

## Affluent Activists and New Tactics:

### The Changing Face of the Chinese Environmental Movement

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#### Abstract

This essay will discuss a shift taking place within the Chinese environmental movement. The work of Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations, the established face of the movement, has been characterized by efforts to work within the constraints set by the government. The emergence of confrontational protests led by members of the middle class represents a shift in the movement as a whole. These protests have emerged as the result of the growing level of middle class environmental consciousness and the government's inadequate response to environmental problems. This is reflected in citizens' frustration over the lack of government transparency and public consultation. While protests can be perceived as a threat to the careful organizational and methodical strategies of ENGOS, both have a role to play in the fight against China's pollution and environmental degradation.

#### Introduction

“Taiwan's Chen Yu-hao and the Xianglu Group have begun construction on a PX chemical project in Haicang. Once this highly toxic chemical goes into production, it will mean that an atomic time bomb has been released on Xiamen Island. Xiamen people will have to live their lives with leukemia and with children born with congenital defects. We want life, we want good health! International organizations have determined that this sort of special project should only be developed 100 kilometres or more outside a city, but Xiamen is only 16

kilometres from the project at farthest. For the sake of our future generations, please act!”<sup>1</sup>

For the past two decades, China’s Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations (ENGOS) have acted as the face of the country’s environmental movement. These groups have survived not only by adapting and responding to the Chinese state, but also through the use of a specific set of strategies. For the most part, these strategies have been of a non-confrontational nature, creating an “embedded environmentalism.”<sup>2</sup> However, recent popular protests involving significant numbers of middle-class Chinese run contrary to the methods by which ENGOS rose to prominence. While they share certain characteristics, the very nature of public protest stands in stark contrast to the careful activism of ENGOS. This shift is the result of greater environmental awareness by the Chinese public and the deficiencies in the government’s response to environmental issues. The efforts of this newly emerging branch of the Chinese environmental movement have met with some success, and this has led ENGO leaders to question their methods.<sup>3</sup> ENGOS have become somewhat more willing to challenge the government over time, but rarely through such extreme and direct means.

In an effort to illustrate the shift taking place within Chinese environmentalism, the first part of this paper will discuss the factors that contributed to the rise and success of ENGOS, the traditional leaders of the Chinese environmental movement. The decentralization of the Chinese state contributed significantly to the initial emergence of ENGOS, as the government began to

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<sup>1</sup> Text message forwarded hundreds of thousands of times to residents of Xiamen, Fujian Province in May 2007, found in Jonathan Ansfield, “Alchemy of a Protest: the case of Xiamen PX,” in *China and the Environment*, ed. Sam Geall, (New York: Zed Books, 2013), 165-166.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Ho and Richard Louis Edmonds, "Perspectives of Time and Change: Rethinking Embedded Environmental Activism in China," *China Information* 21 (2007), 331-344.

<sup>3</sup> Weiya Huo, “Environmental groups at a crossroads,” *chinadialogue.net*, December 18, 2012.

realize the potential benefits of a functioning civil society. ENGOs and their leaders also selected their issues carefully, used the media effectively, established vital networks, cooperated with international NGOs and, more recently, began to use the courts to their advantage. Discussion will be limited to true NGOs, to the exclusion of Government Organized Non-Governmental Organizations (GONGOs).<sup>4</sup> The second part of this paper will examine recent high-profile instances of Chinese environmental protest, revealing the ways that this kind of popular participation represents a significant departure from the efforts of ENGOs. Information on these protests was gathered from articles found through the online news site *China Digital Times*.<sup>5</sup>

## **Factors Contributing to the Rise and Success of ENGOs**

### Decentralization as a Catalyst for NGO Growth

The Chinese government's late 20th century decentralization provided NGOs with an opportunity to emerge and grow by filling roles once held by the state. As part of the dismantling of the infamous "iron rice bowl," the country's leaders sought to divest themselves of previous responsibilities and social burdens. The state had become dominant in so many different areas of Chinese society that when it began to retreat, replacements were needed to provide services and fill roles previously held by the government.<sup>6</sup> It was the hope of the state that civil society could address the areas into which the state had previously overextended itself. One area that gradually

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<sup>4</sup> For further clarification on environmental NGO types by registration, see Caroline M. Cooper, "This is Our Way In": The Civil Society of Environmental NGOs in South-West China," *Government and Opposition* 41 (2006), 109-136.

