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**The Greening of the Chinese Mind:
Environmental Awareness and
China's Environmental Movement**

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The Greening of the Chinese Mind: Environmental Awareness and China's Environmental Movement

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Abstract

Because of its enormous population, spectacular economic growth, and severe environmental degradation, assessing China's environmental impact on the country and the world is an intricate task. Knowledge of the environmental awareness and the growth of environmental movement in China are critical to the understanding of the country's environmental future. Firstly, the paper examines the environmental awareness of Chinese people, based on two major surveys conducted in 1998. The findings contributed to our understanding of people's environmental awareness in the following aspects: environmental literacy, prioritization of environmental problems, environmental governance, environmental ethics, and participation in environmental protection campaigns. Secondly, the paper scrutinizes the emergence of green NGOs in China in the 1990s. Chinese green NGOs possess particular "Chinese characteristics" which distinguish them from the West. To date, the Chinese government is willing to allow more political space for citizen participation in environmental protection. Increasingly, green NGOs have gradually gained support not only from international communities but also from Chinese citizens who value a clean environment. Finally, the paper argues that the emergence of green NGOs offers a breakthrough in the conventional "government-reliance" attitude towards environmental protection. If these eco-activists can target non-sensitive issues, they may make profound contributions in enhancing environmental policy implementation.

Introduction

Because of its enormous population, spectacular economic growth, and severe environmental degradation, China's importance to global environmental health is substantial. Apart from analyzing China's capacity to overcome its varied environmental problems and the effectiveness of its environmental protection agencies in fostering environmental protection policies, an understanding of the environmental awareness of Chinese citizens and the development of the environmental movement in China is critical. Many surveys were carried out in the 1990s to study Chinese people's environmental awareness. Investigating agencies include the mass media, the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA), academic institutions, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and polling firms. Respondent samples include the general public, radio audiences, newspaper readers, factory employees,

environmental protection bureaucrats, and students. The sample size of the surveys ranges from a few hundred to several thousand. The findings of these studies provide invaluable information on the state of environmental awareness of the general public. Although the results vary considerably, depending on the nature and scope of the survey, the findings embrace a wide range of issues and contributed to our understanding of the Chinese perceptions of the environment today.¹

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part examines the environmental awareness of Chinese people, based on the findings of two independent studies in the late 1990s. Peking University, commissioned by SEPA, conducted the most comprehensive nationwide survey of the environmental awareness of the general public, in the summer of 1998. The survey interviewed over 10,000 households in 139 districts in mainland China.² The second survey, conducted in the fall of 1998, focused on the environmental awareness of university students in Beijing. The survey interviewed 350 students from ten universities in Beijing, to elicit their perceptions of environmental problems.³ Secondly, the paper scrutinizes the emergence of green NGOs in China in the 1990s, which were non-existent before (before when?). Because green NGOs emerged in an economic, social, and political context unique to China, they possess particular “Chinese characteristics” which distinguish them from Western NGOs. This paper argues that the appearance of green NGOs, tolerated by the government, may eventually spark a new wave of environmental movements in China. If these eco-activists can target non-sensitive issues, they may make profound contributions in raising the environmental

¹ The two reports are: (1) *Public Environment Awareness in China: An Analysis of the Results of Public Survey*, prepared by Xi Xiaolin, Fan Lihon and Deng Xueming in December 1998 for the Center for the Integrated Study of Human Dimensions of Global Change, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA; and (2) Lee, Y.S.F. (2003) “Public Environmental Attitudes in China: Some Early Empirical Evidence,” *Occasional Paper No.41*, Centre for China Urban and Regional Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University (November 2003).

² This refers to the report edited by SEPA and the Ministry of Education entitled “Report on the Survey of the Environmental Awareness of the General Public in China,” or *Quan Guo Gong Zhong Huan Jing Yi Shi Diao Cha Bao Gao*, published by China Environmental Science Press in 1999. (In Chinese)

³ The survey was supported by a grant from the Faculty Research Grants of the Hong Kong Baptist University. Dr. Koon-kwai Wong, Hong Kong Baptist University, and Professor Guo Zigong, Renmin University, Beijing, are the investigators of the Project.

awareness of the public through community activities and various environmental education programs. To conclude, this paper presents the future development of the environmental movement in China.

