

**Hong Dayong 洪大用 et al., *Zhongguo minjian huanbao lilian de chengzhang* 中國民間環保力量的成長
(*The Growing Nongovernmental Forces for Environmental Protection in China*).**

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After rapid development over the last two decades, China now faces serious pollution problems. At the same time, concern about the environment has grown—not only among the Chinese public, but also among the ruling elites. For an insightful description of this changing picture, we must be grateful for the work of Hong Dayong and his colleagues.

There have been several turning points in the Chinese environmental movement. During the 1980s, as the transition to a socialist market economy accelerated, the Chinese government recognized the importance of environmental protection; ever since then, the ruling elites have regularly drawn up guiding principles for the public. Under the current Chinese Party-state power structure, these guiding principles have included references to “Harmonious Society” (first addressed by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in September 2004) and to “Scientific Outlook on Development.” These themes have also been essential to the development of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and to the interaction between the Chinese government and the growth of environmental NGOs (ENGOS) in recent years.

According to a 2008 environment report issued by the All-China Environment Federation, China has 508 grassroots-level NGOs working principally on environmental issues—the total has increased by nearly 300 since 2005. In total, there are 3,539 ENGOS in the country, ranging from grassroots to government-sponsored organizations, branches of international organizations, and school groups. This figure has jumped by 771 over the last 3 years, and the organizations have become visible players in government policy-making and raising public awareness.

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During the last few years, several scholars (Schwartz 2004; Tang & Zhan 2005; Yang 2005) have studied the state–NGO relationship—only to arrive at conflicting conclusions. In *Zhongguo minjian huanbao liliang de chengzhang*, Hong and his colleagues aim to present a comprehensive view of the unofficial entities working for environmental good. These include environmental awareness groups, NGOs, community-based environmental protection activity, and the environmental industry. The book shows a good understanding of environmental movements in the West and departs from a macro perspective to observe the development and strength of individual ENGOs in China.

Hong and his colleagues suggest that the development of China’s environmental awareness and activism is now in what is known as the gaming stage, a moment when different interests begin negotiations (p. 205). One of the main arguments is that the given rational regulations—the “Scientific Outlook on Development” for instance—should lead to a distinctively socialist harmonious society. If this is so, it would be helpful to direct economic development to minimize environmental degradation. According to their studies, it is insufficient attention to such concerns has been a major problem for both central and local authorities.

In many cases, the most egregious polluters are found in underdeveloped regions, where local governments privilege economic development over public health and environmental concerns. According to Hong and his co-authors, a major obstacle to the implementation of appropriate restrictions on industry is the local governments’ opportunistic attitudes towards instructions they receive from the central government (pp. 188–195). Take the case of the Huai River as an example, implementing the Provisional Regulations on the Prevention and Control of Water Pollution in the Huai River Drainage Area (1995) meant closing down more than 4,000 small businesses. In 1999, the government claimed that pollution had been eliminated, but 5 years later, a devastating release of industrial pollutants into the river drove local residents like Huo Daishan, who had become concerned about pollution after horrific spills in the late 1990s, initiated the first monitoring organization from below—the Huai River Guardian. Since then, this citizen-initiated organization has been tirelessly calling attention to environmental issues. Their protests marked the start of continuing tensions between nongovernmental interests and polluters in the region.

Lotus Company, based in Henan province, is the biggest producer of monosodium glutamate (MSG) in the world, and accounts for the biggest share of pollution in the Huai River. In 2004, after over 10 years of official efforts and amidst a growing feeling that time was running out, Lotus agreed to reveal daily emission data and to make this information available to Huo’s monitoring organization. This case occupies a central place in the narrative constructed by Hong and his fellow authors, who argue that once the various parties make a rational agreement “cooperation becomes much easier” (p. 207).

Using similar cases, the authors show that the relationships among government, public interests, and NGOs in today’s China are different from those in the West. As is explained in the book’s introduction, “These NGOs were (whether unintentionally or intentionally) fostered by the Chinese government” (p. 11). This was the case with the All-China Environment Federation, whose establishment in April 2005 was initiated by the Ministry of Environmental Protection (then the National Environmental Protection Bureau). As a matter of fact, the authors argue, ruling elites have

an abiding interest in working closely with the federation. More important, the transformation of most environmental NGOs has proceeded in a quite rational and helpful manner (pp. 87–89).

Such a characterization will probably interest many readers. Ru and Leonard (2009) also show that the “connections among NGO founders and the educational and professional backgrounds of NGO founders have influenced the diffusion of international NGO norms and in China they have shaped the growth pattern of these citizen-organized environmental NGOs” (p. 141). On the other hand, Schwartz (2004) challenges their status when he points out: “Many Chinese NGOs are best described as GONGOs—governmental nongovernmental organizations” (p. 36), suggesting that their independence has been deeply compromised.

The case studies raise certain methodological issues. In Chapter Three, for example, the author implies that Western concepts and experience may lead to self-governing communities in China. Certainly, this prediction reveals a familiarity with the Western experience while acknowledging Chinese differences. However, this seems inconsistent with the argument made elsewhere in the book. In general, the authors argue that China will not follow its counterparts in the developed countries—but they never really explain why.

According to the authors, the environmental movement in China was first regarded as a new social movement. It was recognized that Chinese and Western NGOs “differed in terms of their values, organizational models, and action strategies, while sharing the commitment to social movement” (p. 211). However, the environmental movement in China tends to emphasize rational choices. Moreover, policy making reflects a composite of national interests, interprovincial interests, regional interests, business interests, and individual interests (p. 195). This leads the authors to suggest a “societal cleavage” approach that exploits institutional conflict among Chinese scholars—without revealing the strength of societal institution conflicts, for example, the sociologist Sun Liping (2003; 2006) on the contrary suggests that China is likely to become a cleavage society, dominated by conflicting interests rather than social harmonies.

Unlike other studies of Chinese NGOs (including the local branches of international NGOs), this book projects a realistic picture of the country’s transition to a market economy. To acquire any sort of recognition in China requires support from the political elites. This book shows how studies of Chinese scholars can be associated with political interests (pp. 30–31). The book does not adopt an overtly political stance, but it attempts to frame interpretations with a strong concern for political legitimacy. Hong and his colleagues clearly embrace a rational approach. By arguing that settlements can be achieved, they argue that the traditional divisions of reform from below and from above can be maintained. Seen by rationalists, environmental problems will be due either to limited reflections or inadequate information. Both can be countered by increasing public participation in planning. More than that, the authors suggest it is time for Chinese political elites to give up the idea of an omnipotent government.

The problem is that the book fails to show why and how NGOs will work according to rational principles, especially when it is asserted that “it will be some time before the establishment of scientific, democratic decision-making in contemporary China” (p. 198). We are left wondering whether the nongovernmental

environmental movement will be able to construct a “rational” framework that can resolve conflicts of interest while incorporating the normative functions of a larger harmonious society. Such a framework, one that will work for the peculiar case of China, is not likely to appear among the Western approaches to environmental management studied by Hong Dayong and his colleagues.

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