<sup>5</sup> China Digital Times was founded in 2003 by Chinese dissident Xiao Qiang, now a professor at the University of California, Berkeley. It functions as a news portal that features translated and uncensored news and voices from sources within China as well as aggregated articles from English language sources. Many of the sources used in the second part of this paper were found through the China Digital Times. More information can be found at <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/about>.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Ho, "Greening Without Conflict? Environmentalism, NGOs and Civil Society in China," *Development & Change* 32 (2001), 902.

received more and more concern was environmental degradation. The early 1990s saw “a gradual shift in the government’s commitment from ‘co-ordinated development,’ with explicit priority given to economic development, to one of ‘sustainable development.’”<sup>7</sup> In *The River Runs Black*, Elizabeth Economy argues that “by promoting the growth of environmental NGOs and media coverage of environmental issues, the Chinese leadership hopes to fill the gap between its desire to improve the country’s environment and its capacity to do so.”<sup>8</sup> Peter Ho presents statistics that show the rapid rise of environmental organizations during the 1990s, which he attributes to both a shared notion of environmental responsibility and the desire to make up for the government’s shortfalls.<sup>9</sup> He argues that the nature of Chinese environmentalism is the result of two factors, (1) the simultaneous emergence of environmental NGOs in China and what he refers to as the “greening” of the Chinese state, and (2) the state’s “toleration and strict control” over NGOs and other social groups.<sup>10</sup> Providing a certain amount of support for ENGOS does confer some advantages. As part of its larger goal of reducing pollution, the government can utilize ENGOS as “an inexpensive mechanism for monitoring local pollution efforts and educating the public on environmental protection.”<sup>11</sup> This is one example of how the interests of the Chinese government and the interests of social organizations can be aligned.

While China’s leaders have to some degree facilitated the growth of these groups, they have also been reluctant to support them fully or to follow through with the implementation of

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 900.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth C. Economy, *The River Runs Black* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 130.

<sup>9</sup> Ho, "Greening Without Conflict? Environmentalism, NGOs and Civil Society in China," 901.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 893.

<sup>11</sup> Economy, *The River Runs Black*, 173.

tough environmental policies for fear of social unrest. Working with ENGOs can potentially address environmental issues while preserving stability. The government is proceeding with caution, which is understandable given the past example of the Soviet Union's experience with civil society. From 1995-1997, the Chinese leadership halted all NGO registration, and in 1998 it presented new regulations for NGOs.<sup>12</sup> Today's regulations are intended to take advantage of what ENGOs have to offer, while at the same time maintaining some level of control.<sup>13</sup> This is a prime example of the way in which the government is trying to keep these organizations in check. But as Ho points out, Chinese government policies that exist to control social groups are seemingly ineffective. Although NGOs must find an institution that will sponsor them in order to register, many of them are able to register with institutions that simply disguise their work, making them essentially invisible to the state.<sup>14</sup> Jiang Ru and Leonard Ortolano also note the gains from the changes in the structure of China's political opportunities.<sup>15</sup> First, when the state instituted registration requirements in an effort to control social groups, it required legal recognition by the Chinese state. Legal recognition allowed social groups to open bank accounts, prepare legal documents, and perform other such activities.<sup>16</sup> Second, because of limited resources, the Ministry of Civil Affairs is unable to mount any challenge to many unregistered

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>13</sup> For an overview of China's regulations on social organizations, see Bonny Ling et al., "China's Civil Society: Controls, Limits and Role in a 'Harmonious Society,'" *China Perspectives* 3 (2007), 118–125.

<sup>14</sup> Ho, "Greening Without Conflict? Environmentalism, NGOs and Civil Society in China," 906.

<sup>15</sup> Jiang Ru and Leonard Ortolano, "Development of Citizen-Organized Environmental NGOs in China," *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 20 (2009), 155.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

NGOs, allowing them to continue their work unaffected.<sup>17</sup> Over time, the government's efforts have developed into a real set of laws and multiple levels of enforcement agencies intended to address environmental issues and manage social groups. Officials voice their support for social organizations, but a give and take has ensued, resulting in confusion over where the boundaries for the actions of NGOs truly lie. This means that NGOs must utilize a specific set of strategies designed to work within the bounds of the Chinese state.

### Importance of Issue Selection

An invaluable tactic in the rise of China's NGOs has been careful issue selection by organization leaders. Liang Congjie's famous NGO, Friends of Nature, helped pave the way for the efforts of future groups. One of the most important lessons to be learned from Friends of Nature is that in Chinese environmentalism, choosing your battles is key. Congjie's early endeavors concerned issues that were perceived as "politically safe," such as the effort to save the Tibetan antelope.<sup>18</sup> Friends of Nature was also involved in many innocuous activities such as garbage collection and tree planting. Examples of other activities undertaken by NGOs include "public lectures, workshops and conferences, salon discussions, field trips, publication of newsletters and multimedia documents, and new forms of 'electronic action' such as online discussions, online mailing lists and internet petitions."<sup>19</sup>

Friends of Nature provides us with a good example of what Ru and Ortolano call cognitive liberation. Cognitive liberation refers to an awareness by Chinese environmentalists

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>18</sup> Judith Shapiro, *China's Environmental Challenges* (Malden: Polity Press, 2012), 113.

