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# CHINA'S ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

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**This is a work in progress. Feedback welcome.**

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## INTRODUCTION

China is facing mounting environmental pressure. Although the country has experienced fast economic growth, a high price has been paid in the form of the environment, which has been seriously degraded. Air and water pollution pose the most serious environmental problems. Other environmental issues include declining water resources, accelerated deforestation and the threats to human health from climate change. In addition, China is still heavily reliant on fossil fuels. The country, which itself is arguably the largest contributor to climate change in the world, must now deal with the increasingly visible negative impacts of global warming.

China has become more open to the world. Since China participated in its first major international event, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972, links have been built between China and international spheres of environmental governance.<sup>1</sup> Over the past three decades, increasing interaction between China and the world has been built and has escalated the establishment of domestic environmental management systems. During the globalization process, international environmental events, organizations and NGOs (INGOs) have had a strong impact on the country. After the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, an increasing number of international NGOs arrived in China. These groups account for a majority of INGOs that have entered China since 1978.<sup>2</sup> It is estimated that around 3000-6500 INGOs have a presence in China, focusing on education, health care, social welfare and environmental protection.<sup>3</sup> These organizations assist Chinese voluntary groups in financial and organizational capacity building, and have established an increasing density of linkages between local NGOs and international NGOs.<sup>4</sup> In addition, bilateral co-operation programs have been developed primarily between China and Northern country governments, such as Japan, UK, Germany, Italy and Norway, which facilitate China in its policy development and promoting governance capacity on climate change and sustainability issues. In particular, in comparison to North

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<sup>1</sup> See Chan, G. Lee, P. and Chan, L., 2008, 'China's Environmental Governance: the domestic-international nexus', *Third World Quarterly*, Volume 29, Issue 2, March 2008, pages 291–314.

<sup>2</sup> Ma, Q., 2006, 'Globalization, International Non-governmental organizations and China's Non-governmental organizations' development,' *Open Times*. Issue 2.

<sup>3</sup> This is a rough estimation of NGO Research Centre, Tsinghua University, a research institute that closely investigates the development of the NGO sector in China.

<sup>4</sup> Zusman, E. and Turner, J., 2005, 'Beyond the bureaucracy, changing China's policymaking environment,' in D. A. Kristen (eds) *China's Environment and the Challenge of Sustainable Development*, M. E. Sharpe. Morton, K., 2008, 'Transnational advocacy at the grassroots in China: potential benefits and risks', in P. Ho and R. Edmonds (eds) *China's Embedded Activism Opportunities and Constraints of a Social Movement*, London/New York: Routledge.

America, the European Union has been more active in promoting co-operation between it and China on major environmental issues that have regional and global impact. Professional multilateral organizations are also important actors promoting China's environmental governance; particularly the Asian Development Bank, the United Nations Development Program, the Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Bank.

Chinese citizens have shown an increasing level of environmental awareness, which is evident in the development of environmental activism and symbolized by the organization of environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS) and voluntary groups. The past few years have seen rapid growth of ENGOS. By October 2008, 3,539 environmental groups had been registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs or its local bureaus.<sup>5</sup> However, unregistered environmental NGOs are not included in this number and neither are web-based organizations or ENGOS registered as business organizations<sup>6</sup>. According to estimates the total number of unregistered environmental organizations that exist is over 2,000.<sup>7</sup> These groups can be seen as articulating the desire of the public and are gradually starting to play a role in improving ecological governance<sup>8</sup>.

A dramatic growth in China's Internet population has been well documented. Across the country, Internet users have reached 298 million and the Internet penetration rate reaches 22.6%, which is higher than the global average.<sup>9</sup> In some demographic sectors, particularly educated urban youth, the level of Internet usage is high. Surveys indicate that almost half of the population in Beijing and Shanghai "frequently use the Internet."<sup>10</sup> The Internet has been embraced by

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<sup>5</sup> All-China Environmental Foundation, 2008, 'Report on environmental NGOs', unpublished internal report.

<sup>6</sup> This survey was taken by a GONGO—ACEF, which may have had difficulties trying to reach unregistered grassroots ENGOS that do not have legal status.

<sup>7</sup> Economy, E., 7 February 2005, 'China's environmental movement, testimony before the Congressional Executive Commission on China Roundtable on Environmental NGOs in China: Encouraging Action and Addressing Public Grievances,' from U.S. Government's Council on Foreign Relations. Available HTTP: <<http://www.cfr.org/publication/7770/>> (accessed 03/02/ 2006).

<sup>8</sup> By October 2008, 3,539 groups have been registered, which is 30% more than that found at the end of 2005. In particular, registered grassroots ENGOS are now almost double those 3 years ago. This data excludes the unregistered environmental NGOs, such as web-based organizations and ENGOS registered as business organizations.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, Yang, G., 2003, 'The co-evolution of the Internet and civil society in China,' *Asian Survey*, Vol. 43, No. 3, pp. 405-422.

<sup>10</sup> '21st Report on Internet development in China' (*Di ershiyi ci Zhongguo hulianwang fazhan tongji zhuangkuang baogao*), 2007. Available at <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/index/0E/00/11/index.htm>

environmentalists, and as suggested by Yang,<sup>11</sup> is often used in exchanging ideas and mobilizing activities.

