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ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM IN CHINA:
FIFTEEN YEARS IN REVIEW, 1994-2008

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**ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM IN CHINA:
15 YEARS IN REVIEW, 1994-2008**

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Despite macro-level structural barriers and official ideology of materialistic historicism, bottom-up environmentalism has emerged and grown steadily in China in the past 15 years. To date, non-governmental organizations (NGO) and social activism have reached a higher level of maturity in environmental protection compared across issue areas. When former U.S. president Bill Clinton requested to meet with local social leaders during his 1998 state visit to China, the Chinese government invited four NGO representatives, among whom two were from the environmental field. In 2002, environmental NGOs elected their own representatives to attend the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. This is for the first time Chinese NGOs participated in global governance meetings, independently and side by side with the Chinese official delegates.

The rise of environmental social activism and its relevance to contemporary Chinese politics has caught academic attention, and in turn, inspired a growing body of scholarly work. Many earliest empirical research and field reports (in English language) on voluntary-based associations in post-Mao China highlighted environmental NGOs. [National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, 1994; Zhang, 1995; Raab, 1996] Environmental NGOs are among the most studied Chinese NGOs (in both Chinese and English languages) with regard to the status and development of civil society organizations.

Therefore, some have already applauded for China's environmental activism, and even argued that environmental activists and NGOs are *avant-gardes* who push the envelope for negotiation with the state and more public participation. [Saich, 2000; Turner, 2004; Economy, 2004; Mertha, 2008] Nevertheless, others remain reserved (and even critical) to the overall relevance of NGOs and activism to environmental policy making and environmental protection on the ground, merely considering them as extension of the state apparatus or hesitating to see them independent from the state. [Lo and Sai, 2000; Ho, 2001; Yang 2005] This paper engages with these seemingly diverging views, and focuses on how to interpret the political meaning of environmental activism and NGOs *as a whole*. Instead of individual organization based factors, the paper highlights inter-organizational linkages, collective learning and collective consciousness building as main indicators to assess the level of maturity of a social activism community.

The core of the paper explicates three features of environmental activism in China: First, consolidation of connections among NGOs and other social groups. Second, coordinating collective actions and sharing experiences. Last not least, self-reflection on the whole community and articulation of shared principles. These three characteristics, in a way, distinguish the environmental case from social activism in other issue areas. They are crucial for capturing the political relevance of environmental NGOs in China. This paper further argues that the continual development of the environment social activism provides important evidence and insights for political scientists when applying the concept of civil society and develop suitable meso-level indicators to analyze contemporary Chinese *politique*.

Environmental activism in China: a brief history

Public environmental awareness in Post-Mao China has gone through two main phases. Mainly driven by a few leading activists, environmentalism first resumed in China in the 1980s and carried on slowly through the first half of the 1990s. From the mid-1990s to date, there has been significant change and growth, marked by rising public awareness, the emergence and development of NGOs and cross-regional environmental campaigns and activism.

Pioneer Chinese environmental activists, together with scientists and professor, first called for public environmental awareness in the mid-1980s to avert the construction of Three Gorges Dam. Even though most policy advocacy took place within the scientist, academic, and social elite circles, the incomplete anti-Three Gorges Dam movement still generated public educational effects to a large extent. It alerted the general public, for the first time after 1949, large-scale environmental problems hidden beneath the booming economy in China. [Economy, 2004: p142-145; Khagram, 2004: p170-176; International Rivers Network, 2003]

Chinese society was, to a large extent, silenced for a few years after the Tian'anmen crackdown. Activists, public intellectuals, and other social entrepreneurs were not able to reenergize the public sphere and civic life in China until the mid-1990s. Nevertheless, in those early years of the 1990s, a few individual citizens took up initiatives to promote environmental awareness. In 1993, Tang Xiyang, a former *Beijing Daily* reporter, published the book *A Green World Tour*, documenting his eight-month journey of nature reserves in Europe, the former Soviet Union, and North America. The environmentalist ideas and teaching in this book made Tang later a spiritual leader among the young generation of Chinese environmentalists. [Economy, 2004: 138-141; Yang, 2005] Yang Xin, one of the nationally acclaimed heroes who canoed along the Yangtze River in the late 1980s, became a full-time advocate for nature conservation after his adventurist career.¹ Both Tang and Yang remain very active and influential within the environmental NGO community until today.