<sup>19</sup> Guobin Yang, "Environmental NGOs and institutional dynamics in China," *The China Quarterly* 181 (2005), 52.

that they could advance environmental causes by working together on projects that did not directly confront the government.<sup>20</sup> This is a consistent theme that has played out in the context of individual organizations as well as in the ENGO movement as a whole. Friends of Nature is just one example of an ENGO that survived the early days by shying away from pushing boundaries. This has given Friends of Nature some semblance of legitimacy in the eyes of the state, which today allows the organization to take stances on more contentious issues like dam construction on the Nu River.<sup>21</sup> More broadly, the efforts of groups like Friends of Nature have created a space for other ENGOs to work towards goals within the bounds of government regulations. Today, ENGOs are involved in policy discussions and even implementation of environmental programs.<sup>22</sup>

### Media Usage

Over the course of the relatively short history of Chinese ENGOs, the media has proven to be a valuable partner. Radio and television are important sources of environmental education for the Chinese public, and journalists and other personalities have lead successful environmental campaigns. Television in particular has been a successful means of spreading the word about individual instances of crimes against the environment.<sup>23</sup> Shapiro makes some important comments regarding ENGO and media convergence. In an effort to describe and categorize the ways that these groups do their work, she uses a model of NGO engagement that divides political

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<sup>20</sup> Ru and Ortolano, "Development of Citizen-Organized Environmental NGOs in China," 155.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Mertha, "'Fragmented Authoritarianism 2.0': Political Pluralization in the Chinese Policy Process," *The China Quarterly* 200 (2009), 995-1012.

<sup>22</sup> Ru and Ortolano, "Development of Citizen-Organized Environmental NGOs in China," 157.

<sup>23</sup> Economy, *The River Runs Black*, 163.

participation into three categories: information, accountability, and symbolism.<sup>24</sup> When ENGOs use information politics, they gather information such as surveys and scientific research, and then distribute it using traditional or new media. Accountability politics refers to efforts by ENGOs to hold both the public and private sector accountable for adhering to previous commitments, treaties, mission statements, or codes of conduct.<sup>25</sup> Symbolic politics attempts to change behavior or incite opposition through the use of striking images. Over time, ENGOs such as Friends of Nature have gained the confidence to work with the media on issues of accountability. This is a particularly dangerous pursuit, as it involves pointing out the missteps of the Chinese state. ENGOs work to carefully exploit divisions between the higher and lower levels of the state, often drawing the attention of higher officials to local and provincial environmental issues. Chongqing Global Village provides a good example of effective media usage. The organization was initially focused on awareness and tree planting, but was eventually able to curb illegal logging.<sup>26</sup> There are a few areas where environmental leaders and the media show an especially strong convergence. Writers and editors further the work of ENGOs by publishing provocative environmental stories both online and in print.<sup>27</sup> In addition, ENGO leaders and other environmentalists are frequent guests on Chinese television.<sup>28</sup> Many of these

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<sup>24</sup> Shapiro, *China's Environmental Challenges*, 109.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Schwartz, "Environmental NGOs in China: roles and limits." *Pacific Affairs* 77 (2004), 28-49.

<sup>27</sup> Shapiro, *China's Environmental Challenges*, 125.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.



organizers got their start as journalists, exposing the environmental disasters that they would later work to combat.<sup>29</sup>

Developments in the relationship between the government and the media have also benefitted ENGOs. While media outlets are in theory the organs of the state, they are no longer under the level of direct control that they once were. In addition, the government has also used the media to promote its own environmental campaigns. These two developments, along with the fact that many ENGO leaders are current or former members of the media, have allowed environmental organizations to take full advantage of the media's ability to disseminate information.<sup>30</sup>

### Establishment of Networks

The establishment and effective use of networks is one of the ways that ENGOs attempt to overcome the controls instituted by the state. There are three kinds of networks at play: networks between ENGOs and officials, between ENGOs and other ENGOs and between ENGOs and protective organizations. One of the ways that ENGOs exert influence on policy is through their connections to officials at different levels of government and the party. These networks rely on the Chinese concept of *guanxi*, which refers to the personal connections and relationships that are crucially important in contemporary China. Informal ties created through the exchange of favors and gifts connect activists to members of the state and party, affording them additional resources to accomplish their goals. As Tang and Zhan report, ENGOs with leadership that includes current or former officials, use their connections to local governments to

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>30</sup> Guobin Yang and Craig Calhoun, "Media, civil society, and the rise of a green public sphere in China," *China Information* 21 (2007), 221.

influence the policy process.<sup>31</sup> For this reason, Ho and Edmonds believe that environmental activism cannot operate without the state or party. This is another illustration of the embedded nature of Chinese environmentalism.<sup>32</sup>

