

UNIVERSITÀ DI TORINO

Dipartimento di Culture, Politica e Società Corso di Laurea Magistrale in Scienze Internazionali



TESI DI LAUREA

**REMAKING CHINA'S ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE IN THE XI JINPING ERA.  
THE ROLE OF CHINESE ENGOs**

Relatore:

Prof. Giuseppe Gabusi

Candidato:

Chiara Ciampi

Anno Accademico 2019/2020

Sessione di novembre



## **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the role of Chinese environmental NGOs (ENGOS) in present-day China considering the context of the authoritarian environmentalism governing the country. The outstanding proliferation of ENGOS has been interpreted as indicative of the central government's difficulties in channelling and addressing popular demands generated by the dramatic environmental crisis. Decentralization (started in the Reform Era) opened for collaborations between ENGOS and local governments, which benefitted both parties: local governments could outsource some of their burdens to ENGOS, while ENGOS got resources and status. Under Xi Jinping's centralizing trends, however, it seems that the space for ENGOS in the environmental governance is shrinking.

A semi-structured interview model has been used to report the direct opinions of four Chinese ENGOS. Reducing the discourse on government-ENGOS relationship to a matter of alliance or opposition, however, is simplistic. Drawing on the literature on embedded activism, we have demonstrated that the case of China is worth studying due to its uniqueness. It represents a combination of the government's willingness to draw on ENGOS to help address environmental challenges and the constant attempts by the Party-state to control their activities. From the research conducted for this study, we can deduce that, overall, the situation has not improved and ENGOS continue to struggle to carve out a political space in environmental governance, trying at the same time to make the most of the opportunities provided by the political framework. Nevertheless, ENGOS are contributing to the spread of a green culture among the Chinese population.

**Key Words:** ENGOS, Environmental Education, Authoritarian Environmentalism

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS .....	IV
INTRODUCTION .....	1
<b>CHAPTER I – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .....</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1 Premise on the definition of civil society .....	5
1.2 The emergence of civil society and social organisations: a historical perspective .....	6
1.3 Civil society “with Chinese characteristics”: a theoretical perspective .....	8
1.4 Rethinking China’s civil society in the Xi Jinping era.....	9
1.5 Environmental authoritarianism in China’s environmental governance.....	12
1.6 Environmental activism “with Chinese characteristics” .....	14
<b>CHAPTER II: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>18</b>
2.1 Methodology and data collection .....	18
2.2 Notes on the terminology adopted in this research .....	20
2.3 Data Sample .....	20
<b>CHAPTER III: ENGOs IN THE XI JINPING ERA.....</b>	<b>22</b>
3.1 The role of Chinese ENGOs: education over advocacy.....	22
3.2 ENGOs and the Corporate Environmental Responsibility (CER) .....	26
3.3 ENGOs -government relations: friends or enemies? .....	29
3.3.1 ENGOs – local governments: a new form of environmental governance .....	29
3.3.2 ENGOs’ advocacy: a risk for government’s legitimacy? .....	36
CONCLUSION.....	42
REFERENCES.....	46

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

**CBCGDF:** China Biodiversity Conservation and Green Development Foundation

**CCP:** Chinese Communist Party

**CPPCC:** Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference

**CER:** Corporate Environmental Responsibility

**CSR:** Corporate Social Responsibility

**EIA:** Environmental Impact Assessment

**ENGO:** Environmental Non-governmental Organization

**EPIL:** Environmental Public Interest Litigation

**GI:** Green Initiatives

**GONGO:** Government-organized Non-governmental Organization

**GZ:** Green Zhejiang

**MEE:** Ministry of Ecology and Environment

**MEP:** Ministry of Environmental Protection

**MOCA:** Ministry of Civil Affairs

**NGO:** Non-governmental Organization

**NPC:** National People's Congress

**PRC:** People's Republic of China

**XGCA:** Xiamen Green Cross Association

## INTRODUCTION

“共谋绿色生活，共建美丽家园”

(Xi Jinping, 2019)

### Background of the study and research question

Since the beginning of the Reform Era, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has enjoyed four decades of nearly uninterrupted economic growth, transforming a backward and isolated country into an emerging superpower with the world's second-largest economy. Although China has lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, such an extended period of rapid economic development has not come without a price: urbanization, industrialization, and economic growth have destroyed China's natural environment and exploited its resources.

Beijing then reversed the course and seems now to be offering the world a green vision. While some years before, Chinese negotiators in global forums invoked the primacy of international legal principle to protect the interests of developing countries, China is now reconsidering its arguments, addressing climate change and other environmental challenges as shared global threats. With the advent of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Chinese policymakers promised to take on global leadership of environmental protection. The Chinese government acknowledged the need to transform China's development model and move towards a more sustainable path where economic growth and environmental protection go in the same direction.

The attitude of the Chinese institutions is exemplified through the political philosophy of Ecological Civilization (Shēngtài wénmíng, 生态文明), which gained widespread support across China's broad state apparatus because it projects the Party's rule as both historical and visionary: starting from the premise that "man and nature are a community of life" (Rén yǔ zìrán shì shēngmìng gòngtóngtǐ, 人与自然是生命共同体), the construction of an ecological civilization is considered a "vital aspect to support the development of the Chinese nation, which will benefit China and future generations, promoting the construction of a new model that will shape a modernization in which man and nature develop harmoniously", said President Xi (2017).

What is certain is that the worsening of the environmental situation, the concerns and dissatisfaction of millions of Chinese people, who worry for their quality of life, and the difficulty of the government in aligning economic recovery and environmental protection, have created the perfect

conditions for the emergence of an environmental activism "with Chinese characteristics". The outstanding proliferation of the non-profit sector has been considered by many a sign of progress towards a new form of governance, presumably more inclusive, democratic, and transparent (Diamond, 1989).

The Chinese political framework, however, has provided environmental activism with both opportunities and constraints. From the reform and opening-up period up to the present days, we have witnessed a change in the attitude of the government towards non-governmental organizations (NGOs): from a policy of acknowledgement to one of animosity. Interestingly, the 19th Party Congress acknowledged the constructive role that Chinese NGOs can play, that is conveying the concerns of the population, participating in co-governance to address problems together with the government and the market, and delivering social services. But in the current political climate of heightened security concerns and low tolerance for certain forms of activism and expression, NGOs find themselves in a controversial situation. The recent crackdown on civil society groups shows a change in the political trajectory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

It is certainly true that Chinese leaders today are more than ever concerned about the stability of the country, especially given the enormous economic and social changes underway. Although the pushing for a more open political system and a pluralistic society, could bring about more freedom and, eventually, greater stability in China, any significant attempt to force such change from the outside would have the opposite effect. Yet, civil society in China proved to be resilient to the strain imposed by the Party as we can see from the proliferation of Chinese ENGOs and the number of "environmental mass incidents" (huánjìng qúntǐxìngshìjiàn, 环境 群体性事件) that occur across the country. The increasing demand for cleaner air, information transparency, and government accountability put forward by the middle class, is a sign that a more articulate civil society, albeit one with "Chinese characteristics", is emerging (Shapiro, 2016).

After having introduced the background, the main objective of the study is to examine the role of Chinese environmental NGOs (ENGOs), considering the context of the authoritarian regime governing the country. The overarching question that this work is willing to address is then: "What is the role of ENGOs in the Xi Jinping Era?"

Further to that, the study will investigate the following specific objectives: enquiry the effectiveness of ENGOs' environmental actions in the context of an authoritarian environmentalism; discuss the nature of ENGOs-state relationship, and finally analyze the interactions between ENGOs and Chinese citizens in a changing society. What I am intended to do is describe how the political line adopted by Xi Jinping is affecting the non-governmental sector, which represent a fundamental component and tangible expression of the civil society in China. Precisely, this work will present constraints and

opportunities for Chinese ENGOs in the light of close state involvement in NGOs' affairs. This work will leave space to the analysis of Chinese ENGOs' activities, and their contribution to the spread of a "green culture" among Chinese society as I believe that an in-depth enquiry on the issue would make a good case to enhance the academic understanding of bottom-up action in a context that differs from the Western one. This becomes relevant as, in China, where institutionalized channels and legal space for social mobilization and policy advocacy remain highly controlled, the effort made by activists and grassroots ENGO to raise awareness among Chinese people and carve out a space in the policy-making process is considerable.

Although Chinese environmental governance and Ecological Civilization have been largely studied by both Western and Chinese scholars, fewer scholars have specifically studied ENGOs as participants of the Chinese state's greening process. At the same time, most of the existing literature on the non-governmental sector in China fails to address the specific features of different subsets of NGOs. Scholars generally focus on the non-governmental sector without distinguishing Chinese NGOs based on their scope and rationale. This work will try to fill the gap in the existing literature by addressing the bottom-up approach of one specific sub-category of NGOs: those that aim at advancing environmental governance and environmental protection.

The novelty of this work resides in the different historical and socio-political context to which this research refers to and in which environmental activism develops. Last decade has indeed marked a critical juncture for Chinese non-governmental sector. Compared to previous legislation, the several laws and regulations introduced by Xi Jinping's administration signal the government's willingness to adopt a more explicit divide-and-rule approach to the non-governmental sector: if on the one hand, the government's attitude is more relaxed towards those NGOs that considers useful for its system of social governance, on the other hand, it pursues a policy of repression against those organizations that instead might pose a threat to the Party-state's legitimacy.

## **Overview of the study**

This work will unfold as follows. Starting from the assumption that NGOs are the expression of civil society, *Chapter I* will introduce the definition of civil society and then will apply it to the Chinese context where environmental activism takes place. Chinese civil society has indeed its own peculiar morphology. Interpreting it through a Eurocentric lens might therefore be misleading. As civil society in China was born and developed to meet the specific needs of the country, it is therefore necessary to briefly review the broader historical and socio-political environment that encouraged its development. Only through its proper understanding, it is possible to comprehend why the relationship between ENGOs and the Chinese government presents certain characteristics, often

different from the Western experience. The chapter will then move to a brief analysis of the civil society in present-day China and the hard-authoritarian turn it is experiencing under Xi Jinping's rule. Along with this issue, the chapter will address the concept of authoritarian environmentalism which is being used by the scholarship to describe the policy adopted by the Chinese government in the environmental sphere. The non-participatory feature, which characterizes the environmental authoritarianism, wants indeed the government to retain control over all environmental policy decisions constraining ENGO's participation in the environmental governance. Lastly, the chapter will present a review of the existent literature on environmental activism in China so as to provide a picture as complete as possible before addressing the research part.

*Chapter II* will present the methodology. This study will be relying on both primary and secondary sources to establish a dialogue between our own original findings and the existing published work on the subject. Specifically, the research will be mainly based on a series of interviews with members of Chinese ENGOs.

*Chapter III* will report the findings of the study. Finally, this study will draw conclusions and restate the results of the research. Limits and future research will be addressed as well.

