

# China's Environmental Activism in the Age of Globalization

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This article explores the impact of globalization on China's environmental activism by analyzing the development of Chinese environmental activism and assessing its links with the transnational environmental movement. It uses the case of Beijing to examine the characteristics, evolution, organizational development, and environmental identity of a green community. Two influential campaigns are presented and compared to illustrate the different movement repertoires employed, which are related to the extent that Chinese environmentalists are involved in the transnational environmental movement. The article concludes that Chinese environmental activists have been actively interacting with the transnational environmental movement, and this has influenced the identification of their issues of concern and the development of their strategies. However, Chinese involvement in the transnational environmental movement is still limited, owing to China's political conditions as well as the movement's early stage of development.

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**Key words:** civil society, environmentalism, globalization, NGOs in China, transnational environmental networks

## Introduction

China is facing mounting environmental pressure. Although the country has experienced rapid economic growth, a high price has been paid in the form of environmental degradation. Air and water pollution pose the most serious environmental problems, but other environmental issues include declining water resources, accelerated deforestation, and threats to human health arising 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 also become more open to the world. Since China participated in its first major international event concerning the environment, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, in 1972, links have been built between China and international spheres of environmental governance (Chan, Lee, & Chan, 2008).

Over the past three decades, there has been increasing interaction between China and the world, including bilateral cooperation programs primarily involving governments of northern countries, such as Japan, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, and Norway. Such programs facilitate policy development in China even while promoting governance capacity on climate change and sustainability issues. In particular, the European Union (EU) has been more active compared to North America in promoting cooperation with China on major environmental issues that have regional and global impact. Multilateral organizations are also important actors in promoting China's environmental governance: particularly the Asian Development Bank, the United Nations Development Program, the Food and Agriculture Organization, and the World Bank. Likewise, international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) have also had a strong impact in terms of assisting Chinese voluntary groups in financial and organizational capacity building, so that there is now an increasing density of linkages between local NGOs and INGOs (Morton, 2008; Zusman & Turner, 2005).

A vivid environmental activism has emerged among the Chinese, many of whom have become alarmed by the country's serious environmental conditions. According to the Measures on Open Environmental Information for Trial Implementation, adopted by the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP) in 2007, citizens are entitled to request environmental protection agencies for greater disclosure of information, which is now required from both governmental bodies and private enterprises. As prescribed by a series of legal documents, including the Environmental Impact Assessment Act (EIA) and the newly promulgated Environmental Strategic Planning Law, which supplements the earlier "Environmental Protection Administrative Licensing Hearings Provisional Measures" (2004) and "Provisional Measures for Public Participation in Environmental Impact Assessment" (2006), individual citizens are entitled to get involved in environmental decision-making through public consultations.

The public has thus gained awareness of legal environmental rights and has shown much enthusiasm in articulating opposition to unjust treatment by government officials on environmental protection matters. Through the use of telephone hotlines and filing of complaints, the public has been actively demanding enforcement action from environmental authorities on the identified harmful effects of, among others, noise pollution and water pollution (Brettell, 2003; Van Rooij, 2006). An increasing number of lawsuits have been filed against environmental protection agencies. The first 10 months of 2009 saw the number of Environmental Administrative Reconsideration cases reach the total number of those that were filed from 1997 until 2007. The majority of the suits result from the bureaucracy established under planned economy (Pan, 2009) and many of them focus on issues concerning land, health threats, urban planning, and estate development.

The increasing level of environmental awareness of Chinese citizens is also manifested in the organization of environmental nongovernmental organizations (ENGOS) and voluntary groups. Although the State imposes constraints on the growth, form, functions, and strategies of civil society organizations,<sup>1</sup> the past few years have seen a rapid growth of ENGOS. By October 2008, 3,539 environmental groups had been registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs or

its local bureaus (All-China Environmental Foundation [ACEF], 2008). This figure does not include unregistered ENGOs, Web-based organizations, or ENGOs registered as business organizations.<sup>2</sup> Some estimates place the total number of unregistered environmental organizations at over 2,000 (Economy, 2005).

