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## **‘This is Our Way In’: The Civil Society of Environmental NGOs in South-West China<sup>1</sup>**

THIS PAPER WILL CONSIDER HOW THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT now taking shape among south-western<sup>2</sup> China’s environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is creating new civic freedoms and dealing with existing constraints under the current Chinese political system. A growing number of Chinese environmental groups constitute not only an effective force in tackling environmental issues, but also a civil society that is starting to transform state–society relations. The environmental cause inherently draws on the rights to a sustainable living environment and the empowerment of citizens to defend these interests. Precedent from other countries in transition shows that environmental movements can be inextricably linked to important new freedoms for the public as well as jarring political change.

### INTRODUCTION

Calculations of the total number of NGOs in China are not always useful, and are often inclusive of government-run and semi-government-run organizations such as trade and industrial unions.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The quotation in the title refers to a statement made by Ms Yen Baohua of Friends of Nature in Beijing, in describing the usefulness of China’s environmental movement to apply diverse political pressures and contribute to the broader reform process.

<sup>2</sup> The south-west: Yunnan, Sichuan and Guizhou provinces.

<sup>3</sup> See, Wang Ming, *The 500 NGOs in China*, ed. by Tsinghua University NGO Research Center, Beijing, UN Center for Regional Development, 2002 and Wang Ming, *Zhongguo NGO Yanjiu, 2001*, UNCRD Research Report 43, Beijing, Tsinghua University NGO Research Center, 2001.

From 1978 to 1998, an estimated 870,000 social organizations were formed in China.<sup>4</sup> Most, however, are government-operated, known as GONGOs, or 'government organized NGOs'. China's political climate, history and regulatory processes have complicated the identity of the independent NGO, subjecting such organizations to wide public and governmental suspicion.

Yet a very distinctive and much more narrowly defined expression of civil society is forming in China, finding shape in certain NGOs that formed in the mid-1990s and growing out of the promulgation of two 1998 laws. Unlike GONGOs, these organizations, while still legally registered, are characterized by nascent independent activism based in urban spaces. Although these organizations must operate under a two-tiered government-devised system of monitoring as stipulated by the 'Regulations for the Registration and Management of Non-Government and Non-Commercial Enterprises'<sup>5</sup> and the 'Regulations for the Registration and Management of Social Organizations',<sup>6</sup> they are significantly more independent both in terms of finances and project direction than GONGOs. As a result, ordinary Chinese people are starting to take advantage of the new openings afforded by both top-down legal reforms and bottom-up NGO development to pursue new social initiatives. This is significant for the amount and extent of political change they could come to leverage. The far-reaching and long-term effects of even small amounts of social organization at the grassroots level should not be underestimated.

This paper will first look at the role of civil society, diverse views on the function of civil society, and the role that NGOs in particular can have, especially with regard to changing state-society relations. The extent to which political change elsewhere in the world has been affected by environmental civic movements will then be examined. This paper seeks to pose the following question: to what extent is the

<sup>4</sup> 'Zhongguo NGO Shengtai' ('The Life of China's NGOs'), *Caijing*, 5 July 2002, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> The People's Republic of China State Council, *Regulations for the Registration and Management of Popular Non-Enterprise Work Units*, Order No. 251, Beijing: The Eighth Session of the State Council, 25 September 1998.

<sup>6</sup> The People's Republic of China State Council, *Regulations for Registration and Management of Social Organizations*, Order No. 250, Beijing: The Eighth Session of the State Council, 25 September 1998.

civil society of China's south-western environmental NGOs playing a role in local political change?

The second section of the paper attempts to address this question by presenting data on 12 legally registered environmental NGOs in south-west China.<sup>7</sup> I will then focus on three NGOs (in Yunnan, Sichuan and Guizhou) whose work is most emblematic of key new developments and possibilities across Chinese NGOs more broadly. The organizations' relationship to the state and their policy impacts are the chief concern of the final section. Though the findings are nascent, they suggest both parallels to environmental organizations and civil society in 1980s Eastern Europe and the former USSR, as well as some challenging new theoretical prospects.

This research was conducted over the course of four months in late 2002 and early 2003, using surveys, interviews and snowball sampling, as well as secondary data analysis.<sup>8</sup> The conclusion of this paper will sum up the significance of the findings, placing the research within the broader spectrum of civil society studies in post-authoritarian and transitioning countries worldwide.

### *1. Diverse Views on the Function of Civil Society*

As a concept with theoretical roots from eighteenth-century Enlightenment European discourse, theories of civil society are complex and, some have argued, predominantly Western-based.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, civil society is variously enriched and complicated by theoretical attempts to define it. The landmark contributions to this debate are here

<sup>7</sup> The Chinese 12 environmental NGOs are: The Pesticide Eco-Alternative Center (Yunnan Province), Nature Watch (Yunnan Province), The New Century Institute of Environmental Protection Science (Yunnan Province), Green Watershed (Yunnan Province), Ecology and Culture Organization (Yunnan Province), The Center for Community Development Studies (Yunnan Province), The Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge (Yunnan Province), Green River (Sichuan Province), Ai Hua (Sichuan Province), The Integrated Rural Development Center (Guizhou Province), The Guizhou Participatory Rural Appraisal Network (Guizhou Province), The Community Based Conservation and Development Research Center (Guizhou Province).

<sup>8</sup> The full findings of the research were produced as a mimeo for the Center for the Environment at Harvard University. A copy of this report can be obtained through the Center at Harvard's Lamont Library or by permission of the author.

<sup>9</sup> See Timothy Brook and B. Michael Frolic (eds), *Civil Society in China*, Armonk, NY, M. E. Sharpe, 1997.

significant both for how they inform the discourse of civil society in general and for how they challenge, and are challenged by, current developments in China.

De Tocqueville's observations of civic life in democratic America laid the foundations for what is commonly called civil society. 'If men are to remain civilized or to become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve in the same ratio in which the equality of conditions is increased.'<sup>10</sup> De Tocqueville noted that American citizens were free to create a wealth of associations and they did so openly and with regard to all manner of social needs: 'Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions consistently form associations'.<sup>11</sup> The nation's democratic institutions and emerging legal framework, he would argue, were all the better for it.

The America of the nineteenth century and the modern nation today are significantly different societies, yet the importance (and complications) of a free associational life for its citizens are still held to have shaped the nation's democratic tradition and, more broadly, what Habermas would come to term the 'public sphere'. Habermas's discussion of civil society and the public sphere seeks to construct a better normative framework of democratic order, suggesting that a healthy democracy does not lead to an engaged public sphere, but rather it is a social order that is utterly dependent on one.<sup>12</sup>

China's political structure has frequently been criticized as unaccommodating of an active civil society similar to the type that has taken shape in the West. However, evidence from elsewhere in Asia (Taiwan, Japan, South Korea as well as South-East and South Asia),<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (first published 1832), New York, Westvaco, 1999, p. 197.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>12</sup> Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1992.