Many even less known common citizens promoted environmental awareness through their seemingly abnormal life choices. Ma Fangkui, an old farmer from Gansu, started planting trees in the degraded land around his home village in 1990. To call public attention to environmental protection, Yang Jingui, a Shanxi farmer, bicycled solo for ten thousand kilometers in 1995. Wang Minghai, a senior business manager, quit his job and became a volunteer tree planter in the deserts of Inner Mongolia. [Xiao and Zhao, 2002: 17-21.]

Meanwhile, the central government began to organize large-scale public campaigns to promote environmental awareness. For example, the annual "China Environmental Protection Millennium Journey" was launched in 1993. Each year, over 3000 journalists participated in this event by reporting bad examples, and praising good ones in environmental protection in 28 provinces. The Communist Youth League organized nation-wide campaigns among school and college students to call on environmental awareness. Researchers find such activities, at large, follow the protocol of top-down mass mobilization employed by the Communist Party during Maoist times. [Sayers, 2003]² Despite the scope and frequency of such campaigns, the general

¹ Interview with Yang Xin in Hong Kong, April 2001.

² Jane Sayers studied mass tree-planting campaigns in China, and pointed out participants of such campaigns (e.g., high school teachers and students) usually lack of motivations. Examples of government organized public environmental education campaigns during in the 1990s included: NEPA organized "Zero Point Action" in 1997. Over 60 CCTV journalists spend two months in the riparian provinces of the Huai River interviewing factories and communities, and they published volumes of articles on pollution incidents, and local industries' compliances with environmental regulations. All China Women's Federation started promoting recycling program since 1996. Sponsored by UNDP, it also collaborated with NEPA to establish a nation-wide Women and Environment Network.

public nearly considered environmental protection as important as economic development, or it should be included in the list of national priorities. [China State Environmental Protection Administration, 1998]

Environmental activism finally took up the momentum around the mid-1990s, marked by the establishment of Friends of Nature (FoN) in Beijing in 1994.³ FoN is generally considered a milestone in the history of environmental activism in China. [Economy, 2004; Ho, 2001; Knup, 1997; Schwartz, 2004; Tunner, 2004; Yang, 2005]. For it is a primary step to establish a formal organization fully devoted to environmentalism, countering the official propaganda of linear economic growth. Almost all other “citizen associations” at that time in China are either hobby clubs, professional associations, or government affiliated organizations. [Wu, 2003] From the very beginning, FoN was not meant to be an eco-tour agency for family Sunday outing. It recruited members nation-wide, launched its own regular publication, introduced most recent environmentalist publications from the West, invited internationally known environmentalists to give public talks in China, and encouraged heated discussion among its members. Since FoN, environmental activism in China entered a new phase, and NGO become the main organizational structures.

After FoN, a dozen other environmental groups obtained formal status in Beijing and various parts of the country. Examples include Global Village of Beijing, Chongqing Green Volunteers, Green Civil Association of Weihai City (Shandong), Farmers’ Association for the Protection of Biodiversity of the Gaoligong Mountains in Yunnan, Green Earth Volunteers of Beijing, and Green Rivers of Sichuan. They organized public education activities, media campaigns against pollution cases, and advocated alternative policy solutions at their home cities. Furthermore, they started promoting public awareness of environmental justice, and establishing conservation projects directly with local communities.⁴

The next few years saw a rapid growth in the total number of autonomous, voluntary-based environmental citizen groups across the country. The number of formally registered environmental social organizations in Beijing alone doubled from nine to 18 in the period from 1995 to 1996. [Ho, 2001: 901] Guobing Yang documented that at least 69 grassroots environmental groups (43 of which are university student associations) were formed between 1997 and 1999. [Yang, 2005: 50]

Despite mixed signals from the central government, particularly the harsh crackdown of Falung Gong exercisers and sympathizers in 1998, the environmental activism community has not only survived but also continued to grow.⁵ In a March 2000 report, the U.S. Embassy in

The Communist Youth League organizes mass campaign each year on World Environment Day (June 5). In 1995, 210,000 youth volunteers participated in the “free of white pollution” campaign along major four railways.

