

China's Environmental Movement

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Author: [Elizabeth C. Economy](#), C.V. Starr Senior Fellow and Director for Asia Studies

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Executive Summary

Environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are at the forefront of strengthening civil society in China, drawing hundreds of thousands of Chinese citizens into environmental activities, forging non-state linkages across provincial boundaries, and establishing the Chinese people as political actors independent of state-directed policies. Environmental NGOs also play a critical role in advancing transparency, rule of law, and official accountability within the Chinese political system. Through this process, they have become a significant force for political reform.

There are approximately 2,000 environmental groups officially registered as NGOs, with perhaps as many registered as for-profit business entities, or not registered at all. Over the past decade, since the establishment of China's first environmental NGO, Friends of Nature, there has been a transformation in the nature of environmental activism in China. Initially concerned primarily with the relatively politically "safe" issues of environmental education and biodiversity protection, environmental NGOs in China today are engaged in dam protests, filing lawsuits against polluting factories, and pursuing multinationals engaged in illegal activities. Most environmental NGOs in China exist as part of a much wider community of environmental activism involving China's scientific community, the media, multinationals, international non-governmental organizations, and elements of the Chinese government.

The Chinese government has generally adopted a positive attitude toward environmental NGOs, recognizing that they fill a critical gap in the state's capacity to protect the environment effectively. Still, Beijing continues to exercise control over NGOs through a range of regulations and restrictions, remaining wary of the potential of environmental activism in China to transform into a force for much broader political change. China's State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) has emerged as a strong supporter of NGO activity, and works very closely with NGOs— both publicly and behind the scenes— to achieve common goals. At the local level, however, some

environmental protection bureaus remain wary of NGO activity, fearing the NGOs will expose their lackluster performance.

I. Who are China's Environmental Activists?

China's environmental activists tend to be educated, articulate, and in many cases, quite charismatic. Their background is varied: Liang Congjie is an historian and Wang Canfa is a lawyer, but the vast majority brings a media background to the table. Liao Xiaoyi, Dai Qing, Wang Yongchen, Hu Kanping, Shi Lihong, Wen Bo, Huo Daishan, and Xi Zhinong, among others, were all journalists, photographers, or radio/television personalities. This media background has proved invaluable in raising the profile of environmental issues within the Chinese government and throughout the country. Most of China's environmental NGO leaders have also spent significant time abroad, particularly in the United States either at universities or training with various U.S.-based environmental NGOs. Several, including Liang Congjie, Liao Xiaoyi, and Wang Yongchen, have won major international environmental awards for their work.

Many of the most renowned of China's environmental activists/NGOs are based in Beijing. However, they undertake activities throughout the entire country, including significant efforts in Tibet, Yunnan, and Sichuan. Many smaller, locally-based NGOs have also sprung up to address local concerns, such as biodiversity protection, dam construction, and water pollution. While many of these smaller NGOs struggle with the government-mandated registration process and funding and membership requirements, the Beijing-based NGOs often try to nurture and develop these NGOs, providing them with training on grant writing, developing materials and programs, and even providing financial support.

Universities have also become hotbeds of environmental activism with many of the larger universities boasting more than one environmental club. (University environmental groups may or may not go through the process of registration, which can be quite burdensome.) In 2004, on Earth Day, a reported 100,000 Chinese college students in 22 provinces participated in environmental activities organized by university groups.

Through environmental websites such as Green Web, newspapers such as *China Environmental News*, *China Green Times*, *Southern Weekend*, and *21st Century Business Herald* *China Green Times*. This has sharply limited the income and circulation of such environmental papers.

II. The Nature of the Environmental Movement

Environmental NGOs in China address an increasingly wide range of environmental challenges. Some focus very specifically on one particular issue, such as environment-related public health problems, while others tackle a broad range of concerns from dam construction, to tree planting, to energy conservation.