This paper explores the impact of globalization on China's environmental activism. As a city being at the foremost of globalization in China, Beijing's environmental activism has developed rapidly and vividly in terms of membership, number of issues addressed, and the role they play in national environmental campaigns. It represents the most successful green community in China in mass and resource mobilization, and the generation of influences on policy-making. Therefore Beijing has been chosen as a case study and, by focusing on environmentalism there, this paper discusses the forms and characteristics and movement repertoires of Chinese environmental activism. The paper assesses whether, and to what extent, it is connected to the transnational environmental movement; and the factors that shape China's environmentalism.

This paper is organized in five parts. The second (next) part reviews the history of China's environmental management and its relation to the evolution of world environmental governance. The third part examines the characteristics of Beijing's green activism, its historical evolution, organizational development, environmental identity and the main focuses and issues. Two influential campaigns are presented to illustrate movement repertoires in the fourth section. The final section discusses the characteristics of China's environmentalism and its interrelationship with the transnational environmental movement.

## **HISTORICAL REVIEW OF CHINA'S ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT**

Environmental issues have entered the international political arena in a forceful way and an increasing level of international environmental co-operation has been achieved. With respect to environmental management and governance within China, the state can no longer maintain a monopoly role. Alongside China's increasing involvement in international environmental governance, the political system has seen growing transparency in domestic environmental governance.

The evolution of China's environmental management system is facilitated by its increasing interactions with the international community. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992, broadened the scope of global environmental diplomacy, by adopting the

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<sup>11</sup> Yang, G., 2005a, 'Environmental NGOs and institutional dynamics in China', *The China Quarterly*, 181: 46-66. Yang, G. 2005b, 'Information technology and grassroots democracy: A case study of environmental activism in China', in C. Nieman (ed), *Democracy and Globalization*. Kent OH: Kent State University Press.

notion of sustainable development. China participated and stated its commitment to the Rio Declaration. Shortly after the conference, the country promulgated a “Ten Major Measures to Enhance Environment and Development” stating that China needs to promote co-ordinated development of the economy, society, resources, and the environment. In 1994 the “China Agenda 21” was issued, the first government guidance on realizing sustainable development. Many of its principles and measures have become the foundation of domestic environmental policy and legislation.

In the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, Zhu Rongji, Premier of the State Council at that time, stated that China has acceded to a series of international conventions and completed the domestic procedure for the approval of the Kyoto Protocol. This was done with a view to taking an active part in multilateral environment co-operation to protect the global environment and to realize global sustainable development. Later in 2005, on the fifth plenary session of the 16<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the Communist Party, the leadership raised the “scientific concept of development” that stresses conservation and efficiency, reduces waste, promotes green GDP indicators, and prevents further damage to the environment. This marked a turning point for China’s socio-economic development.

The evolution of China’s environmental legislation strongly reflects its involvement in global environmental governance. The country now commits to more than 30 international agreements,<sup>12</sup> as well as 20 bilateral agreements on environment and development and memoranda of understanding on environmental cooperation with Canada, the US, Britain and neighboring countries, such as India, Korea, Japan and Russia. Domestically, China has developed a comprehensive environmental legislative framework, greatly enlightened by both the Rio Declaration and the World Summit on Sustainable Development, for principles and measurements in pollution control and sustainable development.<sup>13</sup> This includes 18 laws on environmental protection and energy saving, as well as more than 50 legal regulations and more than 660 ministerial regulations at the local level.

Another area that is affected by international events is public participation and transparency in environmental governance. International organizations and NGOs have been playing a role in formulating international environmental policies.

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<sup>12</sup> One of the major international agreements is United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

<sup>13</sup> See Li, Q., 2006, ‘Review on Environmental Legislation in China: Sustainable Development & Innovation’ *China Population and Environment*.

From the Rio Declaration to the World Summit on Sustainable Development, one of the major developments in international environmental co-operation has been to enhance partnerships between governmental and non-governmental sectors as well as volunteer groups in environmental matters. This development has also affected the Chinese government's attitude toward domestic environmental groups, and has provided increased space for the development of environmental NGOs. Environmental protection has been one of the fields in which some space is provided by the state for the establishment of NGOs.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the environmental movement encompasses public activism that ranges from voluntary groups to on-line activism. Several environmental laws require the government to inform the public: for instance the Environmental Impact Assessment Act promulgated in 2003 confirms the right of public participation in environmental policy-making. This legal framework is complemented by 'Environmental Protection Administrative Licensing Hearings Provisional Measures' (2004) and 'Provisional Measures for Public Participation in Environmental Impact Assessment' (2006). Both legal documents delineated measures for citizens' participation in environmental impact assessment. Being 'at the vanguard of non-governmental activity',<sup>15</sup> environmental activists have become significantly involved in China's environmental management, mainly in protecting nature and bio-diversity; participating in local control of environmental pollution and establishing sustainable household practices.<sup>16</sup> ENGOs and groups do not orient themselves against the state, but rather are situated in a grey area between state and society where multiple actors and stakeholders interact.<sup>17</sup> They are also found to struggle in the face of financial restraints and a lack of publicity.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, their activities

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<sup>14</sup> Saich, T., 2000, 'Negotiating the state: the development of social organizations in China,' *The China Quarterly*, 3, 125-141.

