

Environmental Movements

Huánbǎo yùndòng 环保运动

China's increasingly industrialized economy has had a profound impact on the environment. Non-governmental groups and branches of international environmental groups have supplemented government efforts to gather information, to educate the public and industry to the effects of environmental degradation, and to monitor changes to the environment. Specialized functions of these organizations include technical support and legal advocacy for those harmed by pollution.

The environmental or green movement in China has experienced a steady evolution since the early 1990s, from the burgeoning of a few groups with limited goals to the flowering of a “green” civil sector with diverse focus and expertise. The number of environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has shot up from a handful to over thirty-five hundred in less than two decades. These groups have become increasingly specialized in their operations and sphere of influence. But funding constraints, insufficient government facilitation, and lack of internal resources are major challenges to their future development.

The progress of China's green movement has been coupled with the gradual increase in the complexity of China's social and political structures as a consequence of the country's fast economic development. Further expansion of the sector is likely to remain complex as the

country's economic, social, and political progress breaks down remaining barriers, giving the movement greater opportunity for influence. The movement itself will also serve as a catalyst to accelerate and facilitate change.

Beginnings of Green Movement

China's green movement was galvanized by a special initiative of the central government. In the late 1970s the Chinese government introduced a series of environmental policies that laid the foundation for more sophisticated environmental laws and regulations to come. The Environmental Protection Bureau was established in 1982 under the Ministry of Urban and Rural Construction and Environmental Protection. In 1993 a pivotal event furthered China's green movement: The country set up a powerful agency, the Environmental and Resources Protection Committee of the National People's Congress (China's legislature). Qu Geping, a veteran environmental expert who headed the Environmental Protection Bureau, became the committee's director. Qu, revered as China's “Father of Environmental Protection,” coordinated the effort by thirteen other government agencies and twenty-five media organizations to launch an annual nationwide campaign to publicize laws and regulations related to environmental and resources protection and to review progress of local governments in their implementation. Groups of journalists are dispatched each year to do on-site environmental investigations, and their findings are published throughout the media. The 1993 campaign

Haikou Environmental and Resources Center rents office space to NGOs in Hainan. It currently houses two local environmental groups and serves as an environmental library and meeting space for student groups. PHOTO

BY WEN BO.



brought environmental protection to wide public attention for the first time, and many participating journalists later became leaders and supporters of green NGOs. Those investigations still occur annually. Their influence, though declining as the sources for environmental information diversify, continues to be far reaching in bringing to the public attention the environmental woes that China faces.

Non-Governmental Organizations

China's first independent environmental group was registered in 1994, shortly after the country enacted a law requiring legal registration of social organizations. The number of green groups mushroomed to 3,539 by October 2008. Limitations in the registration law, however, have resulted in a unique feature of the composition of environmental NGOs in China. The registration law requires all social NGOs to have a government sponsor that supervises their operations. As a result, of these 3,539 groups, 1,309 are organized by various government agencies who serve as their sponsors, several of which has been in existence long before the first independent green group got registered. Such groups are called government-organized

NGOs, or GONGOs. There are also 1,382 student groups that are supervised by their respective university authorities and do not need legal registration.

Independent green groups, that is, grassroots NGOs, normally have difficulty finding a government sponsor, and international environmental groups do not have the right to register in China according to the current law. In order to circumvent the registration hurdle, the majority of these groups either register as businesses or as affiliates of universities or research centers. Some groups simply operate in a gray area without registration. The number of independent green groups is considerably smaller than GONGOs and student groups, with only 508 grassroots NGOs and ninety international environmental NGO branches.

Most environmental groups in China are concentrated in big cities on the east coast including Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin, or in ecologically strategic areas, such as Sichuan, Chongqing, and Yunnan in southwest China, that harbor intact forests, headwaters of major rivers, and rich biodiversity; others focus on Hubei and Hunan provinces, which contain the often heavily polluted middle and lower reaches of the Yangzi (Chang) River, or Inner Mongolia, Tibet, and the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Regions, which experience serious grass-land degradation.

Relationship of Economic Growth to Environmental Movement

The robust emergence of China's green NGOs is the direct consequence of the country's breathtaking economic development. Almost three decades of near double-digit annual economic growth, which has lifted millions out of poverty, led to mounting environmental woes. Environmental protection, constantly at loggerheads with economic growth, has been losing out due to the paramount priority put on the economy by the government at all levels. Since China's economy has progressed within three decades from a rudimentary rural economy to one of current heavy industrialization—one with such intensity, scale, and influence—environmental ills have become pervasive and acute, causing public health tolls without discrimination. China's economic reforms have accompanied the sophistication of its economic and social structures, which sometimes renders the tight control from the central government ineffective, requiring it to invite help from outside of the government system, albeit with caution, to address issues pertinent to environmental protection.

Growth of Environmental Movement

Several factors have facilitated and accelerated the environmental movement in China. Its growth has been expedited by a series of milestone laws and regulations enacted by the central government. Those include the Rules for Registering Social Organizations in 1994 that grants legal status to NGOs, the Environmental Impact Assessment Law in 2003 that encourages broader public participation in policy decisions, and the Guidelines for Full Implementation of the Law of State Secrets in 2004 that forces government agencies to disclose unclassified information for public review. As such policy tools encourage public participation in environmental issues, advancement of modern communication technologies, such as the Internet and cell phones, have aided in information sharing and in organizational endeavors. Decades of dedicated public education by green NGOs have raised the general public's awareness of environmental

issues and have created a large, well-trained staff and volunteer pool.

