

China's Evolving Civil Society: From Environment to Health

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Slightly over a decade ago, the Chinese leadership recognized the escalating environmental cost of economic development and decided to engage social organizations to support its environmental awareness and protection campaigns. Environmental nongovernmental organizations (ENGOS) have emerged and expanded in the 1990s, carving a space that is politically non-threatening to the Communist Party and government. The central government recognizes the social and economic importance of protecting the environment and the role NGOs play in mobilizing the population towards that end. The continued growth of ENGOS is assured, particularly due to growing popularity for supporting environmental issues among the population, but importantly also because of the willingness of NGOs to pursue their interests within well-defined, yet unwritten political boundaries that assure the continued leadership of the Party and the government. Like environmental degradation, a weak healthcare system unable to effectively deal with emerging infectious diseases threatens to undermine economic growth and social stability. While the previous generation of Chinese leaders oversaw the emergence of "green" NGOs and actively enabled their growth, the current generation of leaders took power in the midst of the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak and has subsequently invested greater attention and resources in improving public health, including the incubation of health NGOs. Health NGOs seem poised to make up the "second wave" of civil society development in China.

Following the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Communist Party and government dominated all aspects of social and economic development under a "people's dictatorship" whereby all classes of society and the entire economy would submit to absolute government leadership. Independent social groups were not permitted, but citizens were, in theory, given voice through government-controlled "mass-line" organizations like the All China Women's Federation, Communist Youth League, and ministry-controlled associations such as the China Family Planning Association. The suppression of independent social groups and other forms of civil society lasted until 1979, when the government, as part of the "reform and opening" policy of free market economic development and political liberalization, began to gradually decentralize authority and play a less active role in the daily life of citizens, opening up greater space for social freedom. Extensive reform of the legal system, including the drafting of numerous laws and policies in the

1990s, began permitting the cautious development of a civil society sector and the legal establishment of NGOs in China.

The rapid reform of Chinese society has catalyzed greater wealth and permitted more personal freedoms, which have created many new health and environmental problems. These developments have catalyzed the growth of independent NGOs in multiple sectors and fostered the emergence of new government organized nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs), such as the Chinese Association for the Prevention of STDs and AIDS and the All-China Environment Federation. The growing activism and independence of GONGOs from their supervisory ministries is a fascinating trend that will shape the landscape of China's civil society. However, this paper explores how Chinese ENGOS were the first civil society groups to emerge in the mid-1990s, and how the political situation has shifted to allow the growth of NGOs in the health sector, particularly groups focusing on HIV/AIDS. These complementary sectors operate in a dynamic political sphere

that can either foster or hinder their growth and success, shaping their performance at the same time that their actions—as well as exogenous political factors—shape their operating environment.

While the previous generation of Chinese leaders oversaw the emergence of “green NGOs” and actively enabled their growth, the current generation of leaders took power in the midst of the 2003 SARS outbreak and has subsequently invested greater attention and resources in improving public health, including the promotion of health NGOs; an area that is set to become the “second wave” of civil society development.

NGOS AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

China’s economic growth has greatly increased the standard of living for many, enhancing the opportunity for increased social freedom. Similar to many Western countries during their phases of rapid industrial expansion, China neglected the environmental consequences of unbridled economic growth since the opening and reform period began. Preoccupation with economic growth at all levels of government caused significant air and water pollution as well as general ecological deterioration. This degradation has had significant social and economic impacts, particularly on the poor and disadvantaged, further exacerbating economic divides between the haves and have-nots. In extreme cases the deteriorating environment has caused social unrest, and more broadly, reduced economic growth. According to a 2003 report by the RAND Corporation, the impact of water pollution on human health in China costs about \$4 billion annually. The same report cites a World Bank estimate that water pollution is costing China \$3.9 billion annually, amounting to 1 percent of GDP as of 1995 (Wolf, 2003).

It has become clear to the central government that without effective pollution control and protection measures, environmental problems will limit economic growth, hampering efforts to absorb new workers entering the economy along with workers laid off from the state sector. The inability to consistently stimulate job creation could also potentially contribute to social unrest.

While officials in Beijing routinely pass laws to protect the environment, local officials and factory managers often collude to evade them (Economy, 2005). Aside from strengthening regulations and pressuring the bureaucracy to crack down on

polluters, pragmatists within the top leadership calculated that green NGOs presented an alternative approach to mobilize the population to join the government’s effort. The government, particularly at the highest levels, sees benefits in encouraging the population to report local polluters, enhance public awareness, and most recently participate in the environmental impact assessment (EIA) process. However, local-level officials, who often represent the same government that owns the polluting companies, are often less enthusiastic about enabling citizens to challenge their authority and government-supported industries. Nevertheless, the commitment of senior leadership to environmental protection has continued unabated, and gradually the environmental sector has become a relatively safe arena for civil society involvement and activism.

The advent of a permissive policy environment for NGOs was marked in 1994 by the founding of China’s first ENGO, Friends of Nature (FON). This organization, led by the distinguished Chinese scholar Liang Congjie, was the first citizen-organized social group to legally register in China. Since then, the government has permitted numerous green groups to register and encouraged them to enhance public awareness through environmental education, clean-up campaigns, and to attract financial and technical support from foreign organizations that are unwilling to work directly with the Chinese government (Schwartz, 2004). Grassroots environmental activists have expanded to fill the space provided by the government and actively pushed for greater public participation in policymaking.

