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## **Environmental Civil Society and Governance in China**

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### **Summary**

- Chinese environmental civil society has become increasingly active in recent years and has helped to improve environmental governance.
- Environmental NGOs work in close alliance with the media and environmentally-minded officials and agencies in the government, notably the State Environmental Protection Agency.
- There is significant diversity within the NGO sector. Differences between more 'radical' and more 'timid' organizations and between more 'professional' and more 'amateurish' ones may hamper closer collaboration.
- Environmental civil society needs to improve its technical capacity, to further strengthen collaboration between different organizations, and to strike a balance between maintaining domestic support and addressing international concerns.
- The biggest challenge ahead for environmental civil society is to develop the skills to address the broader political, economic and social issues that underlie environmental issues.
- Key emerging issues for international donors include the policy impact of the Chinese environmental civil society. To what extent does it set the agenda? Will it begin to campaign on key issues for donors, such as energy usage?
- Key emerging issues for Chinese civil society actors include whether civil society actors will increasingly cooperate with each other. How can greater cooperation be promoted? How will NGOs maintain momentum when more controversial issues arise, such as development in western China?

\* Field research for this paper was carried out in China in May and June 2005. I would like to thank the individuals who granted me interviews. To protect their identities no names are given here, but I am very grateful to all my interviewees for openly sharing a great deal of invaluable information with me. I would also like to thank Pan Yinian for his research assistance.

Environmental civil society has become highly visible in China since 2003. Environmental NGOs are among the most dynamic civil society organizations. Compared to NGOs in other sectors, they appear to be better organized and more successful at mobilizing public support. Above all, while NGO activities in other sectors are still largely confined to small-scale service delivery, environmental NGOs appear to have begun to make an impact on government policy and practice in China.

This impression has been created by several high-profile campaigns by environmental NGOs, in conjunction with the media, in recent years. In 2003, the media and environmental NGOs mobilized public opinion against a planned dam near Dujiangyan, an ancient irrigation system that has been designated a World Heritage site. Eventually the plan was dropped. In 2004, the construction of a hydropower station on the river Nujiang was put on hold after a campaign led by environmental NGOs and the media generated so much opposition to the project that Premier Wen Jiabao ruled that no decision should be taken hastily. In January 2005, when the State Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) faced severe pressure from powerful state-owned corporations after it ordered a halt to 30 large infrastructure projects because of a failure to conduct environmental impact assessments, 56 environmental NGOs signed an open letter supporting SEPA's decision.

Has the Chinese environmental civil society truly developed to the point where it can influence government policies? Do recent events signal a breakthrough in state–civil society relations in favour of greater civil society participation in governance? Or is the sense of growing civil society power still largely an illusion? This paper will offer an assessment.

## Key allies of environmental NGOs in China

Environmental NGOs have always worked closely with the media in China. Many well-known environmentalists are journalists. Journalists are not only the key members of many environmental groups but also founders of some of the most active environmental NGOs. For example, Wang Yongchen, a journalist with the China Central Radio Station, co-founded Green Earth Volunteers. Shi Lihong, a former *China Daily* journalist, set up Green Plateau with her husband. Zhang Kejia, a journalist at *China Youth Daily*, registered the organization Green Island.

The extensive involvement of journalists in NGO activities has led some researchers to coin the phrase 'the NGO-ization of the media'. As one journalist remarked about some of his colleagues: 'They are not content to be story-tellers. They want to become story-makers themselves.' Journalists have played a pivotal role in all the major environmental campaigns in recent years. For example, Zhang Kejia and Wang Yongchen led the campaign against the planned dam near Dujiangyan. They went on a trip to Dujiangyan together and wrote reports afterwards. They also shared their findings with other journalists through the

'Journalist Salon', a regular forum on environmental issues which they jointly organized. After Zhang Kejia's long article criticizing the dam was published in *China Youth Daily*, other journalists followed suit and more and more reports came out. In the end, over 180 domestic media outlets covered the story.<sup>1</sup> The public attention thus generated was crucial in securing victory for the environmental campaigners.

It is a similar story with the other big campaigns. Extensive media coverage has been an essential component in each case. Wang Yongchen was again a central figure in the campaign to stop the hydropower station on the river Nujiang, mobilizing other journalists to report on the project, collecting signatures from celebrities to support the campaign, and organizing activities such as a photographic exhibition on Nujiang to raise public awareness.