³ China uses a two-tier registration process for non-governmental voluntary-based organization, which almost makes it impossible for any common citizens to legally establish an NGO. To circumvent bureaucratic barriers, FoN was registered as a secondary organization affiliated with the Department of Culture of the Beijing municipal government.

⁴ Interviews with staff of these NGO in the summer of 2000.

⁵ Within the central government, different bureaucratic branches have shown the NGO community different levels of toleration, recognition, moral support, and willingness of collaboration. The State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) has been more or less consistent in providing support in various forms to Chinese environmental NGOs. Senior SEPA officials were frequently present at NGO organized public events, and therefore, lent them crucial moral and public reputation support. For example, former SEPA director, Mr. Qu Geping, used to co-chair with Ms. Liao Xiaoyi, director of Global Village of Beijing, on its weekly environmental education TV shows. However, the same cannot be said about other administrations or governmental agencies at local levels. The general regulations for NGOs are still extremely restricted. It was very difficult for any organization to register from

Beijing identified over a dozen “genuine” environmental NGOs across the country. As a veteran leader in university student environmental activism in Sichuan province, Lu Hongyan conducted a research and concluded that the number of student environmental groups grew from 10 in 1996 to 182 in 2002. [Lu, 2003] In November 2002, as the designated coordinator for the NGO Forum of the Global Environmental Facility’s bi-annual conference in Beijing, FoN identified and invited over 60 grassroots environmental NGOs. Based on several years’ field work, the author of this paper estimates that the total number of grassroots, voluntary-based environmental associations has reached 200 by 2006, and they spread out in all provinces of the country.

In the summer of 2004, Dai Qing, a veteran environmentalist since the anti-Three Gorges Dam movement, as well as a vocal democracy activist, attended a meeting organized by the new generation of environmental activists, who were busy preparing for the establishment of China Rivers Network to campaign against damming the Nu River. She took a moment and reflected on changes of environmental activism in. She commented that the timing for a new anti-large-dam campaign is much more mature now than before because the public is better informed with environmental problems and ideas, and the NGO community has built up their muscles for advocacy and campaigning.

A “green civil society” debated

Though there is consensus that the scope of the environmental NGO community is growing fast in China, scholars disagree sharply on the political relevance of this community. On the one hand, some argue that grassroots environmentalism in China is fragmented and highly localized, and therefore unable to mobilize enduring demonstrations opposing governmental policies. Peter Ho points out that because the Chinese government has become greener, “environmentalism was also robbed of the opportunity and urgency to openly confront the Chinese government”. [Ho, 2001] In the paper, Ho even calls Chinese environmentalism has a “female mildness”—a greening without conflict, and environmentalism with a safe distance from direct political action. (p916) Lo and Leung’s research on environmental politics in Guangzhou arrived at similar conclusions. They argue that the regime’s lack of a democratic tradition imposes tremendous institutional constraints on the further pursuit of a popular approach to environmental governance. There is no independent non-government green group for organizing fragmented public opinion into a powerful political force. [Lo and Leung, 2000]

On the other hand, some observe that Chinese environmental NGOs and activists are delicately dealing with political constraints, and in fact have been able to achieve their goals, overcome policy obstacles, and convince the government of their intentions through non-contentious means. Tony Saich summarizes this type of micro-politics as “negotiating with the state”, Jennifer Turner calls this as “pushing the envelope”, and Kevin O’Brien interprets this as “boundary-spanning contention”. [Saich, 2001; Jennifer, 2004; O’Brien, 2003].

This paper agrees with the latter argument that environmentalists in China are aware of the government’s concern about social activism, and that, in a way, remaining non-confrontational is the best way for them to survive and make changes gradually. It shares with Yang’s point that the use of non-confrontational methods is a strategic choice for environmental NGOs at a fledgling stage of growth. [Yang, 2005: 55] Ho’s interpretation of Chinese environmental NGOs’ lack of boldness is not accurate, and this results from both the error in his selection of cases and a mis-understanding of the nature of social activism in China. Instead of

1998 to 2004. There were many incidents of governmental censorship. For example, in 2003, one of FoN’s Board member was forced to leave for his political opinions.

focusing on self-organized grassroots NGOs, Ho included government-organized quasi-NGOs in his research. Under the current political context, taking non-contentious actions does not mean NGOs are “courting” the government.⁶ Environmentalists make their conscious decisions to keep their presence in the local communities, thereby maintaining their autonomy from governmental control and reaching their goals gradually. The essential question is not whether environmental NGOs should or should not take contentious actions, but whether they are able to achieve their own goals by persuading local authorities and communities to change attitudes towards environmental degradation.

