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The Role of Environmental NGOs in Chinese Public Policy

Andrew I. E. Ewoh and Melissa Rollins

The emergence of environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in China is increasingly drawing attention from observers interested in Chinese environmental politics. In the 1980s, the Chinese government started introducing environmental laws as well as seeking assistance from international NGOs, and bilateral and multilateral aid organizations. The 1990s witnessed a shift in government's focus on command and control regulation to more progressive citizen participation and market incentive laws. In fact, many ambitious environmental and energy efficiency targets were included in both the 10th and the 11th five-year plans. This analysis examines the role played by the environmental NGOs in Chinese public policy process. The article begins with an overview of the emergence of NGOs in China. This is followed by an exploration of the different types of environmental NGOs, the political climate, and the contextual environment in which they must operate in order to survive financially. In sum, the analysis discusses the challenges facing NGOs' participation in Chinese environmental policy reform, and concludes with ways to overcome them in order to press forward with their mission.

Introduction

The proliferation of environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in China is gradually attracting attention from scholars interested in Chinese environmental politics. In the 1980s, the Chinese government began implementing environmental laws and looking for help from international NGOs, and other aid organizations. The 1990s witnessed a shift in government's focus on command and control regulation to more progressive citizen participation and market incentive laws. In fact, many ambitious environmental and energy efficiency targets were included in both the 10th and the 11th five-year plans.

Scholars saw these progressive environmental laws as a marked opening for civil society development, which was required to help Chinese leaders in addressing a wide array of emerging social and environmental problems, and to
reform the increasing power of the local governments. In view of this, the central government enacted regulations to grant legal status to independent NGOs in 1994. Environmental groups were the first to register and are now the largest sector of civil society organizations in China. These NGOs, in collaboration with their international partners, are instrumental in helping pollution victims in getting access to courts, lobbying the government, and working to give rural communications the power to protect and manage their local resources.

NGOs have faced many challenges in protecting the environment and the health of Chinese citizens. The activities that are undertaken by NGOs have several objectives in mind. Firstly, civic and environmental organizations are designed to develop consciousness among the public. They provide use of civic amenities and sanitary facilities on a self-help basis, and influence the enactment of suitable legislation for the betterment of civic standards and environmental protection (Chitra, 2003). In other words, they bring together the standards of legislation with the sanitary needs of the environment. Secondly, NGOs have a service obligation. “Their responsibilities are to provide service to all segments of the society like the poor, women, children and youth through a variety of programs” (Chitra, 2003, p. 2).

The purpose of this article is to explore the role played by the environmental NGOs in Chinese public policy process. The analysis starts with an overview of the explosion of NGOs in China. This is accompanied by an examination of the various kinds of environmental NGOs, the political climate, and the contextual environment in which they must function in order to survive financially. In sum, the article discusses the challenges facing NGOs’ participation in Chinese environmental policy reform, and ends with ways to overcome them.

An Overview

Although China grappled with environmental problems in early 1950s through some environmental regulations, afforestation, and anti-desertification campaigns, the impacts of these policies on natural resources during the 1958 Great Leap Forward and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of 1966 through 1976 are somewhat uncertain (Ho, 2001). Nonetheless, the emergence of environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in China has played a vital role on the political structure of the Chinese government. In the 1980s, the central government started introducing environmental laws, and since their inception, China has experienced a spectacular economic growth. Over the past
two decades the dynamic world of globalization has changed the industry standard for environmental practices due to the proliferation of environmental movements in industrialized countries. In the case of China, for instance, its economic development policies as well as environment practices have earned it a place on the list of the world’s leading contributors to regional and global environmental problems (Economy, 2003). As NGOs began to emerge, they created a bridge of communication linking the government and society; thus, focusing mainly on the economy, culture, education, science, and technology as well as politics (Chen, 2001).

According to Ho (2001), two factors have been important in giving environmentalism in China its peculiar dynamics and features. First, the greening of the central government coincided with the evolution of the first environmental NGOs and other civil society organizations (CSOs). The second is the central government’s politics of tolerance and strict control of CSOs. For the purpose of this analysis, NGOs are civil public organizations with two essential characteristics: first, they work solely for restoring and promoting the best interests of the civil society; second, they engage in activities that are not motivated by an intention to generate profit. Since the 1994 registration of Friends of Nature in Beijing as China’s first environmental NGO, there are now over 386,000 NGOs in China (Hauser Center, 2009).