ENGOs have proven themselves pragmatic and flexible, establishing successful partnerships with international NGOs and foreign donor governments. This pragmatism is reflected in the activities of not only registered NGOs, but also through the many unregistered green organizations. While approximately 2,000 environmental groups have officially registered as NGOs, perhaps the same number is registered as for-profit business entities, while even more—such as Internet, volunteer, or nature clubs—are not registered at all (Economy, 2005). There are also environmentally oriented student groups and “green clubs” on college campuses across China. This diverse group of green NGOs has been at the forefront of true civil society development, creating an officially accepted and recognized nongovernmental sector in a political and social system that was completely government-dominated for 40 years.

The Role of Environmental NGOs in China

The past decade has established that NGOs are an important force supporting the environmental efforts undertaken by the Chinese government. Successful NGOs, such as Friends of Nature, Global Village of Beijing, and Green Earth Volunteers, have played a valuable role in the environmental movement thus far by advocating for more effective enforcement of existing regulations, increasing government accountability, educating the public, and—to a lesser degree—even shaping policy.

Unlike the relationship between many Western ENGOs and their home governments, NGOs in China take a much less confrontational approach. The majority of NGOs are genuinely committed to environmental protection and working closely with the government to achieve their goals, thereby having a positive impact on public policy and various levels of government. The central government in particular, has made ongoing efforts to engage and encourage ENGO participation. For instance, the 1996 State Council Decision Concerning Certain Environmental Protection Issues encourages public reporting on, and exposing of, violations of environmental protection laws and regulations, and participation in environmental protection (Ma & Ortolano, 2000). By working closely with the government in a non-confrontational manner within a mandated framework, ENGOs have established a certain level of trust and gained the support of the many officials, who view their actions as a positive contribution to China's environmental challenges.

Emerging green NGOs in China have played a pioneering role in promoting civil activism and volunteerism across the country. By mobilizing the public and popularizing the cause of environmental protection, green NGOs have not only educated citizens to become active participants in shaping policy, but also have helped embolden the news media. Newspapers and magazines have actively reported on the state of the environment, increasing government accountability, particularly when the government has been derelict in their responsibility. Most notable were the proactive journalists who worked with NGOs to report on the planned dams along the Nu River (Nujiang), for which local governments had not completed the required EIA. The media blitz surrounding the story in the fall of 2004 led Premier Wen Jiabao to temporarily halt the planning process. The contamination of the Songhua River in Jilin and Heilongjiang provinces, which caused water supply system stoppages in Harbin in

November 2005, was widely reported by the news media, placing significant pressure on government officials who had been less than forthcoming with accurate information at the outset of the accident. Increasingly, green groups and journalists have acted as agents of social change and begun to build the notion of public participation and grassroots action in China, and contributed to increased accountability of government.

Reaching the Limits?

Although Chinese ENGOs have steadily grown in size, scope, and influence, the government remains apprehensive of unfettered NGO development and continues to vigorously control and manage the sector's development. Following the retirement of Jiang Zemin and the ascension of Hu Jintao with the "fourth generation" of leaders, the environment for civil society has subtly changed, reflecting the new leadership's preoccupation with the influence of global political events and consolidating their power internally. The leadership has supported increased suppression of dissidents and tightened controls on NGOs to ensure they do not become a base for opposition to the Communist Party. This apprehension stems in part from the national campaign led by Chinese NGOs pushing for greater transparency in decision-making for dam building. Another issue driving this tension is the top leadership's concern about the "color revolutions" that have occurred in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. Chinese studies of these revolutions have led senior leaders to conclude that opposition movements in these countries were strongly backed by international organizations, causing the government to focus increasing attention on Chinese civil society groups and international NGOs.

According to an October 2005 article in *Foreign Policy*, the Chinese Communist Party Propaganda Department has identified several international NGOs, including the International Republican Institute, National Endowment for Democracy, U.S. Institute of Peace, and the Open Society Institute, as organizations that brainwash local people and encourage political opposition (Yongding, 2005). A new NGO registration law that was anticipated to render more freedom to civil society organizations has been postponed; while the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs has presently stopped registering foreign organizations, pending thorough investigations conducted by public security bureaus. Since the summer of 2005, ENGOs have been the subject

of strict scrutiny, evidenced by a nationwide survey conducted by Chinese officials to determine the nature of green groups' work and uncover unregistered organizations. The survey report, released by the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) in May 2006, suggested that the government's effective management and NGOs' strict self-discipline are two essential elements for further development of Chinese ENGOs ("Chinese Environmental," 2006).

In this currently restrictive political period, many grassroots "social entrepreneurs" are adopting a variety of creative identities and approaches in order to cope with potential or actual official suspicions while they continue to explore the limits of environmental activism. The government is caught in the uncomfortable contradiction between achieving goals of environmental protection, sustained economic growth, and the prevention of excessive social activism. The political atmosphere reflects the senior leadership's own sense of insecurity as they consolidate power following the 2002 16th Party Congress and their concerns over the global march of "democracy." As the current leadership becomes ensconced, an optimistic prediction would be that the political atmosphere for NGOs will improve as the growing need for the government to engage the population on environmental protection issues increases.