Generating publicity is only one way in which journalists can help environmental campaigns. Another is by writing so-called 'internal references'. These are reports which are not intended for public consumption but are seen only by high-level government officials. In China, they have always been an important channel through which local problems and grassroots grievances may be brought to the attention of high-level officials and receive some redress. Many NGOs have used this route to seek central government support against local projects which they oppose but are powerless to stop. If a top government leader sees an 'internal reference' report about a problem and instructs local governments to deal with it, many people believe that it offers the maximum chance of a quick resolution of the problem.

In addition to the media, environmental NGOs have also had another key ally – people in the government who share their views. Without them, the outcome of some of the recent campaigns could have been very different. From the beginning, for instance, some elements in the government had opposed both the Dujiangyan and the Nujiang projects. Recognizing that they did not have enough power to stop the projects, these factions used their media and NGO contacts to help drum up support for their position. In the case of Dujiangyan, although the media and NGO campaign started with the visit of Zhang Kejia and Wang Yongchen, efforts by local officials to prevent the construction of the dam predated their visit. In fact, local officials had invited Zhang Kejia and Wang Yongchen to visit and write reports about the planned dam. The various components of the local government including the party committee, the executive branch and the people's congress were united in their opposition to the proposed dam and consistently voiced their opposition to higher levels. Key officials in SEPA were also against the dam and openly lent their support to the dam's opponents.<sup>2</sup>

In the case of Nujiang, the campaign began from within rather than outside the government. As one detailed narrative of the campaign recounts, the media and NGOs became involved when a SEPA official phoned Wang Yongchen after the State Development and Reform Commission (SDRC) approved the plan for the hydropower station on the river Nujiang. The official broke the news to Wang Yongchen and told

her that his dissenting voice was too weak, therefore he urgently needed backing from scholars and experts who could put forward cogent arguments against the dam. Wang Yongchen introduced this official to Professor He Daming of Yunnan University, an expert on river systems who had collected data on the Nujiang. A couple of weeks later, SEPA organized an expert forum on the environmental implications of hydroelectric exploitation of the river Nujiang. At this forum, Professor He Daming strongly protested against the proposed project. Other experts rallied behind him.<sup>3</sup> This launched the campaign to protect the Nujiang.

Even when there is no opposition faction within the government that is allied with civil society, government contacts are indispensable for environmental campaigners. In the ongoing campaign against APP, one of the world's largest pulp and papermaking companies, environmental groups led by Greenpeace China have accused the company of destroying natural forests in Yunnan and Hainan provinces in order to plant fast-growing eucalyptus trees to supply its paper mills.<sup>4</sup> Information on APP activities supplied by local officials provided environmentalists with crucial evidence that they could use against the company. Campaigners fully acknowledge the debt they owe to 'whistle-blowers' in the government. As one of them said: 'There are more whistle-blowers in the Chinese government than people think.'

## Differences between NGOs

There are many possible ways of categorizing environmental NGOs in China. For the purpose of this study two types of rough categorization are most important.

First, one can divide environmental groups into those that avoid confrontation with the government and those that are less fearful of causing offence. The main NGOs involved in the campaign against the Nujiang dam, such as Green Earth Volunteers and the Yunnan-based organization Green Watershed, are examples of the latter. During the campaign, Green Watershed provided training for peasants living alongside the three rivers in Yunnan whose lives had been or were about to be affected by hydroelectric projects. It also brought some peasant representatives to an international conference in Beijing organized by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank and the SDRC, which was intended to defend hydroelectric projects. At the conference, the peasant representatives and Green Watershed members seized every opportunity to criticize the current decision-making processes regarding hydroelectric projects. They demanded greater participation for ordinary citizens in decision-making and that more attention be paid to sustainable development. NGOs represented by Green Watershed's director, Yu Xiaogang, also succeeded in making the conference change some of the wordings of its final declaration to reflect the views of NGOs. The government was not happy about these actions of

Green Watershed. The Yunnan government launched a thorough investigation of the organization, restricted its activities and barred its director from travelling abroad.<sup>5</sup>

Other environmental NGOs, by contrast, carefully avoid actions that might pique the government. Commenting on the troubles which Green Watershed had run into, the leader of one such NGO said: 'Survival is of paramount importance. Radical actions can get NGOs "killed". Chinese NGOs cannot do as they please.' He said that his organization had been asked by one of their foreign partners to take part in an international campaign involving simultaneous protest marches in a dozen countries. The leader had responded that they would like to take part in the campaign but could not organize a march. They would be happy to organize a workshop instead.