<sup>15</sup> Economy, E., 2004, *The River Runs Black: The Environmental Challenge to China's Future*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

<sup>16</sup> Martens, S., 2006, 'Public participation with Chinese characteristics: citizen consumers in China's environmental management', *Environmental Politics*, 15 (2): 211-230. Zhu, J. and Ho, P., 2008, 'Not against the state, just protect the residents' interests: an urban movement in a Shanghai neighbourhood', in P. Ho, and R. Edmond (eds), *China's Embedded Activism Opportunities and constraints of a social movement*, London & New York: Routledge.

<sup>17</sup> Zhu, J. and Ho, P., 2008, 'Not against the state, just protect the residents' interests: an urban movement in a Shanghai neighbourhood', in P. Ho, and R. Edmond (eds) *China's Embedded Activism Opportunities and constraints of a social movement*, London & New York: Routledge. Sullivan, L. and Xie, L., 2009, 'Environmental activism, social networks and the Internet', *China Quarterly*, 198 (6).

<sup>18</sup> Xie, L., 2009, *Environmental Activism in China*. London: Routledge. Martens, S., 2006, 'Public participation with Chinese characteristics: citizen consumers in China's environmental management', *Environmental Politics*, 15 (2): 211-230.



promote public participation in environmental policy-making processes at both central and local government levels.<sup>19</sup>

## **THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT IN BEIJING**

With China's mounting environmental issues, it is no surprise that the number of environmental protests and conflicts has been increasing across the country. Since 1995, the number of demonstrations has risen by more than 25% a year to reach 128,000 -- about twelve times the number from a decade ago.<sup>20</sup> Whereas local conflicts between polluting factories and agitated victims have been quite frequent in rural China, recently large-scale demonstrations have occurred in urban areas.

Beijing, the capital of China, has a population of 15.3 million<sup>21</sup>. This city has witnessed fast economic growth in recent years. An average of 10.3% economic growth has been achieved between 1979 and 2004. In 2005, the average GDP per capita reached 5,457 US\$, which makes Beijing one of the richest cities in China. This average income per capita has reached the level of medium developed countries<sup>22</sup>. As the foremost metropolis in China, Beijing is increasingly connected in global and globalizing networks in the realms of the economy, finance, technology and transport. The city's reputation and credibility have been increasingly raised, especially when the Olympic Games was held in 2008. Beijing has become an indispensable member of the international community.

### *Beijing's ENGO community: a historical review*

Beijing's environmentalists were greatly influenced by China's globalization process. They were among the first to organize environmental NGOs and voluntary activities across the country. In particular, these groups were spurred by the Rio Declaration, which following the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development prompted a large number of international organizations and NGOs to participate in discussing environmental protection. Later, the World Conference on Women was held in Beijing which again highlighted the role of NGOs as representatives in public affairs and impressed the Chinese public. The first

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<sup>19</sup> Stalley, P. and Yang, D., 2006, 'An emerging environmental movement in China?' *China Quarterly*, 333-356. Xie, L., 2009, *Environmental Activism in China*. London: Routledge. Sun, Y. and Zhao, D. (2008) 'State-Society Relations and Environmental Campaigns', in K. O'Brien (eds), *Popular Protest in China*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

<sup>20</sup> Yan, S., 2006, 'Constructing a resource-saving and environmental-friendly society', in X. Ru, *et. al. Anaysis and forecast on China's social development*, Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press.

<sup>21</sup> Referred to Beijing Statistical Information Net. <http://www.bjstats.gov.cn/> (last visited 02/09/2006).

<sup>22</sup> Referred to Beijing Morning Post, 2006, 'GDP Per Person Reached 5,000 Dollars That Represents the Income Level of Medium Developed Countries,' 23/01/2006.

national grassroots ENGO, Friends of Nature (FON), was established in 1993. In the same year, Global Village Beijing (GVB) was established by a famous environmental activist Liao, Xiaoyi. Later, Ms. Wang, Yongchen, a former member of FON, established Green Environmental Volunteers (GEV) in 1997. These three groups appeared as forerunners in organizing NGOs and mobilizing environmental protection among the public. By the end of the 1990s, these forerunners had successfully mobilized environmental awareness in Beijing.

After 2000, a new tide of ENGOs emerged, with the majority of these ENGOs being organized by former staff members of the earlier groups. The founders of these groups were usually capable project officers. The fact that they possessed certain resources was one important reason for establishing their own groups.

This tide of ENGO development was also facilitated by their increased interaction with global civil society. In August 2002, twelve ENGOs participated in the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg. Later that year, the Global Environmental Facility, an intergovernmental organization financing projects to implement the major multilateral environmental agreements, organized its second Assembly in Beijing. More than 40 Chinese ENGOs participated. These international events broadened the perspectives of domestic ENGOs and raised their understanding of public participation. Furthermore, these events provided opportunities for them to build links with INGOs.

As well as gaining a growing number of international connections, Chinese environmental activists' financial situation became more secure. Capable key figures and former staff members of the previous groups began to establish new groups, such as the Beijing Brooks Education Center (BBEC) (2003), which promotes citizens' education, especially peasants' education; the Beijing Earthview Environment Education and Research Center (EEERC) that works on environmental education and related research; and the Global Environmental Institute (GEI) (2003) that focuses on cooperation between NGOs and enterprises and promoting the utilization of technology in protecting the environment. These groups have a more professional profile than their forerunners. For instance, their target audience is more focused on including journalists and community citizens, instead of relying on mobilizing a mass-audience.

