

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE POLITICS OF CHINESE
ENVIRONMENTAL NONGOVERNMENTAL
ORGANIZATIONS: A CASE STUDY OF
THE GREENER BEIJING INSTITUTE

by

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ABSTRACT

Environmental activism has emerged in China since the mid-1990s and environmental nongovernmental organizations (ENGOs) are becoming increasingly visible players in China's environmental politics, drawing hundreds of thousands of Chinese citizens into environmental activities. Through a close look at the Greener Beijing Institute (GBI), this thesis examines how this grassroots group has developed in a gradual way and the characteristics of it in the context of Chinese political and social conditions. The thesis also discusses the main campaigns GBI has carried out and what difficulties they have met with in the process to exemplify how the environmental movement actually operates in China. In conclusion, the thesis shows that Chinese ENGOs today tend to adopt a conciliatory style to raise public consciousness and expand the space for political participation. Nevertheless, the road ahead for China's ENGOs is still hard. They often lack necessary financial support, technical capacity and broad public participation.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACEF	All China Environmental Foundation
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	Chinese Central Television
CPC	Chinese People's Congress
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
ENGO	Environmental NGO
EPB	Environmental Protection Bureaus
FON	Friends of Nature
GBI	Greener Beijing Institute
GVB	Global Village Beijing
GONGO	Government organized NGOs
IFAW	International Fund for Animal Welfare
INGO	International NGOs
NEPA	National Environmental Protection Agency
SEPA	State Environmental Protection Administration

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

China is facing mounting environmental pressure. As China's economy has developed at breakneck speed, a high price has been paid in the form of environmental degradation. The increasing number of factories, power stations and cars has caused very heavy air pollution in many Chinese cities. According to a Greenpeace study, every year more than 650,000 people in China die from diseases related to air pollution.¹ Other environmental issues including declining water resources, deforestation, and the loss of biodiversity are also horrible. China has been one of the biggest CO² emitter in the world and has to deal with the visible negative impact of climate change.

Faced with this crisis, the Chinese government has responded with some creative solutions and developed a series of policies, laws and regulations on environmental protection. Since 1980, a body of laws was put in place prohibiting pollution of air and water, and environmental protection has been established as a "fundamental policy" off the country. A National Environmental Protection Administration was established in the

¹Information gained from <http://www.greenpeace.org/china/en/campaigns/air-pollution> (last accessed 4/25/2010).

early 1980s to set and enforce standards for environmental quality.² Another key response is outside the government, emerging from ENGOs in China. Since the mid-1990s, Chinese ENGOs have proliferated and become key players in the environmental movement, which is marked by burgeoning ENGOs, frequently collective environmental campaigns, environmental education, and policy advocacy both online and offline. By October 2008, 3,539 environmental groups were registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA) or its local bureaus. The number of unregistered environmental organization is over 2,000 (Li, 2007). They organized public education activities and media campaigns on pollution cases and advocated alternative policy solutions. Furthermore, they started promoting public awareness of environmental justice and establishing conservation projects directly with local communities.

This thesis will examine the work of one web-based ENGO—Greener Beijing Institute (GBI), to show how this grassroots group has developed in a gradual way and the characteristics of it in the context of Chinese political and social conditions. This thesis also discusses the main campaigns of GBI and assesses its effectiveness. GBI shares many common features with other grassroots organizations, exemplifies the methods and strategies of many ENGOs, and thus tells a lot about the current state of the environmental movement in China.

² China's recent key state proenvironment policies include: The state EPA halting 30 large projects for failing to address environmental impact in January 2005; passing *Environmental Public Participation Temporary Procedures* in March 2006; passing Environmental Information Open Access Temporary Procedures to encourage open environmental information on April 2007.

This thesis is organized into five chapters. The next chapter briefly introduces the political and media context of the Chinese environmental movement. In the third chapter, I discuss Beijing's special social context, the establishment of GBI and its characteristics. I examine the main campaigns of GBI and analyze their effects in the fourth chapter. In the fifth chapter I extrapolate from the case of GBI some general conclusions about the nature of the Chinese environmental movement.

CHAPTER 2

THE POLITICAL AND MEDIA CONTEXT FOR THE CHINESE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

The Existing Political and Legal Systems in China

China's environmental movement is less than 40-year old. In 1972, Chinese representatives attended the First United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. In May 1978, the Chinese Society for Environmental Sciences, the first civilian environmental protection organization in China, was founded by some governmental agencies. It was funded entirely from national fiscal allocations and its members were primarily environmental engineers, educators and managers.³ Several years later, the government established the China Wildlife Conservation Association and the China Association of Environmental Protection Industry.⁴ Environmental problems have grown in tandem with the growth of the economy. In 1998, China went through a

³ Information from the article *Evolution of the Environmental NGOs in China*, the website of The Hauser Center <http://hausercenter.org/chinanpo/2009/05/evolution-of-environmental-ngos-in-china/> (last accessed 4/25/2010).

⁴ China Association of Environmental Protection Industry (CAEPI) was founded on March 5, 1993. It is a transregional social-economic organization formed voluntarily by enterprises engaged in environmental protection industry.

disastrous year of serious flooding and the Chinese government upgraded the National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) to a ministry level agency—the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) in 1998.

SEPA is the most important environmental protection unit in the Chinese bureaucracy. Its responsibilities include drafting regulations, policies, guidelines and environmental protection development plans for all levels of government. It conducts environmental impact assessments (EIAs) on major industrial projects and is responsible for developing and supervising programs in key regions. SEPA also liaises with the Environmental Protection Units that exist within other ministries and agencies, and sets overall policies and regulations governing subnational Environment Protection Bureaus (EPBs) (Schwartz, 2004).

Current practices outside and within Chinese ENGOs are shaped by the existing Chinese political and legal system. The ongoing state-led economy in China differs greatly from other market economies in terms of political structure and social arrangements. Since the start of the reform era in 1978, Deng Xiaoping initiated a wholesale reform of China's economic and political system. Since the 1980s, tight state control began to relax and an open and decentralized policy was adopted. With China's transition from a planned to a market economy, central-local fiscal relations have changed. In the new fiscal system established in the 1980s, local governments submit a fixed quota of local tax revenues but maintain control over a significant part of their own tax revenues. At the same time, the central government's responsibilities for financing

public welfare were transferred to local governments.

Inherited from the history, the Chinese state regards social welfare as a key state interest but the central government does not take responsibility for funding it. As the central government retreated from the market, it also retreated from being a social welfare provider. Since then, local governments have faced huge pressure to balance the development of the economy, which is the major measure of local governments' capacity, with social welfare including environmental protection (Economy, 2004).

While the Chinese government has promulgated many stringent environmental laws and regulations, China lacks an independent judiciary that has the capacity to enforce its many environmental laws. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) holds a decisive influence through its power to nominate candidates for all major positions in the people's courts. Major positions like the president and the judges of the Supreme People's Court and local people's courts are all subject to appointment or removal by the National People's Congress or the Local People's Congresses (Xie, 2010). The Supreme People's Court possesses a supervisory role but has no real power over the lower courts, which are controlled by the local governments. However, the financial resources of the local people's courts are provided by their respective local governments. On many occasions, local judges make decisions based on local government's interests or subjective notions rather than in strict accordance with the laws.

Recognizing the limitations of the state as the enforcer of environmental laws and regulations, the central government has explicitly encouraged NGO authority to fill the

gap of social welfare needs such as environmental protection, education and medical care. China's leaders have allowed the establishment of NGOs, encouraged media attention on environmental issues and advocated independent NGO activities to protect the environment and educate the public (Economy, 2004). In this political context, the first formally registered Chinese ENGO, Friends of Nature (FON) was founded in 1994 by Mr. Liang Congjie, signaling the beginning of a bottom-up Chinese environmental movement (Yang, 2007). This was quickly followed by Global Village Beijing in 1996, which was registered as a private business entity under the Bureau of Industry and Commerce.