A second form of network is that which links ENGOs with each other. Ru and Ortolano's concept of indigenous organizational strength refers to environmental volunteers, ENGO leaders, and the networks that link them together.<sup>33</sup> This is key to ENGO development, and it is one of the ways that group leaders are able to stretch the boundaries for behavior established by the government without technically going against official policy. Although the government prohibits the establishment of branch offices, individuals are often trained by ENGOs in Beijing before founding their own provincial or local-level organizations in other parts of the country.<sup>34</sup> This is a perfect example of a clever tactic that allows groups to do their work without explicitly opposing the state. The founders of some of China's most influential ENGOs are connected through volunteerism and support networks, allowing them to communicate and share best practices.<sup>35</sup>

The third form of network exists between ENGOs and protective organizations, which can take different forms. As previously discussed, ENGOs must create a link with a sponsoring organization in order to register with the government. This sponsoring organization sometimes becomes part of the network that the ENGO uses to pursue its aims. This type of network can

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<sup>31</sup> Shui-Yan Tang and Xueyong Zhan, "Civic Environmental NGOs, Civil Society, and Democratization in China," *Journal of Development Studies* 44 (2008), 437.

<sup>32</sup> Ho and Edmonds, "Perspectives of Time and Change," 334.

<sup>33</sup> Ru and Ortolano, "Development of Citizen-Organized Environmental NGOs in China," 155.

<sup>34</sup> Economy, *The River Runs Black*, 136.

<sup>35</sup> Ru and Ortolano, "Development of Citizen-Organized Environmental NGOs in China," 151-152.

also be more informal. Friends of Nature was able to successfully use its connections to the Communist Youth League as a cover to complete its activities.<sup>36</sup>

### Influence of International NGOs

International NGOs play an important role in supporting China's ENGOs. They can in a sense be considered an extension of the domestic organization and activist network, providing both strategies and resources, monetary and otherwise.<sup>37</sup> Groups such as the World Wide Fund for Nature, Conservation International, and the Nature Conservancy all undertake environmental conservation projects in China. Conservation International in particular is seen as a "networker and facilitator," as well as a source of education for urban consumers.<sup>38</sup> International NGOs are also useful for making connections between groups on issues that transcend borders. In an effort to oppose dam construction on the Nu (Salween) river, International Rivers worked with NGOs in Myanmar, Thailand, and China.<sup>39</sup>

International groups contribute to the work of ENGOs in a number of diverse ways. The aforementioned Friends of Nature was created as a result of information learned at a UN conference, using methods modeled on a German NGO. Some ENGO founders work first with other groups abroad before establishing their own operations in China. On the other hand, some activists work with outside groups operating domestically before founding their own organizations. Some international groups provide direct financial support for programs in China.

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<sup>36</sup> Shapiro, *China's Environmental Challenges*, 114.

<sup>37</sup> Ru and Ortolano, "Development of Citizen-Organized Environmental NGOs in China," 155.

<sup>38</sup> Shapiro, *China's Environmental Challenges*, 121.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 122-123.

Foreign NGOs also provide training for Chinese activists. One example of this is the Rockefeller Foundation's Leadership for Environment and Development (LEAD) program, which trains development and environmental leaders. International and domestic NGOs form a symbiotic relationship: outside groups are able to use domestic groups as an entry point to a country whose large environmental impact makes it a prime target, while domestic groups use partnerships with outside groups as a source of legitimacy.<sup>40</sup>

### Use of the Courts

Although China's legal system is still relatively underdeveloped, ENGOs have begun to use it to some effect. One well-known group, the Center For Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims, is notable for doing just that. Since its start in 1998, it has successfully argued hundreds of cases for those who have suffered from the harmful effects of pollution. The organization has survived partially because of its host institution's links to the central government and the high international profile of its founder, Wang Canfa.<sup>41</sup> A partnership with the Vermont Law School also contributes to its legitimacy.<sup>42</sup> While China's legal system and the groups that operate within it have a long way to go, the Center is worth noting in the context of this article as example of an effort to work within the constraints of the Chinese government to accomplish environmental protection goals.

ENGOs in China face significant obstacles to accomplishing their goals. These obstacles are in most cases created by the government as part of an effort to maintain control and stability.

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<sup>40</sup> Ru and Ortolano, "Development of Citizen-Organized Environmental NGOs in China," 161-163.

<sup>41</sup> Shapiro, *China's Environmental Challenges*, 128.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

However, by shrewdly taking advantage of the political situation and utilizing a specific set of strategies, they have been able to work towards a variety of environmental goals. This careful method of change is being challenged by large-scale environmental protests led by China's emerging middle class.