Highlights of the 1998 Public Survey

To date, the most comprehensive and systematic survey of the environmental awareness of the Chinese people was the public survey conducted by the Contemporary China Research Center of Peking University in the summer of 1998.⁴ The public survey interviewed 10,495 households in 139 county-and-above administrative districts in 31 provinces, municipalities, and Autonomous Regions. To ensure the quality of the data collected, 140 university professors were recruited to supervise the survey, and 800 university students were trained as interviewers to carry out the interviews all over the country. The contents of the questionnaire included the perceptions of the state of environmental problems, knowledge about environmental science, awareness of environmental laws and regulations, environmental ethics, and environmental behavior. Moreover, the questionnaire included questions to solicit public opinion on the environmental protection performance of the government, and the relationship between economic development and environmental protection. Overall, the findings confirmed many of the conclusions and observations in previous surveys conducted in the 1990s.⁵ This paper focuses the discussion on four major aspects: environmental literacy, prioritization of environmental issues, environmental governance, and environmental ethics.

Environmental Literacy of the General Public

According to Golley,⁶ environmental literacy is defined as the organized way to think about the environment. It incorporates both the knowledge (science-based) and a sense of the

⁴ The study was commissioned by the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) and the Ministry of Education.

⁵ The Xi *et al.* (1998) and Li (2003) reports.

⁶ Golley, F.B. (1998) *A Primer for Environmental Literacy*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

spirit of place. The public survey revealed that the respondents' environmental knowledge, especially the science-based aspect, was unsatisfactory. The average Environmental Knowledge Score (EKS)⁷ of the respondents was 2.8 out of a total score of 13.0. The results indicate that many Chinese people did not possess basic knowledge of major environmental problems. Overall, respondents from cities scored higher (EKS=4.5) than those in the rural areas (EKS=2.4). Moreover, younger respondents generally scored higher than the middle- and older-age groups in environmental knowledge. The results imply that China needs to expand its environmental education in order to make its citizens environmentally literate, which is critical to China's ability to mobilize more people to protect the environment. Presently, China has more than 127 major universities and colleges across the country offering different types of environmental education programs.⁸ Apart from training environmental protection specialists, environmental education is aimed at raising the environmental awareness of Chinese citizens. Additionally, media and green NGOs have a significant role to play in enhancing environmental literacy and the environmental awareness of the general public.

Prioritizing Environment-related Issues

The public survey found that Chinese people not only have low environmental literacy but were inclined to underrate the seriousness of environmental problems. For instance, environmental problems ranked fourth out of the six major global issues. The environment takes lower priority than poverty, education, and overpopulation. Moreover, environmental protection ranked fifth in the most pressing problems of China. People care more about crime and delinquency, education, population, and employment problems than about environmental protection (Table 1). Overall, Chinese did not consider environmental problems the most immediate and important, either globally or nationally.

⁷ The Environmental Knowledge Score (EKS) is the number of correct responses to 13 questions used to assess the level of environmental literacy. The score ranges from 0 (all wrong) to 13 (all right).

Table 1: The most pressing problem confronting (a) the world and (b) China.

Ranking	Global problems	China's problems
1 st	Poverty	Crime & delinquency
2 nd	Education	Education
3 rd	Overpopulation	Population
4 th	The environment	Employment
5 th	Natural hazards	Environmental protection
6 th	War (local)	Social security

In regards to the ranking of development objectives of China, the result is even more worrying. Respondents ranked environmental protection as the least urgent development objective of the country. For more than two decades, China has transformed from a poverty-stricken nation into an economic powerhouse.⁹ The quest for economic development, the most important of the development objectives, is the predominant value of the people in China. Environmental protection, in contrast, is the least urgent objective, even though the environment is beginning to take its toll on the Chinese population. (Table 2)

Table 2: China's most pressing development objectives

Ranking	Developmental Objectives
1 st	Economic development
2 nd	Science & technological advancement
3 rd	Controlling population growth
4 th	Social justice
5 th	Environmental protection

The Governance of the Environment

Following the promulgation of the *Environmental Protection Law* of the People's Republic of China (Trial Law) in 1979, China began to systematically establish an environmental regulatory system focused on industrial environmental management.¹⁰ In 1983, environmental protection was proclaimed a "national basic policy." Key principles for

