State-society relations are on the move in China. In recent years, many new voluntary societal movements, networks, and organizations have been formed. This is a dramatic development for China’s political system. This article examines whether the changes in state-society relations have been at the initiative of the state or are really a grassroots phenomenon. One hypothesis is that the state is creating and co-opting these kinds of groups because they can help the state fulfill its goals. Another hypothesis is that such groups and movements embody grassroots forces and represent a strengthening of the role of society in Chinese politics.

This article challenges state-led models as being too simplistic. Even when the state does create societal groups, there can be unintended consequences related to those actions that result in a strengthening of the power of society. At the same time, the article challenges arguments that only emphasize the growth of genuine public participation in China. These arguments underestimate the continued and embedded power of the state in Chinese society.

The article explores these issues by looking at a group of newly established government organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) that resemble something in between a governmental agency and a non-governmental organization (NGO). It begins by reviewing theories and empirical research addressing state-society relations in China. It then introduces the concept of a GONGO and discusses the state’s rationale in fostering the GONGO sector. Furthermore, it analyzes the role played by GONGOs in China’s environmental politics, and provides several detailed case studies. Most of the GONGOs that are considered were established in the late 1990s. The conclusion stresses that GONGOs with access to international resources and the means to strengthen self-capacity will be the most sympathetic towards the formation of a stronger green civil society in China.

Understanding China’s Emerging Civil Society

As a result of domestic economic liberalization and China’s integration into world affairs, both the governing body and society in China are undergoing dramatic changes. There is an active debate among scholars of China as to whether the growth civil society in China is a grassroots, bottom-up process or is led by the state.1

The bottom-up model has its origins in the Western idea of “civil society.” Following Georg Hegel and Karl Marx’s contentious approach to thinking about civil society, many scholars interested in China have started to examine the power and interests of societal groups vis-à-vis the state.2 Elizabeth Perry and Mark Selden, for example, suggest that mass protests and grassroots resistance show that social forces have been growing in the latter half of the 1990s.3 They found that urban workers who were laid off, environmental victims, and farmers spontaneously organized protests and complaint activities when their interests came under threat from government reform policies, ineffective regulations, or corruption. They sought compensation and fair treatment from the government with their actions. Similarly, Tony Saich challenges the idea that the state can simply control groups. He claims there is a nascent pattern of negotiation emerging between civil society and the state that minimizes the state’s ability to penetrate social groups.4 His work is based on three case studies of social organizations in the areas of family planning, environment and women’s rights. The basic argument he makes is that a particular group of societal organizations have been able to reconfigure the relationship between themselves and the state. Such organizations provide innovative problem solutions to the state and as a result at times can convince the state to allow them some policy input or greater rights to pursue members’ interests and organizational goals.

A word of caution is in order. The concept of civil society has deep roots in Western political and philosophical ideas, and thus, its extension to China must be done with care. In Western democracies importance is placed on the collective identity of societal groups. . . . In the case of China, however, it cannot necessarily be assumed that such identity exists within societal groups.
sarily be assumed that such identity exists within societal groups. Citizens that benefit or suffer from economic reforms do not automatically develop a collective identity.\(^6\) The depth of the solidarity that exists among the protesters observed by Perry and Selden and the NGOs discussed by Saich should be questioned. Social activists and NGOs are not always accountable to their constituencies. This provokes my suspicion regarding the actual extent of a civil society in China. Even within the environment field where NGOs and activists have had some of their most visible achievements and the greatest influence on policy-making and public education, it is still too early to conclude there is a strong group identity within the green community.\(^7\) In sum, this article acknowledges that there is a growing green civil society in China, but argues with the tendency of some scholars to overlook other important forces that are contributing to the changes evidenced in state-society relations. This article will focus attention on one such force: the GONGO sector.

Can the State Lead the Way for Civil Society?

The state-led model is rooted in the idea that there is a Chinese political culture that reifies the state. Literally hundreds of thousands of organizations and groups were created by the state at different administrative levels in recent years to serve as support mechanisms. These organizations have been called GONGOs by researchers. Some scholars have dubbed GONGOs a form of state or socialist corporatism in line with the Leninist-Maoist regime tradition of China’s past where mass social organizations were created as “transmission belts” between the state and society.\(^8\) These theorists argue that GONGOs are not acting against the state but rather are organic parts of the governing body connected by a variety of financial, personnel, and operational mechanisms.