### **The Emergence of Environmental Protests**

Recent environmental protests represent a shift in the Chinese environmental movement. While ENGOs have traditionally sought a place within the state's "consultative authoritarianism" as a means of furthering their goals, the protests in question have confronted the government in a much more direct fashion.<sup>43</sup> To some degree, the growth of environmental protests is tied to the growth of ENGOs. The same process of economic and political reform that resulted in decentralization and the growth of civil society also helped to encourage the growth of the middle class, which plays an important role in these protests. Both ENGOs and groups of protesters are part of China's larger environmental movement, which is at the core of the emergence of a "green public sphere" that is home to an environmental discourse that involves both political debates and public engagement.<sup>44</sup> As of the year 2012, the number of environmental protests taking place had risen by 29% each year.<sup>45</sup> ENGOs should be given some amount of credit for contributing to this phenomenon, as environmental education and the promotion of public participation has been a focus of many groups.<sup>46</sup> ENGOs have also furthered

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<sup>43</sup> Jessica C. Teets, "Let Many Civil Societies Bloom: The Rise of Consultative Authoritarianism in China," *The China Quarterly* 213 (2013), 19–38.

<sup>44</sup> Yang and Calhoun, "Media, civil society, and the rise of a green public sphere in China," 212.

<sup>45</sup> Jie Feng and Tao Wang, "Officials struggling to respond to China's year of environment protests," *chinadialogue.net*, June 12, 2012.

<sup>46</sup> Guobin Yang, "Environmental NGOs and institutional dynamics in China," 52.

the environmental cause in the eyes of the Chinese state, potentially allowing protests to emerge in the manner that they have. The growth of technology in China has played a vital role in supporting both ENGOs and protests. ENGOs use the internet to organize, communicate, and spread information.<sup>47</sup> As we will see, protesters use text messages and social media to spread the word about demonstrations.

The emergence of confrontational tactics can be seen as the result of growing environmental awareness among members of the middle class and a lack of appropriate government response. This is illustrated by 6 high-profile instances of environmental protest which took place in the cities of Xiamen, Guangzhou, Dalian, Shifang, Ningbo, and Kunming.

#### “Strolling” in Xiamen

In 2007, protests against the construction of a paraxylene (PX) plant by the company Xianglu took place in the city of Xiamen, Fujian province. The response of Xiamen’s citizens to this environmental threat quickly became a catalyst for China’s debate over the safety of PX and an inspiration for later protests, some of which also involved PX.<sup>48</sup> The story of the Xiamen case involves Xianglu, local officials, the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA), the central government, and most importantly, the citizens of Xiamen.

Jonathan Ansfield provides a detailed narrative of the events which transpired before, during, and after the protests that helps place them in a broader context. He describes Haicang, the district of Xiamen where the PX plant was to be built, as an area populated by “white-collar migrants who once flocked to Haicang for sea views and sweet breezes.” These citizens became

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<sup>47</sup> Jonathan Sullivan and Lei Xie, “Environmental Activism, Social Networks and the Internet,” *The China Quarterly* 198 (2009), 423.

<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Ansfield, “Alchemy of a Protest: the case of Xiamen PX,” 139.

fed up with the smells coming from the local wastewater treatment plant and the existing Xianglu chemical plant, voicing their disgust on online forums. These forums quickly became a venue for disapproval over the PX addition, and spawned an effort to crowdsource research on the environmental risks of the proposed plant. The residents also attempted to voice their concerns to the relevant authorities. They were unable to get any response from the local Environmental Protection Bureau (EPB), the district government, or the mayor's office. Consequently, they tried to communicate with the State Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) and the National Development Reform Commission (NDRC), the entities in charge of giving approval for the PX project. They discovered that they were too late, as the project had been approved before their letters reached their destinations.<sup>49</sup>

The citizens' plight was recognized by Ma Tiannan, the founder of Green Cross, Xiamen's first ENGO. But even with her connections to the head of Xiamen's EPB, she was still unable to make any progress on the matter.<sup>50</sup> Zhao Yufen, a Xiamen University professor and member of the China People's Political Consultative Conference, also took up the cause. Using her political status, she was able to take the case for the relocation of the PX plant all the way to Beijing. However, Zhao and her colleagues exaggerated the possible negative effects of PX in their arguments, which provided an easy response for those opposing their efforts.<sup>51</sup> Zhao was also informed by an NDRC official that new development, including the construction of a Beijing Normal University campus, had already been completed within the buffer zone around

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 155-156.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 158-159.

the proposed PX plant. The environmental approval had already taken place, and she was unable to gain access to a copy of the report.<sup>52</sup> With few other choices, Xiameners took to the internet once again. Blogs and comments sections filled with statements opposing PX and local officials and calling for protests. This spread among residents through text messages as well, such as the message at beginning of this article which called for demonstrations on June 1, 2007. The protests were referred to as “collective strolls” in order to avoid government censorship.<sup>53</sup>