⁸ See <http://www.zhb.gov.cn>

⁹ Economy, E.C. (2004) *The River Runs Black: The Environmental Challenge to China's Future*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

environmental protection in China were proposed, including “prevention first, then control,” “polluters responsible for pollution control,” and “strengthening environmental management.” Subsequently, a national regulatory framework composed of a series of environmental laws, regulations, standards, and measures was progressively formulated.¹¹ In the public survey, respondents held the opinion that China has had the necessary institutional structure to protect the environment. The majority of respondents thought that ineffective law enforcement and enterprises that refused to respect environmental laws accounted for the failure of many environmental protection programs in the country. The pathetic rule of law concept of the Chinese further accentuated the problem of defiance of laws and regulations in China.

The public survey also attempted to elicit people’s opinions on the environmental protection work of the government. The survey revealed that respondents demonstrated an exceptionally strong “government-reliance” attitude towards environmental protection. The attitude, to some extent, is a reflection of the conventional “government-led” or “top-down” environmental management approach that prevails in China. The national environmental regulatory framework is vertically implemented through a four-tier management system, that is, national, provincial, municipal, and county levels. SEPA is the nation’s leading body for setting up a management system for implementing and enforcing environmental laws and regulations. The latter three tiers, in contrast, are governed directly by their corresponding authorities in both finance and personnel management. This often creates conflicts of interest, as local environmental protection bureaus (EPBs) face significant difficulties in strictly enforcing environmental regulations, due to pressures from local authorities to prioritize economic development.

¹⁰ Zhang, T. and Chen, J. (2003) “Industrial Environmental Management in China,” in Mol, A.P.J. and Bunren, J.C.L. (eds) *Greening Industrialization in Asian Transitional Economies: China and Vietnam*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, pp. 23–38.

¹¹ Ma, X.Y. and Ortolano, L. (2000) *Environmental Regulation in China: Institutions, Enforcement, and Compliance*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.; Wong, K.K. and Chan, H.S. (1994) “The

In the public survey, over half of the respondents believed that the government is not doing enough to protect the country's environment. The general public perception was that the existing environmental protection work was "superficial" and cannot resolve the problem entirely. About two-thirds of the respondents said that they did not know about the environmental protection strategies of the government. The findings clearly indicate that the present "top-down" environmental management approach created an apathetic attitude among Chinese citizens and discouraged public participation in environmental protection work. The public did not regard protecting the environment as part of the duty of every citizen in the country. Despite the fact that China already has a relatively well-established institutional structure for environmental management, the public demanded that the government be responsible by increasing investment in environmental protection and by strengthening law enforcement. Moreover, many Chinese people still do not have a strong awareness of their right to a clean environment.

The Ethical Issue

From an ethical point of view, the public survey found that only about 30 percent of the respondents conformed to the environmental ethics requirement.¹² Similarly, the environmental ethics of urban respondents were found to be higher than those of their rural counterparts. The survey also found that the overall participation rate of the general public in environmental protection activities was very low. Only about 8 percent of the respondents claimed that they always participated in environmental protection activities. About a quarter of them said they sometimes participated in some of the activities, and the majority said they

Development of Environmental Management System in the People's Republic of China," in Brosseau, M. and Lo, C.K. (eds) *China Review 1994*, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, pp. 21.1-21.

¹² Two questions in the questionnaire are used to assess people's environmental ethics position. The first asked whether the respondents would be willing to pay higher prices to acquire a product that is produced according to the environment protection standards or requirements. The second question concerned the options the respondent would take do if he or she had trash (e.g., disposable beverage cups or lunch boxes) to dispose of.

seldom or never participated in any of the activities. As a whole, respondents with more education participated more frequently in environmental protection activities. The findings further affirm the importance of environmental education in the arena of environmental protection.