<sup>13</sup> See Daniel I. Okimoto, 'Japan, the Societal State', in Daniel I. Okimoto and Thomas P. Rohlen (eds), *Inside the Japanese System*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998, pp. 211–15; Sheldon Garon, 'From Meiji to Heisei: The State of Civil Society in Japan', in Frank Schwartz and Susan J. Pharr (eds), *Civil Society in Japan*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003; Jeffrey Broadbent, *Environmental Politics in Japan: Networks of Power and Protest*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1998; Han Sang-jin, 'The Public Sphere and Democracy in Korea: A Debate on Civil Society', *Korea Journal*, 37: 4 (1997), pp. 78–97; John Fuh-Sheng Hsieh, 'East Asian Culture and Democratic Transition, with Special Reference to the Case of Taiwan', *Journal of African and Asian Studies*, 35: 1 (2000), pp. 29–42.

demonstrates that there is nothing culturally, historically or politically particular to the region that would reasonably prohibit democratic development in China. Building on existing analyses of state–society relations in China helps to contextualize better the study of civil society as it is taking shape there. Drawing from the well-known work of Jean C. Oi's 'local state corporatism' model, which aims to describe the political economy born of ever-merging state and business interests, a parallel notion of cooperation between state and civic associations can be formed. A version of the 'local state corporatist' model, but one that is attenuated to social rather than economic development at the local level, theoretically characterizes the development of civil society in modern China. It is a *local state associational model*.<sup>14</sup>

A local state associational model suggests a parallel structure to describe state–society relations at the local level. Oi's local state corporatism model highlights the structure of local-level business opportunities and economic growth in China's reform period that have been forged at the local level both through new economic policies and shared interests among business entrepreneurs and state authorities. The local state associational model highlights the same opportunity trends, evolving instead through new legal reforms and shared issue areas. Oi writes, '(the) merger of state and economy characterizes a new institutional development'.<sup>15</sup> The same merger is now underway between the state and China's civil society. There is

<sup>14</sup> See: Jean C. Oi, 'Fiscal Reform and the Economic Foundations of Local State Corporatism in China', *World Politics*, 45: 1 (October 1992), p. 100. Others have also sought to address and characterize state–society relations at the local level as they are shaping China's modern civil society. Mary Gallagher writes, 'The state corporatist model and its variants better capture the nature of associational life in China . . . [and provides] a better fit for understanding how organized, associational life develops in late-industrializing, authoritarian states', Mary Gallagher, 'The Ties That Bind: Civil Society and the State in China', paper prepared for presentation at the conference on 'Civil Society and Political Change in Asia', Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 24–7 October 2002, p. 10. More directly addressing the tenor of state–society relations with regard to civil society, Frolic uses the term 'state-led civil society', see B. Michael Frolic, 'State-Led Civil Society', in Brook and Frolic, *Civil Society in China*, p. 22. The term *local state associational model* has been developed for this report, in response both to competing theoretical descriptions and new developments in the field.

<sup>15</sup> Oi, 'Fiscal Reform', p. 100.

presently a tenor of state accommodation of civil society, and civil society actors are seeking to expand this through securing creative legal registration and defending the space allocated by the state.

How China's civil society in turn uses those opportunities will have an important impact on the shape of state–society relations in the future. Or, as Yanqi Tong has pointed out in his comparative study of local-level political association and change in Hungary and China, 'How long the regime will be able to keep the critical realm in check, even as the non-critical realm expands, remains an open question'.<sup>16</sup>

## 2. *Civil Society in Authoritarian and Post-Authoritarian Settings*

The space for advocacy and policy recommendation created by civil society operating at the grassroots requires that analyses of such social organizations attend to local political situations. This is particularly relevant in the authoritarian setting, where the development of civil society organizations and activities may be at least partly, if not wholly, controlled and repressed by the state. As William Fisher notes, 'Specific NGOs may move in either democratic or oligarchic directions, depending on their constituencies and their particular circumstances. NGOs may serve both as extensions of regimes or practice, like development, and as sources of alternatives to such regimes'.<sup>17</sup>

Consistent across dominant notions of civil society is the sense that associational life thrives particularly well within democratic societies, indeed that the very structure of the government allows for and encourages participatory civic engagement. Yet evidence from authoritarian countries, or countries transitioning from authoritarianism, suggests that the same associational space can also be created from bottom-up initiatives. Weigle and Butterfield note, 'The topic of civil society emerged in connection with Communist regimes only with the appearance of social activity based on free association, not

<sup>16</sup> Yanqi Tong, 'State, Society and Political Change in China and Hungary', *Comparative Politics*, 26: 3 (1994), p. 350.

<sup>17</sup> William Fisher, 'Doing Good? The Politics and Antipolitics of NGO Practices', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 26 (1997) p. 458.

mobilized participation, and the articulation of interests from below as well as above'.<sup>18</sup>

Civil society's various incarnations under authoritarian conditions, therefore, bear several important characteristics: a wide variety of informal activities and associations, a (potentially) wide variety of formal activities and associations, and complex connections to the state, which can be not only a necessity to civil society but, in some cases, an asset. As Yangqi Tong has pointed out, 'In the case of reforming state socialism, the development of non-critical and critical realms often represents different stages in the emergence of an autonomous civil society and, in the process, political change'.<sup>19</sup> It is within this context of formal and informal state–society relations that China's civil society must be conceptually situated.

For such transitional settings, it is important to locate a definition of civil society that accommodates notions of compliance and resistance as individuals seek to negotiate a plausible public (if not overtly political) space from within authoritarian constructs. By rethinking the Pharr,<sup>20</sup> Diamond<sup>21</sup> and Brook<sup>22</sup> contributions, highlighting both the locus and nature of civil society, while adding conditions specific to the authoritarian setting, a definition of civil society for this paper emerges: *Organized formal and informal voluntary social activity outside (but with various connections to) the state and business spheres.*

### 3. *Environmental NGOs in Affecting Social Change: Eastern Europe and the Former USSR*

The cases of national-level environmental activism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union in the 1980s and 1990s provides useful comparative context to current changes underway in China. In

<sup>18</sup> Marcia A. Weigle and Jim Butterfield, 'Civil Society in Reforming Communist Regimes: The Logic of Emergence', *Comparative Politics*, 25: 1 (1992), p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Yangqi, 'State, Society, and Political Change', p. 334.

