Greening Without Conflict? Environmentalism, NGOs and Civil Society in China

Peter Ho

ABSTRACT

This article argues that the specific features and dynamics of China's environmentalism can be attributed to two factors: the 'greening' of the Chinese state at the time when environmentalism emerged, and the alternating politics of toleration and strict control of social organizations. As a result, environmentalism has developed in a gradual way, encompassing the various forms of 'green' NGOs that we see in the West and the ex-socialist states of Eastern and Central Europe. Yet, on the other hand, environmentalism was also robbed of the opportunity, as well as the immediate urgency, to openly confront the government. This is where it deviates from environmentalism in the West and the former Eastern-bloc countries.

INTRODUCTION: SOCIALIST IDEOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENTALISM

> The clean-up of the Taihu Lake in Jiangsu Province is a total failure. There are not many people in China who dare to admit this openly. But I think that if you want to mean something for your country and you want to change things, you have to say it this way. ... Environmental social organizations have space for manoeuvre as long as they do not interfere with national policies. We *do* interfere with national policies. But even if we get into trouble, someone has to do it. (Founder of the first green NGO in China, 2000)[1]

It seems safe to say that without the emergence of environmental movements around the globe there would have been little or no 'greening' of state bureaucracies and business corporations. Environmentalism in all its manifestations finds its origins in the social movements that grew from populist

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1. This environmental NGO was established in 1991 but closed down after interference from the government.

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grassroots groups, dynamic and amorphous environmental networks, and institutionalized public pressure lobbies.

The rise of environmental movements in the industrialized nations is attributed by some to a shift in society from materialist to post-materialist values: as the basic needs of safety and security have been fulfilled, people start to pursue more luxuriant causes, such as a sense of belonging, and quality of life.[2] Others explain the emergence of environmental movements from a post-industrialist perspective. Initially, industrial market economies pursued a resource-intensive development model that disregarded the environmental costs of high economic growth. The ideals of the Enlightenment — upon which industrialism is predicated — propagated the universal pursuit of progress and the improvement of human living standards. Nature was regarded as the unlimited resource to realize human progress. In more recent times, the limits of economic growth have become more accepted. There is recognition of the need to improve environmental efficiency, promote a free market economy, and enhance a pluralist, democratic political system if long-term economic growth is to be secured. This post-industrial setting is seen as the breeding ground for the 'new social movements' which include the women's movement, the anti-nuclear movement, and the political ecology movements.[3] Doyle and McEachern (1998: 62), however, have rightly noted that the 'interpretations of the origins and significance of environmental movements are as contested as the movements themselves'. The development of the environmental movements in the former Eastern-bloc countries are a case in point.

Industrialism in the Eastern-bloc countries may have sprung from Marxist–Leninist ideas rather than the principles of the Enlightenment, but Marxist–Leninist ideology also emphasized economic growth, technological innovation and rapid industrialization. There were two obvious reasons for this: a) the soviet state needed an industrial base to support war against potential foreign aggressors; and b) industrialization created the power base of the state — the industrial working class. In this worldview, nature was subordinate to man and had to be overcome through science and technology: 'We must discover and conquer the country in which we live. . . . Our step will truly become ours only when we come with columns of tractors and ploughs to break the thousand-year old virgin soil' (the 1929 *Great Plan* of the USSR, quoted in Blaikie and Brookfield, 1991: 210). Similar echoes of Marxist–Leninist ideas of man's domination over nature were also heard in China. In the 1950s, local governments in the pastoral region proudly

2. In this respect, the post-materialist perspective borrows from Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs'. See Maslow (1943: 370–96); also Inglehart (1977, 1990).
3. See, for example, Boggs (1986). The theory of ecological modernization fits in the post-industrialist paradigm; see Huber (1982). For a good overview of recent perspectives of the ecological modernization theory, see Mol and Sonnenfeld (2000).

claimed that 'under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, . . . we have finally subdued nature and turned the grassland that has been desolate for a thousand years into fertile farmland' (Qinghai Nongyeting, 1959: 20–1).[4] At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, chairman Mao declared that 'if people living in nature want to be free, they will have to use natural sciences to understand nature, to overcome nature and to change nature; only then will they obtain freedom from nature' (Mao, 1966: 44).

The socialist states also shared a common manner of policy implementation (including environmental policy) resulting from their centrally-planned economies. The Soviet bureaucratic system was highly inflexible and employed top-down, authoritarian and campaign-like policy approaches. There was scant regard for regional variation and information from the grassroots, which led to frequent policy failure. Environmental policy was often hampered by ideological constraints: externalities were a result of the capitalist system and could not, therefore, have been caused by the socialist state, which has no profit motive.[5] Environmental problems were seen as temporary phenomena that could be solved through scientific and technological measures. Moreover, the socialist states were unlikely to learn from the negative experiences of the West, as these were regarded as the harmful effects typical of capitalism, or as Komarov wrote: the 'organic defects of capitalism' (Komarov cited in Blaikie and Brookfield, 1991: 210).[6]

From here it would be an easy step to identify a common 'socialist' ecological crisis. One need only call to mind the environmental disasters of the Aral Lake, Chernobyl, and the Danube River Basin. But it would be an oversimplification to claim that there was a uniform 'socialist environmental policy' which ultimately resulted in the degradation of the natural environment. In the words of Blaikie and Brookfield: 'there will be a great variety of policies and outcomes of land-use management in socialist countries . . . and in *all* societies there will be problem-solving attempts to cope with the opportunities and constraints which natural conditions place on those who manage land' (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1991: 208–9).[7] In fact, the Chinese communist state had an embryonic awareness of environmental problems as early as the 1950s, as is shown by some environmental regulations, and afforestation and anti-desertification campaigns (Ho, 2000b: 367–74; Palmer, 1998: 789). Moreover, the effects on natural resources of the

4. Yet, it would be too simple to state that the reclamation directly led to land degradation. The effects of reclamation are often unknown and may differ according to ecological conditions.
5. The authoritarian and campaign-like fashion of environmental policy implementation in China is described by Ross (1988: 11–20) and Sinkule and Ortolano (1995).
6. The ideological constraints in environmental policy in socialist countries are also noted in Baker (1996) and Baker and Jehlicka (1998: 7).
7. In addition, there were also great variations in the property arrangements of the different socialist states, see Weimer (1997) and Hann (1998).

reclamation campaigns during the Great Leap Forward (1958) and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–76) are still unclear.[8]

From the 1980s, ecological problems in socialist countries in Eastern and Central Europe gave rise to social resistance and environmental protest. Several authors have shown that it was not only environmental concern that drove people onto the streets: environmentalism also acted as an alternative channel for popular protest against the communist regimes, which became possible in the climate of greater political freedom opened up by *perestroika* and *glasnost*. In this sense, the environmental movement was also linked to wider issues of human rights and democracy.[9] It is claimed that with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, environmentalism lost its momentum and had to search for other objectives: 'the achievement of liberation from Communist rule robbed the environmental issue of its mobilizing potential, and changes since then have forced environmentalists to survive in much changed circumstances' (Baker and Jehlicka, 1998: 12). Jancar-Webster argues that there was a fundamental shift in the nature of environmentalism in Eastern and Central Europe: 'from being a mobilizing agent for populist protest against the *totalitia* of the Communist regime ... in its place has emerged pragmatic, goal-oriented professional organizations. ... It has also resulted in a loss of the local perspective, with its distinct *modus operandi* and bottom-up input, and this has impoverished political discourse in the transition states' (Jancar-Webster, 1998: 69).

