

Let one hundred NGOs bloom



Watershed activist Yu Xiaogang chose his words with obvious care when he met with US reporters earlier this year. “Each time he spoke, he had to say, ‘There are things I can’t talk about’”, reported a San Francisco-based environmental advocate who followed his media tour. Yu’s caution made sense. Even though he has won global praise – and a Goldman Environmental Prize – for his work documenting how government-sponsored dams were impoverishing Chinese villagers, provincial authorities have tried to shut down his courageous new NGO, Green Watershed.

Still, while the image of Yu as the victim of an uncompromising government may fit long-time western perceptions about China, Chinese activists and scientists say today’s reality is more complex. In fact, Chinese officials are highly motivated to confront their nation’s grim toll of environmental emergencies. Since their regulatory system is too weak for them to manage on their own, government environmental officials are increasingly relying on the support of private sector activists, who in turn are gaining in numbers, power, and influence. The result is a nervous embrace that only occasionally leaves bruises.

China’s long list of environmental crises has in fact become a leading reason for increased government tolerance of civic activism and even some foreign influence. With one-fifth of the world’s population, China has become the second-largest global source of greenhouse gases. These emissions have risen by 40% since 1990, even as scientists predict that climate change could cause serious damage to rice production, and make the whole country more vulnerable to storms and floods.

Air pollution in Beijing and other big cities is notoriously bad, and desertification is devouring arable land. But of all China’s problems, water scarcity is now the most immediate – and expensive – threat. Chinese media estimate that it is costing US\$28 billion a year in industrial output and US\$14 billion in lost crops. Some 200 million Chinese drink water so contaminated that it makes them ill.

Government officials have publicly conceded that environmental degradation is now a major factor in increasing social unrest. It is also a drain on international prestige, especially in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Yet China’s State Environmental Protection Administration

lacks both the funds and the clout to carry out its own programs. SEPA has only 300 employees, compared to some 60 000 officials who do environmental monitoring throughout the US, according to Elizabeth Economy, director of Asia Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. Consequently, SEPA has relied on foreign donations for many of its initiatives, while also engaging in a wary partnership with Chinese NGOs.

China’s first environmental NGO, called Friends of Nature, registered with the government in 1994, long after US environmental groups gained such power that they influenced a series of national laws. “We knew from television about Greenpeace, but there wasn’t anything like that in China”, explained Friends of Nature co-founder Liang Congjie. “My friends and I began wondering, why not have something like that here?” Yet Friends of Nature never had much in common with Greenpeace’s in-your-face civil disobedience; instead, it focused on what Liang has called “homey” environmental education, forming clubs for birdwatching, tree-planting, and teacher-training.

In subsequent years, nature lovers throughout China rushed to emulate Liang. Today, China has more than 2000 environmental NGOs, involved in issues ranging from biodiversity protection and improved public transit to the impact of mega-dams. Pushing the democratic envelope, some activists have leveled charges of corruption against local officials, who are normally far less enthusiastic than the central government about improving the environment.

Life has not been a picnic for aspiring activists. Environmental groups. Environmental groups aren’t permitted to raise funds, for instance, until they officially register with the government, which is such a lengthy and costly process that it discourages all but the most persistent. Yet such is the strength of conviction among many Chinese that activists like Yu remain confident, if not defiant.

When I asked him, by email, if he felt free to criticize officials, Yu answered, “From good will, polite way, and good channel”. He added that China’s environment “will be improved...however, without public participation in environment decision-making, it cannot be realized”.

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Yu Xiaogang at the Goldman Environmental Prize award ceremony.