

RUMBLE IN THE ECO-JUNGLE

China's Green Non-Governmental Organizations

BY KATRIN FIEDLER



“Better city, Better life.” With slogans like these, China’s developed cities try to reconcile urbanization and sustainable development.

Photo courtesy of the Amity Foundation

While Western mainstream media frequently report on the dismal situation of China’s environment, the same media rarely focus on the country’s emerging green movement, which deserves more attention. Besides illuminating important efforts in combating the country’s deteriorating environmental situation, studying China’s green Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) sheds light on the conditions under which civil society organizations in China work and how they cope within a restrictive political environment. Aspects that lend themselves to discussion and exploration include a comparison of the history of China’s green NGOs with the emergence of environmental civil society organizations in the West, different understandings and methods of political activism, and the question of whether China’s emerging non-governmental sector is paving the way for a genuine civil society or “third sphere”—the political space in which autonomous citizens voice their interests, usually considered a requisite for functioning democracies.

China’s current environmental situation results not only from three decades of rapid economic development, but also from long-standing man-made problems typical of traditional economies. Today, age-old problems such as soil erosion and deforestation coexist with industrial environmental damage such as air, water, and ground pollution.¹ Perhaps most immediately threatening of all is the water shortage in the west and north; currently, sandstorms regularly remind Beijingers that the Gobi desert is encroaching on the capital, and desertification affects large swathes of the country’s strategically important west. With twenty-two percent of the world’s population, but only seven percent of the global arable land on its territory, China’s natural resources are stretched to their limits under the best of circumstances. The survival of millions of Chinese, and hence the political survival of the government, hinges largely on the sustainable use of China’s natural resources.

As a result, the central government has paid increasing attention to environmental issues in the past years. These days, droves of electric bikes

whizz through Beijing. They are testimony to a new policy that aims to foster electric vehicles in an attempt to curb air pollution in the cities. Greening has become a noticeable part of city planning. With “Better City, Better Life,” Shanghai’s motto for the 2010 EXPO, one of the country’s flagship metropolises has officially adopted sustainable urban development as its guiding principle.²

However, the government is not the only actor engaged in the battle for better environmental protection. Since the mid-1990s, various types of NGOs dedicated to environmental issues have been active in the country. Most of these organizations are genuine grassroots organizations that were set up by ordinary citizens, although a smaller number of NGOs exist which were originally government-initiated or enjoy close ties with the government. In what follows, NGO refers to all social organizations which enjoy a certain amount of independence from the party-state and voice interests of the citizens vis-à-vis the state.

The Legal Framework for NGOs In China

The government’s policy of reform and opening made the establishment of independent organizations only possible in the mid-1980s; environmental NGOs started to appear a decade later. Like other Chinese NGOs, the country’s environmental organizations function within a limiting political framework set by an authoritarian party-state.

While a literal translation of the term “non-governmental organization” (*feizhengfu zuzhi*) exists, it can carry overtones of “anti-governmental organization.” Most Chinese therefore prefer the more innocuous *minjian zuzhi* (people’s organization) or *shehui tuanti* (social organization) to describe these independent entities.

A number of requirements have to be fulfilled in order to legally register an NGO in China. Above all, the legal registration of an NGO requires its “adoption” by a related government body. This work unit is the official government partner in charge of this NGO and can be held responsible for

its work. For example, a Shanghai-based organization focusing on youth work could try to register with the local branch of the All China Youth Federation, or an NGO working nationally in the field of forest protection could try to register with the State Forestry Administration. Not surprisingly, NGOs intending to work on sensitive issues often find it difficult to find the required government sponsor. Few government bodies are eager to take on potentially controversial issues as long as these have not yet become part of the official political agenda. This practice is made even more difficult by the fact that for each thematic area of work, only one organization can be registered per place.³

The government sponsor of a particular NGO is referred to as *popo* (mother-in-law) in Chinese. Until recently, it was customary for young Chinese women in the countryside to move in with their in-laws, an arrangement which often led to tensions with the mother-in-law. Describing the government sponsor as the “mother-in-law” is a usage that highlights the ambivalent relationship between NGOs and the government entity with which they are affiliated. In order to ensure the maintenance of a smooth relationship, many organizations therefore include representatives of their government body on their boards. According to our observations, the actual influence of the *popo* is limited to formal occasions, and day-to-day operations usually are implemented without interference.