<sup>20</sup> Frank J. Schwartz and Susan J. Pharr (eds), *The State and Civil Society in Japan*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 515.

<sup>21</sup> Larry Diamond, (1999) *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation*, Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press.

<sup>22</sup> Brook and Frolic, *Civil Society in China*.

Poland, where 'the most active groups emerged',<sup>23</sup> the Solidarity movement was driven underground following the 1981 imposition of martial law. Participants and leaders were made to reevaluate plans. In response, 'the movement soon developed as a loose network of groups organized around territorial, institutional, professional and personal bases, unified by a set of common goals, values and symbols.'<sup>24</sup> It was in this moment, with the environment as a central activist issue, that the second phase of Solidarity took shape, contributing significantly from the grassroots to momentous political change across Eastern Europe. Membership to the Polish Ecology Club (PEK), for example, grew steeply when Solidarity was banned.<sup>25</sup> Activists soon found ways to utilize the informal, horizontal ties of this social network to bridge into more directly political work.

In Hungary, another environmental group took a similar route from environmental concern to political action. Formed in 1984, the group Danube Circle sought to take action against the construction of the Danubian Dam, 'working on the assumption that its environmental goals were apolitical. By 1988, factions of the group came to the conclusion that social change could not come about without an open political struggle against the party.'<sup>26</sup> Environmental groups in both Poland and Hungary proved especially well-positioned to engage in broader political concerns. The notion of the 'parallel polis' that came to describe the structure of Eastern European society before transition is, as discussion of the 12 environmental NGOs will suggest, a useful framework for understanding state–society relations emerging in China.<sup>27</sup>

In the former USSR, the Socio-Ecological Union (SEU) developed in 1987 in response to the state project to redirect the flow of the Siberian rivers for irrigation in Central Asia. The organization comprised a network of environmental movements across the country and boasted strong international links. An organization called 'the Movement for the Protection of Bitsa Forest' also started in 1987, a

<sup>23</sup> Weigel and Butterfield, 'Civil Society in Reforming Communist Regimes', p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Wapner, 'Politics Beyond the State: Environmental Activism and World Civic Politics', *World Politics*, 31: 40 (April 1995), p. 314.

<sup>26</sup> Weigel and Butterfield, 'Civil Society in Reforming Communist Regimes', p. 12.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.



localized effort among suburban Moscow residents to protect the green space on the outskirts of the city. When they won the protection of one piece of land against the development of a state zoo, the citizen activists shifted focus to include the entire forest in protection from private development and state interests.<sup>28</sup>

Greenpeace Russia followed soon after, starting operations in 1990 with a focus on nuclear disarmament and halting the trade in toxic waste. The organization was funded primarily by donations from Russian citizens and relied heavily on its volunteers. While Greenpeace is the most internationally linked organization of the Russian groups listed here, it was Russian citizens, people familiar with the now transitioning state and able to create and negotiate with the political opportunity structures at hand, who ran the organization.

Gorbachev's *glasnost* later brought marked social and political changes across the former Soviet bloc, to which the environment was intimately linked. 'Environmental movements were in the vanguard of the social movements, combining opposition political forces with those whose major concern was environmentalism', writes Katy Pickvance of Soviet political change, 'Many activists of this early period were catapulted to political fame after first participating in environmental movements.'<sup>29</sup>

As the dynamics of China's transition continue to take shape, its environmental civil society actors will likely turn to a fuller spectrum of (politicized) interests. Comparison to the Eastern European and Russian experiences, despite many important differences, highlights this possibility.

#### 4. *The Legal Framework Guiding Formalized Chinese Civil Society*

Two laws currently structure the field of NGO development in China, the Regulations for the Registration and Management of Social Organizations, and the Regulations for the Registration and Management of Popular Non-Enterprise Work Units. This legislation allows for state-society power dynamics to be newly negotiated from the

<sup>28</sup> Katy Pickvance, 'Social Movements in Hungary and Russia: The Case of Environmental Movements', *European Sociological Review*, 13: 1 (May 1997), p. 39.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

bottom-up. Although these regulations may represent a state mechanism of constraint and monitoring, they also present the NGOs themselves with a pathway to legality and effectiveness. Under both regulations, the registering organization must have a 'dual management system'. Using these two regulations as the connecting mechanism to the state, however, China's NGOs have devised five main identity types (see NGO typology, Figure 1).

The Regulations for the Registration and Management of Social Organizations dictates the registration process of the academic society and related entities. An organization registered in this way must operate under the name of a government institution or university and requires authorization from the state institution (*guankao danwei*) for all kinds of basic activities: to hold meetings, to change or reorganize leadership structures, to devise a mission and programmes, and so on. The overseeing body then registers the NGO with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, completing the two-tiered structure. According to Article 9 of the regulation, 'Candidate social organizations must be investigated and approved (*shencha*) by a professional leading unit, and applying persons (*faqiren*) must make a preliminary application to the registration and management agency'.<sup>30</sup> For its inherently close affiliation to an overseeing government body, and the fluid intermixing of government and 'NGO' workers, this registration choice is the more constraining of the two.

The second law dictates the registration of Popular Non-Enterprise Work Units. Although organizations registered in this way still require supervision from two tiers of government bodies, because the regulation allows for a self-designed and selected monitoring structure (rather than being assigned one) their activities and leadership decisions are not necessarily dictated by the will of the overseeing state institutions. This is a critical distinction.

Organizations registered as Popular Non-Enterprise Work Units, therefore, can be independently operated in terms of finance and management. The definition of the style of organization under this law effectively creates room for a very wide range of organizations to take shape. According to Article 2 of the regulation, these regulations refer to 'social organizations carrying out social service

<sup>30</sup> The People's Republic of China State Council, *Regulations for Registration and Management of Social Organizations*.

activities of a non-profit nature, run by enterprise and institutional work units, social groups and other social forces, and also individual citizens using non-state assets'.<sup>31</sup> A wide range of civic organizations fit these definitional categories, and organizations registered in this way can more readily self-govern, run programmes and make decisions with considerable independence.

While this style of registration is also harder to secure than the first – fewer overseeing bodies are willing to take on the responsibility of a more loosely structured organization with fewer state constraints – most of the organizations interviewed here managed to secure this second type of registration. They have chosen to do so after comparing the prospects for greater independence that each style of registration affords. For many, the registration process moved forward on a complex balance of personal relations or *guanxi*.