These same authors, however, also note the wide variations between the many environmental groups and movements. There was a range of rationales propelling this environmentalism, from a specific environmental ideology — such as the Slovenian greens — to the strong nationalism of the Baltic, Ukrainian and Slovak environmentalists. It would be incorrect to claim that the majority of environmental groups endeavoured to bring down the communist regime in their country. This might have been the case for certain activist groups (for instance in Hungary and Bulgaria), but there were also those who chose to work and effect institutional change from *within* the bureaucratic system (for example, the Ecological Section of the Czechoslovakian Academy of Sciences), or those who were entirely apolitical. The reaction of the state to environmentalism also differed per country, ranging from tolerance and discussion to outright suppression of environmental groups which were deemed dissident (Baker and Jehlicka, 1998: 9–20; Jancar-Webster, 1998: 69, 73–8).

There is thus no overarching theory that can account for the variations over time and place of the environmental movements' origins, dynamics and

8. For example, it is often believed that these reclamation policies were the direct cause of desertification in China. However, a direct causal relation between reclamation and desertification is hard to establish. See also Ho (2001a: 99–132, and forthcoming).
9. See Chatterjee and Finger (1994: 66–7); Szabo (1994: 287); Waller and Millard (1992: 159–85).

internal structure. This article will focus on the particular dynamics of environmentalism in China, and analyse the relations between the state and environmentalism with particular reference to green social organizations.

Hypotheses, Concepts and Methods

Compared with the ex-socialist states in Eastern and Central Europe, China's current political and societal context is very different. Apart from the implementation of village elections since the late 1980s, there have been no clear signs to date of any fundamental political reforms (Diamond and Myers, 2000: 365–86; Wang, 1998). The imprisonment in December 1998 of Xu Wenli and Wang Youcai, leaders of the newly established Chinese Democratic Party, and the harsh repression of the Falun Gong Sect from the time of its first demonstration on 25 April 1999 (van Luyn, 2000; van der Putten, 1998a, 1998b, 1999) seem to leave no doubt about the intentions of the national government. Those who openly oppose the central government, establish national civil organizations, or stage protest demonstrations are treading a fine line. The repression is a reality; this does not mean, however, that the People's Republic can be labelled an authoritarian state with no space for dissenting voices or voluntary organization. Such a label would overlook the many strategies that citizens can employ to escape from the government's control, and would fail to uncover the complex patterns of interaction between state and society that shape environmental movements.

This article will demonstrate that Chinese environmentalism has developed in a gradual way, encompassing the same wide variety of green NGOs and organizations that can be observed elsewhere in the world. Over the past few years, the People's Republic has seen the emergence of a broad range of green organizations, varying from hierarchic, top-down public lobbies working from within the bureaucratic system, to participatory, grassroots organizations that employ tactics of mass mobilization. In this sense, the burgeoning environmentalism also implies a significant strengthening of civil society. On the other hand, environmentalism in China also has a distinct feature that sets it apart from the West and the ex-socialist states in the Eastern bloc: it lacks both the opportunity and the immediate urgency to openly confront the central government. The kind of protest demonstrations and nation-wide rallies for the environment that might serve as an outlet for a wider popular dissatisfaction with the communist regimes in Eastern and Central Europe are unheard of in China. There is no green movement capable of organizing national demonstrations; rather, environmentalism is fragmented and highly localized.

Two factors have been crucial in giving environmentalism in China its specific dynamics and features: first, the 'greening' of the central state which coincided with the emergence of the first environmental NGOs and grassroots organizations; and second, the national government's alternating

politics of tolerance and strict control of civil organizations. In this article, environmentalism is defined in a broad sense, as a form of voluntary collective action to protect the environment that ranges from the founding of NGOs and green political parties, to social resistance. Some would dispute whether one can speak of a true or fully-fledged environmentalism in China. However, as the 'ism' in environmentalism reminds us, we are talking about a set of beliefs and values — in this case concerning the earth's conservation and the development of mankind. It is this set of environmental beliefs and values that has undoubtedly sprouted in the People's Republic.

The research on which this article is based was undertaken in Beijing in the autumn and winter of 2000. Interviews were carried out with representatives of environmental NGOs, officials from the State Environmental Protection Agency and the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and victims of industrial pollution.[10] The fieldwork was part of a pilot study for a project proposal on environmental NGOs.[11] This article reviews interactions between the Chinese state and environmentalism with particular reference to green social organizations. Here I consciously use the term 'social organization' (*shehui tuanti*), as it is the term that the Chinese authorities use to denote citizens' voluntary institutions to realize a common aspiration on a non-profit basis (Article 2, Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs, 1998: 3). In the Chinese context, it includes green NGOs, as well as the 'government-organized' NGOs or GONGOs. This latter term suggests organizations under strict government control, created as the state's outposts in society. However, this is not necessarily the case, as will be demonstrated below. Relations between green organizations and the industrial sector are not dealt with here: under the current societal and political conditions, I would argue that relations with industry are less important for green social organizations, and there seems little chance of environmentalists attempting to 'green' industries and business corporations at this time. Although preliminary Chinese research seems to support this hypothesis, future study is needed on this issue (Wang, 2000: 157, 173, 191).

The rest of the article is divided into four sections. The first takes a brief look at the development of environmental conflict and the greening of the Chinese state since the start of the economic reforms in 1978. The following section sketches the framework of state regulations in place for the administration of social organizations; the manner in which they affect social organizations; and how social organizations in turn react to government regulations. In the third section, the specific features of Chinese environmental organizations will be illustrated by focusing on five cases: the Centre

10. The results of the fieldwork have also been reworked into two radio documentaries, broadcast on Dutch national radio on 5 and 12 February 2001. See Ho (2001b).
11. The project is a collaborative effort between the Environmental Policy Group of Wageningen University and the NGO Research Centre of Tsinghua University. For more information on the project, see also www.ernasia.org.

for Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims, the Global Village of Beijing, the Institute for Environment and Development, the Beijing Environmental Protection Foundation, and Friends of Nature. These five organizations will be analysed in terms of their origins, scope of activities and manner of resource mobilization. The conclusion provides an outlook on the future perspectives of environmentalism in China.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICT AND THE GREENING OF THE CHINESE STATE

This section sketches the development of environmental conflict from the start of the economic reforms to date. During this period, the Chinese state underwent an undeniable 'greening'. The rapidly increasing air, water and noise pollution over recent years[12] have incited environmental complaints by Chinese citizens, who are far from passive about environmental problems that affect their lives directly. According to research by Dasgupta and Wheeler, the national environmental authorities received over 130,000 complaints annually over the period 1991–93, with the incidence of complaints being highest in the urbanized coastal zones of East and South China (Dasgupta and Wheeler, 1996: 3).

As well as environmental complaints, the emergence of environmental conflict in China has increasingly attracted the attention of scholarly research. For example, Jun Jing recorded the history of a village's protests since the early 1980s against a factory that polluted the river with discharged waste water (Jing, 2000: 146–8). In Fangshan Prefecture in the suburbs of Beijing, angry citizens have on several occasions blockaded a coal-processing plant, which has led to violent clashes. The reason for the blockades is that they have for years suffered from the ill effects of the dust and noise of the factory. Research by the Centre for Legal Assistance of Pollution victims has found that 70 per cent of the neighbouring residents suffer from eye and respiratory diseases as a direct result of coal-processing.[13] What stands out in these conflicts is their localized character. In general, environmentalism in post-Mao China has been strongly regional: it is the issues touching on the interests of a local community that spark popular discontent, social resistance, and acts of civil disobedience.