Although lacking in resources for organizational development such as personnel, office facilities, or funding, ENGOs have been active in raising the public's environmental awareness, monitoring polluting enterprises, and participating in environmental decision-making (Xie, 2009; Yang, 2005a). In carrying out their activities, NGOs are entitled to participate in policy consultation, as prescribed in both the EIA and the Environmental Strategic Planning Law. Using personal connections has also proven to be one way for them to cope with an undemocratic political system, particularly in terms of accessing policy information and influencing policy processes (Xie, 2009; Xie & Mol, 2006). Moreover, Chinese ENGOs have formed alliances with the media. Whereas efforts in building public consensus through the media will take a long time, the anticipated social impact can be powerful (Xie, 2009; Yang, 2005b).

Green activism has also been flourishing on the World Wide Web in China. The dramatic growth in China's Internet population has been well documented. Across the country, the number of Internet users has reached 298 million, with the Internet penetration rate at 22.6% of the population, even higher than the global average (see Yang, 2003). In some demographic sectors, particularly educated urban youth, the level of Internet usage is very high. Surveys indicate that almost half of the population in Beijing and Shanghai "frequently use the Internet" ("21<sup>st</sup> Report," 2007). The Internet has been embraced by environmentalists, and as suggested by Yang (2005a, 2005b), it is often used in exchanging ideas and mobilizing participation in activities.

This article explores the impact of globalization on China's environmental activism. As a city at the forefront of globalization in China, Beijing's environmental activism has developed rapidly and vividly in terms of membership, range of issues, and the role played by environmental activists in national environmental campaigns. Beijing represents the most successful green community in China with regard to mass support, resource mobilization, and the generation of influence on policy-making. Therefore, Beijing has been chosen as an illustration. Focusing on Beijing's environmentalism, this article discusses the forms, characteristics, and movement repertoires of Chinese environmental activism. It examines the factors that shape China's environmentalism and assesses whether, and to what extent, it is connected to the transnational environmental movement.

This article is organized in six parts. The next part examines scholarship on transnational environmental movement. The third part reviews the evolution of China's environmental governance and its relationship to the changing global environmental politics. The fourth part examines the characteristics of Beijing's green activism, its historical evolution, organizational development, environmental identity, and the main issues and concerns. Two influential campaigns are presented to illustrate movement repertoires in the fifth section. The final section discusses the characteristics of China's environmentalism and its interrelationship with the transnational environmental movement.

### **Transnational Environmental Movement**

The transnational environmental movement is an international movement that has established a significant presence and that is continually growing. Its activities are “initiated and sustained by non-institutional actors, be they organized groups or networks of individuals across borders” (Portes, 2001, p. 186). Since 1973, the population of transnational environmental organizations has almost doubled (Erik & McCarthy, 2005). Among all types of transnational social organizations, environmental organizations are the second largest in number, next to human rights movements (Bandy & Smith, 2005).

The literature suggests that the transnational environmental movement is characterized by increasing collaboration and coordinated programmatic initiatives among environmental organizations (Dalton, Recchia, & Rohrschneider, 2003; Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005), the development of cooperative networks among NGOs, and the sharing of environmental information and resources across borders (Wapner, 1996). We now see the formation of loose networks and informal networks that have spread across nations (Adamson, 2005). These networks are in turn characterized by a heterogeneous social basis as well as heterogeneous range of protest entrepreneurs (Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005). They are constituted by divergent actors such as local social movements, foundations, media, trade unions, intellectuals, parts of intergovernmental organizations, or even branches of government (Keck & Sikkink, 1998).

In the formation of transnational networks, collective identities are found to play an important role. Based on a common belief that individuals can make a difference (Piper and Uhlin, 2003), heterogeneous networks can be organized in transnational forms; and global concerns rise to the agenda, supplementing the usual focus on local and regional issues. The characteristic of common beliefs is emphasized by Tarrow and Della Porta as “flexible identity”—the development of a shared understanding of the external reality. Despite the diversity that might be found among different individuals and organizations, common identity plays a significant role in mobilizing these actors and reducing tensions among them (Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005).

The environmental movement distinguishes itself from other types of social movements with the multiple goals that are pursued (Dalton et al., 2003; Rucht, 1990). The transnational environmental movement is found to act and think both locally and globally (Faber & McCarthy, 2001; O'Connor, 1998), and its areas of focus include transboundary and global environmental problems, such as the extinction of species, the greenhouse effect, and the depletion of the ozone layer (Van der Heijden, 1999). In recent years, the transnational environmental movement has also incorporated more politically contentious issues, often interlinked with questions of human rights, ethnicity, justice, and global finance (Buttel, 2003; Durbin & Welch, 2002).