Jennifer Turner, a long-time observer of the Chinese green civil society, also points out that Chinese environmentalists are conscious about their inevitable involvement in politics. “Regardless of whether an NGO is only focusing on educating local farmers about black-necked cranes, or advocating the stop of a dam project, such a bottom-up action and direct participation approach is a new phenomenon in Chinese politics.” [Turner, 2004] As Turner noted, environmental NGOs in China are not puppets of governmental environmental agencies and they have their own visions, goals and scope of influences. They pay intensive attention to the government and policy changes; they are aware of the reasons why NGO activities could be sensitive under current Chinese system; and, they see themselves as a legitimate and necessary social force in China’s environmental politics. Environmentalists are pioneers of experimenting with many collective actions to voice their opinions and advocate for policy change in China. They have learned from their experiences and have become increasingly effective in employing various strategies to coordinate large-scale campaigns.⁷ This is particularly relevant to studying changes in current Chinese politics. Having lived in China and observed the rise of environmentalism first hand, development assistance expert Nick Young stresses that “environmental activists have an important role of *exploring* the boundaries of advocacy in China.” [Young, 2001]

This paper does not intend to conclude the above debate, but to provide three observations and sets of findings to encourage further conceptual work. These observations are not meant to exhaust the characteristics of the community of Chinese environmental NGOs and activist groups, but to call particular attention to the status of the collectiveness of this community. Are all the NGOs and activists becoming more and more thinking alike? Can it be argued that there is emerging a proto community identity among all the environmentalists and NGOs?

Interconnections within the green community

The argument that environmental activist community in China has reached a level of maturity cannot be fully substantiated by sheer total number of NGOs, or specific successful cases of NGOs mending policy failures. There at least three more factors worth further explanation, and they together explain why this community, compared with social activism in other fields, has survived better and even grown steadily in China. First of all, environmental social groups have been able to establish and consolidate communication channels and support networks with each. At individual organizational level, individual NGOs and activist groups can improve self-capacity by the opportunities created by these channels. But, more importantly, at the overall level, these interconnections have bonded various groups closer, and made collective actions and

⁶ Ho, 2001. “Green social organizations are increasingly *courting* government approval and influence in policy-making, rather than seeking a potentially dangerous confrontation with the national state.” (p916, emphasis added)

⁷ Yang, 2005. p52. Yang summarized such feature as “mixed-repertoires”.

experiences more possible. This is, to some degree, the foundational layer for any further development of community consciousness.

Due to the genealogy of Chinese green NGOs, many of them are naturally connected. It is this particular feature that has equipped the environmental activist community as a whole a solid foundation to band together and endure the Chinese political context. For example, FoN became the boot-camp of Chinese environmental activists and the cradle of environmental NGOs. Partially due to the leadership of its founders and good management in the past decade, FoN has attracted thousands of concerned citizens across the country to be its registered members since its foundation.⁸ Among FoN members, many are university professors, scientists, governmental officials, journalists and social entrepreneurs. A dozen FoN members have moved on and established their own organizations such as the Green Earth Volunteers (Beijing), the Green Plateau Institution (Yunnan), the Brookings Institute (Beijing), and the Green Island (Beijing). Since 2004, FoN launched a small grant program that is designed to provide seeds fund for new initiatives and groups in formation.

Like the FoN for other environmental NGOs, the Green Camp has been the incubator of the younger generation of environmental activists and college student environmental groups in China. Established in 1994 by Tang Xiyang and his wife Ma Xia, the Green Camp gathers a group of devoted young environmentalists each year to conduct a field trip to some of the most polluted or degraded areas of China. Among the most famous young environmentalists and leaders of college green groups in China, the majority are alumni of the Green Camp, including Wen Bo, Hu Jia, Yan Jiong and Yan Baohua.

Chinese environmentalists and NGOs build up connections within the community first through creating social gatherings, salons, forums, and various forms of informal mechanisms. At these occasional activities, they share information, organize thematic discussions, and conduct brain-storm sessions for potential collaboration.