To date, the only issue that has provoked environmental protest at a national level in China — and might have had the potential to develop into the first nation-wide environmental movement — is the building of the

12. For more information on China's environmental problems, see for example, McElroy et al. (1998) and Vermeer (1998).
13. Pers. comm., Wang Canfa, 2000. See also the radio documentaries broadcast on Dutch national radio on 5 and 12 February 2001 (Ho, 2001b). Other examples of rural environmental protests can be found in Ho (2000a: 404–6); Yeh (2000: 71–4).

Three Gorges Dam. The project is the largest of its kind, resulting in a dam with a generating capacity of approximately 18,000 megawatts — 50 per cent more than the Itaipu in Paraguay, at present the largest hydropower station in the world. The Three Gorges Project involves a total investment of US$ 17 to 20 billion, and the controversial relocation of well over one million people in Hubei and Sichuan Provinces; it is expected to take fifteen years to complete (1994–2009) (Jing, 1997: 65–6).

Criticism of the Three Gorges Project was first made public at a press conference in Beijing in 1989 by the well-known reporter Dai Qing.[14] Evaluations of the project have focused on issues ranging from the extinction of rare species of sturgeon and dolphin, to the flooding of important archeological sites. But the project is most contested for the ecological impact of its resettlement programme. For the transmigration and relocation of an estimated 1.3 to 1.6 million people, a large area of land needs to be reclaimed. The fear is that the relocated population will far exceed the carrying capacity of the newly developed land, which will lead to deforestation and soil erosion. The Chinese leadership at the time was quick to smother opposition. The incident that took place during the approval of the Three Gorges Dam Project at the Fifth Session of the Seventh National People's Congress (or NPC — the Chinese parliament) in April 1992 was a good example of this. Huang Shunxing, a member of the Standing Committee of the NPC and expert on hydro-electrics, tried to make use of the right of interpellation to voice his criticism. At the crucial moment the microphones were unplugged and Huang was literally left speechless. In reaction, Huang Shunxing resigned from the NPC the same day.[15]

In that same eventful year, the People's Republic participated in the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). This marked a gradual shift in the government's commitment from 'co-ordinated development', with explicit priority given to economic development, to one of 'sustainable development'. Together with the State Council's adoption of Agenda 21 and its integration in the Ninth Five Year Plan of National and Social Development and the Outline of Long-Term Targets for the Year 2010 (State Environmental Protection Agency, 1995; see Palmer, 1998: 788–92), the Chinese government decisively embarked on a greening process which was rooted in the early 1970s.[16] To date the People's Republic can boast a comprehensive corpus of environmental laws and regulations, and

14. Although detained on various occasions, Dai Qing has managed to initiate the debate on the Three Gorges Dam. Being the daughter of Marshal Ye Jianying, she does enjoy a considerable degree of immunity in this issue.
15. Pictures of this extraordinary incident were broadcast by BRT1, the Belgian national television company. See Hot Doc (1999).
16. There is a wide body of literature available describing the greening of the Chinese state over the 1980s and 1990s. See, for example Edmonds (2000); Ross (1988); Ross and Silk (1987); Sinkule and Ortolano (1995).

a relatively well-developed framework of environmental institutions at various administrative levels. Environmental issues have been put high on the political agenda and feature prominently in the media.

For the Three Gorges Dam, too, the political climate underwent a marked change, with a change of leadership in 1998 and the replacement of premier Li Peng — generally believed to be the driving force behind the project — by Zhu Rongji. Local protest demonstrations by dissatisfied farmers who complained about the shortage of land in the resettlement areas caused the central government to pay more attention to the environmental aspects of the dam construction (Heggelund, 2000; Jing, 1997: 148–51). Although public criticism and demonstrations are still suppressed, a cautious academic debate on the effects of land reclamation on the ecological environment has emerged.[17]

The latter half of the 1990s also witnessed a rapid growth of environmental social organizations. In Beijing the number of formally registered environmental social organizations rose from one to four between 1967 and 1992, and doubled from nine to eighteen in the period 1995 to 1996. At the same time the number of people working in environmental social organizations increased from 170 to approximately 4000 in 1997 (Zhao, 1993: 32). There is good reason to believe that the majority of green organizations did not actually register at all and thus do not appear in these figures (see also the following section). The growth of green organizations arose from a common sense of civic responsibility towards the environment and an urge to act in areas where the government was falling short. On the other hand, they were also the result of the central state's realization that there was a need for a strengthened civil society, especially as the seriousness and the magnitude of environmental problems confronted the government with its own limitations.

The Chinese state had to find a way to deal with a newly emerging sector in society, which it regarded as legitimate, at least to some (undecided) extent. The Chinese state reacted with a combination of policies varying from stringent control to tolerance and encouragement. This policy mix proved decisive in shaping the environmental sector's response.

The Response of the Chinese State

The earliest regulations by the Chinese communist government on social organizations date from September 1950, when the former Ministry of

17. Pers. comm., Zhang Mingzhu, 2000. According to Zhang (an expert involved in the Environmental Impact Assessment for the water diversion project of the Yangzi River), academic critique on large-scale hydrological projects can be voiced, but public debate is simply out of the question.

Internal Affairs proclaimed the Temporary Measures for the Registration of Social Organizations. The term 'social organization' here meant a non-governmental organization (Wang, 2000: 15–16).[18] However, directly after the communist take-over the central state started to exert increasingly strict control over voluntary civil organizations both in the countryside and in the cities. Those institutions that were established in later years and seemed 'non-governmental', such as the Youth League, academic societies or trade unions, were in fact the state's outposts in society. Martin King Whyte writes:

> By the mid 1950s an organizational system had begun to emerge that made it possible to control and mobilize the citizenry much more effectively than before. The building blocks of pre-1949 cities — guilds, native-place associations, clans, secret societies, neighborhood temple associations, and so forth — had either been eliminated or transformed. In their place a new urban infrastructure had been built that was firmly under Party control. (Whyte, 1991: 697)

The virtual absence of civil society during the collective period (1956–78) gradually changed with the start of the economic reforms. The reforms unleashed great social changes initially unforeseen by the government. In more than two decades of economic reforms to date, there has been an explosive growth of social organizations. The number of officially registered social organizations rose from 100 national and 6000 regional organizations in 1965 to over 1800 national and 165,600 regional ones at the end of 1998.[19] The boom in social organizations is a result of two factors: first, the re-trenchment of the state, as a result of which domains hitherto dominated by the government were gradually returned to society, such as social services,[20] legal counselling, and cultural activities; and second, the central state's growing awareness of the need to strengthen civil society. The rapid increase in unemployment after the major restructuring of state industries and the bureaucracy since the late 1990s has put increasing pressure on the government. At the Ninth People's Congress in March 1998, the Secretary-General of the State Council, Luo Gan, declared that the 'government has taken up the management of many affairs which it should not have managed, is not in

18. For a definition of the term NGO, see Salamon (1994).
19. Statistics by Wu Zhongze, Director-General of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, cited in Wang (2000: 15–16). According to the *1997 China Law Yearbook*, there were 1845 national and 184,821 regional social organizations (Zhongguo Falü Nianjian Bianji Weiyuanhui, 1997: 1077). According to Saich (2000: 126), the number of social organizations would add up to more than one million if all kinds of citizen-run organizations and economic associations were to be included.
20. According to a survey of 104 Beijing-based NGOs by Tsinghua University, 32 per cent were active as trade and commercial associations, and study and students' societies; 7 per cent were research and survey institutions; 6 per cent provided social services; 6 per cent were environmental NGOs; 5 per cent focused on poverty alleviation; 4 per cent engaged in international exchange; 27 per cent belonged to other categories; and 13 per cent did not respond to the survey (Deng, 2000: 26).

a position to manage, or actually cannot manage well' (Luo Gan, quoted in Saich, 2000: 128), which has hindered the efficiency and effectiveness of the government. It was therefore necessary, said Luo Gan, to expand the activities of 'social intermediary organizations'.