An important aspect of environmental ethics is people's perception of nature, especially the way they perceive their relationship with "nature." The public survey revealed that the Chinese favor the transformation of nature—an attitude incompatible with the contemporary principles of environmental conservation. About 34 percent of the respondents believed that "humans should conquer nature for their own benefits." Similarly, about 28 percent believed that "humans should utilize nature for their own benefits." Only 11 percent of the respondents said "humans should adapt to the environment to get what they need." The remaining one quarter was unable to decide which stance they should choose. Under Mao, the traditional Chinese ideal of "harmony between the heavens and humankind" was abrogated in favor of Mao's insistence that "man must conquer nature."¹³ The attitude of the Chinese people remains pretty much the same regarding the relationship between humankind and nature in the post-Mao era.

Obviously, human domination of nature is not conducive to the implementation of many environmental protection measures. About half of the respondents were skeptical of the assertion that "nature has the power of self-regenerating," and "human beings can do little harm to the nature ecosystem." The public survey also revealed that 57 percent of respondents believed that technology could solve all environmental destruction problems. Only 19 percent of them disagreed with the "technical-fix" solution. Similarly, about a quarter of the respondents were unsure whether technology could resolve all environmental problems.

¹³ Shapiro, J. (2001) *Mao's War Against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Implications of 1998 University Students Survey

The preceding review of the 1998 public survey clearly shows that education level is one of the major factors affecting people's attitudes and behaviors towards the environment. The following is a discussion of the environmental awareness of university students in Beijing. The data were collected through a survey conducted in ten universities in Beijing during the 1998–99 academic year. A total of 350 students from the ten universities participated in the survey. The respondent sample portrays a comprehensive profile of university students in Beijing. A more comprehensive analysis of the survey can be found in a paper published in the *Journal of Contemporary China*.¹⁴ In this paper, only findings related to the university students' opinions on the current environmental protection efforts of the government, and their participation in environmental protection campaigns and activities, are discussed.

Strong "Government-reliance" Attitudes towards Environmental Protection

Similar to the respondents in the public survey, university students in China showed a strong "government-reliance" attitude regarding environmental protection. China's government is hierarchical, and environmental protection agencies are no exception. Although the impetus for many environmental policies comes from SEPA, those policies generally count on local environmental protection bureaus for implementation. Therefore, the general perception of students was that local governments should be responsible for cleaning up the polluted environment. About a quarter of the students said that the central government should be responsible for cleaning up the environmental mess. However, fewer than 6 percent of the students thought that the general public should be responsible for cleaning up the environment. The conventional "top-down" approach to environmental management has inhibited ordinary people's initiatives to shoulder environmental protection responsibilities. Citizens have little

¹⁴ Wong, K.K. (2003) "The Environmental Awareness of University Students in Beijing, China," *Journal of Contemporary China*, 12(36): 519–36.

power to revoke the government's environmental policies and thus count on it to protect the environment.

Consequently, most students regarded “strengthening policy implementation” as the most important factor facilitating environmental policy implementation in China. In China, local EPBs exercise much discretion in deciding whether and how to enforce environmental regulations. Often, a wide gap exists between what the EPBs are authorized to do and what they actually do when enterprises violate environmental regulations.¹⁵ Some students considered imposing heavy penalties on polluters and raising the environmental awareness of Chinese citizens through education as essential in tackling China's environmental problems. Contrary to the results in the public survey, less than one-tenth of the students believed that environmental problems could be resolved by developing advanced technology and facilities. Unfortunately, only a very small percentage of students regarded encouraging public participation as an effective environmental management approach.

The majority of the students agreed with the claim that the “government should strengthen environmental protection even if it impedes economic growth.” Evidently, if students were asked to judge independently whether environmental protection or economic growth was more important, they would be inclined, at least ethically, to support the proposition that environmental protection should have higher priority. However, student opinion was divided over whether to support increased investment in environmental protection when this could mean that social welfare provisions were reduced. Only slightly more than half of them were in favor of increasing investment in environmental protection at the expense of social welfare. Their level of support for environmental protection varied under different circumstances, especially when the options might have impinged on their own

interests.

Students' Participation in Environmental Protection Campaigns

In the student survey, fewer than 6 percent of the students had joined environmental protection associations or organizations in university, and only 1.7 percent claimed that they were active members. These findings are consistent with the public survey in 1998, in which 7.1 percent of respondents with tertiary education or above participated in some form of environmental protection activity.¹⁶ Though the majority of students were not members of green groups, over 81 percent indicated that they were interested in the activities organized by these groups. Only approximately 13 percent stated that they were completely uninterested in environmental protection activities (Table 4).