In addition to external political pressures, long-term growth of the ENGO sector is constrained by numerous structural factors, including limited internal capacity and access to resources. Many NGOs lack systematic knowledge of NGO management and have little access to information and funding for capacity building. The current generation of ENGOs often relies heavily on charisma and enthusiasm of individual leaders. Further development of the sector will require strengthening of governance, staffing, and internal management. There is also criticism that Chinese green groups have done a better job at identifying environmental problems rather than proposing technical solutions. As they move forward to address more problems, green NGOs need to dramatically improve their technical skills and find ways to deliver solutions, rather than simply raise awareness. Additionally, the majority of green groups rely heavily on foreign funding; in the face of tightened government scrutiny of foreign-funded activities, Chinese NGOs will increasingly be forced to seek alternative sources, despite legal restrictions on domestic fundraising.

Growing environmental problems helped create political space for Chinese ENGOs, which laid the foundation for greater social activism in areas beyond the environmental sector. Health NGOs have become particularly active over the past few years as reforms and the privatization of the health sector have produced inequalities in health services and poor public health system capacity to address looming crises from infectious diseases, such as SARS, HIV/AIDS and avian influenza.

NGOS AND PUBLIC HEALTH

Following the Communist Party's rise to power in 1949, investments in the healthcare sector greatly contributed to significant gains in public health, measured by greater life expectancy, reduced infant mortality, and the reduction or elimination of several infectious diseases, including sexually transmitted diseases. Primary health care and preventative health services were widely available and the majority of the population had access to health services and insurance. However, since the reforms began, the healthcare system has increasingly privatized, insurance coverage has greatly decreased, and steadily fewer citizens can access or effectively utilize the healthcare system. A recent report released by the Ministry of Health indicated that healthcare reform has been "unsuccessful" (Gao, 2005). Tragically, as the healthcare system has declined and service provision predominantly serves the affluent—infectious diseases have presented highly visible challenges to the government-led public health system. Recognizing it is ill-equipped to tackle these challenges, the government is increasingly seeking support from outside, mobilizing international resources and technical support, and calling upon "all sectors of society" to play a role in suppressing infectious diseases.

The 2003 outbreak of SARS—initially downplayed by the government—demonstrated the health system's vulnerability. International and domestic pressure forced the government to belatedly deal with the crisis by mobilizing considerable resources to address the outbreak; highlighting to the top leadership the potential social and economic impact of an unchecked epidemic, stimulating greater commitment and cooperation with international organizations to addressing other infectious diseases. Diseases such as HIV/AIDS pose particular challenges on a number of fronts. Having emerged in tandem with the economic

// A recent report released by the Ministry of Health indicated that healthcare reform has been “unsuccessful.”

reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, HIV/AIDS has spread along with growing affluence, increased personal mobility, and the dismantling of many state structures that previously controlled so many aspects of the average Chinese citizen's life. Other diseases, such as avian influenza, as well as the threat of a pandemic human influenza, pose unique economic and social threats. The massive scale, scope, and cost of mounting an effective response in a timely fashion reduce the likelihood that the government alone can avert a pandemic.

HIV/AIDS poses a major concern because of its significant socioeconomic impacts, affecting young people at the most productive periods of their lives. The virus can also spread undetected from asymptomatic carriers for up to ten years. In China, HIV/AIDS remains concentrated among marginalized populations that the government is ill equipped to effectively reach, such as intravenous drug users and commercial sex workers. Other populations disproportionately impacted include men who have sex with men (MSM)¹ and former plasma donors who contracted HIV donating plasma in unhygienic blood selling stations in Henan Province and other rural areas. While the epidemic is concentrated among these marginalized groups, there is concern that HIV is spreading; recent government statistics establish that China has approximately 650,000 HIV/AIDS cases. Although the new estimate is lower than previous figures, the rate of infection is still rising, with 70,000 new cases in 2005 (PRC Ministry of Health, 2006). In 2002, UN health officials predicted if the epidemic was left unchecked, the number of people living with the virus would exceed 10 million by 2010 (UNAIDS, 2004). However, ahead of the 2005 World AIDS Day, the Chinese Ministry of Health pledged strong nationwide preventive measures that they expect will keep the total below 1.5 million over the next five years.

Government's Response to the HIV/AIDS Crisis

To gain a sense of the potential of health NGOs becoming a strong force for change in China, it is

instructive to consider the emergence of Chinese NGOs that specifically address the HIV/AIDS epidemic. HIV/AIDS garners significant political attention, both domestically and internationally, and considerable global resources are channeled to fight the disease; key factors which support the NGO community. Because HIV/AIDS in China is still primarily concentrated among intravenous drug users, commercial sex workers, and men having sex with men, the government's public health system is particularly unprepared to address the root causes of the spread of HIV, which are primarily socioeconomic, rather than purely medical (Thompson, 2005). Like all countries that confront the dual epidemics of drug abuse and HIV/AIDS, China's government must address the illegal activities associated with HIV transmission.

Responding to HIV/AIDS and other diseases will undoubtedly require national responses that are well beyond the capability and means of the government health system alone. Despite the lessons from the government's failed attempts to cover up the SARS outbreak in 2003, transparency and timely delivery of accurate information about health-related events is not always forthcoming. Multiple ministries that are tasked with responsibilities addressing various health threats often do not coordinate their efforts. Additionally, China's top-down bureaucracy has few mechanisms for effectively reaching out to citizens who are outside of the formal economic and political system. The government is acutely aware of the need to mobilize the nongovernmental sector to respond to health challenges and to help make up for gaps in the government's healthcare provision system; effective prevention and control requires mobilizing civil society organizations and formalizing public-private partnerships.