In short, this state-led approach suggests that the state apparatus has adaptive characteristics. By creating GONGOs, the state is able to channel the diverse demands of the society and arrange them in ways to support its own legitimacy. Mutual perceptions of strengths and weaknesses play a key role in the relationships between GONGOs and the state. The state is aware of its own inability to deal with social welfare problems that have accompanied the dramatic macro-economic reforms, and expects GONGOs to contribute to solving those problems with their expertise and flexibility.

Yet, there are competing arguments that challenge the depiction of GONGOs as mechanisms effectively linking the state to society. One important challenge to the state-led model comes from scholarship that focuses attention on the new business elite and a particular type of GONGO—the industry association. This work suggests that because clientelism still remains a salient feature in China’s state-society structure, GONGOs should be thought of organizations established for strategic purposes.\(^9\) There is no solid group consciousness among business elites, the unemployed, blue-collar workers, or professionals. Nor are there institutionalized horizontal ties that can be used to articulate their collective interests. GONGOs act as service delivery agencies for the state or mechanisms to ease short-term societal tensions. According to this way of thinking, GONGOs should not be considered as formalized representation channels for society.

Re-thinking GONGOs and the Transformation from the Middle Ground

My own research on environmental GONGOs in China raises additional challenges to the state-led model. The grand administrative reform of the central State Council system and provincial governments in 1998 triggered a boom in the number of GONGOs. These GONGOs were not created simply to serve as arms of the government, but rather to absorb governmental officials who were laid off during this reform.

The state is pushing GONGOs to be self-sufficient and partially separate from the government. It is well known among national GONGO leaders that in three to five years, the budget coming from the government will be cut down to zero.\(^10\) On August 13, 2000, the Party and the State Council both declared principles and timelines for the reform of governmental public cause units, which compose a large share of the GONGO sector.\(^11\) Those principles indicate that the government will cut down financial support to the public cause units. Moreover, it is possible that in 2002, a new tentative regulation will be passed for non-profit research institutions. The new regulation could adopt different financial, personnel and organizational requirements than the Regulation of Social Organizations as amended in 1998. Current legislation requires a strict two-step registration with governmental agencies for all GONGOs. Legislative reform could result in a relaxation of this requirement. At high political levels a consensus appears to be forming that GONGOs should be less closely tied to the government.

It is also the case that mutual perceptions between the state and GONGOs are changing. The state initially appears to have established GONGOs primarily in order to receive international assistance from inter-governmental organizations or foreign NGOs, to strengthen technology and information support, or
solve new problems. Yet, as later parts of this paper will show GONGOs are developing their own organizational ideologies and capacities, and in the process both governmental and GONGO perceptions of their respective roles are changing.

To understand state-society relations in China, and the role played by GONGOs, a middle ground transformation model is needed. As the transition scholarship on negotiated pacts between elites in an authoritarian government and the societal forces of opposition suggests, high-level political support for change and institutional transformation of the government body is a necessary but not sufficient condition for eventual political change. An active role must be played by political and intellectual elites, and especially techno-politicians. Techno-politicians are situated in between the state and society, and as a result they can influence the formation of new collective identities and political coalitions.

Elizabeth Economy’s studies on China’s environmental diplomacy and compliance with international agreements have shown that there is a dual policy-generating mechanism at work: the formal institutional side and the informal, but increasingly structured side in which techno-politicians play a major role.

As suggested above, environmental GONGOs have mushroomed within the national and provincial administrative bodies, and attracted numerous retired (or pre-retired) high level officials, environmental scientists, university scholars, respected practitioners, social celebrities, and international experts as members. This is especially the case since the reforms of 1998. Because of the less restrictive institutional structure of GONGOs, elites can enjoy considerable leeway and take full advantage of their expertise, personal connections, and management innovations. GONGOs are becoming a more important, yet informal arena for China’s environmental politics.