Table 4: Participation in environmental protection organizations (N=350)

Participation status	Percentage
No, not interested	12.6
No, but interested	81.4
Yes, but not active	4.3
Yes, very active	1.7

One of the objectives of the student survey was to elicit students' intended participation in selected environmental protection campaigns or activities. The majority of students said that they were willing to sign petitions or to distribute pamphlets to support environmental protection campaigns or activities. Notably, about one-third said that they would take personal action, such as by changing their habits, to support the government's campaign for the "stringent control of natural resource development by industries" and to "promote saving food, water, land, and energy." The students were very conscious about China's resource scarcity problem, and were willing to take conservation action to save resources. However, about

¹⁵ This phenomenon is known as the "implementation gap." See: Chan, H.S., Wong, K.K., Cheung, K.C., and Lo, J.M.K. (1995) "The implementation gap in environmental management in China: The Case of Guangzhou, Zhengzhou, and Nanjing", *Public Administration Review* 55(4): 333-40.

¹⁶ See The Environmental Awareness Survey Report (1999), p. 15. [Referred to earlier?](#)

two-thirds of the students were against the campaign to “make China a nuclear-power-free country.” They were also hesitant about supporting campaigns to recycle CFCs, to limit the growth in the number of vehicles in cities, to participate in animal rights campaigns, and to campaign to make 10 percent of the land in China nature reserves. Not many students opted to write to SEPA (or local EPBs) or newspapers to complain about environmental problems or to express their support for certain environmental campaigns. Still fewer students joined protests or demonstrations about protecting the environment. In China, students are inclined to choose non-confrontational approaches in environmental protection campaigns. Chinese students are normally quite hesitant to criticize government policy openly, or to organize protests or demonstrations to achieve their goals. The political atmosphere of the present regime is definitely one crucial factor prohibiting more confrontational campaigns for environmental protection.

Undoubtedly, the environmental awareness of the Chinese people is growing, but at a rather modest rate. The 1990s have seen some encouraging developments in China’s environmental movements. Increasing numbers of environment-concerned organizations have been established in a number of Beijing universities and colleges.¹⁷ The student survey revealed that an overwhelming number of students (94%) supported the environmental protection activities launched by green organizations or societies. Students believed that green groups could provide additional channels to monitor the environmental protection efforts of the government. Additionally, many green groups emerged outside the campuses in Beijing during the 1990s, such as Friends of Nature (FON) and Global Village Beijing (GVB). In the survey, the majority of the students indicated that they would either “support” or “strongly support” the development of green groups in China. Evidently, intellectuals and tertiary education students can play a critical role in addressing urgent environmental concerns in

¹⁷ See the article by Liu Yingland, “Better environment desired,” *The China Daily*, December 3, 1998, p. 12.

China.

Public Participation in China's Environmental Movement

As revealed by the findings of the preceding environmental awareness surveys, Chinese citizens held an unusually strong “government-reliance” attitude towards environmental protection. Citizens, the public and students alike, do not see it as their responsibility to clean up and to protect the environment. Most respondents attributed “weak environmental awareness of the Chinese people” as the major reason for environmental problems. Respondents were also dissatisfied with the low priority of environmental protection in the national agenda. The pathetic rule of law concept and the negligence of enterprises in enforcing environmental protection measures were the other reasons given as causing environmental problems in China. The major implication of the findings of these studies is that China needs a fundamental change in its approach to address environmental management issues. The conventional “top-down,” government-led, and science-based approach has proved inadequate to solve China's worsening environmental problems. The Chinese leadership should consider other approaches, such as allowing political space to encourage public participation (bottom-up), democratizing the decision-making processes, and emphasizing human values more. In fact, some encouraging signs signaling the birth of environmentalism in China emerged in the 1990s, leading some analysts to observe some hope of the “greening” of the Chinese mind. Despite of its short history, Chinese environmentalism is already exerting an influence on Chinese politics and society.