Transnational networks and their diffusion are found to have affected local environmental activism as well as produced broader policy impact at the state, national, and international levels (Doherty & Timothy, 2008). In different countries, the influence of the transnational environmental movement varies, depending not only on the form, focal areas, and development of the local social movements, but also on the nation states' environmental governance structure

and the political system's opportunity structure (Rodrigues, 2004; Williams & Mawdsley, 2006).

### **The Evolution of China's Environmental Governance**

Environmental issues have entered the international political arena in a forceful way, and an increasing level of international environmental cooperation has been achieved. In China's environmental governance, the monopoly role of the Party-state can no longer be maintained. Alongside China's increasing involvement in global environmental politics has been a growing transparency in domestic environmental governance and increasing responsibility given to nonstate actors—both private companies and organized citizens (Mol, 2009).

From the Rio Declaration to the World Summit on Sustainable Development, one important development in global environmental governance is the enhanced partnerships between governmental and nongovernmental sectors as well as volunteer groups in environmental matters (O'Neil, 2009). This development has affected the Chinese government's attitude toward domestic environmental groups and has seen more space provided for the development of ENGOS. After participating in the first United Nations Conference on Environment and Development that was held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, China issued "China Agenda 21," the first government guidance on realizing sustainable development. In the process of implementing this document, the Chinese government received assistance from the United Nations and foreign countries, which stressed the importance of government's partnership with various nonstate actors, including NGOs. Though very few grassroots NGOs existed in China in the early 1990s, since the mid-1990s, China has witnessed the establishment of dozens of environmental government-organized NGOs (GONGOs). GONGOs' tasks are mostly determined by government agencies to which they are closely related (Wu, 2002); they serve the political structure by means of their policy enforcement and monitoring activities. Environmental GONGOs are found to play an active role, for instance, in responding to the internalization of environmental protection programs, obtaining international assistance, and mobilizing international expertise.

In the course of pursuing environmental cooperation with foreign donors, the Chinese government has become very aware of the limitations of state monopoly in environmental governance and the necessity to involve the public in this process. As 80% of its environmental budget came from abroad,<sup>3</sup> China had to strictly comply with conditions that were set by its foreign donors, including the need to involve NGOs in environmental protection projects and activities. For instance, Germany and the Netherlands stressed the need to reform China's institutional structures of environmental governance by establishing mechanisms for public participation in policy discussions. In many projects, it became compulsory for Chinese authorities to include one or two grassroots social organizations, which were expected to play a role in project implementation as well as supervising government bodies (EU, 2007; International Development Committee, 2009).

The country has also attached high importance to working with international ENGOS (O'Neil, 2009). ENGOS were among the first INGOs to establish a presence in China since the country's open-door policy was implemented. In 1979,

World Wildlife Fund (WWF) China made its debut program calling for the preservation of China's pandas. Other INGOs and foundations such as the Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, and International Crane Foundation also entered the country around the same period. According to China's National Biodiversity Strategy Action Plan published in 1994, the protection of nature reserves was an early focus, followed by biodiversity protection, health care, and social welfare provision, among others. An increasing number and types of INGOs arrived in China after 1995, when the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women was held. More INGOs began to work on environmental research, anti-desertification, and combating climate change.

Confronted with serious environmental degradation and increasing social instability, Chinese political leaders began to adopt a less repressive attitude toward the public, although the impulse to completely control social insurgencies remains. Since the 1990s, dynamic changes have been identified in China's political opportunity structure, with more access points provided for the environmental movement, later having increasing impact on the country's policy-making processes (Xie & Van der Heijden, 2010).

### **The Environmental Movement in Beijing**

With China's mounting environmental problems, 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% each year to reach 128,000—about 12 times the number from a decade ago (Yan, 2006). Whereas local conflicts between polluting factories and agitated victims have been quite frequent in rural China, recently, large-scale demonstrations have also occurred in urban areas.