In order to cope with these changed circumstances, the central government proclaimed the Regulations for the Administration and Registration of Social Organizations in September 1998, which replaced the outdated rules of 1989. The state institution primarily concerned with the control of social organizations is the Department for the Administration of Civil Organizations of the Ministry of Civil Affairs (*Minzhengbu Minjian Zuzhi Guanliju*).[21] The 1998 regulations aim to increase control over social organizations through stringent registration procedures. If an organization wishes to be registered as a social organization, four basic conditions must have been met: 1) prior to registration, approval must have been obtained by a sponsoring institution (*zhuguan bumen*); 2) the total number of organization members cannot exceed fifty; 3) the organization must have a fixed address, specialized staff corresponding to its scope of activities, and legal financial resources of 100,000 Rmb for a national or 30,000 Rmb for a regional (provincial level and lower) social organization; 4) 'within the same administrative area' there can be no other social organization applying for registration (articles 9–13, Ministry of Civil Affairs, 1998: 7–10). There is no right of appeal if an application is rejected by the sponsoring institution or the state organs for civil affairs.

What these rules mean in practice is illustatred by the words of a person who attempted to set up an NGO: 'Only if you can find a sponsoring institution willing to be your "mother-in-law" (*popo*) can you register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs. This means that the sponsoring institution has to be responsible for your organization's actions. Nobody dares to be your mother-in-law, as they fear that you will make trouble or arouse the people' (Wang Huizhan, pers. comm., 2000).

The fact that two organizations in the same field are not allowed makes it even more difficult to register. The NGO research centre of Tsinghua University commented that 'this stipulation has strong traits of a planned and monopolist system. On the one hand it uses artificial measures to protect the existent top-down NGOs [those set up by the state], on the other hand, it limits the establishment of NGOs from the bottom up. In fact, it is not beneficial for the capacity-building and long-term development of NGOs in China' (Wang, 2000: 17). If we add to this, the state's restrictions on the number of NGO members and a required minimum of financial

21. The Chinese term '*minjian*' is difficult to render in English. It literally means 'among the people' and is sometimes translated as 'popular', 'folk' or even 'non-governmental'. However, for the latter term the word '*feizhengfu zuzhi*' is more common. Here I have used the word 'civil' for '*minjian*'.

resources, it seems that the central government is attempting to limit rather than stimulate the development of NGOs.

The social organizations that are formally registered are generally established by people with strong connections to the government. Many government institutions have set up their own 'non-governmental organizations' partly to devolve certain government functions to the market as a result of budgetary pressures and partly in order to attract (foreign) funding.[22] It is what the Chinese call GONGOs or 'Government-Organized NGOs' The phenomenon of GONGOs is a source of concern for scholars and policymakers: 'The lack of separation between the government and society also affects the development of grassroots organizations. In order to obtain the support or recognition from the government they readily accept administrative intervention. Many scholars have criticized that NGOs in China lack a non-governmental character and are not worthy of the name NGO' (Wang, 2000: 20). To reduce government intervention in the civil sector, in 1994 the central government issued a ban on concurrent leadership functions by state and party officials; this was reiterated in 1998. To date it is uncertain what effect this has had on the development of NGOs.[23]

Given the problems of registering as a social organization, many NGOs chose to set up 'in disguise'. There are several ways of doing this: register as an enterprise (a possibility closed off since 1998), or as a subsidiary organization under a façade institution; or avoid registration altogether and set up an informal 'club' or 'salon'. For example, the Beijing Science and Technology Association is a typical façade institution and a great number of NGOs used to register as 'research institutes' under its name. It became so popular that the government put a halt to this practice in June 1994. In response, the Beijing Science and Technology Association privatized its research institutes and registered them as daughter companies under the newly established 'Chaolun Technology and Development Company'. An example of an informal club is the environmental expert network founded by Qi Jinxu (a pseudonym), who is quoted at the beginning of this article. Qi — a dissatisfied official within the Ministry of Land Resources — had already attempted to set up an environmental NGO in 1991, with staff from the Academy of Social Sciences. His Association for Research on Environmental Policy was the first environmental NGO to be set up since the reforms started in 1978. It was warmly welcomed and supported by

22. As Liang Congjie, the Director of China's foremost environmental NGO (Friends of Nature) states: 'In China we have what I call "GONGOs" — that's "government-organized non-governmental organizations". They claim to be independent writer's or photographers' societies, for example — but they're run by the government, financially supported by the government' (Liang, quoted in Environmental Defense, 1995: 1).

23. See the '1998 Notice by the Secretariat of the Communist Party and the State Council on the Prohibition of Concurrent Leadership Functions in Social Organizations by Leading Cadres of Government and Party Organs', in Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs (2000: 22–3).

international organizations, but was soon prohibited by the government. Qi Jinxu has now organized a group of experts who want to publish an annual 'state of the environment' — a critical evaluation of national environmental policies. When asked whether he fears government intervention, Qi responds:

> Although we will publish openly, I do not think we will run into trouble. First of all, we publish anonymously. And second, we have been organized as a loose network, I call upon certain experts depending on the subject of each publication. ... Also this time, foreign financiers want to support us, but we do not want their money. It's safer this way. (Qi Jinxu, pers. comm., 2000)[24]

Although many NGOs complain that they are extremely difficult, the current registration procedures do not actually prevent people from establishing voluntary organizations. This proves that citizens command effective means to circumvent government regulations. Yet, in the long run, this situation can impede the effective functioning of NGOs. Firstly, an unregistered social organization cannot act as an independent legal entity, which means, for example, that the organization itself cannot enter into contractual relations. Secondly, it becomes difficult to attract specialized and capable personnel as the organization cannot take care of the basic essentials of the employee, such as pension, medical insurance, and the household registration or *hukou*.[25] For this reason, many NGOs have to rely on volunteers and retired people. Thirdly, without registration a social organization is not entitled to have its own bank account, but must relinquish its entire financial administration to the responsible department. This makes it difficult for an NGO to attract funding as it lacks financial transparency and has to pay a certain 'management fee' to the responsible department for activities undertaken.[26] For foreign organizations, especially, these three factors can seriously frustrate the establishment and execution of co-operative projects.

