
ENVIRONMENTAL NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS IN CHINA SINCE THE 1970S

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Abstract

The expansion of environmental non-government organisations (ENGOS) in the past two decades has been perhaps the most conspicuous phenomenon in the recent history of civil society in China. Many factors promoted the early development of ENGOS in China: the political reform of government, the defects of environmental governance, public worries about environmental problems, international interaction, and the efforts of influential elites. In recent years, ENGOS have been further boosted by the change of public ideas about the environment, the professionalisation of ENGOS, the development of the internet, and increasing environmental deterioration. Nevertheless, Chinese ENGOS are facing four major challenges: economic difficulty, low levels of specialisation, interior estrangement, and grass-roots isolation. Chinese ENGOS are not hesitant to expose environmental problems or to criticise what they perceive as negligent protection by government. However, confined by traditional culture and current political institutional arrangements, ENGOS abstain from radical confrontation with government. While Chinese environmental problems remain serious in the long term, the development of ENGOS in China is hopeful because younger generations are more actively taking part in environmental protection and a further political reform is progressing.

Keywords: environmental protest, Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations (ENGOS), China, development.

Introduction

It is notable that during the past decades, Chinese Environmental Non-Government Organisations (ENGOS) have grown explosively, and continue to do so. According to open statistics, there were 2,768 registered ENGOS in 2005, with the number rising to 3,529 in 2008 and 7,881 by 2012.¹ The changing figure

¹ All-China Environmental Federation, 'Findings Report on ENGOS Development in China [中國環保民間組織調查報告]', *Environment Protection* [環境保護], 5b (2006): 61; 'China's ENGOS Increase to almost 8000', *People Daily (Overseas Edition)*, accessed 5 March 2013: www.chinanews.com/gn/2013/12-05/5584508.shtml, accessed 12 July 2014.

clearly shows how fast China's environmental movement is expanding while it also suggests increasing public anxiety about a deteriorating environment. While environmental issues are given great notice by the Chinese public and government, the nexus between ENGOs and government is still imbalanced. Although there is success in pushing many popular movements, Chinese ENGOs are shaped and sometimes constrained by Chinese political institutions and traditional culture. On the one hand, the public regard government as the critical factor in environmental protection while ENGOs are also themselves catalysts for change. On the other hand, most Chinese ENGOs are neither independent from state power nor tightly connected to genuine grassroots movements. Consequently, while ENGOs are usually not hesitant to expose environmental problems or to criticise a negligent government, they also abstain from radical confrontation with government and are cautious to join in street demonstrations. Chinese ENGOs seem more acceptable to government and in turn they receive more freedom and flexibility than many other civil societies in China.

'Civil society' and NGOs in China

The term 'civil society' is sometimes misunderstood by the Chinese public because of its translation. Normally 'civil society' is translated as *shimin shehui* or *gongmin shehui* in Chinese. Although it contains the meaning of a realm separate from government and private business, *shehui* scarcely points to organisation. A more popular and accurate counterpart of civil society in Chinese should be 'non-government organisation (NGO)'. Moreover, the conception of 'civil society' is sometimes sensitive in the Chinese official discourse because of its deep origins in Western history and culture. As Edward Shils argues, the core characteristic of civil society is *civility*—a civil collective self-consciousness which makes civil politics possible and presumes in Western societies that citizens are supposed to collaborate with each other.² Therefore civil society in the Western context presumes autonomy for non-government forces. Even though the self-organisation of citizens may be fallible, it could protect them from an incorrigible state or government.

However, China's 'top-down' or pyramidal political culture and rigid bureaucratic systems are always critical to understanding Chinese society. For example, Thomas Metzger argued that Chinese civil society is heterogeneous and so-called civility, evident in the West, is essentially absent in Chinese history. Put another way, China never enjoyed the strong tradition of spontaneous self-governance by common people apparent in many Western countries. Chinese society used

² Edward Shils, *The Virtue of Civility: Selected Essays on Liberalism, Tradition, and Civil Society*, Steven Grosby, ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1997), 335.

to be efficiently governed by emperors who, mentally and morally served by intelligent elites or Mandarins, were ‘Sons of Heaven’ and people were naturally their subjects. ‘Public good’ could be always achieved and sustained by a ‘corrigible state’.³ An influential Chinese political historian Xiao Gongqin also declared that Chinese traditional culture never contained an idea that society owns integrated rights free from state power.⁴ According to these views, in China, government at different levels is most responsible for social governance. In environmental history, one of the most evident cases is management of the Yellow River by central government in imperial China. The river flooded periodically and sometimes killed millions of residents in its flood plain, while central government always sponsored dike construction and maintenance and could call up labour from all around the country.⁵

The arguments of the authors above have been challenged in recent years, because many scholars find that state power did not completely overwhelm the autonomy of society. In effect, they argue that local Chinese communities, at least since the sixteenth century and especially in rural areas, have been delicately led by landed gentry (*shishen*), a group not directly absorbed and constrained by collective government bureaucracy which formed a kind of proto ‘third realm’ of civil society.⁶ In this framework, local elites directed many environmental issues, including construction of irrigation systems and distribution of natural resources. Ironically this situation was not finally altered until 1949 with New China’s establishment, which soon turned into a totalitarian state.⁷ During this period, China had many social movements, but almost no civil activities. For example, in the Great Leap Forward (GLF, 1958–1962), people were driven by an extreme official ideology to recklessly transform the physical environment in the name of creating a new nature and nation. Civil society and individualism, believed to be capitalist endeavors that obstructed the state from concentrating resources to initiate grand projects, were repressed for almost

3 Thomas Metzger, ‘The Western Concept of the Civil Society in the Context of Chinese History’, 1997, unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/Public/documents/APCITY/UNPAN014782.pdf, accessed 12 July 2014.

4 Xiao Gongqin 蕭功秦, ‘Civil Society and the Three Obstacles of China’s Modernization [市民社會與中國現代化的三重障礙]’, *Chinese Social Sciences Quarterly* [中國社會科學季刊] 5 (1993): 189–96.