What is of note in both laws is a double-layered monitoring structure. Though this framework still presents considerable challenges to the social organization seeking legitimization in the eyes of the state, clearly a greater range of legal options are opening up to NGOs, and their decisions regarding the use of these registrations reflect an increasingly sophisticated and detailed understanding of their capacity to affect social change from the bottom-up.

## THE ENVIRONMENTAL NGO IN SOUTH-WEST CHINA

### *1. Geography as Opportunity: Yunnan, and the South-West, in China*

The south-west, defined here as the provinces of Yunnan, Sichuan and Guizhou, is particularly fertile ground for the development of civic groups in China. Of the south-western provinces, Yunnan is perhaps the most dynamic province. By its proximity, the growth of organizations in Yunnan has bolstered efforts in Sichuan and Guizhou provinces, linking the region through environmental NGO expansion.

According to the *China Development Brief* report, 250 Chinese NGOs as of August 2001 there were 16 NGOs in Yunnan, 11 of

<sup>31</sup> The People's Republic of China State Council, *Regulations for the Registration and Management of Popular Non-Enterprise Work Units*.

which were devoted to environmental issues. There were 9 NGOs in Sichuan, 4 of which concerned environmental issues, and there were 4 NGOs in Guizhou, 3 of which concerned the environment.<sup>32</sup> The report's update, issued in October 2002, added an additional 13 environmental NGOs to the south-western roster.<sup>33</sup> As registration requirements shift at the central level and are variously interpreted and utilized at the grassroots, these figures will continue to grow.

The three main reasons articulated in surveys by the regional NGO respondents for why Yunnan has proven to be such a dynamic province are varied but broadly connected. First, the reform era government in Yunnan has been consistently more liberal than in other provinces, allowing for more civic developments and seeking creative solutions to the many challenges that face one of the most ethnically and biologically diverse provinces in the nation. Secondly, Yunnan's shared borders with South-East Asia, a region that has often been blamed for heightening the province's drug and HIV/AIDS problems, has also had the effect on the province of making it more open and receptive to international exchange. Environmental organizations in Yunnan regularly connect with regional organizations based in Malaysia and Thailand. Sharing best practices and comparing experiences with such groups across the border has helped to broaden and diversify the approach of the Chinese organizations. Third, the range of natural resources and diversity of ethnic groups in Yunnan Province have served as the basis of many ecological and social development projects that have attracted vast foreign interest and funding. A burgeoning eco-tourism trade is a related part of this development. Investment from among the international development agencies to protect and manage these resources has steadily increased in recent years.

## *2. Civic Responses: The Registered Identities of NGOs in China*

Participant NGOs represented here are among the better-known environmental NGOs of China's south-west, while others were

<sup>32</sup> *250 Chinese NGOs: Civil Society in the Making*, China Development Brief, August 2001.

<sup>33</sup> *China Development Brief*, 5: 2 (Autumn 2002).

discovered through word-of-mouth. As a result, this research probes only one, rather tightly knit community that is a part of a much wider landscape. Yet the trends set and goals sought by these 12 NGOs point to important conclusions about environmentalism and civil society in China more generally.

Of the 12 environmental NGOs surveyed for this paper, seven were located in Yunnan Province, two in Sichuan and three in Guizhou. Nine organizational leaders have previously worked for the government, and most have combined academic and government experience. Four of the organizations are directly affiliated with the Political Consultants' Conference (Zheng Xie). Yearly budget among the NGOs averaged US\$78,393. Total number of employees averaged 20, and average staff age was 41. Under the two legal frameworks described, five possible NGO entity types have emerged among the environmental NGOs surveyed in the south-west. In this way, the legal framework is creating unexpected local associational opportunities. The typology (Figure 1) outlines these five organizational types.

**The GONGO** (government-organized NGO) is largely outside the area of concern of this paper, although their existence is an important starting point to the analysis of NGOs in China. This is a state-organized NGO and the organization is often viewed as an offshoot of a government institution and therefore does not require separate registration or identity. This is the most constrained of the five organizational types.

**The Semi-GONGO** has some parallels to GONGOs in that it is often located within government office space. Yet these organizations tend to be more dynamic, organizing projects in conjunction with state officials while also seeking to move more closely toward an independent NGO identity through outside funding and separate projects. Registration will be under the Regulations for Registration and Management of Social Organizations.

**The Business NGO** registers only with the provincial or municipal level Industry and Commercial Administration Bureau. In this way, the organization does not exist as a non-profit NGO at all, but rather maintains a business identity in the eyes of the state. The benefit of this registration process is that neither the overseeing body of the social organizations nor of the popular non-enterprise work units must be secured, nor is the organization required to draft the monthly report of activities and finances that is required of registered social organizations or popular non-enterprise work units. As a

**Figure 1**  
*Registration Typology of Environmental NGOs*

| <i>Type of Organization</i>                 | <i>Distinguishing Features</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | <i>Registered Under which Law</i>                                                                                            | <i>Example NGOs</i>                                                                        |
|---------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| (1) The GONGO<br>(Government organized NGO) | Salaries and leadership determined and frequently provided by the state. May consult government body for programmatic direction. The most restricted registered NGO type of the five.                                                               | Because of its affiliation with a state institution, this type of organization does not require separate legal registration. | Sipan (Sichuan Poverty Alleviation Office)                                                 |
| (2) The Semi-GONGO                          | Although still under the state, this type is notable for its more dynamic organizational vision and membership utilization of political outlets like the Political Consultants' Conference (Zheng Xie).                                             | Regulations for the Registration and Management of Social Organizations.                                                     | The Yunnan Entomological Society; Sichuan Natural Resource and Development Training Center |
| (3) The Business NGO                        | Registers as a business, delivering social goods and services. Pays taxes to the state and does not require an overseeing body ( <i>guankao danwei</i> ), though work areas may be curtailed according to what is deemed suitable for a 'business'. | Provincial or municipal level Industry and Commercial Administration Bureau.                                                 | The Center for Community Development Studies, Yunnan                                       |
| (4) The Working NGO <sup>34</sup>           | Formed under a Semi-GONGO with which it is very familiar or helped to create. The Semi-GONGO becomes the monitoring body for the Working NGO. The least restricted registered NGO type of the five.                                                 | Regulations for Registration and Management of the Popular Non-Enterprise Work Unit.                                         | New Century of Environmental Protection Science, Yunnan; Green River, Sichuan.             |
| (5) The Underground NGO                     | An active social organization that works diversely across an issue area and avoids all state intervention. The least restricted non-registered NGO type of the five.                                                                                | No registration.                                                                                                             | The Sustainable Development Center, Yunnan; PRA Network, south-west China                  |

business entity, however, this organization must pay taxes to the state, a burden not required of registered social organizations. Its activities may be curtailed according to what is deemed suitable for a business.