Another tide of growth appeared after 2005, when a large number of grassroots ENGOs emerged (ACEF, 2008), mainly represented by Internet based

NGOs. Studies have observed high visibility of environmentalism in cyberspace and asserted that information and communication technologies play a significant role in the emergence of environmental activism.<sup>23</sup> Extensive connections and linkages exist among individuals and organizations both on-line and on the ground, which together contributes to the growing environmental network in Beijing. However, the scope of activities of on-line environmental groups remains unexplored.<sup>24</sup>

#### *Organizational development and issues of concern*

International NGOs (INGOs) have contributed substantially to the prosperity of Beijing's green community. Funding is the primary form of support. Among the international support that local NGOs receive, the contributions from the US, EU and Hong Kong (SAR) are the most significant. A large proportion of Beijing's NGOs' funding comes from INGOs.<sup>25</sup> In general, the funds provided have been relatively substantial. They are often meant to cover administrative operations. The staff of these environmental groups could subsist from these funds.<sup>26</sup> In this way, NGOs in Beijing could offer their staff competitive salaries and became attractive to graduates and job seekers as a career. Therefore, supported by foreign funds, a career in Beijing's NGOs gradually became a promising opportunity for graduates.

With respect to professionalization, Beijing's NGOs have seen a low level of institutionalization and formalization, which is identified by a weak membership system, informal internal administration and very few systematic mechanisms that have been developed for decision-making. Individual key members or leaders dominate organizational life, and determine these organizations' agendas. In addition, NGOs hardly develop as professional organizations, and lack clear development strategies and plans. Major influential NGOs, such as Green Earth

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<sup>23</sup> Yang, G., 2005a, 'Environmental NGOs and institutional dynamics in China', *The China Quarterly*, 181: 46-66. Sullivan, L. and Xie, L., 2009, 'Environmental activism, social networks and the Internet', *China Quarterly*, 198 (6); Yang, G., (2005b) 'Information technology and grassroots democracy: A case study of environmental activism in China,' in C. Nieman (ed), *Democracy and Globalization*. Kent OH: Kent State University Press. Sullivan, L. and Xie, L., 2009, 'Environmental activism, social networks and the Internet', *China Quarterly*, 198 (6).

<sup>24</sup> Ma, A., 2006, *Non-Governmental Organizations in Contemporary China: Paving the Way to Civil Society?* London: Routledge. Yang, G., 2007, 'How do Chinese civic associations respond to the internet: findings from a survey', *The China Quarterly* Vol. 189, 122-143.

<sup>25</sup> Deng, G., 2001, 'A preliminary analysis of the NGO survey', in M. Wang (ed.) *Research on NGOs in China* (zhongguo NGO Yanjiu), Vol. 43, Beijing: United Nations Centre for Regional Development Research Reports Series.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Wen, Bo, director of Global Environment Fund. 09/04/2006. Interview with Shen, Xu, director of Green Web. 04/04/2004.

Volunteer (GEV), still do not have a focus for their activities after more than 10 years of development. Instead, it has rather diverse focuses, such as environmental education, protection of wild birds and animals and the desertification problem in northern China. Many of Beijing's ENGOs are found to work in the same field and try to accomplish the same work in the same way. This overlap increases the competition for resources and results in wasted resources.<sup>27</sup>

Closely related to financial sources and ideas disseminated by international agencies, ENGOs' issues of concern have enlarged significantly and have incorporated a variety of environmental issues. They are among the first in the country to have a rather diverse focus. Similar to the environmental movement worldwide,<sup>28</sup> an incorporation of justice issues has been identified in Beijing, which focuses on the relationships between the environment and poverty, public participation, economic inequality and the ecological hardships confronting peoples in poor regions of China's West and Southwest. Under the "sustainable development" and "civil society" programmes of major funding bodies, such as the Ford Foundation and Oxfam, a variety of social and economic projects in local communities have been developed, including community sustainable development and empowerment, environmental participation and promotion of consumer behaviour changes. Beijing's environmentalists have incorporated issues of higher levels, including energy issues, changing agriculture patterns, consumer behaviour and climate change, and can be considered avant-garde as they represent the leading forces promoting social change in China.

### *Movement strategies*

The Chinese environmental movement works closely with the mass media, as is often the case in the environmental movement across borders. Domestic media attract the largest proportion of Chinese environmentalists' resources, while increasing international media contacts have been built in recent years.

Throughout the last decade, more and more media have gained a growing independence from the Party state. To some extent they had to become increasingly economically independent as state subsidies diminished, while at the

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<sup>27</sup> Chatham house, 2007, 'Civil society and environmental governance in China', Workshop Report: 'Forging Alliances for Environmental Protection Between NGOs in Different Regions and Sectors', Beijing. Jan.

<sup>28</sup> Faber, D., 2005, 'Building a transnational environmental justice movement: obstacles and opportunities in the age of globalization', in J. Bandy and J. Smith (eds), *Coalitions Across Borders: Transnational Protest and the Neoliberal Order*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

same time state control relaxed somewhat on those issues that were not of high political importance.<sup>29</sup> Newspaper staff, who often are environmental activists and leaders of ENGOs, collaborated with movements in building public consensus.<sup>30</sup> Through reports and articles, they have educated the public, publicizing ideas and advocating the objectives of environmental NGOs.

