

Environmental groups in China face bureaucratic red tape and find themselves in the red financially — but they still manage to maintain their green message.



A decorative pot adorns China's Forbidden City, a section of Beijing where China's elite once lived.

China's grassroots grow deeper

BY ZHENYU LI

Since the first grassroots environmental group was established in China during the 1990s, more than 2,700 Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations (ENGOS) with more than 224,000 members — ten times as many as ten years ago — have been formed in the People's Republic.

Chinese ENGO participants are young, well educated and passionate, according to the All-China Environment Federation (ACEF), which commissioned a study about Chinese ENGOS in 2006. About 80 percent are 30 years old or younger, and more than 50 percent have at least a bachelor's degree. Significantly, more than 30,000 members have studied or worked overseas, where they solidify their desire to protect the environment for the public good rather than for personal gains.

Xiaoyi Liao, the sponsor of Beijing Earth Country, created an environmental TV program called "Daughter of Earth" in America in the 1990s. After interacting with many environmentalists abroad, she was inspired to set up her own grassroots ENGO in China in 1995.

But less than 10 percent of Chinese ENGOS are grassroots organizations. According to the All-China Environment Federation report, the Chinese government initiated about 50 percent of them — raising questions as to how a non-governmental group can be, well, governmental. Some researchers call these groups G-ENGOS, which are less active than their grassroots counterparts.

Regardless of origin, all Chinese ENGOS encounter tough challenges.

LEGAL-ESE — TRANSLATION, PLEASE!

Unclear legal status is the biggest obstacle many ENGOS face. Each NGO is legally required to obtain two kinds of registrations from the government. First, an organization has to register with the government office related to their field after gathering at least 50 individual members or 30 group members. Then, the organization must register with the Department of Civil Affairs, a federal office.

Most Chinese ENGOS have no chance to register with the Department of Civil Affairs because few government agencies bother to spend time or money on grassroots organizations. Consequently, some grassroots organizations either register as commercial enterprises or give up registration all together.

Friends of Nature, the first grassroots ENGO in China, was unable to find a government agency that worked with the environment willing to oversee its inception. So in 1994, it decided to register with a branch of the Chinese Culture Institute.

Yuan Li, the leader of Green Net, another ENGO, said, "When we seek financial aid, corporations will ask us whether we are a registered institute. When we go to communities, they will ask what our legal status is." Without legal status, groups cannot receive government funding and have a difficult time raising money in the private sector. And without money, the groups' hands are tied.

Xijin Jia, the vice president of NGO Institute of Tsinghua University in Beijing, stated, "Including ENGOS, there are thousands of NGOs in China. Some of them have legal identities; some of them have no independent corporation status. How to obtain a legal status is a crucial issue for Chinese ENGOS' development."

MONEY TALKS

More than 170,000 Chinese ENGOS, accounting for 76.1 percent of the total number, are short of fixed financial support. Currently, most funding comes from dues. The rest comes from private donations, overseas contributions and government grants.

According to the report from All-China Environment Federation, about one in four ENGOS applied for but did not receive financial aid in 2005, and 81.5 percent of them received less than \$6,200. As a result, 60 percent of ENGOS don't have offices, 43.9 percent of

staff employees are almost unpaid, and 72.5 percent can't afford to pay social security contributions for their staff.

Liao mentioned that Chinese companies might be more willing to finance NGOs if China had a tax relief like those available in the West.

"It is increasingly difficult for us to get overseas funding in recent years," Li said. "A lot of international organizations shift their interest away from China because they assume Chinese NGOs have been richer as a result of economic growth in this country."

PRACTICING WHAT THEY PREACH

"Popularizing environmental protection knowledge in China is like fighting a war you can never win. But the point is not winning, but persisting," said Conjie Liang, president of Friends of Nature.

And the group's persistence has garnered some victories.

Friends of Nature started protecting the gold monkey and Tibetan antelope in 1995, marking the first extensive self-organized environmental protection movement in China. Since it was established in Beijing, more than 100,000 people have participated in its activities. The group's petition for protecting northwest wild forest in Sichuan Province even aroused the central government's attention.

Liang sent an open letter to U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1998 when he visited China, asking him to ban the trade of Tibetan antelope fur in England. Blair replied the next day, expressing his understanding and support.

Other Chinese ENGOS have also actively leveraged the media. Beijing Earth Country has produced and broadcast several environmental TV programs, including Environmental Moment, Daughter of Earth, Salvations, Environmental Protection in Daily Lives and Environmental Protection Travel in America. In addition to these videos, they also published many books, including "Citizen Environmental Protection Activities Criterion" and "Children Environmental Protection Activities Criterion."

Chinese ENGOS also focus on how to enforce laws to protect public interests. In 1999, the China University of Political Science and Law set up a pollution law aid center and opened a hotline. Since then, it has received more than 10,000 calls and helped thousands of victims with more than 50 pollution lawsuits.

In 2005, the group assisted 1,721 peasants in Fujian Province with a lawsuit that awarded them more than 680,000 RMBs (about \$50 per person) which is a lot by rural Chinese standards. These peasants accused a chlorate chemical plant in the south of Pingnan County of releasing excessive chlorine into the atmosphere and causing vegetation to die and cancer to surge. The case was ranked as one of the top ten most influential lawsuits in China that year.

More recently, ENGOS have gotten actively involved in many civil engineering projects, calling for public attention to their environmental impact. Cooperation between ENGOS and the State Environmental Protection Administration (China's EPA) in 2006 led to the suspension of the Nujiang River Dam Project, which environmentalists believed would damage the environment. After the project was announced, ENGOS broadcasted the news on the Internet and reported the potential destruction of a public good. They eventually won public support and succeeded in stopping the project.

"Chinese ENGOS haven't developed a professional and comprehensive system yet," Jia said. "Although ENGOS' capability and social influence are still weak, our society has a great need for ENGOS' contributions. They have tremendous potential in the future." ☺

Zhenyu Li is a first-year master's student in the School of Journalism at MSU. This is her first appearance in *EJ*. Reach Zhenyu at lizhenyu@msu.edu.