## CHAPTER I – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 1.1 Premise on the definition of *civil society*

The relationship between state and society in China has been a perennial topic in Western intellectual circles since Hegel theorized China as a state without society (Kim, 1978). This relationship, as it has unfolded until the present day, continues to pose challenges to both Western and Chinese scholars, among whom, many consider civil society as a legitimate sphere separated from the state. There is a lively debate among academics, who wonder if the emergence of civil society in China, in whose context environmental activism takes shape, is part of a bottom-up process - a model that draws its origins from the Western idea of civil society - or whether in China this process is led by the state. In this regard, it is worth first clarifying what is meant generally with civil society.

The term *civil society* is used today in a broad sense to indicate both an analytical space and an associational practice. In the first sense (analytical space), the civil society is described often as a vast intermediate area between the private sphere, the economy, and the state. It relates to government, businesses, family life, while remaining distinct from them. Concerning the second meaning (associational practice), World Bank reports that civil society includes “community groups, non-governmental organizations, labour unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations” (World Bank, 2010). Some authors have defined *civil society* as the set of voluntary civic and social organizations and institutions that constitute the underpinning of the society in opposition to the formal structures of the state (Baum & Mahizhnan, 2010). Other maintains that the civil society is a prerequisite for political democracy and its absence a sign of socio-political malaise (Fishman, 2017). In general, the entry of the term *civil society* into the language of modern European thought was mainly due to the spread of the liberal doctrines about society and politics (Kenny, 2016).

If we look at the Chinese context through a Western lens, it is difficult to find democratic or liberal practices now and the country is far for creating a civil society as conventionally defined by the Westerner thought. The academic world, which has always found difficult to define and adapt this term to the Chinese context, has proposed various definitions of the term *civil society* designed for the Chinese case, but the debate remains open. According to the Party-state ideology, the Chinese socialist governance aims at maximizing the public good, and civil society plays an important role in the achievement of a "harmonious society" (héxié shèhuì, 和谐社会).

The recent political demand for a more accurate and more normatively charged definitions with particular attention to freedom of association and expression has made the dialogue on civil society more controversial in countries like the Chinese one where space for legitimate public action, yet existing, is constantly supervised and permeated by the Party ideology (Kuhn, 2018). In this study, when addressing the Chinese civil society, we try to stick to a sociological definition, referring to it as an intermediate associative sphere situated between the State and the constituent elements of society, rather than as a social force as opposed to state resulting in - or part of - a democratization process. From this perspective, talking about civil society even in an authoritarian context like the Chinese one becomes easier.

## **1.2 The emergence of civil society and social organisations: a historical perspective**

If we look at the Chinese history, we discover that civil society has been absorbed by the state for a long time, and the emergence of a relatively “independent” civil society is a product of modern China. In the existing literature on the issue, many agree that a turning point in the rise of a civil society was signed by the economic reform launched by Deng Xiaoping (Ma, 2002b). Before the founding of the PRC, the social sphere in China was managed by family-based organizations or by state organizations. In the Maoist era, autonomous organizations (including political, social, and religious groups) merged into the government apparatus, replaced by the so-called mass organizations (Smith & Zhao, 2016). Substantial changes took place only after the policy of reform and opening up. The Reform Era - started in 1978- did not only accelerate the economic development, but it also affected the state-society relationship. The introduction of market socialism together with some closely related social processes brought about deep changes that created a fertile context for the emergence of a Chinese civil society.

The economic transformations initiated by Deng allowed the growth of a private sector operating under the logic of the market. Decentralization gave more autonomy to local governments which from that moment oversaw cadre management, local administration, social management, political and economic policymaking, taxation, finance, and banking. Chinese government started to pay increasing attention to the legal system and the rule of law. Political control became more relaxed and less stringent and allowed a greater participation of many non-state actors in the policy process and governance (Saich, 2000; Wang, 2017; Mertha, 2009). People started organizing groups and associations to advocate and represent their interests (Fewsmith & Rosen, 1978; Johnston, 2008). The entire decade of the 1980s is recognized as a fortunate period for social organizations.

What is relevant to the purpose of this research is that the Reform Era was followed by partial changes in the pattern of state political conduct, of which the most fundamental feature was the

retrenchment of the state's power over society (Ma, 2002b; Shi, 2004). The Chinese government found it difficult to manage social resources as large-scale social changes were followed by political instability and social disorders (Chen, 2012). Once admitted the inadequacy of its means in solving the social problems, the Chinese government delegated part of its functions and responsibilities to the private sector and society, pursuing the policy of “small government, big society” ( Xiǎo zhèngfǔ dà shèhuì, 小政府大社会) (Yang et al., 2016, p.2292). Social organization emerged to deliver some welfare functions that the Party-state was “unable or unwilling” to fulfil (Saich, 2000, p.124; Ma, 2002a). As Shi pointed out, there was a gradual transformation of social values, of which the main trajectory was the replacement of “state-standard” values with “society-standard” values, and the prioritization of individual welfare over state power (2004, p.229). As part of the socio-economic and political transitions, the exponential growth of Chinese social organizations followed a double trajectory. Firstly, a top-down trajectory. As mentioned before, the authoritarian state withdrew from the market and society and left a void that was then occupied by social organizations. Second, the bottom-up trajectory. Social organizations emerged spontaneously in response to the growing diversification of societal interests and needs associated with the deepening of the market economy (Jia, 2007). Following the Tiananmen protest, however, the Chinese leadership was forced to rewrite its social contract. Chinese leaders started worrying about the strong associationism and mobilization power of the masses.

Hu Jintao demonstrated to be aware of the socio-economic situation of imbalance and inequality that had arisen in the China of the economic boom. The Hu-Wen administration believed that the promotion of a certain amount of ideological openness would benefit the legitimation of the Party as well as strengthen the resilience of the government. The political stance adopted by Hu Jintao was part of a broader political agenda of social management aimed at the achievement of the well-known “harmonious society”. Hu Jintao's “harmonizing” instances were initially welcomed with great enthusiasm. Concerning social organizations, more regulations were introduced to tighten the control on this sector. For many, however, the tools adopted by the government were synonymous with suppression of dissent and control of the information circulating in the country. In this way, “harmony” often ended up coinciding with repression. As some scholars noticed, repression has been fragmented and sporadic (Fu & Distelhorst, 2017). In practice, the attitude of the leadership towards civil society remained ambiguous. Limited space for activism was tolerated as long as it served the government's purposes (Froissart, 2017). Historically, pluralizing socio-economic changes co-exist with the uncontested supremacy of the Party-state (Saich, 2000).

### 1.3 Civil society “with Chinese characteristics”: a theoretical perspective

A large part of the literature refers to Chinese civil society as the “missing link” between Western and non-Western political experiences (Chamberlain, 1993). To apply (or misapply) the term civil society to China can, however, deeply affect how the country is perceived by others. This is to say, it is significant how certain concepts specific of the Western culture are framed and how they are used in the non-Western narrative discourse. Before delving into the core of this work, it is worth briefly reviewing the literature on civil society in China to have the theoretical tools to understand why state-civil society relationship presents some features that might be different from the Western experience. This premise on civil society and how the concept of civil society is framed in the Chinese understanding becomes relevant to avoid Western bias when addressing the role of social organizations in China.

Dialogue on civil society in China has always been difficult for scholars. Nevertheless, a lot has been written on this very issue and from different perspectives. Goldman (1991), Bonnin and Chevrier (1991), Nathan (1990), Brook (1997) among others, detected a nascent Chinese civil society in the emergence of independent organizations outside state control in the post-Mao era. Many considered this phenomenon as a possible path towards democratization, but hopes were crushed by the event of 1989. Diamond’s definition of *civil society* as “the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, self-supporting and autonomous from the state” (1994, p.5), was contested by many scholars who argued for its inapplicability to non-Western contexts.

White (1993) detected only embryonic elements of something that could partially resemble the Western definition of *civil society*, i.e. limited autonomy, limited voluntary nature and limited ability to influence the state. Similar position was held by Baogang He (1994), who highlighted the weaknesses of Chinese “semi-civil” society and how these limitations imposed from above would preclude China’s democratization process. Frolic (1997) therefore, introduced the definition of “state-led” civil society to indicate that the emergence of Chinese social organizations was guided by the state. In his review of the literature about civil society in China, Chamberlain (1998) showed skepticism about the existence of a civil society “with Chinese characteristics”. Drawing on Diamond, Chamberlain maintained that none of the defining elements of Diamond’s definition could be fully found in the Chinese realm. He stated that attempting to adapt the Western-style definition of *civil society* to China is therefore meaningless. Huang concluded that continuing to binarily look at state and society as two opposites is misleading. What he suggested was to employ a “trinary conception, with a third space between state and society, in which both participate” (1993, p.216). So, if we stick to the Western ideal of *civil society*, namely a realm of political participation that is largely independent from state power and beyond its control, we will not probably find it in China.

More recently some authors have argued that civil society should not be intended just as a mere “counter structure” to the state, yet as an “alternative structure”, that is a way of organizing and dealing with the state apparatus differently, rather than challenging it altogether (He, 2006; Liu, 2014). According to He (2016) there is an overlap between the state and the societal sphere, which is useful to understand the degree of the development of associational life in China and the complexity of state-society relations. Despite the constraining political context, there have been an outstanding growth of social organizations. According to Truex (2017) this has been possible because the Chinese government advocates for a “civil society with Chinese characteristics” that acts within the boundaries of consultative authoritarianism and under the strong influence of the CCP. Hsu and Hasmath (2017) have promoted a more nuanced understanding of the authoritarian yet non-monolithic Chinese political framework and analyzed how civil society organizations have adopted specific strategies to put up with the restricted political space.

Must we conclude, then, that the concept of civil society has little or no relevance to China, and that a possible link between Western and Asian political experiences has gone missing again? No, but we do need to change our perspective on the issue. Not only we must be more attentive to the changing relationship between the state and society, but we must also recognize the role played by the Party-state in this dynamic, especially in present-day China. As Evans et al., (1985) suggested in a different context, we need to “bring the state back in”. More precisely, we need to look for the presence of civil society in areas relatively closer to the state-area, that is, where the state can and does help to encourage the emergence of citizens from society. We must be careful then not to take any element of independence, or potential independence, as being against the state power (Strand, 1990). We should seek out and explore those fields that reveal the constant tension of the entanglement between state, society, and the individual. Taking the Western model of governance as the only model possible or legitimate, we will preclude ourselves from understanding state-society dynamics in other contexts.

#### **1.4 Rethinking China’s civil society in the Xi Jinping era**

It was believed- latest events have then proven it wrong- that the emergence and the pluralization of the public debate in China and the presence of complex social dynamics would awake the consciences of hundreds of millions of Chinese, thereby making socialism implode under the paradigms of freedom of expression and association, internationalization of civil society, and other democratic practices. By contrast, the foundations of the Chinese socio-political structure proved to

be more solid and complex than a certain vague and ambiguously naive Westernism wanted us to believe. For those who expected China to move gradually towards a more “democratic” path (Shi, 2004; Wang, 2007) hopes faded away when Xi Jinping took important measures to concentrate power in his hands in a remarkable effort to lead China to a “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” (Xiang, 2018).