Beijing, the capital of China, had a population of about 18 million by the end of 2009. This city has witnessed fast economic growth in recent years, averaging 10.3% between 1979 and 2004. In 2005, its average gross domestic product per capita reached US\$5,457, making it one of the richest cities in China and at par with the level of medium developed countries.<sup>4</sup> As the foremost metropolis in China, Beijing is increasingly connected to global and globalizing networks in the realms of the economy, finance, technology, and transport. It has become an indispensable member of the international community. The city's reputation and credibility have been continually rising, especially when the Olympic Games were held there in 2008.

### **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 ENGOs and voluntary activities across the country. These groups were spurred by the Rio Declaration, which prompted a large number of international organizations and NGOs to participate in discussing environmental protection, and the World Conference on Women held in Beijing, which impressed on the Chinese public the role of NGOs as representatives of the public interest. The first 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 Earth Volunteers (GEV) in 1997. These three groups appeared as forerunners in organizing NGOs and mobilizing the public for environmental protection. 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, 12 Chinese 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 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 they gained international connections and as their financial situation became more secured, capable key figures and former staff members of the previous groups established new groups, such as the Beijing Brooks Education Center (BBEC), which promotes citizens' education, especially peasants' education; the Beijing Earthview Environment Education and Research Center (EEERC), which works on environmental education and related research; and the Global Environmental Institute (GEI), which focuses on cooperation between NGOs and enterprises promoting the utilization of technology in protecting the environment. These groups have a more professional profile than their forerunners, and their target audience includes journalists and community residents, instead of merely relying on a mass audience.

Another tide of growth occurred after 2005, when a large number of grassroots ENGOs emerged (ACEF, 2008), particularly Internet-based ENGOs. Studies note the high visibility of environmentalism in cyberspace and show that information and communication technologies play a significant role in the emergence of environmental activism (Sullivan & Xie, 2009; Yang, 2005a, 2005b). Extensive connections and linkages now exist among individuals and organizations both online and on the ground, contributing to the growing environmental network in Beijing. However, the scope of activities of online environmental groups remains unexplored (A. Ma, 2006; Yang, 2007).

### **Organizational Development and Issues of Concern**

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 ENGOs receive, the contributions from the United States, the EU, and Hong Kong (SAR) are the most significant (Xie, 2009). A large proportion of Beijing's ENGOs' funding comes from INGOs (Deng, 2001). These funds reach billions of dollars and constitute the major source of revenue

for the ENGOs (Fu, 2004). They are often meant to cover administrative operations; the staff of these environmental groups could subsist from these funds.<sup>5</sup> In this way, ENGOs in Beijing could offer their staff competitive salaries and ENGO work became attractive to graduates and job seekers as a career.

The interaction with INGOs also facilitates the professional development of Chinese environmental groups. As the management of nonprofit organizations is relatively new to Chinese citizens, they obtained their knowledge of management and project monitoring almost entirely from INGOs.<sup>6</sup> Through these processes, Chinese NGOs learned how to manage their programs in a formalized way. INGOs also organize seminars and workshops to train Chinese NGO staff, in order to improve their skills and techniques in fundraising and project evaluation.

Beijing's ENGOs started with a low level of institutionalization and formalization, characterized by a weak membership system, informal internal administration, and very few systematic mechanisms for decision-making. Key individual members or leaders dominated organizational life and determined these organizations' agendas. In addition, ENGOs hardly developed as professional organizations, lacking clear development strategies and plans. Even major influential ENGOs, such as GEV, still do not have a focus in their activities after more than 10 years of development. Instead, it has rather diverse focus, including 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 a waste of resources (Chatham House, 2007).

As a consequence of financial sources and the ideas disseminated by international agencies, ENGOs' issues of concern have enlarged significantly. Following the pattern of the environmental movement worldwide (Faber, 2005), justice issues have been incorporated in environmental work in Beijing, focusing on the relationship 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" program 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 behavior changes. Beijing's environmentalists have also incorporated higher-order issues such as energy, changing agriculture patterns, consumer behavior, and climate change, and they 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, but international media contacts have been increasing 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 same time state control relaxed somewhat on those issues that were not considered of high political importance.<sup>7</sup> Newspaper staff, some of whom are also environmental activists and leaders of ENGOs, collaborated with ENGOs in building public consensus (Xie, 2009; Yang & Calhoun, 2008). Through reports and articles, they have helped educate the public, publicizing ideas and advocating the objectives of ENGOs.