**The Working NGO** is an organization that develops out of the two-tiered registration process to achieve a high measure of legitimate, independent space. Full registration is under the Regulations for the Registration and Management of Popular Non-Enterprise Work Units. Apart from the registration processes for securing its legal identity, however, such an organization remains independent in leadership and direction. In this case, a willing and like-minded body has

<sup>34</sup> This is the NGO-type most featured in this paper: legally registered but markedly more independent.

already been officially established and under this, members can create and register an offshoot organization that can thus achieve the highest degree of legal NGO autonomy currently available in China. Funds are raised from international sources, while government or university money is rejected. Good relations, however, are maintained with obliquely overseeing government and university bodies. In this way, the working NGO can register with the relevant (provincial or municipal) Civil Affairs Bureau and additionally secure the required oversight body. This is the most effective public organizational strategy in China yet to be negotiated, and provides the most evidence in support of a local state associational model.

**The Underground NGO** is the final possible category of NGO identified in this paper. For this organization type, the requirements and restrictions offered under legal registration either do not appeal or are deemed unmanageable by the organization and a detriment to its goals. There appear to be two versions of this organization. The first is the organization that remains entirely underground: unidentified by the international donor community or local officials and poorly funded. However the group may be quite active within the issue area of its concern.

A second form of grassroots underground entity is the informal network. The Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) Network based in Guizhou, for example, is composed of individuals concerned about development and the environment and operates across the south-west. It maintains informal branches in Sichuan and Yunnan provinces and is largely funded through international sources. Individuals can only join to represent themselves.

### *3. Local-Level Activism: Three Case Studies from the South-West*

The largest focus area among the organizations is in 'agriculture and community', an indication of how the organizations are striving to link their environmental concern to social need in terms of sustainable livelihoods, community development and even notions of social justice. Examples include Green Watershed, the Center for Community Development Studies, and the Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge, all in Yunnan, as well as Ai Hua in Sichuan and the Community Based Conservation and Development Research Center in Guizhou Province.

The second-largest focus area was in what I have termed 'general interest', meaning the organization pursues broad environmental initiatives that include water, soil erosion, air pollution and others. These diverse initiatives are most often coupled with public-awareness campaigns. Organizations such as Nature Watch and the New Century Institute of Environmental Protection Science in Yunnan Province, and Green River are producing small newsletters, public advertisements and community meetings to communicate their environmental messages. These organizations have noted that the environment is a tenable issue area on which local authorities and state officials welcome public debate.

This section presents three case studies to illustrate the work of distinctive but representative south-western environmental NGOs from among the three focus provinces – Yunnan, Sichuan and Guizhou. These three organizations were selected for profile as they represent some of the most dynamic work taking shape in each of the three focus provinces, were able to analyse their focus within a broader context of civil society development in China, and were among the most responsive to interviews and research. Each NGO is classified in the 'working NGO' category, in that each is working dynamically in their respective environmental fields. They are maintaining legal registration while challenging state and business actions that are detrimental to the environment.

*The Pesticide Eco-Alternative Center, Yunnan Province (PEAC).* PEAC received its official registration in February 2002 under the Yunnan Civil Affairs Bureau and the Yunnan Science and Technology Bureau. PEAC is primarily organized under the guidance of Mr Kuang Rongping, though leadership is broadly shared across the eight NGO staff that includes scientists, economists, accountants, students and one retired general from the Sichuan branch of the People's Liberation Army. PEAC's motto is 'Fighting pesticides in China through consumer-driven, farmer-centred action'. PEAC has a four-fold strategy for advocating pesticide reduction: farmer training, consumer education, legal reform and policy recommendation. The organization claims to be the first registered NGO in China to focus on pesticide issues.

PEAC held a significant farmer-training conference on pesticides in August 2002, bringing together policy makers, local officials, other regional and South-East Asian NGOs, and over 30 provincial farmers. PEAC approaches consumer education through the development of a free newsletter, provisionally entitled *Eco-Learning*. Legal reform is



promoted with the help of international advisers, from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (UNFAO) and the Pesticide Action Network Asia Pacific (PANAP). Research on the strength and weakness of current pesticide laws is an ongoing focus area for two PEAC staff members. Finally, PEAC is utilizing mobility afforded through its registration under the Yunnan Entomological Society (YES) and Mr. Kuang's affiliation with the Political Consultants' Conference (Zheng Xie) to promote both new agricultural policies relevant to pesticide issues, and more broadly to encourage state acceptance of NGO policy recommendations. The organization maintains a website that is linked to international campaigns against pesticides.

*Green River, Sichuan Province.* Green River received its official registration in 1997 under the Sichuan Civil Affairs Bureau and the Sichuan Environmental Bureau. Mr Yang Xin, a fairly well-known environmental advocate in China, who traversed the length of the Yangtze in 1986 and published his memoirs on the experience, is the leader of Green River. He is engaged in environmental activities across China. Green River has two staff members and a rotating group of approximately 600 volunteers who divide their time between the Chengdu office and the NGO's own Sounandajie Protection Station in Hohxi, Qinghai province.

The NGO's focus is the monitoring and protection of the Yangtze River, with special attention to the source areas in Qinghai and Tibet, as well as to the surrounding wildlife of the region. The NGO seeks to raise public awareness of Yangtze-related environmental issues, to promote sustainable development for the river source area, and to issue environmental policy recommendations. Green River does this through environmental campaigns and events, dialogues with local residents of the Yangtze source area, distributing promotional material to the public and submitting policy-related reports and recommendations to local government bodies based on original research. Green River's most successful policy recommendation to date came in the autumn of 2002, when a recommendation issued jointly to the Beijing Traffic Bureau, the Twelfth Group of the Ministry of Rail Environmental Protection Office and local trucking companies successfully requested that all traffic across one stretch of Qinghai highway be halted for one hour each day to allow the Tibetan antelope of the region to pass safely. This regulation has been implemented.

*The Community-Based Conservation and Development Research Center (CCDRC), Guizhou Province.* The centre received its official

registration in January 2003 under the Guizhou Civil Affairs Bureau and the Guizhou Science and Technology Bureau. Mr Ren Xiaodong runs CCDRC and oversees six staff members. The main goal of CCDRC is to promote 'massive participatory approaches' to environmental protection.