Among the international connections made by Chinese environmentalists, the media constitute a small proportion. Through international events and introductions from international organizations and NGOs, Beijing's environmentalists have become familiar with a few media from Hong Kong, Western Europe and North America. These contacts provide ways to mobilize resources and support on environmental issues.<sup>31</sup> However, in comparison to collaboration between ENGOs and domestic media in sensitizing the public to specific issue of concern, little international collaboration has been made.

Another strategy that is often adopted by environmentalists is to use the personal networks of NGO leaders and key figures. Complex personal connections widely permeate Chinese culture and society, therefore individual connections and relations among friends, relatives, colleagues, neighbours and so forth play an important role in the construction of the Chinese environmental movement.<sup>32</sup> Through case studies, Xie illustrates how personal networks function to form environmentalism as a collective identity, mobilize coordinated actions and affect political authorities by accessing useful information and acquiring political protection.<sup>33</sup> Beijing's environmentalists are deeply rooted in the social context of Beijing and utilize close social ties with civic activists from previous social movements and collective actions, such as Dai, Qing from the Student's Movement in 1989.<sup>34</sup> By meeting and discussing with these individuals, environmentalists

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<sup>29</sup> This has not been the case on for instance the Falun Gong, Taiwan, the Party, military developments, Tibet and foreign affairs. The environment is, however, clearly indicated as a less sensitive issue, although at times reporting is also clearly regulated and restricted, such as on the Three Gorges Dam, the Harbin disaster and spatial planning and land property rights.

<sup>30</sup> Yang, G. and Calhoun, C., 2008, 'Media, civil society, and the rise of a green public sphere in China' in P. Ho, and R. Edmond (eds) *China's Embedded Activism Opportunities and constraints of a social movement*, London & New York: Routledge. Xie, L., 2009, *Environmental Activism in China*. London: Routledge.

<sup>31</sup> Dalton, R., J. Recchia, S. and Rohrschneider, R., 2003, 'The environmental movement and the modes of political action,' *Comparative Political Studies*, 36: 743-770.

<sup>32</sup> Yang, G., 2005, 'Environmental NGOs and institutional dynamics in China,' *The China Quarterly*, 181: 46-66. Tang, S. and Zhan, X., 2008, 'Civic Environmental NGOs, civil society, and democratisation in China,' *Journal of Development Studies*, 44: 3 (425-448).

<sup>33</sup> Xie, L., 2009, *Environmental Activism in China*. London: Routledge.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Mr. Zhou, close friend of Ms. Wang. 17/01/2005.

have learned useful tactics that could be used in raising environmental campaigns to affect the current environmental policies.

### *Collective identity and environmental networks*

Despite Beijing's ENGOs having a relatively low level of professionalization, the green community is characterised by active collaboration among local ENGOs and activists. This is attributable to the formation of an environmental identity among the green activists.

Beijing's environmentalists comprise social groups that share a common identity: socio-environmental responsibility, a combination of social responsibilities and environmental care. Members of ENGOs are mostly made up of young people, under 40 years old, and more than half of them have university education. As taught by moral education that was required by the ruling party in their childhood,<sup>35</sup> this group of young people is deeply influenced by social ideals and collectiveness,<sup>36</sup> as emphasized by the Chinese Communist Party. Therefore, their environmentalism is to protect the environment as one way of realizing one's social ideal for a responsible individual.

Group leaders of Beijing ENGOs share with young people socio-environmental responsibility, which for them is rooted in a so-called elitism that commits to improve social equity and realize one's ideals to promote social reform. As case study on one of the established influential organization Green Earth Volunteer shows,<sup>37</sup> a large number of those who work as officials, scholars, journalists and NGO professionals are over the age of 45. Thus the largest cohort experienced hardship in their youth, when China was a developing country. They witnessed various political movements of the Chinese Communist Party that disturbed many lives, the most well-known being the 'cultural revolution'. This older generation also gained a large sense of social responsibility towards collective interests.<sup>38</sup> This group of people has a higher likelihood of believing in Confucian principles.<sup>39</sup> With respect to positions they occupy, they represent social elites in

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<sup>35</sup> See Yuan, B. and Shen, J., 1998, 'Moral values held by early adolescents in Taiwan and Mainland China', *Journal of Moral Education*, 27(2), 191-208.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Zhang, Kejia, journalist of China Youth and director of Green Island. 02/12/2004. Interview with Zhao, Ang, project officer of GEV. 24/03/2005.

<sup>37</sup> Xie, L., 2009, *Environmental Activism in China*. London: Routledge.

<sup>38</sup> Liu, X., 1992, *This Generation's Fear and Love*, Beijing: Sanlian Publishing House.

<sup>39</sup> See Shi, T., 2000, 'Cultural values and democracy in the people's republic of China', *The China Quarterly*, 162, 540-569.

Chinese society.<sup>40</sup> Under influence of the principles of Confucianism, these individuals believe it is an obligation for them to articulate the public's interest in environmental protection, although such deeds require tremendous courage and strength under the authoritarian rule of the CCP. A kind of 'environmental elitism' was formed.

