

Books: a gradual green awakening in China and the state of the environment NGOs

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China's ecological movement is led from the top down, Hong Dayong's *The Growing Nongovernment Forces for Environmental Protection in China* shows. Wu Jian wonders when the grassroots will grow up.

The Growing Nongovernment Forces for Environmental Protection in China

Hong Dayong and others

China Renmin University Press, 2007

My first thought on reading this book was that its English title — *The Growing Nongovernment Forces for Environmental Protection in China* — seems more appropriate than the Chinese version, which would translate literally as “the maturing of nongovernment forces for environmental protection”. The English title reflects the sociological, rather than historical, approach of the book. “Growing” shows that these forces still have some way to go in the future and that tension remains between reality and what we hope for.

The book vividly describes the birth, current status and trends of the non-governmental environmental movement in China, covering the non-governmental organisations (NGOs), grassroots communities and green enterprises that have developed over the last decade and the increasingly important role they have played in China's environmental-protection sector. It also portrays the gradual environmental awakening that has taken place against a background of Chinese economic growth.

Environmental issues are a conflict between man and nature, and have become more pressing as societies change and economies develop. For the last century, China has been caught up in wars, revolutions and campaigns, with modernisation in the true sense starting in 1978. The country has been moving away gradually from traditional social structures for only three decades, and non-governmental forces have struggled to participate. According to one survey, in 2004 China had 44,000 non-governmental environmental groups, with 3,000 considered to be key environmental NGOs. These organisations, says the book, “*are becoming more concerned with making their voices heard and acting as a spokesperson for public opinion*”, and are participating more actively in legislative and policy-making processes.

As the book states, the Chinese environmental movement is “*government-led*”, with non-governmental forces extremely limited in the role they can play. This is due both to the current state

of the nation and the power of tradition. From the Qin and Han dynasties, China has been polarised between the powerful and the powerless, with little in the middle, and conflict always has been between those two groups – the government and the people. There is a lack of intermediary groups, and private associations of citizens often are seen as problematic, an enemy of the rulers.

Even in modern China this tradition remains powerful. Until the 1990s, there were very few genuinely non-governmental organisations, and few of those were concerned with the environment. Those that did exist were non-governmental in name only, and functioned as extensions of government – *“top-down semi-official groups, which are in fact tools for government to mobilise society.”* The All-China Environment Federation, formed in 2005, has serving or retired officials holding posts of honorary president, president, vice-president and secretary-general.

Although the book provides ample factual material on the development and current state of China’s non-governmental environmental organisations, we cannot agree entirely with the values the author assumes. The writer believes that existing environmental groups have certain strengths: a rejection of environmental extremism and a realistic search for balance between environment and economy; a rejection of antagonistic and uncooperative relationships with government in favour of acting as *“government helpers”* or *“partners”*, *“rarely getting involved without government support”*; and continuing government patterns of mobilisation, working mainly within government structures. Clearly the author approves of all this, but it is not hard to find in these three characteristics the reasons why China’s environmental groups – indeed all of civil society – is still in a slow process of maturing.

As mentioned, the forces of tradition and a restrictive environment have kept China’s environmental protection movement as a “government-led” style – but this would be better described as a “lacking the people” style – that is, the vast majority of civil society action is in fact continued and derived from official action, and lacks its own ideals and character. The legacy of the all-powerful government — or *“big government, small society”* — is still with us. Officialdom is in two minds about the rise of non-governmental environmentalism. On one hand, it is pleased, as government is becoming aware of its own limitations and the rise of civil society can relieve some of the pressure and bring more power to bear on environmental and other issues – as demonstrated over the last decade.

But there also are concerns. Ongoing globalisation, and the global nature of environmental issues, means an increasing tension between national sovereignty and globalisation and an increasingly close relationship between internal control and the government’s legitimacy. Civil society cannot be brought to maturity in one fell swoop, and the government must consider how to manage this process. Cultural and ideological differences mean that anti-China sentiments are still strong overseas – and civil-society groups are one channel for those forces to penetrate China. So government keeps a tight hold on civil organisations, with many environmental ones still struggling to obtain official status.

The characteristics of China’s non-governmental environmental groups mentioned above are not accidental, then. Limits on personnel, funding and other resources mean they would struggle to survive outside of the government framework and therefore must rely on it to operate — even appointing government officials to leadership or consulting positions, and acquiring members through government systems or organisations. Limited opportunities for expression and activity mean that they do not dare to speak out of step with government and exist as *“government helpers”*; nor do they dare take an extremist stance and interfere with economic growth. Of course, I am not against those characteristics. I just believe that our environmental groups are too homogenous. Allowing people to freely express their thoughts on environmental protection, within the limits of the law, would not only benefit the environmental movement, but also would put pressure on

government to take more care in policy formation.

China's civil society, including environmental groups, is still growing. But we cannot help but ask: when will they grow up?

P.S.

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