The international media, on the other hand, constitute only a small proportion of Chinese ENGOs' international connections. Contacts are made through international events and introductions from international organizations and INGOs, particularly to media from Hong Kong, Western Europe, and North America (Dalton et al., 2003).

Another strategy employed 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, and neighbors, among others, play an important role in the construction of the Chinese environmental movement (Tang & Zhan, 2008; Yang, 2005a). Through case studies, Xie (2009) illustrates how personal networks function in shaping environmentalism as a collective identity, mobilizing coordinated actions and influencing political authorities to grant them access to useful information as well as political protection. 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 1989 students' movement.<sup>8</sup> Environmentalists have learned useful tactics from such individuals that could be useful in raising the capacity of environmental campaigns to affect current policies.

### **Collective Identity and Environmental Networks**

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

Beijing's environmentalists share a common identity—socioenvironmental responsibility, a combination of social responsibilities and environmental care. Members of ENGOs are mostly 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 during their childhood years (Yuan & Shen, 1998), these young people are deeply influenced by social ideals and a sense of collectiveness,<sup>9</sup> as emphasized by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Therefore, their environmentalism is one way of realizing one's social ideals.

On the other hand, leaders of Beijing's ENGOs also share a sense of socio-environmental responsibility, which for them is rooted in a so-called elitism

that commits them to realize one's ideals of improving social equity and promoting social reform. A case study on one of the influential organizations, GEV, shows that a large number of those who lead the organization are scholars, journalists, and NGO professionals over the age of 45 (Xie, 2009). This large cohort experienced hardship in their youth, when China was a much less developed country. They witnessed various political movements by the CCP that disrupted many lives, including the well-known Cultural Revolution. This older generation also gained a large sense of social responsibility toward collective interests (X. Liu, 1992). They have a higher likelihood of believing in Confucian principles, thus believing that it is their obligation to articulate the public's interest in environmental protection, although such deeds require tremendous courage and strength under the authoritarian rule of the CCP (Shi, 2000). With respect to the positions they occupy, they represent social elites in Chinese society; a kind of "environmental elitism" was formed (Li, 1996).

Based on their shared identity, Beijing's ENGOs are generally willing to cooperate with each other. Like their counterparts in transnational environmental activism (Dalton et al., 2003; Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005), they engage in collaboration and coordinated programmatic initiatives with international and regional ENGOs. They form transnational organizations and networks to supplement the usual focus on local and regional issues. For instance, five of Beijing's ENGOs together with WWF China collectively initiated a "26 Degree Campaign" during the summers of 2004 and 2005,<sup>10</sup> originally to help address global environmental issues. Seeing the urgency of keeping climate change in check and the potential to save more energy in the summer months when air conditioners run on full power, hotels and private enterprises volunteered to comply with the campaign to set their air conditioners to a minimum of 26°C. After two years of such advocacy activities, the WWF succeeded in influencing state agencies located in Beijing, with the State Council in June 2007 issuing a formal order directing all governmental agencies and state enterprises to set their air conditioners only to a minimum of 26°C.

It should be noted that collaboration between domestic ENGOs and INGOs is built mainly through the INGO chapters in China. Localized international organizations have more chances to cooperate with Chinese ENGOs than those that do not have local personnel. Smaller INGOs 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, such as Ecologia with Shinestone Community Participation Action, both of which are small environmental groups from the United States. 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>11</sup>

GONGOs also help INGOs link up with grassroots NGOs. Such collaboration facilitates information exchange and promotes coordinated actions among different actors. Because of GONGOs' link with government, a potential platform is provided for interaction between NGOs and political authorities.<sup>12</sup> The formation of China Civil Climate Action Network is an example of this. Composed of INGOs and an increasing number of ENGOs from across the country, this network facilitates information sharing and joint action at various levels,

with the goal of forming a wider coalition of stakeholders addressing climate change.

### **Campaigns Against Dam Construction**

In examining the development and significance of Beijing's environmental activism in recent years, it is interesting to compare the Nu River anti-dam construction campaign in 2003–2004 with that of 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 hydroelectric 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 kilowatts, up to one-ninth of China's total electricity output; the dams to be built on the Nu River would produce 3.64 million kilowatts. Both projects would have enormous physical and social consequences: the Three Gorges Dam would inundate 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 13 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 as a consequence of constructing the Three Gorges Dam. The construction of 13 dams 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 initially delaying the Nu project, premier Wen Jiabao decided in April 2004 to halt implementation of the plan altogether. He called for careful consideration of all major hydroelectric projects that have aroused a high level of concern in society and that conflict with environmental protection goals. Although the plan is still poised to move ahead (the project developer, China Huadian, was reported to have begun preparations in February 2008), it is still unclear whether the project has received final approval from Beijing. Local government officials have denied that approval had been given.

