverse logic that not acting will make it worse. The concept of justice in ecological citizenship also embodies itself as not doing the wrong thing, which is avoid known and seen negative consequences of in the ecological space. A retired children’s book writer describes her stance as below:

Personal power is very small and the process is hard. But no matter how small individual action is, it is an action, someone is doing some thing and pushing for better for the earth. That is rewarding to think about, no matter how much or how many people can be influenced. If no one acts, the situation will be worse. If everyone acts, it might form a strong power over time. (Banxia, Kunming)

A Chinese teacher resonates “I feel powerless sometimes, but if I don’t continue, the overall power for change will even be weaker, and the (not sustainable) power will be more dominating” (Qiqi, Zhengzhou). A young man working in financial field takes a pessimistic stance toward individual efficacy and the society’s ability to go truly zero waste. When asked about why he still practices sustainable lifestyle, he responds that “the true sustainable practitioners are those who recognize the cruel reality but still contribute as much as they can. The world is doomed but we still can’t just stand by. We see imperfection but still perceives perfection. Thought we cannot reach, we still strive toward it” (Young, Shanghai).

The perception between individual change and political change is as nuanced as the convictions of ecological citizenship amidst uncertainties. While Dobson (2003)’s citizenship concept transcends nation state, the Chinese ecological citizenship conceptualization intimately involves citizen duties for the country’s eco-civilization (Zeng et al. 2016). How do ecological citizens with highly de-politicized sustainable lifestyle expressions perceive the role of state? I find that the importance of state-oriented politics is not downplayed at all. A third of the informants actually mention state-led change as the most effective. Hewang in Beijing reiterates that the plastic ban policy gives her the biggest hope to carry on in sustainable lifestyle and she doesn’t feel alone in the fight. Other informants affirm the predominant role that state needs to take in regulating environmental problems and cultivating a social environment that facilitate sustainable lifestyles.

The choice to avoid state-oriented politics is thus due to low efficacy in political opportunity structure, as de Moor et al. (2018) find. But if we should move beyond a conclusion of changing political structure in China, the avoidance of state-oriented politics is empowering to practice ecological citizenship rather than disempowering. GoZero Waste staff Guyu claims that “zero waste lifestyle is empowering because there are always solutions. I used to feel powerless in front of environmental issues”(Luoyang). A young wife who part-time involves in environmental education illustrates this situation:
My husband think personal effort is too small and futile. Government policies will change it. But I think individuals also need to act in addition to policies...And I just can’t stand by - I can’t just wait for policies and do nothing on my end. I also cannot go back to the old way. (Chaoxi, Chengdu)

Her quote reflects a nuanced state-civil relationship in environmental change. Everyone acknowledges the ultimate power of stat-led change, but it is a domain out of citizen’s involvement - the change is only to be “waited”. The role of citizens as voters, protestors, and activists doesn’t apply in China’s political opportunity structure. In this case, focusing on accountability of state politics might not best serve ecological citizenship but instead undermines citizen’s motivation to act as individuals. Some informants articulate this state-civil relationship in environmental issues:

When you mention environmentalism people might lose interest because they think it’s government and big corporations’ problem. I believe in acting small, even it’s a little bit of change, and mobilizing people around to change a little bit. (Fengxia, Chongqing)

Lots of people would say zero waste needs policies and technologies. I think all are needed. I am not saying that individual actions downplay technical change and policy change, but (individual actions) this is what I can intervene, so I intervene this part. (Shenbaise, Nanjing)

Top-down policies and state-level actions will certainly be faster- those are compulsory and can form social norms...But don’t reject good because it’s too small. As a citizen, whether it’s Chinese citizen, or earth citizen, it’s our duty. (Liyan, Beijing)

Since the input efficacy of political opportunity structure is low, non-activist citizenship behaviors become main site of change in addition to individual lifestyle change. The sustainable lifestyle practitioners are very active in the public sphere as well: three out of four informants engage in at least one non-activist citizenship behavior beyond individual lifestyle change. These include involvement in environmental NGOs volunteer work, environmental education events at work place, schools, and neighborhoods, donation to environmental organizations, community-based sustainability initiatives (e.g. swap parties or recycling). For example, Liyan mobilized several families in her personal circle to start food compost in her residential communities (Beijing); Yuxi leads eco-enzyme workshop in Hunan library (Changsha); Mao is a member of Wenzhou City Environmental Volunteer Association and regularly reports environmental pollution...

