

12.12.2000

Chinese Citizens' Views of Environmental Issues and of Industries

Contribution to the Sino-German Environmental Conference on 12./13.12.2000, Beijing, from results of the GLOBAL ISSUE MONITOR Survey Programme

Dr. Bernhard Rieder, General Manager Ri*QUESTA GmbH

Transfer of knowledge for successful cooperation on environmental protection is a central theme at the Sino-German Environment Conference 2000 - and a challenge at many levels. It covers not only environmental protection technology and the legal and political frame of conditions, but also the question of how the needed symbiosis of "technology push" and "society demand" can be guaranteed: The success of environmental protection and sustainability strategies initiated by politicians and business depends on cooperation with the public at large.

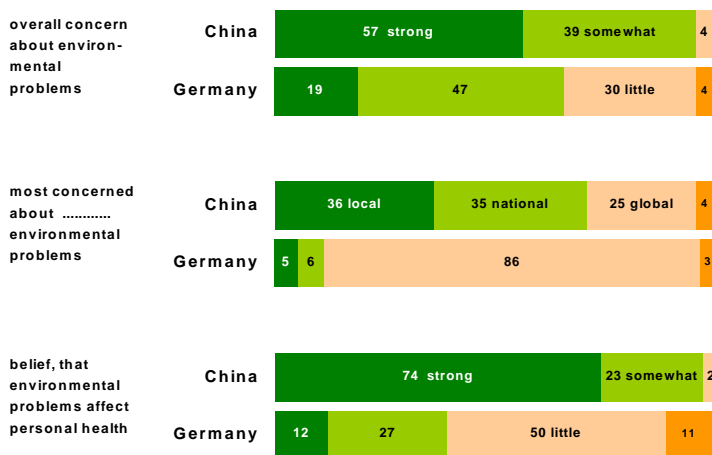
When countries try to cooperate from different stages of economic development and from different cultures, it is especially important that those involved develop a common understanding of the specific demands and viewpoints of the national publics concerning issues of environmental protection and sustainability. Furthermore, public opinion in China is becoming increasingly important for companies who wish to improve their profile and reputation in global competition:

What about the spectrum of public expectations and attitudes that industries and companies are facing in China?

Based on nationally representative surveys, the GLOBAL ISSUE MONITOR provides answers to numerous aspects of this question:

Status of the Environmental Theme

Level and Focus of Environmental Concerns



According to the latest survey carried out in May 2000, 57% of the respondents in China (53% in April 1998) are *very concerned about environmental problems*. In total, 96% of the urban population are now *very or quite concerned* about environmental issues.

"Significant concern about environmental problems" is currently a more significant phenomenon in China than in Germany. In Germany, only 2/3 of the population stated that they were very or quite concerned about environmental problems in May 2000.

In a comparison between China and Germany, there are also very clear differences regarding the type and direction of environmental concerns, e.g. in the following points:

- Whereas in China more than 70% of the respondents are most concerned about **local and national environmental problems**, in Germany only 11% said so. This correlates with the fact that only half of the Chinese respondents consider the environmental quality in the area where they live as being good, compared to about 9 out of 10 respondents in Germany.
- **Concern about hazards to health due to environmental problems** plays a very important role in China. Around 3/4 of the Chinese people (+12% since 1998) see their personal health highly at risk because of environmental problems compared to only 12% in Germany.
- Out of eleven environmental problems, the greatest problems perceived in China are clearly local problems, the predominant ones being **air and water pollution and automotive exhaust**. Germans are much more concerned about global problems.

However, time series show that the **awareness of global environmental problems is also growing rapidly in China**. In 1998 30% of the Chinese saw "climate changes caused by the greenhouse effect" as a very serious environmental problem, whereas in May 2000 the figure is 40%.

Some corporate headquarters in Germany are still cultivating a view of the world where Germans are seen as being oversensitive to ecological issues and people in countries such as China are seen as only being interested in improving their economic standards of living as soon as possible. Such a view is far off reality. When people were asked about China's *most urgent challenges* today, a more frequent spontaneous reply was "*environmental protection/pollution*" rather than "*employment/unemployment*".

In China, German companies should expect a level and quality of environmental concern which is more demanding and more challenging than it ever was in Germany. The particularly high expectations are the result of concern about environmental problems at all levels simultaneously - local, national and global, combined with an extraordinarily high level of concern about personal health.