Thirdly, besides numerous irregular gathering activities and sort of shared ‘genealogies’, there are also many regular mechanisms established by Chinese environmentalists particularly for peer NGOs, concerned individuals, researchers, and journalists to meet, exchange information, and integrate resources. In Beijing there are Green Island (a journalist salon) are Beijing NGO Salon (maintained by a group of young NGO leaders). Environmental NGOs in Kunming (e.g., Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge, Community Development Studies Center) maintain an NGO Forum to support social activism in a variety of issues in the province.

Secondly, NGOs interact and provide support to each other by joint project implementation (e.g., public education, feasibility research, pilot conservation project). Such specific organizational based connections sometimes can be random and short-term. However, many leading environmental NGOs are making conscious efforts in capacity building for emerging groups.

More and more NGOs even consider networking and providing communication opportunities for fellow activist groups as a main part of their work. For example, the Grassroots

⁸ One founding member, Liang Congjie, a former professor in history, has a legendary family background. His grand-father, Liang Qichao, was a leading intellectual and reformist politician in late Qing Dynasty. His father, Liang Sicheng, became a leading architect of the People’s Republic of China, and designed many major monumental public buildings in the country, including the Tian’an Square and the People’s Congress Hall. What is also unique about FoN is that the other three of its founding members were also active in promoting democratic and liberal ideas in China, who are all good writers and have loyal readers.

Community (a registered NGO) in Shanghai holds monthly public talks on environmental topics and hosts social events for activists and professionals from and beyond the city. This NGO later span off a company devoted to provide consultation, training and other services for NGOs and voluntary groups.

As a result, regional ‘hot-hub’ for environmental activism has emerged. For example, FoN, Green Earth Volunteers, and the recently established China River Networks in Beijing, Grassroots Community in Shanghai, Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge in Yunnan, and Green Han River in Hubei.

For college environmental activism, three regional clusters stand out. This has greatly accelerated the development of student activism in the environmental field. The China Green Student Forum, initiated by a group of Beijing-based college student activists at the end of the 1990s, was intended to be the umbrella organization for all college student environmental groups and has been influential in the northern part of China. The Nanjing University Green Stone group has been the center of student environmental activism in southeastern China. In 2004, it became the executor of a mini-grant program for the Finnish Embassy in China, and has since then expanded its outreach among college groups in more provinces. Through a seed fund mechanism (Green SOS Fund), the Environmental Volunteers Association of Sichuan University, created in 1994, has become the focal student organization in the western Region. It has administrated small environmental protection grants to dozens of college student groups in the past three years.

After over a decade’s development, the environmental activism community in China has extended beyond center cities, and now presents itself resembling a network of interconnected groups. Chinese environmentalists have paid special attention to increase and condense the connections among each other, which is not common among all social activism circles.

Collective actions and sharing experiences

One direct result of the high level of interconnection within the green community is that activists are more able to act together, and mobilize for cross-regional public campaigns. This section explores the meaning and effects of such collective actions. To do so, it looks at whether activists, as a whole, benefit from acting together, and what they have learned from their common experiences.

In the late 1990s, Chinese environmentalists successfully organized two policy campaigns for saving wildlife and habitats—the Golden Monkey and Tibetan Antelope movements. Both are across regions, long-lasting, and have had impact on policy changes. [Economy, 2004: 149-156.] The frequency of such wide-spread campaigns and movements has noticeably increased in recent years. During the time when Beijing was bidding for the 2008 Olympic Games, environmental NGOs rallied together and organized many public meetings to voice their opinions and criticisms.⁹ In 2003, with support from Beijing-based green NGOs, a group of environmentalists in Shanghai launched a demonstration against a construction of golf courses sponsored by the municipal government.¹⁰ In the summer of 2004, over a dozen Beijing-based green NGOs stood by each and launched the “26°C Campaign”. This campaign mobilized local media to monitor air-condition use and conserve electricity in all public facilities in Beijing city.¹¹ Since August 2003, environmental activists from both Beijing and Yunnan, together with international NGOs, have successfully mobilized a large number of Chinese media, NGOs, and

⁹ Interviews with participants of the meeting, Beijing, August 2002.