China’s growing nonprofit organizations can be found in numerous jurisdictions across the country. Through financial funding from domestic and international partners, these organizations have developed support groups within the private and public sectors alike. Since these organizations are often referred to as social organizations or private nonprofit work units, they serve on both sides of China’s environmental decision-making processes. Most financial support to NGOs comes from corporations that stand to gain from international partnerships. The relationships that are developed between NGOs and businesses create sustainability. Businesses usually gain the support of NGOs and other stakeholders in various ways, such as reputation enhancement, brand building, marketing opportunities, employee motivation, and risk reduction (Cheung, 2007).

According to the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, about one-third of NGOs are involved in industry associations, another one-third is academic groups, and the remaining is public welfare and friendship organizations (Moore, 2004). The development of NGOs has created a healthy
environment for the Chinese government. Through positive realms of communication, NGOs have not only influenced the introduction of new laws, regulations, and policies, but they have subsequently impacted a new direction for policymakers. Since our analysis focuses on environmental nongovernmental organizations, the next section looks at the major types of these organizations in China.

**Major Types of Environmental NGOs**

Environmental NGOs are the major players in environmental activism in China. Table 1 shows seven categories of environmental NGOs and their registration status. According to Yang (2005, p. 52), they “all aim to promote environmental consciousness, sustainable development and public participation.” Alternatively, Schwartz (2004) further divided environmental NGOs into three categories on the basis of their roles and influence in environmental protection policies as follows: traditional environmental NGOs, governmental environmental NGOs, and environmental semi-NGOs. Since NGOs must register to become legal and independent social organizations with the Bureau of Administration, a unit of Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs, the traditional environmental NGOs have no legal status and sponsors. As a result, the first group of Schwartz’s (2004) classificatory scheme has limited influence on environmental policies due to factors such as financial difficulties, data accessibility, and membership expansion.
Table 1: Main Types of Environmental NGOs in China

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational Type</th>
<th>Registration Status</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Registered NGOs</td>
<td>Registered as social organizations <em>(shehui tuanti)</em> or private, non-profit work units <em>(minban fei qiye danwei)</em></td>
<td>Friends of Nature; Green River</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Non-profit enterprises</td>
<td>Registered as business enterprises but operate as non-profit organizations</td>
<td>Global Village of Beijing; Institute of Environment and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Unregistered voluntary groups</td>
<td>Unregistered organizations that function as NGOs</td>
<td>Green Earth Volunteers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Web-based groups</td>
<td>Unregistered groups that operated mainly through the Internet</td>
<td>Green-Web; Greener Beijing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Student environmental associations</td>
<td>Registered with campus Youth Leagues yet function and perceived as NGOs</td>
<td>Sichuan University Environmental Volunteer Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. University research centers/institutes</td>
<td>Affiliated with institutions of higher learning but operate as NGOs</td>
<td>Center for Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims, China University of Political Science and Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Government-organized NGOs (GONGOs)</td>
<td>Social organizations established by the government agencies, also known as state-owned NGOs (SONGOs)</td>
<td>China Environmental Science Association</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Notes:

*Friends of Nature is registered as a secondary organization (erji zuzhi) yet operates as an independent NGO both administratively and financially.


The governmental environmental NGOs (also known as GONGOs) are well established due to their relations with the government. Their membership comprises of former government employees, and they have easy access to government officials and data as well as good financial support from international and domestic organizations. Nonetheless, GONGOs enjoy less political autonomy. Since they are government affiliates, their members may criticize local government environmental officials, but must not do so with central government officers. Moreover, due to the influence of State Environmental Protection Administration over GONGOs’ hiring, salaries, and promotion, GONGOs cannot readily refuse to implement government assignments.

China Environmental Protection Foundation (CEPF) is a good example of a Chinese GONGO, created in 1993 under China’s National Environmental Protection Agency with the donation of United Nations Environmental Protection Prize award to Qu Geping, chair of the Environmental Protection Committee of the National People’s Congress and former NEPA administrator. CEPF’s major goal is to facilitate the donations of funds and goods in order to help develop environmental protection undertaking in China. To accomplish its goal, CEPF organizes and trains volunteers interested in developing cooperative relationships and technology exchanges with international organizations interested in environmental protection in China (Schwartz, 2004). In 2004, for example, CEPF awarded its first China Environmental Prize to Otis Elevator Company, a branch of the United States multinational United Technologies Corporation, for the company’s commitment to maintaining environmental regulatory standards and practices that exceeds local laws (Zeng & Eastin, 2007).
Another example of a Chinese GONGO is the Heilongjiang Provincial Territory Society, established in 1994 by the Heilongjiang Provincial Planning Commission (HPPC). Through this quasi-governmental NGO, the HPPC was committed to a four-year project with two American NGOs and two sections of the Russian Academy of Sciences to develop a sustainable land use plan for the Ussuri River watershed. Although the staff and offices of the Territory Society are the same for the HPPC, the GONGO was able to involve policymakers and scholars from the Forestry Bureau, the Environmental Bureau, and various universities and other administrative agencies due to its status as an NGO. This type of shadow organization is common in China to attract international financial support and partner with other NGOs. Also, this type of NGO can exist or discontinue once its mission is accomplished (Knup, 1997).

