ENVIRONMENT

Quietly Sowing the Seeds of Activism

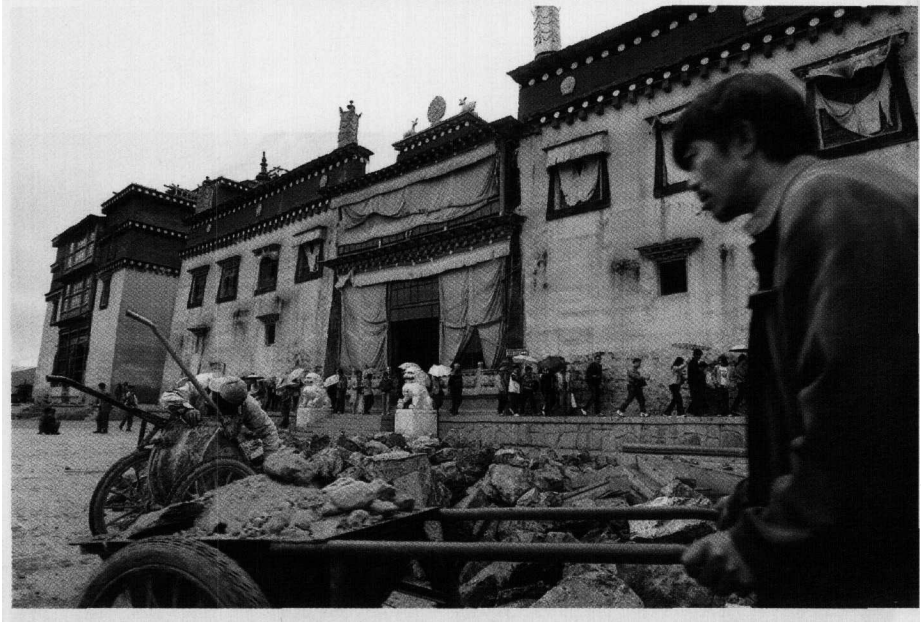
A gradual campaign to build a civil society, where citizens can help to promote change on issues that affect them, is taking on a distinctive shade of green in southwestern China with a host of new local organizations striving for a better environment

By Caroline Cooper/XIAO JIA YING VILLAGE, YUNNAN PROVINCE

GROWING IN SHANGRI-LA: A woman works in the green hills of a Yunnan county renamed after the mythical paradise last year to attract tourists

Photos: Frederic J. Brown/AFP

EATING INTO THE COUNTRY: A construction worker passes a 300-year-old monastery in Yunnan



CARVING OUT A NEW GREEN ROLE

Local NGOs embrace the environment as a springboard for growth:

- Because of relatively cooperative local governments in the southwest
- To promote more active public involvement to solve green problems
- Because they seem to be less at risk than big, Beijing-based groups

THE HIGH PLAINS of Qinghai province are home to the endangered Tibetan antelope, an animal sought by hunters for its fine wool, meat or simply a good chase. While local customs are hard to change, truckers are also at fault, killing hundreds of antelopes every year on the roads. And for years, Green River, a small and relatively independent non-governmental organization in Chengdu, Sichuan province, has lobbied on behalf of the antelope. Finally, Beijing took notice and last November changed local policy in line with Green River's recommendations. Now, for an hour each day along a busy section of the Qinghai road, all traffic stops to allow the antelopes to cross.

"We were so excited when we received this notice from the Traffic Bureau of Beijing," says Yi Wen, a programme officer for Green River, holding up the letter. "Usually when we submit our environmental suggestions for the region, the government accepts them but does nothing. This time they actually did something." In this case, the step was agreed between Beijing, provincial officials and local trucking companies. "It's good to see NGOs contributing to changes in local policy," Yi says. "I hope more and more NGOs can be heard by the government."

Green River is just one of a host of local NGOs that have sprung up in China in recent years to combat the environmental problems that have come with growing industrialization and lax, or no, enforcement of regulations. Many of the most dynamic groups are in the southwest, where government attitudes toward NGOs are more cooperative than elsewhere. And increasingly, through the environment, these NGOs are edging into political discussions and local politics. Environmental groups in Yunnan province are lobbying for clearer agro-chemical laws, another group in southern Sichuan is working to promote voting at the village level on environmental decisions while a group in Guiyang in Guizhou province coordinates NGO efforts across the southwest. It is political engagement that is still constrained, but it is slowly starting to change the way Chinese citizens approach the state.

Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. "The key is not how the government tries to control NGOs, but how it could instead be subverted by them."