- *Environmental education* remains a mainstay of Chinese NGO activity: Friends of Nature supports environmental education vans that travel throughout the country to provide environmental education that is specifically targeted to the region at hand, for example, overgrazing and desertification in Inner Mongolia. Green Earth Volunteers and Global Village Beijing both organize journalist salons to educate journalists on a wide range of environmental challenges. More recently, the Institute of Environment and Development has been developing a curriculum on renewable energy education.
- *Biodiversity protection* also continues to drive significant environmental activism in China. Many NGOs, such as Friends of Nature, Green Earth Volunteers, Wild China, and Green River launch campaigns and develop educational material including videos or photographic exhibits to promote biodiversity protection. In 2004, for example, a movie “Kekexili” was produced that discussed the plight of the Tibetan antelope. Recently, some NGO activists have been calling for greater emphasis to be placed on the protection of plant as well as animal life. This focus on biodiversity protection is supported by the strong presence in China of numerous international non-governmental environmental organizations with similar interests, such as WWF (World Wildlife Fund), Conservation International, the Nature Conservancy, and the International Fund for Animal Welfare. WWF, for one, has served as a training ground for many of China’s younger environmentalists.
- *Energy conservation and efficiency* is a relatively new focus for China’s environmental NGOs. The nuts and bolts issues of developing energy efficiency codes for buildings or promoting tradable permits for SO₂ (sulfur dioxide) generally remain the purview of international NGOs such as NRDC (Natural Resources Defense Council) and ED (Environmental Defense), along with their Chinese think tank or government partners. However, Chinese NGOs have begun to develop their own programs in the energy arena. During summer 2004, for example, Beijing-based NGOs launched a campaign to persuade hotels and other large public buildings to keep their thermostats at 26 degrees Celsius in an effort to conserve energy. Thirty NGOs nationwide joined the campaign. In addition, with the support of the Energy Foundation, Liao Xiaoyi of Global Village Beijing, established the Sustainable Energy Journalist Forum; there is an associated award given by the Energy Foundation. WWF, and ON Semiconductor. Global Village Beijing also organized journalists from Beijing to participate in a symposium sponsored by Michelin on clean energy vehicles. One of the most interesting initiatives is the effort by the Global Environment Institute, directed by Jin Jiaman, to promote projects as wide-ranging as Bus Rapid Transit, biogas in Yunnan, and assisting farmers in developing renewable energy enterprises. This Institute is heavily supported by the international community, including the Energy Foundation, the Blue Moon Fund, and the International Network for Bamboo and Rattan.
- *Air and water pollution* is yet another area of growing interest and concern for China’s environmental NGOs. Wang Canfa, the director of the Center for Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims, is a highly energetic and engaging man who has taken as his mission getting redress for pollution victims through the legal system.

He has put forth about 60 cases, 20 of which have been resolved successfully. His center is funded primarily by the Dutch government. A different approach is taken by the Huai River Protectors (Guardians), which was founded by Huo Daishan. It is a grassroots organization that is committed to educating villagers about the impact of the polluted water of the Huai River on their health. This issue has been receiving significant attention in the Chinese media, and CCTV recently completed a documentary film, "A Village and a River," that explores this problem. Huo is also trying to assist villagers in digging deep water wells to gain access to clean water.

- *Large-scale dams and hydropower projects* have also engaged a number of Chinese NGOs both in Beijing and in the regions where the dams are slated for construction. Over time, there has been a "radicalization" of the rhetoric of NGOs engaged in dam protests, possibly due to the support of international NGOs such as International Rivers Network, such that Chinese NGOs now talk extensively about social justice and displaced peoples rather than focus exclusively on consequences for the environment or ancient cultural sites. The NGOs have achieved some significant success in Sichuan and Yunnan, but not without fierce political battles and some personal risk. Green Watershed of Yunnan, Wild China, Green Earth Volunteers, Friends of Nature, and China Rivers Network have all taken up the fight to slow dam construction on China's rivers. They have undertaken a wide range of activities in this effort. Wang Yongchen, for example, participated in the World Commission on Dams in Thailand and gathered signatures from 61 countries against the dam construction on the Nu River in Yunnan. In a separate fight to prevent a dam, Chinese activists garnered 15,000 signatures via the internet. At great personal risk, Yu Xiaogang of Green Watershed, organized trips for villagers slated for relocation at one dam site in Yunnan to speak with villagers from other dam sites, whose relocation had been far from successful. His damming report to the Central Disciplinary Committee in Beijing as well as the Yunnan Provincial government almost caused the NGO to be closed and Yu to be arrested. The Civil Affairs Bureau, the Academy of Social Science, and Green Watershed's sponsor, the Yunnan Association of Science and Technology, however, declared that Yu's work was well within the scope of his NGO's charter.