While the government has allowed the growth of ENGOs over the past 12 years, the political atmosphere for health NGOs (particularly in the HIV/AIDS field) has only recently improved, highlighted by multiple statements made by government officials in 2005:

• In spring 2005, at a Beijing summit on HIV/AIDS in Beijing, Vice Premier and then Minister of Health Wu Yi said that the nation's anti-AIDS campaign cannot be won by the government alone, and that, “China has formed a mechanism and social environment featuring the leading role of the government, cooperation of various departments and participation of the whole society.”²

- At the press conference in Beijing before World AIDS Day 2005, Chinese Minister of Health Gao Qiang stressed that although HIV/AIDS prevention and control is the responsibility of the Chinese government, the epidemic cannot be stemmed without effectively partnering with NGOs.³

- In a talk given at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in June 2005, Executive Vice Minister of Health Dr. Wang Longde acknowledged that while the government and the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have been doing the bulk of intervention targeting high-risk populations, NGOs have a greater role to play besides technical support, including outreach and prevention education among “hard to reach” groups (CSIS, 2005).

Chinese officials are not just “talking the talk” when it comes to NGO involvement in HIV/AIDS

work. The central agencies are allocating and distributing funds to assist health NGOs to provide social services such as awareness education, support, and care. In 2005, the government committed 25 percent of the \$24 million budget from the “round four” project funded by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria to government-affiliated NGOs and grassroots NGOs. In July 2005, the Chinese CDC’s National STD and AIDS Center held a meeting with NGOs working with men who have sex with men. Officials discussed mechanisms to provide NGOs with 6 million Yuan in funding to conduct studies and prevention education among men having sex with men. Central and local health officials have begun to actively promote NGOs, including people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) support groups in major cities and heavily impacted villages. The

BOX 1. Wan Yanhai and Beijing Aizhixing Health Education Institute

Aizhixing (*Love, Knowledge and Action*) Health Education Institute, led by a well-known AIDS activist Dr. Wan Yanhai, is one of the most experienced HIV/AIDS NGOs in China. Established in Beijing in 1994, Aizhixing today carries out programs in many regions of China, and recently began to support capacity building for other grassroots NGOs.¹ Currently, Aizhixing has four major program areas: legal aid to people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHAs), AIDS education, policy advocacy, and NGO capacity building.

Legal Aid. Aizhixing has staff lawyers to provide free legal aid to people affected by HIV/AIDS. Aizhixing aspires to improve public awareness of laws in areas hard hit by the epidemic, encouraging affected individuals to use existing laws to fight for their rights. Dr. Wan hopes that enhanced local knowledge about legal tools will lead to increased government accountability. Aizhixing has focused much of its legal work in villages in central China with large numbers of HIV-positive villagers who became infected in the mid-1990s through unhygienic plasma donation practices.

AIDS Education. Aizhixing targets its education initiatives at disadvantaged groups, such as commercial sex workers, intravenous drug users, men who have sex with men (MSM), as well as the urban poor. Aizhixing distributes prevention education materials and condoms to sex workers in Beijing and northeastern China. With funding from the British government, Aizhixing has established six schools for the children of migrant workers in Beijing. Without

receiving sufficient education these children are more likely to turn to drugs or engage in commercial sex work to support themselves. The organization expects to expand the number of schools to 50 in 2006.

Policy Advocacy. Aizhixing seeks to improve government accountability and capability in HIV/AIDS prevention work through advocacy activities. Aizhixing actively lobbies the government to increase financial transparency and encourages the Ministry of Health to allocate appropriate funding to NGOs from government funds as well as resources provided by Global Fund and other international organizations. Additionally, Aizhixing attempts to strengthen nongovernmental efforts to monitor government activities. Dr. Wan points out that although advocacy work in the short term seems somewhat intangible, providing advocacy alongside tangible services to affected communities is imperative.

Capacity Building. Aizhixing has taken the lead to promote the growth of other grassroots HIV/AIDS groups by acting as a platform for information sharing and networking among various NGOs across the country. To date, Aizhixing has supported over 20 NGOs to conduct programs in the HIV/AIDS field, and expects to support more in the years to come.

NOTES

1. Authors’ interview with Dr. Wan Yanhai. (October 2005).

Ministry of Health's pragmatic response to NGO partnerships addressing HIV/AIDS is reminiscent of the approach taken by environment officials in the past to work with NGOs to mobilize communities and build support for their common goals.

Chinese HIV/AIDS NGOs Today

Much like the diversity displayed by green groups, Chinese HIV/AIDS NGOs operate under a variety of guises—registered social organizations, registered commercial enterprises and institutes, unregistered grassroots groups, self-help groups formed by PLWHA, and student groups. Among the 266,000 NGOs registered with the civil affairs administration, the total number of known health NGOs is still limited. Most HIV/AIDS groups based in Beijing and throughout urban communities and rural villages are very action-oriented and engage in numerous HIV/AIDS programs, with some servicing hard-to-reach marginalized groups by providing clean needles to injection drug users, condoms for sex workers, and health education for these affected populations and communities. Many NGOs deliver prevention and education messages to communities in both urban and rural areas, while others counsel at-risk and affected individuals in person or over telephone hotlines. Examples include a report released in late 2004 by the Beijing Gender Health Institute, which studied behavioral intervention methods targeting men who have sex with men. The Beijing Aizhixing Institute, led by the renowned AIDS activist Dr. Wan Yanhai, has developed into an organization that not only conducts prevention programs of its own, but also supports the growth of many other NGOs by providing funding and capacity building support. The Beijing Aizhixing Institute also has conducted extensive research and disseminated reports to keep both the general public and HIV/AIDS prevention practitioners informed on trends and treatment strategies in China, as well as providing material support to affected individuals. (See Box 1 for more details on this NGO).

