

The Growing Role of Chinese Green NGOs and Environmental Journalists in China

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Since 1999 I have coordinated the China Environment Forum within the Environmental Change and Security Project at the Woodrow Wilson Center. In the China Environment Forum we convene meetings and create publications that promote dialogue among U.S. and Chinese scholars, policymakers and NGOs on environmental and energy challenges in China. In the course of my work I have become acquainted with many Chinese "eco-entrepreneurs," which is a term I use to describe people in the government, NGO, and news media sectors who are creatively pushing for improved environmental quality. I therefore have a familiarity with the dynamics of the green NGO movement.

The comments I make today on green NGOs and environmental journalists in China represent my personal opinion and do not reflect the views of the Woodrow Wilson Center. In my ten minutes I have four points to make about China's nascent environmental movement and what it means for China's environment and civil society. Development in the environmental sphere is one of the bright spots in China's civil society and this sector presents many opportunities for cooperation from international organizations.

1) The Chinese government has opened political space for environmental protection activities, which has enabled an impressive growth in Chinese green NGOs and an increase in environmental activities by universities, research centers, journalists, and government-organized NGOs (GONGOs).

2) Independent Chinese environmental NGOs are at the forefront of civil society development in China.

3) Because environmental journalists enjoy more freedom in pursuing their stories than other beat reporters, they are quickly becoming a force pushing environmental awareness and investigations of local problems.

4) In the short term, expansion of green civil society in China is more dependent on improving organizational capacity of NGOs than an increase in political space.

1) Growing political space for green NGOs, journalists, and others

The Chinese leadership is aware that the government cannot solve the serious environmental problems alone, which explains why political space has opened up for eco-entrepreneurs in both the state and non-state sectors to create organizations to help government environmental policies by: 1) Promoting environmental education, 2) Acting as watchdogs for local governments, 3) Conducting environmental and energy-efficiency policy research, 4) Undertaking on-the-ground conservation and sustainable development projects.

How have independent NGOs and other organizations grown?

- In the mid-1990s, Chinese environmental NGOs were the first to register when Beijing passed legislation granting legal status to citizen-organized social groups. Individuals wishing to create green NGOs were inspired into action by not only the severe pollution problems, but also by the growing presence of international environmental NGOs in China. The growing environmental activities that universities, government research centers, and GONGOs were doing with international groups also signaled work in this area was acceptable.

- Approximately 50 citizen environmental groups are registered with the government, but since the registration process often can take years, hundreds of other environmental activists are doing their work as nonprofit corporations or within professional associations, Internet-based groups, or very small informal volunteer organizations or clubs (e.g., bird watching clubs). Some activists opt to join and learn from the numerous international environmental NGOs operating in China.
- Many central and provincial government agencies have created their own environmental NGOs (a.k.a. GONGOs) to create more jobs and attract international funding. These environmental quasi-NGOs (which number between 1000-2000) tend to have more technical skills than independent NGOs. Some GONGOs, particularly the Women's Federations and Communist Youth Leagues are drawn to an NGO model for environmental work as they adapt to China's changing social context and their organizations are weaned from government support. Over the next five years central and provincial governments will be cutting most of the funding for all types of GONGOs and those environmental GONGOs that survive will become real independent (albeit with good government connections) environmental NGOs.
- Student environmental organizations at universities have exploded in number: From 22 at the end of 1997 they have now increased to 184 student groups, located at 176 universities in 26 provinces. In the early 1990s, university administrations created the first student green groups, but today most groups are initiated by students, who do green work on and off the university campus (e.g., waste reduction and environmental awareness activities, summer green camps for university students, monitoring water quality in local areas). Student green groups have created networks to share information on their green activities. These student groups are helping to cultivate a growing pool of environmental activists and more environmentally aware graduates entering the workforce.

2) Green NGOs at the forefront of civil society development in China

Despite their small numbers, environmental NGOs have been a model of inspiration for other kinds of civil society groups, for not only were they first to emerge, but they also have been creative in gradually expanding their activities through partnerships with domestic and international groups. In their work with international organizations, Chinese environmental NGOs have been able to work with local government and research centers, which represents a very new kind of horizontal policy cooperation in China. Moreover, by working with different types of organizations environmental NGOs are gaining valuable skills and capacity.