Nick Young, the Beijing-based editor of the *China Development Brief* magazine, foresees significant growth of environmental NGOs in China, and their ability to promote a more active public life. "If you are passionate about workers' rights in China, you are either in jail or you do nothing about it. The environment has more latitude," he says. But Young is quick to add that the environmental

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS SEE THEMSELVES AS THE KEY IN CHINA TO BUILDING A CIVIL SOCIETY

The result is building a civil society—with Chinese characteristics—from the bottom up by working with local governments to affect policy change. "The environmental NGO definitely gets more space than other kinds of NGOs," says Yi of Green River. The NGOs see themselves as the key in China to starting to build a civil society, the social space where private citizens can gather, discuss a social issue and formulate campaigns that are largely independent of government or business influence. "At the very least, these leaders and similar activists seek a stronger rule of law," says Elizabeth Economy, the director of Asia

organizations in no way harbour a confrontational political agenda. "These are not politicized agitators. But within the environmental movement there are people with a sophisticated understanding of the social, political and economic issues at stake," he says.

Kevin Kamp, a Bangkok-based programme director for the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization, has worked with environmental NGOs in the southwest of China and still sees a higher degree of independence among them than elsewhere in the country.

"This area used to be its own kingdom," he says. "So the history is ▶▶

very important. And being far away from Beijing helps."

Seeing this potential for greater autonomy, the Ford Foundation focused much of its efforts in the 1990s on issues in the southwest and developing local organizations to deal with them. Anthony Saich, a professor at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, was the director of the Ford Foundation in Beijing during this formative period.

"What the Ford Foundation is good at is grassroots work," says Saich, who sees the environment as a potential platform for broader discussions of change and activism. "Bright, young Chinese who choose the environment as their issue find themselves led into a whole different set of issues, including citizen participation and the problem of bad government policy." Foreign funding is now a major component of the growth of green NGOs in China, with foundations like Ford, Rockefeller Brothers Fund and Winrock International annually chipping in with millions of dollars to support groups.

With this dramatic increase in funding since the mid-1990s, environmental groups now appear to be the most vibrant sector of NGO growth in China. Another advantage that may help, the FAO's Kamp notes, is that the environment is widely not seen as a social or politically threatening cause so it can be discussed without straying into sensitive ideological areas. Now NGOs are often met halfway by local officials too overwhelmed to respond effectively to poverty, health and development problems linked to environmental degradation. "There is no question that there is a desire on the part of the government to recognize NGOs as organizations that can help the government," says Kamp.

Wong How Man/CERS

TOP TARGET FOR PROTECTION: A Tibetan antelope runs free across the plains

Traditionally, the Communist Party prohibited NGOs, fearing such informal organizations might eventually be able to challenge its monopoly on power. But in the 1990s, social organizations emerged and fell under varying degrees of state control. In turn, hard-pressed local governments gradually found such groups could often be more of a help than a hindrance in tackling problems and motivating people. Finally in 1998, clear rules were set on how to establish and register NGOs. The regulations even allowed foreign funding for some organizations, but barred direct fund-raising. And NGOs aren't totally independent because they need an official sponsor.

For these reasons, big international NGOs don't operate in southwest China but some are using Beijing as their entry point. To be sure, for every success story like Green River, there are plenty of other NGOs that never develop beyond their original aims or disband under pressure from local officials. Such pressures ▶▶

NGOS' LONG, HARD ROAD TO WIN OFFICIAL APPROVAL

Non-governmental organizations in China are victims of the Communist Party's fear they could be co-opted by people seeking to challenge its monopoly on power.

For legal standing, which means the right to open a bank account, rent office space and hire staff in their own name, NGOs have three main options. They can register with the government as "social organizations." They can find universities to affiliate them as research centres. Or they can register as businesses.

The conditions for registration as "social organizations"—the closest category to an NGO as most of the rest of the world understands it—are onerous, with the biggest hurdle being a requirement that the NGO line up a sponsoring government agency with jurisdiction over the area in which the NGO plans to operate. Activist groups seeking recognition as NGOs often have particular trouble finding government sponsors to take responsibility for their actions.

The sponsor rule explains why by far the greatest number of approved NGOs are industry associations and academic research associations with close ties to ministries and bureaus. Among the latest batch of national-level NGOs approved by the Ministry of Civil Affairs: the China Xinhua Bookstores Association, sponsored by the State Press and Publications Administration; the Chinese Working Dogs Association, sponsored by the Ministry of Public Security; and the Education Through Labour Research Association (yes, labour camps), sponsored by the Ministry of Justice.

Funding requirements are a barrier too. National-level NGOs have to show operating assets of 100,000 renminbi ($12,000) or more. Sponsors have to be national-level ministries or commissions. Locally registered NGOs need assets of 30,000 renminbi. All NGOs must have at least 50 members. After that, registration is subject to annual review.