These HIV/AIDS groups also conduct outreach to increase prevention knowledge and help affected persons access treatment, while others provide material support to affected communities, including donating clothes and supplies, financing education for orphans, and even initiating “pen pal clubs” for urban youth and students to correspond with affected children in villages. The scope of activities carried out by HIV/AIDS NGOs is

extremely broad, as illustrated by the groups profiled in Boxes 2 and 3.

Compared to green groups, these HIV/AIDS grassroots groups are still in their infancy and have relatively limited capacity. Organizations are often small, staffed with only one or two paid employees or relying entirely on volunteers. Tight budgets and limited capacity reduces the quality of output by many groups. Like green groups, HIV/AIDS NGOs also face difficulties obtaining consistent funding. Foreign funding is often short-term, making it difficult to mount long-term operations. Additionally, government wariness about international NGO funding—stemming from concerns about their political motivations has increased suspicions of Chinese groups receiving foreign funds. Local fundraising is limited by government regulations forbidding national appeals, while companies and wealthy individuals have little or no incentives to donate to independent NGOs, because they receive no tax breaks and potentially risk alienating government officials who encourage donations to their affiliated GONGOs.

Independent HIV/AIDS NGOs risk clashing with the government because they not only act as policy advocates, but are also service providers to affected communities. NGOs can face official opposition either because they essentially compete with government fee-for-service providers or because they seek to engage in activities the government considers illegal. Thus, organizations that distribute condoms to sex workers or clean needles to drug addicts risk sanctions from the public security authorities. Private organizations dispensing methadone to opiate addicts would be discouraged because they might compete with the growing number of government-owned clinics that charge fees to patients. Some AIDS activists in China have recently circulated various materials over the Internet that likely test the tolerance of government officials, such as non-violent civil disobedience manuals, similar to those produced by international NGOs. Other NGOs have supported HIV-positive individuals to petition the central government and agencies to claim compensation. These activities demonstrate how some AIDS groups are testing the limits of political activism, which other groups worry could potentially distract from the provision of services to those in need, and likely impact the operating environment for the entire sector.

BOX 2. Chengdu Gay Community Care Organization

Founded in 2002 by Mr. Wang Xiaodong and Mr. Jiang Hua, the Chengdu Gay Community Care Organization (CGCCO) is a regional NGO established and run by gay men in the capital city of Sichuan Province in southwest China.¹ Their stated mission is to:

Mobilize gay men to fight against AIDS on the basis of community; as well as combine concern and response to AIDS with improving the gay community's social image and status in China, so as to promote community development and social progress.²

Receiving financial support from the China-UK HIV/AIDS Prevention and Care Program (known simply as "China-UK") that ran from 2000 to 2006, CGCCO members have focused their efforts on outreach and education for the gay community and other stakeholders in Chengdu and other cities in China. They have incorporated innovative approaches and best practices from the United States and elsewhere to design and conduct activities that directly address the threat that HIV poses to the gay community in China.

Policy Advocacy

The organization's agenda includes policy advocacy, such as consulting and training government officials about the health needs of the gay community. In 2005, the group participated in the Sichuan provincial government seminar to develop the "Sichuan 2006-2010 AIDS Prevention and Treatment Plan," marking the first time that an NGO focusing on gay issues had been invited by the government to participate in an official planning meeting.

CGCCO has organized training for public health officials to sensitize them to the medical and psychological needs of gay men. In one instance, the group's trainers worked with a hospital in Chengdu to train staff

on medical issues related to STDs and other associated problems faced by sexually active gay men. A major component of the training focused on sensitivity training for doctors and hospital administrators to reduce stigma and judgmental attitudes and improve the overall quality of care for men who have sex with men (MSM).³ As part of the group's outreach program, they distribute referral cards that provide contact information for the trained doctors, the number to call for information and consulting, and directions to the hospital. In the six months following the training session, 110 men visited the doctors who were trained by the group.

Community Outreach

As a grassroots community-based organization, CGCCO is active in mobilizing the gay community, and conducting outreach and education activities. They operate a 24-hour hotline and publish a quarterly magazine distributing 9,000 copies in 20 cities nationwide. They have produced their own education materials including pamphlets that they distribute along with condoms in bars, on the street, and in outreach meetings. The group estimates that there are approximately 100,000 gay men in Chengdu, and make local outreach efforts their top priority. They estimate that through their efforts, they had reached 3,000 men in 2003, 4,000 in 2004, and 5,000 in 2005.

Locally, they mobilize and educate the gay community through activities in bars and on the street in areas where gay men congregate. They have 10 staff that supports the work of about 100 volunteers. They conduct training sessions for their volunteers twice a month, training them to train others. The group's fieldwork includes education and outreach to individuals

GREEN NGOS AND HEALTH NGOS: STAGGERED EMERGENCE, LINKED FUTURES

Making a Connection

The emergence of environmental and health NGOs in China share many characteristics. The leadership deliberately created space for both sectors to assist the government in responding to complex and pressing challenges that are threatening China's economy, political stability, and social welfare. Regardless of sector, the growth rate of NGOs

remains determined by the government, which perceives their role as complementing the government in its response to the country's crises.