What distinguishes Xi Jinping’s policy is the authoritarian control over society imposed through censorship, surveillance, and repression of all forms of dissent. As Fu and Distelhorst (2017) explained, the repression against civil society not only has become more severe compared to the past, but it has also taken a new form. From the reforms introduced by Deng onwards, civil society and governance processes underwent a certain amount of diversification and even pluralization, which conferred a unique dynamism to the Chinese authoritarian system. Although the Hu-Wen Era did not lack strong – yet limited – restrictions on civil society, the leadership tolerated forms of confrontational civil society as long as it were useful for the overall objectives of the Party (Froissart, 2017).

Conversely, it seems that orthodoxy has been restored under Xi’s authority. In 2013, an internal directive known as “Document No.9”, which circulated within the Party, listed civil society among the threats to Communist ideology and to the principle of Party leadership (Buckley, 2013). The idea that civil society might represent not only a concrete threat to national security but also a threat to the Party- state’s ideology, explains the qualitatively different, stronger approach adopted by Xi Jinping (Fu & Distelhorst, 2018). It is not a case that under Xi’s administration, China records a very low degree of freedom for civil liberty and philanthropy. Freedom House (2020) labels China *not free*, giving -1 for political rights and 11 for civil rights.

If it is true that the repression of boundary-pushers in civil society has become a prerogative of his political line, it is also true that Xi Jinping has not fully brought civil society back under the Party-state umbrella yet, and probably he will never do. Although the harsher measures against civil society and any forms of independent activism have set Xi Jinping apart from his predecessors, the institutionalized forms of public participation, which developed precisely under Hu Jintao, i.e. local elections, roundtables, deliberative meetings, are elements of continuity (Unger et al., 2014). Interestingly, according to Fu and Distelhorst (2017), these institutionalized participatory mechanisms are frequently used under Xi Jinping. So, on the one hand, the Party-state seems responsive to the concerns and requests coming from civil society, on the other hand, it poses legal obstacles to the latter’s development and systemic barriers of all kinds. Existing literature suggests that these shifts towards centralization and authoritarianism might be a response to the Party-state’s

position of weakness in facing slowing economic growth, increasing inequalities, extensive environmental degradation, and considerable social tensions (Zhao, 2016).

A sore point in Xi Jinping policy is the attitude towards social organizations. 2016 represented a watershed for the non-profit sector as the Chinese government passed the Charity Law (2016), which is the most relevant law for the management of domestic NGOs to date. The aforementioned law encompasses issues such as NGOs registration requirements, NGOs reporting duties for periodic evaluation, NGOs allowed activities and funding. In 2017, the enforcement of the Overseas NGOs Law (2017) placed a large administrative burden and tight restrictions on foreign organizations as well. It is worth pointing out that many of the kinds of expectations and requirements that are now being placed on foreign NGOs are ones that domestic NGOs have been putting up with for years. Compared to previous legislations, those introduced by the Xi administration are justified by the necessity to manage and supervise NGOs' exponential growth and diversification. According to the scholarship, however, behind the introduction of these new laws, lies the government's willingness to adopt a more explicit divide-and-rule approach towards the non-governmental sector. As explained by Froissart (2017), Xi administration has improved and simplified the legal framework for social organizations but only to support those that complement authoritarian rule by addressing needs and offering services not provided by the state, and even reinforce the resilience of the regime.

Wang Zhenyao, member of the China Philanthropy Research Institute at Beijing Normal University and a former Ministry of Civil Affairs, analyzing the 19th Party Congress report, argued that social organizations are recognized an important role in building social governance (Liu, 2017). The most important signal of this new attitude towards NGOs seems to be a lexical one: the more state-centric social management has been replaced by the new governing model of social governance, which called for social players' participation in governance (Guo, 2017, p.366).

Notwithstanding the social governance rhetoric, Xi Jinping has proved to be more determined than its predecessor to frame crackdowns of NGOs and detention of activists to safeguard national security. The enforcement of a series of national security laws coupled with a concerted propaganda effort further explains the expanding security apparatus' reach into civil society. The space for NGOs has diminished to such an extent that little room is left for even moderate organizations that conduct work in non-sensitive areas. NGOs that focus on environmental protection are not exempt from the recently worsening political situation neither. Constraints for this subcategory of NGOs are due not only the stricter legislation adopted by Xi Jinping, but also to the political framework of environmental authoritarianism that characterizes Chinese environmental governance.

## 1.5 Environmental authoritarianism in China's environmental governance

Chinese environmental governance can be described as authoritarian environmentalism (Gilley, 2012; Eaton & Kostka, 2014; Lo, 2015; Li et al., 2019). According to the scholarship, what makes this model unmistakably authoritarian is its power centralization and its non-participatory nature. Both official policy frameworks as well as actual policy practices have stressed either non-existent or low-level public participation. Once excluded popular participation, environmental policymaking remains in the hands of a small circle of experts namely “ecolites” made up of technocrats and specialists at the service of the Party-state (Gilley, 2012, p.291). Consequently, achievements in the environmental realm are nothing but the product of state intervention and technological advancement, while the role of society essentially consists in complying with top-down directives (ibid).

Reality is more complex. While Chinese governance at the central level looks authoritarian, local experience is more ambiguous, displaying a mixture of authoritarian and liberal features, which is mainly due to central government's failure in controlling the conduct of local officials for decades<sup>1</sup>. The current patterns in Chinese environmental governance, therefore, show a propensity to streamline environmental bureaucracy through a recentralization process (Kostka & Zhang, 2018). Among scholars of environmental governance in China, there is a consensus that China's decentralized administrative structure – designed to create incentives for implementing national growth-oriented mandates – has been ill-suited to address the nation's growing environmental challenges (Mol & Carter 2006; Kostka & Mol 2013; Ran 2013; Qi & Zhang, 2014). Even when the central government passed several environmental laws, China's fiscal structure and local officials performance evaluation system resulted in lax policy implementation (Kostka & Nahm, 2017). Recentralization would help the government to address China's long-standing coordination problems of fragmented authoritarianism (Lieberthal & Oksenberg, 1988) and the unclear allocation of responsibilities among different government bodies, which caused frequent overlaps and conflicts in the policymaking and implementation processes (Ran, 2013).

Along with this tendency, the exclusion of public participation characterizes China's environmental governance. Participatory mechanisms in the Chinese policymaking have received much attention from the scholarship. What emerges from the existing literature on the issue, is the

---

<sup>1</sup> Environmental protection agencies are established at four levels of government: national, provincial, municipal and county governments. At the national level, the MEE is funded by and operates under the direct leadership of the State Council. At the latter three levels, Environmental Protection Bureaus (EPBs) are governed by their corresponding authorities. At provincial government level and below, EPBs implement policies and laws promulgated by the MEE and other governmental agencies (Jahiel, 1998).

non-participatory nature of the Chinese governance. In the environmental realm, however, the policymaking process has always been more open to non-governmental forms of participation (Gilley, 2012, p.293). Environmental impact assessments (EIA), environmental information disclosure, and public hearings are some institutionalized forms of public participation in environmental governance (Gu, 2008; Ge et al., 2009). During the 1990s, several amendments to environmental legislation added provision extending to the citizenry the right to sue local officials who did not comply with the law or polluting enterprises. After having analyzed participatory practices in rural China, Xie (2016) concludes that participatory practices such as roundtable meetings are effective in providing local governments with useful information about local environmental problems. More importantly, she maintains that these types of practices increase citizens' political commitment and raise their environmental awareness. Many scholars argue that, despite embedded in the legal framework, participatory mechanisms in China still face practical limitations. Yang (2008) examine participatory mechanism in the making of environmental legislation, claiming that the policymaking process is largely government-directed and inaccessible to other participants. They explain that the fact that the law established participatory mechanisms, it does not mean that these mechanisms will be used, and that public opinion will be taken into consideration.

Information transparency is another controversial issue. According to Ge et al., (2009)., environmental information disclosure lies at the base of public participation. The authors suggest that the government should acknowledge that public participation is a basic right especially when it comes to environmental problems that affect millions of people (ibid). Although the Chinese government has demonstrated its commitment to information transparency about pollution levels, there are, however, considerable problems of poor information quality, selective information disclosure, and data falsification (Wang, 2017). Unless it is coupled with the right mechanism for its utilization, information disclosure alone is useless (Seligsohn et al., 2018).

More recently, Owen (2020) has introduced the theory of “participatory authoritarianism”, which holds that Russian and Chinese governments have reshaped global trends towards active citizenship and participatory governance by assimilating them into their authoritarian political institutions. The author argues that new participatory mechanisms have become fundamental for local governance. As previously said, government agencies use participatory mechanisms to collect useful information from citizens, NGOs, and other non-state actors. Practices of participatory authoritarianism enable governments to involve the public sector in the political process, while directing increased civic agency into non-threatening channels. This is the case of NGOs as Chinese local governments provide social actors with (limited) political space as long as their activities are

useful for the social governance system and pursue a policy of repression when they fears that ENGOs' policy advocacy might pose a threat to the Party-state's legitimacy.

### **1.6 Environmental activism “with Chinese characteristics”**

The worsening of the environmental state, the concerns and dissatisfaction of millions of Chinese, and the difficulty of the government in aligning economic recovery and environmental protection have created the perfect conditions for the birth of an environmental activism "with Chinese characteristics", which includes individuals, groups, loose networks, and organizations with different degrees of institutionalization and formalization, such as ENGOs, student associations, but also government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) (Ho, 2001; Yang, 2005; Zhang, 2018). ENGOs will be to focus of this research.

Before 1994 ENGOs did not exist in China. The first Chinese ENGOs was Friends of Nature, founded by historian and activist Liang Congjie in 1994. Friend of Nature was a pioneer of environmental activism and set the model for the development of other ENGOs among the country (Economy, 2011; Ho, 2001; Schwartz, 2004; Turner, 2004; Yang, 2005). Most of the earliest empirical research on Chinese voluntary-based associationism in post-Mao Era already recorded the presence of numerous ENGOs (Howell, 1994; Raab, 1996). Guobing Yang reported that at least 69 grassroots environmental organizations, among 43 of which university student associations, were established between 1997 and 1999 (Yang, 2005, p.50). According to the information disclosed by HEYI Institute, a database dedicated to registered ENGOs, there are more than 3000 ENGOs in present-day China (HEYI Institute, 2020).

Apart from growing in number, these grassroots organizations have become more and more professional and their diffusion increasingly localized. The diversification of environmental protection offers wide choices for ENGOs. A recent study conducted by Xie et al., (2020) shows that there are thirty-one different environmental focuses at present, among which environmental education is the most popular focus with the 84.3% of the total ENGOs organizing related activities. Thanks to their peculiar nature, generally smaller scale, connections to local communities, flexibility, capacity to promote private initiative in support of public purposes, and their contribution to the building of “social capital” (Sokolowski & Salamon, 2004, p.180), Chinese ENGOs have been regarded as strategic intermediaries between the state and the citizenry (Yang et al.,2015).

Over time, an extensive literature has developed on the growth of environmental activism and its relevance to contemporary Chinese politics. Chinese ENGOs not only have been praised by many scholars for having achieved collective goals, but they have been also considered the forefront of

Chinese civil society as they represent instances of plural governance and give voice to the concerns of the population (Saich, 2000; Turner, 2004; Economy, 2011; Mertha, 2008). By contrast, others argued that due to the absence of strong social support and the presence of several political constraints, ENGOs have not been particularly successful in attempting to advance requests to the government, to improve the structure and functioning of the governance and to hold the government accountable (Diamond, 1989; Schwartz, 2004).