To alleviate financial pressures on NGOs, the central government adopted the 'Law for Donations for Public Welfare', which became effective in

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24. The critical annual evaluation of the Tai Hu Lake clean up by Qi Jinxu's group of experts (see quote from Qi Jinxu at the beginning of this article) is important as it reveals the results of environmental policy implementation that are normally not available for the general public. A recent article on this topic by Mara Warwick (1999) seems more positive on the control of water pollution.
25. In China, the *hukou* system was installed as a means of control over migration. In urban areas, the household registration is administered by the work-unit or the organization by which one is employed. This system remains the basis of Chinese life — without a *hukou* one cannot hold a formal job, marry or get a passport. For more information on the *hukou* system, see Cheng and Selden (1994: 644–69); Potter (1983: 465–99); Selden (1998).
26. That this is not always a disadvantage was made clear by Li Lailai, the Director of the Research Institute for the Environment and Development, an NGO 'in disguise' under the Chaolun Technology and Development Company. 'We have to pay a management fee of 10,000 Rmb per year and in return for that they take care of our financial administration, which is much cheaper than if we hire an accountant ourselves' (pers. comm., 2000).

September 1999. This law stipulates that donors can enjoy tax breaks for money donated for the public good. At present, however, the law merely defines a basic framework for charity donations; it is still uncertain how it will be implemented. Questions as to the exact way in which tax breaks can be enjoyed and safeguarded, and how donations for the public good are to be defined, have still to be answered (Wang, 2000: 18).

Ironically, with the current registration procedures for social organizations, the government achieves the opposite of what it is aiming for: improved control and administration of the non-governmental sector. In fact, the majority of NGOs prefer to register under an entity that hides their true nature; they thus vanish completely from the government's view. One wonders whether it is not preferable to abolish the requirement for a responsible department and simply register with the relevant state institutions. To this suggestion, an official in the Department for the Administration of Civil Organizations replied: 'We know the problems that social organizations face when trying to register. But we are still in an experimental phase and cannot change things within a few years. We have already sent many delegations to the United States, Australia and the Philippines in order to study and learn from the experiences of other countries'.[27]

The Chinese state is facing a dilemma. In order to ensure sustained and stable socio-economic development it cannot escape from strengthening civil society and allowing the rise of grassroots organizations. Yet, it is anxious not to repeat an earlier experience, in which an organization called the Falun Gong Sect managed — unnoticed — to penetrate every layer of society and government.[28] The risk of a such a recurrence looms over any potential relaxation of control. The content of the 1998 regulations on social organizations shows that the central government is following an unofficial policy of toleration: the authorities are aware that as a result of their own rules, a great number of social organizations escape government control. However, the spirit of the regulations is to convey the idea that the government will do anything in its power to avoid the 'indiscriminate emergence and disorganized development of social organizations'. To this end, the use

27. Interview with an official of the Department for the Administration of Civil Organizations (pers. comm., 2000). According to Saich, reformers in the central government have already proposed a simplification of registration by eliminating the responsible department. However, Luo Gan, a member of the Secretariat of the Central Party Committee, strongly opposed such a relaxation of control; see Saich (2000: 130–1).

28. The harsh repression of the Falun Gong Sect incited a lot of criticism. Even an official as high as the Vice-President of the Academy of Social Sciences criticized the approach adopted by the government in dealing with this sect. In order to look for alternative approaches, the Ministry of Public Security filed an official request with the Royal Dutch Embassy for assistance in the administration and control of religious sects in Spring 2000. The application was not granted (Robert van Kan, cultural attaché, pers. comm., 2000). More information about the rights of social organizations can be found in the China report by Human Rights Watch Asia; see www.hrichina.org/reports/freedom.html.

of force and repression will not be eschewed (Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs, 1999: 36).[29]

Having sketched the political, societal and legal conditions under which environmentalism emerged in China, it is now time to turn to the specific features of green organizations.

NGOs, GONGOs AND CHARISMATIC INDIVIDUALS: FEATURES OF CHINESE GREEN ORGANIZATIONS

To date, little is known about environmental organizations in China. Basic data on the total number and geographical distribution of green NGOs and social organizations nation-wide are non-existent. There is certainly no detailed information on their scope of activities, organizational structure and resources. It appears that the majority of environmental social organizations are located in the country's capital. However, in her informative thesis, Zhao Xiumei also noted the emergence of green social organizations in other regions of China, such as the Daoist 'Club for Green Civilization' set up in 1993 in Sichuan; the Shandong-based 'Green Civil Association of Weihai City' established in the same year; the 'Association of Green Volunteers of Chongqing City' set up in 1995; and the nation's first voluntary peasants' organization — the 'Farmers' Association for the Protection of Biodiversity of the Gaoligong Mountains in Yunnan' founded in 1996 (Zhao, 1993: 28–9).

There are large differences between environmental social organizations in China with regard to internal organization, decision-making arrangements, number of members, degree of professionalism, and contact with the government. It is virtually impossible to make a general statement about their nature and configuration, because: a) environmental social organizations have only emerged over the past few years and the sector is still developing; b) there is no overarching pattern in the development of social organizations; and c) there is an overlap between the activities and style of resource mobilization of the social organizations which makes a rigid classification meaningless. In the following sections, I will review these three factors by examining some concrete cases.

Struggling in a Changing Environment

The development of environmental social organizations only took off in the mid-1990s and the green sector is still in a state of flux. Social organizations

29. For more information on the administration of social organizations and NGOs in China, see Duo (1996); Zhao (1998).

are constantly shaping and reshaping themselves, attempting to strike a balance between their desired organizational form (informal and democratic versus professionalized and hierarchic) and the need for effectiveness and efficiency in fund-raising under rapidly changing socio-economic conditions. The recently established Centre for Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims (CLAPV) is a case in point.

The centre was set up as a 'research institute' under the China University of Political Science and Law in October 1998 by Wang Canfa, a professor in environmental law. One of the cases that Wang has taken up is that of a farmer in Huairou County near Beijing. In September 1998, farmer Zhang Jinhu discovered hundreds of his ducks dead as a result of water pollution by a pig farm upstream. He did something rather uncommon for the Chinese countryside: he attempted to seek legal redress. In the rural areas, many farmers are ignorant of their legal rights and easily intimidated by businesses which the local government protects. In Wang Canfa's words: 'Local businesses pay taxes and are big employers. So local governments need them and are reluctant to close them down'. With his legal services, Wang hopes to change this situation, 'if they [businesses] knew that victims might claim compensation, that would bring huge pressure on polluters' (Wang Canfa, pers. comm., 2000; see also Rosenthal, 2000: A1, 12).

The centre has developed several activities: legal counsel for which expenses have to be paid if the case is won and which is free of charge if the case is lost; an environmental advice telephone hotline; a 'lawyers' mailbox' in co-operation with the *China Environmental Newspaper* to which readers can send their questions and comments; training, seminars, and lectures; and lastly, policy advice on environmental law. With these activities, Wang Canfa has entered a terrain novel to China. He has received great attention from the national and even international media (Editorial, 1999: 1; Li, 1999: 1; Rosenthal, 2000: A1, 12; Yan, 1999: 1). As a result, the centre has been engulfed by requests for legal advice, which — with the limited resources at hand — it is simply incapable of handling. At present, this rapid success might therefore also be the centre's greatest threat.