The environmental semi-NGOs are required to register with any Chinese university system, and have no direct ties with government. They are funded by university grants and international organizations, and are staffed by university professors and well-trained college students. The major goal of semi-NGOs is not only to improve the institutional capacity and public awareness of government officials, but to increase the willingness of these officials to take on vested public interest in the implementation of environmental protection policies (Schwartz, 2004).

Academic research institutions have been the centerpiece for semi-NGOs existence. “The Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge (1995), established in the Yunnan Province by researchers from the Kunming Botany Institute, and the Pesticides Eco-Alternatives Center (2001) created by entomologists, also in Yunnan, are two examples of environmental semi-NGOs that grew out of academic research” (Young, 2009, p. 29). These institutions are geared toward policy influence and advocating for change. The Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge (CBIK), for example, governs its principles in the areas of watershed governance, community livelihoods, indigenous knowledge, and capacity building. CBIK addresses the issues facing the indigenous people in Southwest China by conducting case studies and pilot projects, documentation synthesis, and practice and innovation. Through various techniques, policymakers, stakeholders, and local and national media attend international conferences where dissemination of findings is presented and discussed. According to the CBIK website, this method is used entirely to help influence policy decisions (The Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous
Knowledge, 2011). Overall, the goal of CBIK is to bring together the needs and values of the indigenous people to the needs and values of the local government.

Environmental semi-NGOs are better situated than other NGOs because of their affiliation with academic institutions. Their financial supports come from both university grants and international organizations, and they have access to government officials due to their expertise. These are crucial advantages when compared to other NGOs (Schwartz, 2004).

Whereas academic institutions and NGOs have partnered to combat issues that citizens face, they have become the voice of governance while maintaining the link between humanity and natural resources. The next section discusses the role of NGOs in environmental policy.

Local NGOs Role in Environmental Policy

Organizations that exist to combat the issues of environmental reform are pressured to make long-term changes for China. “In 1986 air pollution in China was the least concern amongst researchers. Since 2007 this has become the greatest health concern and new concerns have grown since China has expanded exponentially” (Mehta et al., 2008, p. 65). The rise of globalization has exacerbated the problem of air pollution in China. The concerns surrounding public health issues have become a huge incentive for meeting environmental standards. Rapid economic growth and development coupled with the decentralization of the Chinese government has affected citizens of China. “A large and growing population with rising expectations for material well-being, fed by a rapidly growing and industrializing economy, all put pressure on China’s natural resources” (Knup, 1997, p. 9). The social organizations that exist and are strongly favored by the current regulatory standards are the least autonomous. The following is a partial list of major government-organized NGOs or CONGOs:

- China Environmental Protection Foundation,
- China Society of Environmental Science,
- National Natural Science Foundation,
- Heilongjiang Provincial Territory Society,
- Center for Environmental Education and Communications,
- Policy Research Center for Environment and Economy, and
• China Environmental Science Association (Knup, 1997; Schwartz, 2004; for a comprehensive list of Chinese GONGOs, see China Environmental Forum, 2009).

These organizations tend to be large, national organizations that receive the bulk of their funding from the government. Such organizations house well-known Chinese officials and scholars with close ties to the government (Knup, 1997; Schwartz, 2004; Yang, 2005). A partial list of major individual organizations is as follows:

• Friend of Nature,
• Global-Village of Beijing,
• Beijing Environment and Development,
• Institute of Environment and Development,
• Center for legal assistance to Pollution Victims,
• Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge, and
• Institute of Environment and Development (Knup, 1997; Schwartz 2004; for a comprehensive list of Chinese individual environmental NGOs, see China Environmental Forum, 2009).

Individual organizations adapt to the Western-style of social organizing. They tend to have limited resources and their staff personnel have little connection with the government. “These organizations tend to be more grassroots in nature, draw their members and volunteers from among the general population, and focus their education and awareness-building activities ‘down’ as opposed to ‘up’” (Knup, 1997, p. 12; see also Schwartz, 2004; Yang, 2005; Yang & Calhoun, 2007).