Besides the official affiliation with a government body, emerging NGOs wishing to be legally acknowledged need to provide opening capital. Depending on the organizational form, up to eight million RMB (approximately US \$1.1 million) is required for a “foundation” (*jijinhui*) that aims to work and fundraise on a national scope in China.⁴ Since many Chinese NGOs start their lives as volunteer-run initiatives, coming up with the required sum can be a huge impediment for legal registration.

On the surface, the fear of organized political activism, as revealed through the elaborate requirements regarding the registration of NGOs, may seem to be a modern phenomenon in the Chinese socialist context. But the need for strict control also replicates the historical fear of organized

groups outside of the political orthodoxy, which already existed in the traditional Chinese imperial system. Throughout history, Chinese rulers have been fearful of *luan* (chaos) caused by political uprisings.⁵

Given these obstacles in obtaining official registration, many independent Chinese organizations are not registered at all and, as a result, operate in a legally shady situation. Others register as a business and, consequently, renounce important rights such as preferential tax treatment or the possibility to engage in fundraising. Organizations especially intent on embarking on controversial issues and forms of advocacy often prefer to register as a business in order to avoid government supervision. In recent years, the possibility to generate support and activism from the Internet has created an additional option for aspiring groups; some start as Internet-based groups and thus avoid the immediate need to register.⁶

Due to these various forms of registration, it is extremely difficult to come up with reliable figures for NGOs in China. Some observers estimate the existence of up to 800,000 NGOs. A figure of this magnitude would likely include any type of independent organization from the local calligraphy club to national commercial associations. Looking for socially active NGOs or those with a potentially political agenda, these figures melt down rapidly. For the environmental sector, observers estimate a figure of at least 2,000 registered independent groups—not counting university groups, of which at least another 200 exist.⁷ Furthermore, China Development Brief, a small organization dedicated to observing and fostering the Chinese civil society sector, lists forty-five international environmental NGOs active in China.⁸

The Development of China’s Green NGOs

Environmental issues found their way into China’s emerging civil society in different ways, and the various types of green NGOs that exist today represent them. The first group consists of home grown NGOs that were founded specifically with the aim of working in environmentalism. For students of China, these are the most interesting environmental groups in the country today. They not only show Chinese approaches towards envi-

Improving Asia’s Environmental Quality through Market Incentives

Successfully battling Asia’s environmental challenges certainly depends upon significant responses from Asian governments and citizens. Still, government policies and citizen activism are not the only ways to improve the environment. In fact in Asia (and elsewhere), government policies have often precipitated environmental catastrophes; consider the long-term policies of the USSR that resulted in the destruction of the Aral Sea in Central Asia or the man-made famine and desertification in large part perpetuated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during and after the “Great Leap Forward.”

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Mountain Institute in the US and China’s indigenous varieties of the same genre are engaged in significant environmental preservation efforts in Asia. These efforts are highlighted in this issue, but readers interested in having students consider the positive role market incentives and property rights can play in helping to solve some of the environmental problems of the world’s most populous region should be aware of the Bozeman Montana-based Political Economy Research Center (PERC).

PERC, founded thirty years ago, is dedicated to improving environmental quality through free market incentives like pri-

vate property rights and markets. It began as a think tank where scholars documented the ways that government regulation and bureaucracy often led to environmental degradation, and originated the idea of free market environmentalism (FME) by finding examples in North America and elsewhere of how FME was already working.

Interested teachers and students are encouraged to visit PERC’s website at <http://www.perc.org/index.php> to learn more about FME. The following three Asia case studies, all written in accessible prose for general audiences, should be of interest:

Jeff Bennet, “Growing Green in China” PERC Reports, Volume 26, No.3, fall 2008 at <http://www.perc.org/articles/article1078.php>.