The 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro triggered a fundamental change in the Chinese leadership's conception of environmental governance. China's participation in the NGO forum was limited by its inability to deliver any genuine environmental NGOs. The group of delegates that China had

sent constituted the government-organized nongovernmental organizations (called GONGOs) and was the major cause of embarrassment to the Chinese leaders in the Rio Conference. The leaders began to recognize the importance of the Western ideals of popular participation and the role of NGOs in the realm of environmental protection.¹⁸ The traditional top-down approach in environmental governance failed, and the grassroots bottom-up approach is now getting more attention.

Apart from the above incidence, genuine NGOs of any kind are a recent phenomenon in China. The emergence of NGOs is closely related to the socio-political development of the country. Starting from the early 1990s, the Chinese leadership gradually withdrew from its responsibility to meet all social welfare needs of the population, including health, education, and environmental protection. It welcomed greater public participation in environmental protection. This provided concerned environmentalists a golden opportunity to establish green NGOs. Therefore, grassroots environmental NGOs have sprung up in many regions of the country.¹⁹ This voluntary participation in green activities marks a turning point in the environmental movement in China.²⁰ To a certain extent, instead of following the conventional government-initiated campaigns to protect the environment, the public can now join forces with NGOs to launch environmental protection programs or activities. The critical factor that convinced the government to allow the establishment of environmental NGOs appears to be the growing concern regarding China's severe environmental degradation and the relative ineffectiveness of the government in educating and motivating the people to deal with the problem. The government sees NGOs as having a role to play. Green NGOs can complement their own shortcomings in mobilizing people to participate in environmental

¹⁸ Administrative Centre for China's Agenda 21 (1994) *Introduction to China's Agenda 21*, Beijing: China Environmental Science Press.

¹⁹ Economy, E.C. (2004) *The River Runs Black: The Environmental Challenge to China's Future*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

²⁰ See a report presented by Jin Jiaman, Co-founder, Green Earth Volunteers and Researcher, entitled "The Growing Importance of Public Participation in China's Environmental Movement," in the *Proceedings of the*

protection. This new model appears to be welcomed by the public and tolerated by the government.

However, the Chinese government wants to closely monitor the activities of NGOs through stringent regulations. For instance, in order to gain legal status, the NGO applicant has to fulfill all the regulations stipulated by the *Temporary Social Organization Registration Management Regulation*.²¹ The communist party and the government will issue a permit to an NGO only if it can register with a government oversight bureau. Presently, there are many ways to establish green organizations in China. Broadly speaking, they can be divided into two major categories: (1) institutionalized (governmental and quasi-governmental) organizations, and (2) citizen organizations.²² According to regulations, governmental and quasi-governmental organizations (GONGOs) are required to formally register with a government agency in order to become an independent and legal social organization. A typical example of a GONGO is the Chinese Environmental Science Institute (CESI) founded in 1979. It is China's earliest and largest nonprofit organization that carries out environmental protection activities. The members of CESI are high-ranking government officials, and it organizes nationwide activities and campaigns in which high-level government officials participate. In recent years, the financial support of the government has gradually dropped, and it accounts for about 35 percent of the organization budget in 1997. At the same time, CESI has become more autonomous and therefore more critical of environmental protection policies of the country.

Citizens' environmental social organizations encompass groups established by individual citizens. Because these groups are financially independent of the government, they are free to

Green NGO and Environmental Journalist Forum held in Hong Kong on April 9–10, 2001, organized by the Woodrow Wilson Center, Centre of Asian Studies, HKU, and Journalism and Media Studies Centre, HKU.

²¹ *Temporary Social Organization Registration Management Regulations*, promulgated in 1989 and revised in 1998.

set up their own kinds of environmental organization. The best example is Friends of Nature (FON), founded by a well-known Chinese historian, Professor Liang Congjie. The government approved FON's registration in March 1994, and it became the first environmental NGO in China. Now, the organization has about 500 active members, primarily scholars and business people. The focus is on mass environmental education, research on environmental problems, and mobilizing official and private efforts to find solutions to protect the environment. FON's activities have been very well received by the people and it is probably the most widely known "green" organization in China.