The networked ecological citizenship generates community-based environmental change (Ananthmaran 2014) and a virtuous cycle of ecological citizenship (Kennedy 2011). It doesn’t
lead to policy campaigns or conventional social movement, but it spurs growth of new organizations and social entrepreneurship. The leader of Nanjing group states that “a mom started her own group of outdoor trash pickup with other moms and kids. The environmental circle in a city is all connected here. People inspire each other and give birth to new groups” (Shenbaise, Nanjing). Tracy, the leader of Shenzhen group, develops a course for community zero waste awareness campaign and runs a not-for-profit enterprise which provides zero waste workshops for non-profit organizations, residential neighborhoods, and schools. Youzi, the leader of Guangzhou group and a senior in University, starts her rural sustainability focused social media account and partners with GoZero Waste in leading online book clubs. Lingfeng, a young entrepreneur, runs a vegetarian restaurant that partners with Chongqing GoZero Waste group for zero waste events. These actions in residential neighborhoods, on the internet, and through social entrepreneurship, can be the Chinese forms of civic activism when the state-oriented political realm is out-of-touch.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article discusses the practices of sustainable lifestyle in contemporary urban China and its implications for ecological citizenship. I use the case study of GoZero Waste, the largest social media-based zero waste lifestyle community founded in 2016. Based on in-depth interviews with 41 sustainable lifestyle practitioners in GoZero Waste, I find that sustainable lifestyle is a fusion of global trend of post-materialistic lifestyles and traditional values of frugality. The rapid economic change within generations in China facilitates this fusion, but cultural norm that associates purchasing power with symbolic status presents challenge to sustainable lifestyle. The middle-class, high cultural capital sustainable lifestyle practitioners represented by GoZero Waste members are leading cultural change to ecological citizenship. An ecological citizenship that transcends state-oriented citizenship or politics best captures the non-activist expression of sustainable lifestyle. I argue that de-politicized sustainable lifestyle is not only a pragmatic strategy in China but also a reflection of nuanced state-civil relationship in environmentalism in the current political opportunity structure. State and citizens act in different domains but avoidance of state-oriented politics doesn’t mean downplaying its importance. Non-activist citizenship actions become main repertoire in ecological citizenship practice beside individual lifestyle change.

My article has theoretical implications for civic involvement in environmentalism and practical implications for promoting sustainable lifestyles. I interact with several main discourses about civic involvement in environmentalism, including sustainable lifestyle movement, ecological citizenship, and state-civil relationship in China’s environmental governance. Since most sustainable lifestyle movement literature focuses on cases from Euro-America, my study contributes to the discussion by exploring the similarities and differences of sustainable lifestyle in a non-western, developing economies. My findings show that the growing post-materialist pursuits through sustainable lifestyle resonate with the global trend of post-materialism. Deliberations of environmental impact, anti-consumerism, mental and spiritual pursuits of self-identity, and search for interpersonal relationships are main drivers of sustainable lifestyles. In these regards, practicing sustainable lifestyle in China is to that in western societies. Some might question if anti-consumption is an inherent critique to Chinese’s post-reform political economy. I argue that anti-consumption is a common fighting against the
same larger capitalist economy that operates on consumerism rather than a country-specific political system, as shown in the informants’ narrative. Or from another perspective, quoting my informant, “zero waste group is still the minority and the mainstream still supports consumerism. We won’t de-stabilize the economy”.

Sustainable lifestyle in China also has different implications than the that in western societies. First, it draws on the traditional Chinese philosophies on harmony between human and nature and the legacy of frugality from previous generations’ lived experiences. The sustainable lifestyle movement, to some extent, keeps the social and cultural legacy fresh and enacts it in new form (Bebbington 1993). Second, the political sensitiveness of civic environmental activism makes the non-activism expressions of sustainable lifestyles a pragmatic strategy for enacting change. In the case of Chinese civic environmental participation, citizens are largely unable to engage in traditional politics through voting, protest, or campaign. This doesn’t mean they downplay the importance of political change, but it is a domain of change out of touch. My study thus illustrates a nuanced relationship between the state and the citizen in their actions for environmentalism.