This report describes the desertification caused by CCP collectivized agriculture and, beginning in 1999, gives an account of government policy reversal through the initiation of cash and grain incentives to farmers for private agricultural environmental countermeasures, such as planting tree seedlings and perennial grasses. The author also discusses government creation of multi-decade guarantees that give farmers control over their outputs as a possible step toward providing specific

ronmental issues and political activism, but are also perhaps the most shining example of the evolving civil sector or “third sphere.” In this article, we are primarily concerned with these home grown environmental NGOs.

International NGOs that have moved their programs into China form a second group. Traditionally, this was only possible by working through a local counterpart. Among one of the earliest foreign NGOs to be active in China was the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF), which started its first program in China in 1980. Since 2004, it has become possible for international NGOs to work directly in China, i.e., to open local offices and work through them rather than through Chinese partner organizations.⁹

The third group consists of Chinese NGOs established with other missions in mind, but who have incorporated green approaches and issues into their work over the years. The Amity Foundation, a Chinese NGO which has been active in development work, education, and social work since 1985, is one example. Both as a result of mounting environmental pressures and raised awareness among its staff and clients, the foundation’s rural development programs have literally “greened” over the years and now routinely include elements such as solar and biogas energy, reforestation, and organic farming.¹⁰

Tao Fu, head of *China Development Brief*, sees the founding of “Friends of Nature” (*Ziran zhi you*) in 1994 as the establishment of China’s first green NGO. Fu notes that,

*The founding ceremony took place in a small park in the western suburbs of Beijing; the official reason for coming together was the birthday of founder Liang Congjie. This shows how sensitive at that time collective activities of unofficial nature still were.*¹¹

Today’s Chinese environmentalists mockingly call the activities of those early days—tree planting, bird watching, and rubbish collection—the “Three Olds.” However, stories like the founding ceremony of Friends of Nature show how exceptional such activities were at the time. Since then, grassroots movements have in some cases exerted considerable influence.

long-term property rights incentives for farmers to engage in agricultural practices that help preserve soil resources.

Gijsbert Nollen, “Transforming Pollution into Profits” PERC Reports, Volume 25, No.4, winter 2007 at <http://www.perc.org/articles/article1019.php>.

This report describes how a private company in Thailand created economic incentives for large agro-industrial companies to clean up their wastewater using a process that converts methane and biogases into needed energy and then giving sellers a chance to buy it back at a reduced cost.

Barun Mitra, “Saving the Tiger: China and India move in Radically Different Directions” PERC Reports, Volume 23, fall 2006 at <http://www.perc.org/articles/article822.php>.

This analysis demonstrates how India’s strict conservation laws are failing to preserve the tiger while China is experimenting with Tiger breeding bases run by private as well as government organizations. The PERC Report honors “the free market of ideas” precept by providing a link at the end of this report where readers may access an opposing viewpoint.



Crumbling away: Desertification threatens to bury the remnants of The Great Wall of China (Ningxia Province). Photo by Katrin Fiedler

Efforts to protect the Tibetan antelope by some of the early NGO activists were so successful that the animal subsequently became one of the 2008 Olympic mascots.

China’s green NGOs entered a second phase in 2003, triggered by improved environmental legislation. In particular, a law passed in that same year required comprehensive environmental impact assessments (EIA) for construction projects. Advocacy through popular pressure (rather than indirect lobbying) started to become more and more common because of this legislation. Among the most prominent activities of that time were various movements opposing the construction of dams for water energy. In the case of the Nujiang Dam, grassroots activists twice achieved a postponement from the central government; a major victory for the nascent movement. Situated in Yunnan province, the Nujiang Dam was particularly controversial because of its location in a pristine environment inhabited mostly by poor ethnic minorities. The fact that the controversy surrounding the Nujiang Dam came at a time when construction of the similarly controversial Three Gorges Dam was underway added fuel to the debate.