¹⁰ Interviews with participants of the protest, Shanghai, summer of 2003.

¹¹ Participatory observation and interview with organizers of the campaign, Beijing, summer of 2004.

professionals to join the campaign against the plan for dam construction on the Nu River in northeastern Yunnan.¹²

The most important meaning of such collective actions to the environmental community is neither their reputation facing the public, nor their potential bargaining power against the authorities. This paper argues that what is most relevant here is the shared memories and experiences, and moreover, the common political learning process. By campaigning together, environmentalists explored the boundaries of advocacy through multiple trials of mobilization strategies. For example, the advocacy meeting with Beijing municipal official regarding Olympic bid in Beijing, April 2001 mentioned above. At the beginning, a group of Beijing-based environmentalists and NGOs, led by FoN and Global Village of Beijing, sent an invitation to a senior level official of the Beijing municipal government, stating that the meeting is only to discuss with him the plan of paving all river beds in the city. However, their agenda actually was to turn the meeting into a press conference and confront the official with critical questions in front all major media. The organizers called up their journalist friends, and the meeting was ready to go. Shocked and offended, the official left immediately, and reported the incident to the central government. The responsible department of the central government immediately sent signals and threatened to shut down all related NGOs. It was only through personal connections with a few sympathetic senior officials of the central government did the environmentalists involved in the meeting escape further political repression.¹³

The environmental NGO community has since taken this incident as a serious lesson in dealing with governmental officials. It is observable that environmental activists also share their experiences of how to interact with the government with peers through the NGO networks and communication channels mentioned in the previous section. In September 2004, Wang Yongchen, the main activist of the anti-dam movement on the Nu river, gave a public talk in Washington, D.C. on how to organize public campaigns in China.¹⁴ She particularly pointed out the importance of cultivating contacts within the government, building alliance with sympathetic and activist-minded officials, and developing wide networks with mass media before openly putting forward policy criticism. She used many examples of collective learning experience with fellow activists in the past decade.

No one knows exactly where is safe for public campaign and policy advocacy in China, while where is not. Activists tried some tactics, and got warnings from the government. They tried again with other tactics, and got a green light. They shared such experiences, and learned about the subtlety of the real politics by numerous trials and errors. Every issue can be sensitive in contemporary China, not due to its nature, but the social resentment and collective reaction caused by it. Environmentalists have accumulated practical knowledge of how to decode the official language and signals, and how to go through the delicate web of bureaucratic hassles through their careful and skillful acts. The important point here is that they have shared such knowledge, either consciously or not, through the frequent and dense connections with fellow activists and NGOs. This is a crucial reason why the green activist community as a whole has so

¹² Multiple interviews with various organizers of this campaign were conducted in Beijing and Yunnan, from February to August 2004. Appendix gives a chronology of the anti-dam movement on the Nu River.

¹³ Names are kept anonymous as requested by the interviewee.

¹⁴ China Environmental Forum, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C., September 2004.

far suffered fewest personal repression and arrests, while won public campaigns, compared with other social activist circles.¹⁵

Shared principles and group consciousness in formation

Besides webs of connections among NGOs and cross-regional collective actions, what also distinguishes social activism in the environmental field from other issue areas is the reflective activities that are conducive to the emergence of a collective identity. First of all, there are a few leading activists have always promoted open discussions and political reflections within the community. As researchers have noticed that within the environmental community there are a number of democracy movement activists or activists who also promote liberal democratic ideas, social justice and human rights. [Turner, 2004] Tang Xiyang, a leading environmentalist and founder of the Green Camp, puts forward the idea of democracy forcefully when he writes that “without real democratic life, there will not be everlasting green rivers and mountains.” [Yang, 2005] Economy also pointed out that a small number of NGOs, in fact, promote democratic principles. [Economy, 2004: 138-141] More and more Chinese environmental NGOs are informed and become conscious about the political implications of being non-governmental actors under the Chinese political context. Democracy is gradually becoming an un-said underlining principled idea for Chinese environmental NGOs.

Influenced or, to some extent, inspired by the leading figures, the green community has produced many internal newsletters, publications, and online forums where reflective discussion continues. FoN publishes a monthly magazine on topics related to the environment and environmental activism, and there are constantly articles related to the role of NGOs and civil society in a country’s social and political affairs.