Until recently, the Three Gorges Dam had yet to begin producing hydropower. Water levels have been raised in preparation for power generation, but numerous landslides and earthquakes took place as a result of dam construction. More than 1.2 billion euros have already been invested in the dam project, with the actual investment 20 times what was originally planned. In terms of its social impact, of around 1.1 million people whose livelihood was affected, no more than one-fifth was actually moved out of the dam construction area. More migration will have to take place in the near future.

### **Environmental Network**

In the Three Gorges Dam campaign, the activist networks were isolated from the outside world and were loosely organized, consisting mainly of Beijing-based

scientists, intellectuals, journalists, and deputies of the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). Probe International, a Canada-based organization, had been carefully monitoring the Three Gorges project since the early 1980s when planning commenced. It worked with Canadian 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*—criticizing the feasibility study of the dam's design that the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) financed.<sup>13</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, given the difficulties in communication across borders.

In contrast, the Nu dam protest involved a transnational network. Locally, environmental activists from Beijing, mainly organized by GEV and its leader, Ms. Wang Yongchen, played a leading role in the campaign. Wang had built an informal network among environmentalists, scholars, officials, the media, ENGOs in Beijing, and INGOs outside China.<sup>14</sup> GEV is connected with Green Watershed—a grassroots NGO that organized and represented dam victims from Yunnan, which counted among its members scholars and experts from Yunnan University, civil servants, journalists, and scientists from Beijing. A loose link was also built between GEV and International Rivers Networks (IRN), an INGO that helped the Chinese network link up with partners across borders. IRN is a professional environmental organization that focuses on protecting rivers, including the Nu River. Aside from linking GEV with partners in the Mekong region located in the lower branch of the Nu River,<sup>15</sup> IRN also provided financial aid and useful information on river protection and anti-dam construction, supporting GEV to form a protest coalition to stop the dams.

### Media Coverage

Under the relatively closed political system of the early 1990s, there was no substantial media freedom. The leader of the activists, Ms. Dai Qing, published a book called *Changjiang*, *Changjiang* in which ideas opposing the Three Gorges project were raised. With the state strongly controlling the media, this book was banned and 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 ethnocentrism were prevalent in the media, which greatly helped push forward the construction of the Three Gorges Dam (Sullivan, 1994).

In the Nu River dam protest, from August 2003 until February 2004, the movement coalition aimed to draw public attention to the controversial dam building through the mass media. More than 20 newspaper articles appeared 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 CCP, which has a major impact on policy makers (Zhang, 2003; Zhao, 2003). At the same time, a TV program was made and was allowed to broadcast (H. Ma, 2003).

The activists' understanding of the negative effects of the project 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 learned of the significant impact dam construction 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 coexist 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 social conditions in the Nu River area and how these would be affected by the dams (C. Liu, 2004; Tang, 2004). Consensus building then shifted from mere ecological protection to include concern for the inhabitants of the area.<sup>16</sup>

### **Coordinated Actions**

Following the banning of the book and the subsequent imprisonment of the movement's leader in 1990, the network protesting the Three Gorges became rather loose. In general, the members began to work independently: scientists wrote letters to political authorities; 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 that this issue be vetoed.<sup>17</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 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 ENGOs 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 venues on their campuses. At the same time, an interactive Web site called "Nu River Sentiment" was established, on which updates on the progress of the campaign were posted. This Web site facilitated the exchange of information and communication between movement actors.

Activities 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 (which 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 that 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 its increasing involvement in global environmental governance and interaction with INGOs, China has witnessed the development of a vivid environmental activism for nearly two decades. The Chinese environmental movement has successfully built consensus on local and regional environmental issues. With its own form of networks, Chinese environmentalism has achieved a significant impact on both domestic and international public opinion.