Drawing from the theory of political opportunity structures, which posits that “social organizations seek to exploit opportunities resulting from changes in institutional structures and informal power relations” (Zhang & Tang, 2011, p.6), many scholars are pessimistic about the possibility for Chinese ENGOs to carve out a space in the policymaking process at the moment. It is no surprise that under the framework of authoritarian environmentalism, the Chinese green movement does not completely fit the Western ideal-type of environmental activism, in the sense that the capacity and opportunities to mobilize a popular movement on a national scale are less prominent. Lo and Leung (2000) explain that the authoritarian environmentalism places severe institutional constraints on the development of a bottom-up approach to the environmental governance. Many existing studies in the broader literature reported that Chinese environmental activism is therefore fragmentary, small-scale, and organized around local rather than national political issues. Anna M. Brettell (2003) argues that the Chinese environmental movement would rather be a form of “proto-movement” because it possesses all the characteristics of traditional Western social movements, but unlike them, it is limited in its activity because of the particular structure of political opportunity.

Despite ENGOs, as any other type of NGO should, for their nature have no ties with government institutions, in many cases the relation between government and non-government actors can be described as “symbiotic”. According to Tony Saich (2000), although the Chinese Party-state exerts its authority on social organizations and set out boundaries to public participation in environmental governance, social action does not configure itself as a matter of state versus society, or state dictating to society, yet as a steady interaction and ongoing negotiation between the two. In this way, the Chinese ENGOs manage to maximize the benefits of this “symbiotic rather than unidirectional” relationship with the government (Saich, 2000, p.124): while the government relies on the knowledge and the skills brought by ENGOs’ experts, the latter can gain legitimacy through the collaboration with governmental agencies. Concerning the peculiar relation between ENGOs and local governments, Ho (2007) formulated the theory of “embedded social activism”, meaning that Chinese environmentalism has evolved within the boundaries set by the Party-state. Through embeddedness, many Chinese ENGOs have been therefore able to gain a certain legitimacy and status in the eyes of local officers. For this reason, many affirm that, since their emergence, ENGOs have

adapted to, rather than opposed, the political conditions of the time. The adaptation came along with a process of incremental change that allowed these social organizations to proliferate despite structural and political constraints (Xie & Van Der Heijden, 2010).

Part of the scholarship instead, agree that Chinese ENGOs and activists have been able to achieve their goals, overcome policy obstacles, and persuade local officials of their intentions mainly because have they adopted non-confrontational means. Wu (2009) maintains that a non-confrontational stance is the best way for ENGOs to overcome institutional constraints and to introduce incremental changes into the environmental governance. This type of environmentalism consciously keeps distance from possible confrontations with the central government through “depoliticized politics” and “self-imposed censorship” (Ho, 2007, p.189). Similarly, Yang adds that the use of non-confrontational methods is a strategic choice for ENGOs especially at the initial stage (2005).

Turner (2004) points out that over the last decade Chinese environmentalists are participating more actively in the political sphere. The author affirms that, contrarily to common belief, Chinese ENGOs are not completely dependent upon governmental environmental agencies instead they have their strategies, objectives, and scope of influences, but above all they see themselves as a legitimate and necessary social force in China’s environmental politics. (Dai & Spires,2018; Han, Swedlow, & Unger,2004) stresses that ENGOs have the important role of expanding the boundaries of policy advocacy in China. The concept of *advocacy* belongs to the Western narrative and refers to the attempt by non-state actors to challenge and influence governmental policies, practices, ideas, and values on behalf of common interest (Reid, 2000). While scholars have questioned if it is possible to talk about advocacy under environmental authoritarianism, where interest group politics is not the norm and adversarial stance is not accepted by the government, others believe that this is possible because, as Mertha (2009) noticed, Chinese politics is not so resistant to outside pressure and this provides social organizations with the opportunity to carve out a space in the political realm.

There are several channels through which policy advocacy can be exerted. Dai and Spires (2018) provided us with a punctual analysis of the strategies adopted by the Chinese ENGOs to influence local governments. Among the institutionalized strategies, ENGOs are making an increasing use of the legal and administrative channels to express their dissent or to make local governments or corporates accountable.

Some important factors like greater awareness of citizens' rights, the support of the media and increasing contacts with international organizations, contributed to the development of different non-institutionalized approaches that ENGOs use to advocate their requests. The extant scholarship has paid much attention to the role of the Internet and the new social media in providing ENGOs with

media exposure and in mobilizing collective actions (Yang, 2003a/b; Sullivan & Xie, 2009; Sima, 2011; Xie, 2011; Liu, 2011). At the same time when institutionalized channels are not sufficient to exert pressure on the local governments, street protests may be one-off cases of advocacy that urge governments to take public complaints or problems into considerations and which might eventually lead to policy changes (Cai, 2010). Hong (2018) maintained that the practice of self-identification is an effective approach for ENGOs to construct subject legitimacy as active participants in environmental governance. According to Jia (2007) instead, ENGOs' legitimacy in carrying out policy advocacy comes from citizens' empowerment.

In recent times, however, the environment in which ENGOs operate has become increasingly complex, especially following Xi's crackdown on civil society. Under these circumstances only ENGOs with better financial assets and strong ties with the party-state bodies (mainly GONGOs), can take full advantage of the political opportunities to enhance their policy advocacy capacity (Zhan & Tang, 2013). A recent analysis conducted by Kuhn (2018) further reports that advocacy-oriented organizations and those that have connections with foreign NGOs face more difficulties than those ENGOs that opt for a low public profile and that do not have foreign affiliations. Consequently, many Chinese ENGOs prefer shifting the focus towards the improvement of society by seeking practical solutions in line with governmental thinking and not against it. A huge portion of Chinese ENGOs relies heavily for its survival on the registration with government agencies to acquire legitimacy. Once registered, most of them try to set up informal networks with Party officials thanks to which they manage, for example, to mobilize the necessary resources to smoothly carry out their activities. The question then is not whether ENGOs should or should not align with the government's political line, but whether they can achieve their objectives or not in the end. We will try to find out in this research.

## CHAPTER II: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Analyzing the work of social organizations in contemporary China is significant as it would make the case to understand the dynamics that occur between state and society. The increasing number of ENGOs across China has been interpreted as indicative of the government's difficulties in channeling and effectively resolving the popular demands generated by the worrying environmental crisis. In general, social organizations are the closest stakeholders to Chinese citizens, and they represent the interests of civil society by giving voice to people's concerns and dissent. Under current circumstances, promoting advocacy and influencing policy without causing trouble depends on the careful steering of communication, and especially on social organizations capability of issue framing. Given the Chinese political context, which outlaws the right to assembly, ENGOs continue to carry out their activities. After having reviewed the literature on the issue study, there are plenty of immediate, basic, and practical questions to answer that have become part of an ongoing discourse:

1. *What roles and purposes do ENGOs fulfill in present-day China?*
2. *What are the patterns of their relationship with the formal government institutions?*
3. *What type of constraints do ENGOs encounter in their daily activities?*
4. *What type of pressures do ENGOs exert on local governments? In what way?*
5. *To what extent the public trust ENGOs and have confidence in their action?*

### 2.1 Methodology and data collection

Having introduced our research questions, this section will explain the methodology employed for data collection. This work is concerned with the description of the current situation of environmental NGOs in China under Xi Jinping, their nature, position among society, achievements, and obstacles to their activity.

To answer the research questions, the methodology adopted for the study is a descriptive qualitative analysis of both primary and secondary data. Qualitative research collects information that attempts to describe a topic rather than measure it: it is about impressions, opinions, and points of view. A qualitative analysis is less structured and aims to go deeper into the topic in question to gather information related to people's motivations, thinking and attitudes (Kvale, 1983).

The existing literature on Chinese civil society and authoritarian environmentalism have been reviewed firstly and used for *Chapter I*, which provide an overview of the context – historical, social, and political- in which ENGOs carry out their activities. For the literature review section, academic

database, as well as official data provided by government publications and records of environmental organizations, were used as secondary sources.

The review of the relevant literature and official documents represents the starting point for the second part of the research, which for context-related accuracy involved semi-structured interviews. In this type of interviews, the interviewer asks only a few predetermined questions while the rest of the questions are not planned. The advantage of semi-structured interviews is that they follow a checklist of issues and questions that the researcher wishes to cover during the session, while also providing an opportunity to spontaneously explore topics relevant to that interviewee (Kvale, 2008). While semi-structured interviews have the advantage of allowing people to communicate and express their free flow of thoughts, we need to pay attention to cultural dimensions when communicating, which means recognizing and respecting the diversity of different cultural backgrounds. Failure to recognize cultural dimensions could lead to communication problems and unpleasant results during the interviews.

Specifically, a qualitative research where Chinese civil society representatives are both subject and object of study has then been carried out so as to have a picture that is as much transparent as possible. All respondents were chosen among Chinese ENGOs' members. For this study, four Chinese ENGOs, namely Green Zhejiang, Xiamen Green Cross Association (XMGCA), Green Initiatives and China Biodiversity and Green Development Foundation (CBCGDF) have been interviewed. These ENGOs are all Chinese organizations dealing with different environmental issues and which are in different Chinese provinces and municipalities. Each one has a different background and a different relation with the Chinese government. What we did is to present questions so as that encourage insightful responses based on the respondents' personal history and background with environmental activism. Interviews with Chinese activists are centred around three main themes. First, general information. All respondents were asked to describe their organization's mission, values, main activities, and projects. Second, respondents were asked to tell about the constraints they encounter during their activity. Third, relationship with governmental institutions and the citizens was investigated. Observations and semi-structured interviews were conducted online between May and August 2020.

Answers from the respondents have subsequently analysed and coded to find patterns that have been then referred to the existing literature to assess, compare and enquiry whether the way they work has changed in the last decade, what opportunities it offers and what constraints it places.

## 2.2 Notes on the terminology adopted in this research

Before addressing the research, it is necessary to clarify the terminology adopted in this study.

- Use of the terms *NGO* and *social organization* in present-day China

The term 非政府组织 (*fēi zhèngfǔ zǔzhī*) did not exist in the traditional Chinese language, but it is the literal translation of the English word *NGO*. This term entered common usage in China after Beijing hosted the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. What must be emphasized, however, is that 非 (*fēi*) not only means "not, without", but also "wrong, anti-, against". This can create some linguistic confusion and can further complicate the inconsistency in the classification of non-governmental organizations in China. 非政府组织 seems unsuitable to illustrate the Chinese associative dimension, where legal spaces for social mobilization and policy advocacy are highly controlled, and the independence from the government is a disputable notion. In the Chinese legislation, we find the term 社会团体 (*shèhuì tuántǐ*) which refers to "non-profit social organizations that are formed voluntarily by Chinese citizens and that carry out activities in accordance with a formal structure of rules in order to realize common objectives" (Order No. 250 of 1998, Regulations for Registration and Management of Social Organisations, art.2, MOCA). So, when referring to the Chinese non-governmental sector, the term *social organization* is usually more appropriate. For convenience, both terms *NGO* and *social organization* are used interchangeably throughout this study.