Some other NGO leaders expressed similar views. After Green Watershed incurred the displeasure of the government, other environmental NGOs in Yunnan were also put under pressure. Every organization was asked to submit a report on its activities to the government. Several NGO leaders have used this to prove their point that NGOs should avoid directly challenging the government. One leader said: 'If we all become martyrs, then who is left to do the work?' Another leader remarked that when Greenpeace took on APP, it would not bring harm to itself. Rather, it may receive more funding afterwards. But Greenpeace was in a different position from Chinese NGOs. It could protect itself. 'NGOs should only engage in an action with the precondition that they will be able to protect themselves.'

It is worth stressing that even the NGOs which are regarded by others as 'radical' are not really intent on opposing the government. Beijing-based NGOs which were involved in the Nujiang campaign did not come under as much government pressure as Green Watershed. This is because the campaign challenged a local project in Yunnan rather than the central government. Far away from Yunnan, Beijing NGOs did not have to worry too much about offending the Yunnan government. Green Watershed's action could be considered more 'reckless', since the organization was under the jurisdiction of the Yunnan government, yet it engaged in activities which were perceived by the latter as harming Yunnan's interest. The Yunnan government would derive huge economic benefit from the hydropower station and was therefore keen for it to go ahead. Nevertheless, Green Watershed never saw its role as deliberately challenging the government. For example, before it organized training for peasants, over 3,000 peasants whose lives had been negatively affected by a hydropower station had staged a demonstration. Green Watershed used the training to persuade peasants that they should use 'legal and rational means' rather than unauthorized demonstrations to protect their rights. It was mainly concerned to promote the right of local residents to participate in decision-making when big hydroelectric projects are undertaken and to ensure that their legitimate interests are protected; it did not necessarily wish to stop government-sanctioned hydroelectric projects.

The second distinction between different environmental groups that is worth noting is that some organizations lack skills for technical environmental work and are not able to carry out rigorous analysis of environmental and related issues; others have relatively more capacity in this regard. The latter sometimes object to being lumped together with the former as 'environmental NGOs'. They often quote a famous remark by Wang Yongchen that the initial activities of many environmental NGOs in Beijing consisted of three things: bird-watching, tree-planting, and garbage collection. While this accurately describes many Beijing-based groups, NGOs which see themselves as more professional emphasize that they did not start from such a 'primitive' basis.

Even NGOs which consider themselves more professional acknowledge that the more amateurish groups have also evolved to a more advanced stage in recent years, citing the fact that Beijing-based organizations are now heavily involved in all the big environmental campaigns on serious issues instead of merely arranging holiday tree-planting trips to the countryside. However, apparently some NGOs still lack professional knowledge and do not have the capacity to carry out practical work. Those that have projects on the ground and have conducted field research tend to have a better understanding of the complexity of environmental issues. They see a close link between these issues and wider political and social ones, and have started to take steps to tackle these wider issues. Green Watershed's work with peasants living alongside the three main rivers in Yunnan is a good example of such an approach. Many people believe it was essentially these activities that landed Green Watershed in so much trouble with the government. It could be seen as mobilizing peasants to confront the government. In other words, at a time when the government is deeply worried about social stability in rural areas, Green Watershed has violated a taboo.

In some cases, greater understanding of the complexity of environmental issues can make NGOs less inclined to engage in campaign-style advocacy or to criticize the government. For example, an NGO that seeks to reduce the use of pesticides, the Pesticide Eco-Alternatives Centre (PEAC), thinks the pesticide problem can only be solved through a long-term process. It does not believe a quick fix such as a new government regulation will work. As the director of PEAC's council explains, reducing pesticide usage will require major changes on a number of fronts. For instance, reform of the current agricultural chemical distribution system is necessary since at present many people depend on selling pesticides for their incomes. Viable alternatives to pesticide must be found and offered to farmers, whose livelihood will otherwise be affected. Consumers' awareness needs to be substantially raised so that they will reject polluted agricultural products. A system of quality and safety control must be set up to keep polluted products out of the market. Making all these changes takes time. It is unrealistic to expect the government to do everything overnight, therefore campaign-style advocacy to pile up pressure on the government is not the preferred approach.