However, the Chinese government exhibits an ambiguous attitude towards the development of ENGOs. On the one hand, the government actively encourages environmental protection and has established many relevant environmental policies; on the other hand, it puts tight constraints on the registration of NGOs (Yang, 2005). Current Chinese laws require all NGOs to register with the MOCA or its local branches, but the requirement and process are strict and complicated.⁵ So many grassroots ENGOs cannot register to obtain legal status. Under restrictive government constraints and with scant

⁵ To register, NGOs must first undergo examination by a government bureau with a connection to the NGO's area of interest. After an initial screening process, application can be made to the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA). What is more, NGOs in China must find a "supervisory unit" which must be in the government to sponsor and supervise its activities. Besides dual registration, another major obstacle for private organizations wishing to register is the high bar set for establishing an NGO. According to the 1998 Regulations of Registration of Social Organizations, Social Organizations must be corporate entities, and they must have over 50 members (or 30 institutional members) as well as 100,000RMB in operating funds for establishing national organizations (or 30,000 RMB for local organization) (Ma, 2006).

financial and human resource support, many ENGOs are either born online or established a web presence to initiate actions among members and the general public (Liu, 2009).

The Internet has thus become an invaluable tool for ENGOs to create, expand, and maintain the network of environmental activist and new possibilities for the environmental movement in China (Liu, 2009). Some ENGOs as well as governmental agencies and research centers use the Internet to promote themselves to the public.

Websites also have begun to multiply among grassroots groups organized by volunteers, usually unregistered and with no full-time staff (Yang, 2005). At the same time, the environmental movement is no longer just “bird watching, tree planting and picking waste up,” but has expanded to represent public welfare, participate in government decision-making, supervise the government, defend environmental rights and enhance public participation in their activities. The save the Tibetan antelope campaign in 2000, the protest against Nujiang River hydropower development in 2003, the “setting air conditioner at 26 degree Celsius” campaign and the “move the Beijing Zoo” campaign in 2004 are all good examples of the broaden scope of environmental activism.

What is more, members of ENGOs become more and more diverse. In June 2004, the Society of Entrepreneurs & Ecology (SEE) was established, which is China’s first NGO consisting of nearly one hundred famous enterprises. One year later, the All China Environment Federation (ACEF), a government-organized NGO (GONGOs)⁶ under the

⁶ “GONGOs are organizations that are both registered with the government and are directly affiliated with the state bureaucracy: percentage of funding received from government and the

supervision of the SEPA of China, was established. During this period, more and more international ENGOs entered China and carried out a large number of campaigns all over the country. Based on the research of ACEF, there are 90 international ENGOs in China as of 2008 including Conservation International, Green Peace and Wild Aid. Some international ENGOs entered China earlier have expanded their work and impacts (Ma, 2006).

The Role of Media in Environmental Movements

The Chinese media has been a strong supporter of ENGOs from the very beginning (Yang, 2005), as evidenced by the extensive coverage of ENGOs and by media professionals' direct participation in ENGOs as organizers or members. It is common for ENGO leaders or staff members to work in the media. Such people are referred to as "amphibious men."⁷ For example, nearly 10% of the members of FON are media professional, like Feng yongfeng who is a journalist with the *Guangming Daily*. Wang Yongchen, a journalist with China Central Radio Station, cofounded Green Earth Volunteers. Zhang Kejia, a journalist at *China Youth Daily*, registered the organization Green Island.

Beyond this kind of direct connection, many people in ENGOs have experience working in media before their ENGO work. The founder of FON, Liang Congjie, was the

number of government officials serving among the NGO staff or boards of directors" (Schwartz, 2004).

⁷ The people work in both ENGOs and the media.

editor of the Encyclopedia of China Publishing House and one of the founders of a monthly publication called *Encyclopedic Knowledge*. Liao Xiaoyi, the director of GVB, was a hostess of CCTV's program *The Moment of Environmental Protection*. The founder of the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs, Ma Jun, worked at *South China Morning Post* for almost 10 years.

The extensive involvement of journalists in ENGO activities has led some researchers to coin the phrase "the NGO ization of the media". As a journalist remarked about some of his colleagues "they are not content to be story-tellers. They want to become story makers themselves." Journalists have played a pivotal role in all the major environmental campaigns in recent years (Lu, 2005). They often go to the activity site of a project directly and write reports afterwards. They also share their findings with other journalists through the "Journalist Salon," a regular forum event on environmental issues that they jointly organized. There are other similar forums organized by ENGOs like the "Sustainable energy journalist's forum" presented by GVB. According to its founder Liao Xiaoyi: "There are about 60 journalists attending our forum every time" (Shen, 2008, p.17). Because of the good relationship between the media and ENGOs, the activities and initiatives of ENGOs are comparatively easy to report to the public. After Zhang Kejia's long article criticizing the Nu River dam was published in *China Youth Daily*, other journalists followed suit and more and more reports came out. In the end, over 180 domestic media outlets covered the story. The public attention thus generated was crucial in securing victory for the environmental campaigners (Lu, 2005). Moreover, cooperation

between the media and ENGOs is increasing and groups like FON and GVB as well as newer ENGOs appear regularly in media outlets. The media resources of these major ENGOs create aggregate effects, which bring out a larger coverage of the mass (Shen, 2008).

There are many reasons for this close alliance between the media and ENGOs in China. The first one is the obstacles Chinese ENGOs face. Unlike legal systems in democratic countries, China's laws and regulations do not protect or promote the growth of NGOs, but rather discourage registration and control politically sensitive speech. Therefore, the media has become a vital ally that helps promote their campaigns and attract the attention both of the public and the government. Liao Xiaoyi once said: "I am not afraid of being a star, as the leader of an ENGO who has neither money nor power; it is a good thing to be followed by the media" (Shen, 2008, p.18).

Secondly, according to Yang (2005)

ENGOs and the media in China are influenced by the same changing political system. Chinese media professionals are in an awkward position, having to 'please and serve two masters': the Party superiors who have political authority over the press and the market which puts economic constraints on it. (p.56)

Environmental issues are popular and attractive to the media audience, but they are also loaded with political meanings, so it is safest to discuss "pure" environmental issues⁸ and cater to the state policy line on sustainable and harmonious society (Yang, 2004).

⁸ Environmental activists in China pretend that environmental protection goes beyond the politics. It is safe for them to stay in the environmental realm, instead of getting involved in politics, even though the pure environmental issue does not exist.

With the decreasing levels of financial subsidies from the state, the media have to survive in the market economy. The media's freedom to discuss news and public affairs those are not of high sensitive political issues have been increased due to a loosening state control (Liebman, 2005). Over the past decade, media commercialization has facilitated its increasing role of "exposing alleged wrongdoing, criticizing officials for failure to address injustice and influencing both the outcome of individual disputes and interpretation of existing legislation" (Liebman, 2005, p.7). In the realm of environmental protection, the media has played a crucial role in exposing enterprises that disobey environmental laws and large scale abuse of environment. Meanwhile, social-network media are expanding the boundaries of content to deliver more incisive and political risky information with blogs and podcasts.

The media has been played an integral role in the development of environmental protection and environmental awareness in China since the late 1970s, when the state opened its door to the outside world. Starting in 1978, when China's first legislation on the environment was put in place, a few print and broadcast media began to offer columns and feature programs on the environment. *China Environment News*, China's first newspaper on the environment was published in 1983, and the first publishing house on environmental science was set up in 1980. China Centre Television (CCTV), China's largest TV network, launched its first environmental feature, *The Animal World*, in 1981 (Yang, 2008). Although the overall coverage at that time was quite primitive and limited, professional environmental media began to take shape. Beginning in the 1990s, when

many of China's most important environmental laws went into effect, the government learned to use the news media to further its policy directives. The media gained ground as an indispensable environmental watchdog with its ability to supervise the wrong-doers and communicate with the public (Liebman, 2005). As the public woke up to environmental issues, the market conscious media had to respond quickly. Environmental journalists started to look into the deep story behind the surface in the first place instead of only disseminating environmental knowledge. Media coverage created public demand for authoritative and accurate information which forced the government to release an annual report on the environment, a monthly report on the water quality of major rivers, and a daily report on the air quality of major Chinese cities starting in 1996 (Yang, 2008).