Both NGO sectors also face a number of similar challenges. Being a fairly new phenomenon in China, capacity building is a major goal, including governance, management, and fundraising—as well as the skills to provide services and advocate on behalf of their constituents and stakeholders. To operate effectively, they need to be recognized and validated by the government, which will not tolerate opposition or dissent. Due to restrictions

in Chengdu, as well as mobilizing the gay community elsewhere in China through workshops and seminars. In 2005, CGCCO held a seminar to help others in the gay community to build their capacity to develop more grassroots organizations and NGOs.

Innovative Approaches to HIV Testing

The group has conducted innovative voluntary HIV & STD testing sessions with their peers. Calling their program “life companion education,” CGCCO has adapted principles used internationally to encourage gay men to recommend their partners get tested for HIV. The group convenes a social gathering of gay men in a casual setting, such as a teahouse (teahouses are a major part of Chengdu culture), to discuss safe sex behavior and distribute condoms. Gay men are encouraged to bring their friends and refer partners to the group. Those that engage in high-risk behavior are encouraged to have an HIV test on site.

Trained CGCCO staff draws blood samples at the teahouse, creates an identifier number that corresponds to the individual’s contact information to ensure privacy. The samples are tested at the Sichuan Provincial CDC and CGCCO is notified of the results. If an individual is HIV or STD positive, CGCCO staff members contact the person, inform them of the results and provide counseling on treatment options and HIV prevention. The psychological support provided by peers is considered to have a greater impact than the prescriptive (and sometimes judgmental) counseling provided by Chinese medical professionals who often lack a personal connection to the patient.

The cost of testing is not passed on to the individuals, but is covered by China-UK program grants provided to CGCCO. This community-based testing model is quite innovative in China, where HIV testing is most often confined to hospitals and clinics.

Future Challenges

Like most Chinese NGOs, access to funds is a major challenge and barrier to achieving the organization’s goals. CGCCO is registered as a company, not as a nonprofit organization, exposing it to significant tax liability on grants received. The lack of an effective NGO law that gives them tax-free status limits their effectiveness, because of the corporate tax burden and the fact the government is unable to give CGCCO grants to provide public health services to marginalized communities. The organization also has had little success raising funds from individuals or corporations, partly because the current income tax law does not encourage charitable giving or provide tax-deduction opportunities.

Fortunately, there is increasing awareness in China that the MSM population is at increased risk for HIV infection and therefore requires greater attention and resources. As the China-UK program winds down and approaches completion in 2006, new sources of funding from other international agencies will increasingly be available for prevention activities among MSM communities. With an established track record and strong reputation for work in the gay community, CGCCO will likely benefit from future grants that will enable them to carry on its mission to mobilize the gay community in the face of HIV/AIDS.

NOTES

1. Author’s interview with Wang Xiaodong, Director, Chengdu Gay Community Care Organization. (March 2005).
2. China HIV/AIDS Information Network (CHAIN). (Online). Available: <http://www.chain.net.cn/article.php?articleID=2294>.
3. While not all men who engage in sexual behaviors with other men identify themselves as “gay” or “homosexual,” the Chengdu Gay Community Care Organization emphasizes that they are “gay.”

under current law on the registration and management of social organizations—environmental and health NGOs both exist in various creative forms; both sectors have received significant international support, raising government suspicions. NGO activists are aware they operate in a dynamic political environment as government policy oscillates between support for NGOs that solve problems and alleviate social tensions and fear of grassroots movements that might ultimately challenge the Party. Survivability for an NGO requires the ability to “know which way the wind blows” in

order to operate within the boundaries of what is currently tolerated.

Looking Forward

Over the past 12 years, environmental groups have built up valuable experience and capacity that health NGOs can draw upon. Besides carving political space for other NGOs and building up their credentials as partners with the government, ENGOs can offer capacity building assistance to health NGOs. Many health NGOs are likely to succeed over the long-term by following the model pioneered by green

NGOs; complementing the government and avoiding sensitive political issues; mobilizing society; and providing services in a non-confrontational and non-competitive way. Health NGOs are now mobilizing a general public that is more aware of public participation and volunteerism, notions instilled by pioneering green NGOs. Despite many challenges along the way, health NGOs are already establishing the capacity to push a second wave of civil society development in China. A third wave could be the joining of these two sectors to address growing environmental health problems.

The accidental discharge of tons of life-threatening chemicals into the Songhua River in November 2005 vividly illustrates the threats posed to health by poor environmental controls. Local authorities' attempts to cover up the spill and control media coverage of the event were met with public outrage. The news media responded by openly speculating that the cause of the water stoppage in Harbin was the upstream factory explosion and subsequently reporting details of the government response, forcing a certain level of government accountability. While the Harbin disaster was an "acute" one, the long-term health effects of pollution are significant in China, contributing to increases in early death, birth defects, and "cancer hotspots," particularly in rural areas where clusters of certain cancers are more prevalent than the rest of the country. Pollution, which is directly attributed to declining levels of health in many communities, is increasingly a cause of civil unrest, sparking spontaneous mass-mobilization of pollution victims. While this type of grassroots activism has not yet fostered a sustained environmental-health NGO sector, it is an indicator of the forces that could drive activism and advocacy surrounding the nexus of environmental degradation and health. As an inherently grassroots issue, the sector is primed for growing civil society participation.