In this phase, the demands for environmental protection turned more and more into a civil rights debate. There was a growing awareness among grassroots groups of being representatives of the public interest, and environmental demands were couched in terms of social justice and public environmental interest. Through this change in perspective, China’s environmental activism acquired a completely new political dimension.

With an increasingly rights-oriented environmental debate touching on issues such as the rights of local peoples, cultural protection, and the publication of environmental data, Chinese NGOs started to use legal

means to pursue these aims. For the first time it became possible to file cases arguing for the right of environmental preservation and the public good. One prominent example of an NGO with a legal background that specializes in environmental cases is the Center for Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims, established in 1999 and based at the Chinese University of Politics and Law.¹² In 2009, the Chinese Association for Environmental Protection (*Zhongguo huanbao lianhehui*) managed to file two successful lawsuits in the name of the public (against the Ministry of Land and Resources as well as a company causing pollution); these victories were landmarks for China's green NGOs.

Other important areas of work for local NGOs since 2003 have been household waste management and monitoring river pollution. By compiling local pollution data for China's air and water pollution, local NGOs managed to expose some of the major polluting companies, and, as a result of the disgrace suffered, these companies were forced to make amends. In conjunction with international organizations active in China, local NGOs initiated a number of educational and promotional activities regarding climate change, including an initiative for voluntarily restricting air conditioning to a room temperature of 26°C (78.8°F).

Looking back at the development of China's green NGOs since 1994, one discernible trend is the "universalization" of mandates and approaches. Confronted with the multidimensional causes and effects of environmental damage, many NGOs have come to adopt an integrated approach to their work. "To protect a forest species, it is not enough to save the forest—you also have to offer the local population sustainable ways of income generation," summarizes Chris Chaplin from WWF China.¹³ In some instances, the side effects of environmental damage even mutated into an NGO's main concern, as happened in the case of the Nujiang Dam: "The refugee problem has become problem number one, the ecology only number two," Wang Yongchen from Green Garden (*Lü Ji-ayuan*) said at one point about his organization's involvement in the matter.¹⁴ Despite the trend toward broader work mandates for existing NGOs, highly specialized NGOs with a very distinct local base have increasingly come into existence since 2000 (such as the Black-Neck Crane Association in Yunnan or the Yueyang Wetland Protection Association in Hunan).¹⁵

In less than fifteen years, China's green NGOs have significantly broadened their outlook and approach. They have matured from organizations pursuing isolated causes, such as species protection, into entities concerned with citizen's environmental rights, social justice, and the preservation of local cultures. With this fast track to a rights-based, comprehensive approach to environmental issues, the development of China's green NGOs replicates the development of their Western counterparts in a condensed way. It is not only the self-imposed mandates that have broadened and matured. China's green NGOs have also learned during this time span to make full use of, and even expand, the range of means available to them within a restrictive political system.

Green NGOs with Chinese Characteristics

Unlike Northern American, Western European, or even some Southeast Asian NGOs with their highly confrontational forms of advocacy, Chinese NGOs have to resort to less militant means in pursuit of their aims. Inciting citizens to illegal demonstrations or similar approaches would quickly eliminate any existing spaces for green NGOs; as a result, their strategy is to work towards system change from within. Rather than outrightly challenging the government on certain issues, they form alliances with enlightened individual politicians, exploit divergences of interest between different government bodies, use media exposure, and enlist scholars sympathetic to their aims to back up their claims. This use of existing channels can be considered a Chinese adaptation of Western forms of lobbying and advocacy.

The environment in which Chinese NGOs operate creates a number of formal and informal channels for the formulation of interests. Among these distinctive Chinese features are blurred boundaries between the government and non-governmental organizations. While a number of genuinely independent organizations exist, there are others that, though nominally independent, are closely linked to the government. The Chinese Association for Environmental Protection is one example of an organization that works as a conduit between grassroots interests and the government. Founded by high-ranking retired officials, it also maintains friendly contacts with grassroots organizations and thus enhances their legitimacy vis-à-vis the government. The necessity to be affiliated with a government sponsor also contributes to the blurring of boundaries between the government and NGOs.