The emergence and the growing influence of online media with its potential to break and reconfigure existing social boundaries, changed the landscape of environmental communication in China beginning in 2000. Chinese authorities put strict censorship on the print and broadcast media reports,⁹ but found it increasingly difficult to monitor internet news sources. In the case of major breaking stories, the internet's capacity to provide frequent updates throughout the day means that news may spread nationally before local authorities are even aware of the stories being published. According to Liebman, the loosening of state control over the internet also reflects the government's decision to encourage a variety of actors to support state approaches to addressing social

⁹ Although Chinese authorities often block access to overseas websites, and the authorities devote significant resources to monitoring and restricting web postings, the restrictions are relatively loose compared with those on TV and print.

problems. “The development of China's media thus parallels the development of the legal system more generally in important respects, in particular in the granting of incentives to those who challenge local authorities” (Liebman, 2005, p. 63). In addition, media reports that are blocked from print media are from time to time posted on the internet.

However, traditional media like TV remain the dominant source of news for most of the population. The national television penetration rate was 98.2% in 2005. The nationwide TV audience amounts to 1167 billion people (Wang, 2008). In China, television channels are owned by the state or local governments and state-owned media groups, particularly at the national level, are still the most influential in the industry. The media still plays a vital role as a mouthpiece of the government to spread opinions and promote the implementation of the governments' environmental policies (Xie, 2010).

CHAPTER 3

GREENER BEIJING AND LARGER SOCIAL CONTEXT

The Social and Economic Context of Beijing

Beijing, as the capital of China, is a centre of culture and media, but also famous for its terrible air pollution and sandstorms. Beijing is vying with Mexico City for the “honor” of the world’s most polluted capital. Water quality deterioration is also severe due to excessive pumping of the underground water and to uncontrolled industrial pollution.¹⁰

Since 1998, Beijing’s municipal government has taken serious measures and spent much money to improve its environment. In 1998, there were only 100 days with good air quality, while there were 241 such days in 2007. Of course, this is mainly due to the \$12 billion effort to green the 2008 Olympics. The Blue Sky Program required clean energy use in the Olympic village, closed nearly 200 industries in the region, converted buses and taxis to cleaner fuels, and encouraged clean transport pilot projects. While the Blue Sky Program pushed dirty industries to clean up, close, or move—most notable was

¹⁰ Information gained from Greenpeace website:
<http://www.greenpeace.org/china/en/campaigns/air-pollution/beijing-air-pollution-index> (last accessed 4/25/2010).

the closure of the Capital Iron and Steel Plant in northern Beijing—the Beijing government enacted stricter industrial standards in 2004 and identified the 28 worst polluters in the city.¹¹

According to Lei (2007), “besides administrative measures, the authorities in Beijing also demonstrated an open attitude by involving ENGOs in environmental governance as a supervising force” (p. 94). The “Law on Evaluation of Environmental Effects”, implemented on September 1, 2003, was hailed as a landmark of the legal system of environmental protection. It stipulates that before approving any project that may affect the environment, the authorities must hold consultative meetings and public hearings to collect opinions from relevant organizations, experts and the public. It is the first legal document that enables the participation of the public in environmental-policy making processes. The people have the right to know, to understand and to supervise public policy related to their environment. It also means that anyone preventing people from taking part in the decision-making process is breaking the law.¹²

The campaigns to promote “greenness” for the Olympic Games produced many instrumental brochures and videos for the public. The Blue Sky Program and the use of clean energy greatly increased public environmental awareness in Beijing. Many ENGOs

¹¹ Stefanie Beyer, 2006. *The Green Olympic Movement: Beijing 2008*. Learned from the website of Chinese Journal of International Law:

<http://chinesejil.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/full/5/2/423> (last accessed 4/25/2010).

¹² Pan Yue, 2006. *The environment needs public participation*. Learned from the website of China Dialogue: <http://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/604-The-environment-needs-public-participation> (last accessed 4/25/2010).

used the Olympics as a platform not only to promote clean energy and green lifestyles, but also to educate the public on the importance of biodiversity, protecting endangered species and other environmental issues.

Beijing is the hub of NGO activity in China for several reasons. The central government and the municipal government are both located in the city, so it is comparatively convenient to communicate with officials at the city and national levels. There are also many foreign embassies located in Beijing which are concerned with the development of ENGOs in China and often provide support for them. The contribution of international NGOs (INGOs) to Beijing's NGO sphere is substantial, and most foreign NGOs have headquarters in the city (Lei, 2007). Beijing has the most offices of INGOs of any Chinese city who give significant financial and organizational support to Chinese NGOs. According to Ma's research, 80% of all donations to Chinese charities come from international organizations, foundations, and corporations (Ma, 2006). INGOs also provide expertise and development strategies by running conferences, workshops, seminars and lectures on how to run NGOs, apply for funding and other practical topics. The exchange of information related to funding, new policies and projects is more frequent in Beijing than in smaller cities. Therefore the leaders of ENGOs prefer to stay in Beijing to gain the latest news and network with other organizations.

Because of the density of the city's political and international organizations and activities, Beijing residents are concerned about state affairs and have a strong sense of social responsibility. The graduates of Beijing's many top-ranked universities tend to stay

in the city and maintain close ties with their university communities. The strong international presence in Beijing also fosters a cosmopolitan attitude of curiosity and openness to foreign and global ideas. Thus the Beijing population is more attuned to global environmentalism. Young people are apt to embrace trendy way to express their environmental aspirations. For example, they make fabric totes with the words “I am not a plastic bag” handwritten on them. They do performance art on the street wearing colors of trees or animals. Community events promoting environmental protection presented by local ENGOs provide many opportunities for Beijing citizens to be part of “green” campaigns. In contrast, Tianjin, a big city 75 miles away from Beijing, barely has any environmental activities. Volunteer opportunities are also abundant in the city. With the most access to funding sources and political networks, Beijing has become the most active center of new “green” activities with the most public participation.

The Origins of Greener Beijing

GBI, the first web-based ENGO in China, began its work in 1998 (Figure 3.1). The group aims to promote public awareness of and participation in environmental protection by using the internet as an efficient tool to gather volunteers and spread information. The founder of GBI, Song Gang, majored in technical English at Beijing University of Science and Technology and got his first job at the Beijing Environmental Sanitation Bureau.¹³ The birth of GBI was due to his interest in both environment and technology.

¹³ Beijing Environmental Sanitation Bureau was dismantled in 2001.



Figure 3.1 The logo of GBI (GBI's website)

In 1998, the internet was a new phenomenon and people were just starting to make their own websites. Prominent websites such as Sina.com and 163.com both sprouted up at that time. When Song Gang began to try out chat rooms online at the beginning of 1998, he heard of the concept of a personal webpage and then decided to make one as a platform for discussing environmental issues.¹⁴

His website became the first environmental website in China and attracted many users' attention. With the increasing influence of his website, Song Gang used his own savings to establish GBI and began to organize several small-scale off-line activities such as gathering wasted batteries and recycling garbage.¹⁵ At this stage, all of the organizers

¹⁴ Referred to *People's Daily*. 2000. "The Green Home Online" 9/4/2000 <http://www.greenbeijing.net/Item/185.aspx> (last accessed 4/26/2010).