The stated mission of CCDRC is 'to shape the governmental policy on the management of natural reserves (particularly Cao Hai Natural Reserve, Guizhou Province). This policy seeks to ensure that local people around natural reserves benefit from environment protection.' The main activities of the NGO are organizing and hosting training sessions for local government officials, volunteers and local citizens in provincial villages on participatory approaches to environmental protection.<sup>35</sup> The organization works closely with the Guizhou PRA Network and as a consequence of this close connection, CCDRC has access to additional environmental and development specialists to assist with programs.

These three organizations are among the most dynamic of the local-level south-western environmental NGOs surveyed. PEAC is working with local villages and state officials simultaneously to educate, change practices and foster dialogue between farmers and local government officials on a broad range of issues relevant to pesticide use. Green River works closely with government officials and the private sector, whose joint business decisions are having adverse environmental effects on the Yangtze. The Community Based Conservation and Development Resource Center of Guizhou Province is similarly involved in assessing the development needs and community issues of the natural reserves of Guizhou Province.

#### *4. Policy Impacts and NGO–State Relations*

The capacity to effect policy change and engage in the political is the single most important arena to which environmental NGOs

<sup>35</sup> The ideas of participation in this sense are shaped as much from the influence of Robert Chambers and counselling from the Ford Foundation and related support agencies, as from what the organization feels to be appropriate and useful in the Chinese context (Ren Xiaodong, director of the Community Based Conservation and Development Research Center, personal interview, Guiyang, Guizhou Province, 20 January 2003).

cross over to broader impact. The ways in which these local-level south-west environmental organizations are approaching policy change and relationships with the state, and the effect that this is having, shows critical new shifts and possibilities in the field of state–society relations in a long-term reforming country. Moreover, the prospect and realization of political impact from among civil society actors highlights the ways in which the power to effect change is as much negotiated from the bottom-up as the top-down. As Tan Jingzheng, director of Ai Hua in Sichuan Province points out, ‘The most important thing NGOs can do is to raise some policy recommendations’.<sup>36</sup>

Of the surveyed south-western environmental organizations, 94 per cent felt the environment to be the most viable platform for average citizens to effect policy change and engage in a public and political life.<sup>37</sup> Roughly half had evidence of bringing about direct policy change through formal engagement, while the other half utilized more informal methods. A combination of both the formal and informal is proving most effective. In this way, the organizations are starting to show dynamic capacities for civic engagement while also remaining tolerable in the eyes of the state.

Formal methods of policy engagement are an increasingly important tool that environmental NGOs are seeking to apply. But formal methods (participation in province-level government meetings like the Political Consultants’ Conference (Zheng Xie), submitting official requests and petitions to local-level officials) are best combined with informal methods (banquets, informal encounters, use of *guanxi*). As a result, government bodies are increasingly aware of and sensitive to the contributions of these organizations. Although in its earliest stages, all 12 NGOs that participated in this research study indicated that they seek to effect policy changes and closer state relations to challenge better the local (and in some cases national) government on environmentally unsound practices and policy.

There are a number of examples of policy change and new state–society relations that are developing as a direct consequence of the work of south-western environmental NGOs. These include the

<sup>36</sup> Mr Tan Jingzheng, director of Ai Hua, personal interview, Chengdu, Sichuan Province, 17 January 2003.

<sup>37</sup> Change is measured either in terms of total policy adjustment or improved enforcement and monitoring of a policy in place.

**Figure 2**  
*Formal Methods of Policy Change*

| <i>NGO</i>                                                                  | <i>Policy Effect</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Nature Watch (Yunnan Province)                                              | Providing reports and policy recommendations to local officials on the use of tiger bones in health products produced in Yunnan Province, which have improved tiger protection policy. Monitoring the export of local fungus for health products.                           |
| New Century Institute of Environmental Protection Science (Yunnan Province) | Providing reports and policy recommendations regarding the harvesting of certain plants in Yunnan Province for health companies, improving government monitoring mechanisms.                                                                                                |
| Green Watershed (Yunnan Province)                                           | Changed the compensation policy to farmers in Lijiang county, Yunnan Province, for the effects of a dam built upstream from the town, causing frequent floods.                                                                                                              |
| Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge (Yunnan Province)          | Successfully negotiated between Tibetan farmers living in alpine wetland area and government development project for tourism. Assessing government upland conversion projects; filing reports with policy recommendations to local officials.                               |
| Green River (Sichuan Province)                                              | Changed traffic policy along Qinghai highway, providing better protection to local antelope species. Beijing Traffic Bureau signed final policy agreement (2002).                                                                                                           |
| Ai Hua (Sichuan Province)                                                   | Working with local officials to adjust government-run micro-credit scheme in Wenzhou, Chongqing Province, revising participatory grasslands management in Hongyuan county, establishing a biodiversity conservation village in Jishi township.                              |
| Guizhou PRA Network (Guizhou Province)                                      | Managing sections of the Caohai Natural Reserve, Guizhou Province with focus on the policies affecting the 200,000 farmers living there. Organizing a yearly meeting between NGOs, international agencies and government officials for dialogue and policy recommendations. |

work of Nature Watch in Yunnan Province to monitor closely the production of Chinese medicines using endangered species and its successful lobby for change in production regulations. Green River in Sichuan Province provides another example after the organization changed traffic policy governing a section of Qinghai road that was threatening local antelope.

Other organizations are also having an impact in the policy arena, but are doing so on an informal basis. This is a process of dialogue and multi-level relationship-building that allows them not only potentially to change government policies, but also to represent better the local communities to government bodies. Examples of effective informal activities include the conferences hosted by PEAC, which draw together both government officials and local peasant farmers for discussions. CCDRC in Guizhou Province is another example, working informally with local government officials in Fanjingshan Nature Reserve and Caohai Nature Reserve (both in

**Figure 3**  
*Informal Methods of Policy Change*

| NGO                                                                                                    | Policy Effect                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Pesticide Eco-Alternative Center (Yunnan Province)                                                     | Uses excellent relations with local government leaders and the Yunnan Political Consultants' Conference to push for change in NGO registration laws and in loosening NGO networking constraints under the state. Good local relations coupled with research work gains PEAC personal access to Yunnan law makers who are drafting new pesticide regulations. |
| Center for Community Development Studies (CDS) (Yunnan Province)                                       | Researches arable land policy to make recommendations to government on changes, maintains good relationship with high-level officials. Focuses on 'policy impacts' at the village level.                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Integrated Rural Development Center at the Guizhou Academy of Agricultural Sciences (Guizhou Province) | Manages 17 projects of rural-based natural resource management study, the basis of which will provide better policy recommendations for specific areas in the future.                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) Network (pan-south-west)                                           | Networks across the south-west, developing a more concerted force of development and environmental specialists, eventually for developing policy recommendations.                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Community-Based Conservation and Development Research Center (Guizhou Province)                        | Works with local government officials in Fanjingshan Nature Reserve and Caohai Nature Reserve (both in Guizhou Province) to introduce and promote participatory methods of decision-making. Encourages local officials to include farmers and local community members in policy-making.                                                                      |

Guizhou) to introduce and promote participatory methods of developmental decision-making.