The centre relies entirely on volunteers — thirty-six in total, twenty-two of whom are lawyers and professors, and fourteen undergraduate and graduate students. As there are no hired employees, the centre lacks professionalism while working in a highly specialized field. There is no coherent recruitment policy and no long-term continuity in staffing; the leadership and management structure is basically a one-man affair, with Wang having to take all major decisions. The centre is facing great financial difficulties as it generally prepays legal expenses for the pollution victims (which took up 60 per cent of the total annual budget of one million Rmb in 1998). In 1998, the total budget was provided by international financiers. But the centre's status as a second-tier organization under the University for Political Science and Law, instead of being an independent legal entity, represents a serious impediment for future fund-raising (Wang and Wei, 2000: 180–93). The centre rocketed

into existence within a short timeframe. This has caused many problems in organization, management and finance which have to be solved in the medium term if it is to survive. However, the centre is only one of many newly emerging green NGOs that face such a situation and that need to struggle in a fast-changing environment to safeguard their existence.

The Environmentalist Spectrum: Activists and Specialists

The second factor making it difficult to generalize about the nature and characteristics of Chinese environmental social organizations is the lack of an overall development trend. In the literature on environmental social movements it is sometimes suggested that environmentalism in the West and in the former Eastern-bloc countries underwent a transformation process, from a populist force to institutionalized, co-opted social groupings. On closer inspection, environmentalism includes a wide spectrum that runs from grassroots organizations to institutionalized public interest groups.[30] In a sense, the situation in China is not dissimilar to this. On one side of the environmentalist spectrum, there are activist, participatory groups that address the more 'catchy' and popular themes. They draw on large groups of volunteers to organize 'politically innocent' activities such as green summer camps, garbage clean-up campaigns, and the protection of rare animal species like the snub-nosed monkey and the Yangzi river white dolphin.

An example of this type of social organization is the 'Global Village of Beijing' (GVB).[31] This NGO is led by the flamboyant Liao Xiaoyi,[32] a Chinese national who spent over four years at North Carolina State University and was active on the American environmental scene. She has made several documentaries and TV series attracting widespread praise and attention. In March 1996, the Centre for Integrated Agricultural Development (CIAD) of the China Agricultural University provided Liao Xiaoyi with free office space, and the establishment of the Global Village of Beijing became a fact. Like other NGOs evading the state's control, it registered as

30. Rootes (1999: 21) writes of environmental movements in the West: '... we have sketched what appears to be a rather straightforward process from radicalism to institutionalization. ... But is the trend really so homogenous? And, is there a "trend" at all?'. For the ex-socialist states in East and Central Europe, Jancar-Webster notes a shift in the environmental movement from populist and oppositional to pragmatic and professional. Yet, she too notes the many differences in style and manner of environmentalism between the various Eastern-bloc countries. See Jancar-Webster (1998: 69–72, 78–82).
31. Its full name is the Beijing Global Village Environmental Culture Centre.
32. Liao Xiaoyi has become one of the figureheads of Chinese environmentalism. She won the prestigious US$ 100,000 Sophie Prize in June 2000. During the visit of US President Bill Clinton to China, he invited her to participate in a round-table meeting on the environment in Guangxi Province.

an enterprise with the Department for Commerce and Industry. Global Village stresses the relationship between women and the environment, and actively promotes environmental awareness through its self-produced VCDs, posters, and textbooks. It hosts a weekly TV series called the *Environmental Protection Hour*, which has been broadcast by the national television (CCTV7) since April 1996.

One of its core activities is the building of 'green communities', encouraging garbage sorting and a green lifestyle at the community level. Global Village's first pilot project of this kind was launched in 1997 with the support of the Huaibaishu Neighbourhood Committee[33] of the Xuanwu District in Beijing. Two years later, the country's first sorted-garbage transporting and recycling system began operating in the same district. The organization has also founded an environmental protection education and training base on 200 hectares of land in the hills of Western Erdao Township not far from Beijing. The forty or so households living at the base have introduced a green lifestyle, featuring garbage sorting, the reuse of everyday articles, and organic farming (Huang, 2000a: 19–20).

Informality and participatory structures are typical of Liao Xiaoyi's organization. This is partly a result of the relative youth of the organization, and partly a conscious effort to shape an institution similar to the participatory, grassroots organizations Liao witnessed abroad (Huang, 2000b: 12–19). The organization is horizontally structured, with no formal decision-making procedures: daily affairs are decided through consultation with all employees. There are no fixed meetings — when consultation is deemed necessary a meeting is held — nor is there a consistent recruitment policy. In December 1999, there were eight women working full-time and one male volunteer from the United States. By March 2000, there were six people working full-time (all of whom were female), two part-time and five working as volunteers. From this one can see that the staffing of Global Village is not without problems. Social researcher Feng Ling notes that 'human resources are still unstable. ... To a certain extent this will weaken the operational capacity of the organization'. She also comments on the democratic decision-making structure: 'the necessary reporting between the responsible persons of Global Village is lacking. This causes duplication in work, the wasting of human resources, and decrease in working efficiency' (Feng, 2000: 148–50).

In contrast to the sort of NGO founded by Liao Xiaoyi, there are social organizations that work on highly specialized issues such as the development of a new legal system for tradeable waste permits, and green technology for small and medium-scale enterprises. It is these organizations that have a high potential to develop into professionalized NGOs and public interest

33. The neighbourhood committees, a remnant of the collectivist past, are today adopting new roles in society, although they are still responsible for the daily management affairs of a neighbourhood, such as birth control, public security and the environment. See Read (2000: 806–20).

lobbies working with the bureaucratic system. The Institute for Environment and Development (IED) is an example of this kind of NGO. It is led by Li Lailai, a former female researcher in environmental history at Beijing University. This NGO was originally established as one of the many research institutes of the Beijing Science and Technology Association until they were forbidden by the authorities. At present, it is part of the Chaolun Science and Technology Development Company which was founded in June 1994 in response to the government intervention. One of the main activities of Li Lailai's organization is a project for training in cleaner production for small and medium-size (rural) enterprises. The project is funded through LEAD (Leadership for the Environment), an international environmental NGO, and has an annual budget of US$ 150,000.

The project has been running since 1994 and aims to stimulate the transfer and adoption of green technology by small and medium-size companies. To this end, highly specialized training is given in the types of available clean technologies, the way to raise funds for the acquisition of such technologies, and project planning. In addition, representatives from the environmental bureaucracy and from the international funding agencies that support clean technologies are brought into contact with the company managers. Of the environmental social organizations, the Institute for Environment and Development is one of the few NGOs active in this particular field (Li Lailai, pers. comm., 2000).

NGO, GONGO or a Hybrid?

The last reason why China's environmental organizations are hard to describe in general terms, is the overlap between the scope of activities and adopted tactics of resource mobilization. An organization that appears to be a government-organized NGO or a public interest lobby working from within the bureaucracy, can sometimes make successful use of civic participation and community action to achieve its aims. Contrarily, grassroots organizations — in particular in the Chinese political context — are dependent on the recognition of the state, and therefore seek to strengthen their contacts with government officials.

The Beijing Environmental Protection Foundation seems a typical GONGO with strong connections to the government. Appearances, however, can be deceptive. It was founded in August 1996 and formally registered as an official social organization with the Beijing Department of Civil Affairs. Its founder and current director is Jiang Xiaoke, a woman of inexhaustible energy. She is a member of the NPC and concurrent commissioner of the NPC Commission on Environmental and Natural Resources Protection. This commission is the highest state organ responsible for policies on environmental protection and natural resource management in China. Moreover, it supervises the State Environmental Protection Agency and its

subordinate institutions, and assists in the drafting of new environmental laws and regulations.[34] With these contacts the Beijing Environmental Protection Foundation can be assured that its voice is heard.