¹⁵ The website GBI built was the first and one of the most popular environmental website in

had their own jobs and were involved in GBI as volunteers who shared the same ideas and had the same goal of environmental protection. Most of GBI's resources were gained by negotiating with other organizations.

Ironically, Song Gang did not plan to establish an environmental organization. At the beginning, Song Gang gathered together with friends visiting natural parks and watching birds. The website and forum were managed by him, his brother, Song Xinzhou, and some of his friends in their free time. The web-design and network maintenance were handled by Song Xinzhou, a design major at Sichuan University and Chen Chu, a doctoral student at the Beijing University of Science and Technology. Indeed, GBI was borne from the internet, which plays a crucial role in allowing Chinese ENGOs to engage in online collective actions and create a green public virtual space (Liu, 2009). Its website and forum are critical to its development. Since its founding, their online bulletin board has attract 15,107 registered members who are active both online and offline throughout the country. The users have to create a name and password to register to send messages on the forum. Zhou Ling, Song Xinzhou's wife, is in charge of membership and volunteers. She shapes discussions and modifies political tone by monitoring the discussions of registered members.

Critical to the successful expansion of GBI was Song Gang's ability to link networks

China. It has received wide recognition and many honors, such as the spell out CIS Top 100 Chinese websites; the 1999 National Internet Application and Design Award; and the 1998 China Homepage Design Competition Award. Information gained from GBI's website: <http://www.grchina.org/greenerbj.htm> (last accessed 6/18/2010).

of academics interested in internet technology and government officials to support its campaigns. His own research, widely published in academic journals and presented at international conferences, focuses on the concept of e-government which involves utilizing web and social networking technology to enhance citizen participation in governance and increase its accountability.¹⁶ Linking his academic interests to government service, he currently serves as director of the Mobile Government Laboratory China and also as a guest professor at the Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunication. He also held the position of director of system development for the Management Information System of City Operations System for Beijing Olympics in which capacity he became one of the earliest figures utilizing internet technology to promote political development in China. In a paper he presented at a conference on mobile government in Europe in 2005 he argued that “mobile technology, or ubiquitous computing at large, will further push forward the organizational and social change following the internet technology.”¹⁷

Neither of the Song brothers had a political ambition to challenge China’s social or state structure nor advocate democracy as the “Tiananmen” generation did. The original

¹⁶ One goal of e-government will be greater citizen participation. Through the internet, people from all over the country can interact with politicians or public servants and make their voices heard. E-government helps voters better decide who to vote for in the future or how to help the public servants become more productive. A government could theoretically move more towards a true democracy with the proper application of e-government.

¹⁷ Information gained from:

<http://www.massconf.org/2010/ShowOrganizerDetails.aspx?personID=52> (last access at 6/17/2010).

intent of GBI was “pure” environmental protection,¹⁸ understood to be consistent with the state’s goals. But the strategies and goals they adopted for GBI reflected the values of participatory and accountable government implied in the notion of e-government or mobile government.

In 2001, Song Xinzhou took over leadership of GBI from Song Gang when he developed health problems.¹⁹ Inspired by a sense of responsibility to society and the commitment of volunteers who had supported GBI for a long time, Song Xinzhou quit his job as a graphic designer for the Sichuan Provincial Government and came to Beijing to head up GBI.²⁰ But Song Gang’s political philosophy still influences GBI’s development. Song Xinzhou, like his brother, also emphasizes public participation, volunteerism, and nonhierarchical relationships both within and between organizations. He once said “the road ahead for Chinese environmental protection lies in public participation....Only cooperation between government, industry and the public will bring about real change and a new era in public participation in the environment.”²¹ According

¹⁸ Environmental activists in China pretend that environmental protection goes beyond the politics. It is safe for them to stay in the environmental realm, instead of getting involved in politics, even though the pure environmental issue does not exist.

¹⁹ According to Song Xinzhou, his brother, who had been plagued with ill health since childhood, created serious health problems for himself during GBI’s first major campaign to Save the Tibetan Antelope because he exhausted himself with overwork and lack of sleep. Xinzhou claims he took over GBI because of his brother’s declining health. Xinzhou told me that since GBI is extremely loosely structured and informal, literally a virtual community, if he had not taken it over, it might have fallen apart.

²⁰ Interview with Mr. Song Xinzhou 1/14/2010.

²¹ Song Xinzhou. 2008. Public Participation: highs and lows. From China Dialogue website: <http://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/161> (last access at 6/17/2010).

to Song, public participation needs to top the environmental agenda—for government and NGOs. In his interview, he kept emphasizing the simplicity of GBI’s mission, that is “pure” environmental protection and education, and he tried to avoid involvement in any political topics. But he emphasized that in order to achieve his goal of promoting an environmentally sustainable society, both government enforcement and civil society participation are essential.

CHAPTER 4

CAMPAIGNS OF GBI AND THEIR EFFECTS

Having explained the history of GBI's emergence and development, we now turn to analysis of the four most influential environmental campaigns staged by GBI—the campaign to save Tibetan antelopes, the campaign to promote green Beijing, the campaign to do environmental education in Bars and the campaign to save the grassland in Inner Mongolia—to see how a grassroots organization carries out campaigns and what difficulties they met in the process to exemplify how the environmental movement actually operates in China.

Save Tibetan Antelope Campaign

The campaign to save the Tibetan antelope was a major event in the environmental movement in China. The Tibetan Antelope is an endangered species that inhabits the remote plateau of Tibet, Qinghai and Xinjiang provinces in China. They are killed illegally to make shahtoosh shawls which sell for thousands of dollars in fashion shops in London, Paris, New York and Hong Kong. International trade in the wool has been banned for over 20 years, but demand remains so high that poachers are still gunning

down whole herds, often with automatic weapons. Experts estimate that only about 70,000 of the antelope in 1999 remained down from over a million around 1900, and that 20,000 were being killed every year for their wool. The Tibetan antelope's range covers 130,000 square kilometers of rugged terrain with elevations over 13,000 feet, making antipoaching efforts difficult.

FON learned the story of Tibetan antelopes from Yang Xin, a river explorer and photographer at the end of 1995.²² Yang Xin was inspired by the martyrdom of Sonam Dorje, who was the head of the West Working Committee (*xibu gongwei*) of Zhiduo County, Qinghai province.²³ Led by Sonam Dorje, the committee fought against the poaching in the part of the Kekexili region under the jurisdiction of Zhiduo County. Sonam Dorje, however, was killed by the poachers in 1994 in a gunfight. Deeply moved by his heroic death, Yang Xin vowed to build a nature preservation station in Kekexili as a base to combat poachers (Sun & Zhao, 2007).

FON's early efforts from 1996 to 1998 took the form of supporting Yang Xin to build the station. It became more directly and actively involved in the campaign after Zhawa Dorje, brother-in-law of Sonam Dorje, came to Beijing at the invitation of the FON and

²² Yang Xin, the leader of Green River, used to be a photographer of the Yangzi River. In 1994, he organized the TV crew for "The Mysterious Yangtze Source" (team captain); found the area deteriorating even more, and numbers of the rare Tibetan antelopes on the Tibetan Plateau decreasing further. The animal is on the verge of extinction. Information gained from: <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2005/Sep/140930.htm> (last accessed 4/26/2010).

²³ The West Working Committee was established in 1992 by Zhiduo County. Its original mission was to explore and manage the mineral resources in the county in order to develop the local economy. Yet Sonam Dorje shifted its focus to fighting poaching of Tibetan antelopes.

the magazine *Green Weekend* in October 1998. The charismatic Zhawa Dorje reassembled the West Working Committee after Sonam Dorje's death and turned it into an armed antipoaching team, better known by its nickname the "Wild Yak Brigade." The ensuing media reports portrayed Zhawa Dorje as an altruistic lone hero who persisted in regular patrols in the desolate Kekexili region to protect an endangered species despite forbidding natural conditions and extreme financial straits.