Although success is hard to measure, environmental NGOs in south-western China are using diverse tactics to press policy recommendations and build relations with the state. As Mr Yi Wei, a programme officer for Green River in Sichuan Province explains, something very important happens when it works:

For us, every year we will give our report to the government. For example, if solid waste is serious along the train tracks, we will give our report to the relevant bodies. Last year we heard from the government that they would adopt our policy suggestion along one highway in Qinghai Province. I think this is great in China, because the government can start to listen to what we have said.<sup>38</sup>

The environmental groups profiled in this paper, and many others excluded here, are approaching the state through a multi-spectrum lens that includes policy change and political interface. They do this through both formal and informal methods in the short-term. In the longer term, power dynamics between state and society are

<sup>38</sup> Mr Yi Wei, programme officer for Green River, personal interview, Chengdu, Sichuan Province, 15 January 2003.

becoming permanently altered to accommodate more and stronger grassroots forces – parallel to the experiences in Eastern Europe and the former USSR. The change that they effect and the monitoring they provide are resources local government cannot afford to neglect, even as the state structure is itself challenged to transform through the engagement.

*State–society perspectives of local officials.* State officials from the highest level to the local counties have expressed a strong interest in working with the new NGOs that are developing, pressed as they are to single-handedly address China's many social and environmental challenges. Yet they remain wary of the social forces, suggesting that they do not become 'too independent', shift foci suddenly, or maintain a sustainable profit from their activities.

From the perspective of local governments, the financial resources and social tools that China's south-western environmental NGOs have are appealing, but will be welcomed only within a setting that maintains strong state engagement. Mr Liu Weijia, director of the Foreign Capital Project Management Center under the Sichuan Poverty Alleviation Office and a long-time civil servant, echoes the enabling capacity of the local state associational model in his comments:

Our methods of participation not only focus on the people, but also include the local government. This is a multi-level, multi-sector approach to include each level of society and government and to better bring the two together. For the participants, we require that local government leaders and departments be equally involved. So when we use the participatory methods to talk about environmental issues, it will not invite political problems, but rather just make the local communities more environmentally sustainable. In fact, participatory methods have changed and improved the relationship between the people and the government, so it will not bring about political problems.<sup>39</sup>

In this response, Mr Liu captures Jean C. Oi's characterization of the local official as the 'overseer of community wellbeing'.<sup>40</sup> But not all are so sanguine. Asked the same question, Mr Yang Zaiyi, vice-governor of Dan Zai Township in Guizhou Province, who also

<sup>39</sup> Mr Liu Weijia, director of the Foreign Capital Project Management Center under the Sichuan Poverty Alleviation Office, personal interview Chengdu, Sichuan Province, 16 January 2003.

<sup>40</sup> Oi, 'Fiscal Reform', p. 125.

supports and promotes participatory decision-making in environmentalism, was a little less optimistic. 'I have no idea how to control this',<sup>41</sup> he commented.

Although state-based reports, such as those from Tsinghua University, indicate some degree of suspicion and concern about the activities of NGOs in China, there is also significant evidence that the central levels of government are becoming more accommodating and trusting of NGOs in China.<sup>42</sup> An important split, therefore, has emerged between the local and the central governments on the role that civil society in China play.

*State-Society Perspectives of the NGOs.* The view that the NGOs take toward the state reveals a similar mix of cooperation and resistance. While some organizations report very good relations, and seek closer union with state officials, others hold that such ties lead only to repression and stagnation.

Mr Li Zhaoyuan, director of Nature Watch in Yunnan Province, has had good experiences of local officials and has been impressed by the genuine concern they have shown for his group. 'The government is quite supportive. The Kunming Science and Technology Bureau called me twice asking what kind of difficulties I have. They want to know what they can provide.'<sup>43</sup> Other NGO leaders instead read the same level of concern through a different lens of coercion and control. Frustrated by the multiple roles that officials are currently playing, Ms Li Wei of New Century of Environmental Protection Science in Yunnan commented, 'The government agencies function as both the umpire and the athlete'.<sup>44</sup> NGOs seem to share as complex and varied a view of the state, just as the state itself regards these emerging social forces.

In all, there is a deep and at times uneasy ambiguity of roles shared by both government and NGO officials concerning what their

<sup>41</sup> Mr Yang Zaiyi, vice-governor of Dan Zai township, personal interview Guiyang, Guizhou Province, in the office of Mr Wu Xiangqian, director of the Guizhou Ethnic Area Poverty Alleviation Foundation, 22 January 2003.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, *The PRC National Report on Sustainable Development, 2002*, Beijing, China Environmental Science Press, 2002.

<sup>43</sup> Mr Li Zhaoyuan, director of Nature Watch, personal interview, Kunming, Yunnan Province, 11 January 2003.

<sup>44</sup> Ms Li Wei of New Century of Environmental Protection Science, personal interview, Kunming, Yunnan Province, 8 January 2003.

relationship to each other should be, and what the broader role of the NGO in Chinese society will be. Most government officials suggest that NGOs can and should be welcomed as an assistant in forming government policy, and the NGOs consulted roundly agree that their goal is in contributing to Chinese social development and environmental protection. Yet, in articulating how this goal should be achieved, 82 per cent of the NGOs consulted are interested in or have formulated policy recommendations that are meant to augment the local- or national-level policy in place, and another 78 per cent expressed a significant frustration with the government policies that are in place now to handle environmental challenges. Moreover, 92 per cent of the NGOs consulted contend that the issue is the most plausible entry point into broader, more political concerns about improving local governance, eradicating corruption and clarifying the laws.

The tensions these interests suggest, perhaps more than shared cooperative sentiments, may come to shape NGO–state relations in the future, environmental and otherwise. Above all, these relations are not simple, never direct, nor do they represent a zero-sum game of the state versus society in any context. Dependency and distance are perhaps the two best defining characteristics to capture NGO–state relations among the environmental groups in south-western China, just as these words could also aptly describe the state–society relations in the waning years of communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The changes are taking shape, and relationships brokered, along the lines of the mutually accommodating local state associational model.