The younger generation is even more eager to engage in discussion about environmental equity and justice rather than merely the technical aspect of environmental protection. Some of the young environmentalists eventually switched to public education or political advocacy due to their enthusiasm in the political meaning of NGO work. For example, Han Hai Sa, an young people’s group, originally devoted to desertification problems, conducted a series of public education activities related to health policies during the SARS crisis in 2003.¹⁶ The author of the paper has attended dozens of gatherings and meetings of environmental activists in China, and “civil society”, “democracy” and “public participation” are some of the most debated and discussed topics.

It is perhaps a bit stretched to argue there is causal link between being an environmentalist and a pro-liberal democratic thinking person in today’s China. However, it is not exaggerating to say that the green community has built up this culture that encourages open discussion and political reflection. Among the young generation, it is particularly obvious that many of them are well versed with ideas related to social justice, liberty and human rights. Compared with activist from other fields, environmentalists are more inclined to speak about the political causes of public policy failures, the necessity of public participation, and the importance of the autonomy of civil society. [author’s note: this part is not evidenced sufficiently. needs more work]

¹⁵ This is not to say that no environmental activists have ever suffered some warning or repression in various forms. The most recent and severe case is the arrest of Wu Lihong.

¹⁶ Another probably more known example is Hu Jia. Hu was active in anti-Antelope campaign, but after 2002 gradually turned into a human rights and AIDS prevention activist.

Moreover, environmental NGOs have paid significant attention to self-reflection, and gradually concluded a set of normative principles or ethical codes commonly endorsed within the community. As more voluntary groups are mushrooming across the country, and the regime is creating government organized NGOs (GONGOs) to cope with international assistance and policy consultation needs, environmentalists debate heatedly among themselves what are the real criteria to be qualified as a ‘non-governmental’ organization, what are the ethical standards for NGO activities, whether NGO should collaborate with business, how to prevent power hierarchy between urban NGOs and rural communities, and whether NGO should always take a contentious position against the government.

The author once attended a gathering and guest talk organized by the BINGO—Beijing Integrated NGO—in the summer of 2004. It is an informal group initiated by staff from both international and Chinese NGOs, to promote exchanges and information sharing among all NGOs in Beijing. The talk was given by a professional non-profit consultant from the United States, and it was about the need of establishing Board of Directors for NGOs. To most people in the audience that night, this term Board of Directors was completely foreign and incomprehensible. However, many raised their hands and opinions courageously, and used their own words and working experience to remind the speaker that it might not be terribly bad for a Chinese NGO not to have a Board in the short run. More interestingly, the debate did not simply end in the room that night, it carried in many email exchanges among environmental activists. Some criticized the problem of lack of book keeping among all Chinese NGOs, and urged to face the issue of Board of Directors; while, others praised ‘indigenous knowledge’, and suggested that Chinese NGOs do not have to follow a uniform organizational structure.

The author has witnessed many debates among environmentalists and NGOs on a variety of issues. What is somehow consistent is the process, and final consensus. The process is usually open and inclusive, and the conclusion often returns to the spirit of voluntary actions, equal opportunity for participation, and justice.

Due to the nature of environmental protection course, individuals and organizations cannot rely on biological or group-based features to identify with each other such as ethnicity, gender, or religion based social groups. In order for the environmental activism community to be more tied together, it requires some kind of shared normative principles. This paper does not argue that such principles are already in existence or have been consolidated. However, the above evidence alludes that the tendency is there.

Conclusion:

From environmental activism to still “searching for civil society”

Environmental activism has emerged in China since the mid-1990s, and environmental NGOs are becoming more visible in China’s environmental politics than before. They are important not only because they have made notable achievements in public education and conservation, but also because they are increasingly connected with each other and a group identity is forming. As they continue to share experiences of policy advocacy and public campaigning, environmentalists identify themselves as a part of a green civil society—an independent force in China’s environmental politics.

To make that argument that a collective identity is in formation, it is necessary now for researchers to ponder more on the ideational aspects of the green community. It is needed to be able to understand and depict accurately environmental activists and NGO staff think, whether they think alike and differently from other social groups, and whether they consider themselves a

connected group and should play a role in China's contemporary politics. One of the Maoist and classic socialist legacies in today's China is the fragmentation and cellular nature of citizen's voluntary actions and associational life. It remains to be researched and proved whether the environmentalists have overcome this socially rooted obstacles and contributed to bring about new sources of collective actions for policy changes among common citizens.