After that, Liang Congjie (The leader of FON) sent a letter to British Prime Minister Tony Blair during his official visit to China in 1998, asking him to use his personal influence to raise awareness of the plight of the Tibetan antelope. He also tried to win support from the central government. His proposal to the SEPA and the State Forestry Administration on coordinated antipoaching efforts between the three provinces of Tibet, Qinghai and Xinjiang was partly adopted by the authorities, resulting in the widely publicized Kekexili No. 1 Action in April 1999, a joint wildlife crime fighting operation by authorities, which extended state legal protection to several endangered species.

GBI joined in the cause in 1999, launching a website featuring the "Save the Tibetan antelope campaign" to disseminate information and mobilize support. Although many ENGOs were concerned about the situation of the Tibetan antelope and provided aid to Kekexili, the bloody hunting was not constrained at all. At that rate of killing, the Tibetan antelope was predicted to become extinct in 1 or 2 years. A joint force was needed in a hurry. GBI did not have a broad network at that time, but given to its dynamic activities online, many ENGOs in Beijing began to contact it and tried to find ways to cooperate on



Figure 4.1 Save the Tibetan Antelope Website Union (GBI website)

this campaign. After considering the suggestions of volunteers and other ENGOs, GBI led the team and made use of its website to develop a *Save the Tibetan Antelope Website Union* in 2000²⁴ (Figure 4.1). Before GBI grew stronger, its strategy to rely on the internet was very successful and got wide attention both from other ENGOs and the public.

GBI's launching of the *Save the Tibetan Antelope Website Union* was the first collaborative action of environmental groups in China. GBI took the leading role in integrating the work of different organizations, websites and the media, including 125 websites like Sina.com, Chinaren.com and Focus.cn. The campaign succeeded in bringing national and international attention to this endangered species. GBI also cooperated with some INGOs, for instance, International Fund for Animal Welfare

²⁴ Interview with Mr. Song Xinzhou. 1/14/2010.

(IFAW). They held an online auction together to fundraise for the Wild Yak Brigade.²⁵

GBI hoped to take this opportunity to form a long-term, comprehensive assistance project for the antelope. They also expected to promote a universal ecological consciousness among the public by saving the antelope.²⁶ The Chinese government which had been very sensitive to the collaboration with foreign organizations tolerated GBI's work with foreign environmental groups because it focused on "pure" natural species conservation case.

From April to June in 2000, the *Website Union* together with 27 universities in Beijing organized exhibitions and seminars about saving the Tibetan antelope and presented a benefit performance at Qinghua University raising money and awareness for their cause. Over 30 pop singers and campus theater troupes performed. Journalists who worked in Kekexili also gave reports of the situation of the Tibetan antelope during the performance. On May 28th, GBI ran a live online chat with the members of the Wild Yak Brigade in Kekexili on their website, which attracted the participation of huge numbers of members. Moreover, the first internet song, *Heaven on Fire* was composed by GBI volunteers in October, 2000. This song called for saving the endangered Tibetan antelope and was widely used in the subsequent activities. People can still listen to and download this song from their website.²⁷

The Save the Tibetan antelope campaign gained great media publicity and

²⁵ Referred to GBI's website: <http://www.grchina.org/greenerbj.htm> (last accessed 4/26/2010).

²⁶ Interview with Mr. Song Xinzhou. 1/14/2010.

²⁷ Referred to GBI's website: <http://www.grchina.org/greenerbj.htm> (last accessed 4/26/2010).

international support. Beijing Youth Newspaper, Beijing Broadcast Station, Beijing TV Station and the Hong Kong Phoenix TV Station all reported on it. This is a typical example of how GBI's online activities worked as a catalyst for "off-line" environmental activism. At the same time, the Tianjin TV station presented a program called "Green Trip to the West." Wild Yak Brigade members and environmental protection volunteers gave speeches about saving the Tibetan antelope and its ecological environment along the way. GBI used this program as a good opportunity to promote the Save the Tibetan antelope campaign by updating the follow-up reports and news on the *Web Union* every day.²⁸

This campaign was considered the largest public online charitable activity in China up to that point (Yang, 2007) and also a turning point for GBI. Through this campaign, GBI began to identify and communicate with many like-minded activists in ENGOs, experts and journalists who are also concerned the environment. The personal networks galvanized by the Song brothers for this inaugural campaign of GBI have subsequently been built up and have played an important role in the campaigns that followed this one.

One of the largest successes of this campaign was that ENGOs discovered the power of acting together and mobilizing for cross-regional cooperation. They benefited from collaboration which gained them national media exposure. As a result, the Tibetan antelope is much better protected than before and the number of them has increased gradually. This campaign also aroused international attention on the harmful effects of

²⁸ Referred to GBI's website: <http://www.grchina.org/greenerbj.htm> (last accessed 4/26/2010).

the shahtoosh trade. This animal is on the US list of the Endangered Species Act and protected worldwide. However, this campaign was not a complete success. It centered on supporting the Wild Yak Brigade, which entangled it with local politics. Their forceful promotion of the brigade brought conflict with local authorities and other forces which had interests in the Kekexili Bureau. The brigade was disbanded in the end even though it got support from the central government, an interesting demonstration of the declining power of the central state towards local authorities.²⁹ Afterwards, the disheartened ENGOs gradually withdrew their attention and support from Qinghai. Yet, the collective action in this campaign was a breakthrough in which they shared experiences and lessons and explored the boundaries of advocacy through trials of various mobilization strategies, some of which worked and some of which did not.

The “Green Beijing for Green Olympics” Campaign

The campaign to promote Green Beijing started in 2001 when Beijing was bidding to host the 2008 Olympic Games. The Chinese government was eager to improve Beijing’s environmental quality and do public environmental education. The government presented a comprehensive environmental plan applicable to all segments of the Games: venue

²⁹ Yushu prefecture disbanded the Brigade in August 1999. FON with 17 journalists wrote a petition to Vice Premier Wen Jiabao appealing for a revocation of this decision. There was an intervention directly from Wen Jiabao but it only temporarily halted the dissolution scheme. At the end of 2000, the Yushu government disbanded the Brigade again (Sun & Zhao, 2007). A popular saying on the local officials is: After a new regulation comes out, we have coping measures accordingly.

construction, transportation, pollution control and waste management. The Beijing Olympic Committee also sent out an initiative to call people to participate actively in a campaign called “environmental protection, starting from me”. Liu Jingmin, the Vice Mayor of Beijing and Vice Chairman of the Beijing Olympic Committee said that the public’s participation in governmental efforts to improve the quality of Beijing’s environment were the most significant support for the bid.³⁰

Taking advantage of the state promotion of a “Green Olympics,” GBI and the doctoral class of the School of Environmental Science and Engineering at Qinghua University jointly initiated the “Green Beijing for Green Olympics” campaign by collecting articles, photos and paintings from the public. All submissions had to use “green” as a point of view, reflecting both the beauty of nature and problems with Beijing’s environment. This initiative mobilized the enthusiasm of the public for environmental protection and showed its responsiveness to the government. But the most important outcome was to call up advice and suggestions from the public and then deliver them to the government for consideration as policy. GBI collected the submissions and posted them on its website. Doctoral students at Qinghua University offered many high quality articles as well as technical support. According to Song Xinzhou, some suggestions involving the inappropriate proportion of male and female trees which causes too many spring catkins, river rigidification and transportation development strategies were reflected in a number

³⁰ Stefanie, 2006. The Green Olympic Movement: Beijing 2008. Learned from the website of the Chinese Journal of International Law: <http://chinesejil.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/full/5/2/423> (last accessed 6/17/2010).

of governmental policies.³¹

This campaign is a good example of GBI's political sophistication. It worked in a loose alliance with the government to implement a government proposal at the local level, while transferring public opinion back to government officials and trying to influence policy. The strategy was a success: on the one hand, the government welcomed ENGOs' help in educating the public and promoting "green" ideas; on the other hand, the public was enthusiastic about discussing "green" topics and participating in developing a cleaner Beijing for the Olympics.