5 Ling Zhang, ‘Harmony or Disharmony: Traditional Chinese and Their Natural Environment’, in Naomi Standen, ed., *Demystifying China: New Understandings of Chinese History* (Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 79–88; Zhang, ‘Manipulating the Yellow River and the State Building of the Northern Song Dynasty’, in Carmen Meinbert, ed., *Nature, the Environment and Climate Change in East Asia*, (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 137–159.

6 Li Fan 李凡, *Silent Revolution: Civil Society in Modern China* [靜悄悄的革命: 當代中國的市民社會] (Hong Kong: Mirrors, 1998); Huang Zongzhi 黃宗智 [Philip Huang], ‘“Public sphere” and “Civil society” in China?—the third realm between state and society [中國的“公共領域”與“市民社會”?—國家與社會間的第三領域]’ in Huang Zongzhi ed., *The Debating Paradigms in China Studies* [中國研究的範式問題討論] (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2003), 260–288.

7 ‘New China’ here points to the People’s Republic of China (PRC), established in 1949. In a later part of this paper, ‘Chinese government’ or ‘government’ specifically refers to the PRC government.

thirty years.⁸ As currently every village or community has its Party branch, the limited 'third realm' of tradition has hardly recovered and so is not the crucial force to stimulate ENGOS.

The development of civil society in China resumed in the early 1980s, with the Reform and Opening-up Policies. As civil society expands, some optimists suggest that it may evolve into a civil society similar to the West.⁹ However, other scholars highlight its distinctive traits, rooted in tradition, that may hamper its further development. Australian scholar He Baogang argues that China's civil society is currently entangled with state power, so its autonomy is hardly realised, and is a 'semi-civil society' identical with Philip Huang's definition of the 'third realm'.¹⁰

Furthermore, Gordon White classifies the emerging Chinese civil society into four categories: the first is 'the caged sector'. Sponsored and manipulated by the state, it attracts many regular people in the manner of organisations like the Communist Youth League, which absorbed millions of students; the second is 'the incorporated sector', usually professional organisations formally registered by government even if many are independent NGOs. They are more acceptable to authority because they are politically insensitive. The third sector, existing in an 'interstitial' or 'limbo' world of civil society, is barely recognised by official institutions. These organisations are very active in some professional circles and most importantly have roots in some local communities, including among patriarchal clans and religious organisations. They are sometimes suspected, but rarely suppressed, by government. The fourth sector is 'the underground civil society' or 'the suppressed sector', which are usually accused of threatening political security or being involved in criminal offenses. What are easily identified as illegal are secret societies, radical political organisations, and religious cults.¹¹ Most Chinese ENGOS could be attributed to the former three categories and are more inclined to exhibit characteristics of the first and second sectors identified above.

In sum, China witnessed a long history of strong state and weak society during which time civil society was not completely stifled. Although Chinese civil society has enjoyed a kind of spring since 1980, the Chinese people are still accustomed to allowing a centralised government to take responsibility for

8 Judith Shapiro, *Mao's War against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

9 Li Fan, *Silent Revolution*, 28.

10 He Baogang, *The Democratization of China* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

11 Gordon White, Jude A. Howell, and Shang Xiaoyuan, *In Search of Civil Society: Market Reform and Social Change in Contemporary China*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 29–37.

resolving all social problems, including most environmental issues. In turn, the Chinese government always looks forward to a cooperative or even obedient society. This perception has deeply influenced the trajectory of Chinese NGOs.

Environmental governance and the emergence of NGOs in China

Given the powerful state, the emergence of NGOs is not simply a spontaneous reaction by Chinese society toward a worsening environment, but also, most crucially, a reaction to central government environmental policies. One important reason is that the new Chinese government was hesitant to recognise that the socialist country had environmental problems—environmental problems were instead viewed as an evil of capitalist institutions. Environmental issues were also logically subordinate to other emergent national affairs, namely modernisation and rapid industrialisation, from the GLF onwards while dissent had been actively stamped down upon by the Chinese state since late 1950s. However, following a number of environmental events with catastrophic consequences, the massive modernisation movement undertaken in China has revealed major environmental challenges.

In March 1971, for example, public health officials reported that many of Beijing's citizens were poisoned after eating some bad-smelling fish. Premier Zhou Enlai (1898–1976) immediately ordered the relevant departments to investigate. Soon it was reported that the problematic fish came from Guanting Reservoir, one of Beijing's main sources of drinking water, and had been heavily contaminated by DDT and other toxic chemicals. The follow-up campaign to clean up the Reservoir and some other seriously polluted water bodies from Liaoning Province to Guangdong Province was testament to government's attempts to manage the environment.¹² With the uneasy truth of environmental problems being revealed by this and other instances of pollution, the State Council called the first national meeting for environmental protection in 1973. Environmental problems were officially accepted by the central government as part of its agenda. In an unprecedented move in the new 'Constitution of 1978', China declared that government should supervise both natural resource protection and pollution abatement. One year later, the 'Environmental Protection Law of the People's Republic of China' was promulgated by the National People's Congress and in the following decades, almost 20 acts or amendments were issued. All of these measures finally established a dominant role for government in environmental governance in China.

12 Mao Da, 'An Overview of the Green Movement in China', (forthcoming paper).

With the Reform and Opening-up policies of the 1980s, the Chinese government gradually welcomed ENGOs because they greatly supplemented the limited function of government in dealing with environmental affairs. It was particularly remarkable because resolving environmental problems demonstrated and could be used to justify that the new government was more capable than any previous one or social organisation in Chinese history.¹³ As early as 1988, the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA), which is now the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP), separated from the Ministry of Urban-Rural Development to become an independent department. Soon, it developed into approximately 3,000 environmental protection bureaus (EPBs) at the provincial, municipal, and county levels. However, environmental governance was still inefficient because of two reasons. One was the country's overwhelming focus on economic development and growth of gross domestic product (GDP). Therefore, environmental protection was not a political priority and environmental bureaucrats were about the least influential within administration and among policymakers. The other reason was that China's bureaucratic system was increasingly sluggish to face emerging environmental problems. With environmental problems developing in almost every province, the complicated process of reporting, reviewing, and identifying was inefficient and wasted money. Some of these agencies even become 'protecting umbrellas' for polluters and environmental criminals. Realising the shortcomings of official institutions, some famous public figures started to advocate for the creation of ENGOs and to disseminate ideas of environmental protection from bottom to top.

