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. 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.

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
Environmental Challenges and Asia

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 private 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:


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 incentives.
Environmental 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 zhiyou) 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.

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
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 government's implicit tolerance of the publication of environmental data and of ministrations 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.
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.”

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. 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 environmentalists 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**


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.


7. Turner and Lü, 266.


11. For the historical development of China’s green NGOs, see Tao Fu, “Zai huangjin 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.


14. Fu, (manuscript) 10.

15. Turner and Lü, 270f.

16. “Zhongguo huanbaoju fujuzhang Pan Yue de liang da ‘kunrao,’” (“China’s Deputy Minister of Environment, clearly admitted this in an interview with *China Youth Daily* (Zhongguo Qingnianbao):” in a publication to be edited by Zheng Yisheng (Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, forthcoming)).

17. Turner and Lü, 279f.

I would like to thank Lucien Ellington and two anonymous referees for helpful suggestions concerning an earlier draft of this article and Mark Prandolini for helping with the language editing. Special thanks goes to Fu Tao from *China Development Brief* for sharing his personal insights, which greatly informed my understanding of the subject matter.

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