To many environmentalists in China, the procedure for registering as a citizens' environmental social organization like FON is far too stringent and complicated to acquire full legal status for their organization. To avoid the hurdles, some environmentalists choose to register their green NGOs with lower level governmental agencies. Or alternatively, they might be able to get a permit by registering the organization as a "citizen nonprofit enterprise" under an industrial management bureau. The first green group registered as a nonprofit enterprise is Beijing's Global Village Environmental Cultural Center—better known as the Global Village Beijing (GVB). The founder of GVB is Liao Xiaoyi, and the organization registered under the Industry and Commerce Department of the Beijing Municipal government in March 1996. GVB stresses that women are the primary consumers in China, and they encourage women to follow a more sustainable and less materialistic lifestyle, e.g., limit purchase of disposable products, recycle as much as possible, and try to handle waste responsibly. The group has approximately 1,000 members and is mentioned favorably by government environmental officials. GVB uses television, radio, and print media as well as community activities to promote the idea that successful protection of the environment depends on the participation of all people.

²² Jin Jiaman (2001).

Since the mid-1990s, many grassroots “green” NGOs were established. The government tacitly supports their work and publicizes their efforts in the state-run media in an effort to raise people’s environmental awareness.²³ The government, too, encourages the establishment of environmental societies and student groups in universities. Chinese universities have long been centers of activism, and the environmental movement is no exception. Many student environmental groups became very active in many universities, including Tsinghua, Renmin University, and the Beijing University of Forestry in Beijing. Concerned students and faculty in universities and professional institutes can now initiate the establishment of environmental organizations. The university administration, rather than the government bureaus, grants the approval for student-run green NGOs. Such student associations depend on three types of funding source: (1) the university, (2) membership fees, and (3) donations from public and local industries. The university green NGOs are developing quickly and have grown from a handful in the mid-1980s to more than 100 at the end of the 1990s. They have also spread from universities in major cities to universities in most provinces in the country. These organizations sponsor classes to increase environmental awareness, both on campus and in surrounding communities, hold street fairs on Earth Day, lead field trips to study environmental problems, arrange clean-up days in nearby areas, and put on exhibitions of photographs or displays highlighting problems and possible solutions. The government has been very tolerant of this type of student activity and in fact has publicized several student trips in the national media to draw attention to environmental problems.

Environmental NGOs with Chinese Characteristics

Dr. Jennifer L. Turner of the Woodrow Wilson Center's Environmental Change and Security Project described the major characteristics of the current status of environmental NGOs in China. She rightly pointed out that the Chinese government has allowed political space for environmental protection activities, thus enabling impressive growth in green NGOs over the past decade.²⁴ According to Turner, green NGOs in China have the following characteristics: (1) they were the first to emerge of all civil organizations established in the 1990s in China; (2) Chinese NGOs are generally non-confrontational; (3) they slowly expand the scope of activities into relatively "safe" areas; (4) they utilize a broad range of partnerships to build capacity and effectiveness; and (5) they use the Internet to improve their outreach and membership abilities.

As Turner notes, green NGOs in China were among the first independent organizations that emerged after the Chinese government permitted social organization registration. As pioneers, green NGOs set the example for other NGO activists, especially in the areas of disabilities, women and children's rights, and in health and poverty alleviation. Paradoxically, while permitting the NGO sector to develop, the Chinese government has been vigilant about limiting the range of its activities.²⁵ Unlike many Western environmental groups, Chinese NGOs do not stage protests against the government or industry. In fact, many Chinese environmental NGOs have established cooperative relations with governmental agencies and institutes. Some groups even use the government's familiar "mass campaign style" techniques to promote their environmental messages. Therefore, some people have mistaken green NGOs for government departments.

²³ A December 1997 report from the US Embassy Beijing entitled "Environmental NGOs in China: Green is Good, But Don't Openly Oppose the Party" by the Embassy Beijing Environment, Science and Technology Counselor.

²⁴ Dr. Jennifer L. Turner (2003) "The Growing Role of Chinese Green NGOs and Environmental Journalists in China" on the website of *The Congressional-Executive Commission on China*, <http://www.cecc.gov/pages/news/topicIndex.php>