Based on their shared identity, Beijing's ENGOs are generally willing to cooperate with each other. Like their counterparts in transnational environmental activism,<sup>41</sup> they have become engaged in collaboration and co-ordinated programmatic initiatives with international and regional ENGOs. Transnational forms of organization and networks have been developed to supplement the current focus on local and regional issues. For instance, Beijing's 5 ENGOs with WWF China collectively initiated a "26 Degree Campaign" during the summers of 2004 and 2005<sup>42</sup>, which was the first there to tackle global environmental issues. Seeing the urgency to keep climate change in check and the potential to save more energy in the summer months when air conditioners run full power to cool hotels, offices and private homes, these efforts were well-received among hotels and private enterprises which volunteered to comply to set their air conditioners to a minimum of 26 degrees. After two years of advocacy activities, the campaigns had also successfully influenced state agencies located in Beijing. In June 2007, the State council issued a document formally regulating that all governmental agencies and state enterprises must set their air conditioners to a minimum of 26 degrees.

It should be noted, however, that collaboration between domestic ENGOs and international NGOs is built mainly through their chapters in China. Localized international organizations have more chances to cooperate with Chinese ENGOs than those that do not have local personnel. Smaller organizations that can hardly establish an office in Beijing often choose to build partnerships with local environmental groups and mainly rely on the latter in their collaborative projects,

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<sup>40</sup> Li, C., 1996, 'Rediscovering urban subcultures: the contrast between Shanghai and Beijing', *The China Journal*, 36, 139-153.

<sup>41</sup> Della Porta, D. and Tarrow, S., 2005, *Transnational Protest and Global Activism*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Dalton, R., J. Recchia, S. and Rohrschneider, R., 2003, 'The environmental movement and the modes of political action,' *Comparative Political Studies*, 36: 743-770.

<sup>42</sup> In 2004, Global Village Beijing, Friends of Nature, Green EarthVolunteers, Institute of Environment and Development, WWF China and China Association for NGO Cooperation collaborated. In the second year, another 3 ENGOs joined, including SEPA China Environmental Culture Promotion Association, Friends of Earth (HK) and Conservation International.

such as Ecologia with Shonestone Community Participation Action.<sup>43</sup> This kind of collaboration usually lasts only for a short period of time. Yet, INGOs are very cautious in working with and joining domestic advocacy activities, because of the repressive political conditions in China.<sup>44</sup>

## **CAMPAIGNS AGAINST DAM CONSTRUCTION**

In highlighting the development and significance of Beijing's environmental activism in recent years, it is interesting to compare an anti-dam construction campaign in 2003-2004 with that on the Three Gorges Dam project, which took place in the early 1990s.

The two campaigns have many aspects in common. Both deal with national level projects, aimed at generating hydro-electric power in order to keep pace with China's economic growth. The three Gorges Dam project's 26 hydropower turbines are expected to produce 18.2 million kilowatt, up to one-ninth of China's total electricity output; the dams to be built on the Nu River would produce 3.64 million kilowatt. Both projects would have enormous physical and social consequences: the Three Gorges Dam would be inundating 632 square kilometers (395 square miles) of land and become the largest hydropower station and dam in the world; the Nu River project would include the construction of thirteen dams. The social costs of resettlement would be enormous as well. Chinese officials estimate that more than 1.1 million people will have to be resettled for constructing the Three Gorges dam, The 13 dams' construction on the Nu River would forcibly displace 50,000 people, indirectly affect the livelihoods of millions living downstream in China, Burma and Thailand, and negatively affect the flora and fauna in the surrounding areas.

Yet, the two campaigns had completely different results and impacts. The movement opposing the Three Gorges Dam was strongly repressed, whereas the Nu River campaign was a comparative success. After a first delay of the project, premier Wen Jiabao decided in April 2004 to halt implementation of the plan. He called for careful consideration of major hydroelectric projects that have aroused a high level of concern in society, and with which the environmental protection side disagrees. Although the plan was poised to move ahead (the project developer, China Huadian, was reported to begin preparations in February 2008), it is still

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<sup>43</sup> Both of them are small-size environmental groups from the US.

<sup>44</sup> See for instance a talk made by Lo, SzePing, campaign director of Greenpeace China. [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic\\_id=1421&fuseaction=topics.event\\_summary&event\\_id=274600](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1421&fuseaction=topics.event_summary&event_id=274600)



unclear whether the project has received final approval from Beijing. Local government officials denied approval had been given.

Until recently, the Three Gorges dam has yet to begin producing hydro-power. Water levels have been raised preparing to generate power, but numerous landslides and earthquakes have been caused. 1.2 billion Euros has therefore been invested in the dam project, with an actual investment 20 times that planned. In terms of its social impact, around 1.1 million people whose livelihood was affected, no more than one fifth moved out of the dam-construction area. More migrations have to be made in the near future to avoid the local ecology from being worsened.