## Change and continuity

Going back to the questions posed at the beginning of this paper: to what extent does recent environmental activism in China signify a substantial change in state-civil society relations? Have NGOs begun to have an impact on environmental policy and governance? These are questions which are being debated by Chinese environmental activists themselves. It seems that most people hesitate to draw over-optimistic conclusions. Some even dismiss recent events completely. Speaking of the Nujiang campaign, one NGO director said:

It is simply an illusion of increased NGO strength. Rather than saying that NGO actions have had some effect, it would be more accurate to say that the SEPA has been in action, and it successfully used NGOs to help achieve its objective.

Although less dismissive, other activists are also cautious in their assessment. One activist described the signing of an open letter by 56 NGOs to support SEPA's sanction of 30 large infrastructure projects as

... an isolated case. It carried little political risk. The decision was already made by the SEPA. To use an analogy, NGOs can also jointly sign a letter saying that they support the decisions of the Party. Will the government have a problem with that? Of course not.

Another activist who played a key part in campaigns against large hydropower projects was modest about the role of NGOs, arguing that dams and reservoirs have now become so pervasive on China's water systems and have caused so many environmental and social problems that they are already a highly visible public issue. Therefore, it is inevitable that environmental civil society has become involved. This is only a 'natural development', not an indication that environmental NGOs are *avant-couriers*. The problems associated with the large-scale construction of dams and reservoirs will take time to be solved and 'the action of civil society alone is not sufficient'.

The view that the success of the campaigns against the Dujiangyan and Nujiang dams were 'special cases' seems to have considerable support among environmental activists. Both successes were 'surprises'. Some even argue that although the suspension of both projects took place after the interventions by the media and NGOs, this does not necessarily prove a causal link between the two events. Since the decision-making process in China is complicated and lacks transparency, one cannot tell which factor(s) decisively influenced a particular decision.<sup>6</sup>

Doubts about its own effectiveness help demonstrate that Chinese environmental civil society does not yet operate in a fundamentally changed political and institutional context. NGOs work closely with allies within the government. Even those which are not averse to criticizing the government seek the backing of government officials whenever possible.

They may criticize a particular government project or a particular local government, but they still pin the hope of winning the argument on persuading agencies and officials at higher levels to take their side. Although they increasingly collaborate with the media to create public pressure on those who damage the environment, they have not stopped using informal channels and personal connections to appeal to high officials to intervene on their behalf. For example, when Green Watershed was investigated by the Yunnan government, it sought help in Beijing through friends with highly-placed contacts. When an NGO failed to stop a sub-provincial government from approving an environmentally detrimental development project, it used the media to attack the project, but at the same time it tried to ask a senior official in Beijing to contact the local government. When this did not work, the NGO explored the possibility of mounting a legal challenge to the project but, as its director said, in China it was better to solve problems through 'mediation'; going to court should only be the last resort. Although the NGO had contacted lawyers, it froze the process after it managed to get a journalist to write an 'internal reference' report. This was seen by a member of the Politburo, who asked the provincial government to look into the matter. The NGO was encouraged by this development and decided that going to court was no longer necessary for the time being.<sup>7</sup> One journalist has described the manner in which NGOs currently approach the government as more like petitioners than interlocutors.

In short, despite the spectacle of recent environmental campaigns, the interaction between NGOs and the state does not seem to have undergone any fundamental change. The state still holds predominant power and the exercise of this power does not take a fully institutionalized form. NGOs' current operations reflect this reality. The state can easily suppress an environmental campaign, for example, by ordering the media to stop covering a particular issue, as happened in both the Nujiang and the APP campaigns. The ability of civil society to influence government policies and decisions lies in the interpenetration between the state and civil society. Not only are there allies of NGOs in the government, but many civil society activists are employed by the state. For example, journalists/NGO activists such as Wang Yongchen and Zhang Kejia are employed by state media, and many NGO staff continue to be employed by state research institutes. The director of Green Watershed, Yu Xiaogang, remained a member of the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, a government think tank, until December 2004. The continued lack of a clear demarcation between state and civil society helps to explain many of the features of Chinese environmental NGOs described above.