Volunteer organizations reflect a range of organizations that focus on reform. These organizations include membership organizations, research institutes, and “single-issue” institutes—that is, homelessness or poverty. For example, Green Earth Volunteers was established in 1997 as a volunteer organization, and is being financially supported by volunteers who participate to implement the NGO’s mission (Knup, 1997; see Schwartz, 2004; Yang, 2005; Yang & Calhoun, 2007).
The overall purpose of the government in China is to sustain economic growth and to tackle critical issues that threaten the environment currently and in the future. The emergence of NGOs has been a direct result of the decentralization of the Chinese government and the influence of international NGOs. The section that follows presents the alliance of NGOs in influencing Chinese environmental policy using the case of the Nu River hydropower development in Yunnan as an example.

**Alliance of Environmental NGOs: The Case of Nu River Campaign**

In June 2003, the Chinese government proposed to build 13 dams on the Nu River in Yunnan Province, which attracted stiff opposition from local and international NGOs. The objections of these actors compelled Premier Wen Jiabao to halt the proposal in April 2004 and delayed it until 2008. What are the reasons for Premier Wen's actions? The discussion that follows will attempt to answer this question and outline the role played by environmental NGOs and other actors in the campaign to stop the dam construction.

The Nu River originates on the Tibetan Plateau, and enters Yunnan Province through Nujiang Prefecture, flowing through four prefecture-level administrative jurisdictions and 10 county-level jurisdictions. It is part of the Three Parallel Rivers that was designated as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, and one of the only two rivers that have not been dammed, it leaves China and flows into Burma, where it enters the Andaman Sea. Reasons for the dam construction include, but are not limited to, hydroelectric power is the best choice for renewable energy, and such a project will facilitate economic growth in Yunnan Province (Chen, 2010).

Although the major reason for public opposition centered on the Nu River's ecological value, a high level of social concern was cited as the reason for the project's suspension. There were also disagreements from within the central government and political pressures from downstream such as Thailand and Myanmar (Litzinger, 2007). Other players in the anti-Nu River dam campaign include National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), State Environmental Administration (SEPA), Huadian Power Company (the chief promoter of the hydropower development), Yunnan provincial government, the prefecture governments, the media, environmental NGOs, the international community, and affected local citizens.
While the NDRC proposed the Nu River hydropower development project, SEPA remains the environmental-level protection agency. Since the implementation of environmental protection is shared by various agencies and actors in China, SEPA and its local bureaus engage in a full range of environmental activities such as law drafting, monitoring, enforcement, environmental impact assessments, and research tests (Economy, 2004). Generally, SEPA is more involved with the project and is responsible for convening hearings to review its potential environmental impact on the Nu River valley.

In 2004, the Yunnan local NGO Green Watershed viewed the establishment of good governance mechanisms as crucial to overcoming poverty and water crises, and took 14 villages from Nu River County to visit a nearby Manwan dam in order for them to see how the dam's construction will affect their lives. The socioeconomic condition of the people around Manwan shocked the villagers. Also Green Watershed facilitated the participation of the Nu River village representatives in the 2004 UN Dam and Development Symposium in Beijing. The techniques being deployed by Green Watershed were not welcomed by local government officials who tried to unsuccessfully close the local NGO for engaging in activities beyond its mission (Johnson, 2009), but succeeded in banning Green Watershed founder from traveling overseas.

After the dam issue was discussed by different levels of government, it attracted media coverage and the emergence of environmental networks that include but are limited to the Green Earth Volunteer, Beijing Global Village, and Friends of Nature. Due to the risks involved with the mobilization of local citizens, environmental NGOs opposed to the Nu River dam project placed more emphasis on promoting public participation according to Chinese laws. On February 18, 2004, Premier Wen ordered the suspension of the dam construction while maintaining that a serious environmental impact study has to be done by scientists and experts before the project's execution.

Starting in 2005, and continuing to the present, they began to pay attention to the formal policy process. For instance, they informed the government to hold hearings on the project as mandated by Environmental Impact Assessment Law and EIA Measures. Through this process, Johnson (2009) argued that NGOs and their supporters have adopted a political correctness procedure as their bottom line. If the dams were built, they will be assured that their opinions were
presented to push forward the governance processes that have been made possible by reforms in the environmental protection policies.