## 2.3 Data Sample

Here below there is the list of Chinese ENGOs that accepted to be interviewed.

### **Green Zhejiang (GZ) 绿色浙江**

**Mission:** Promoting low-carbon lifestyles and the open publication of environmental data; enhancing public awareness of environmental protection.

**Region:** Zhejiang

**Interviewee:** Hao Xin, vice president and executive director

**Website:** <http://www.greenzhejiang.org/>

### **China Biodiversity Conservation and Green Development Foundation (CBCGDF) 中国生物多样性保护与绿色发展基金会**

**Mission:** Preserving the Nation's biodiversity and enforcing civil rights of the citizens of China in respect of environmental incidents.

Region: Beijing

Interviewee: Cyan, staff member

Website: <http://www.cbcdgf.org/English/>

**Xiamen Green Cross Association (XGCA) 厦门市绿十字**

Mission: Helping enterprises, individuals and society pay more attention to the importance of environmental protection and sustainable development.

Region: Fujian

Interviewee: Ma Tianna, founder

Website: temporarily unavailable

**Green Initiatives (GI) 绿色倡议**

Mission: Working with businesses on waste recycling, staff engagement programs and supporting the adoption of sustainable solutions and services.

Region: Shanghai

Interviewee: Nitin Dani, founder, and director

Website: <https://greeninitiatives.cn/>

## CHAPTER III: ENGOs IN THE XI JINPING ERA

After presenting the theoretical framework, the research questions and the methodology employed by this work, we will now turn to findings. This section will address our first research question: building on both theoretical perspectives and empirical research through qualitative methods, it will try and frame an analysis of the Chinese environmental non-governmental sector under Xi Jinping's office.

First, this chapter will investigate the relationship between ENGOs and the public. To do so, it will look at the countless initiatives promoted by environmental organizations to enhance public participation in environmental governance. It will then provide an insight into the relationship between ENGOs and enterprises, given the need that the latter assume a corporate environmental responsibility (CER). Lastly, this chapter will investigate the delicate relationship between ENGOs and the Chinese government.

We found that under Xi Jinping the overall situation for the non-government sector is complex, but ENGOs have found strategies to overcome the barriers put up by the Party-state. This claim builds both on a theoretical and on an empirical ground. As this chapter will show, ENGOs are instrumental for the government – especially now that environmental protection and climate change are on top of Beijing's political agenda – yet they still struggle to get proper legitimacy.

### 3.1 The role of Chinese ENGOs: education over advocacy

Asking Chinese ENGOs about their relationship with the public we grouped answers according to the following patterns:

#### *Environmental education - 自然学校*

As the scholarship explains, ENGOs primarily seek to educate and guide the public. This idea has been well expressed by Ma Tianna, founder of Xiamen Green Cross Association (XGCA), who answered to the question “What is the role of an ENGO in China today?” in the following way:

“(We are) the educators and leaders of public participation in environmental protection. The public has a certain degree of blindness, does not understand many issues, and needs education and guidance” (XGCA, May 10, 2020).

Before delving into the description of the many educational activities carried out by Chinese ENGOS, it is worth taking a moment to explain the need in contemporary China for environmental education providers.

A recurrent topic that emerged since the first moment during the interviews was the low environmental awareness of the Chinese people. All four ENGOS' representatives reported that, despite several improvements in the past twenty years, environmental awareness in China is still low. All the interviewees agreed that a very small fraction of the community understands or actively participates in pro-environmental activities. Nevertheless, they all stressed the fact that the youth is increasingly involved in environmental protection.

When we enquired about the reason for this lack of awareness, all respondent mentioned the lack of education on the issue. "People have no clear understanding of environmental protection and sustainability", said Hao Xin, founder of Green Zhejiang (GZ). He maintained that issues such as climate change, energy-saving and sustainable urbanization are often presented as related to the spheres of science and politics, in a dimension made up of new technologies, large-scale economic tools, complex computer modelling etc., that makes non-experts more and more confused. "Chinese propaganda sometimes is difficult to understand [...] only a small percentage of the population can effectively engage in a discourse on environmental challenge", he said. To express the "novelty" of the issue to the Chinese population, he added:

"I discovered the meaning of "sustainability" when I studied in America. Twenty years ago, Chinese people had no idea of what environmental protection was; it is a new topic" (GZ, May 23, 2020).

Along with the problem of lack of awareness, the online questionnaire survey "Investigation Report on Citizens' Ecological Environment Behavior" conducted by the Environmental and Economic Policy Research Center of the MEE sheds light on another issue: the lack of public intent. According to the result of the survey, the public generally recognizes the influence of personal behavior on ecological environmental protection and, compared to ten years ago, it has adopted more eco-friendly habits, yet there is still a phenomenon of "high awareness and low level of practice" (MEE, 2019).

In this regard, all four respondents agreed that one of the best explanations for low public participation is people's strong reliance on government. "Citizens do not see it as their responsibility to protect the environment; thus, they tend not to engage in environmental protection activities unless they are compelled to do it", said Hao Xin (Interviewed May 23, 2020). His words are in line with the survey "Low-carbon city public awareness survey project" conducted in 2018 by the Chinese think-tank Innovative Green Development Program (iGDP). The survey asked people to express their opinion about the responsibility of tackling climate change. Most of the respondents identified the government, followed by the media, environmental groups, and last individuals and enterprises as the major actors.

Going back to the issue of environmental education, respondents maintained the first step towards a more engaged citizenry is educating people about environmental protection. People with more education tend not only to be more concerned about the environmental crisis, but also to proactively engage in pro-environmental behavior. What emerged from the interviews is that when people are provided with information and education on certain issues, they become aware. Once aware, it is more likely that they will take environmental protection more seriously.

As each ENGO is committed to a specific aspect of environmental protection, the strategies adopted, and the educational activities promoted by the respondents are different. GZ, XGCA and CBCGDF reported to use festivals or special occasions to hold various environmental protection lectures, seminars, and exhibitions, write environmental protection science books and magazines, and use new media for publicity. Another strategy is, for example, to build up connections with schools and universities. In 2019, Dr Zhou Jinfeng, General Secretary of CBCGDF, hold more than 30 seminars on biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and the key role of the youth in environmental governance in several schools in China. CBCGDF has long been committed to biodiversity conservation and sustainable development and organizes summer camps for young college students to provide them with a real insight on nature environmental protection through field visits, inspections, experiences, research practices, and documentary filming on the east coast of Hainan Island. As GZ is mainly committed to water governance, an example of educational activities coordinated by the organization is the training classes where students learn how to measure pollution in rivers. Concerning engaging people in eco-friendly activities, GZ organized a green bicycling tour that circled Zhejiang Province to reduce emissions and promote local ecotourism. Since 2002,

GZ organizes the Zhejiang Youth Green Camp. The program was awarded Best Activity of National Mother River Protection Action in 2004.

Given the growing importance of recycling, the organization was also in charge of the project “ReClothe” aimed at collecting old clothes to make new ones. Green Initiatives (GI) instead, works with companies: “We have worked with over 100 partners– both large and small, international and local, and conducted hundreds of training sessions resulting in improved waste management systems that have diverted tons of textiles, electronics, paper and other waste from landfills to people that need them, or to credible recycling facilities”, said Nitin, founder and director of GI (GI, August 26, 2020).

### *Community building - 社区营造*

Thanks to its own distinctive history and cultural environment, Chinese community development and social structure is quite distinct from the Western experience. Community building in China is aimed at raising residents’ community awareness on specific problems such as homelessness, family care, poverty, and waste management (Ding, 2008). The growing importance of public participation in China’s green community assessment programs can be related to the emerging international demand for participatory approaches in environmental management (Boland & Zhu, 2012). In the race to improve environmental conditions, the central government recognized that a more tailor-made approach, city by city, might be the solution to achieve more positive results in the long run. Global Village of Beijing, a state-led pilot project launched in 1997, is one of the first examples of a green community in China. Now China can count more than a hundred of these projects.

Strictly speaking, community-based environmental activities organized by local ENGOS represent a valuable example of bottom-up response to the critical situation of many Chinese cities. These activities mainly consist of workshops aimed at facilitating the exchange of “best practices” between environmental organizations and citizens. Taking the introduction of compulsory waste sorting in 2019 in Hangzhou as example, Hao Xin from GZ, reported that when compulsory waste sorting was introduced, people complained: “four different bins is too complicated, we don’t know where to throw the waste” (Interviewed May 23, 2020). To solve this problem, GZ started practical demonstrations among local communities to teach people how to sort waste. GZ helped residents to establish teams of volunteers in charge of waste management. In somewhat similar guise, GI supervised Shanghai’s first community e-waste recycling project. Partnership with private companies, F&B outlets and building owners (Element Fresh, Anken Group, Ford Motors, CITI) were established to create drop-off points for the community. Part of the mission of GZ, according to the interviewee

is aimed at promoting the dialogue between the community committees, experts, enterprises, social organizations, and other stakeholders is fundamental for the development of green communities in China (绿色社区, lǜsè shèqū).

This approach to urban sustainability, which is based on the environmental makeover of residential spaces through participatory initiatives, aims at promoting the idea that through collective action it is possible to achieve concrete results. According to Boland and Zhu (2012), communities' involvement in environmental activities is "pedagogic in function and performative in form" (p.147). Respondents agreed that, however, there is still a long way to go before we can see truly engaged communities unless they are victims of environmental disaster.

The interviews revealed that there is a great variety of activities that the respondents categorize as educational. This research report only few examples, but the list of activities and services offered by these ENGOs is long and variegated. From cycling into the nature to attending training classes on waste sorting, all these activities have an educational value, according to the respondents. The importance attached to building relationship with schools and universities signals that ENGOs are betting on the youth, believed to be more willing to take environmental lessons. Only GI works with business rather than with students or neighborhood communities. Although the target is different, the organization, acknowledged the educational value offered by its services.

Interviewees agreed that the process of guiding the public towards a more sustainable lifestyle is still long and slow-paced. Nevertheless, the fact that people, instead of using the official channel, usually prefer reporting to ENGOs, which are considered more trustworthy and genuinely involved in the issue, makes the respondents proud of their work.

All the ENGOs mentioned the pivotal role played by the government and the importance of the collaboration with government bodies. Overall, ENGOs did not openly discredit government top-down policies. Respondents however, stressed the need to improve top-down directives with the ENGOs-led bottom-up approach.

### **3.2 ENGOs and the Corporate Environmental Responsibility (CER)**

Asking Chinese ENGOs about their relationship with enterprises, we found that despite the efforts of ENGOs in corporate projects, results are not always positive or reliable.

The term Corporate Environmental Responsibility (CER) is modelled on the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and refers to private companies' duty to improve their environmental performance through the integration of the principles of environmental protection into

their business strategies and activities. Consequently, companies commit to the reduction of waste and emissions and to an efficient and sustainable use of the resources.

Government policies and regulations are the main drivers for the CER. Legislation, regulations, and policies are coupled with fiscal tools such as subsidies, tariffs and taxes to encourage the implementation of the CER. Apart from the role of the government as the main promoter of the CER, media, public and ENGOs are acting as watchdog of the companies.