Nonetheless, although no revolutionary transformation of state–civil society relations has occurred, it would be wrong to assume that there have been no new developments in civil society activism or changes in environmental governance. Despite the doubts among environmental activists about the significance of recent campaigns, they have tried to

analyse these campaigns through discussions and debates in order to draw lessons which can inform their future actions. Some assessments seem to be widely shared by environmental activists. These include:

- The political space for environmental activism has expanded, if only because the environmental problem has become more grave. Although the government remains wary of NGOs, it recognizes that it needs their assistance to address these problems.
- There is enhanced networking and coordination among NGOs, the media, and environmental experts. Their concerted action was crucial in making recent campaigns more effective.
- The NGO sector as a whole has become bolder in pushing the limit of political activism.<sup>8</sup>

The fact that this kind of discussion and debate is taking place is itself a sign of the growing sophistication of environmental civil society. There are many other signs:

- Environmental NGOs are making greater efforts to cultivate and nurture potential allies. For example, while many journalists are enthusiastic about environmental protection, most lack the technical knowledge to write accurate and in-depth reports. Some NGOs have organized training for journalists to enable them to gain a better understanding of environmental issues.
- Environmental campaigners are better at seeking international support, including bringing international pressure to bear on the Chinese government. For example, as both the planned Dujiangyan and Nujiang dams involved World Heritage sites, campaigners asked UNESCO, which is responsible for helping to protect World Heritage sites, to intervene. During the campaign against the Nujiang dam, some environmental NGOs participated in an international conference in Thailand – the Second International Meeting of Dam-Affected People and their Allies – attended by NGOs from over 60 countries. Chinese NGOs asked for support for their campaign, and the conference issued a joint appeal against the dam on the Nujiang river. Since the lower reaches of the river Nujiang are in Thailand, after the conference over 80 Thai NGOs also sent a joint letter, endorsed by the Thai Prime Minister, to the Chinese Embassy, urging China not to develop the river in a way that may harm

Thailand's interests. Several NGO representatives also attended the United Nations Environment Programme's Fifth Global Civil Society Forum in South Korea, giving a presentation on Nujiang and collecting signatures for their campaign.<sup>9</sup>

- Environmental activists are more consciously seeking to influence government policy and decision-making. They argue that their goal should not be simply to oppose individual projects. Rather, they should aim at changing bad policies and the institutions behind those individual projects.<sup>10</sup>

Apart from these signs of the increasing sophistication of environmental civil society, other developments suggest that environmental activism has grown in strength and has contributed to improvements in environmental governance. During the campaign against APP, a trade association, the Zhejiang Province Hotel Association (ZPHA), decided to support the campaign by asking its 471 member hotels to boycott APP products.<sup>11</sup> The ZPHA took the action on its own initiative. Its director is an environmentalist and has been a member of the Beijing-based environmental NGO Friends of Nature. Under his leadership, the ZPHA has tried to promote environmentally friendly practices in its member hotels. The involvement of the ZPHA in the APP campaign is significant, as it shows that environmental activism is expanding beyond environmental NGOs.

The same campaign has also seen the active participation of student environmental groups. In recent years, many such groups have sprung up on university campuses, with larger universities having more than one.<sup>12</sup> Environmental NGOs have provided training and guidance for these student groups, who are often keen to take part in environmental campaigns. In one instance during the APP campaign, several student environmental groups on different campuses agreed to take action together. They all sent members (about 30 students) to over a dozen local supermarkets in several cities to urge customers to boycott APP products.<sup>13</sup> Such groups are becoming an important force in environmental protection.