Obviously, environmental NGOs in China do not have the same autonomy as NGOs in Western societies.²⁶ All Chinese NGOs must be registered with and approved by the government, and many are established to meet government agency objectives.²⁷ Under these circumstances, NGOs are not free to criticize the government's environmental policies and programs. For instance, Liao Xiaoyi, who leads the prominent GVB, said that her organization has to target non-sensitive issues, as the government is still not ready to accept criticism of large-scale construction projects, such as the controversial Three Gorges Dam.²⁸ Despite these impediments, the government is increasingly less hostile to green NGOs in China. For instance, both Liang Congjie and Liao Xiaoyi became advisers to Beijing's Bid Committee for the 2008 Olympic Games. To soften its image, the Beijing municipal government has accepted most of the 40 environmental suggestions made by numerous environmental NGOs. They hope that the effects of their suggestions will last beyond the bid.²⁹

Undoubtedly, Chinese green NGOs tend to undertake activities in relatively "safe" areas such as environmental education, promoting green consumption patterns, campaigning against littering, surveys of endangered species, and studies of efficient energy use. Some other groups, especially those with a professional background, are providing various services, such as legal assistance for pollution victims, conducting surveys of environmental problems and using local news media to promote their results, and working with international NGOs and local governments to create and manage a nature reserve. Chinese green NGOs are generally small groups. Therefore, many NGOs have to search for collaborative partners not

²⁵ Economy (2004)

²⁶ Ma and Ortolano 2000: 72–74.

²⁷ As Elizabeth Knup argued: "As long as these organizations address problems deemed valid by the State, and in a manner deemed appropriate by the State, some public space will continue to exist and perhaps even growth." From the author's article, "Environmental NGOs in China: An Overview," published in *China Environment Series 1* (1998).

²⁸ See the report by Agence France-Presse entitled, "Target non-sensitive issues, says eco-activist," June 29, 2000, *The South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong).

only to bring in financial resources but also new skills and knowledge. It is common for many Chinese green NGOs to increasingly partner with government research centers, GONGOs, and international NGOs. In fact, the activities of many Chinese green NGOs do serve to complement the central government in enforcing and implementing environmental laws by promoting environmental education and monitoring local governments.

Chinese green NGOs have to face many difficulties. The most prominent is registration. In China, the current regulation requires an applicant to find a sponsoring unit to register, and the sponsoring unit must undertake responsibility for the NGO. Due to this stringent requirement, very few units are willing to be sponsors for the NGOs. Many concerned environmentalists encounter great difficulties in finding a sponsoring unit to register. To a great extent, this limits the number of NGOs that can provide the necessary services to society. The second difficulty is the shortage of funds. The lack of donations from common people may be partly due to flaws in the taxation system. Moreover, some NGOs, though claiming to be independent, sometimes prove to have strong a governmental background. These NGOs have difficulty in winning the trust of people and therefore their willingness to contribute to support their programs or activities. Because the government controls all the media in the country, green NGOs have great difficulty in getting access to the media to advertise their programs or activities. As revealed by the findings of the two environmental awareness surveys, the general perception is that the NGOs are still not powerful enough to influence governmental policy-making, both locally and nationally. Unless the NGOs become truly independent, both financially and structurally, from the government, and shake off the impression that they are making profits from their activities, they will not win the support of the common people. Apart from several prominent cases, green NGOs have not significantly influenced the government's policies related to the environment. Activities such as bird watching, tree planting and some educational programs are, in the public eye, are more like

²⁹ See "Cadres lend an ear to green gurus," by M. Ma in *The South China Morning Post*, February 21, 2000.

recreational activities for NGO members than environmental protection activities.

Concluding Remarks

The appearance of green NGOs in China offers a breakthrough in the “government-reliance” attitude towards environmental protection, as revealed by the environmental awareness surveys. The emerging environmental movement is trying to change centuries of old customs and beliefs that an individual citizen’s responsibilities should stop at the front door, and that it is up to the government to solve the problems, not the citizens. The Chinese government is now willing to allow some political space for citizen participation in environmental protection. Chinese green NGOs are at the forefront of civil society development. Despite their small numbers, these NGOs have been a model of inspiration for other kinds of civil society group. On the governance front, China’s NGOs will continue to grow, supported not only by the international community but also increasingly by Chinese citizens who value a clean environment and are willing to contribute both financially and personally to ensure its sustainability.³⁰ Increasingly, green NGOs have been able to work with local government and research centers, an effort that represents a new kind of horizontal policy cooperation in China. Obviously, China’s environmental future depends not only on the central government but on the concerted efforts of local officials, citizens, and the international community.

³⁰ Economy (2004).

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