The issue of relocation for dams is a highly politically sensitive one. In October, as many as 100,000 farmers from seven townships in Sichuan Province reportedly gathered to protest their proposed compensation and relocation as a result of the Pubugou Dam construction. They had witnessed what had happened to other villagers who had been relocated a few years earlier: they received substandard housing on poor land. Thousands of People's Armed Police were brought in to keep the peace. *China Youth Daily* did its own investigation, questioning the project and the relocation plan, and found that local officials had budgeted one billion less in relocation compensation than had been promised. At the conclusion of an investigation, several local officials were fired.

III. NGO Relations with the Chinese Government

China's State Environmental Protection Administration generally works very closely with environmental NGOs. Environmental NGOs agitated for SEPA to be included in the Go West campaign leading group, supported the call for a green Olympics, worked with SEPA on an energy efficiency campaign, and serve as SEPA's eyes and ears at the local level. Even on the most sensitive political issues such as dam construction, there is a strong alliance between NGOs and SEPA. The decision in late January 2005 by SEPA Vice Director Pan Yue (with the support of Premier Wen Jiabao and the State Council) to bring to a halt 30 large infrastructure projects including 26 power-related projects on the grounds that environmental impact assessments were not properly completed suggests strong support within the top reaches of Beijing for NGO activity in this realm. These projects however, also speak to other central government priorities such as enforcing the rule of law and slowing large-scale investment.

Still, SEPA support for NGOs is very strong. It is common now for high-ranking SEPA officials, such as Pan Yue, to articulate the necessity of environmental NGOs for safeguarding the environment. Pan has also said that within the next two years, SEPA will help to establish an NGO cooperation network and to provide professional training for small grassroots groups. He believes that it is critical to have the Chinese people engaged in environmental protection and to open the decision-making process for environmental issues to make it democratic.

More generally, however, the government keeps a watchful eye on environmental NGOs, as well as on all registered NGOs. Officially, NGOs must have a government sponsor to whom they report their membership, funding sources, and activities. NGOs are not permitted to have branch organizations in various provinces, and no person who has been labeled a political dissident may be a member of an NGO. NGO leaders say that the degree to which all of these strictures are enforced varies according to the sponsor. There remains a concern in some parts of the Chinese government that NGOs are subversive entities. In 2002, Friends of Nature was forced to remove one of its founding board members, Wang Lixiong, because of his support for two Tibetan monks who were about to be executed, or face closure. There are also periodic crackdowns in which NGOs are shut down for violations as innocuous as not having sufficient funding or sufficient number of members. Nonetheless, during the fall of 2004, the Ministry of Civil Affairs suggested that discussions were underway to lift the requirement that NGOs become affiliated with a government sponsor.

IV. Where to From Here?

Chinese environmental NGO activists are a politically skilled and sensitive group. Over the past decade, they have moved into areas of greater technical challenge and political sensitivity with notable success. Still, as the environmental movement in China continues to evolve, several challenges remain.

First, some Chinese and outside observers have argued that Chinese NGOs are more effective at identifying problems rather than proposing answers, and shy away from addressing technically-oriented challenges. The State Environmental Protection

Administration, for example, was disappointed that NGOs did not participate in a SEPA-advertised public hearing in August for comments on its draft rule on emission permit license management. Four individuals and 12 companies participated, but no NGOs.

Second, China's NGOs remain heavily reliant on international funding for their work. International foundations, multinationals, and other governments provide an overwhelming portion of Chinese NGO financial wherewithal. Some challenges arise from this situation.

- Chinese NGOs remain open to political criticism down the line that they are actually foreign-directed enterprises. While some smaller NGOs and websites exist primarily on Chinese contributions, there has yet to develop a real strategy on the part of Chinese NGOs to attract funding from Chinese sources. (One positive trend, in this regard, is the establishment of an association of Chinese businesses committed to supporting environmental protection.)
- There are signs of some resentment on both sides due to differing strategies and capabilities. Some sectors of the Chinese NGO community are articulating a desire for greater independence from international donors. They complain that international donors don't appreciate how difficult it is to make progress and are too short-sighted; and that international supporters try to direct some of the projects, thereby distracting Chinese NGOs from pursuing the projects they are most suited to tackle. From the international perspective, some donors have likewise voiced the opinion that some Chinese NGOs have taken money and not delivered on what was promised, and are not technically proficient enough to do the work that needs to be done properly.
- Third, until the Chinese government removes its restrictions on NGO registration and otherwise supports the development of civil society, the environmental movement may remain limited in size, as well as forced to operate under the shadow of knowledge that political caprice or shifting political winds could force them to pull back from their efforts, or risk being shut down entirely.