“Under the Dome”, a popular documentary on air pollution, released in China in 2015 and then banned by the government, sparked off a debate on the CER. In response to the growing environmental complaints from local communities and the pressure exerted by the international community, a new corporate legislation that calls for companies’ responsibility in the environmental realm was enacted in 2006 by the Chinese government<sup>2</sup>.

China’s state-led model of CER does not seem suitable for the participation of ENGOs. Nevertheless, some scholars have demonstrated ENGOs involvement in successful CER initiatives (Davis & Moosmayer, 2014). Chinese NGOs are using the CER tool to challenge the corporate practices of the companies that operate in China. Under the supervision of the ENGOs, many Chinese enterprises are carrying out pollution control and have established an environmental protection system. To have a better insight into the relations between these social organizations and businesses, we mainly looked at the activities carried out by GI. From GI’s website, we found that the organization works with several local and global companies on employee engagement through waste recycling, including Arup, Rio Tinto, Schneider Electric, PwC, and others.

GI, answered to the question “Why do you collaborate with businesses?” in the following way:

“We felt that businesses needed to take more responsibility for their employees and the environment by supporting meaningful initiatives; there weren’t enough local eco-projects that companies could support; we need more modular and affordable projects that are low-risk and easy to understand” (GI, August 26, 2020).

GI, that has been working with Chinese companies for years, affirmed that there have been many improvements and more commitment from companies. Regardless of the good achievements that many businesses and enterprises have made so far, working with them might be difficult, especially for those ENGOs that do not have international leverage. From the interview conducted with GI and XGCA, some negative aspects emerged as well. As explained by the two organizations,

---

<sup>2</sup> The law mentioned in the text is the China’s Company Law. [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/bizchina/2006-04/17/content\\_569258.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/bizchina/2006-04/17/content_569258.htm)

sometimes enterprises release false information about their environmental performances. Information transparency is another controversial issue. Ge et al., (2009) maintained that environmental information disclosure is a right, and local governments must ensure citizens that the businesses that do not respect the environmental standards, do not comply with the legislation or that release false information are punished. According to the interviewees, people has the right to know, especially when businesses' misconduct directly impacts their lives. The problem of non-compliance with the CER is expressed in the following statements:

“We have worked with over 100 companies, [...] for most businesses it's mainly a CSR (corporate social responsibility) or PR (public relations) tactic” (GI, August 26, 2020).

On the same issue, XGCA further explained that:

“The company subsidizes non-governmental environmental protection organizations to do projects. [...] this project has nothing to do with the company. In the end, the company writes the entire funded project into the corporate social responsibility report” (XGCA, May 10, 2020).

Large companies, however, are not always able to get away with environmental regulations. In recent years, environmental organizations and institutes have developed ad hoc strategies to ensure that large corporations meet their environmental responsibilities. Taking advantage of the public information disclosure procedures, the Institute for Public and Environmental Affairs (IPE) launched the China “Water Pollution Map” in 2006, a database of thousands of environmental quality records and infringements issued by various government agencies. Users can monitor corporate environmental performance and check the pollution status of different geographical locations. With this publicly available information, anyone can view who are the polluters. This map holds as deterrent for corporation misconduct.

#### *Alliances as a strategy*

It can happen that enterprises that do not respect the environmental standards exert pressure on ENGOs to save their reputation and avoid problems with the local government. When this happens - explained XGCA- ENGOs often try to solve these unpleasant situations by building up alliances between organizations. In China, the cooperation between non-governmental organizations that

conduct the same type of activities has been widely acknowledged as a strategy to overcome barriers, either organizational, financial, or legislative.

“When a company asks to be removed from the blacklist [...] it requires the unanimous consent of thirty-four organizations. In this way, the pressure from the company can be dispersed, and the non-governmental environmental protection organization can withstand it. If it is a single organization, it is very difficult. Unbearable” (XGCA May 10, 2020).

However, it is not just a question of facing pressure together. Sharing resources, knowledge and expertise allows these organizations to gain more leverage and to build up new networks with other social organizations, either domestic or foreign. Hao Xin, for example, co-founded the *China River Watch Alliance* with other twenty-seven Chinese water advocacy ENGOs. Besides, GZ became part of the international non-profit *Waterkeeper Alliance*. GZ engages specifically in the water protection of the Qiantang River, the largest river in Zhejiang Province. He reported that thanks to the aforementioned alliances, GZ could work together with both domestic organizations and international stakeholders. XGCA, instead, is a member of the *Green Choice Alliance*, a coalition of Chinese ENGOs that support large corporations in the environmental management of their supply chain.

From the interviews we found that, although ENGOs are assuming an important role in the promotion of best practices among businesses, they sometimes struggle to exert their “authority,” especially when it comes to making big enterprises respect the CER. We must keep in mind that, compared to government-led NGOs (GONGOs), grassroots ENGOs operate informally. So, while GONGOs probably have more leverage, small-size, independent, domestic ENGOs – as those interviewed for this research – face more difficulties. Going against large companies, especially state-owned ones, is risky and most NGOs do not have the tools to deal with certain situations. As demonstrated by respondents, setting up alliances can be an effective strategy to get their voices heard and to make local problems reach a wider audience.

### **3.3 ENGOs -government relations: friends or enemies?**

#### **3.3.1 ENGOs – local governments: a new form of environmental governance**

In this section we analyze the relation between ENGOs and the government.

Government-NGOs coexistence in China differs from the Western ideal. NGOs-state relation is fluid and multidirectional (Hsu 2010; Hildebrand 2013). The existing political and legal environment, but also NGOs' understanding of their roles, affect this relationship, which can be described as a combination of acknowledgement and avoidance.

### *Improving good governance*

As largely explained by the existing literature, few NGOs can claim fully autonomy from the government (Shieh & Deng, 2011). Many ENGOs see themselves in a dynamic of mutuality rather than autonomy from the government, in a situation where the state and non-state actors can mutually benefit from their interaction. All respondents acknowledged the centrality of the government in the policy-making process. Nevertheless, they also stressed the importance of the non-governmental sector, especially when it comes to implementing policies at the local level. From the interviews emerged that ENGOs consider themselves a bridge between the civil society and the government. A unidirectional approach to tackle the environmental issue is therefore wrong. This idea is well expressed in the following statement by XGCA:

“The government has functions, but it is not omnipotent. The good governance of the government requires public participation”.

(XGCA, May 10, 2020)

The concept of governance contains the ideas of plural powers, plural centers, responsiveness, transparency, justice and effectiveness, and it is therefore encouraging the building of civil society (Dai, 2002). Yu Keping (2011) stressed the importance of *good governance*, which imply a healthy cooperation between the state and civil society or between the government and citizens. The good governance approach welcomes the potential role of social organizations in providing public goods and services, but it is wrong to assume that good governance will inevitably lead to democratization (Baogang He,1997). The good governance rather creates the conditions for the local governments to look for ENGOs as partners.

### *Environmental supervision - 环境监督实*

Apart from nature education and community building, another task that many ENGOs perform is environmental supervision in cooperation with departments for law enforcement. To help solve the shortage of environmental protection inspectors in the province, GZ, for example, said that they

regularly collaborate with relevant government departments. The collaboration involves the creation of teams made of volunteer citizens, which on behalf the local government take regular environmental health assessments, collect information, and file environmental pollution reports, promoting the rapid handling of environmental pollution cases and the disclosure of environmental pollution information in the entire province of Zhejiang. Specifically, GZ cooperates with the Zhejiang Provincial Environmental Law Enforcement Inspection Corps and local environmental law enforcement agencies to investigate and deal with pollution sources reported by the public. Hao Xin reported that since 2011, his ENGO has patrolled more than 100,000 kilometers and has assisted the local government in investigating dozens of pollution incidents. The organization has also established an alliance of representatives and committees to submit relevant information through deputies to the National People's Congress (NPC) and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CCPPC) members. What is necessary, in respondents' opinion, is a combined approach and a steady dialogue between government, ENGOs and businesses. GZ perfectly conveyed this idea by saying that:

“[it is important] to promote the establishment of a three-pole social-ecological structure of government, enterprises, and social organizations” (GZ, May 23, 2020).

#### *ENGOs-local governments: accessing resources through cooperation*

All the ENGOs interviewed for this research declared themselves to be independent organizations. Nevertheless, they said to have registered with the MOCA to avoid legal problems. Among the respondents, GZ said that it is trying to make the most out of this “dependence” from the government. Specifically, the interview with GZ validated the resource dependence theory according to which an organization needs resources to survive and these resources can be obtained from the surrounding environment, or from other organizations (Malatesta & Smith, 2014) – local governments in this case. This idea was perfectly conveyed by the founder of GZ who affirmed to please government officers to gain resources and visibility. In an interview released for a foreign TV program, Hao Xin affirmed that “developing relationships with officials and gaining their respect is a key concern for Chinese Waterkeepers, as it enables them to work more closely with government environmental agencies and have more influence when fighting polluters” (Ball, 2014).

From GZ perspective, the most rational and rapid way to accomplish their role is to use the Party-state as a key source of resources. All the respondents acknowledged the supremacy

of the Party, not only in terms of political power but also of availability of resources, either these are funding, or access to clients, or simply legitimation. When GZ decided to collaborate with local government, the ultimate object was not to replace the local administration in water governance, but rather to suggest suitable solutions to fight the pollution level of the Qiantang River and then persuade the local administration to adopt them.

GZ contended that despite having a comparative advantage over the government, ENGOs lack professional recognition, which sometimes prevents them from being listened. Collaborating with the local governments would help them get the recognition and legitimation they desire. In the case of GZ the partnership with the local government proved successful and the two collaborate on regularly basis.

Despite some sporadic achievements, most ENGOs still act informally, which limits the long-term effectiveness of their actions. Avoiding politicized topics or explicit critiques to the government conduct is the tacit rule if ENGOs want to partner with the local governments. The resource strategy of state alliance is successful when ENGOs' goals are in line with those of government agencies (Hildebrandt, 2013). This strategy creates opportunities for a fruitful negotiation that combines local knowledge and government support. Some scholars maintain that in the long run this strategy increases the state power rather than reduce it. While the power of the ENGOs remain "borrowed", local governments instead, reduce the burdens of their service delivery and enjoy the positive achievements obtained through the collaborations with the local ENGOs (Hsu & Jiang, 2015).

#### *Information disclosure and participatory mechanism*

In a social and political context like the Chinese one, the population is not provided with the fundamental tools that allow an effective involvement in participatory processes. Concerning the environmental governance, participatory mechanisms, however, are embedded in China's legal framework. In 2015, the MEE released an online document entitled "Methods for public participation in environmental protection" (环境保护公众参与办法, huánjìng bǎohù gōngzhòng cānyù bànfǎ). The document provides citizens with the possibility to take part in the formulation and supervision of environmental policies and regulations and gives them the right to ascertain any cases of contamination and/or other violations of environmental regulations.