Another typically Chinese channel for voicing interests is China's Political Consultative Conferences. As parallel bodies to the People's Congresses of the various administrative levels, the Political Consultative Conferences constitute a second political chamber with advisory function in which representatives of religious bodies, ethnic minorities, and other social groups are active. In recent years, representatives from NGOs have assumed positions in various Political Consultative Conferences; in other cases, NGO representatives lobby their members indirectly.

In comparison with other Chinese NGOs, the country's green grassroots organizations have certainly benefited from overlapping interests with the state. Shared aims with at least parts of the central government, in particular the Ministry of Environmental Protection, helped to create the latitude necessary for their activities. The fact that an organization like the aforementioned Center for Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims, based at the Chinese University of Politics and Law, highlights one such mechanism. The central government has an interest in exposing environmental offenders and in improving the design and implementation of its environmental laws.

China's central government is not a monolith when it comes to environmental policies. Clashing economic and environmental interests create differing interest groups not only in society as a whole, but also within the Chinese government. As a result, NGOs and the Ministry of Environment occasionally cooperate in an almost symbiotic manner, since each of them alone would not be powerful enough to bring about the desired change. The ministry's implicit tolerance of the publication of environmental data and of broad public participation in decision-making processes is a case in point.

At the same time, the media and many scholars have become more and more entwined with environmental grassroots movements. The Nujiang Dam case in particular helped to shape a social environment sympathetic to NGOs, and forged enduring links between the media, grassroots activists, and scholars. Rising environmental awareness in the general population also helped to create a pool of potential activists, most notably through environmental organizations based at universities.

Much of what Chinese NGOs have achieved over the past years would not have been possible without the inspiration, expertise, and financial support from their international counterparts. In recent years, Chinese contacts with international NGOs have broadened to include not only Western organizations, but also movements based in African and other Asian countries that hope to win China as an advocate for their interests.

Conclusion

The government's attitude toward green NGOs reveals the general ambivalence of Chinese policymakers regarding the civil society sector. With pressing social, developmental, and environmental needs and the overall retreat of the state from large areas of provision of services, the government is eager to enlist the help of independent players. However, the wish to control what they are doing remains deeply ingrained in the minds of policymakers.

In comparison with other local NGOs, China's indigenous environmental NGOs inhabit a privileged political position and enjoy, relatively speaking, greater freedom of political expression. This is highlighted by the fact that over the course of only fifteen years, China's green NGOs have been able to adopt a rights-based discourse vis-à-vis the government, and public hearings have become a new political tool in the increasingly volatile dealings with environmental activists, scientists, and ordinary citizens.

No matter what policy area we examine, despite its monolithic appearance, the Chinese government is fragmented. Factions and varying ideas of politics and policies can be found everywhere within the seemingly unified entity of the party-state. Along a similar vein, policy aims and measures tend to vary between the central government and its local counterparts. The big discrepancy between strict environmental legislation and ambitious environmental aims from the central government's side in contrast to their actual implementation at the local level is a case in point, highlighting the difficulties policymakers may face from their own ranks. At the same time, the fact that environmental activists purposely make use of these political divergences underscores the chances inherent in increasing political diversification within the system of the party-state.

With its unusual openness for public participation and transparency as political means, the field of environmental protection is ultimately also a field for experiments in social and political reforms. Pan Yue, Vice Minister of Environment, clearly admitted this in an interview with *China Youth Daily* (*Zhongguo Qingnianbao*):

In terms of political sensitivity and economic profits, the field of environmental protection is less complicated than the fields of politics, economics or culture, and its fruits can be enjoyed by a maximum number of people. Therefore it is a suitable arena of experimentation for political and social reforms.