- ***First to emerge.*** Environmental NGOs were among the first type of independent organizations to emerge after the Chinese government permitted social organization registration. As pioneers in registering, they promoted confidence in other NGO activists. Other NGO sectors that are most successfully following in the footsteps of green groups include disabilities, women and children's rights, health and poverty alleviation groups.
- ***Generally non-confrontational organizations.*** Unlike many western environmental groups, Chinese NGOs do not stage protests against the government or industry. In fact, many Chinese environmental NGOs have built up cooperative relations with governmental agencies and institutes. Some groups even use the government's familiar "mass campaign style" techniques to promote their environmental message.
- ***Slowly expanding areas of activities.*** While green NGOs, student groups, volunteer, and virtual groups tend to undertake activities in relatively "safe" areas (e.g., public education on wildlife, personal consumption patterns, littering, surveys of endangered species, studies of energy

efficiency), some groups, especially those with a professional base are exploring innovative activities. For example:

- 1) One lawyer created a group to provide legal assistance for pollution victims.
- 2) One group made up of environmental professionals took surveys of environmental problems in their city and used local news media to promote their results.
- 3) One group founded by environmental scientists in southern China brought together and worked with international NGOs and local governments to create and manage a nature reserve.

- ***Utilizing a broad range of partnerships to build capacity and effectiveness.*** Because Chinese environmental NGOs are generally small groups, many have found that expanding their range of partners not only brings in financial resources, but also new skills and knowledge. Chinese NGOs have increasingly partnered with government research centers and GONGOs, international environmental NGOs, and multilateral organizations. In some areas international NGOs have helped bring Chinese green groups and local governments together for projects. While the activities of many Chinese environmental NGOs do serve to help the central government enforce and implement environmental laws by promoting environmental education and monitoring local governments, a handful of Chinese NGOs are carrying out more technical pilot projects, usually with international NGOs or multilateral organizations (e.g., Environmental Defense works with one Chinese group on an SO₂ emissions trading project; NRDC works with various Chinese NGOs, local governments, and research institutes on energy-efficiency projects, WWF works with local governments and community groups on a wide-range of conservation activities).
- ***Growing use of the Internet.*** Some of the newest green groups in China are virtual organizations staffed by volunteers and their success offers useful models for other types of NGOs. One green group was able to mobilize more than 7,000 people to get online to "campaign" for nationwide battery recycling in China. Other groups have circulated petitions to help save wetlands and protect endangered species. As green NGOs increase their capacity in developing Web sites, they will improve their outreach and membership abilities.

3) Environmental Journalists

The abundant crop of environmental stories in China has not come about spontaneously. In the early 1990s, the National People's Congress launched a massive publicity campaign to raise environmental consciousness and set up a central command post to rally Chinese reporters to write stories on the environment. In the first eight years after launching the campaign some 13,000 reporters from all news media organizations produced an astounding 104,000 pieces of work, according to a study by the International Media Studies at Tsinghua University.

Environmental reporters say they enjoy more freedom in pursuing their stories than other beat reporters, for the support they have from Beijing enables them to obtain cooperation from local authorities in doing their investigative work.

To illustrate the results of the freedom, in newspapers environmental reporting has been increasing steadily since the early 1990s, even though it is not a formal beat at most papers. One Chinese NGO tracked the yearly number of environmental articles in major national and local newspapers in China from 1994-1999. Between 1997 and 1999 the number of articles on environment doubled in number (76 papers produced 22,066 articles in 1997 while 75 produced 47,273 in 1999). The percentage of in-depth reporting (e.g., investigations, features, editorials) among these articles averaged about 20 percent.

In the past, China's two state environmental newspapers (*China Environment News* and *China Green Times*) have been published for a government readership. As these two papers have become financially independent from their agencies they are trying to market their newspapers to the general public. To sell papers they aim to publish more insightful environmental education and investigative pieces and move beyond reporting government slogans about successful environmental policies.