It is estimated that between 300 and 600 people initially gathered at the Xiamen city government offices to demonstrate.<sup>54</sup> The protest swelled as the day went on, and People’s Daily reported on August 4 of 2009 that the protesters eventually numbered around ten thousand.<sup>55</sup> The event was covered by bloggers who were present, documenting chants of “reject pollution, protect Xiamen!” and banners such as “resist PX, protect Egret Island.”<sup>56</sup> The demonstrations continued for a second day before they were declared illegal by the local police, who called for the gathering to cease. It began to rain, and the protests were over by the second evening.<sup>57</sup>

It is interesting to note the response of Xiamen Green Cross, the aforementioned ENGO, to the demonstrations. After protesters began to post pictures and information from the protest to its website, Ma Tianan, the leader of Xiamen Green Cross, was pressured by the authorities to take care of the matter. She responded by stating the organization’s neutrality and denying any

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 163-164.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>55</sup> “Protests help clear the air (4),” *People’s Daily Online*, August 4, 2009.

<sup>56</sup> Jonathan Ansfield, “Alchemy of a Protest: the case of Xiamen PX,” 170.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 173-174.



responsibility for organizing the protests.<sup>58</sup> When confronted with this level of monitoring, she had no choice but to comply. Later, she and her organization would be attacked by other activists for their neutrality during the protests.<sup>59</sup> This illustrates one of the ways that ENGOs are somewhat limited in their activities, creating space for protests to emerge independently.

### Guangzhou

Two years after the Xiamen protests, another widely reported protest took place, this time over a garbage incinerator in Panyu District, Guangzhou, Guangdong province. The facility, which would process two thousand tons of waste per day, was planned as part of an effort to deal with the area's growing needs. However, after residents learned that cancer rates had gone up in the nearby village of Likeng after the construction of a similar incinerator, they began to mount an opposition to it.<sup>60</sup> Accounts seem to indicate that the organizers of the protest were peasants living in the immediate vicinity of the construction site, but large numbers of middle-class residents quickly joined in, blocking the road to the offices of the municipal government.<sup>61</sup> The protesters eventually entered the offices, then held a peaceful demonstration in the city square.<sup>62</sup> More than 1,000 Guangzhou residents are believed to have participated after pictures and information were posted online through Weibo and illegally on Twitter.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>60</sup> James Pomfret, "Hundreds in south China oppose waste incinerator," *Reuters*, November 23, 2009.

<sup>61</sup> Malcolm Moore, "China's middle-class rise up in environmental protest," *The Telegraph*, November 23, 2009.

<sup>62</sup> Jonathan Watts, "Chinese protesters confront police over incinerator plans in Guangzhou," *The Guardian*, November 23, 2009.

<sup>63</sup> Malcolm Moore, "China's middle-class rise up in environmental protest."

Those who participated did so for a few reasons. The residents of luxury housing complexes close to the construction site were particularly worried that the incinerator would not only release carcinogenic emissions, but also negatively affect their property values.<sup>64</sup> The protests also point to an even larger concern: dissatisfaction with the lack of consultation in the decision-making process. This reflects the public's growing distrust of and frustration with the government. "The government told us there won't be any pollution, but we don't believe them," said a woman who gave only the surname Ou. "At least today the government have heard the voice of the people. They can't pretend that they are deaf and mute anymore."<sup>65</sup> The people of Guangzhou also demonstrated the increasing environmental awareness of Chinese citizens. According to a Guangdong provincial social research and study center public opinion poll, "nearly 92% of residents believe the project will seriously harm their health and the environment, while more than 97% oppose construction of the plant."<sup>66</sup>

### Dalian

In 2011, two years after the Guangzhou garbage incinerator protests, a demonstration occurred in Dalian that surpassed even the numbers seen in Xiamen. The events were the result of fears that the damage done to Dalian's dikes by Tropical Storm Muifa could cause leaks from the Fujia PX plant, located on the coast.<sup>67</sup> According to one Dalian resident, an online message asked citizens to "stroll" on the People's square, the same terminology used in Xiamen to call for

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Jonathan Watts, "Chinese protesters confront police over incinerator plans in Guangzhou."

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Samuel Wade, "China Says Will Shut Plant as Thousands Protest," *China Digital Times*, August 14, 2011.

protest while dodging China's censors. Further use of social media to spread the word resulted in a demonstration by an estimated 12,000 people, who demanded that the PX plant be moved. Other accounts suggest that the number of people involved may have been as high as seventy thousand.<sup>68</sup> As reported in Reuters, "protesters including children marched holding banners that declared: 'I love Dalian and reject poison,' 'return me my home and garden, get out PX, protect Dalian,' and 'Return my future generations' beautiful home,' according to eyewitness accounts." The plant was ordered to shut down in response, and the authorities made a pledge to move the plant, although no timetable was given.<sup>69</sup>

The Dalian protest bears some important similarities to the two previously discussed protests. First, it reflected a distrust of those in charge. Although the local government insisted that no chemical leaks had taken place as a result of the tropical storm, the public was not so easily persuaded. Second, significant numbers of middle-class citizens were involved. As Meg Rithmire noted on *The China Beat* on August 15, 2011, Dalian is home to many middle and upper-class Chinese and is considered a very desirable place to live. This privileged position is what allowed them to not only express concern over the state of their environment, but also to protest in an effort to improve it.