Views of the Role of Business in general

Because of their history, people in China and Germany see the roles of various institutions on future issues in general, and on environmental protection in particular, very differently:

- **In Germany**, the majority of the people think government/ authorities should have a leading role. In its pluralistic society, **business and industry** do have, however, a **clearly independent and distinctive competence**. They are independent "actors" in environmental protection and future sustainability issues.
- In contrast, people **in China** think that the **leading role** is **absolutely in the hands of state institutions**, i.e. in the hands of government at national, province and local level and in the hands of respective authorities.

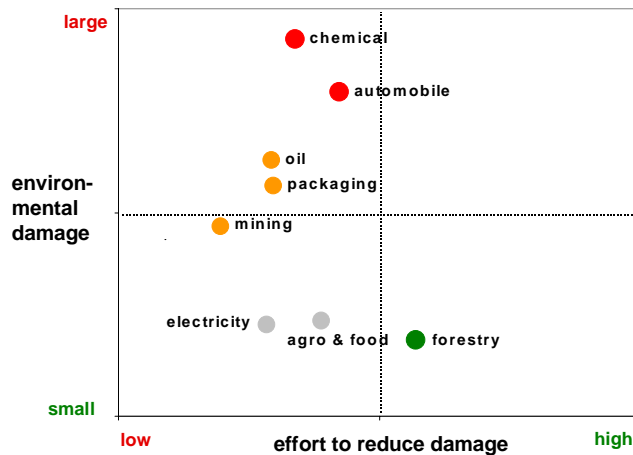
The question that arises for business is whether it can afford to accept being seen in this passive position. It is easy to predict from current developments in environmental and sustainability issues, from public perceptions and from the economic developments, that business will very soon and increasingly be held responsible as an independent sector by the general public - whether it likes it or not.

For **all foreign companies and for German companies too, their initial position in public's perception is critical**. Most Chinese citizens hold the opinion that *Chinese* companies contribute more to economic growth and wealth in China, do more for environmental and health protection and safety in China and are more aware of their social responsibilities in China than *foreign* companies.

The Image of various Industries and Companies

Surveys were conducted in May 2000 in more than 30 other countries and among 30,000 respondents all over the world. Among the Chinese too, there is a clear "ecological ranking" of certain industries [see chart next page]:

Environmental Image-Position of Industries



- **Chemical, automotive, oil, packaging and** have a **defensive eco-image** in the eyes of the public in China. The extent to which they cause environmental pollution is rated to be higher than their efforts to reduce the pollution they cause.
- **Electricity utilities, agriculture and food industries** are not (yet) seen as being critical with regard to environmental protection and sustainability issues.
- The **timber and forestry industry** is the only one currently rated at a clearly positive eco-image.

Comparing the positions of these industries with those in the past and internationally it can be seen that **chemicals and especially automobiles** are currently receiving **particularly high attention in environmental protection and sustainability issues** among the Chinese public. Pollution to the environment caused by these industries is now considered higher than 2 years ago. And "cars" were spontaneously named most frequently when the public was asked for the most pollutive consumer product.

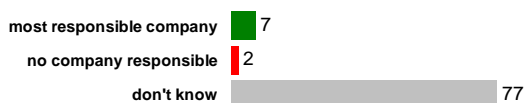
It remains open whether these images do reflect "reality" on industry issues concerning environmental pollution, industries' commitments to environmental protection, and their performance to the benefit of other industries and of society. Individual industries could use these survey results to **develop their communication and reputation strategies towards the public in China.**

This also applies to **individual companies** in these industries:

AUTOMOBILE INDUSTRY



CHEMICAL INDUSTRY



- Competitive images are pretty much established in the **automotive industry**. The best positioned company was named spontaneously by 15%. Approximately half were able to name a company.
- In comparison, competitive views of large companies of the **chemical industry** with regard to ecological performance and responsibility have hardly developed. Around 3/4 still do not have any company in mind.

Summary and Outlook

The environmental theme, its significance among public concerns, and its impact on the degree of free play in business and politics are, too, following the laws of the globalization process. The cyclic changes of economic and ecological priorities, known from developments in previous decades in Europe, are no longer acceptable, from the viewpoint of the public in China either. Acute economic, ecological and social issues are inseparably tied.

Technologically innovative developments, including developments in environmental protection, need public's acceptance and support to develop effectively and successfully. Investors in China, foreigners in particular, need to cope with this challenge in their own business interest.

Den **IEM-Report 2000** mit den kompletten Ergebnischarts (ppt), einer Management-Summary (pdf) und detaillierten Ergebnistabellen (xls) können Sie umgehend beziehen und nutzen.

Klicken Sie einfach auf [Anfragen](#) und gehen Sie dort zu [Ri*QUESTA®-Trendstudien](#).