One interesting initiative by this organization is its effort to stimulate legal reform in Beijing's environmental legislation. Instead of relying on command-and-control policies and end-of-pipe technologies, Jiang Xiaoke is proposing the drafting of new laws on tradeable waste permits, pollution taxes and the use of other economic incentives for pollution control. It is hoped that once such a legal system is in place in Beijing, it can serve as a national model. At present, advanced discussions about this issue have already been undertaken with the State Environmental Protection Agency and the State Taxation Bureau.

Despite its high political profile, the foundation also regularly engages in activities of community and volunteer actions, such as encouraging consumers to bring their own cloth bags to the supermarket instead of getting a plastic bag for virtually each article they buy (Jiang Xiaoke, pers. comm., 2000). Jiang also plays a critical role within the environmentalist scene. When asked whether a 'GONGO' such as the Beijing Environmental Protection Foundation had any contact with 'real' NGOs, a director of a social organization answered: 'Jiang Xiaoke often helps us with small funding or rooms for a seminar. With her contacts and resources she can arrange these things. She is a well-known and appreciated figure in the green community' (Li Lailai, pers. comm., 2000). The links with grassroots organizations, and the mix of experience with participatory approaches and involvement in parliamentary politics could turn Jiang Xiaoke's foundation into an important environmental NGO or — more speculatively — into a possible green party in the future.

An environmental NGO that has made the mass mobilization of volunteers its hallmark is China's most famous: Friends of Nature.[35] To circumvent government regulations, this NGO was registered in March 1994 with the inconspicuous name 'Academy of Green Culture' under an existing social organization (the Academy of Chinese Culture), but it has gained fame as 'Friends of Nature'. Friends of Nature could serve as a model NGO in China in many respects. It has a strong and charismatic leader in Liang Congjie, a professor at the History Department of Beijing University and concurrent member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (the highest advisory organ of the Chinese state). As the grandson of the renowned political reformer Liang Qichao, Liang Congjie enjoys great political and societal credit. Friends of Nature is relatively well-organized, with a council consisting of thirty-nine people, a director appointed for two years (which can be extended), a secretariat staffed by two people, and five

34. For a description of this body, see Palmer (1998: 793).
35. The environmental students' associations at universities are also important green voluntary organizations. For a description see Dai and Vermeer (1999: 150–1).

employees (four full-time and one part-time) responsible for four work groups: the bird group; the green lecture group; the media group; and the teachers' and training group. In 1999, Friends of Nature had 553 individual members, 21 member organizations and 567 volunteers (of whom 306 were women). Major decisions are taken through voting by the entire council. Smaller decisions are taken by the director in consultation with the secretariat and persons responsible for the groups. Although Friends of Nature falls under the jurisdiction of the Academy of Chinese Culture, it can operate freely. It is not an individual legal entity, but does have its own financial administration and account (Hu, 2000: 166–7).

Due to its success in organizing volunteer actions, Friends of Nature is one of the few Chinese NGOs that can afford to ask a membership fee. The annual fee is twenty yuan per member, yielding over 10,000 yuan (or 3 per cent of the total annual budget).[36] Its high-profile actions, such as the protection of the habitat of the snub-nosed monkey against illegal tree felling, have attracted nation-wide attention and have been broadcast on national television.[37] Currently, the governmental contacts of Friends of Nature are relatively weak, but because of its fame, it can increasingly seek political influence, and with some small successes. Hu Wen'an notes:

> As regards the public domain, the Chinese government was in the past not used, nor favourable to NGOs up to the point of prohibiting their participation [in policy-making]. … Friends of Nature is actively looking to communicate with the government. … Recently, the State Planning Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation, and the State and Beijing Environmental Protection Agency have invited Friends of Nature to participate in some of their activities. This shows that the situation is changing. (Hu, 2000: 173)[38]

FUTURE PERSPECTIVES: CO-OPTATION OR RESISTANCE?

In a case study from Guangzhou, Lo and Leung (2000) focus on the relation between the environmental bureaucracy and citizens, and show the limits of the use of social forces by the state in environmental governance. They present a rather pessimistic picture of environmentalism in China: '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' (ibid.: 704).

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36. This is only a rough indication. Hu gives some financial data on the budget of Friends of Nature, but these are rather patchy and unreliable; see Hu (2000: 169, 175).
37. The action for the snub-nosed monkey was broadcast on 2 August 1998 on CCTV1's 'Focus Interview' (*jiaodian fangtan*).
38. Friends of Nature and the Centre for Legal Support to Pollution Victims have also become well-known to the Chinese government, as indicated by the fact that both were invited for an official banquet and discussion meeting during the planned visit of the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs to China. Unfortunately, the visit was cancelled because of diplomatic troubles around the Falun Gong.

The reality, however, is not that clear-cut. We have seen that environmental conflict since the start of the economic reforms in 1978 largely focused on regional issues. The first environmental conflict with the potential to incite nation-wide protest was the start of the Three Gorges Dam Project in the early 1990s. Since then, the societal and political context has changed considerably: the central state has become increasingly aware of environmental degradation and has put the protection of the environment high on the political agenda; at the same time, a vibrant environmentalist sector has sprung up in Chinese society. The policies and regulations that govern the environmentalist sector have failed to achieve the government's aims. Instead of a better overview and control by the state, the policies and regulations have led to civil and voluntary green organizations vanishing from the state's gaze, as they fail to register. The specific features of environmental organizations have been illustrated by focusing on five concrete cases.

From the above, we can distil two main features of Chinese environmentalism: its broad development and the lack of confrontation with the national government. Since the mid-1990s, environmentalism has emerged as a wide-ranging and fluid spectrum of participatory, grassroots organizations versus more co-opted and institutionalized organizations in the fringes of a burgeoning civil society. In this sense, China's green community is similar to environmentalism elsewhere in the world. There are no general rules to describe the variety of green organizations, which differ widely in origin, scope of activities and manner of resource mobilization. Some use the contacts with their mother state institutions to report back problems in the implementation of environmental policy, while others rely on the mobilization of large groups of volunteers to effect change in the state of the environment. There are social organizations working on issues that attract widespread attention by the media, and there are those that opt for a low public profile, working on highly specialized technical or legal issues. Due to their recent development, many are weak in terms of organization, and human and financial resources.[39] What is striking about the social organizations highlighted here, is their heavy dependence on a strong and charismatic leadership, which can prove problematic in the long run.[40] But despite its short development history and a myriad of problems, environmentalism in China appears to be built on a relatively solid base.

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39. Another issue that was brought up during one of our fact-finding missions, was the problem of inter-institutional co-operation. According to Li Lailai, the Chinese social organizations miss the ability to co-operate. Experience with conflict-resolution mechanisms and multi-stakeholder approaches is still very weak (Li Lailai, pers. comm., 2000).
40. For example, during the establishment of the project between Wageningen University and Tsinghua University the co-operation with one Chinese NGO came to a standstill, because its director fell seriously ill and nobody else could or dared to take major decisions and sign the letter of agreement. For reasons of privacy the identity of this organization cannot be revealed.