GONGOs in China’s Environmental Politics

The role and importance of environmental GONGOs have been undervalued by those scholars who merely see them as agents of the government. Although there is little literature on GONGOs, they are pervasive within both national and local level environmental policy making (see Figure 1). The first national environmental GONGO, The China Environment Science Association (CESA), was founded in 1979, even before the National Environment Protection Agency (NEPA) was granted independent status from the Ministry of Construction in 1984. At the national level, currently, there are three major GONGOs under the State Environment Protection Agency (SEPA). They are the CESA, the China Environment Protection Industry Association, and the China Environment Fund. Because of the comprehensive nature of environmental issues and the history of China’s environmental governance, there are many environment-related offices and GONGOs under the State Planning Commission as well as several other state ministries. In the field of energy efficiency, for example, relevant institutions include the Renewable Energy Center under the State Development Planning Commission (SDPC) and the Chinese Renewable Energy Industry Association (CREIA), the Energy Saving Center and the China Association of Resources Comprehensive Utilization, which are under the State Economic and Trade Commission (SETC).

There are also many quasi-governmental units that function as GONGOs. Examples include the China Environment Science Institute, whose members have been participating in international events and training as non-governmental representatives. The Center for Environmental Education and Communication under SEPA has been implementing projects, hosting environmental scientists from German NGOs, and networking with international organizations. The Beijing Energy Efficiency Center is a secondary GONGO under SETC, which plays an important role.
It is necessary to consider all these entities when addressing the structural functions of environmental GONGOs.

At the provincial level, there are three major categories of GONGOs facilitating the interaction between the provincial Environmental Protection Bureau (EPB) and professional environment groups (in science and technology), and related corporations. Some publication education centers under the EPB have also been moving towards a GONGO working style since the 1990s (see Figure 2). Their idea is to obtain project contracts and build up more local connections.19

Environmental GONGOs are performing a variety of structural functions at both national and provincial levels. GONGOs have their own expertise and are able to contribute to policy-making on particular issues. They can take advantage of the existing administrative system, but they do not have real power. They need to foster their own cooperative working relationships with societal entities. They are, however, closer to society, especially

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**Figure 1 GONGOs in the Chinese Environmental Administrative Structure (National Level)**

National People’s Congress ———— State Council

Environment and Resource Protection Committee

SEPA

other ministries with environment components

- departments
- public course units (shiye danwei)
- affiliated units (guakao danwei)
- semi-affiliated units (gua pai danwei)

environmental GONGOs

double-governed units (shuangchong guanli)

secondary GONGOs (erji danwei)

(Sources: Chinese Environment Protection Institutions and Corporations Index, 1996; and personal interviews. There are 22 public course, 7 affiliated units under SEPA, 30 semi-affiliated, 10 double-affiliated units under the SEPA.)

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**Figure 2 GONGOs in the Chinese Environmental Administrative Structure (Provincial Level)**

Provincial People’s Congress ———— Provincial Government

EPB

- other departments with environment components

- departments
- public education and propaganda center (public course unit)
- environment media unit (public course unit)
- environmental technology association (GONGO)
- environmental science association (GONGO)
- environment corporation association (GONGO)

(Sources: Chinese Environment Protection Institutions and Corporations Index, 1996; and personal interviews)
at lower levels, than the government. Ideally, they can play the role of bridging state and societal interests. In order to better understand the role that GONGOs play in environmental protection in China, the following section will examine seven national-level GONGOs. Local GONGO politics while important are not addressed here.

The Rationales for Establishing GONGOs

Seven GONGO cases are examined in order to shed light on the growing autonomy and increasing capacity of the GONGO sector (see Table 1). Even though these seven GONGOs represent only a small portion of all environmental GONGOs in China, they demonstrate the diversity of the sector. They include foundations, education centers, research institutes and industry associations. These seven are among the more active and influential groups because of the opportunities they have and the contexts under which they were created. Six were established in the 1990s, and almost all were initiated under international influences. These cases strongly suggest that the Chinese central government creates environmental GONGOs to fulfill specific goals, and not as argued by socialist corporatism theories to channel diverse societal interests. These goals are discussed below.