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Appendix. A Chronicle of the Nu River Anti-Dam Movement (July 2003-August 2004)

- 3 July, 2003. UNESCO included the Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan Protected Areas in the World's Heritage List. The three rivers are the Nu, Lanchang, and Jinsha.
- 12-14 August, 2003. China State Development and Reform Committee reviewed and passed the proposal of building a 13-level dam on the Nu River (21MW).
- 16 August, 2003. Environmentalist Wang Yongchen heard about the Nu River dam proposal.
- 3 September, 2003. SEPA organized a roundtable to collect feedback on the proposed Nu River dam. Yunnan environmental scientist, He Dayi, presented his disagreement on the issue. He became the first scientist who openly opposed the Nu dam proposal, and his arguments were the foundation of Beijing anti-dam activists' reference for public campaigns. Wang Yongchen called many journalist friends and sat in the meeting.
- 1 October 2003. A Yunnan NGO Green Watershed started investigation of the Nu River dam site, and tried to persuade local governments the negative effects of large dams.
- 15 November, 2003. The 3rd Sino-U.S. Environmental NGO Forum was hold in Beijing, sponsored by the International Fund for China's Environment. Over 200 Chinese activists and environmental NGO representatives participated the meeting. Wang raised the issue of the Nu River dam and caught much attention.
- 17-22 November, 2003. World Dam Commission meeting in Thailand. Supported by international funding, Wang and other environmental activists from the Friends of Nature, Green Island, and Green Watershed attended the meeting, during which they organized a petition against the Nu River dam. Around 80 Thai NGOs also signed a letter against the dam, and submitted to the Chinese embassy in Bangkok.
- 16-24 February, 2004. Conservation International and International Rivers Network sponsored Wang and other 20 activists, scientists and journalists to conduct a comprehensive field investigation of the Nu River dam site. Meanwhile, Wang's activist and media friends in Beijing have managed to submit a policy recommendation letter to the Office of Primer Wen Jiabao.
- 18 February, 2004. Primer Wen brought to a temporary halt of the dam proposal and called for further environmental assessment.
- 14 March, 2004. The website for the Nu River anti-dam movement was up.
- 21 March, 2004. Photograph exhibition of the Nu River was launched by the Green Earth Volunteers, with the support from CI.
- 26-29 March, 2004. Wang and other three anti-dam activists attended the Fifth UN Civil Society Forum in Korea, and received moral support from UNEP senior official on the issue.
- 3 May 2004. Activists, journalists, and activist-minded governmental officials gathered a brainstorm meeting in Beijing. Dai Qing, Liang Xiaoyan, and many other leading activists in the Three Gorges Dam movement were present. Before the meeting, a SEPA official was criticized for his sympathy and involvement in the anti-dam movement. However, he continued his invisible involvement in the movement. Another group of environmentalists from Beijing and Yunnan organized farmers from the Nu River Dam site to visit Manwai

Dam area. About 50,000 farmers and ethnic minorities were forced to relocate during the construction of the Manwai Dam completed in 1998. After talking to the farmer at Manwai, who lost their lands and have not received promised compensations from local governmental authorities, the farmers from Nu River were better informed about the consequences of dam project on their livelihoods. Environmentalists made a documentary film out of this trip and distributed within the activist community.

16 May 2004. Another gathering of anti-dam activists, during which Wang proposed to establish a “China’s River Network”.

July 2004. Condi Nest awarded Wang Yongchen for her worldwide recognizable achievement in environmental protection.

July 2004. UNESCO issued warning documents on the status of the Three Parallel Rivers World Heritage site. Beijing environmentalists invited a UNESCO official to give a talk about the details, and discussed with him where and how to submit policy advocacy letters.

August 2004. China’s River Network was formed in Beijing.

To date, the Nu River dam proposal is still undergoing cycles of re-assessment, rejection and re-submission. The total scale has been reduced to nigh-level. More Chinese and international NGOs and environmentalists are combining their resources to continue protesting against the proposal.