### *Environmental network*

In the Three Gorges Dam campaign, movement networks were isolated from the outside world and were loosely organized, consisting mainly of Beijing-based scientists, intellectuals, journalists and deputies of the NPC and the CPPCC. Probe International, a Canada-based organization, has been carefully monitoring the Three Gorges project since the early 1980s when planning commenced. It worked with local NGOs, intellectuals, and the press to oppose the dam and published a book: *Damming the Three Gorges: What Dam Builders Don't Want You to Know*, criticising the feasibility study of the dam's design that the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) financed.<sup>45</sup> However, no international connections were made between the Chinese movement actors and their Canadian counterparts, who were working on the same issue. This is not hard to understand with the difficulties in communication across borders.

In contrast, a large number of actors were involved in Nu dam protest. Environmental activists from Beijing, mainly organized by Green Environmental Volunteers and its leader Ms. Wang, Yongchen played an important leading role in the campaign. It connected with Green Watershed—a grassroots NGO that organized and represented dam victims from Yunnan, scholars and experts from Yunnan University, civil servants, journalists and scientists from Beijing. GEV is also funded by INGOs to conduct advocacy on large rivers in Yunnan. International Rivers Networks (IRN) provided funds for GEV's trip inspecting river gorges threatened by hydropower projects. GEV was also encouraged to collaborate with

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<sup>45</sup> CIDA provided \$14 million Cdn in financing for a pivotal feasibility study of the dam's design. The study was carried out by a Canadian consortium of public utilities and private engineering firms, under the supervision of the World Bank. However, these two agencies didn't provide any more money to the dam because of public's opposition and financial concerns.

other Chinese NGOs, journalists, academics and community members to protect the international river of Nu River.<sup>46</sup> These funding activities facilitated GEV in leading the Nu River campaign.

### *Media coverage*

Under the relatively closed political system of the early 1990s, media freedom was insubstantial. The leader of the activists, Ms. Dai Qing published a book '*Changjiang, Changjiang*' in which ideas opposing the Three Gorges project were raised. With the state strongly controlling the media, this book was soon banned and the author imprisoned. Opposing voices were strongly repressed. In the early 1990s, the Party state manipulated policy discussion on the Dam, allowing only positive reports on it. Nationalism and ethno-centrism were prevalent in the media, which greatly helped decide the construction of the Three Gorges Dam (Sullivan, 1994).

Regarding the Nu River dam protest, from August 2003 until February 2004 the movement coalition aimed to attract public attention to the controversy of dam building through the mass media. More than 20 newspaper articles appeared in the news concerning the dam project and the controversy around it. These articles were not only published in general newspapers for the wider public, but also in the daily newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, which has a major impact on policy makers<sup>47</sup>. At the same time, a TV program was made and was broadcast<sup>48</sup>.

Movement actors' understanding of the negative effects of the project was deepened after February 2004, when GEV organized a mission for journalists, scholars and environmentalists to investigate the local situation of the Nu River. During this trip, participants became impressed by the significant impact the dam construction project would have on the rich biological diversity and cultural diversity in the area. Only then were the social consequences of the project fully understood and 'experienced'. Twenty-two minorities and six religious groups co-exist in this area, most of whom farm and herd in the isolated mountains above the river. The project would result in the potential relocation of 50,000 people, most of them from minority groups. This excursion led to a large number of reports especially on the

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with Wang, Yongchen. 23/03/2004.

<sup>47</sup> 11, September, 2003, Zhao, Yongxin, 'Keep The River of Ecological Significance for Future Generation.' *People's Daily*. Beijing. 19, August, 2003. Beijing. Zhang, Kejia. 'Dam Building On Nu River is planned. Construction is Opposed.' *China Youth Daily*. Beijing.

<sup>48</sup> 28, December, 2003, Ma, Hongtao. 'Conflicts in Dam Building on Nu River.' Half An Hour On Economy. TV Program. By National TV Station. Beijing.

social conditions in the Nu River area and how these would be affected by the dams.<sup>49</sup> Consensus-building then shifted from mere ecological protection to include concern for the inhabitants of the area.<sup>50</sup>

### *Coordinated actions*

Together with the banning of the book and the subsequent imprisonment of the movement leader in 1990, the movement network protesting the Three Gorges became rather loose. Movement actors generally worked independently: scientists wrote letters to political officials, deputies tried to influence decision-makers through the NPC or the CPPCC. Unfortunately, both the NPC and the CPPCC meetings were strongly manipulated by the CCP. During the 1992 NPC meeting, deputies were restricted in articulating their interests and opinions on the Three Gorges project. The Party controlled the Conference and ordered this issue to be vetoed.<sup>51</sup>

In comparison, a series of coordinated actions were organized in the Nu River campaign. One of the most visible collaborations among actors was between the ENGOs and the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP), which was largely based on movement activist Ms. Wang's close connections with Mr. Mu, previous chief inspector of the supervision department of the MEP. Mr. Mu's evident positive attitude toward environmental NGOs was known and silently approved by a small group of top leaders within the MEP. During the policy process and the campaign, Mr. Mu provided Ms. Wang and the GEV with updated information, both on substantial environmental matters as well as on the development of the political debate.

ENGOs had been active in organizing collective actions. In March and April 2004, nine photo exhibitions were held in Beijing's universities, in a supermarket, an office building, and a post-office. Student Environmental Associations were contacted to help organize a venue at their campus. At the same time, an interactive website called 'Nu River Sentiment' was established, on which updates on the progress of the campaign were posted. This website facilitated the exchange of information and communication between movement actors.