Here, as in other campaigns, Song Gang's personal networks played a crucial role in the success of the campaign. His relationships with both the academic community and governmental officials facilitated GBI's efforts to get support from Qinghua University and to get information and ideas up to the upper levels of the city government. Wang Yongchen, the director of Green Earth Volunteers, has pointed out the importance of cultivating contacts within the government, building alliances with sympathetic and activist-minded officials before openly putting forward policy initiatives and critiques. GBI has clearly adopted this approach.

³¹ Song Gang was in charge of the City Operations System for the Beijing Olympics; however, I am not clear if he initiated this campaign during or after this job.

The Bars Campaign

Another of GBI's campaigns promotes public awareness of environmental protection by using another strategy—linking environmental protection with popular trends and fashions. In July 2001, GBI began the Environmental Awareness Promotion Tour in Bars, trying to promote environmental awareness among the urban middle class and the younger generation. They presented several concerts in bars with the theme of “Our Earth” in collaboration with the rock band *Jiu Tian* (Figure 4.2). The shows included contests with prizes like reusable handbags and CDs of *Jiu Tian*'s music. The bags were used for carrying dining utensils, so as to avoid the use of throwaway chopsticks and other disposable goods. All the bags were handmade by GBI volunteers.³² By presenting concerts, GBI combined “green” ideas with popular culture and introduced it to a new group of people, strategizing that if young people see environmental protection as something trendy, public awareness will greatly increase.

In this campaign, GBI got beyond its normal network with other ENGOs and opened a new connection with pop stars and cultural organizations. Their goals included not only environmental education but also changing business practices and consumer behavior. This campaign reflected Song Xinzhou's view that NGOs should become adopt certain corporate strategies to improve the effectiveness of their operations, while corporations should adopt the goals and values of NGOs by taking environmental protection and other

³² Referred to GBI's website: <http://www.grchina.org/greenerbj.htm> (last accessed 4/26/2010).



Figure 4.2 Slogan of Bars Campaign (GBI website)

social responsibilities into account.³³

GBI tailors its campaigns to attract different audiences. For example, in the Save Tibetan Antelope Campaign, GBI focused on young internet users, media workers and politicians. In the Green Beijing campaign they focused on Beijing citizens and its academic community, people who care about the quality of life in Beijing. In the Beijing Bars Campaign GBI took its environmental protection message to entertainment venues favored by young professionals and students. The concerts were well attended and created abundant buzz. People loved to be a part of these activities which at the very least raised consciousness about environmental issues and the possibilities for citizen involvement in social change, and probably even inspired some people to change some of their daily habits.

The Grasslands Campaign

In 2002, GBI moved its attention from environmental education to advocacy focused on a local and community-based case in the grasslands of Inner Mongolia. The East Ujumchin Banner is located in the northeastern part of Xilingol league in the Inner

³³ Chinese: NGO 公司化, 公司NGO化

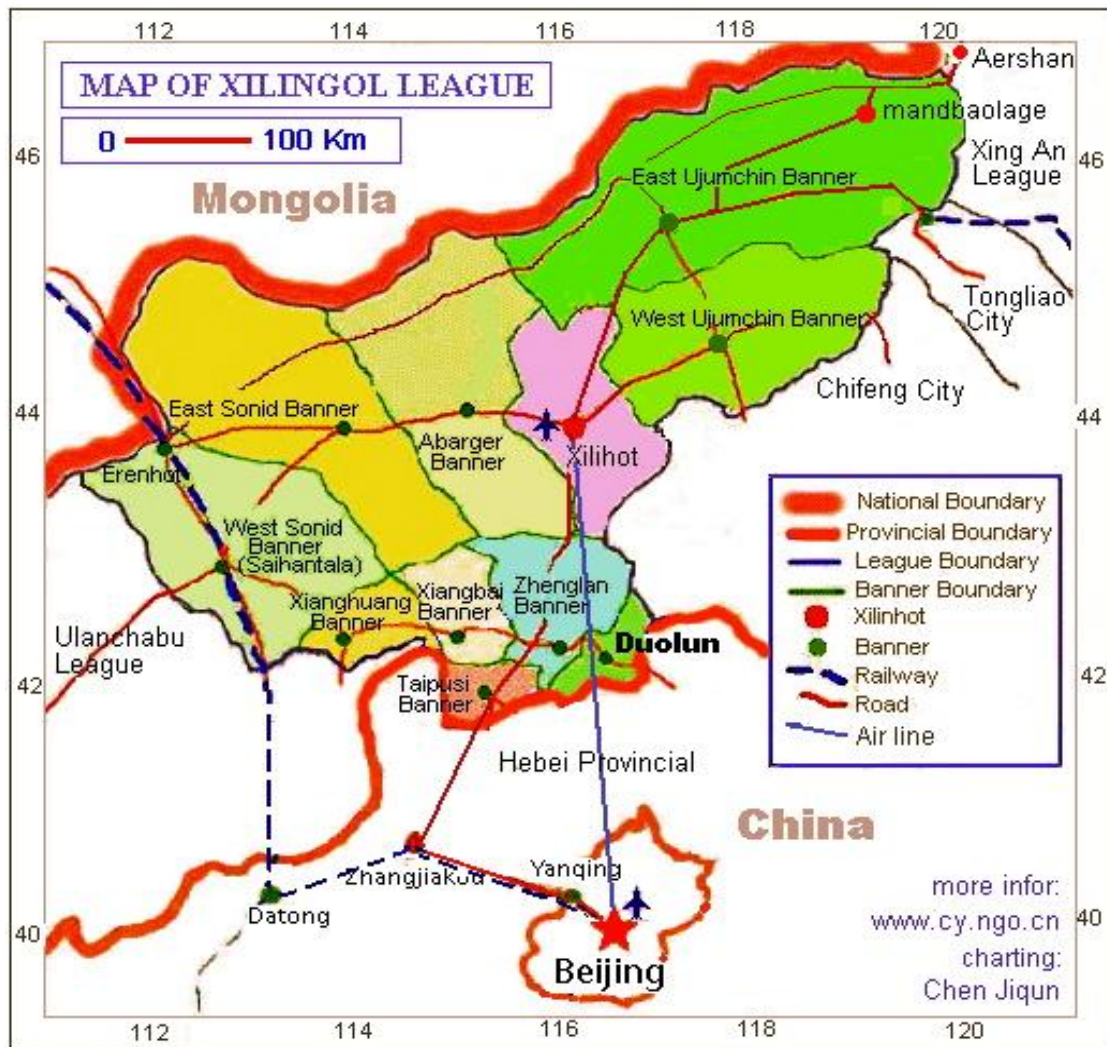


Figure 4.3 Map of Xilingol League (Echoing Steppe's website)

Mongolia Autonomous Region. It is 850 kilometers from Beijing, covers an area of 47,326 square kilometers and has a population 57,000, of which 38,000 are Mongolian (Figure 4.3). East Ujumchin is famous for its fertile pastures, but cultivation of land was forbidden throughout history until 1969, when the Ulagai Cultivation District was established.³⁴ After that, the Ulagai River was destroyed and large areas of land were

³⁴ The Division No.6 of Inner Mongolian Development Force occupies and makes use of more

cultivated with great damage to the environment.³⁵ By 1986, a total of 16,000 hectares of grasslands were cultivated in Ulgai River Valley. In the same year, the government of Ujumchin Left Banner occupied 6.7 hectares of grassland to build a paper mill on herders' contracted land in Dund-Gobi Som.