When respondents were asked to express their opinion on this participatory mechanism, CBCGDF answered that public participation in environmental governance had improved a lot over recent years and that people could definitely express the concerns, for example by submitting complaints or

proposals to the legislative body. “Each year we organize meetings before the Two Sessions to solicit and file reports, recommendations, and proposals from individuals, institutes, grassroots NGOs”, said CBCGDF (Interviewed June 17, 2020).

Notwithstanding the opportunities, barriers remain to substantial and meaningful environmental public participation. Even though public opinions are solicited for Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), they are often not taken into serious consideration and there are no transparent and objective criteria to establish what “full consideration” really means- as specified in the Environmental Protection Law (Zhao, 2010). This idea is consistent with the view of two ENGOs, namely XGCA and GZ. XGCA contested the effectiveness of this mechanism:

“The government failed to realize information disclosure during the project development<sup>3</sup>, did not involve the public, and ignored the public's right to know. This is a lack of environmental information disclosure” (XGCA, May 10, 2020).

The same opinion was held by GZ: according to the organizations, local governments only pretend to be interested in having feedback from citizens.

“Environmental pollution data in China have to be publicly available. However, polluting industries and local environmental protection bureaus are reluctant to show these data. Also, data are hardly comprehensible to ordinary citizens” (GZ, May 23, 2020).

GZ further reported that the bureaucracy framed an unclear environmental policy. Taking the case of the Qiantang River in Hangzhou as an example:

“Nine dragons<sup>4</sup> from water bureau to river administration are involved in the management of the river [...] nobody really knows to whom they should send reports, and in the administration, nobody takes responsibility” (GZ, May 23, 2020).

What emerged from this research is that local governments respond to public requests on ad hoc basis and without institutional commitment to public participation in environmental governance.

---

<sup>3</sup> In 2007 in Xiamen people took the streets to protest against the construction of a petrochemical plant nearby the city.

<sup>4</sup> The “nine dragons” are the multiple departments in charge of water governance. The Chinese saying “九龙治水” (nine dragons control the water) refers to the fragmentation of the bureaucracy and the persistence of divergent interests, in addition to the influence of external interest groups, which continue to undermine the implementation of the law.

To solve the problem of environmental disclosure, GZ is making use of internet technology for pollution monitoring purpose. The ENGO has started to work shoulder to shoulder with netizens for a kind of crowdsourced reporting on local pollution. The result of this collaboration is a mobile app, “Pollution Watch”, which is being used to collect and analyze environmental data and communicate them back to the affected communities and the broader public. Data can be consulted through internet pollution maps in a very easy and comprehensible. The enthusiasm for the app is evident from the following statement:

“This (Pollution Watch) has proved a lot more efficient than when single citizens have to directly report to the Environmental Protection Bureau” (GZ, May 23, 2020).

There are, however, cases of successful public participation where local governments promptly responded to citizens’ demands. One of the most successful cases of participatory mechanism has been the online voting system set up by the Xiamen local government after the protest occurred in the city in 2007.

In recent years, “Not In My Backyard” or “NIMBY” mass environmental protests, such as protests against waste incinerator plants and sewage treatment plants, have frequently occurred among Chinese cities. Facing this common challenge in China, public participation in the past was intense and confrontational, with a lack of trust in government information disclosures. The PX (P-Xylene) project case in Xiamen, Fujian province, attracted nationwide attention. In the book “Manual for law-based environmental advocacy in China”, Ma Tianna reports that in 2007 Xiamen residents took to the streets to ask the resignation of the Communist Party Secretary of Xiamen, He Lifeng, and the cancellation of the PX project. The demonstration or, 集体散步 (jítǐ sànbù, walking group) as reported by the Chinese media, was organized through text messaging and word of mouth. The huge number of people that reversed into the street prompted the city government to reconsider the PX project and conduct a new environmental impact assessment (EIA) before taking a final decision. The government set up an online voting system to ask citizens whether they agreed or not with the establishment of the chemical plant. With 55,376 votes opposing the PX project and only 3,078 voters supporting it, the MEE announced the relocation of the PX project to another city. The processes and effects of public participation in the decision-making regarding the Xiamen PX project was praised by the mass media as a milestone in environmental decision-making in China (Zhu and Jiang, 2007).

All respondents agreed that the case of Xiamen is the proof that local governments are responsive to bottom-up requests. The interviewees added that, however, without the support and the information provided by the ENGOs, citizens often fear to advance their requests. Very often, as one of the

interviewees reported, citizens are not even aware of their rights. In the case of Xiamen, citizens exercised their rights to know and to oversee public policy decision-making. Under the strategic guidance and joint efforts of several ENGOS, the attempt to guide the public in the participation in policy making through legal means proved successful. Public participation in the Xiamen PX case was the result of a joint effort of provincial and national ENGOS. People relied on the guidance of local ENGOS, opinion leaders, and activists. When a project involves a wide range of fields, including petrochemical sector, energy security, environmental protection, legal issues, for which nobody has an overall grasp, ENGOS and activists can provide guidance and coordination.

From the case of Xiamen, we learnt two things. First, local governments, even in an authoritarian country like China, are not reluctant to public participation. Second, ENGOS play an important role as a bridge between government bodies and the citizenry. Despite the mechanisms of public participations should be improved, the case of Xiamen set an example for constructive bottom-up input to environmental governance.

#### *Environmental Public Interest Litigation (EPIL)*

What happened in Xiamen is a one-off case of successful participatory mechanisms. When public's opinion is not heard in the first instance, victims of environmental pollutions and worried citizens can bring their cases to the attention of the mass media (Yang and Calhoun, 2007), send complaint letters or visit government offices, and even protest on the streets. Lastly, when decisions have been made and pollution has occurred, the public can redress their grievances by suing polluters in the courts. The defendants can be governmental bodies and agencies, including provincial and city governments, or individual corporate or private defendants. However, as both XGCA and GI explained, the public has no leverage to be listened to by the government agencies, so ENGOS usually act as intermediaries. This idea is well expressed in the following statement by GI:

“Government can rely on only one part of society. It has to be a combined approach a continuous dialogue between government, civil society and businesses. But yes, there should be a window where the common public can report their suggestions and grievances. Maybe it is already there and is in Chinese and we are not aware. Better to talk to a local NGO” (GI, August 26, 2020).

Environmental Public Interest Litigation (EPIL) in China allowed qualified ENGOS to file litigation to protect the public interest by safeguarding the environment and natural resources from pollution and ecological destruction. Many years have passed before the Chinese government framed

an appropriate EPIL scheme within the law<sup>5</sup>. The EPIL provides non-governmental actors with the possibility to express complaint on environmental issues or report case of environmental misconduct. Respondents agreed that EPIL proved effective in holding polluters and local enterprises accountable for ecological damages. EPIL is indeed a strategy adopted by the majority of respondents- three out of four reported to have used this tool- to put pressure on polluters. Despite the clear rules about who can bring cases before the court – only registered ENGOs that have been engaging in public services activities in environmental protection for at least five years and without any record of violation of the law (Yu, 2016) - lack of financial resources and inadequate subject matter coverage<sup>6</sup> emerged as common problems. According to the *UNDP Issue brief* on China (2015), a low percentage of ENGOs have the technical, financial, human and managerial capacity to handle EPIL cases. Moreover, local protectionism guarantee that polluting firms get away with the EPIL. The difficulty for the courts to assess the damages especially when it comes to air pollution and harm to human health is another problem.

Nevertheless, respondents reported many successful cases of EPIL. CBCGDF for example, has put relentless efforts in safeguarding environment justice through environmental public interest litigations (EPIL). The foundation has filed over 100 environment EPILs against environment polluters. In 2015, CBCGDF brought a lawsuit against eight chemical companies for causing pollution in Tenggeli desert. The case ended with the polluting companies making public apologies and providing a fund of 6 million yuan (900,000 US dollars) for environment remedy, which is one of the biggest compensations in an EPIL in China so far. More recently, CBCGDF filed an EPIL case against a Moon Cake company for excessive packaging (CBCGDF website).

### 3.3.2 ENGOs' advocacy: a risk for government's legitimacy?

In this section, we analyze ENGOs' advocacy. To address societal problems, ENGOs generally engage in both service provision and advocacy. Even though these two roles are often integrated into NGO work, they also reflect different approaches to the promotion of social development and equality. The imbalanced power dynamic that currently exists between the Chinese state and society has led to

---

<sup>5</sup> Art.55 of the Civil Procedure Law (CPL) was revised in 2012 and becoming effective in January 2013. The article allowed relevant bodies and organizations to represent the public interest in court lawsuits to address environmental pollution (Global China Law, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> On August 2020, the Supreme People's decided to retrial the maritime EPIL filed by CBCGDF in January 2018. CBCGDF had filed a lawsuit with the Xiamen Maritime Court, which did not accept the case because social organizations did not have subject qualification on marine EPIL (CBCGDF, 2020).

the development of a civil society which emphasizes service provision over advocacy (China Development Brief, 2013). What explains this imbalance between advocacy and service provision is ENGOs' limited political space. We have seen that ENGOs can trigger collective action, but collective action can represent a threat Party-state's authority. When NGOs try to influence the policymaking process going beyond the political boundaries set by the government, they put at risk their own survival.

*A question of advocacy: Green Zhejiang water governance*

GZ has participated in water governance in Zhejiang province since the beginning of 2013. Hao Xin from GZ told that GZ launched the "Find the Swimmable Rivers campaign", a TV program produced by the Zhejiang Satellite TV. The program worked as an information mechanism uncovering the poor water quality of the Qiantang River. The initiative gained significant public attention and exerted pressure on both local government and provincial-level government. "GZ does not have any formal authority to force government agencies to do anything. However, by reporting detailed information on water pollution and identifying the responsible institutions, this informal participation solved the problem of information asymmetry between the provincial government and its subordinates", said Hao Xin during the interview ( May 23, 2020). Consequently, the Provincial Party Secretary, Xia Baolong, warned his subordinates to pay attention to water pollution. This led to fierce competition between local officials around good water governance. As a result, the quality of the water has improved.

What happened in Zhejiang can be considered a success for two reasons. First, Green Zhejiang successfully framed water governance as an important policy issue by mass mobilizing citizens to report water pollution in their hometowns via provincial media. Second, by providing necessary information for the provincial government to supervise its subordinates' implementation of environmental policy, Green Zhejiang "borrows" some informal power from the provincial authority to hold the local government accountable, both to their superiors and to the public. The provincial party-government, however, never empowered GZ in any formal way. In previous cases of media supervision, local government could silence the interviewees during the TV program. The case of GZ in water governance suggests that citizens and social organizations can participate meaningfully in environmental governance and achieve social justice outcomes even without formal institutions. The citizen participation mobilized by Green Zhejiang was effective in achieving immediate goals, including citizen participation and increased satisfaction with environmental policy.

In our examination of ENGO advocacy in Zhejiang, we find that GZ is working to carve out space to engage with both the government and the public in a new manner. Despite many challenges, GZ has taken on policy advocacy as part of its core work and took actions to influence government decisions and policies. Notwithstanding with this, their action remains framed as supportive of government goals. The following statement explains this idea.

“We do not want to embarrass local governments or their cadres. As long as they promise to deal with the pollution case, we are willing to drop the case on media [..]As ENGO, we do not want to compete or replace the governments, but must work with governments, give them inspiration, and push them. [...] We supplement this (government’s role) with our service” (GZ, May 23, 2020).