Environmental civil society has also been boosted by closer cooperation between NGOs and SEPA, which supported each other in the campaigns against the Dujiangyan and Nujiang dams. When SEPA faced pressure after calling a halt to 30 large infrastructure projects, environmental NGOs published a joint letter praising its action. SEPA's deputy director Pan Yue has repeatedly referred to environmental NGOs as 'allies' and has stressed that they can play a crucial role in acting as the government's watchdog: 'There are too many construction projects going on. Apparently the government is not able to monitor all the projects itself.'<sup>14</sup> SEPA has sought to facilitate greater NGO and civil society participation in environmental governance. For example, it is promoting public hearings as a vehicle for popular participation in environmental decision-making. On 13 April 2005 SEPA organized its

first public hearing on the environmental impact of a project, which was broadcast live on the Internet. Pan Yue said at the beginning of the hearing that its purpose was to normalize popular participation in environmental matters and to help democratize the decision-making process.<sup>15</sup> SEPA also put over 30 NGO leaders on the executive council of the All China Environment Federation, which was launched on 22 April 2005<sup>16</sup> and is funding capacity-building programmes for environmental NGOs.

## Challenges ahead

Recent environmental activism does not yet signal a fundamental transformation of state–civil society relations or environmental governance in China. However, it does indicate that positive changes have taken place. Environmental civil society has grown in strength and sophistication and there are signs that it will have a greater impact on environmental policy and decision-making.

Nevertheless, a number of challenges remain. One is to develop technical capacity. It has been widely observed that Chinese environmental NGOs generally lack such capacity and are therefore unable to engage in detailed technical discussions of environmental issues. SEPA organized a public hearing in August 2004 while it was drafting a new regulation on waste emission permits. While 12 companies applied to attend the hearing, no NGOs attended. More recently, the negative consequence of NGOs' deficiency in scientific knowledge was demonstrated when they came under attack from Fang Zhouzi, an investigative analyst/polemicist who has become prominent through his website and commands a large following among university students. Fang Zhouzi, who was trained in natural sciences, exposed the technical errors made by environmental activists in their speeches and writings opposing the Nujiang hydropower project. Exposing the lack of rigour and accuracy in their analysis, he called them 'pseudo-environmentalists' and accused them of resorting to propaganda-style emotional appeal rather than scientific argument to sway public opinion.<sup>17</sup> Lacking scientific training in environmental issues and unable to mount a technical defence of their positions, environmental NGOs are clearly vulnerable to such attacks.

Another challenge for these NGOs is to coordinate organizations with different styles. While there has been closer networking and coordination between different NGOs, the differences within the sector deter greater collaboration. NGOs afraid of criticizing the government sometimes wish to keep a distance from those which they perceive as too 'radical'. The latter, in turn, often lack respect for the 'timid' NGOs. Sometimes environmental NGOs in the same city have little contact with each other and are unaware of each other's activities. Similarly, NGOs that consider themselves technically more sophisticated sometimes look down on organizations which they consider to be more 'amateur'. Given the resource constraints faced by the environmental NGO sector, organizations would

benefit from supporting each other and pooling their resources. Therefore NGOs need to seek common ground and find ways of working together instead of allowing their differences to keep them apart.

The biggest challenge is to tackle the broader concerns that underlie many environmental issues in China. Many NGOs are fully aware that sooner or later these issues will lead into politics. As one NGO practitioner said: 'Behind environmental issues is the competition for resources. Different interests come into conflict. In this sense, environmental issues are highly political.' This has been seen in all the recent environmental campaigns. In Nujiang, both the local government and the state-owned Huadian Corporation, which was going to construct the hydropower station, would reap huge economic benefits from the project. Environmental campaigners were thus taking on powerful vested interests. In the campaign against APP, initially the company was targeted, but it soon became clear to the campaigners that the real responsibility lay with the government. In both Yunnan and Hainan provinces, where APP was accused of destroying forests, the local governments had invited APP to set up paper mills and offered to supply it with wood pulp. APP had not acted illegally – local governments had approved the felling of trees. Campaigners learnt that after the media started to turn the case into a big story, the Yunnan governor paid a visit to concerned central government departments, telling them: 'If you punish APP, you punish me first.' Therefore for a while the Party's Propaganda Department banned further media coverage of the APP story. If campaigners wish to get to the bottom of the matter, then they may come into conflict with the local governments and may need to challenge the entire local economic development strategy.

