

Environmentalism and civil society

Political reform is critical to China's development. However, village elections aside, there have been no signs of fundamental political reform since the late 1980s. The December 1998 imprisonment of Chinese Democratic Party leaders Xu Wenli and Wang Youcai, the repression of the Falun Gong Sect and the 2004 detention of influential intellectuals leave no doubt: those who openly oppose the government, establish national civil organizations or stage protests walk a thin line.

Peter Ho and Richard Louis Edmonds

The repression of dissent is a reality. The People's Republic, however, is not a 'typical' authoritarian state devoid of divergent voices and voluntary organizations. Such a view disregards the many strategies citizens employ to escape government control, as well as complex interaction between state and society: China's economic development has spawned a middle class and, subsequently, the development of civil society. It has led to civil protests throughout the country. New social spaces have opened up for voluntary citizen action - particularly in areas deemed politically innocent in government eyes, such as rural poverty, women in development and the environment. The environmental scene is one of the most active sectors of China's nascent civil society.

Over the past few years, a broad range of green organizations have emerged, from public lobbies working within the bureaucratic system to grassroots organizations employing mass mobilization. Burgeoning environmentalism implies a significant strengthening of civil society. Environmentalism in China, however, has a distinct feature: it lacks the opportunity to openly confront the central government. The large-scale environmentalist protests and nation-wide rallies that expressed popular dissatisfaction with the communist regimes in East and Central Europe are unheard of in China, where environmentalism is fragmented and highly localized.

Political context

Economic reforms unleashed social changes unforeseen by the government; two decades of reforms have seen explosive growth in the number of 'social organizations' (in China the use of the tainted term 'non-governmental organization' or NGO is avoided). The number of officially registered social organizations rose from 100 national and 6,000 regional organizations in 1965 to over 1,800 national and 165,600 regional ones at the end of 1998. The boom results from the retrenchment of the state from domains it hitherto dominated, such as social services, legal counseling and cultural activities. Rising unemployment owing to the restructuring of state industries and bureaucracy since the late 1990s pressured the Ministry of Civil Affairs to increase control over social organizations through stringent registration procedures. If an organization wishes to be registered with the Ministry, approval must be obtained by a sponsoring institution. What this means became clear according to an activist who attempted to launch 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

Plant flowers and trees to beautify the environment, 1982.



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your mother-in-law, as they fear that you will make trouble or arouse the people'.

Tsinghua University NGO Research Centre Director Wang Ming commented: '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; on the other hand, it limits the establishment of NGOs from the bottom up. It is not beneficial for the capacity-building and long term development of NGOs in China'. The state restricts the number of NGO members and requires a minimum of financial resources. It seems the central government limits rather than stimulates NGO development.

Formally registered social organizations generally have strong government connections. Many government institutions have established their own 'non-governmental organizations', partly to devolve government functions because of budgetary pressures and partly to attract funding. These GONGOs, or 'government-organized NGOs', concern scholars and policy-makers - the lack of separation between government and society affects the development of grassroots organizations; to obtain government support or recognition, they readily accept administrative intervention. Many scholars claim that NGOs in China lack a non-governmental character and are not worthy of the name NGO.

As it is so difficult to register as a social organization, many NGOs register as an enterprise, or as a subsidiary of a façade institution, or by avoiding registration

altogether and establishing an informal 'club' or 'salon'. The Beijing Science and Technology Association is a typical façade institution; numerous NGOs registered as 'research institutes' under its name until the government put a stop to it in June 1994. The Association then privatized and registered its research institutes as daughter companies under the newly established 'Chaolun Technology and Development Company'.

Yet in the long run this situation impedes the functioning of NGOs. First, an unregistered social organization cannot act as an independent legal person, which means the organization cannot enter into contractual relations. Second, it becomes extremely difficult to attract capable personnel as the organization cannot provide pensions, medical insurance and household registration or

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hukou for its employees. (Many NGOs have to rely on volunteers and retired people). Third, without registration a social organization is not entitled to a bank account and must relinquish its financial administration to the responsible department. This sacrifices financial transparency while the NGO must pay a 'management fee' to the responsible department, making it difficult for an NGO to attract funding.

An example of a Chinese Green NGO

Little is known about environmental organizations in China. Detailed information on their activities, structure and

resources, let alone basic data, such as their total number and geographic distribution, is nonexistent. It appears the majority are located in Beijing, although many green social organizations have also emerged in other regions: the Daoist 'Club for Green Civilization' in Sichuan and the Shandong-based 'Green Civil Association of Weihai City' established in 1993; the 'Association of Green Volunteers of Chongqing City' created in 1995; and the first voluntary peasants' organization, the 'Farmers' Association for the Protection of Biodiversity of the Gaoligong Mountains in Yunnan', founded in 1996.

Among the oldest Chinese NGOs is the Centre for Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims (CLAPV) in Beijing. Wang Canfa, a professor in environmental law, established the Centre as a 'research institute' under the China University of Political Science and Law in October 1998. Wang's most newsworthy case concerned a farmer in Huairou County near Beijing. In September 1998, Zhang Jinhu discovered that hundreds of his ducks had died due to water pollution from an upstream pig farm. He sought legal redress, an unheard of action in rural areas, as many farmers are ignorant of their rights and intimidated by government-protected businesses. In Wang's words: 'Local businesses pay taxes and are big employers. So local governments need them and are reluctant to close them down. If businesses knew that victims might claim compensation, that would bring huge pressure on polluters'.

The Centre developed no-cure-no-pay legal counsel; an advice hotline; a 'lawyers' mailbox' in the *China Environmental Newspaper* where readers send questions and comments; environmental law training, seminars, lectures and policy advice. These activities broke new ground and received national and international attention. Engulfed by requests for legal advice, the Centre's greatest threat may be limited resources. 36 volunteers - 22 lawyers and professors, 14 undergraduate and graduate students - run it. With no hired employees, it lacks professionalism, a coherent recruitment policy and long-term staffing. Wang makes all major decisions. The Centre

generally prepays pollution victims' legal expenses, which takes up 60 per cent of its budget. Reliant on funding from outside the country, its status as a subsidiary of the University for Political Science and Law impedes fund-raising, while it faces organizational, management and financial problems. Many NGOs are in a similar situation and must adapt to a rapidly-changing environment to justify their existence.

The future

Western observers are concerned about China's civil organizations' autonomy from the state. On the surface, the state exerts strict control. On closer inspection,

however, citizens are undeterred. Scholar Elisabeth Knup noted: '...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'.

Unlike environmentalism in the former East-bloc and Western countries, China's green 'NGO' community abstains from mass protests against the state and private sector. Protests that do occur tend to be local, perhaps directed against one factory by disgruntled locals unconnected to a larger movement.

Chinese green activists profess a 'female mildness', keeping a safe distance from direct political action. When a reporter asked one of China's most renowned green activists, 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'.

Despite its restricted social space and avoidance of state confrontation, Chinese environmentalism can influence policy-making. Many environmental NGOs are active in a wide variety of areas. They build specialized expertise and gain experience through participatory actions that give the citizenry a voice. Today's sprouts of environmentalism in China might become a potent social force in the future. ◀

Reference

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