Essentially three direct social factors promoted the emergence of ENGOs in China. The first derived from the decentralisation reforms which encouraged a more open atmosphere for public debate on environmental problems. In 1979, sponsored by SEPA, but open to all professional environmental scientists, the Chinese Society of Environmental Science (CSES) was founded in Beijing. It is a typical 'caged sector' of the Chinese civil society, but it created a framework wherein the public could openly discuss and express different ideas to authorities on environmental issues. In April 1994, the State Council declared that government officials were no longer permitted to take a leadership role in NGOs and that all NGOs should be registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs as independent corporations. In 1995, only 30.4 per cent of NGOs' funding came from government. A 1998 central government document again required all

13 Chairman Mao proudly declared that bilharzia, afflicting the Southern Chinese peasants for years, was eliminated in 1958, although the breaking out of this epidemic was partly because wet land was widely transformed to paddy field after 1949.

governmental cadres to avoid leadership of NGOs and announced the cessation of government funding for any NGO established after 1985.¹⁴ These decisions stimulated a more independent genre of ENGOS.

A second driving force was international communication and exchange. In the 1980s, the Chinese government invited many environmental officials and experts from abroad, including those from international ENGOS. The first two organisations were the International Crane Foundation (ICF) and the World Wildlife Fund (now World Wide Fund for Nature, WWF). Their early work in China brought new ideas for establishing natural conservation and promoting civil society. The first Chinese ENGO, initiated by Liu Detian, a journalist for *Panjin Daily*, was directly under the influence of two experts sent by ICF and WWF respectively. In April 1991, Liu registered the 'Saunders Gull (*Larus Saundersi*) Conservation Society of Panjin City (SGCSP)' to protect this precious species and its habitat in Panjin region. 'It is the first time in my life to hear of the word "imminent danger" and "ecological net"', Liu said, 'the Canadian expert of ICF remind me Norman Bethune, the transnational work is amazing [sic].'¹⁵ WWF in later years contributed greatly to environmental protection in China and remains one of China's most significant international ENGOS.

The third spark was a growing self-consciousness among specific individuals to protect the environment because of the visible loss of natural habitat, forests, rare species, and the degradation of arable land. For example, as early as in 1981, 17-year-old Xu Xiujuan formally dedicated her life to the protection and cultivation of the Red-crown Crane (*Grus japonensis*) in Zhalong Crane Nature Reserve, training for a year at the Northeast Forest University. However, Xu tragically drowned in the marsh in 1987 when searching for two lost cranes. She was quickly regarded as a hero of environmental protection and her death inspired many other naturalists and environmentalists to follow her passion. In a more emotional way, nature writers such as Xu Gang and Wu Dengming (1940–2013) also actively aroused people's common interest in protecting the 'wild' and other forms of environment through their writings. Wu also wrote survey reports, petitioned the government, and organised young fellows to spread the idea of environmental protection to local residents.¹⁶ All these factors paved the way for the blossoming of ENGOS in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The case of 'The Friends of Nature (FON)' is undoubtedly representative of ENGOS in China in the early period of their formation. FON was formally launched in 1994 by several famous intellectuals such as Liang Congjie

14 Hong Dayong 洪大用, 'Shift and Continuity: The Transformation of the Chinese ENGOS [轉變與延續: 中國環保民間組織的轉型]', *Management World* [管理世界] 6 (2001): 59.

15 Xu Nan, 'The Life of the ENGOS in China', *Southern Weekend*, (8 October, 2009), no page. Norman Bethune was a doctor native in Canada who devoted his life to the Chinese medical service.

16 Mao Da, 'The Rise, Influence and Improvement of Environmental NGOs in China', (forthcoming paper).

(1932–2010), Yang Dongping, Liang Xiaoyan and Wang Lixiong, who were all professionals in the humanities or sciences. Of particular note is Liang's eminent family background—his grandfather, Liang Qichao (1873–1929) was an outstanding thinker and social reformer, and his parents were the most famous architects who were in charge of designing the national flag. Liang Congjie was worried about Chinese environmental problems from the early 1980s. When he worked as an editor for the magazine, *Encyclopedic Knowledge* [*Baike Zhishi*], an article on industrial pollution in the numerous township enterprises caught his attention. Following that, Liang selected more articles on environmental issues for his magazine. While Liang Xiaoyan, a young colleague of Liang Congjie, initiated another magazine, *The Intellectual*, he more frankly committed herself to looking for new ways to foster civil society in China and push social reform forward. They were more or less involved in the movement clamouring for social reform in the late 1980s, so they were courageous and sophisticated enough to seek government support. In the mid-1990s, all NGOs were officially registered and supervised by specific government departments. When SEPA refused to oversee FON, Liang used his occupation and political leverage, as a member of the National Political Consultative Conference of China, to successfully make FON affiliated with the China Cultural Collage (a semi-independent research institute of the time) and thereby gain it a legal identity.