The theoretical conversation with ecological citizenship also enables to re-examine what count as political. Dobson (2003) and also Chinese ecological citizenship theory define a citizenship that transcends the nation state. The political space is cosmopolitan, and ecological citizenship focuses on rights and duties to mitigate unequal ecological impact across time and place. This framing of citizenship is reflected in sustainable lifestyle practitioners’ conceptualization of their citizen responsibilities to the earth and to future generations. Moreover, when activist citizenship behaviors are not available, can non-activist citizenship behaviors, as I describe in the last section in findings, be a domain of collective actions? In the Chinese society where the non-state actors need to be understood differently (Guttman et al. 2018), can domains such as residential neighborhoods be non-state actors’ political space? The literature on sustainable lifestyle movement more or less point to social movement mobilization or political campaigns as the ultimate goal for civic environmentalism, how to re-define that ultimate goal and what count as effective civic environmentalism in the Chinese case? I argue that non-activist citizenship environmental actions are so far the best result of sustainable lifestyle movement. Future research can explore the relationships between sustainable lifestyle practitioners and engagement in activist citizenship behaviors, which are few but not non-existent (Zhang 2014; Lu and Steinhardt 2022). In particular, if state-oriented political actions can be conceptualized as ecological citizenship in China, what that looks like, and if the political engagement is effective.

The practical implications for promoting sustainable lifestyle are multiple. For different generations and citizens with different economic background, the strategies look different. Emphasizing post-materialist pursuits beyond environmentalist rhetoric can be effective for younger generations and citizens with high cultural capital in sustainable lifestyle mobilization. Since the post-materialist values cannot be in full-swing immediately after economic growth (Inglehart 2016), economic incentives (or sanctions) are still more effective for scaling up sustainable lifestyles. Future studies can explore the two groups based on quantitative measures and shed light on tailored policies as well as communication campaign strategies. Another potential direction is to study the extent and implications of growing anti-consumption lifestyle as consumer activism in China.
References


Appendix A  Full List of Interviewees’ Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (nickname)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Role in GoZero Waste</th>
<th>Job</th>
<th>Years joined</th>
<th>Marital</th>
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<tr>
<td>Laotang</td>
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<td>Beijing</td>
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<td>Married</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shunsun</td>
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Appendix B  GoZero Waste and Sustainable Lifestyle Survey (translated by the author)

1. Are you a member in GoZero Waste community? (Member can be a follower of GoZero Waste WeChat account, a member in GoZero Waste WeChat groups, or GoZero Waste events participant) [Multiple choice]
   Yes
   No (takes to the end of the survey)

2. City you are in [Multiple choice]
   Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Wuhan, Changsha, Nanjing, Chongqing, Chengdu, Fuzhou
   Tianjin, Qingdao, Jinan, Dalian, Shenyang, Xian, Suzhou, Hangzhou, Jiaxing, Jinhua, Luoyang, Zhengzhou, In rural areas, Other

3. Gender [Multiple choice]
   Male, Female, Other/ prefer not to say

4. Age group [Multiple choice]
   18 and under, 18-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50 and above

5. Work status [Multiple choice]
   Student, Full-time job, Part-time or self-employed, Homemakers, Retired, Unemployed, Other

6. Is your job or major related to environment/sustainability? [Multiple choice](such as environmental non profit, renewable energy, environmental science, agriculture, environmental protection)
   Yes, No

7. Marital status [Multiple choice]
   Not married, Married, Married with kids, Other

8. Education level [Multiple choice] (please choose the highest level you attained or are attaining)
   High school and below, Bachelor degrees, Graduate and above, Prefer not to say

9. Income level (monthly income in RMB)[Multiple choice]
   2000 and below, 2000-5000, 5000-10000, 10000-50000, 50000-100000, 100000 and above, Prefer not to say

10. Faith/religion [Multiple choice](can choose not to answer)
    Communist Party member, Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, Muslim, Spiritual but not religious
II. Involvement with GoZero Waste and sustainable lifestyles (all multiple choice, you are half way done! Thank you!)

11. How did you join GoZero Waste? [Multiple choice] (Please select most direct reason)
Through the WeChat account
Others invited, Participated in in-person events, Participated in online events,
Through other environmental organizations’ events, Know the founder, Other____

12. **When did you join GoZero Waste?** [Drop-down menu] (if you cannot remember, choose the closest)

13. **Why did you join GoZero Waste?** [Multiple choice](Can choose multiple ones that apply)
Interest in sustainable lifestyles/zero-waste/simplicity
Seek meaningful community, friendship
Others invited
No particular reason, just curious
Giveaway and get second-hand items
Other____

14. **Why are you interested in sustainable lifestyles?** [Multiple choice](Can choose multiple ones, no more than four) Coded into binary variables
Aware of environment problems and want to do something
Minimalism, simplicity
Consistent with my personal life habits and beliefs
Second-hand items and make best use of things
Health and well-being
Economic, save money
Vegetarianism/compost/ecological agriculture
Family upbringing
Other____
Actually I dont really care