1) Reacting to the Internationalization of Environmental Protection

The China Environment Science Association (CESA) was founded in 1979 as a leading consulting team for national policy-makers after the deep frustration the Chinese delegation encountered during the 1972 Stockholm UN Conference. The Prime Minister at that time, Zhou Enlai, who headed the Chinese delegation to Stockholm, took the initiative to organize two national environmental meetings after the Conference. This led to the establishment of CESA, which was set up to cope with the growing internationalization of environmental management and protection.

These cases strongly suggest that the Chinese central government creates environmental GONGOs to fulfill specific goals, and not as argued by socialist corporatism theories to channel diverse societal interests.

2) Responding to Environmental Degradation

Since the late 1980s, in response to domestic environmental degradation (and disasters), new global environmental problems, and the need to comply with international regimes, the Chinese government has established a variety of GONGOs. For example, during the preparations for the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, the Ministry of Science and Technology created the organization, which was later to be re-named the Chinese Society for Sustainable Development (CSSD). The China Environment Protection Fund (CEPF) was first created in 1993 and chaired by Qu Geping, the former Minister of the National Environment Protection Agency and the first Chinese representative to UNEP. Unlike foundations in the general sense, CEPF cooperates with SEPA, the National Youth League Committee, and other governmental agencies. It collects funds from, instead of providing funds to, society and individuals. CEPF promotes environmental awareness and education as a means of building up the state’s reputation and capacity in environmental protection.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Cases of National-level Environmental GONGOs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full Name of GONGOs</td>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China Environmental Science Association</td>
<td>CESA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China Wildlife Conservation Association</td>
<td>CWCA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chinese Society for Sustainable Development</td>
<td>CSSD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China Environment Protection Fund</td>
<td>CEPF</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beijing Energy Efficiency Center</td>
<td>BECon</td>
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<tr>
<td>Center for Environmental Education and Communication</td>
<td>CEEC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese Renewable Energy Industry Association</td>
<td>CREIA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3) Obtaining International Assistance

While opening its doors to the global market, the government opened opportunities for official assistance agencies, private foundations, development banks, and NGOs to work in China. Assistance strategies among both donors of official development assistance (ODA) and NGO communities have shifted towards a more grassroots orientation because of their earlier bad experiences with big construction projects in the past two decades. Thus, one crucial criterion the Chinese government has to meet in order to obtain more international grants and technology assistance is to guarantee non-state actors’ participation in project implementation. Many of the GONGOs were set up by the state taking into account this type of external pressure. In the early 1980s, the Great Pandas in China were threatened by a sudden bamboo shortage in the southwestern provinces. In response, in 1983 the China Wildlife Conservation Association (CWCA) was created by the government under the supervision of the Ministry of Forestry (now the State Forestry Bureau-SFB) to accept international donations from private foundations and NGOs to save the Great Panda.

4) Benefiting from International Expertise

In 1993, the Beijing Energy Efficiency Center (BECon) was founded as a secondary GONGO under the Resource Institute (RI) of the SDPC. The main leaders of this organization included Zhou Dadi, Director of the RI, and William Chandler, Director of Advanced International Studies at U.S. Pacific Northwest National Laboratory. BECon is a hybrid organization in terms of its indirect affiliation with the SDPC and its relatively high autonomy in decision-making. It was formed as a secondary GONGO because of the push from Chandler. Chandler’s vision grew out of his experience directing the establishment of five other independent energy efficiency centers in former Communist countries since the end of the 1980s. Similarly, the Chinese Renewable Energy Industry Association (CREIA) was created in 1999 to implement a five-year project, “Capacity Building for the Rapid Commercialization of Renewable Energy in China.” This project was initiated by the State Economic and Trade Commission, SEPA, and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and co-funded by the UNDP, the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), the Global Environment Facility (GEF), and the Australian and Dutch governments. Despite the establishment of a government Project Office under SETC, CREIA was designed at the same time as a GONGO to establish connections and facilitate capacity building among renewable energy industries.