The development of FON's work was never too radical because of its close association with the state. Since it was founded, the new organisation's activities were simply limited to convening the Second Green Talkfest and organising environmental photography exhibits.¹⁷ In November 1994, Liang was invited by some foundations and international NGOs to the United States, where he received the first overseas grant towards FON's future projects. In 1995 and 1996 during the National Political Consultative Conference, Liang, with his colleagues, proposed relocating Capital Steel, one of China's biggest heavy industrial enterprises and a main source of Beijing's air pollution, to a suburban area. When Liang made the proposal, it was considered a challenge to government because Capital Steel was a state-owned company and one of the main taxpayers in Beijing. However, his proposal was finally realised in 2005 when officials ordered Capital Steel's relocation. Liang Congjie also wrote letters to Tony Blair, the former British Prime Minister, asking for the cessation of the *chiru* (Tibetan antelope, *Pantholopshodgsonii*) fur-trade in Britain, then its largest market. Blair quickly replied and soon urged constraints on the trade around the world.¹⁸ All of these cases reflected how personal interest and international communication greatly shaped the early work of the ENGOS.

17 The first Green Talkfest was held in Beijing in 1993 before FON was established. The Talkfest had almost 50 participants, who later became FON's earliest members of FON.

18 Liang Congjie, 'Open Letter to Tony Blair, the Prime Minister of Britain', www.grchina.com/gb/kekexili/allwordcare-2.htm, accessed 20 July 2014.

Local-level ENGOs were also developing. For example, Wu Dengming, a famous nature writer, lived in Chongqing, the second-largest city along the Yangtze River, and turned to a more practical way to arouse public attention to the fate of this major river of China. He established the Chongqing Green Volunteer Association (CGV) and regularly organised volunteers to survey the river environment and to broadcast their suggestions to local communities. At the end of 1999, CGV organised volunteers to hike along the Yangtze River for 1,170 kilometres in 45 days. They passed through four provinces and more than 120 towns to spread the idea of environmental protection. CGV also held eight series of training courses for more than 600 local school teachers.¹⁹ Yunnan and Guizhou provinces were also early hotspots of local Chinese ENGOs.²⁰ One reason is that these two provinces were both famous for their biodiversity and ethnic people who lived around China's last remaining piece of original tropical rainforest on its borders with Southeast Asia. Another reason is that they are not only far from Beijing, the political center, and so have not been developed by ambitious entrepreneurs from this region or coastal eastern China.

Chinese ENGO activities

China's earliest ENGOs were most successful in the least politically sensitive area of public environmental education. With help from international NGOs and other influential NGOs, such as the China Youth Development Foundation, FON launched several popular environmental education projects. In May 2000, the 'Antelope Van' project was started and sought to protect western China's fragile ecology. Inspired by the German educational idea of mobile teaching, a cartoon image of an antelope covered the van, which was equipped with various teaching tools and materials for outdoor environmental education. The van could drive children to the nature reserves, enabling them to vividly encounter and understand the natural areas to be protected through games and personal experience. In less than a year, by April 2001, the van had visited 125 schools and brought environmental education to more than 10,000 pupils. By the end of 2002, nearly 100 media agencies, including CCTV and the National Geographic Channel, had reported on educational drive.

19 'CGV changed the public decision,' www.green.org.cn/b_28_87_14_news.aspx, accessed 5 November 2014. CGV's founding father, Wu Dengming, passed away in 2013.

20 For related studies, see, for example, Shu-min Huang, 'Lashihai: Changing environmental protection of an Alpine lake and wetland', in Ts'ui-jung Liu, ed., *Environmental History in East Asia: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2014), 156–168; Zhaoqing Han, 'Maize cultivation and its effect on rocky desertification: A spatial study of Guizhou province (1736–1949)', in *Environmental History in East Asia*, 243–258.

The Institute of Environment and Development (IED), founded in 1994 by sociologist Li Lailai, also focused on environmental research and aimed at providing reliable and practical environmental information for other social groups and the younger generations. IED sponsored two projects committed to playing a special role to strengthen the capacity of Chinese ENGOs. The first is a young ENGO practitioner training program, called Leadership for Environment and Development (LEAD). Even now, many core ENGO members had experience in LEAD. Another project sustains a computer server and provides free space for all ENGO supporters on the internet.

ENGOs also used various other methods to enhance their appeal. For example, in March 1996, Liao Xiaoyi and Li Hao, two long-time friends, established an ENGO, 'Global Village of Beijing (GVB)'.²¹ Liao was a philosopher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences while Li, different from most pioneers of ENGOs in the 1990s, was an epidemiologist with a PhD from a German university. Her western scientific background and personal experience equipped Li with a better understanding of China's environmental crisis. Together, they mainly focused on making television documentaries and promoting public environmental awareness, such as by campaigns encouraging energy and water savings, as well as the need to recycle. It is valuable that GVB enthusiastically promotes environmental education and training for the 'left-behind' children whose parents work in cities far away from their hometowns.

Compared to environmental education, the political influence of Chinese ENGOs developed much more slowly. One unexpected reason was the changing nature of Chinese society in the 1990s. Since political reform was almost suspended after 1989, government prioritised economic development and it soon occupied the central position in public debates. It meant that Chinese society, which became politically muted in the wake of the later 1980s suppression, was less focused on any other issues except improving personal lives. Another reason for political weakness was rooted in ENGOs themselves. Most pioneers of national ENGOs were intellectuals or social elites who maintained close connections with various branches of government and so were reticent to involve themselves in sensitive issues. These people never lacked compassion but as elites, they found it hard to connect with grassroots sentiments. In contrast, the elites were skilful in utilising private connections to high-ranking officials to achieve environmental aims. For example, Liang Congjie was a good friend of Mou Guangfeng, a senior official of SEPA who helped Liang's career and finally drafted a proposal to one of the State Councillors, who pushed an official environmental doctrine by the State Council in 1997. Requiring that all levels of government should actively support

21 Now the full name is Beijing Global Village Environmental Education Centre.

ENGOS' activities, the doctrine was considered the first officially supportive comment on the Chinese ENGOS in general.²² Since the very beginning, then, circumstances have made ENGOS politically conservative.