Many Chinese TV stations have regular environmental educational programs and a growing number of radio programs feature environmental hotline call-in shows and exposés of local government pollution violations. While reporting on the ecological strains brought by industrialization along the Yangtze River, a Chinese national public radio reporter described how cruise ships threw plastic food containers into the waterway turning the 5,500-kilometer river into a giant public sewer. Within days of the broadcast, local officials were galvanized to action in the face of public outcry and the littering stopped. The result was a slightly cleaner river.

In general environmental journalists can report local environmental problems and criticize local government authorities, but they tend to avoid targeting national-level agencies and policies. All reporters in the Chinese news media practice self-censorship. However, sometimes environmental journalists put their sensitive stories into internal newspaper and government reports and these reports can help educate local officials and change policies. For example, one journalist in Shanghai wrote an editorial about the possible water and environmental problems from planned golf courses outside of the city. This article led municipal officials to halt the plans for the golf courses and undertake an environmental impact assessment.

An intriguing cross-fertilization is taking place between green NGOs and journalists—some environmental journalists take their interest beyond work and have been active in either creating or helping green NGOs in China. In some major cities journalists have created networks or salons to help each other improve in their environmental reporting.

4) In the short term, further growth in green civil society in China is more dependent on improving the organizational capacity of NGOs than an increase in political space It is not easy to create and operate an NGO of any kind in China, for such the NGO concept is relatively new and registration requirements are challenging. Despite the registration woes, there exists a fair amount of leeway for green activists to undertake environmental projects and activities. However, the effectiveness of NGOs to do green work is often limited by lack of funds and organizational capacity. Three core challenges to environmental and other types of NGOs in China are:

1) Onerous registration requirements

The current regulations for social organizations make it challenging to register an NGO because they contain vague registration requirements and are rather ambiguous about the scope of permissible activity. These regulations require all applicants secure the sponsorship of a government agency (a.k.a. the "mother-in-law" requirement). Those NGOs that do apply are not always allowed to operate in areas that have government departments or GONGOs doing similar work. Moreover, NGOs cannot set up branch organizations in other parts of the country. This latter rule does not yet represent a major hindrance for green groups in China, for they tend to be small and focused on doing activities locally.

2) Funding challenges

While a majority of Chinese green NGOs in urban areas have gotten funding from international foundations and NGOs, foreign governments, and multilateral organizations, raising sufficient funds for activities and salaries is a problem that plagues most groups. This reliance on international sources of funding stems in part because there is not a philanthropic community in China. Because the concept of

membership fees is still quite foreign in China many groups depend on volunteers to help them do their work.

One potentially bright sign for future funding is that the Chinese government is currently revising rules for permitting tax-free donations to NGOs.

3) Capacity Challenges

- Many green NGOs are creations of one motivated individual who defines the organization. These groups are still very new, but it is unclear if some of these groups could function if the founder left.
- Most groups lack knowledge of managing a nonprofit organization or the experience in setting up membership systems.
- While most green NGO staff are enthusiastic and committed, they often lack the skills needed to do technical environmental work and write grant proposals to fund the organization. The struggle for financial resources dominates much of the energy of these groups and even creates competition among green civil society groups.
- Hard to keep NGO staff because of low or lack of salary, so institutional memory easily lost.
- Because most groups are new and struggling to sustain their activities, networking with other groups has not always been a priority, which means they miss opportunities to learn from other NGOs. Perhaps because the NGO movement has not yet reached critical mass, we are not yet seeing a lot of networking across sectors (e.g., environmental working with health or children's groups, which substantively could become a mutually beneficial type of partnership and strengthen the capacity of both organizations).

Positive Steps

Most environmental NGOs are now aware of their need to build internal capacity and are seeking training to help themselves in this area. While some international organizations (such as the Canadian Civil Society Program, the Dutch government, and PACT China) have stepped in to create workshops and some training for all kinds of Chinese NGOs, much more could be done to help strengthen the capacity of green and other civil society groups, so they could be more effective in their work.

In summary, many Chinese environmentalists know how to operate within politically acceptable boundaries, however, because of internal capacity and funding problems I believe a lot of groups are not yet fully utilizing the space they have to make significant impacts on protecting the environment. It will take time for them to strengthen their internal organizational capacity and develop technical skills to become more effective. With time I am also confident that this sector will be given more freedom of operations, because most groups are doing activities that help the government pursue their own environmental goals.

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