According to documentation provided by the website of Echoing Steppe, an NGO focused on the preservation of existing natural grassland in Inner Mongolia and traditional nomadic culture,³⁶ on January 15th, 2000, the Shiliin-gol League Economic Bureau and the owner of a private firm called Bai Yang Dian Paper Mill signed a contract under which the latter rents 8 hectares of property from the Ujumchin Left Banner Paper Mill, including the factory building, for an annual rent of 500,000 yuan for 15 years. According to the contract, the government of the Ujumchin Left Banner promises to “provide the tenant with enough free land for sewage drainage.” In June of the same year, the paper mill arbitrarily drained heavily polluted sewage into 200 hectares of the contracted grassland of seven herder households without having any environmental assessment. According to the Southern Mongolian Human Rights Information Center,

than 10,000 square kilometers grassland and forest of Ulgai, Mand-bulag, Bogd-uul, Heseg-uul, Bayannuur, and Huulin-gol areas at the upper part of Ulgai River Valley in Ujumchin Left Banner. More than 10,000 troops, peasant workers, and retired soldiers are stationed there.

³⁵ Information gained from Echoing Steppe's website: <http://www.cy.ngo.cn/english.htm> (last accessed 4/26/2010).

³⁶ Echoing Steppe was founded by former sent down youth who were assigned to the region during the Cultural Revolution. Echoing Steppe plans and implements ecological and social studies, trainings and education for herdsman to protect their lands, interests and traditional culture. “Echoing Steppe” was formally established in April 2005 but during 2000-2004, they had already set up a website, and were publishing Mongolian language law books and so forth. This campaign happened during this period.

“No pollution treatment infrastructure [was] built, and the grassland [was] directly polluted.”³⁷

The director of Echoing Steppe was a Beijing "reeducated youth" who was sent down to Ujumchin Left Banner to live and work during the Cultural Revolution and also a volunteer for GBI.³⁸ At a volunteer meeting, he did a report on the heavily polluting industries in East Ujumchin and tried to get help from ENGOs in Beijing. The sandstorms in Beijing had been getting more severe with the destruction of the grasslands in Inner Mongolia by agricultural projects and polluting industries in the name of “developing the west.” After 5 years development, GBI had accumulated rich networks and experience and economically comfortable Beijing residents were increasingly willing to turn their attention to the plight of less fortunate people in China’s hinterlands, so Song Xinzhou decided to launch a campaign to support this Mongolian community.³⁹

First of all, GBI formed an environmental study group of scientific experts to investigate the situation in East Ujumchin. Guided by members of Echoing Steppe, they undertook a field trip of over 5,000 kilometers to witness the extent of the pollution. The companies had dug waste pools that covered tens of hectares directly into the natural grassland. Untreated waste was emitted straight into these pools, and because soil on the

³⁷ Quoted from the website of the Southern Mongolian Human Rights Information Center: <http://www.cy.ngo.cn/english.htm> (last accessed on 4/25/2010).

³⁸ “During the Culture Revolution, the Chinese state displaced millions of people and relocated them to the hinterlands. 20 million ‘educated youths’ were sent to the countryside to work on land reclamation. In Inner Mongolia, a million mu were cleared, bringing arable land to a total of 1,530,000 mu” (Shapiro, 2001:194).

³⁹ Interview with Mr. Song Xinzhou. 1/14/2010.

grassland is loosely packed, this waste seeped through into groundwater supplies, causing irreversible pollution.⁴⁰ The team of experts conducted indepth investigations of the polluted grassland and took samples back to the Beijing Academy of Environmental Science for testing. The results confirmed that the paper mill's toxic sewage output was extremely high. A second group of experts distributed questionnaires and conducted door to door interviews among local herders to study the effects of the pollution. During the interviews, they taught herders how to protect their own rights through the legal system. They also visited governmental officials and managers of factories to learn more about their attitudes.⁴¹ The local governmental officials admitted that they understood that the factories' sewage posed a fatal threat to the grassland, but they still protected the factories because they made a huge contribution to local GDP which is an important standard for evaluating local government achievements. A large quantity of videos, pictures and recordings were collected during the process which became important materials for a subsequent lawsuit against the paper mill.

According to the information of Echoing Steppe, on August 8th 2002, the Paper Mill case was placed on file for prosecution at the Shiliin-gol League Intermediate Court. On March 11th 2004, the court ordered the Ujumchin Left Paper Mill to pay 260,000 yuan (30,000 US dollars) to the plaintiffs (herders) for losses caused by pollution. On April 5th

⁴⁰ Referred to Southern Mongolian Human Rights Information Center: <http://www.cy.ngo.cn/english.htm> (last accessed on 4/2010).

⁴¹ Information gained from SEE's website: <http://see.sina.com.cn/news/2005/0323/365.html> (last accessed 4/26/2010).

2004, the plaintiff herders refused to accept the court ruling and authorized their attorney to appeal to the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region Higher People's Court. The second ruling in the pollution case ordered the defendants to pay 280,000 yuan (33,000 US dollars) to the herders as compensation for their losses.

During the case proceedings, GBI organized a conference on "Inner Mongolian Grassland Protection: Industrial Development and the Protection of the Ujumchin Left Banner's Natural Grassland" in Beijing on July, 2003, inviting many scholars of grassland ecology, relevant governmental officials, herders affected by grassland destruction and journalists. Based on the new Grassland Law, which focuses on ecological reconstruction and ecological compensation, they had a constructive discussion on the grassland management. They also highlighted the importance of protecting herders' right by legal means. At the end of the conference, the representatives signed a "Proposal for Grassland Protection and Rational Use in Inner Mongolia" and promoted this initiative for grassland protection to the public.⁴² GBI also launched a large-scale photo exhibition titled, "The Shadow of the Grasslands" in 2004. The opening ceremony included many experts, scholars, governmental staff, educated youth, NGO representatives, journalists and community representatives and the exhibition travelled to 20 universities in Beijing over 2 months. A number of media outlets reported on this

⁴² Information gained from SEE's website and GBI's website: <http://see.sina.com.cn/news/2005/0323/365.html> & <http://www.grchina.org/greenerbj.htm> (last accessed 4/26/2010).

series of activities and helped to arouse public attention on grassland protection.

Song Xinzhou was the director of this campaign and in charge of the integration of resources, strategic planning and program implementation that supported it. He indicated in our interview that many experts evolved into volunteers in the process of the campaign and devoted huge amount of time to the success of the lawsuit. Many volunteers worked on gathering and collating testimonies and evidence for the lawsuit. They edited over 500,000 words of oral recordings into written materials. GBI also did much work on public relations both with the local government and the central government in Beijing. In this campaign the central government did not just allow ENGO criticism of factories and a local government but encouraged the ENGOs to challenge these local interests in a lawsuit despite their economic importance to the region.

China's economic reforms since the 1980s have decentralized economic decision-making power. State-owned enterprises have been partially privatized, provincial governments have been given more authority, and entire sectors of the economy have been deregulated. In economic terms, this strategy has been widely successful. It has also diminished, however, the central government's reach, with significant consequences for environmental protection. Although laws and regulations are promulgated in the capital, provincial authorities are responsible for implementing them. Since provincial and local governments depend on tax revenue from local industries, shutting down polluters often runs counter to their interests. Local officials who are no longer beholden to the party patronage machine as they once were can make good money by selling land to developers

or taking bribes to protect a private factory. A promotion from Beijing is no longer the only route to upward mobility. Typical of local industrial pollution cases, in the grasslands conflict local officials were forced to choose between economic development by supporting the polluting factory or upholding national environmental protection laws. As in most such cases, they chose the former, “considering environmental protection as a costly drag on local economy” (Economy, 2005, p. 92).