In the early 2000s, the impact of ENGOS on government decision-making was still not outstanding, even while media pressure and professional suggestion had enlarged their influence. In 2000, the Lake Yangliu hydropower station project, in Sichuan province, attracted intense media criticism. In two months, over 180 news reports criticised the project because of its potential ecological impacts. The project was finally aborted by Zhang Xuezhong, the General Secretary of Sichuan Province. It was the first time a big official project was suspended through public pressure for environmental protection. One year later another huge debate erupted after the announcement of a project to construct a series of hydropower stations along Nujiang River (Salween River), an international river that crosses several nations apart from China. It involved actors, such as state-owned power companies, local governments, central departments, scientific workers, media and ENGOS, in a debate that was widely reported and which also attracted international attention, a sensitive factor that central government took into account when reaching its decision. The dispute was ended when Premier Wen Jiabao suspended the project in late 2003.

In the new millennium, the transformation of the Chinese attitudes towards life offered a great opportunity for the expansion of ENGOS and the latter soon became the leading force for improving environmental governance. It was widely recognised that polluted air, water, and food were threatened everyone, including top political leaders and millionaires. With the rocketing Chinese economy, demand for a better living environment and with it, health quality, became hot public issues. However, China's environment, especially in industrial cities and huge urban areas, was dramatically deteriorating. With the intensifying contradictions between economic development and environmental protection, a growing number of local ENGOS, with the help of local residents, endeavored to attain specific environmental objectives. In five years, the total number of ENGOS steadily grew and almost doubled beyond their number prior to 2003.²³

As Yang Guobin has argued, the emergence of the Chinese ENGO was as a result of a combination of various forces wherein the internet played a significant role, most notably from 2003.²⁴ What particularly changed people's attitudes and their support of unfettered economic development was an unexpected

22 'The Life of the ENGOS in China', *Southern Weekend* (8 October 2009), no page.

23 It is recorded by www.greengo.cn and www.chinadevelopmentbrief.org and tabled by Dr. Mao Da.

24 Yang Guobin, 'Environmental NGOs and Institutional Dynamics in China', *China Quarterly* 181 (2005): 47; 'The Co-evolution of the Internet and Civil Society in China', *Asian Survey* 43: 3 (2003): 411–412.

epidemic, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). To stop its rapid spread, people avoided public places while university students, the internet's earliest users, were not even allowed to go out of campus from April to July. People consequently relied more than ever on the internet to access the latest news. As a contagion the likes of which had not been faced for decades, SARS killed many medical workers and caused enormous anxieties about the ecological system.

When it was proven that the disease derived from the civet cat (*Pagumalarvata*), sometimes cooked in Guangdong Province, ENGOs quickly seized on the opportunity to raise a public debate on rethinking the relationships between human beings and animals. In May, the *Southern Weekend*, a newspaper based in Guangdong, but popular in the whole country, carried a large report that criticised the State Forestry Administration's (SFA) new doctrine suspending trade in wild animals and their products in China. It was considered too conservative, and most ENGOs argued for 'forbidding' rather than simply 'suspending' wild animal consumption. The report interviewed Liang Congjie, FON's well-known head, arguing that the best solution should be to revise the 'Law of the PRC on the Protection of Wildlife'. Several days later, *People's Daily*, the largest newspaper of the Communist Party, also reported that 38 ENGOs had jointly signed an agreement for protecting eco-diversity and anti-SARS.²⁵ Since then, environmental protection and wildlife conservation received unprecedented attention in public fora and the internet. In this way, ENGOs gained widespread public attention, especially among the less educated.

Some ENGOs even became active and stable participants in helping to formulate official policies. In the 2003 Nu Jiang River controversy, ENGOs had failed to push for a public hearing. However, they succeeded in another environmental controversy at the Yuanmingyuan Royal Park in 2005. The Park, located in a Beijing suburb and since 1949, a symbol of European imperialist aggression to China, is both a cultural and ecological heritage site. After visiting it, a Lanzhou University professor complained about park authorities lining the park's lakes with impermeable plastic film. Public criticism quickly followed and became a hot issue across the country. ENGOs successfully allied with reformists within SEPA and pushed for a public hearing. Seven ENGOs sent representatives to criticise park authorities' actions. Ultimately, the hearing overturned the findings of the first Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report on the project. At that time, most EIA reports in China were merely rubber stamps for such projects.

25 Peng Xiaohua 彭曉華 and Cong Zongliang 宗晨亮, 'Dance with Media: Media Mirror of the Indigenous Chinese ENGO with the Case Studies of the Friends of Nature [與媒體共舞: 以'自然之友'為例考察中國本土環境運動的媒體景象]', *Journalism and Communication* [新聞傳播] 4 (2012): 206.

The Yuanmingyuan hearing changed the EIA in China. Although this should have promoted optimism about Chinese ENGOs's influence on Chinese politics, further challenges remain.

Challenges to Chinese ENGOs

According to a report by the All-China Environment Federation (ACEF), founded as the largest national ENGOs by SEPA in 2005, Chinese ENGOs were officially divided into four categories. The first is sponsored by government; the second is initiated by individuals; the third is organised by students; and the fourth is a branch of international ENGOs in mainland China.²⁶ This classification is similar to Jonathan Schwartz's, which identifies three major forms of Chinese ENGOs: (1) 'government organized non-governmental organization (GONGO)', (2) grass-roots-founded ENGOs, and (3) university-organised ENGOs.²⁷ It also reminds one of Gordon White's classifications of Chinese NGOs.²⁸ Except for some GONGOs, which are logically more conservative, most Chinese ENGOs were facing huge challenges.