5) Absorbing Former Government Employees

Since the Jiang Zhemin-Zhu Rongji regime was consolidated in 1996, the central government has been undergoing extensive administrative reform. Many GONGOs are being created to absorb former governmental officials and staff, to supply new technology services, and alleviate fiscal budget burdens. The Center for Environmental Education and Communication at SEPA (CEEC) is a good example. CEEC was officially founded in 1996, with the main purpose of expanding public education activities and providing information for SEPA, including organizing national campaigns for improving environmental curriculum in schools, a specialized public library in environmental research, and a comprehensive website for SEPA. With a flexible entity such as CEEC, SEPA can maintain its control over public environment education and propaganda without having to pay all the expenses.

Unintended Developments Related to Environmental GONGOs

Though all GONGOs are created by the state for particular purposes, the evolution in their organizational ideologies, the scope of their activities, and the recognition they have obtained from both insiders and outsiders have gone far beyond what the state ever intended. After the 1995 UN Conference on Women in Beijing, for example, CESA became more active in developing women-environment networks. They implemented a three-year program together with the UNDP, “Women in China’s Sustainable Development.” The program deals with capacity building and sustainable development education among female political leaders and entrepreneurs. Recently, the CEPF has been friendly towards and presented moral support to grassroots green NGOs, thereby helping them to gain public recognition and trust. CEPF annually awards individuals who have made extraordinary contributions to China’s environment. CEPF has also been active in international events such as the UN’s NGO Millennia Forum in 2000. These activities, in turn, effectively extend CEPF’s reach to both domestic and international green communities. Both the CESA and the CEPF are physically located within the same building as SEPA, which to some degree explains their close relationship with SEPA. Generally speaking, both tend to follow SEPA’s policy lines. Thus, they belong to the group of GONGOs that are among...
the more constrained by the state. Their organizational agendas are still heavily shaped by the state. Even for these groups, however, empirical evidence has shown that in recent years, they have become increasingly aware of the strength and merits of building working relationships with groups other than governmental agencies, internationally and locally. This type of change in GONGO leaders’ attitudes sheds light on the unintended consequences of the state’s decision to create GONGOs.

Some GONGOs, such as BECon and CREIA, have become more independent in decision-making and project implementation, partially because external forces were involved in these organizations from the beginning. Compared to other cases in this study, BECon has always enjoyed higher levels of autonomy in its own priority-setting and partnerships. BECon’s on-going projects include providing the SDPC with policy recommendations for formulating China’s 10th Five-Year Plan (2001–2005) and Medium to Long Term Strategy on energy efficiency. It also partners with the World Bank and GEF for the projects on energy conservation promotion, barrier removal for efficiency light products and systems, and training for various Chinese energy efficiency organizations to apply for international funds, and especially those from the GEF. BECon’s name is well recognized among energy efficiency communities beyond China. It also plays an active role in supporting provincial and local energy efficiency institutions to obtain more assistance from international organizations. It is certainly naïve to argue that BECon represents the majority of those expertise-oriented GONGOs and the state is losing supervision over them. What the BECon case has proved, instead, is that with advanced expertise and continuous support from the international community, it is possible for GONGOs to move on and develop organizational capacity beyond the state’s original design.

The state’s original idea behind the establishment of CREIA was to take advantage of international capital to hasten the development of renewable energy industries, to promote the market for renewable energy products, and to encourage more corporations to join this market. CREIA’s activities, however, have been expanded to include influencing national and provincial renewable energy policies, and networking with the GEF, the World Bank, the Packard Foundation and other international donors.22 In a way, CREIA is creating a new interest group rather than representing it. With its leading role in setting professional standards and norms, and its networks with domestic industries and international actors, it is very possible that CREIA will play a crucial role in the future in the regulation and self-regulation of the renewable energy sector.

Like BECon and CREIA, CEEC has achieved more than the state’s expectations in the field of promoting public environmental awareness. Its major achievements include the establishment of Mobil China Environmental Education Fund, public awareness billboards in cities, and the official China environment information website.23 As a quasi-NGO, CEEC has also helped disseminate information on China’s environmental status, social reactions to environmental regulations, and challenges that result from China’s integration into global environmental governance structures to a broader audience. CEEC has been anxiously meeting environmental NGOs in Europe and North America, and actively participating in NGO components of the World Bank and other international institutions. The newsletters published by CEEC have been widely read among policy-makers and practitioners outside China.24

These seven cases show that GONGOs are expanding their reach with both domestic citizen groups and international organizations. Moreover, some GONGOs are not only mobilizing resources for self-capacity building, but assisting more grassroots groups and helping to connect them with the international community.