For instance, in August 2005, a group of over 90 NGOs, academics, and over 450 individuals signed an open letter to the central government requesting more transparency in the Nu River project in accordance with EIA provisions (Johnson, 2009, p. 124). The same group of NGOs and their supporters restated their request for a transparent decisionmaking process in March 2008, when reports revealed that construction on the first dam on the Nu River was forthcoming. In response to the public sentiments and Premier Wen’s concern, the NDRC and SEPA reexamined the project. Based on the review, Zhu Guangyao, the Vice Minister of SEPA, assured that the dams will be reduced from 13 to four (and they are Liuku, Saige, Yabiluo, and Maji). The NDRC 2008 publication of its five-year plan for energy development listed two dams on the Nu River as major projects, and the construction of the Liuku dam was started in the summer of 2008 (Brown & Xu, 2010). It is not easy to speculate what might happen to the remaining projects; however, the local government actors will continue to push for them while the environmental NGO will continue to mount opposition.

**Challenges**

Many of the challenges NGOs face are seen in the social, economic, and political areas. Primary source of challenges are due to lack of funding, and as we earlier discussed, financial sustainability is the biggest challenge for NGOs to continue in their efforts to support the needs of the clients they support. “In an effort to access new funding sources, over the past several years some NGOs have aggressively courted private sector partners, carving out public relations alliances with international corporations seeking to raise their philanthropic profile” (Stoddard, 2003, p. 30). Financial support has been pivotal to survival. Domestic and international partnerships have helped create dynamic programs that build sustainability and change lives.

The dependence that NGOs have on the government has posed a challenge for their existence. In fact, they have been limited in their usefulness to express interests and values because they rely on the government to help implement necessary projects. “As part of its reform program, the national leadership has encouraged government agencies to transfer some of their functions to NGOs, but many agencies at the local level are reluctant to do so, as it would reduce their
power and resources” (Lu, 2005, p. 4). The government has limited the NGOs’ access to help make an impact in the social and economic problems that China faces.

Many of the policies that exist have hindered the expansion or the growth of NGOs. This limitation has caused challenges because it limits the population the organizations can serve. For example, the limitations and regulations found in Beijing have hindered NGO management:

- **Clause I**: Prohibits NGOs from establishing regional branches.
  National NGOs cannot set up any branch in Beijing, while provincial and county-level NGOs must confine their organizations to the provincial capital city or the county seat. NGOs carrying out the same activities can exist simultaneously at all the different administrative levels, but they must remain separate organizations.

- **Clause II**: Bars any individual from serving as the legal representative of more than one NGO.
  “Legal representative” is the role usually assumed by the leader of an NGO. Under the “no regional branch” rule, any extension of the original organization in other locations must be registered as independent NGOs, which means founders cannot be the legal representatives, i.e. the leaders, of both the original and the new organization (Lu, 2005, pp. 2-3).

Maintaining an efficient volunteer base and recruiting volunteers has been a challenge for NGOs. Due to the lack of trust throughout society recruiting and promoting volunteers has caused NGOs in China to rely on different aspects to gain support. “In general, the public does not believe that one person; with no government affiliation will do something beneficial for society without a self-interested motive” (Fangqiang, 2009, p. 2). Since most, if not all, NGOs are primary run by volunteers, this is an important aspect NGOs continuously face, but must attempt to avoid. Gaining public trust ensures longevity for the existence of programs.
Conclusion

The environmental NGOs in China have played a vital role on the political structure of the Chinese government. Environmental NGOs have impacted governmental decisions to address health concerns and environment policy initiatives. Most NGOs have sustained financial support through domestic and international partnerships, allowing them to continue their efforts to support a healthier environment for Chinese people. While the Western civilization has influenced the dynamic growth of the Chinese government, its role on the decision making efforts for policy change has been limited. Since China is the fastest-growing energy consumer in the world, it must find a way to reduce energy consumption. The global impact on the climate is an essential piece to changing political policies. China has opportunities to reduce its global footprint by adopting new improvements that NGOs have attempted to establish.

The Chinese government reforms have impacted the growth of NGOs. The opportunities to help rebuild the civil society in China have grown out of the reforms China has implemented. Over the past decade, China has attempted to rebuild its administration; however, there is lack of support from the public and other government agencies within the country. The government must find a way to incorporate NGOs in its decision making efforts so that restoration of trust can be maintained.

Challenges are inevitable for environmental NGOs. These organizations should not solely rely on the funding from their partnerships, but must find a way to self-sustain their income by forming networks or alliances with other NGOs—especially those that have national and international connections. While this is a huge challenge, it will help promote longevity as they press forward with their mission and values. Environmental NGOs have to address civil awareness in such a way that they gain support from volunteers in order to influence the policy process.

References