The first challenge facing most ENGOs is their limited funding. According to the latest openly accessible material, 66.7 per cent of international ENGOs received more than 500,000 Yuan (about USD80,000), compared with 9.9 per cent for GONGO, and 4.9 per cent among grassroots ENGOs.²⁹ Although international ENGOs were financially wealthier and more stable, they were normally not allowed to collect money from Chinese citizens. According to 2008 official reports, only 26 per cent of ENGOs had stable financial resources while in some completely independent ENGOs (42.1 per cent of which were GONGOs and 36.8 per cent were university ENGOs), 59.6 per cent of funds came from their own members.³⁰ However, in respect of funding models, a noticeable event was the establishment in June 2004 of Alxa Society of Entrepreneurs and Ecological Association (SEE). SEE, created by more than 100 Chinese entrepreneurs, emphasised ecological health in the Alxa area of Inner Mongolia, and received support from other ENGOs. Given its wealthy sponsors, this is an ENGO that rarely worries about financial problems and is more flexible in its aims than almost any other ENGO in China. Every year, the SEE foundation awards an

26 All-China Environment Federation (ACEF), *The Findings Report on the Development of ENGOs in China*, 2006, www.doc88.com/p-9751909379533.html, accessed 20 July 2014.

27 Jonathan Schwartz, 'Environmental NGOs in China: Roles and Limits', *Pacific Affairs* 177: 1 (2004): 28.

28 White et al., *In Search of Civil Society*, 29–37.

29 ACEF, 'The Findings Report on the Development of ENGOs in China', (2006): 62.

30 ACEF, 'Blue Paper of Environment Protection: The Findings Report on the Development of ENGOs in China [中國環保民組織發展狀況報告]', 2008, wenku.baidu.com/view/dad061313968011ca30091e1.html, accessed 20 July 2014.

environmental prize of one million RMB. However, SEE only encourages the most prominent environmentalists and remains the only ENGO of its type in China.

A second challenge is the low level of specialisation among ENGO staff. Research in 2008 reveals that 28.9 per cent of ENGOs had no specialised staff; 46.5 per cent, only sustained staff of fewer than five people. Some 80 per cent of branches of Chinese international ENGOs have fewer than 20 staff and 59.7 per cent of grassroots ENGOs had a staff of fewer than 10.³¹ Deficiencies in scientific knowledge and a lack of professional guides dramatically impair ENGOs. For example, in November 2005, when Songhuajiang River pollution triggered a new wave of public concern with water pollution in China, ENGOs appeared to be silent in the face of this human-caused environmental disaster. The public sharply criticised ENGOs when a seminar held one month later exposed the main reason for their silence. Wang Yongchen, leader of Green Earth Volunteers (GEV), admitted that Chinese ENGOs did not have the capacity to get involved in some events which required expertise in economics, ecology, chemistry, and geology. Therefore, since 2005, more experts other than humanities and social science specialists have initiated organisations. For example, Aurora (Public Information Technology Center) was created by experts in database and GIS (geographic information science) technology. They have helped create several environmental databases based on specific ENGO requirements. Petroleum and Environment Network (established in March 2005) is another very specialised ENGO initiated by people familiar with this industry. Their projects include information distribution, justice in the oil economy, and safety of oil and gas shipment. While the situation improves, further cooperation is still needed because the most competitive experts and scientists are always absorbed by government organisations.

A third challenge is the lack of co-ordination among ENGOs. Firstly, the geographical distribution of ENGOs is very uneven. As ACEF's report of 2005 showed, Chinese ENGOs were mainly concentrated in three regions: the economically developed coastal region; areas along the Yangtze River; and frontier areas like Yunnan, Tibet, and Xinjiang. According to ACEF's second report in 2008, only Guangdong had emerged as a new ENGO area in the three years since their earlier report. Guangdong is far away from the political centre and enjoys a stronger tradition of civil society than other parts of China. Considering China's variety of landscapes, ecosystems, and climates, some local ENGOs prefer to pursue narrow-interest issues. Many young ENGOs leaders are also narrowly focusing on their own careers or the interests of their small circles, a sectarianism that either leads to unfair competition or apathy about

31 Xiao Gongqin, 'Civil Society and the Three Obstacles'.

each other's work.³² In addition, extreme ENGOs or 'deep green groups' attract a lot of criticism from the public and other ENGOs. Many disputes centre on whether Chinese should use certain plants and animals, which are scarcely used in other countries for medicine and food. From 2012, some animal protection organisations have blocked the IPO attempt of Gui Zhen Tang, a medical company which regularly extracts bile from bears. These organisations greatly raised public consciousness of animal ethics. However, when extreme activists stopped trucks legally carrying dogs on the express road, they were widely criticised for their dangerous behaviour. When ENGOs interrupted the dog-meat festival in the city of Yulin, locals poured scorn on them, because of the traditional acceptance of eating dog meat in this region.

A fourth challenge is the isolation of ENGOs from genuine grassroots movements. Currently there are two conspicuous environmental movements successively happening in China; respectively, resistance to government projects to build chemical plants and rubbish incinerators. These issues belong to a wider civil rights movement because potential victims increasingly question arbitrary official decisions in supporting large polluting industries. For example, in 2007, in an anti-PX project demonstration in Xiamen (Amoy), in an unusual move, Fujian province called in more than 100,000 citizens concerned about potential environmental hazards, who appealed to remove the project from the city. The movement was widely noticed through the internet and similar events happened in a series of other cities, including Dalian, Qingdao, Ningbo, and Maomin, all famed for their amazing coastal environments. Accompanied by sometimes violent confrontations between protestors and local administration, most of these projects were finally aborted or transferred to other sites. Following these movements, there has been a few appeals for establishing a more transparent and institutionalised public system permitting investigation of the environmental impacts of projects. As Zhou Zhijia observed, '[c]itizen participation in the PX movement has merely revealed a rudimentary civility, and the functional absence of NGOs is an important element leading to this situation'.³³

Although the scale is sometimes smaller, the tactic of open resistance is more frequently seen when it is directed against construction of rubbish incinerators. The earliest influential case happened in Panyu, a district of Guangzhou, in 2009. Concerned with toxic chemical pollution, local residents spontaneously appealed for the incinerators' removal, finally suing the relevant administration. One of the most recent cases took place in Yuhang, a district of the popular

32 Yu Jianfeng 余劍鋒, 'An Investigation and Review of the Culture of Contemporary Chinese Environmental Movement [中國環境運動文化的現狀分析和反思]', *China Development Brief* [中國發展簡報] (2012): 16.