Because the government still has the paramount power in addressing environmental problems, green NGOs in China tend to cooperate with the government instead of taking a confrontational approach against it. Initially, green groups engaged mainly in simple educational activities, such as encouraging water saving, animal protection, and promoting environmental education in schools. With the increase both in the number of NGOs and in their expertise, NGOs expanded their operations in the late 1990s to include forest, water, and wetland conservation, smoking prohibition, green consumption, energy saving and emissions reduction, and climate change. They nurtured public awareness and volunteer spirit through education and activities. They also provided studies and surveys for environmental policy making, cooperated with the government to supervise the implementation of environmental policies, and served as a watchdog to check powerful local governments and industries in environmental offenses.

The expanding scope of NGO activities has continued in China in recent years. Some NGOs have specialized in providing technical support, such as structuring a database for water and air pollution mapping, a green choice public interaction platform, and biodiversity protection mapping. Some focus on encouraging public participation

A team building exercise to foster cooperative spirit among Chinese environmental activists.

PHOTO BY WEN BO.



in environmental issues; others provide capacity building for civil groups or carry out surveys and investigations on specific issues. Several green groups have engaged in safeguarding public interests by providing pollution victims access to courts. Two such groups, the Center for Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims and the Center for Environmental Legal Service under the All China Environment Federation, have more than one hundred volunteer environmental lawyers among them and have helped millions of people who asked for legal assistance from 2005 to 2008.

A new operational mode has become popular as well. Confronted by the perennial shortages of funding, personnel, and other resources, green groups began to collaborate in recent years, integrating resources and dramatically enhancing their influence on policy making and attitudes of the general public. In July 2007, several green groups in Beijing initiated a campaign of “Public Action on 20 Percent Energy Saving”; more than forty groups nationwide participated in the efforts. Such alliances also advanced campaigns for reducing air pollution by driving less and coordinated emergency rescue and relief efforts after the massive earthquake in Sichuan in May 2008. These trends are likely to continue into the future.

Challenges to Growth of Environmental Movement

Despite the drastic advancement of the environmental movement in China, several key barriers constrain its future development. A major challenge lies in the government’s dubious attitudes towards green NGOs. Although the government needs the extra exposure from the environmental groups to address rampant environmental woes, it is still wary of their power. As a consequence, many government agencies are reluctant to share information with and to invite help from green NGOs, and the current registration limits will continue to quench the zeal of new independent grassroots groups.

Another major hurdle is the shortage of funds; more than half of all environmental NGOs see this as the greatest challenge to their future development. Philanthropic awareness has been very low in China. While business and individual donations are mainstream practices in developed countries, they are still minimal in China. Corporate

social responsibility is a novel concept in the country, and businesses lack incentive to make donations for philanthropic endeavors. Individual donations are meager as well. Per capita donation in China is less than one yuan (one U.S. dollar is equivalent to about seven yuan), while in the United States that figure is \$460 per capita. Individual donations in the United States account for 2.1 percent of its national gross domestic product, compared to only 0.01 percent in China. Thus funding channels for environmental groups are very limited, and they must rely on personal connections and international foundations or branches of international organizations. Green groups themselves are weak in fundraising capacity, and those registered as businesses lose their legal standing to raise funds. Funding from international foundations or branches of international environmental organizations, one of the major current funding sources for China’s green groups, tends to be unreliable in amounts, terms, and specific objectives.

Those hurdles are likely to be overcome in time if the current rate of progress by government and other stakeholders continues. The central government has given higher priority to the environment and has incorporated environmental protection in its national development plan. Environmental performance has also become a benchmark in evaluating the performance of local officials, and success or failure in this area will directly influence their political careers. The institutional structure has been further upgraded: The Environmental Protection Bureau has become the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA), an independent agency below ministry level. SEPA was formally reorganized as the Ministry of Environmental Protection in 2008. The advancement of environmental protection on the government’s agenda will create greater opportunity for the green movement in China.

Prospects for the Future

In recent years, the business sector in China has gradually begun to cooperate with green NGOs. Although enterprises are the major targets of green groups, some have helped environmental groups in campaign activities for public welfare, social surveys, and exhibitions. Approximately one hundred entrepreneurs launched the Alxa SEE (Society, Entrepreneur, and Ecology) Ecological



Turtle sculptures get splashed by a wave along a coast. The environment has become a theme in contemporary Chinese art. PHOTO BY YIXUAN SHUKE.

Association in 2004 in Inner Mongolia. This green group is dedicated to restoring the ecosystem in this area, one that has been degraded by increasing desertification. The Alxa SEE Environmental Award was created a year later; at RMB¥3 million, it is the highest such award in China.

Green groups in China will continue to get international assistance and cooperation. International environmental NGOs started to enter China in the 1980s, and now many major groups operate in China, including the World Wildlife Fund, the Environmental Defense Fund, the Nature Conservancy, Conservation International, the Worldwatch Institute, and the World Resources Institute. American and European foundations along with bilateral, multilateral, and regional development aid agencies have been increasingly active in supporting the work of environmental groups. One influential donor is the Blue Moon Fund, which has provided the seed money for the creation of the Beijing-based Global Environment Institute, an independent research institute. Such cooperation and partnership also helps capacity building and personnel training for local green groups.

Governmental and non-governmental organizations have arisen to deal with the environmental degradation that

is a byproduct of China's increasingly industrial economy. Governmental and civil structures have changed to accommodate operations of these green groups. While funding and administrative hurdles exist, the continued advancement of the effectiveness of these groups seems assured.

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Further Reading

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