### Shifang

While the "mass incidents" in Xiamen, Guangzhou, and Dalian were relatively peaceful, demonstrations against the construction of a molybdenum-copper alloy plant in Shifang in Sichuan Province resulted in clashes with police in the summer of 2012. Tens of thousands of

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<sup>68</sup> Jonathan Watts, "China orders petrochemical plant shutdown after protests," *The Guardian*, August 14, 2011.

<sup>69</sup> Sui-Lee Wee, "China says will shut plant as thousands protest," *Reuters*, August 14, 2011.

citizens were involved in three days of protests before the government agreed to cancel the construction in Shifang. Thousands of riot police attempted to disperse the demonstrators after they entered the headquarters of the city government and smashed police cars. Tear gas was used, and reports indicate that at least thirteen people sustained injuries in clashes with riot police. The government also threatened that any protest organizers who did not surrender within three days would be “severely punished.”<sup>70</sup>

The Shifang demonstrations are another example of citizens’ dissatisfaction with their government. As they become more affluent, they desire greater voice than what is available to them. Reports indicate that residents of Shifang had already filed complaints opposing the copper plant, but to no avail. No public hearings took place, and the environmental report on the proposed plant was released without the inclusion of information on solid waste and waste water.<sup>71</sup> Oversights such as these contributed to the public’s distrust of authority.

### Ningbo

Concern over PX emerged once again in late 2012 when citizens of Ningbo, Zhejiang Province took to the streets. A plan to expand a local chemical plant resulted in three days of protest by urban, middle-class residents of Ningbo.<sup>72</sup> Following the example of previous incidents in Xiamen and Dalian, the internet and social media were used to learn about the dangers of PX as well as to organize the protests. Stories about contamination of nearby areas sometimes become calls to action for urban activists, as was the case in Ningbo. Protesters were

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<sup>70</sup> Sui-Lee Wee and Ben Blanchard, “China city scraps alloy plant after protests,” *Reuters*, July 3, 2012.

<sup>71</sup> Tania Branigan, “Anti-pollution protesters halt construction of copper plant in China,” *The Guardian*, July 3, 2012.

<sup>72</sup> Sophie Beach, “Ningbo Protests Point to Middle Class Discontent,” *China Digital Times*, October 29, 2012.

also aware of the mixed success of the activists in whose footsteps they followed; even after local authorities promised to stop the expansion of the plant, they continued to protest out of pure suspicion and lack of trust in their government.<sup>73</sup>

A statement made by a resident of Ningbo who was involved in the protest perfectly captures both peoples' environmental awareness stemming from affluence and their dissatisfaction with the government:

“It is said that this project would bring a large increase in GDP—which may be a good thing for the city. But we believe it will pollute the soil we live on, the water we drink, the food we eat, and the air we breathe. We’d just love to have a clean place to live and to preserve it for the later generations. We aren’t so concerned about how much money the project brings because we are already satisfied with the current economic situation. We don’t trust the treatment techniques to reduce emissions or the official ‘assessment’ of the pollution impact.”<sup>74</sup>

These two factors, combined with the increasing prevalence of the internet and the use of social media, creates a situation where citizens see protests as a potential method of addressing their concerns.

### Kunming

Kunming, Yunnan Province, was the site of two separate protests in May of 2013. The first, in much the same vein as those in Xiamen, Dalian, and Ningbo, was against the construction of a PX plant within the city. Organizers used social media to spread the word about a “civil march” in Nanping Square, which eventually attracted around two thousand participants. The Kunming protest is particularly notable for its high level of organization. Four “teach-in

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<sup>73</sup> Christina Larson, “Protests in China Get a Boost From Social Media,” *Bloomberg Businessweek*, October 29, 2012.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

zones” within Nanping Square were set up, featuring speakers who tried to educate attendees about the dangers of PX. Discussions were also held over an issue that should be familiar by now: the disconnect between the government’s environmental approval process and the concerned public. Although roughly two hundred police officers were present, no arrests or other conflicts with protesters took place.<sup>75</sup> Two weeks later, activists took to the streets once again, this time in front of the headquarters of the provincial government, rather than in a public square. One protester was arrested by plainclothes police, after which the police showed less and less opposition to the crowds, which eventually swelled to an estimated 2,500 individuals. Their initial target was the same PX project from two weeks prior, but over time the protest expanded to include opposition to the construction of a PetroChina oil refinery in Kunming. Late in the afternoon, the city’s mayor addressed the crowd in person. He promised greater transparency through the use of a Sina Weibo account and a public hearing on the matter.<sup>76</sup>