33 Zhou Zhijia, 'Environmental Protection, Group Pressure or Interests Relatedness?', *Chinese Journal of Sociology* 31: 1 (2011): 1.

tourist destination, Hangzhou, in early 2014, and evolved into a large-scale riot. In all of these cases, ENGOs were neither major organisers nor participants. Although ENGO members contribute scientific data to judge EIA reports, all these events are essentially genuine grassroots movements.

As noted, ENGOs are cautious to stand in opposition to the government, and are instead content to push 'good governance' within the existing political system. The reason is simple: environmental events are no different from other civil protests, whether individual or collective, which openly challenge state authority and are easily accused of disrupting 'social stability'. The poison milk powder event of 2008 was unforgettable for many ENGOs, although it dramatically aroused public concern about food security and public fury against negligent administration. While the offending milk factory was shut down and relevant officials were dismissed, some lawyers who insisted on further punishment were also attacked. Therefore, although genuine grassroots environmental movements are increasing, the influence of ENGOs on them is still unpredictable.

Conclusion: Understanding the uniqueness of Chinese ENGOs

The expansion of ENGOs over the past two decades has been one of the most conspicuous phenomena in the history of Chinese civil society. The birth and early development of Chinese ENGOs resulted from many factors: progressive political reform of government, defects of environmental governance, worry about environmental problems, increasing international interactions, and the efforts of influential elites. In recent years, changes in popular environmentalism, ENGO specialisation, the internet's rise and a still-deteriorating environment further boosted ENGO support. However, Chinese traditional culture and political institutions are still the leading factors that shape Chinese ENGOs. The so-called GONGOs, ENGOs sponsored by government, are still China's most powerful ENGO, although an increasing number of independent ENGOs are also developing.

Given the Chinese political system, official attitudes towards environmental problems always create opportunities for ENGOs. Although the 2005 Yuanmingyuan hearing was widely considered an achievement for ENGOs, it took place against a background of SEPA demonstrating unparalleled strictness towards EIA reports. SEPA terminated 30 building projects of power stations that amounted to more than 117.9 billion RMD of investment earlier

in that year.³⁴ In 2008, SEPA was upgraded to the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP) and became more powerful. In June 2014, it fined 19 power companies and heavy industry enterprises almost 70 million U.S. dollars. Many of these are state-owned companies that ENGOs have failed to challenge.³⁵ Another case further shows how powerful the state still is in constraining civil society. Registration of NGOs is still complicated. Although many provinces, such as Guangdong, do not require a supervisor for newly formed NGOs, informal methods of obstruction, including deliberate prolonging of the application process, is commonplace. Moreover, the Chinese government is unusually sensitive to ENGOs with an international background, so overseas registration of ENGOs in China is still not all that open. In addition, since the 1999 US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia, conservative Chinese nationalists have dismissed Western media criticism of Chinese domestic affairs, including environmental problems: to them, such criticism merely proves Western prejudice towards China and jealousy of its economic boom.

One should also not forget the impact of traditional political culture. As early as 1992, Deng Zhenglai, a famous sociologist and law researcher, suggested that Chinese civil society should not expose a zeal for politics too early, and should not be successors to the tradition of radical conflict between the grassroots and government that usually ended in bloody riots. It should be very cautious in finding a way to establish civil society from the bottom up.³⁶ Furthermore, Jiang Qing even asserted that China could never expect to build a civil society like that of the Western model because Chinese culture tends toward accepting 'a society with reasonable hierarchy and proper freedom for the individual'.³⁷ According to this line of argument, any development of civil society has to take into account Confucianism. Therefore, a critical issue for ENGOs might not be how to balance state power and civil society, but actually how to boost an effective bureaucratic system in China.

Compared with many radical human rights ENGOs that fail even to gain any public notice, ENGOs are very successful, since they choose a progressive way to pursue their aims. With the popular online name 'Basuo Fengyun', Luo Jianming—famous for his leading role in online resistance to a Panyu garbage incinerator in 2009—actively promoted recycling of rubbish and

34 '2005 The EPAs Storm: A Gambling should not Stop (2005環評風暴: 一場不該戛然而止的博弈)', *The Chinese Business* [中國經營報], 27 February 2005, finance.sina.com.cn/g/20050227/12181387293.shtml, accessed 17 July 2014.

35 Available at: china.haiwainet.cn/n/2014/0617/c345646-20750220.html, accessed 20 July 2014.

36 Deng Zhenglai鄧正來and Jing Yuejin景躍進, 'Construct Chinese Civil Society [構建中國的市民社會]', *Chinese Social Sciences Quarterly* [中國社會科學季刊] 1 (1992): 58–68.

37 Jiang Qing蔣慶, 'Confucius Culture: An Rich Resource to Construct the Chinese Model of Civil Society [儒家文化: 建構中國式市民社會的深厚資源]', *Chinese Social Sciences Quarterly* [中國社會科學季刊] 3 (1992): 170–175.

sponsored a number of ENGOs. When he was awarded the SEE•TNC annual prize in 2011, he said: 'I did not care about politics and my neighbours until 2009 when I suddenly found government was not as arrogant as the stereotype in my mind. One should adopt a more proactive approach to government and look for a benign compromise with it'.³⁸

All of these cases explain the unique experience of Chinese ENGOs. It is reasonable that Chinese ENGOs avoid involvement in street politics by grassroots movements, and it is effective that the meritocratic ENGOs prefer private connections to senior officials. Since environmental problems will be serious for a long time yet in China, there is hope that civil society will have a louder voice in the environmental movement and gain the support of more young students. Their organisations can conveniently and easily register under a university. Among such university ENGOs, Green Anhui, Green Longjiang, Green Camel Bell, and The Green Environmental Advisory Centre of Chongqing are four successful ones. Their advantage lies in stable student groups, sufficient back-up personnel, and good connections with university scholars. This is evident in the case of Fang Minghe, born in 1984, who founded Green Eyes (GE) as a high-school student in 2000, and soon became the youngest leader of any ENGO in China. These young people and their ENGOs, led with passion and talent, may speed up the expansion of ENGOs and even Chinese politics. However, the attitude of government towards civil society will decisively influence the destiny of China's ENGOs.