Having learned to reckon with the power of a local government in the Save the Tibetan antelope campaign, GBI here took the initiative to deal directly with local officials in Ujumchin instead of relying on the central government’s support. Initially GBI and the other ENGOs involved in the campaign did their preliminary investigations of the polluted sites without publicity to avoid conflict with the local government. There were not many reports on their websites and media exposure was minimal. But once the evidence was gathered and the lawsuit was launched, they organized high-profile events in Beijing like the conference and exhibitions that were supported by a wide network of academic institutions and professionals and got great media publicity and built up political support for the cause among Beijing professionals and the public. Public sympathy in Beijing for the plight of the herders worked to pressure the central government to support their case and it in turn put pressure on the local government in Ujumchin. The result was a verdict in favor of the herders requiring the factories and local government to pay them damages.

Since the grasslands campaign, GBI has not taken up any high-profile campaigns, but

it continues its smaller scale activities online and offline. GBI organizes the planting of trees in the suburbs of Beijing every spring as it has for over 12 years. It also participates in humanitarian work. After the Yushu earthquake in Sichuan, GBI organized activities immediately online to collect materials and donations, which volunteers in Yushu and members of the Wild Yak Brigade helped to distribute (Figure 4.4).

As a web-based grassroots ENGO, organizational sustainability is always a critical issue for GBI. In our interview, Song Xinzhou pointed out that the most pressing challenge China's ENGOs face is not governmental restrictions but the lack of financial resources. For GBI, funding usually comes in for specific projects.⁴³ In the Grassland Campaign, Mr. Song used his own savings as the initial capital for the preliminary investigations. During the process, two foreign foundations became interested in the project and provided financial support.

In the first phase they got \$5200, in the phase \$20,000 and in the final phase got \$10,000 from foreign foundations. That was a 3-year campaign, and their total funding was almost



Figure 4.4 Help Yu Shu earthquake victims (GBI's website)

⁴³ Interview with Mr. Song Xinzhou. 1/14/2010.

\$40,000 from foundations as well as volunteers.⁴⁴

The funding is usually used up on the projects so not much can be used to pay for high quality staff for GBI. Song Xinzhou confessed that many of GBI's volunteers were eager to become full-time staff and some even agreed to work without payment, but he refused. "As an outsider living in Beijing, I know how huge the living pressure is. I don't want to see our staff working hard but not getting a good salary. One day in the future—when I can give a middle-level payment, I will call them back."⁴⁵

GBI also lacks a permanent working place, partly because it is a web-based ENGO so is not necessary to have an office, but it is harder to get trust from the public without a stable office space. Depending on the funding and the projects it handles, it rents offices sometimes. The office right now is the home of Song Xinzhou in Beijing. GBI also lacks formal internal decision-making mechanisms. Decisions are usually made by Song Xinzhou and then disseminated through telephone or email. Besides this, GBI does not have clearly established rules for operating projects or managing its budget. There are no set regulations on membership. Attendance at meetings and events is voluntary and participants need to share the cost of running the activities. Their behavior is governed only by trust from the leaders and individual self-consciousness of members. As with many ENGOs most members only participate in activities instead of getting involved in decision-making processes (Lei, 2007).

⁴⁴ Information gained from SEE's website and GBI's website:
<http://see.sina.com.cn/news/2005/0323/365.html> (last accessed 4/26/2010).

⁴⁵ Interview with Mr. Song Xinzhou. 1/14/2010.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

GBI, the first and one of most active web-based ENGOs, was established in 1998 without formal registration. It makes full use of the internet to launch public debates and campaigns about environmental issues and has more than 3,000 volunteers spread all over China. Song Gang and Song Xinzhou are tech savvy and their personal experiences with interest in technology have had a big impact on the development of GBI and the success of its campaigns. During the past 12 years, GBI has been experienced and witnessed the development of Chinese ENGOs and Chinese environmental movement.

The environmental movement in China exhibits some distinct collective dynamics and organizational characteristics (Lin et al., 2004). In contrast with Western social movements that tend to use more radical action and confrontational style, Chinese ENGOs tend to focus on raising public consciousness and solve specific problems through negotiation with various parties. The support for their work from SEPA is very strong. It is common now for high-ranking SEPA officials to articulate the necessity of ENGOs for safeguarding the environment. However, the government keeps a watchful eye on ENGOs. Officially, ENGOs must have a government sponsor to whom they report

their membership, funding sources, and activities. NGOs are not permitted to have branch organizations in various provinces, and no person who has been labeled a political dissident may be a member of an NGO. Environmentalists in China are aware of the government's concern about social activism; therefore, remaining nonconfrontational is the best way for them to survive and bring about changes gradually (Yang, 2005).

Unlike social movements that seek explicitly political change, GBI, like many Chinese ENGOs aims to raise public awareness and get public participation, for example in the Green Beijing for Green Olympics Campaign and the Bars Campaign. This does not mean that these groups have no political intentions or effects. As Yang points out, however, these activists consciously try to effect gradual political change through practicing—not preaching—democratic values, such as citizen participation, self-responsibility, and reasoned debate (Yang, 2004). The younger generation is more eager to engage in discussion about environmental equity and justice rather than merely the technical aspects of environmental protection. Song Xinzhou does not say that he advocates democracy or maybe he is afraid of saying that, but the values of public participation, mutual respect and personal responsibility which he insists on in all of GBI's campaigns reflect unstated political beliefs. As a matter of fact, more and more Chinese ENGOs are informed and become conscious about the political implications of being nongovernmental actors in China's political context. Democratic principles are gradually becoming the unstated values of Chinese ENGOs.

ENGOs in China are thus not puppets of governmental environmental agencies and

they have their own visions, goals and scope of influence. They pay intensive attention to the government and policy changes and they are aware of the reasons why NGO activities could be sensitive under the current Chinese system (Turner, 2004). In the Save the Tibetan Antelope Campaign, GBI was not motivated to challenge the regime, but it became embroiled in local politics. In the grasslands case, GBI actually confronted the local government and powerful local corporate interest groups directly. Although Chinese ENGOs claim to fight “purely environmental battles” instead of political ones they often become entangled in local politics and therefore shape environmental politics at multiple levels in China when they carry out their projects (Jun & Zhao, 2006).

Mass media and the internet have a uniquely important role in the Chinese environmental movement. Media support of the movement is evident in the extensive coverage of environmental organizations and their activities and in the direct participation by media professionals as organizers or members. Facilitating this alliance is the fact that both ENGOs and the media are seeking more autonomy within the changing political landscape with its paradoxical patterns of increasing openness and control. The internet facilitates communication and information sharing, promoting a green virtual community online. ENGOs also use it to organize activities and recruit members and volunteers. For informal groups like GBI, the internet makes up for the lack of resources and helps to overcome some political constraints. Chinese ENGOs and activists are delicately dealing with political constraints, and in fact have been able to achieve their goals, overcome policy obstacles, and convince the government of the productiveness of their intentions

through noncontentious means that encourage learning, cooperation, participation and dialogue (Yang, 2004).

Although there are increasing opportunities for Chinese ENGOs to get involved in decision-making processes and supervision of the government, the road ahead is still hard. China's ENGOs often lack the necessary financial support, technical capacity and broad public participation. They remain heavily reliant on international funding. International foundations, multinationals and other government agencies provide an overwhelming portion of Chinese ENGO financial wherewithal. They remain more effective at identifying problems than proposing answers. Technical proficiency is a huge challenge they are facing. What is more, until the Chinese government removes restrictions on registration and supports the full development of civil society, the environmental movement in China may remain limited in size with limited ability to get broad public participation.

The history of environmental activism in China is brief. Yet even though ENGOs have existed only since the mid-1990s, they are becoming important players in China's environmental politics and their impact is growing. So far their most important achievements are in raising public awareness of environmental problems. But as the movement matures, their effort to deal with these problems through nonconfrontational action may not only begin to show results in terms of environmental protection, but may also gradually push back the existing political boundaries and expand the space for political participation in China.

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