The Kunming protest provides us with another example of the general public’s frustration with their government over the lack of environmental transparency. This is a reality that even the mayor of Kunming understood when he confronted the demonstrators. As part of his effort to appease them, he seemed to suggest that in the future the public would be more involved in the decision-making process regarding the oil refinery and that the environmental impact assessments would finally be released.<sup>77</sup>

### **The Rise of Middle Class Protest**

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<sup>75</sup> “Anatomy of a Protest: Kunming citizens voice concern over chemical plant,” *East by Southeast Blog*, May 6, 2013.

<sup>76</sup> “Unstoppable: Kunming’s environmental protest movement takes a powerful turn,” *East by Southeast Blog*, May 17, 2013.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

The examples of environmental protest given here show a significant amount of middle-class involvement as well as a desire to present complaints directly to the relevant authorities. This shift in the environmental movement is the result of two factors: a significant increase in middle class environmental awareness and the failure of the government to respond appropriately to the demands of environmentally-aware middle class Chinese. According to a Pew Research Global Attitudes Project survey, 47% of the Chinese public considers air pollution to be a big problem, up from 36% just one year previously. Similarly, 40% consider water pollution a big problem, up from 33%.<sup>78</sup> This increase in middle class environmental awareness is particularly important given the special attention the government pays to the urban middle and upper classes as opposed to rural peasants. As these populations grow, the government has a vested interest in keeping them satisfied as a means to maintain social stability. It can often afford to ignore low income groups because of their lack of knowledge and resources.<sup>79</sup> Media attention is also consistently biased against the country's rural population for political reasons.<sup>80</sup> Thousands of demonstrations occur across China every year, but only those which are politically safe and involve citizens deemed more important become widely reported on, or have any hope of achieving a favorable response.

The current environmental protection system does not function at the speed demanded by environmentally-aware middle class Chinese. According to a survey of residents of 34 cities by Shanghai Jiao Tong University's Public Opinion Research Center, almost 80% of China's people

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<sup>78</sup> "Environmental Concerns on the Rise in China," *Pew Research Global Attitudes Project*, September 19, 2013.

<sup>79</sup> Benjamin Van Rooij, "The People vs. Pollution: understanding citizen action against pollution in China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 19 (2010), 63-64.

<sup>80</sup> Guobin Yang, "Brokering Environment and Health in China: issue entrepreneurs of the public sphere," *Journal of Contemporary China* 19 (2010), 107.

consider environmental protection to be more important than economic development. Not only that, over 60% indicated that there is a lack of transparency in the government's environmental protection information.<sup>81</sup> Protests often are set off by frustration over the lack of transparency and public consultation that defines the Chinese system. Although the state has an interest in improving the environmental situation, it would prefer to do so in a way that maintains its control and political stability. ENGOs have in many cases been a tool for accomplishing this. While the state sees NGOs as a partner in some cases, it has not hesitated to repress their activities when it sees fit.<sup>82</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The emergence of directly confrontational protests bolstered by significant middle class support represents a shift in the Chinese environmental movement as a whole. These protests have emerged as the result of the growing level of middle class environmental consciousness as well as the inadequacy of the government's response to serious environmental issues. This is particularly evident in the public's frustration over the lack of government transparency and public consultation. While this shift is in one sense a challenge for ENGOs, it also represents the maturation and growth of Chinese environmentalism. While ENGOs are no longer the sole actors driving Chinese environmentalism, they still have an important role to play. Protests may be an effective means of gaining the attention of the state, but they lack the connections and embeddedness that allow ENGOs to influence policy. It may be some time before social organizations are willing to link themselves to large-scale protests, but they must learn to take

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<sup>81</sup> "Survey: Govt needs to focus more on environment," *China Daily*, May 8, 2013.

<sup>82</sup> Anthony J. Spires, "Contingent Symbiosis and Civil Society in an Authoritarian State: Understanding the Survival of China's Grassroots NGOs," *American Journal of Sociology* 117 (2011), 22.



advantage of the energy and public interest they create. There is some hope that ENGOs and other groups will find success as part of China's growing non-profit sector, supported by the expansion of philanthropy that has resulted from the country's growing wealth.<sup>83</sup> Protesters could also benefit greatly from the established networks and organizational abilities of ENGOs, giving them new tools with which to accomplish their goals. Cooperation between these two groups would require significant risk-taking, especially on the part of ENGOs, but a partnership is necessary to create a united front that can work towards solutions to China's dire environmental problems.

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<sup>83</sup> Sophie Beach, "Chinese Nonprofits Survive and Thrive," *China Digital Times*, June 19, 2013.

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