Looking forward, the future of environment and health NGOs in China is inextricably linked. The political space each sector carves out and expands ultimately benefits civil society. The government at all levels will remain wary of unchecked expansion of civil society groups regardless of their positive contributions. As an increasing number of health NGOs joins green groups in a non-confrontational effort to

BOX 3. Guangzhou Beautiful Life Training Center

Beautiful Life (*Meili Rensheng*) Training Center is a very small but novel NGO, operating in the Pearl River Delta. Founded by Mr. Wu Qinghua several years ago, the center is registered as an affiliated organization of the Guangzhou Academy of Social Science and has two full-time staff. Mr. Wu has drawn support for the center's activities from local manufacturing enterprises in the Pearl River Delta area, including condom manufacturers. This example of indigenous corporate social responsibility is exceptional in China, and cause for optimism to see Chinese enterprises that have benefited from economic growth over the past 25 years growing aware of opportunities to support grassroots NGOs that provide services to vulnerable or less-developed communities. With a very limited budget, the center conducts two innovative programs focusing on the HIV/AIDS epidemic and migrant workers.

AIDS Awareness Education Program for Migrant Workers in Guangzhou. The center offers HIV/AIDS life skills training, free counseling, and distributes information posters in communities where many migrant workers reside in Guangzhou. Targeting the "floating population" as migrants are often called in the Pearl River Delta area, this program is a grassroots effort to improve HIV/AIDS awareness among large numbers of rural citizens who come to work in Guangzhou.

Thousand Village Program (*Qian Cun Xing*). Each year, universities in the Guangzhou area enroll students from across the country, a large number of whom are poor students from the countryside. It is often the case that these students cannot afford transportation fares back home during school vacations. The center developed the *Qian Cun Xing* program to mobilize these students to become volunteer HIV/AIDS educators, and subsequently sponsor their trips home. The center offers to pay for students' train tickets under the condition that once they return to their home villages during school vacation, they will conduct HIV/AIDS awareness training for local villagers and distribute suitable education materials. This outreach approach is designed not only to educate college students about HIV/AIDS, but also to capture rural youth before they engage in high-risk activities, particularly before they leave home in search of work in urban areas. The *Qian Cun Xing* program was initiated in 2004, and to date has reached over 100 villages across the country. The goal is to eventually cover 1,000 villages.

better their communities, the political climate could improve, allowing more organizations to engage in a broader range of activities. It is instructive to reflect on recent crackdowns and also consider possible scenarios of how the sector could develop.

While Chinese labor activists have long been subject to persecution, there are indications that ENGOs may increasingly be the subject of greater scrutiny. For example, the Yunnan provincial government has pressured a local NGO that was educating villagers in the Nujiang basin on the potential threats dams could pose for their livelihood (Nijhuis, 2006). In another case an NGO leader was arrested in Zhejiang for monitoring the protest activities of a community demanding the closure of an industrial park (Buckley, 2005). While the “bottom-up” push by grassroots groups is not always candidly opposed by authorities, such actions are often held in suspicion. After NGOs opened the Nujiang dam debate and effectively caused planning to halt in February 2005, a new EIA was completed. ENGOs have pushed the government to disclose the new EIA—as is required by law—but the report has been deemed a state secret. International pressure has begun to build over these planned dams, bolstering domestic green activists to maintain their demand for publication of the EIA. While this issue continues to fester, it remains a litmus test of government accountability and its willingness to include the public in decision-making processes. Barring an unexpected shift in government approaches towards transparency, governance, and civil society in general, NGOs will continue to operate in this somewhat ambiguous paradigm. As such, the long-term future of civil society and NGO development is far from certain.

Speculation about the Future:

The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly

The Good. Assuming NGOs continue work alongside the government and do not directly oppose the government-defined status quo or involve themselves in sensitive political areas—such as advocating for democratic or legal reforms that challenge the Party—the outlook for civil society expansion is positive. The current environment of tightened control of NGO registrations and activities, particularly foreign-funded NGOs, can potentially be eased as the government is reassured of their positive role in the nation’s response to pressing environment and health challenges. As more local governments see positive results, NGOs will increasingly be perceived as valued local partners who deliver public

benefits and contribute to social and economic development. The government has placed greater stress on fostering “harmonious development” by stating their intention to increase government funding for education, health, and the environment in the new Eleventh Five-Year Plan. Alignment of government interests with the goals of NGOs will further support development of civil society and the role of the private sector in the provision of public goods that the government is no longer able to effectively provide. Additionally, deepening cooperation between the government and the private sector at all levels can potentially improve effective governance—particularly transparency, and accountability—creating a virtuous cycle that ultimately contributes to the government’s desire for more stable development.

The Bad. In an extremely bleak scenario, the inherent confrontation between the state and private sector would be realized, especially as the one-party Chinese political system lacks effective checks and balances on power. NGOs often chafe under the authority of a government reluctant to cede authority or responsibility for public services that it cannot effectively deliver due to insufficient capacity or corruption. Government departments, particularly at local levels perceive NGOs—particularly in the health sector—as competitors for delivery of fee-for-service programs and react by suppressing the private sector actors. When the interests of the public and private sectors diverge, the government is most likely to lose faith in civil society’s ability to operate in a constructive and non-threatening manner. NGOs’ reliance on foreign funding in the absence of domestic support fuels government suspicion, prompting fears that NGOs are subversives, attempting to undermine the government through western-supported “peaceful evolution” (*hepingyanbian*). Increased tension and suspicion lead to more restrictive policies that limit registration, membership, fundraising and permissible activities, effectively making existing NGOs insignificant and preventing expansion of civil society.