Autonomy, Capacity and Future Tendencies of Environmental GONGOs

GONGOs are gaining greater organizational autonomy. In addition to the importance of their legal status and financial and personnel resources, elements that are critical to GONGO autonomy are their capacity building abilities and access to international sources. It is because of the growing self-capacity and support from the outside, that GONGOs can realize their own organizational missions, negotiate with the state for more self-governance, and facilitate trans-societal cooperation.

In a legal sense, most GONGOs are independent legal entities. BECon is an exception, as it is not a legal person and operates under the supervision of the RI.

Financially, after the state creates the institutional framework for a GONGO, generally GONGOs are gradually expected to take care of their own operational costs. Support from the government (or from international organizations through inter-governmental agreements) typically declines and is eventually cut off. In some cases, even though the amount of support is maintained, it becomes proportionally smaller over time. For example, the cen-
Central government provides the CESA annual financial support of 20,000 RMB, the same as it received 22 years ago. This is far below actual operating expense levels. Additional financial support must be raised from membership fees, training and research grants. Similarly, in addition to receiving operational funds from the government, CSSC charges project fees for its services. In fiscal year 2000, four years after it was established, 70 percent of CEEC’s funding came from outside of China: 220,000 RMB came from SEPA; 80,000 RMB from international grants, and 500,000 RMB from contracts and project fees. In three years, governmental funds to CEEC will be cut off. Secondary GONGOs like BECon have to be self-sufficient from the beginning. When first started, World Wildlife Fund (WWF)-US gave BECon a grant of 10,000 USD. Now all funding comes through project contracts. The laggard here is the CWCA. All the staff members at the national office (which is located in the SFB building) and operational expenses are still paid for by the Bureau, at an equivalent level to governmental officials and departments.

Key leaders of environmental GONGOs are usually former or current techno-politicians. As an example, CESA is composed of the country’s most influential environmental scientists and experts. Currently, there are over 3000 individual members, and 16 full-time staff at the national office, all of whom are considered governmental employees. The Standing Committee has 25 members including 8 from each related state ministry. Besides the leaders, most national-level environmental GONGOs have a consultative committee, through which current governmental agencies can yield their influences and guidelines. This is the case with CSSD, CWCA, CEPF, and CESA. CSSD has a huge consulting body made up of political elites. Most of its staff members keep their governmental official rankings and benefits. However, more and more GONGO staff members are recruited under contract. Except for the chief directors, most of the 19 full-time and 4 part-time staff members at CEEC are not government employees. Half of BECon’s staff members are under contract, the other half also work for the government.

The effects of personnel relationships on GONGO autonomy are less straight-forward than legal or financial considerations are. GONGO leaders face constraints placed upon them by their affiliated governmental agencies, but at the same time, they may also possess some leverage over policy outcomes and protect GONGO independence with their official power. In some cases such as CSSD and BECon, the leaders’ ability to leverage policy-making and facilitate self-capacity building outweighs constraints. Organizations such as the CEPF, CESA, and CWCA which have a large staff made up primarily of governmental employees, face the highest level of intervention by the government both at the organizational and individual level.

Generally speaking, the higher the self-governing capacity of a GONGO, the more autonomy it gains. Self-capacity in this paper specifically means the ability to implement projects, to innovate solutions for problems, and to influence policy outcomes independently. This is distinct from being able to implement governmental policies through existing administrative systems. For example, even though the majority of CESA’s research tasks are determined by SEPA, CESA was able to cooperate directly with the UNDP on a project to design special training for female political and social entrepreneurs. During the project’s implementation, CESA took advantage of its good connections with provincial Environmental Science associations and EPBs, but they could not use administrative orders to reach their goals. Other examples of innovative initiatives include CREIA’s success with the Investment Opportunity Facility, CEPF’s efforts to involve grassroots green NGOs in national Earth Day celebrations, and CEEC’s partnership with Mobil for the creation of an environmental education foundation. Being one of the central groups involved in the Tenth Five-Year Plan on energy efficiency, BECon demonstrates the extreme extent to which a GONGO can reshape policy outcomes. Given sufficient political support, most GONGOs are able to assist with policy to satisfy the government. The challenge for the GONGOs is to contribute something extra, to mobilize sources of support beyond the government, and to maintain and expand their organizations. To meet this challenge, GONGOs are motivated to improve their own capacity. With higher capacity levels, they can develop their own expertise, expand their activity scope, and gradually obtain more autonomy from governmental agencies.

International access appears to be having a two-fold effect on GONGO autonomy. On the one side, GONGOs are strengthening their self-capacity with information, expertise, and knowledge sharing obtained from networking with international organizations. On the other, international access is contributing directly to GONGO autonomy, especially when external actors are involved from the initial stage of an organization’s existence. A GONGO can be relatively autonomous when it is established as a result of negotiations or interaction between the state and international organizations. In these cases, they are typically provided with sufficient funding, technology, and psychological

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**SYMPOSIUM**

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support from the outside to conduct their activities. Importantly, the state is not the only supervising institution, and the balance of power between the state and external actors provide these GONGOs with flexibility. International actors that play this kind of role include intergovernmental organizations, such as the UN agencies in the case of CREIA; governmental agencies of another state, such as the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory of the U.S. for BECon; and international NGOs, such as German NGOs to CEEC.

If a GONGO ruins its credibility in the eyes of international donors, it may lose its influence domestically. In the case of wildlife conservation, for example, international donors have questioned CWCA’s effectiveness and transparency. The scale of international non-governmental funding for CWCA has declined because more western NGOs are coming into China and implementing projects directly with local NGOs, who are considered better grantees than CWCA. In this sense, international actors shape GONGO autonomy through pressure instead of incentive and direct support.

As Table 2 shows below, the GONGO sector is very diverse in terms of capacity and access to international sources. The first tier includes those newly established GONGOs, BECon, CREIA and CEEC, which enjoy both high levels of capacity and international access. More traditional GONGOs, such as CESA and CEPF are low in both categories. CSSC represents the group of GONGOs that lies in the middle.

Some GONGOs are very supportive of grassroots NGOs and even partner with them. For example, CEEC maintains close relationships with major environmental education NGOs. Not surprisingly, some GONGOs, such as BECon, will likely become NGOs or non-profit independent research institutes in the near future, as further legalization of the third sector in China progresses. However, many like CESA and CEPF will prefer to remain closely connected with the government. Given their organizational goals, greater financial constraints, and lower levels of autonomy, this group of GONGOs seeks to maintain stable relationships with the government. An urgent challenge for CESA according its leaders, for instance, is dealing with the association’s decreasing influence on SEPA’s policy making as a result of growing competition from other institutions, such as the China Environmental Science Institute, the Sino-Japan Center research departments, and the CEEC. The more autonomy a GONGO enjoys, the less it will rely on state assistance, the more it will be able and willing to assist societal groups and facilitate trans-societal cooperative initiatives. This is the most surprising, and perhaps most important, unintended consequence of the Chinese government’s reform strategies and the invention of GONGOs.

**Conclusions**

Neither the state-led nor the bottom-up model of state-society relations is sufficient to capture the dynamism of environmental politics in current day China. Instead, the wide-spread existence of GONGOs at both the national and provincial lev-
els, suggests that a middle ground transformation model is more appropriate. This model challenges the state corporatism theory by not only clarifying the state’s rationales for establishing GONGOs, but also points out the unintended consequences of state strategies. More and more GONGOs are pursuing organizational goals beyond the state’s original expectations. The larger implications of this development for politics in China will be a subject of much interest and importance.

The research presented here suggests that through legal, financial and organizational separation from the central government, many GONGOs have gained a certain degree of autonomy from the state. Their self-capacity building efforts and increased access to international sources are furthering this process. Findings from this research project also suggest that the more autonomous the GONGO sector becomes, the more probable it is that it will facilitate the growth of a green civil society in China. Newly established GONGOs, such as BECon, are playing active match-maker roles between domestic NGOs and international donors. For students who are interested in state-society structures in China, this particular group of GONGOs will be important to watch.

It is not certain whether the majority of GONGOs will move on to become more independent or remain co-opted by the government. The result is not likely to be uniform. Given the growth in the numbers and capacity of GONGOs, whether they will strive to be independent or not will have an important impact on both the environmental administrative structure and domestic civil society. No matter which side GONGOs choose to ally with in the future, such movement will shift the balance between the state and society. They may assist the governing body by acting as a consultative committee, service provider, or communication facilitator; or, they can empower grassroots groups by sharing their expertise, and smoothing the access to international sources. Their “soft support” (versus direct assistance) has been crucial in helping the general public to identify with the role of NGOs, legitimize the work of NGOs, and facilitating mutual trust building between the public and NGOs.

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Endnotes

4. Saich, Tony. “Negotiating the State: The Development of Social Organizations in China.” The China Quarterly, Vol.161, 2000. The term social organization is used in a loose way in his paper. His discussion includes a national-level GONGO (the China Family Planning Association) a highly institutionalized member-based NGO (the Friends of Nature) and an informal activist network (the magazine Rural Women Knowing All). The differentiation is important.
7. I make this argument based upon numerous interviews and discussions with not only environmentalists themselves but also many anxious observers, independent researchers, and practitioners inside and outside China. See also Turner, Jennifer and Fengshi Wu eds. Green NGO and Environmental Journalist Forum (in Greater China). Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2001.
8. The idea of state corporatism was popularized by Phillippe Schmitter in The New Corporatism (Frederick B. Pike and Thomas Stritch, eds. London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974) and has been frequently applied by China scholars when addressing the state-society relation question. See also Unger, Jonathan, and Anita Chan. “Corporatism in China: A Developmental State in an East Asian Context?” In Barret McCormick and Jonathan Unger eds. China after Socialism: In the Footsteps of East Europe or East Asia? Page 95–129. Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1996.
10. Interviews with GONGO leaders and SEPA officials in summer 2000.
11. Reported by major newspapers. www.eastday.com. Many GONGOs are operating as public course units. Thus, this declaration on public course units which urges them to be more market-oriented will also have a significant impact on GONGOs.
15. Public course units mainly refer to mass media, publishing, advanced research (i.e. the National Academy of Science), and public education institutions. Semi-affiliated units compose even more diverse groups of entities ranging from monitoring and assessment, to standard setting institutions. Double-governed units are under the supervision of more than one governmental agency. Secondary GONGOs have even less financial or personnel connections with the government.

16. Most are only partially funded by the government. In some cases, personnel of these entities are government employees, but without equivalent official rankings.


18. Interview with Jin Jiaman from the CESI in summer 2000. She was invited by ECOLOGIA (American NOG), for a study tour of American environmental NGOs in 1994. Later, she and Wang Yongchen started a grassroots green NGO in Beijing, the Green Earth Volunteers.

19. Interviews with EPB officials in Beijing, Shanghai, and Dalian in summer 2000.

20. Interview with Mr. Zhang Shanning, Deputy General Secretary in summer 2000.

21. The U.S. Pacific Northwest National Laboratory is managed by the Battelle Institute. The Battelle Institute itself is a quasi-non-profit private entity specialized in management of scientific research. See “Inventory of Environmental Works in China.” China Environmental Series. No.4. My thanks to Drs. Zhou Dadi, William Chandler, and Jeff Logan from BECon and Battelle for sharing their insights on this topic.

22. Interview with Mr. Zhu Junshen, Director of CREIA in summer 2001.

23. Partnership with the Mobil oil company. www.chinaenvironment.com


25. Interview with Mr. Jia Feng, Deputy Director of CEEC in summer 2000.

26. Interview with Mr. Chen Kun, Deputy General Secretary of CSSD in summer 2000

27. Numerous discussions with American conservation NGOs and observers. Special thanks to Dr. Jennifer Turner, Senior Project Associate at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholar, and Dr. James Harkness, Director of the World Wildlife Fund—China office, for sharing their insights on this issue.