15. Are there experiences or events that start your interest in sustainable lifestyle and practices? [Text response] (can choose not to reply)

16. How active are you in the group? [Multiple choice]
Check group messages almost everyday, actively post or maintain the group
Frequently check group messages and interact in the group
Sometimes check group messages or interact in the group
Rarely check group messages
Other____
17. What impacts do GoZero Waste have on your sustainable lifestyle? [Multiple choice] (can choose multiple that apply)
   Not really any impact
   Enhance awareness of sustainability and environmental protection
   Prompt my sustainable behavior change
   Get sustainable living tips and information
   Provide sense of belonging and group support
   Provide platform for secondhand item exchange
   See the diversity of sustainable lifestyle and broaden my vision
   Group messages are not really conducive to sustainable living
   Other____

18. What parts of GoZero Waste impact you the most? [Multiple choice] (choose all that apply)
   City group chat
   National group chat
   In-person events
   Online events
   Public account articles
   365 blogging
   Other____

19. Have you invited others to join GoZero Waste group or events? [Multiple choice]
   No
   Invited but others not interested
   Invited one or two
   Invited three and more
   Other____

20. Do you often talk about sustainable lifestyles with people around or share about sustainable lifestyles? [Likert-scale] 1 represents least often, 5 represents most often
   1~5

III. Understanding and practices of sustainable lifestyle (Second to last page, thank you!)

21. What your understanding of “sustainable lifestyles”? What is sustainable lifestyle to you? [Text response] (there is no right or wrong answer)

22. Which stage in sustainable lifestyle change do you think you are in? [Likert-scale] (1 represents the lowest, 5 represents the highest)
   1~5

23. How well are you practicing the sustainable lifestyle behaviors below? [Likert-scale matrice ]

4
(1 represents not doing, degree of practice increase with the number, with 5 represents achieving it)

1~5
Refuse single use plastics (BYO)
Minimize consumption, buy only when needed
Second-hand over buying new
Reuse and giveaway
Waste classification and recycle
Green transportation
Reduce takeaway, minimize food packaging waste
Economic use of resources
Vegetarian, reduce meat consumption
Eco-friendly products

24. Beside individual lifestyle, have you participated in public environmental actions below? [Multiple choice] (choose all that apply)
Environmental organizations’ events
Environmental awareness and education activities at my community, school, or workplace
Reporting environmental problems, policy advocacy, petitions
Donation for environmental projects
Environmental volunteer and environmental education
Public gatherings or activism for the environment
So far no
Other____

24. What are the biggest challenges or barriers you meet in sustainable lifestyle practice? [Multiple choice] (Please choose the most salient ones, no more than 4)
Lack of time and energy
Constraints of economic and living conditions
Lack of external conditions support
Feel guilty or frustrated about not doing well enough
People around don't support
Inconvenient
Lack of information or methods
Impulsive consumption
Feel powerless
Other____

IV. Sustainable lifestyles and Environmental Sustainability (this is the last page, only 3 questions left, you are great! Thanks for your participation)

26. Please select how much you agree with the following statements about sustainable lifestyle [Likert-scale Matrice] (1 represents strongly disagree, 3 represents neutral, 5 represents strongly agree) 1~5
a. Lifestyle in modern society has caused great pressure and negative impact on the environment
b. The negative impact put things I value under threat (such as nature, biosphere, future generations etc)
c. I am responsible for contributing to environmental and social sustainable development through personal lifestyles
d. I can reduce environmental impact and contribute to sustainable development through personal practice of sustainable lifestyle
e. I consider the environmental impacts of every behavior in life and this awareness influences my behaviors
f. Practicing sustainable lifestyle is a way of civic participation in environmental sustainability and a statement of my stance to environmental problems
g. I am willing to change my lifestyle and living standard for sustainability goals
h. Sustainable lifestyle is a very important part of my self-identity and value

27. Do you think individual lifestyle change is effective for achieving sustainability? [Multiple choice] (please choose the one that comes closest to your view)
   Effective, but actions in public sphere are also necessary
   Effective, but policy and technology change are more effective
   Very effective, if everyone changes lifestyles sustainability can be achieved
   Individual change is hardly effective
   Other ______

28. What support do you think are needed for sustainable lifestyle change? [Text response] (Support can be different aspects, material, non-material, inside GoZero Waste community and outside the community)