##### *5. Problems, Challenges and Lessons Learned*

The south-western environmental NGO, like many other civic organizations in China, faces a number of problems: some very general to NGOs in China and others quite specific to the particular environmental organization. Many problems with which China's NGOs are grappling are not specific to the nation's conditions – such as maintaining focus and ensuring that balanced, representative leadership is upheld across the organization – and can be found in NGOs around the world. Others, however, are quite literally born of specific Chinese conditions: the combined rapid influx of foreign aid



and development organizations into the country in the reform era, the struggle among Chinese activists to effect change through a permissible issue area, and the particular policy responses of the government as it seeks to both accommodate and control the development of Chinese NGOs. This section will briefly outline the three main problems facing NGO development in China, based on the experiences of the 12 south-western environmental NGOs, and points to lessons learned.

The first and largest problem is the already-described precarious position of NGO–state relations. Organizations that have successfully negotiated the registration process report existing in a state of persistent fear of government intervention, seizure and in some cases even arrest, despite having secured legal status and, with it, a higher degree of legitimacy. Several articles in the NGO regulations allow for a wide and various government interpretations of NGO activities, leading to easy incriminations and manipulation of the legal code. As a result, most organizations consulted describe a degree of self-censorship (the curtailing or changing altogether of the content of certain projects) to ward off the possibility of government intervention. Increasingly, however, these organizations are also utilizing the legal system to secure protection and legitimacy from the state.

Sufficient and sustainable funding is the second challenge identified by the south-western environmental NGO. Most subsist from funds provided for specific projects from international sources. While some foundations, such as the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, also provide additional grants to new NGOs for capacity building of staff, salaries and general office expenses, such organization-building grants are rare and difficult for most organizations to secure. Heavy dependency on international sources poses a range of challenges to the burgeoning environmental NGO. Many organizations described a personal frustration with not being able to rely more on domestic Chinese funding. Other organizations complain of altering their true mission to fit the wishes of foreign donors. At present, Chinese businesses do not receive a tax break for making donations to non-profit organizations and it is illegal for such organizations to engage actively in fundraising. This has left the organizations dependent on insecure sources of funding.

The extent of public awareness of NGOs is the third problem. As Chinese NGOs form and carry out projects, the idea of comparatively independent interest groups operating in the country will become

increasingly permissible to the general public. At present, however, public opinion in the non-urban areas of many environmental NGOs' concern remains largely tentative. 'If you are not from a government agency, the local people may not accept you', says Mr Tan Jingzheng, director of Ai Hua in Sichuan Province, of the general Chinese population. 'It is not easy for us to explain our organization. And people always ask which bureau you work in, where you are from, what your social status is or the registration details of the organization. It's a pity and it's really difficult.'<sup>45</sup>

As Chinese NGOs form deeper connections among themselves and with the international NGO community, their presence and contribution to society will increase incrementally. With this transition, new legal norms will come into place to accommodate (financially and otherwise) a growing and increasingly legitimate social force. Also through this process, the public will become more aware of how its own civil society works, what its rights and duties are. Maintaining transparent practices, clear initiatives and good communication is the best way for Chinese NGOs to keep a good face in the public eye while this process takes shape.

## CONCLUSIONS

Despite the restricted nature of political associations in China, increasingly independent NGOs at the local level have emerged and grown rapidly in recent years. The groups are operating in diverse ways to engage with and potentially change state policy and state–society relations. The consequences of this will have far-reaching effects across Chinese society. Just as de Tocqueville notes of American society in 1835, 'Nothing, in my opinion, is more deserving of our attention than the intellectual and moral associations of America',<sup>46</sup> so too, in looking at reform-era China, is nothing now more important than a parallel study of the nation's civic life.

There is no fixed characterization to capture the political impact of south-western environmental NGOs. Rather, the nature of the local state associational model from the civil society perspective

<sup>45</sup> Mr Tan Jingzheng, Ai Hua, personal interview, Chengdu, Sichuan Province, 16 January 2003.

<sup>46</sup> De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 189.

allows Chinese NGOs to work diversely across topics while using one issue in particular – the environment – as a pliant entry point. It is a combination of locally created political opportunity structures, collaboration with international support, and related reform-era shifts that has ensured the livelihood and sustainability of civil society in China. Environmental groups are at the forefront of this: the environment is a diverse working platform.

Parallels between the course of change in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union as compared to China suggest that all regimes have been ambiguous about the role that civil society should play. Yet from the bottom-up, formal and informal pressure points have been devised through which ordinary citizens become empowered to agitate for meaningful social policy change and a more inclusive reform and even political process. In this way, this paper asserts that local-level forces, as much as elite factions, are shaping civil society in China. Compliance and resistance, cooperation and opposition, and the relationship between the state and society from the perspectives of multiple actors fit within a local state associational model. These are the micro-forces behind China's civil society now; forces that are taking shape most visibly and cohesively among the country's environmental NGOs.

Local-level groups are becoming more dynamic and effective in pressuring for change in China's transitioning political setting. This is neither a portrait of locked oppositions nor of mutual compliance, but a diverse and varied situation through which vast and new opportunities can be secured. This is a significant socio-political crossroads that both elite and grassroots forces in China are negotiating together, the implications of which, as demonstrated in Eastern Europe and the former USSR, are not the least limited to the environment.

This paper suggests several avenues for further study. In general, a complete survey of environmental NGOs across all regions in China would make a useful comparative study to map better the contours of this civil society and its effects. Related analysis of how the NGOs are interacting with and influencing each other would be valuable. More specifically, a study of both the positive and negative effects of environmental development projects lead by multinational institutions (such as the World Bank, the United Nations and the Asian Development Bank) on local-level conditions in civil society and state-society relations would also be valuable.

This paper concludes first that, in order for China to be able to address its environmental challenges in a sustainable way, the government must accept the emerging civil society and NGOs working in this field. Support and ideas from the grassroots will be essential to tailor environmental policies to local conditions and to ensure greater compliance with, and effectiveness of, those policies. The second conclusion of this paper, and with relevance more broadly to the shifting political landscape of a state in transition, concerns the powerful effects local-level citizen organizations can have on a transitioning state structure, despite nominal authoritarian barriers that remain in place. As activists grow adept and begin to move even more fluidly from environmental issues to related social and political concerns, governments must effectively respond to the new direction of these forces and the public interests they represent.

In conclusion, no matter how oppressive the setting or how authoritarian the regime, civic organizations will take shape and find expression on the issue, or set of issues, that most plausibly provides space. Civil society – in whatever forms it takes – matters in particular to societies in transition, and can help to influence the outcomes of that transition.

In China, the environment has proved to be a platform for civil society's most dynamic growth. It is critical that people committed both to the improvement of China's environment, and shifts within its political setting, observe this recent development. The nexus between the two is imperative to the country's future.