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38 'Luo Jianming: We Need a Rational Mode to Negotiate with Government in Resisting Garbage Incinerator', news.qq.com/a/20110610/000788.htm, accessed 1 October 2014.

Table 1: Indicative List of ENGOs Established in China, 1997–2002.

Area	Name	Founded	Founder	Registration	Working focuses
Beijing	Centre for Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims	October 1998	Prof. Wang Canfa (environmental law researcher)	Non-independent legal figure	Environmental law and environmental lawsuits
	South–North Institute for Sustainable Development	1998	Environmental and development researchers	Private non-enterprise organisation	Sustainable energy
	Beijing Human and Animals Environmental Education Centre	1997	Animal lovers	Private non-enterprise organisation	Animal rights
	Green Beijing	1998	Environmental Volunteers	Not registered	Environmental Education
	Green Web Alliance	1999	Environmental Volunteers	Not registered	Environmental information
	Green Star Volunteer Service on Waste Batteries	2001	Wang Zixin (expert on waste battery recycling)	Not registered	Waste battery and other household hazardous waste
	Echoing Steppe	2000	Environmental Volunteers	Not registered	Steppe in Inner Mongolia
	Ocean Protection Commune	2000	Yi Wuchen	Social organisation	Ocean environment
	Han Hai Sha	April 2002.	Volunteers of FON and Green Net Alliance	Social organisation	Environmental education and desertification
	Beijing Human and Animal Environmental Centre	1997	Animal protectors	Private non-enterprise organisation	Animal protection and animal rights
Green Cross	December 2002	Environmental artist	Private non-enterprise organisation	Rural community, recycling	
Tianjin	Green Friends in Tianjin	November 2000	Environmental volunteers	Social organisation	Local environment
Hebei	Green Friend Association	May 1999	Zhang Zhongmin (professor of journalism)	Social organisation	Environmental education
	Hengshui Earth Daughter Environmental Volunteers Association	October 2002	Environmental volunteers	Social organisation	Environmental education and recycling
	Greenhome Environmental Protection Centre (GEPC)	1998	Environmental volunteers	Private non-enterprise organisation	Local environmental improvement in the northwest part of Hebei
	Bird Lovers Association of Xibaipo, Pingshan	April 2002	Bird watchers	Social organisation	Bird protection

Area	Name	Founded	Founder	Registration	Working focuses
Inner Mongolia	Echo Ecology in Pasturing Area Research Centre of Inner Mongolia	December 2002	Social science researcher	Private non-enterprise organisation	Natural resources and rural community
	Chifeng Desert Green Project Institute	March 1999	Local researchers	Private non-enterprise organisation	Natural resources and desertification
Shandong	Linyi Entomological Institute	2000	Yang Tongjie (entomologist)	Unknown	Insects and agricultural ecology
Henan	Green Tian	May 2002	Tian Guirong (activist on waste batteries) and farmers	Social organisation	Environmental rights and recycling
Hubei	Green Han Jiang	2002	Yun Jianli (former government officer)	Social organisation	Protection of Hanjiang River
	Association for Wetland Conservation	May 2005	Photographers	Social organisation	Protection of wetlands
Jiangsu	Green Stone Environmental Action Network	September 2000	University students	Enterprise	Environmental education and information
	Friends of Green Environment	1998	Environmental volunteers	Social organisation	Environmental education and information
Shanghai	Grass-roots Community	2000	Grass-roots volunteers	Social organisation	Rural and urban communities, environmental education
Zhejiang	Green Zhejiang	January 2002	School teachers	Social organisation	Youth, environmental education
	Greeneyes China	January 2000	Fang Minghe (high school student)	Enterprise	Youth, animal protection, environmental education
	Hainan Ecological and Environmental Education Centre	July 2001	Environmental volunteers	Not registered	Environmental education

Area	Name	Founded	Founder	Registration	Working focuses
Yunnan	Green Watershed	2002	Environmental researchers	Private non-enterprise organisation	Environmental policy, water resources
	Zhaotong Volunteers Association to Protect Black-necked Cranes	December 1998	Environmental researchers	Social organisation	Bird protection, environmental education
	Yunnan EcoNetwork	January 2000	Chen Yongsong	Private non-enterprise organisation	Capacity building and resources conservation
	Shangri-La Folk Environment Protection Association	February 2002	Local residents	Social organisation	Natural resources, biodiversity, rural community
	Pesticide Eco-Alternatives Centre Yunnan China	2002	Agricultural scientists	Social organisation	Pesticide, environmental health
Sichuan	The Daba Mountains Academy for Biology and Poverty Problems	2001	Zhang Haoliang	Social organisation	Rural community and environment
	Green Student Organisation Society	June 2001	University students	Not registered	Environmental education, capacity building
	Green River	November 2000	Yang Xin (environmental photographer)	Social organisation	Environmental education, animal protection, biodiversity
Guizhou	Guizhou PRA	1998	Ren Xiaodong (university researcher)	Chose to not register	Rural community
Ningxia	Centre for the Environment and Poverty Alleviation in Ningxia	1998	Volunteers	Private non-enterprise organisation	Natural resources, rural community, environmental education
Gansu	Green Camel Volunteer Organisation	2002	Environmental volunteers	Unknown	Local environment

Source: www.greengo.cn, www.chinadevelopmentbrief.org.³⁹

³⁹ The table was offered by Mao Da in 2012. It lists 39 ENGOs established between 1997 and 2002, nearly five times the number established in the six years between 1991 and 1996, and most of them are registered. Considering the difficulties of registration, there were many more ENGOs emerging in this period.

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