Pan adds that measures fostered by his ministry, such as broad-scale political participation, could provide important lessons for the "development of a socialist democracy."¹⁶

Despite some impressive successes achieved within a short time, China's green NGOs are confronted with a number of challenges. Facing a dwindling willingness from international partners to support organizations in a country with a booming economy, many NGOs will have to resort more and more to local fundraising. How this will develop remains to be seen. Traditionally, Chinese have given to causes of social work, but "green" donations from ordinary citizens are still a novelty. Studies also show that many citizens prefer to direct their charitable giving to government-run bodies which they consider to be more trustworthy. Besides, the legal framework for fundraising is only starting to emerge. Unclear or unfavorable legislation serves as an impediment for the development of an individual or corporate culture of giving. Overall, a culture of corporate social responsibility and individual giving is only slowly emerging.

Another challenge that China's young green movement is facing is the question of how to expand environmental activism beyond the urban sphere. Currently, China's green NGOs are almost exclusively based in the cities with their financial resources, well-educated citizens, and networking opportunities. How to serve and enlist China's rural dwellers in environmental affairs, which very often effect them in dramatic ways, is perhaps the most daunting task lying ahead of China's environmentalists.¹⁷ Here, like elsewhere, the rural-urban gap constitutes one of China's biggest development challenges. With its justified hunger for quick and substantial economic development, the country's impoverished rural population is most susceptible to outdated industrial development models with a heavy emphasis on the overuse of natural resources. At the same time, this very overuse of resources has been and threatens to be the cause of much poverty in China. After demonstrating a broad environmental awareness at events such as the EXPO, the real challenge for Chinese environmental-

ists and policymakers will be how to implement sustainable development concepts in the country's rural areas—or, to rephrase the EXPO slogan, how to achieve "Better Countryside, Better Life". ■

NOTES

1. For an overview of China's environmental situation, see: Dongping Yang, ed., *The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Yearbooks: The China Environment Yearbook, Volume 3: Crises and Opportunities* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009).
2. It has to be noted, though, that implementation of these well-intended policies often lag behind on the local level. A lack of awareness mixed with poverty often causes local cadres to disregard environmental legislation in favour of attracting "easy" industrial investment.
3. Jennifer L. Turner and Lü Zhi, "Kapitel 8: Zum Aufbau einer grünen Zivilgesellschaft in China," in *Zur Lage der Welt 2006: China, Indien und unsere gemeinsame Zukunft*, ed. Worldwatch Institute (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2006), 265. For an English version of this comprehensive overview, see Jennifer L. Turner and Lü Zhi, "Chapter 9: Building a Green Civil Society in China," in *State of the World 2006*, ed. Worldwatch Institute (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006).
4. China Development Brief, "Regulations for the Management of Foundations," China Development Brief, 301, accessed July 27, 2010. <http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.com/node/>. The China Development Brief website is an excellent source of information on China's NGOs.
5. Pye, Lucian: *Asian Power and Politics* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1988) 183–187, 189–191.
6. Turner and Lü, 268.
7. Turner and Lü, 266.
8. "Directory of International NGOs (DINGO)," *China Development Brief*, accessed July 26, 2010. <http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.com/dingo/Sector/Environment/2-12-0.html>.
9. "Blurred law may be better than none," *China Development Brief*, accessed July 27, 2010, <http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.com/node/110>.
10. See The Amity Foundation at <http://www.amityfoundation.org>.
11. For the historical development of China's green NGOs, see Tao Fu, "Zai huanjing weiju zhong tuwei: Zhongguo bentu huanjing NGO de fazhan," ("Breakthrough in times of environmental danger: The development of China's indigenous environmental NGOs,") in a publication to be edited by Zheng Yisheng (Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, forthcoming).
12. See the Center for Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims at <http://www.clapv.org>.
13. Chris Chaplin, personal information in conversation with the author, May 26, 2010.
14. Fu, (manuscript) 10.
15. Turner and Lü, 270f.
16. "Zhongguo huanbaoju fujuzhang Pan Yue de liang da 'kunrao,'" ("China's Deputy Minister of Environmental Affairs: His two big puzzles"), *Zhongguo Qingnianbao* (*China Youth Daily*), May 16, 2006, accessed July 27, 2010. http://www.cyol.net/cyodn/content/2006-05/16/content_1385119.htm quoted in Fu (manuscript): 16.
17. Turner and Lü, 279f.

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