Many NGOs end up registering as businesses. "It is something that people do to have some kind of a legal basis,"

can hit even the biggest Chinese groups. Beijing's Friends of Nature, which was founded in 1994 and is China's oldest environmental NGO, discharged its secretary and founding member Wang Lixiong after officials at the NGO registry in Beijing in January described the writer and academic as a "dangerous person." Fearing that its existence was endangered because of the official opposition, Friends of Nature asked Wang to leave.

The New York-based Human Rights in China said that Wang was branded "dangerous" because of his involvement in the case of a Tibetan lama, Tenzin Delek Rinpoche, and his follower, Lobsang Dhondup. Lobsang Dhondup was executed on January 26—the same day that the Sichuan Higher People's Court rejected Tenzin Delek Rinpoche's appeal of the death sentence imposed after he was convicted of separatist terrorist activities in Sichuan. Both cases attracted international attention, in part because of Wang's efforts. The watchdog group said that Wang, a writer, was not involved in political movements.

In the southwest, it is the smaller NGOs with lower profiles that are perhaps less at risk than larger, Beijing-based counterparts. The Pesticide Eco-Alternative Centre (PEAC) of Yunnan province is an example of a small NGO looking to show local communities that they should be concerned about environmental problems.

At the government-run Tea, Mulberry and Fruit Station in Fuming county, Kuang Rongping, a director of PEAC, hears that local farmers use plenty of pesticides but know little about long-term effects on their health and the ecosystem. Farmers say many government-run agriculture extension centres across the southwest sell pesticides direct or recommend to get the most effective, and often most toxic, pesticides—even if they are banned. With barely enough money for salaries, selling pesticides is a lucrative sideline.

But maintaining good relationships with local officials is vital to NGO work in the long run so there is no direct confrontation over this issue. "Working closely with the government is very important for any NGO," says Kuang. "I would never want to jeopardize those friendships." His meeting with local farmers is more straightforward. "I have no idea how many pesticides I use per year," one grape grower says with a laugh. "It's a lot."

Kuang says that he takes heart from the case of a woman farmer in Qiling district, northeast of Yunnan's capital Kunming, who sprayed her pear trees with the pesticide Methamidophos, and applied what was left over to her peach trees. Six children then ate some of the peaches. One died and the others fell extremely ill.

The farmer was taken to court, and, for once, the case didn't end in dismissal or a small fine. The court held the pesticide poisoning was criminal negligence because Methamidophos is banned for use on fruits, vegetables and food crops in China. The farmer was fined 25,000 renminbi ($3,000) and sentenced to three years in prison—though her jail time was later postponed.

Kuang hopes more courts will mete out similar sentences and says the case shows the potential for the kind of work done by PEAC: educating farmers on safe pesticide use in tandem with the broader goals of reducing pesticides, providing alternatives and advocating on environmental issues. Kuang was a farm worker when his family was sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution under Mao Zedong. "For this reason, I feel a very close bond to the Chinese farmer. I understand their concerns and I want to do all I can to help them," he says. ■

Caroline Cooper is a graduate student at Harvard University

> **"Bright, young Chinese who choose the environment as their issue find themselves led into a whole different set of issues"**
>
> Anthony Saich at Harvard University

says Nick Young, editor of *China Development Brief*, a magazine that chronicles the work of international and domestic NGOs in China. The downside is that donations are taxable income, and recruiting members isn't allowed.

NGO regulations since 1998 have no provisions for registering international NGOs. Some register with the local Bureau of Industry and Commerce as enterprises or representative offices of businesses. Others go unregistered.

Chinese officials and academics who study NGOs say that the government may this year promulgate a new set of rules for NGOs, including for the first time international NGOs. Their staff say they would welcome such a change. With legal recognition would come "the ability to fund-raise in China and have members in China, all of which would be wonderful to be able to do," says Jim Harkness, the China representative for the environmental group WWF. Chinese NGOs have also lobbied for new rules to eliminate the requirement for them to have a government sponsor.

Like many others working with NGOs, Harkness, however, isn't holding his breath. "Every year since I moved here, someone in academia or in the Ministry of Civil Affairs has assured me that a new law on social organizations will be promulgated within six months," he says.

Young and others attribute the delay in publishing new rules in part to official skittishness generated by the state's stand-off with the Falun Gong movement. Falun Gong began as an exercise group sanctioned by Chinese sports authorities. "Falun Gong put back the whole issue of associational space by several years at least," Young says.

He believes efforts by some NGOs to organize demonstrations and other opposition to the United States-led war in Iraq could trigger new official concerns about the growth of such organizations in China. "If this anti-war sentiment looks as if it might damage the state's interests, again it might slow down" moves to allow greater ease of association, Young says.

In the long term, he says, "what we are far more likely to see is not more liberal rules being put out, but rules already there being observed and enforced less strictly." ***Susan V. Lawrence***