As the Chinese government pushes ahead with its strategy of 'Developing the Western Regions', environmental NGOs believe that more conflicts are inevitable between local governments and companies, bent on exploiting the natural resources of the region for economic gain, and local communities, whose livelihood depends on the preservation of the environment. The situation is complicated by the presence of many ethnic minority groups in western China. NGOs face tremendous difficulties in tackling environmental issues here. The director of the Centre for Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims, an NGO that helps citizens affected by pollution to seek justice

through the legal system, revealed that a judge who had ruled against his clients later told him in private: 'We wanted to rule in favour of the ordinary people [you represented], and they should have won the lawsuit, but we were under too much pressure. We could not let the ordinary people win.'<sup>18</sup> This shows the magnitude of the problem with which environmental NGOs need to contend. Another NGO which worked with local communities in western China found villagers who were completely unaware of their basic rights and who were so afraid of incurring the wrath of the authorities, after years of intimidation, that they thought the government would send police to arrest them after the NGO tried to inform them of some environmental laws. The villagers believed that only the government could talk about laws. To work in such an environment, NGOs need not only to face up to the local government, but also to educate and empower the local communities in order to change local power relations. Whether they like it or not, Chinese environmental NGOs will need to confront political issues and to develop the skills for such a task as they grow out of their 'bird-watching, tree-planting, and garbage collection' phase.

Finally, Chinese environmental civil society has not campaigned on issues that have galvanized international environmental groups, such as climate change, the building of nuclear power stations, or international trade in illegally logged timber. It tends to focus its energy on specific local issues which have an immediate impact on local living conditions. This is hardly surprising given the gravity of environmental problems in China, NGOs' lack of resources, and their extremely limited technical capacity to address complex environmental issues. However, since Chinese environmental NGOs are highly dependent on international funding, it is likely that they will face increasing pressure from foreign donors to tackle more globally-relevant issues. This may put Chinese NGOs in a difficult position. Even when they merely criticize local projects which contravene national policies, they are already vulnerable to accusations of entanglement with foreign interests.<sup>19</sup> If they take on issues which may involve challenging national energy policies, then their actions may be perceived as undermining national interests. This is a risk they cannot afford to take. Balancing pressure from international donors and domestic interests presents yet another challenge for Chinese environmental civil society.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> 'Who protected Dujiangyan?', *South Metropolis*, 22 September 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> 'The non-governmental forces behind the sudden halt of the Nujiang dam', *Economics*, 20 May 2004.

<sup>4</sup> For more background information on the campaign see the Greenpeace publication 'Investigative Report on APP's Forest Destruction in Yunnan', November 2004.

<sup>5</sup> At the time of the research it was not clear whether the travel ban was temporary or long-term.

<sup>6</sup> Email exchanges between environmental activists.

<sup>7</sup> Email communication, June 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Based on interviews and email exchanges between environmental activists.

<sup>9</sup> Wang Yongchen, 'The role of the media in environmental protection as seen from "Qing Xi Nujiang"', undated article.

<sup>10</sup> Interviews, May and June 2005, and email exchanges between environmental activists.

<sup>11</sup> 'APP claims the forest destruction charge is sheer fabrication. Boycotting of APP has led to three clashes', *Contemporary Gold*, 25 November 2004; 'APP sued the Zhejiang Hotel Association, seeking 2.2 million in damages and public apology', *Contemporary Gold*, 2 December 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Economy, Written Statement at the US Congressional-Executive Commission on China Roundtable 'Environmental NGOs in China: Encouraging Action and Addressing Public Grievances', 7 February 2005.

<sup>13</sup> 'University students advocating a boycott of APP products in supermarkets, calling on APP to admit its mistake', *The Beijing News*, 28 March 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Xu Xiaoying, 'The alliance between Chinese NGOs and the government', *Business Watch*, 4 April 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Transcripts of the hearing can be found at <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2005-04-13/09106371224.shtml>.

<sup>16</sup> Xu Xiaoying, 'The alliance between Chinese NGOs and the government', *Business Watch*, 4 April 2005.

<sup>17</sup> For example, see Fang Zhouzi's speech at Yunnan University on 8 April 2005. A transcript of the speech can be found at <http://tech.sina.com.cn/d/2005-04-11/1357577996.shtml>.

<sup>18</sup> Wang Canfa, 'The status of environmental rights protection in China: issues and solutions', in Wang Yongchen and Xiong Zhihong (eds), *Green Journalist Salon* (Beijing: China Environmental Science Publishing House, 2005), pp. 184–9 and p. 183.

<sup>19</sup> For an example of such an attack see Fang Zhouzi's speech at Yunnan University on 8 April 2005.

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