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<sup>49</sup> Relevant reports, see 20, May, 2004, Tang, Jianguang. 'Force that Delayed Construction on Nu River.' *China News Weekly*. Beijing. 19, April, 2004, Liu, Chang. 'Visit Nu River.' *International Tribune*. Guangzhou.

<sup>50</sup> Personal interview. No. 2004-03.

<sup>51</sup> Among 2, 613 delegates, 1,767 voted in favor, 177 opposed the resolution, 644 abstained, and 25 did not cast their votes.

Actions were also organized to produce international influence. In an international conference, “World and People along Watershed” held in Thailand in December 2003, representatives of Chinese ENGOs, including GEV and a Yunnan-based NGO, and Green Watershed initiated a signing session to protest against the dam construction. As a result, 80 NGOs from Thailand and Laos (that are also situated in the lower streams of the Nu River) collectively wrote to the Chinese government, inquiring about the decision-making process on this project which did not involve consultation with the downstream countries. This letter was sent to the Chinese embassy in Thailand. The collective efforts therefore exerted pressure on the Chinese government.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Influenced by China’s increasing involvement in global environmental governance and interaction with INGOs, China has witnessed the development of a vivid environmental activism for almost two decades. The Chinese environmental movement has successfully built consensus on local and regional environmental issues. With its own form of movement network, Chinese environmentalism has achieved significance in both domestic and international public opinion.

An indigenous environmental identity has developed in China and is supported by the country’s cultural heritage and traditional moral education. In Beijing’s case, the formed collective identity is combined with the sense of social responsibility. It strongly strengthens the mobilization of masses and resources, and helps to preserve the movement’s autonomy from international NGOs as their funding organizations. This characteristic distinguishes the Chinese environmentalists from their counterparts in other transitional societies, for instance, Russia. Promoted by foreign donors, Russian environmental groups have become increasingly professionalized. However, they lack connection with local communities and hence have developed into a sector that is inefficient for promoting civil society and influencing environmental policy.<sup>52</sup>

A plurality of opinions and interests has become available for policy-making and greater public participation is now present in environmental governance. Although very few issues are raised and framed in ways that challenge the ruling

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<sup>52</sup> Henry, L., 2001, ‘The greening of grassroots democracy? The Russia environmental movement, foreign aid, and democratization’, *Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies*. Paper 2001\_03-henr.

party and its legitimacy, the environmental movement in China has been closely related to the growing demand for transparent and accountable politics.

In organizing different individuals and organizations in transnational mobilization, a movement network has been formed. It bears similarity to its counterparts in other regions, being characterized by a heterogeneous range of protest entrepreneurs.<sup>53</sup> As indicated by the case of activism against dam construction in the Nu River, scientists' participation is important, as they possess more freedom of expression, criticism and information access under the authoritarian State than environmentalists. As argued by Cao and Suttmerier (2001), with the development of a market economy and the transition of the new political leaders, scientists and scholars began to be better supported by the ruling authority.<sup>54</sup> In addition, the active involvement of Chinese political authorities is also recognized. This is probably because political elites fear that their opinions will scarcely affect the main policy-makers and dominate in the policy negotiations. But by gaining support from the public and generating public consensus, they may gain power in policy negotiations.<sup>55</sup> As a result, domestic civil society has been boosted.

China's environmental movement has been actively interacting with the transnational environmental movement since it was established. Affected by its international donors or collaborators, the Chinese environmentalists have indicated similar patterns in developing their issues of concern. The movement evolved from a single-issue to mixtures of multiple issues beyond environmental concerns such as social justice and civil rights. An identification of global causes is established through active interaction with INGOs and gradually including energy saving, biodiversity protection and climate change issues. However, it has to be noted that Beijing's environmental activism has been at the forefront of the country's environmental movements and, in other areas outside Beijing, citizens are more concerned about issues that relate directly to their local living environment, where issues are easily shared and disseminated, and become part of a common identity.<sup>56</sup> It will still take some time for the rest of the country to identify with global causes through their interaction with Beijing's ENGOs or INGOs.

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<sup>53</sup> Della Porta, D. and Tarrow, S., 2005, *Transnational Protest and Global Activism*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Keck, M. E. and Sikkink, K., 1998, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

<sup>54</sup> Cao, C. and Suttmeier, R. P., 2001, 'China's new scientific elite: distinguished young scientists, the research environment and hopes for Chinese science', *The China Quarterly*, 168, 960–984.

<sup>55</sup> See also Wang, S., 2007, 'Historical transformation: from economic policy and social policy', *China Economic Times*, April 6.

<sup>56</sup> Xie, L., 2009, *Environmental Activism in China*. London: Routledge.

In sum, Chinese environmentalists' involvement in the transnational environmental movement is still limited. This is partly related to political conditions in China, where there are strict restrictions on issues of concern and the development of movement strategies. In addition, China's environmental movement's stage of development also contributes to its limited involvement at the international level. Most Chinese ENGOs have limited resources and are at a low level of formality. It can be predicted that with growing professionalization, Chinese ENGOs will develop broader networks and a higher level of co-operation with international organizations and INGOs. Internet and computer-based communication will also facilitate these processes. But it is certain that Chinese environmentalism will come to possess its own characteristics relating to the cultural heritage and socio-political conditions of the country, in collective identity formation, movement repertoires and the development of political demands.

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