An indigenous environmental identity has developed in China, supported by the country's cultural heritage and traditional moral education. In Beijing's case, the common identity that has been formed is combined with a strong sense of social responsibility. This strengthens the mobilization of masses and resources, and helps to preserve the movement's autonomy from INGOs 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 (Henry, 2001).

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 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 for 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 (Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005; Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Highly resourceful individuals (in terms of, e.g., network capital, access to elites, information) play a significant role. As indicated by the Nu River case, scientists' participation is important, as they possess more freedom of expression and criticism and enjoy greater information access than environmentalists, under the authoritarian State. As argued by Cao and Suttmeier (2001), with the development of a market economy and the transition to new political leaders, scientists and scholars begin to enjoy more support by the ruling authority. In addition, the active involvement of Chinese political authorities is also recognized. This is probably because some members of the political elite feel that otherwise, their opinions scarcely affect policy negotiations. By gaining support from the public and generating public consensus, they may gain power in policy negotiations (see Wang, 2007). 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. Chinese environmentalists have indicated similar issues and concerns as their international donors and collaborators. The movement evolved from single-issue advocacy to mixtures of multiple issues, at times going beyond strictly environmental con-



cerns into social justice and civil rights, and more global issues of energy, biodiversity protection, and climate change. However, it has to be noted that although Beijing's environmental activism has been at the forefront of the country's environmental movements, in other areas outside Beijing, citizens are more concerned about issues that relate directly to their local living environment, where problems are readily shared and disseminated and become part of the common or shared identity (Xie, 2009). It will still take some time for the rest of the country to identify with the above-mentioned global causes, likely through more intensive interactions with Beijing's ENGOs or INGOs.

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 the types of issues and strategies that may be pursued. In addition, the stage of development of environmentalism in China also contributes to its limited involvement at the international level. Most Chinese ENGOs have limited resources and have a low level of institutionalization. It can be predicted that with growing professionalization, Chinese ENGOs will develop broader networks and a higher level of cooperation 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 sociopolitical conditions of the country—unique characteristics in terms of collective identity formation, movement repertoires, and the nature of political demands.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>In 1989, the State Council promulgated the Regulations on the Registration and Administration of Associations. According to this law, the authoritarian state leaves little latitude for self-organized social groups and their involvement in politics and policy-making.

<sup>2</sup>This survey was taken by a government-organized NGO—ACEF, which may have had difficulties trying to reach unregistered grassroots ENGOs that do not have legal status.

<sup>3</sup>China commits to more than 30 international agreements as well as 20 bilateral agreements. One of the aspects that China benefited from them is their financial mechanisms. For instance, China is the largest recipient of environmental aid from the World Bank and the Global Environment Facility.

<sup>4</sup>GDP per person reached 5,000 dollars that represents the income level of medium developed countries (*Beijing Morning Post*, January 23, 2006).

<sup>5</sup>Interview with Wen Bo, director of Global Environment Fund, April 9, 2006. Interview with Shen Xu, director of Green Web, April 4, 2004.

<sup>6</sup>Interview with Wen Bo, director of Global Environment Fund, October 5, 2004.

<sup>7</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>8</sup>Interview with Mr. Zhou, close friend of Ms. Wang, January 17, 2005.

<sup>9</sup>Interview with Zhang Kejia, journalist of China Youth and director of Green Island, December 2, 2004. Interview with Zhao Ang, project officer of GEV, March 24, 2005.

<sup>10</sup>In 2004, GVB, FON, GEV, Institute of Environment and Development, WWF China, and China Association for NGO Cooperation collaborated to organize this activity. In the second year, another three ENGOs joined: SEPA China Environmental Culture Promotion Association, Friends of Earth (HK), and Conservation International.

<sup>11</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).

<sup>12</sup>Interview with Ms. Wang, X. Y., China Association for NGO Cooperation, February 2, 2010.

<sup>13</sup>CIDA provided CDN\$14 million 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 did not provide any more money to the dam because of the public's opposition and financial concerns.

<sup>14</sup>Interview with Wang Yongchen, March 23, 2004.

<sup>15</sup>IRN's partners include civil society organizations, academics, and community movements from Burma, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam. These actors have built determined national coalitions committed to defending the region's rivers.

<sup>16</sup>Personal interview, No. 2004-03.

<sup>17</sup>Among 2,613 delegates, 1,767 voted in favor, 177 opposed the resolution, 644 abstained, and 25 did not cast their votes.

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