An issue much debated by Western and Chinese observers is the phenomenon of environmental GONGOs or the 'government-organized NGOs'. From this article, it has become clear that the term 'government-organized' is a disputable notion. Among the GONGOs there are indeed those institutions set up by the state to attract new (foreign) funding and to cushion the downsizing of the bureaucracy. But they also include organizations that can play a crucial, positive role in the environmentalist scene precisely because of their governmental connections and resources, such as the Beijing Environmental Protection Foundation. In addition, if the dividing line is drawn with the criterion of 'government-organized', Qi Jinxu's highly critical expert group — on which the government cracked down during its initial establishment — should also be deemed a GONGO as he is a state official.

The issue of GONGOs touches on the question of the autonomy of civil organizations. On the surface, the central state exerts a strict control over the green community. Since 1998 a legal framework has taken effect that imposes a whole set of limiting requirements on social organizations in terms of a sponsoring institution, number of members, and financial resources. On closer inspection, however, it is clear that citizens are not stopped by state regulations when they feel the need to respond to ecological problems which the government is unable or unwilling to solve. As Elisabeth Knup notes: 'many newly established social organizations have achieved a relatively high degree of autonomy, as long as the organization's activities support the overall goals and policies of the state' (Knup, 1997: 9–15). Here lies the crux of the matter: what are the 'overall goals and policies' when it comes to environmentalism?

On the one hand, the central government is under increasing pressure to devolve certain state functions back to society. More importantly, awareness of its own limitations has also led the central state to tolerate and even cautiously encourage citizens' voluntary actions. In this sense, environmentalism is linked to broader issues of political reform, civil society and human rights.[41] On the other hand, the state fears the loss of control over society and is seeking ways to allow the growth of a sector deemed legitimate, but without the prospect of one day having to face another nation-wide social movement such as the Falun Gong. The Chinese state is itself unclear about the exact path of development for the environmentalist sector. The autonomy of green social organizations is a space of continuous negotiation and wavering between official control and informal toleration. This, combined with the increasing environmental sensitivity of the state since the first green

41. Lafferty and Meadowcroft argue: 'There are good reasons for believing that the relationship between democracy and good environmental practice is far from being straightforward'. However, they do offer convincing arguments why this could be so; see Lafferty and Meadowcroft (1996: 2).

social organizations emerged, has enabled the environmentalist sector to develop gradually and broadly.

At the same time, these two factors have also deprived environmentalism of a cause to rebel against. A state that resolves to crack down on any social movement that attempts to challenge it, while relaxing its grip over society, opens up a flexible and negotiable space in which environmentalism can find its place. A government that does not turn a deaf ear to society's environmental ills is an ally rather than an adversary — albeit an ally with shortcomings and constraints. Quite unlike environmentalism in the former Eastern-bloc countries and the West, China's green community stays aloof from any large-scale, organized confrontational activity against the state or the business sector. Mass protests and demonstrations for the environment, such as the East German rally against environmental pollution in Leipzig in 1989, the gathering of 40,000 demonstrators protesting the construction of the Nagymáros Dam in Hungary, and the public protests against air pollution in the town of Ruse in Bulgaria (Jancar-Webster, 1998: 71), are unheard of in China. The environmental protests that have taken place are highly localized and smaller in scale.[42]

Chinese green activists profess a 'female mildness' — a greening without conflict, an environmentalism with a safe distance from direct political action. When a reporter asked Liao Xiaoyi: 'Will you adopt radical methods like some overseas NGOs to criticize and urge the government to resolve environmental problems and other related issues?', she answered:

> We still adhere to our principles: guide the public instead of blaming them and help the government instead of complaining about it. This, perhaps, is the 'mildness' referred to by the media. I don't appreciate extremist methods. I'm engaged in environmental protection and don't want to use it for political aims. This is my way, and my principle too. (Liao Xiaoyi, quoted in Huang, 2000b: 17)[43]

The popular view of environmental movements is that they developed from a participatory, grassroots social force into a more domesticated, institutionalized lobby and pressure groups. Some authors writing on the

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42. The nature of environmentalism in China and the government's response to civic environmental actions is not atypical. Many Asian governments used to argue against democracy, human rights and civil society in favour of 'Asian values'. The concepts of human rights and civil society were not values that could be universally applied, as the Asian region had its own unique history, culture and socio-economic path of development. Due to strict control over civil society, environmentalism has faced similar conditions in various Asian countries. 'In many cases, governments have not welcomed civil society as a partner but have been suspicious of it and have sought to control or co-opt civil society actors. Independent national think-tanks that wish to advocate public policy for the environment or contend for intellectual leadership on these issues are still rare in some countries in East Asia, such as China, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore' (Zarsky and Tay, 2000: 146).
43. However, exactly this issue was debated during a recent meeting between mainland Chinese, Hong Kong and Taiwanese NGOs; see Chiu (2001).

development of environmentalism in the ex-socialist states of Eastern and Central Europe make use of the same narrative. They argue that the environmental movement was a mobilizing agent of popular protest against the old regimes. Once their immediate goals for social and political reform were attained, the green movement lost its momentum. For this reason, a number of environmental groups were forced to shift from being oppositional, grassroots organizations to pragmatic, institutionalized organizations. This image of green movements is a powerful one and is illustrative of the fluidity of social movements which makes it so difficult to capture them in reductionist analyses. However, it does no justice to the nature of environmentalism. As Christopher Rootes notes: 'Like other social movement organizations, EMOs [environmental movement organizations] are faced with choices between professional and mass participatory forms of organization and between conventional and unconventional forms of action. These choices are not mutually exclusive; the mix of forms and tactics varies both over time and from place to place' (Rootes, 1999: 3).

Although there is no rigid divide in the choices between professional and participatory, conventional and unconventional, and institutional and grassroots, the fear that co-optation equals neutralization is undoubtedly felt by many green activists. Yet, many also agree that it is necessary to work from *within* the nexus of power in order to make a difference. The dilemma of co-optation not only vexes environmentalism in the former Eastern-bloc countries, but environmental movements all over the globe. In the words of Chad Hansen, who was moved to found a breakaway group from the American environmental organization, the Sierra Club:

> At some point they lost sight of the fact that ecosystems are more important than the organization; that this is not about organization, but a struggle with life and death consequences for millions of species and future generations of humans. They succumbed to the intoxication of political access — at a price. They lost their vision. They lost their connections to the land. After a while, there ceased to be a right and wrong — just access, ego, and power. While there's still hope — and there is still hope — it's time for this to change. (Hansen, 1995: 26)

The environmental movement in China, however, seems to be travelling another path: green social organizations are increasingly courting government approval and influence in policy-making, rather than seeking a potentially dangerous confrontation with the national state. This is not true at the local state level: open confrontation of environmentalists with the local state is sometimes even encouraged by the central state, as it is regarded as a way to overcome 'local protectionism'.[44] The dilemma of co-optation is not yet as relevant in the Chinese context, because there is no true oppositional role for environmentalism. In fact, because of its gradual

44. It explains, for example, the leverage that the Centre for Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims has when issues of pollution by local industries are brought to court.

and state-controlled development, environmentalism currently has an opportunity to win influence in environmental policy-making; to build up strong expertise on specialized issues; and gain experience with participatory actions that can give the citizenry a voice. For these reasons, the sprouts of environmentalism we witness in China today might become a potent social force in the future.

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Peter Ho is lecturer and senior programme officer for China in the Environmental Policy Group at Wageningen University. He has published numerous articles through *The China Quarterly, Development and Change, The Journal of Development Studies, Modern China* and M.E. Sharpe on themes of rural development, natural resource management, and environmental policy in China. Since 1997 he has served as the personal interpreter (Chinese) for the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs.