New Partners or Old Brothers?
GONGO\textsuperscript{s} in Transnational Environmental Advocacy in China

By Fengshi Wu

Chinese government organized nongovernmental organizations (GONGO\textsuperscript{s}) have been viewed by most China scholars and international agencies simply as extended organs of the government. The GONGO sector in China—particularly in the environmental sphere—is quite diverse in terms of political independence and strength. Moreover, GONGO\textsuperscript{s} are distinctive from the government and NGOs in that they straddle and sometimes bridge the worlds of governmental agencies and NGOs. In this paper, seven brief case studies illustrate the Chinese government’s rationales in fostering environmental GONGO\textsuperscript{s} and how in the 1990\textsuperscript{es} these GONGO\textsuperscript{s} developed in ways unforeseen by the government. Specifically, GONGO\textsuperscript{s} have obtained some organizational autonomy from state control and some green GONGO\textsuperscript{s} have opted to cooperate with local environmental NGOs in China. Access to international environmental communities and building organizational capacity are two factors that have contributed most to the increase in GONGO autonomy.

T
he China Green Light project is a joint initiative by the Chinese State Economic and Trade Commission, UN Development Programme (UNDP), and Global Environment Facility (GEF). All three partners regard this project as an example of “best practice in international cooperation,” exceptional in that it enabled China to successfully adopt new energy-efficiency technology in a short period of time.\textsuperscript{1} The Beijing Energy Efficiency Center (BECon), registered as nonprofit secondary governmental research institute under the State Development Planning Commission, has played a crucial role in the initiation and implementation of this project.

After participating in seminars at the 1995 UN Women’s Conference in Beijing, several officials in the Shaanxi Provincial Women’s Federation were inspired to initiate some informal environmental protection activities during their spare time. Their mobilization of stay-at-home mothers to undertake community environmental education work led to the creation of the Shaanxi Mothers Environmental Volunteers Association (MEVA). The reputation of this group has spread well beyond Xi’an and key members of the association have been invited to World Bank seminars and other international meetings organized by the Professional Association for China’s Environment, an NGO based in Washington, DC.

Sponsored by the Chinese Aid Committee for the Culturally Disadvantaged and National Working Commission for Children, activists at the Hand-in-Hand Earth Village (an organization affiliated with the Children’s Newspaper) have been working to build up hands-on environmental education facilities and activities in grade schools in Beijing and poverty-afflicted areas around China. Hand-in-Hand received two major environment awards funded by international organizations—the Ford Motor Environmental Protection Award (Ford Motor Company Fund) in 2000 and the Earth Award (Friends of the Earth, Hong Kong) in 2001.

Despite differences in the scope and substance of their successful environmental work, BECon, MEVA, and Hand-in-Hand all can be categorized as a type of organization distinctive from other governmental agencies and societal groups in China—government organized nongovernmental organizations (GONGO\textsuperscript{s}). GONGO\textsuperscript{s} have been viewed by most China scholars and international environmental organizations simply as extended organs of the government. Some China watchers have even inaccurately categorized GONGO\textsuperscript{s} as genuine independent grassroots nongovernmental organizations (NGO\textsuperscript{s}). The GONGO sector in China is quite diverse in terms of political independence and strength, but they are distinctive from the government and NGO\textsuperscript{s} in that they straddle and sometimes bridge the worlds of governmental agencies and NGO\textsuperscript{s}.

Within the environmental sphere in particular, as illustrated by the above examples, many GONGO\textsuperscript{s} are building their capacity through partnerships with international organizations. Moreover, some environmental GONGO\textsuperscript{s} are supporting the
develop a stronger independent green civil society in China. Are they new partners for transnational advocacy NGOs to work with to solve environmental problems in China? Or just old Communist brothers wearing new hats? More information and analysis of the GONGO sector are needed for the international environmental community to establish more sustainable working relationships in China.

Decentralization of administrative and financial power within the government sphere and the opening of China to the world are reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping that created political and social space for dramatic changes in state-society relations. Most striking has been the formation of many new independent grassroots social organizations in the areas of health, environment, women, elderly, and disabilities.

This changing political landscape also has led to a quiet proliferation of new environmental organizations from within the government itself. Over the past 20 years, a great number of multilateral organizations, transnational environmental NGOs, and official development assistance agencies have been supplying Chinese governmental agencies, the small, yet growing, number of grassroots green NGOs, and environmental GONGOs with funding, information, and technical support. The growing environmental advocacy networks between international organizations and Chinese NGOs and GONGOs have resulted in innovative environmental activities ranging from national policies on greenhouse gas emission control to biogas utilization demonstration projects, from pesticide education in Yunnan to Tibetan antelope anti-poaching campaigns. Little comparative research has been done on the structures and complex patterns of this transnational cooperation with Chinese GONGOs. To fill this gap, this paper examines a group of newly established environmental GONGOs in China.

To understand the significance of these new types of GONGOs, I begin by reviewing theories of two typical views of Chinese GONGOs and then propose a middle-ground perspective on the topic. In the next section I introduce the variety of roles played by GONGOs in China’s environmental politics by examining how they are situated in national and local policymaking circles and transnational NGO advocacy partnerships. This is followed by seven brief case studies that help to illustrate the Chinese government’s rationales in fostering environmental GONGOs and how in the 1990s these GONGOs developed in ways unforeseen by the government. Specifically, GONGOs have obtained some organizational autonomy from state control and some green GONGOs have opted to cooperate with local environmental organizations in China. Access to international environment communities and building of organizational capacity has contributed most to the increase in GONGO autonomy. In my research I have found that GONGOs with access to international resources and the means and motivation to strengthen their organization’s capacity have become more supportive of the formation of a green civil society in China than GONGOs with less autonomy from the government.

**What is a Chinese GONGO?**

There is no single clear-cut law regulating various types of GONGOs and other quasi-governmental entities in China. The core criteria differentiating a GONGO from a genuine independent societal group is that the initiative to establish a GONGO is taken by a government agency or institution. An important distinction between GONGOs and government agencies is that GONGOs do not implement projects directly through formal administrative systems but instead function more as research centers or consultants for government agencies. The GONGO sector is very diverse in terms of legal status, policy influences, amount of access to local organizations, and access to international resources (e.g., funding, partnerships, and information). Even the official names to describe them vary. Most GONGOs are registered as social organizations (shehui tuanti) or affiliated units (guakao danwei) at the Ministry of Civil Affairs and are professionally sponsored by a governmental agency. However, not all legally registered social organizations in China are GONGOs, some are genuine NGOs. Some of the public enterprises (shiye danwei), semi-affiliated units (guapi danwei), and double-governed units (shuangchong guanli danwei) are operating under the same rules as GONGOs. Due to the difficulty of registering as a formal GONGO, some organizations are registered under existing GONGOs as secondary entities. Notably, the number of secondary GONGOs has grown rapidly in the past few years. To add to the confusion in classification, some of these secondary GONGOs function as independent NGOs, while others maintain close links with a government agency.

**Bottom-Up Perspective**

There is an active debate within recent China policy and political studies literature as to whether the growth of autonomous societal forces in China is a grassroots, bottom-up process or is led by the state. GONGOs are defined and analyzed differently under these two perspectives. The bottom-up perspective emphasizes the independent power within civil society to mobilize...
without (and sometimes against) the control of the state. Utilizing this perspective in an analysis of mass protests and grassroots resistance in China, Elizabeth Perry and Mark Selden suggest that independent social forces have been growing in the latter half of the 1990s. Tony Saich goes further claiming that emerging civil society organizations are limiting the state’s ability to penetrate society.

The depth of the solidarity that exists among the protesters observed by Perry and Selden and the NGOs discussed by Saich, however, should be questioned. Moreover, Chinese social and NGO activists are not always accountable to their constituencies. The lack of solidarity and accountability raise questions of the actual extent of civil society development in China. Even within the environmental field in which NGOs and activists have had some of their most visible achievements and greatest influence on policymaking and public education, it is still too early to conclude there is a strong group identity within the green community. While there is a growing green civil society in China made up of NGOs and individual activists, scholars often overlook another force, namely GONGOs that also are contributing to the growth of civil society in China. Additionally, some civil society researchers inaccurately categorize Chinese quasi-governmental organizations, such as GONGOs, as independent NGOs.

**Top-Down/State-Led Perspective**

Civil society development in China also is analyzed as a state-led phenomenon. This perspective argues that over the past several decades the Chinese government and Communist Party have created thousands of organizations—GONGOs—at different administrative levels to serve as support mechanisms for governmental and party structures. Many China analysts have dubbed GONGOs as a form of state or socialist corporatism, in which mass social organizations were created between the state and society to communicate the rationale of government and party policies to the public. In other words GONGOs were established to shape interest group opinions and not to represent societal interests or enable individuals to lobby or act against the state. Thus, GONGOs are seen as organic parts of the government structure connected by a variety of financial, personnel, and operational ties.

An examination of recently established environmental GONGOs in China challenges this state-led model. The major administrative reform of the central 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. On 13 August 2000, the Central Communist Party and the State Council both declared principles and timelines for the reform of public enterprises (shiyi dasu), which compose a large share of the GONGO sector. A central issue was to urge public enterprises to be more market-oriented. Since 1998 the government and party leadership has been pushing GONGOs to become financially self-sufficient and partially separate from their affiliate government agencies. It is well known among national-level GONGO leaders that in one to three years the budget coming from the government will be slashed to zero. In 2002, a new tentative regulation may be passed for nonprofit research institutions as well. The new regulation could adopt different financial, personnel, and organizational requirements than the 1998 amended Regulation of Social Organizations. Current legislation requires a strict two-step registration with governmental agencies for all GONGOs. The pending legislative reform could relax this two-step requirement, which would mean new GONGOs would be easier to create and less closely tied with government agencies.

These looming changes have led those running GONGOs to reevaluate their role in society. Although the state initially established GONGOs primarily to: (1) receive assistance from multilateral, bilateral or international nongovernmental organizations; (2) strengthen technology and information support; or (3) solve new problems, many GONGOs are now developing their own organizational missions and capacities while some even opt to promote NGO development.

**A Middle-Ground Perspective**

To understand the rapidly changing role played by GONGOs in current environmental politics in China, researchers need to examine the distinctive goals and motivation of the techno-politicians (also known as technocrats) who lead and make up the staff of these GONGOs. The techno-politicians in GONGOs 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 revealed a dual policy-generating mechanism at work within the Chinese government—the formal institutional side and the informal (but increasingly structured) side in which techno-politicians play a major role. Economy’s insights into the informal impacts of individual officials on environmental diplomacy provide a new perspective to
examine the potential power of leaders and staff within GONGOs. Instead of a top-down or bottom-up analysis we need to adopt a middle-ground transformation model focusing on agents within political structures to capture how these GONGOs are empowered and motivated to change their role.

Environmental GONGOs have mushroomed within the national and provincial administrative bodies and attracted numerous retired (or nearly retired) high-level officials, environmental scientists, university scholars, respected practitioners, social celebrities, and international experts as leaders and members. This is especially the case since the administrative reforms of 1998. Because of the less restrictive institutional structure, leaders and staff in GONGOs can enjoy considerable leeway and take full advantage of their expertise, personal connections, and management innovations. GONGOs are therefore becoming a more important, non-state arena for China’s environmental politics. Thus, this paper challenges the conventional top-down and bottom-up understanding of GONGOs and highlights the growing independence and diverse roles GONGOs play in linking external and internal actors in China’s environment policymaking.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National People’s Congress</th>
<th>State Council</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environment and Resource Protection Committee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEPA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other ministries with environmental components</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment related offices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental GONGOs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double-governed units (shuangchong guanli danwei)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary GONGOs (erji danwei)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Sources:
- Chinese Environment Protection Institutions and Corporations Index. (1996); and personal interviews. There are 22 public enterprises and 7 affiliated units under SEPA. In addition there are 30 semi-affiliated and 10 double-affiliated units under SEPA.
Association (CREIA), (2) Energy Saving Center, and (3) China Association of Resources Comprehensive Utilization.

There are many quasi-governmental units functioning as environmental GONGOs that also need to be included in a comprehensive analysis of national-level environmental GONGOs. Examples include:

- The China Environment Science Institute, whose members have presented themselves as nongovernmental representatives at international events and training workshops;¹⁵
- The Center for Environmental Education and Communication under SEPA has been implementing projects, hosting environmental scientists from German NGOs, and networking with international organizations; and,
- The Beijing Energy Efficiency Center is a secondary GONGO under SETC, which has played an important role in developing energy conservation targets and shaping national legislation and plans.

In an almost mirror-like structure, at the provincial level there are three major categories of GONGOs: those that (1) facilitate the interaction between the provincial Environmental Protection Bureaus (EPB) and local communities; (2) work with professional environment groups (in science and technology); or (3) cooperate with environmental technology or energy-efficiency corporations. Some publication and education centers under EPBs also have been moving toward a GONGO working style since the 1990s in order to obtain project contracts and build up more local connections.¹⁶

Environmental GONGOs are performing a variety of supportive functions at both national and provincial levels. GONGOs have their own expertise and are able to contribute to policymaking on particular issues. While they can take advantage of the existing administrative system, they do not have real power over government agencies. Instead, they need to foster their own cooperative working relationships with government agencies, research institutes, and NGOs. Within China’s GONGO sector, environmental GONGOs are among the most active in forming transnational advocacy networks across China’s

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**Table 1. Estimates of Transnational Environmental NGO Partnerships in China**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Total Number of Transnational NGOs Working in China</th>
<th>Central Government Partners</th>
<th>Local Government Partners</th>
<th>NGO Partners</th>
<th>GONGO Partners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China Environment Series 3 &amp; 4 Inventories ¹</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China Environment Series 5 Inventory ²</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China Development Brief ³ and interviews</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Feature Articles

Borders. Table 1 summarizes transnational environmental NGO partnerships in China from 2000 to 2002 based on the China Environment Series “Inventory for Environmental Work in China,” “Directory of International NGOs Supporting Work in China” published by the China Development Brief, and personal interviews with transnational NGOs and Chinese GONGOs. These data indicate GONGOs are among the most popular partners, second only to governmental agencies, for international environmental NGOs working in China.

In order to better understand the role GONGOs play in environmental protection in China, and their interactions with the state, transnational NGOs, and local communities, the following section will examine seven national-level GONGOs. Local GONGO politics, while important, are not addressed in this paper.

State Rationales for Establishing Environmental GONGOs

The formation and development of seven environmental GONGOs are examined in order to shed light on why they were created by the Chinese government, and to understand the growing autonomy and increasing capacity of the GONGO sector in China. (See Table 2) Even though these seven GONGOs represent only a small portion of all environmental GONGOs in China, they demonstrate the diversity of the sector, which includes foundations, education centers, research institutes, and industry associations. These seven (six of which were established in the 1990s) are among the most active and influential environmental GONGOs because most were created in part by international organizations and all have taken advantage of international partnerships to achieve and expand their missions. These cases strongly suggest that the Chinese central government creates environmental GONGOs to fulfill specific goals, and not to channel and co-opt diverse societal interests, as argued by socialist corporatism theorists. The multiple goals of the Chinese government for creating environmental GONGOs are discussed below.

1) Reacting to the Internationalization of Environmental Protection

The China Environmental Science Association (CESA) was founded in 1979 as a leading consulting team for national policymakers after the deep frustration the Chinese delegation encountered during the 1972 Stockholm UN Conference on the Human Environment. Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, who headed the Chinese delegation to Stockholm, took the initiative to organize two national environmental meetings after the UN conference. These meetings led the Chinese leadership to: (1) create a National Environmental Protection Agency; (2) initiate national environmental legislation, and—of central interest to this paper; (3) establish CESA, which was set up to cope with the growing internationalization of environmental management and protection.

Since the late 1980s, in response to domestic environmental degradation and natural disasters, new global environmental problems, and the need to comply with a growing number of international environmental regimes, the Chinese government established other environmental GONGOs besides CESA. For example, during the preparations for the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro (Rio Earth Summit), the Ministry of Science and Technology created the Chinese Society for Sustainable Development (CSSD). Another key GONGO created in 1993 right after the Rio Earth Summit was the China Environment Protection Fund (CEPF). Since its creation Qu Geping, the former Minister of the National Environmental Protection Agency and the first Chinese representative to the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP), has chaired this GONGO. Unlike private foundations, CEPF cooperates with SEPA, the National Youth League Committee, and other governmental agencies in order to promote environmental awareness and education as a means of building up the state’s reputation and capacity in environmental protection. To support its work, CEPF actually collects funds from (instead of providing funds to) social organizations and individuals.

2) Obtaining International Assistance

While opening its doors to the global market, the Chinese government also created opportunities for official assistance agencies, private foundations, development banks, and NGOs to work in China. In the environmental sphere, assistance strategies of both donors of official development assistance (ODA) and NGO communities have shifted toward a more grassroots orientation. This shift is due to concerns about the lack of transparency of Chinese government partners and lessons learned from some less-than-rewarding experiences with big government-led construction projects in other parts of the developing world over the past two decades. Thus, in order to obtain more international grants and technical assistance for environmental projects, the Chinese government often must guarantee the participation of non-state organizations in the project’s implementation. Environmental GONGOs have been set up in response
to this kind 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, the Chinese government created the China Wildlife Conservation Association (CWCA) under the supervision of the Ministry of Forestry (now the State Forestry Bureau) to accept international donations from private foundations and NGOs to save the great panda.18

3) Benefiting from International Expertise

In 1993, the Beijing Energy Efficiency Center (BECon) was founded as a secondary GONGO under the Resource Institute of SDPC. The main leaders of this organization included Zhou Dadi, director of the Resource Institute, and William Chandler, director of Advanced International Studies at U.S. Pacific Northwest National Laboratory.19 BECon is a hybrid organization in terms of its indirect affiliation with SDPC and its relatively high autonomy in decision-making. It was formed as a secondary GONGO because of the push from Chandler, whose vision for BECon grew out of his experience directing the establishment of five independent energy-efficiency centers in former communist countries (Ukraine, Romania, Czech Republic, Russia, and Poland).

Similarly, the Chinese Renewable Energy Industry Association (CREIA) was created jointly by international and Chinese government agencies in 1999 to implement the five-year Capacity Building for the Rapid Commercialization of Renewable Energy in China Project. This project was initiated by SETC, SEPA, and UNDP, and co-funded by UNDP, UNEP, GEF, and the Australian and Dutch governments. Despite the establishment of a government project office under SETC, the project partners simultaneously created CREIA as a GONGO to explore market opportunities for Chinese renewable energy enterprises and introduce foreign technical and financial measures. (Editor’s Note: For more on CREIA see the 19 July 2001 meeting summary in this issue of the China Environment Series)

4) Absorbing Former Government Employees

Since the Jiang Zemin-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. Most key officials of GONGOs previously worked for the central government and were appointed or recommended by the government to lead these GONGOs. In addition, GONGOs will form

### Table 2. Cases of National-level Environmental GONGOs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Full name of GONGOs</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Date Established and Governmental Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China Environmental Science Association</td>
<td>CESA</td>
<td>1979, State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China Wildlife Conservation Association</td>
<td>CWCA</td>
<td>1983, Ministry of Forestry (now the State Forestry Bureau)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese Society for Sustainable Development</td>
<td>CSSD</td>
<td>1992, Ministry of Science and Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China Environment Protection Fund</td>
<td>CEPF</td>
<td>1993, NEPA (now SEPA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beijing Energy Efficiency Center</td>
<td>BECon</td>
<td>1993, Resource Institute of the State Development Planning Commission (SDPC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Center for Environmental Education and Communication</td>
<td>CEEC</td>
<td>1996, SEPA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
a consultation committee including former or current national and provincial governmental officials. Most retired officials or former government employees are grateful to take GONGO positions as compensation for demotion or job loss. As an example, China Environmental Science Association (CESA) is composed of the country’s most influential environmental experts and techno-politicians. Currently, there are over 3,000 individual members and 16 full-time staff at CESA’s national office, all of whom are still considered government employees. Moreover, CESA’s Standing Committee (the consultation body) has 25 members, 8 of whom are from central government ministries. This is also the case with China Society for Sustainable Development (CSSD), China Wildlife Conservation Association (CWCA), and China Environment Protection Fund (CEPF). CSSD has a huge consulting body made up of political elites and most of its staff members keep their official government rank and benefits.20

5) Requiring New Services

The Center for Environmental Education and Communication (CEEC) at SEPA is a good example of the trend that the government is creating new GONGOs to supply new technology services and alleviate fiscal burdens on state coffers. CEEC was officially founded in 1996 with the main purpose of expanding public education activities and providing information to SEPA. Their work has included organizing national campaigns for improving environmental curriculum in schools, setting up a specialized public library in environmental research, and creating a comprehensive Web site for SEPA. With a flexible entity such as CEEC, SEPA can maintain its control over public environmental education and propaganda without having to pay all the expenses.

GONGO Autonomy: Expanding beyond the State’s Intention

Though all GONGOs have been created by the state to fulfill one or more particular purpose, the evolution in their organizational ideologies, the scope of their activities, and the recognition they have obtained from both domestic and international organizations have gone far beyond what the Chinese government ever intended. In this paper, I define GONGO autonomy not only by their independent legal and partially independent financial status, but also their expanding outreach into both local and international communities.21

After the 1995 UN Conference on Women in Beijing, for example, the Chinese Environmental Science Association (CESA) became very active in developing women environmental networks. Together with UNDP, CESA implemented a three-year program titled Women in China’s Sustainable Development. The program deals with capacity building and sustainable development

It is because of the growing self-capacity and support from the outside that environmental GONGOs have come to realize their own organizational missions.

of whom are from central government ministries. This is also the case with China Society for Sustainable Development (CSSD), China Wildlife Conservation Association (CWCA), and China Environment Protection Fund (CEPF). CSSD has a huge consulting body made up of political elites and most of its staff members keep their official government rank and benefits.20

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work—such as introducing new energy-efficiency technology and management techniques that have been used to shape laws and standards, which China desperately needs to guarantee continued energy security.

BECon’s ongoing projects include providing SDPC with policy recommendations for formulating China’s Tenth Five-Year Plan (2001-2005) and the national Medium to Long Term Strategy on energy efficiency. BECon also partners with the World Bank and GEF for projects on energy conservation promotion, barrier removal for efficiency lights products and systems, and training for various Chinese energy-efficiency organizations to apply for international funds, and many GEF activities. Because BECon’s name is well recognized among energy-efficiency communities beyond China, it plays an active role in helping provincial and local energy-efficiency institutions obtain more assistance from international organizations.

As an exceptional GONGO in China, the BECon case illustrates that with advanced expertise and continuous support from the international community, it is possible for GONGOs to develop organizational capacity beyond the state’s original design. The state’s original idea behind the establishment of CREIA was to: (1) take advantage of international capital to hasten the development of renewable energy industries; (2) promote the market for renewable energy products; and (3) encourage more corporations to join this market. CREIA’s activities, however, have been expanded to include influencing national and provincial renewable energy policies, and building cooperative networks with GEF, the World Bank, the Packard Foundation, and other international donors. With its leading role in setting professional standards and norms, and its networks with domestic industries and international actors, it is very possible CREIA will play a crucial role in the self-regulation and monitoring of the renewable energy sector. In a way, CREIA is creating a new interest group in society, rather than solely representing the government’s views.

Like BECon and CREIA, the Center for Environmental Education and Communication (CEEC) has achieved more than the state’s expectations in the field of promoting public environmental awareness. Its major achievements include: (1) the establishment of the Mobil China Environmental Education Fund; (2) the posting of public awareness billboards in cities; and (3) the creation of the official China environment information Web site. Similarly, CEEC also has helped disseminate information on China’s environmental status, social reactions to environmental regulations, and challenges resulting from China’s integration into global environmental governance structures to a broader audience. Members of CEEC have been ceaselessly meeting environmental NGOs in Europe and North America, and actively participating in NGO activities sponsored by the World Bank and other international institutions. The newsletters published by CEEC have been widely read among policymakers and practitioners inside and outside China.

When examining GONGO connections with societal groups or international organizations it is not always the case that these efforts stem from a GONGO’s intention to become independent. The two cases of China Society for Sustainable Development (CSSD) and China Wildlife Conservation Association (CWCA) share a lot of characteristics in terms of their presence at international meetings and partnerships with inter-governmental organizations. Both of these GONGOs benefit from being closely connected with SEPA and sometimes carry the state views to international NGO gatherings. On many occasions, they are sent by the Chinese government to participate in international NGO meetings to collect information. Nevertheless, CWCA also has been partnering with many transnational NGOs, including International Fund for Animal Welfare, International Snow Leopard Trust, and Wildlife Conservation Society on specific projects. While these partnerships with NGOs are not yet fully developed, they can be regarded as signs that CWCA is reaching out to international green groups. Indeed, it is too early to argue that CWCA has abandoned its ties to the government in favor of outside partners.

**Exploring Keys to GONGO Autonomy**

GONGOs are gaining greater organizational autonomy. Elements most critical to increasing 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 environmental GONGOs have come to realize their own organizational missions, negotiate with the state for more self-autonomy. The two cases of China Society for Sustainable Development (CSSD) and China Wildlife Conservation Association (CWCA) share a lot of characteristics in terms of their presence at international meetings and partnerships with inter-governmental organizations. Both of these GONGOs benefit from being closely connected with SEPA and sometimes carry the state views to international NGO gatherings. On many occasions, they are sent by the Chinese government to participate in international NGO meetings to collect information. Nevertheless, CWCA also has been partnering with many transnational NGOs, including International Fund for Animal Welfare, International Snow Leopard Trust, and Wildlife Conservation Society on specific projects. While these partnerships with NGOs are not yet fully developed, they can be regarded as signs that CWCA is reaching out to international green groups. Indeed, it is too early to argue that CWCA has abandoned its ties to the government in favor of outside partners.

**Self-capacity Building**

Generally speaking, the higher the capacity of a GONGO, the more autonomy it gains. Self-capacity in this paper specifically means the ability to: (1) implement projects; (2) create innovative solutions for problems; and (3) act as an independent force shaping policy. Due to existing connections with government agencies, most environmental GONGOs are able to assist with policy formation to satisfy the government. The challenge for GONGOs is to contribute something extra, to mobilize
sources of support beyond the government, and to maintain and expand their organizations. Freed from many of the constraints inherent within the government hierarchy and faced with the challenge of becoming financially self-sufficient, some environmental GONGOs have been motivated to improve their expertise, expand the scope of their activity, and gradually increase their capacity.

The China Environmental Science Association (CESA) provides one example of a GONGO using its expertise and greater autonomy to reach and train grassroots environmentalists. Even though the majority of CESA’s research tasks are determined by SEPA, CESA was able to cooperate directly with UNDP on a project to design special training for female political and social entrepreneurs at the provincial or municipal level. During the project’s implementation, CESA could not use administrative orders to reach their goals; instead, they took advantage of good connections with provincial environmental scientist associations and EPBs. Other examples of innovative GONGO initiatives include:

- CREIA’s success in creating the Investment Opportunity Facility to serve renewable energy industries and attract international investment;
- CEPF’s efforts to involve grassroots green NGOs in national Earth Day celebrations;
- CEEC’s partnership with Mobil for the creation of an environmental education foundation;
- BECon’s extensive input into the Tenth Five-Year Plan on energy efficiency; and,
- CSSD’s effort in translating and promoting the Agenda 21 among the Chinese general public.

**International Connections**

International access appears to be having a two-fold effect on GONGO autonomy. On one hand, GONGOs are strengthening their self-capacity with information and expertise obtained from networking with international organizations. On the other hand, international access is contributing directly to GONGO autonomy, especially when external organizations were involved from the initial stage of a GONGO’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, GONGOs typically are provided with sufficient funding, technology, and advice from outside China to conduct their activities. Importantly, the Chinese state is not the only supervising institution and the shared power between the Chinese government and external organizations provide these GONGOs with flexibility. The Chinese government avoids the appearance of overly controlling these GONGOs in order to attract international support. GONGO partnerships with international actors have included:

- UN agencies helped in the creation of CREIA;
- The Rio Earth Summit had a direct influence on the agenda setting of CSSD;
- The U.S. Pacific Northwest National Laboratory assisted in the creation of BECon; and,
- International NGOs, such as German environmental and energy NGOs have worked intimately with CEEC.

If a GONGO ruins its creditability in the eyes of international donors, it may lose its influence domestically. In the case of CWCA’s wildlife conservation work, international donors have questioned CWCA’s effectiveness and transparency. The scale of international nongovernmental funding for CWCA also has declined because more international environmental NGOs (e.g., International Crane Foundation, Conservation International, The Nature Conservancy, and International Fund for Animal Welfare) have been implementing wildlife conservation projects directly with local Chinese NGOs, who are considered more representative of the local people and governments than CWCA.25

In addition to large-scale international NGO sponsored projects, some smaller international foundations are also bypassing GONGOs and supporting grassroots conservation groups and individual environmental activists in China. For GONGOs to tap into this international funding, they must become more independent from the government. This highlights how international actors also are pushing GONGO autonomy through competitive pressure instead of incentive and direct support.

As Table 3 shows, 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, CWCA and CEPF are low in both categories. CSSC is an example of a GONGO that lies in the middle—their capacity, international access, and autonomy levels are moderate. CSSC also does lend some support to the green civil society and possess the ability to become more independent.

The next section explains how the levels of autonomy and capacity, as well as access to international funding appear to influence whether a GONGO is willing to
support independent environmental organizations in China.

**GONGOs Utilize Their Autonomy**

Not all the environmental GONGOs will pursue a more independent path. However, among national-level environmental GONGOs, a number that have enhanced their capacity and international access have become more open-minded toward Chinese green civil society than the GONGOs that have not innovated or sought international partnerships. Moreover, the second-generation leaders of those more internationalized environmental GONGOs will mostly be recruited from outside the government. The visions and education background of these new leaders will be key to the transformation of their organizations after they have won some organizational autonomy.

**Support of Grassroots Groups**

Some of the environmental GONGOs with a high level of autonomy are very supportive of grassroots environmental NGOs and even partner with them. For example, CEEC maintains close relationships with major Chinese environmental education NGOs (e.g., Global Village of Beijing on CCTV environmental education broadcasting). Not surprisingly, some GONGOs, such as BECon, which regularly contacts and trains local-level experts and NGOs, will likely become NGOs or nonprofit independent research institutes in the near future. As legalization of the civil society sector in China progresses, secondary GONGOs, which already accept little financial and technical support from the government will be tempted to move onto an even more independent path. Similarly, GONGOs with strong professional expertise, such as CREIA, will find it more effective to be independent as China’s free-market and legal reforms progress.

However, in comparison to BECon, GONGOs such as CESA, CWCA, and CEPF are limited by their organizational goals, greater financial constraints, and lower levels of autonomy. These groups are unable (and perhaps unwilling) to extend their mandate into helping grassroots groups. An urgent challenge for CESA, according its leaders, is dealing with the association’s

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Environmental GONGOs</th>
<th>Level of Autonomy</th>
<th>Causes of Autonomy</th>
<th>Outcomes of Autonomy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China Environmental Science Association;</td>
<td>Low to Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Remain within the Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China Wildlife Conservation Association; China</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Indifferent to Moderate Interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Fund</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>China Society for Sustainable Development</td>
<td>Moderate to High</td>
<td>Moderate to High</td>
<td>Remain close to Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China Renewable Energy Industry Association Beijing</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate Interest to Actively Supporting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy Efficiency Center; Center for Environmental</td>
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<td>Education &amp; Communication</td>
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decreasing influence on SEPA’s policymaking as a result of growing competition from other institutions, such as the China Environmental Science Institute, the Sino-Japan Center research departments, and CEEC.26 CESA may need to find a new mission. Because the foremost task for China Environment Protection Fund (CEPF) is to collect funds for environmental protection in China and attract ODA, it is not likely CEPF will lose its special connection and trust with SEPA. In both CEPF and CWCA almost the entire staff is still affiliated with government agencies (SEPA and State Forestry Bureau, respectively), which is another practical obstacle for their independence from the government.

The future of CSSD is still hard to predict. The impacts of the Rio Earth Summit on China have weakened over the past ten years and the implementation of many international conventions has been deadlocked. Given its current loose structure, CSSD needs a core leadership to launch effective projects and stabilize the organization.

Second Generation Leadership

One key factor shaping the future of the GONGO sector is its second generation of leaders. Because the first generation GONGO officials were mostly named by the state, the effects of personnel relationships on GONGO autonomy are twofold. Namely, 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 BECon, the leaders’ ability to leverage policymaking and facilitate self-capacity building outweighs the potential constraints of government pressure. The autonomy of organizations such as CEPF, CESA, and CWCA has been limited due to the fact their leaders are former or still high-level governmental officials. However, the second generation GONGO leaders and staff most likely will be recruited from outside the government. Because many of these new leaders attended university in the reform era they very likely will have a different educational background, views, and visions from their predecessors.

For example, with the exception of 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 were drawn from outside the government sector and work under contract, while the other half continues to work for the government. Most of the new staff, researchers, and project managers in these two GONGOs have had previous experiences with transnational NGOs and other international organizations, and therefore have been exposed to new international norms and standards. They tend to be more open to supporting domestic grassroots groups and facilitating trans-societal exchanges. CREIA always has had in residence some international experts, who bring “fresh air” and innovative ideas into the organization and have indirect influences on the upcoming second generation of leaders. Nevertheless, this is not to argue that all GONGOs are changing at the same pace and same manner. Table 3 suggests that GONGOs with higher capacity and international access gain higher autonomy. In turn, greater autonomy tends to create a more independent leadership and enables GONGOs to provide more support to local environmental NGOs.

Conclusion: Implications for the Environmental Advocacy Community

Neither the state-led nor the bottom-up model of state-society relations is sufficient to capture the dynamism of GONGOs in Chinese environmental politics. Although they were creations of the state, increasingly, environmental GONGOs are pursuing organizational goals beyond the state’s original expectations. The research presented here suggests that the extensive networks and partnerships with international organizations have enabled many GONGOs to gain a certain degree of autonomy from the state.

This article offered but a glimpse into the multifaceted nature of the environmental GONGO sector in China. Given the growth in their number and capacity, whether they strive to be independent or remain partially co-opted by the government, GONGOs are serving both the state and civil society—sometimes even acting as a bridge between government agencies and grassroots organizations. GONGOs also are assisting government agencies by acting as policy consultants, service providers, or communication facilitators with international organizations. Simultaneously, some environmental GONGOs are empowering grassroots groups by sharing their expertise and facilitating access to international support. Their “moral support” (i.e., inviting NGOs to national ceremonies) has been crucial in helping the general public to identify with the role of NGOs in China’s environmental protection field, legitimizing the work of NGOs, and facilitating mutual trust building between the public and NGOs.

Their self-capacity building efforts and increased access to international sources are increasing GONGO independence from state control. Findings from this paper also suggest that the more autonomous the GONGO...
sector becomes, the more likely it will facilitate the growth of a green civil society in China in two ways. First, given the freedom in decision-making and project design, newly established GONGOs, such as BECon, are playing active matchmaker roles between domestic NGOs and international donors. Moreover, many environmental GONGOs are beginning to resemble independent NGOs. Secondly, the second-generation leaders of those more autonomous GONGOs have not been recruited directly from government agencies. Instead, they have been exposed to grassroots activism and advocacy. The path they choose for their GONGOs should be even more independent and more driven to build up their capacity than the previous generation.

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**ENDNOTES**


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


4 Public enterprises mainly refer to news media, publishing, advanced research (e.g., National Academy of Science), and public education institutions. Semi-affiliated units are comprised of 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.


8 I make this argument based upon numerous interviews and discussions with not only Chinese environmentalists, but also with many independent researchers and practitioners inside and outside China. See also Turner, Jennifer and Fengshi Wu. (Eds.). (2002). *Green NGO and environmental journalist forum: A meeting of environmentalists in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan*. Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center.

9 For example, the term social organization (e.g., NGO) is used in a loose way in Saich’s paper in that his case studies include a national-level GONGO (China Family Planning Association), a member-based NGO (Friends of Nature) and an informal activist network (the magazine *Rural Women Knowing All*). The important differences among these organizations were not noted.


11 Interviews with GONGO leaders and SEPA officials in summer 2000.

12 The first step is to register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs and second step to register with a professional government agency.


Interview with Jin Jianman from the CESI in summer 2000. Jin was invited by ECOLOGIA (a U.S. NGO), 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.

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


Interview with Mr. Zhang Shanning, deputy general secretary of the CWCA in summer 2000.

The Battelle Institute, which is affiliated with the U.S. Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, is a quasi-nonprofit private entity specialized in the management of scientific research. See The Wilson Center’s “Inventory of Environmental Works in China.” China Environment Series Issues 2,3,4,5 for more information on Battelle’s China activities. My thanks to Zhou Dadi, William Chandler, and Jeff Logan for sharing their insights on this topic.

Interview with Mr. Chen Kun, deputy general secretary of CSSD in summer 2000.

Legally, most GONGOs are actually independent entities. BECon is an exception, as it operates under the supervision of SDPC’s Resource Institute. Financially, after the state creates the institutional framework for a GONGO, it is expected to gradually take care of its own operational costs. Support from the government (or from international organizations through inter-governmental agreements) typically declines and is eventually cut off.

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

www.chinaenvironment.com


The information in this section is drawn from numerous discussions with American conservation NGOs and researchers. Special thanks to Dr. Jennifer Turner, senior project associate at the Woodrow Wilson Center and Dr. James Harkness, director of the World Wildlife Fund–China office, for sharing their insights on this issue.

Interview with Ms. Yang Jinwei, general secretary of CESA in summer 2000.

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