The Ugly. As noted above, the future of environmental and health NGOs are interlinked, which poses potential risks. Contentious behaviors of “outliers” can be interpreted by the government as reflections of the core of civil society. For example, if a critical mass of NGOs in one or both sectors engages in political activities the government considers threatening, the political reaction would be felt across all sectors. Because both health and environmental issues directly affect individuals

and communities, NGOs can find themselves in situations that place them in opposition to government officials, such as representing the interests of affected groups by organizing individuals to seek redress from the government or government supported enterprises. Other NGOs might engage in activities that directly seek government accountability for environmental or health crises, causing a backlash from officials. While only a certain number of organizations might engage in activities that directly threaten the government, contradictions could potentially lead to troubling events, such as increased civil unrest, which would likely result in a crackdown against all NGOs. Certainly, some organizations already engage in activities similar to those mentioned here without significant reaction from authorities, indicating two things; the “envelope” for NGOs is being stretched, and a threshold volume of such activities has not yet been reached. If enough NGOs are perceived to be in open opposition to the government, the response is likely to significantly rollback the operating freedoms that have developed over the past 12 years.

CONCLUSION

Overall, environment and health NGOs in China have largely avoided direct confrontation with government and focused on their core missions, thereby establishing a positive operating environment. While there are few indications this relationship will decline, as the operating environment improves and NGOs are given more freedom to operate, it is possible individuals will gain a false sense of security and push to the point where the government begins to push back. The social and economic systems in China have been in a constant and dramatic state of change for the past 25 years, outpacing changes in political systems, leaving the government ill-equipped to single-handedly address environment and health challenges, such as HIV/AIDS. It is unimaginable at this point that the Chinese government will wholeheartedly embrace civil society in the foreseeable future. However, trends are generally positive, so long as NGOs focus on delivering positive outputs and build constructive relationships with government. These relationships will mitigate the affects of “outlier” organizations seeking to directly challenge the government, and could potentially even increase appreciation for NGOs that abide by the unwritten rules. As the private

sector in general, and NGOs in particular play a growing role in society, albeit in the shadow of a dominant government, they increase the likelihood that NGOs will become an indispensable factor in Chinese society, and affect positive changes within government such as increased accountability and transparency. How the tension between the government’s desire to maintain the status quo dominating the economy and society and the NGOs’ attempts to change the fundamental political causes of environmental degradation and poor public health is resolved, ultimately will define the future of civil society in China.

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NOTES

1. Note, “Men who have sex with men” refers to men who engage in sexual behaviors with other men, but who may not identify themselves as “gay” or “homosexual.”

2. Speech by Vice Premier Wu Yi at the opening ceremony of the GBC's Joint Summit on Business and AIDS in China. (March 18, 2005).

3. State Council Press Release Conference, Gao Qiang on HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control. (November 30, 2005).

金木水火土

FEATURE BOX

The China Environmental Health Project

Millions of rural citizens in southwest China suffer from health problems and limits to economic development that result from air pollution from coal and face inadequate drinking water supplies due to that region's karst geology, where much of the water flows underground through caves rather than at the surface. These health problems are yet another burden on tens of millions of subsistence farmers who live below China's poverty threshold of \$85 per year. For 15 years, scientists at Western Kentucky University (WKU)—together with Chinese university counterparts and a number of U.S. government agencies and other organizations—have been undertaking applied research and training projects focused on enhancing Chinese infrastructure and technical capacity with regard to monitoring emissions from coal burning and finding solutions to safe drinking water challenges in southwest China's limestone karst regions.

In October 2006 these research efforts coalesced into the CHINA ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH PROJECT, with major support from the U.S. Agency for International Development and matching funds from partner organizations. The project is led by WKU's Hoffman Environmental Research Institute and Institute for Combustion Science and Environmental Technology and will be carried out in partnership with the China Environment Forum (CEF) at the Woodrow Wilson Center, the International Institute for Rural Reconstruction (IIRR), as well as with Chinese scientists from the School of Geography at Southwest University of China near Chongqing and the Anhui University of Science and Technology in Huainan. The main focus of the collaborative project is university partnering to enhance technical infrastructure in air quality analysis, hydrogeology, and Geographic Information Systems computer



A woman carries water from a karst spring near the village of Yaji in the Guangxi Autonomous Region. Millions of people must carry their water supplies by hand in China's southwest karst region and many of these springs are contaminated by bacteria and pesticides. © Chris Groves.

mapping technology. The water component will utilize on-the-ground demonstration projects in Chongqing and Yunnan to serve as a training vehicle while providing direct benefit in water supply and quality to residents in the areas of the projects. The coal component will focus on increasing air quality monitoring capacity in Huainan and on implementing health impact studies in the city. At each project site CEF and IIRR will be carrying out community outreach and education work to bring citizen input into the research projects. Subsequent issues of the *China Environment Series* will feature updates of the China Environmental Health Project's activities. The Hoffman Institute (<http://hoffman.wku.edu>) and CEF (www.wilsoncenter.org/cef) webpages will also be posting project information and information on environmental health issues in China.