We found that ENGOs have the capacity to encourage government’s transparency and bring citizens’ voices into policymaking, improving government’s performance, and perhaps helping the government’s efforts to maintain social stability. However, there are ENGOs that do advocate even in “antagonistic” ways such as exposing government inaction, criticizing government policies and decisions, and launching public campaigns against government decisions. Policy advocacy in these times is risky. Advocating for transparency and respect of the norm is allowed only if this happens within the framework set by the government. This idea is well expressed in the following statement:

“Non-governmental environmental protection organizations must always remember that they must advocate under the framework of the law. Otherwise, the law will be inexorable and there may be major risks at any time. Non-governmental environmental protection organizations should always stay awake, avoid blindness, conduct detailed analysis of risks, and use reasonable methods to avoid them. Advocacy that conforms to the law is feasible, is suitable for China's current national conditions, and can serve sustainable development” (XGCA, May 10, 2020).

#### *Going against the government: The case of Xiamen Green Cross*

Restrictions enacted by the central government against civil society are exemplified by the enforcement of the Charity Law overseeing domestic NGOs, as well as adoption of the Overseas NGO Law to manage foreign NGOs working in China. Article 93 of the Charity Law, the most significant law for civil society organizations, states that the Civil Affairs Department at the county

level or above has the right to take a series of measures over those organizations suspected of illegal acts. In particular, local government's members are authorized to carry out inspections, request clarification from charitable organizations and access to and copy relevant materials; investigate work units and individuals involved in charitable activities, regarding supervision and management; and finally inquire into financial accounts of charitable organizations. This situation put many NGOs in a difficult situation.

This position is illustrated by Ma Tianna, whose organization has been shut down by the local government in 2019 because they opposed to government's interference in the management of the organization. His statement below perfectly conveys this idea:

“NGOs that can continue to survive in China now must have a CCP group within their organizations, and CCP members are trained every week. My Green Cross refused to set up a CCP groups, so it was one of the reasons for being shut down. [...] the police came into our office very often, and always invited me for dinner and tea, that mean they were kindly asking me for more and more information. Before 2011, I think there was still space for NGOs to take actions. At that time, China's social organizations developed at their best. After Xi came into power, various controls began. In the past two years, most organizations without a CCP branch were shut down” (XGCA, May 10, 2020).

The founder of XGCA said he was sorry and angry that he could not carry on the project. But he also stated that now is a difficult historical moment for NGOs. The other ENGOs claimed that they have never encountered such problems. Referring to government crackdown on NGOs, GI said: “generally speaking, if you engage in constructive, solutions-driven advocacy and environmental work then you see no challenges” (Interviewed August 10, 2020). It is easy to think that this is due to the strategy adopted by most NGOs in recent years, namely to act within the limits imposed by the government, accepting their interference in exchange for being able to carry out their work without problems. However, this sometimes means compromising their nature and values.

#### *Unauthorized forms of dissent*

The government is tightening restrictions on both national and foreign NGOs, fearing that their activities might encourage unauthorized forms of dissent. In this regard, Ma Tianna explained

that participating in a protest is risky as well as complicated. Both activists and common people are discouraged and do not believe in the effectiveness of protesting in the streets. This idea is well expressed in the following statement.

“It is necessary to go through certain approval procedures, otherwise it is illegal. The “Assemblies, Processions and Demonstrations Law” stipulates that the person in charge of the demonstration must personally report to the public security organs about the demonstration five days before the date through the submission of a written application. The application should include the purpose, method, slogan, number of people, number of vehicles, type and quantity of audio equipment used, start and end time, location (including meeting place and disbanding place), the route and the name, occupation, and address of the person in charge” (XGCA, May 10, 2020).

Talking about the protest in Xiamen, Ma Tianna explained that the "walking group" was not accused of illegality for two reasons. First, people protested peacefully. Third, despite the high affluence at the mobilization, the political nature of the movement was weak. This eased local government's resistance, creating a space for the construction of a rational interaction between participants and the government. Certainly, not all citizen mobilization can achieve such goals. Overall, the interviewees maintained that protests are not the best way to get government's attention. What is happening these days in China demonstrates government low tolerance for any form of dissent. From the interview emerged that protests are usually motivated by a desire for social justice and triggered by reasons that often differ from the genuine desire to protect the environment: issues related to health, land ownership or corruption of officials. Moreover, such requests often end up being individualistic claims, which are limited to the local sphere and lack a broader and more responsible vision of the common good.

Achieving sustainable development, which combines economic, environmental, and social aspects and which considers all stakeholders' interests is challenging. First, the government continues to have an ambivalent attitude about the desirability of certain actions from civil society: on the one hand, it calls for transparency and disclosure of information, on the other hand, it arbitrarily invokes state secrecy to limit access to environmental data that might threaten social stability and Party legitimacy. Second, while encouraging new participatory approaches such as those mentioned above, it limits the development of a pluralistic debate, controlling freedom of expression or tightening its grip on activists and civil rights defenders.

From the interviews, we could perceive that respondents' approach is quite pragmatic: three out of four ENGOs have decided to act within the boundaries set by the Party, which in turn never interfered in their activities. Only XGCA opposed to local government's interference. The shut-down of the organization has been the price to pay.

We found that not only GONGOs, but also NGOs, are able to engage successfully in policy advocacy. Our findings show that proactive advocacy efforts are also being pursued by medium-sized NGOs outside the elite stratum; groups that despite no formal links to the state and little *guanxi* were able to establish working relationships with the local government and influence their policy-making. Green Zhejiang water-governance is a case in point. Nevertheless, ENGO advocacy at present is still cautious, piecemeal, and limited to environmental governance issues. Groups are careful to avoid fundamental political issues, and the state remains both the agenda setter and final decision-maker. Moreover, few groups exclusively work on policy advocacy, and most are engaging sometimes in mutually beneficial cooperation with the government.

Despite some policy successes, most ENGOs still acts informally, which limits long-term effectiveness. However, incorporating citizens into public administration in a meaningful way requires sharing policymaking power formally, and thus far, local governments are only willing to share power in an ad hoc and informal way. Neither instances such as those mentioned before represent a radical challenge to the disposition of power in public space, though it is important to consider them a reminder that participatory initiatives can create possibilities for expanding the scope of engagement, even in highly centralized political framework (Boland & Zhu, 2012).

## CONCLUSION

This research is aimed at understanding the role of environmental NGOs (ENGOS) in present-day China. Specifically, given the authoritarian context, this work tried to enquire ENGO's opportunities and constraints that derive from their interaction with both state and non-state actors. ENGOS have been chosen among other types of social organizations because their proliferation was interpreted as indicative of the central government's difficulties in channeling and addressing popular demands generated by the environmental crisis. Decentralization (started in the Reform Era) opened for collaborations between ENGOS and local governments, which benefitted both parties. Local governments could outsource some of their burdens to ENGOS, while ENGOS got resources and status. Under Xi Jinping's centralizing trends, however, it seems that the space for ENGOS in the environmental governance is shrinking. Xi Jinping has indeed demonstrated an ambivalent attitude towards Chinese ENGOS, which on the one hand are considered useful for the system of social governance and, on the other hand, might pose a potential threat to social stability.

The methodology adopted for the study is a descriptive qualitative analysis of both primary and secondary sources. The study presents first a brief review of some key theoretical and definitional issues about civil society in China and then it situates the discussions within the framework of authoritarian environmentalism to provide the socio-political background. A semi-structured interview model has been used to report the direct opinions of four Chinese ENGOS, namely Green Zhejiang, Green Initiatives, Xiamen Green Cross and China Biodiversity Conservation and Green Development Foundation. Respondents were asked questions related to their mission, values, main activities, and projects as well as their relationship with governmental institutions and the citizens.

What emerged from this research is that ENGOS mainly engage in educational and awareness-raising activities. We discovered that ENGOS usually focus on local problems such as water and air pollution, waste sorting or other issues that might significantly impact on people's daily lives. By doing so, it is easier for them to get supported locally. The majority of our responding ENGOS – three out of four – work mainly with students and local communities. Only one, instead, works with businesses on waste recycling, staff engagement programs and encourages the adoption of sustainable solutions and services. The organization, however, acknowledged the educational value offered by its services. This is important for our research for two reasons. First, we can assume that the primary focus is on non-political activities. Second, the Chinese population needs to be educated: all four ENGOS' representatives reported that, despite several improvements in the past twenty years, environmental awareness in China is still low.

Importantly though, all respondents underlined their role as intermediaries between citizens and local governments. They stated that people usually prefer reporting to ENGOs rather than to local officers because the first are considered more trustworthy and genuinely involved in the environmental issue. Apart from the public trust in ENGOs, all respondents agreed that the process of guiding the public towards a more sustainable lifestyle may still be long and slow-paced. What emerged from the interviews is that, although ENGOs are assuming an important role in the promotion of the best practices among businesses, they sometimes struggle to exert their “authority”. This is especially true when they try to force big enterprises to respect their corporate environmental responsibility (CER). Opposing large companies, especially state-owned ones, is a risk that most ENGOs do not have the tools to deal with.

ENGOs-government relation is fluid and uncertain, as well as dynamic and multifaceted (Shieh, 2009, p.37) under often-ambiguous political parameters (Yang et al., 2016). Respondents never discredited central government's top-down policies, instead, they all acknowledged Beijing's efforts in providing proper legislation for environmental protection and climate change. Yet, they all stressed the need to improve the coordination between top-down directives with the ENGOs-led bottom-up approach. Barriers remain to substantial and meaningful ENGOs' participation in environmental governance at the local level. We found that despite participatory mechanisms being embedded in the legislative framework, local governments may not be so willing to share their political space with other stakeholders. Nevertheless, China's environmental state does not completely neglect forms of non-governmental participation. On the contrary, this research has demonstrated that an authoritarian leadership can, under certain circumstances, be responsive to public demands for improved environmental governance as for the case of Xiamen protest or water governance in Zhejiang province. As demonstrated by respondents, setting up alliances between ENGOs can be an effective strategy to get their voices heard and to allow local demands to reach a wider audience.

In one case, we found that local government exerted pressure to set up a CCP groups within an organization and forbade to talk about civil society and policy advocacy. The ENGO opposed to government's requests and it was forced to close. The founder of the organization affirmed that before Xi Jinping came into power there was hope for freedom, while now even getting registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs has become complex. Other respondents did not explicitly condemn Xi Jinping's political line, but they all expressed concerns for the worsening of the political situation. Discussing political opportunities, all the interviewees agreed that it is now difficult for ENGOs to

carve out a political space in environmental governance. This difficulty is well exemplified in that only one out of four interviewed ENGOs affirmed to be explicitly committed to policy advocacy as conventionally defined, while the others showed a tendency to shift their focus to generic educational or non-political activities. Reporting is put aside to leave room to practical activities that can find legitimacy within the dominant ideology. It seems that the only acceptable type of advocacy is the one that involves the collaboration with the government.

In this regard, another significant finding is that, despite claiming their non-affiliation with the government, all four ENGOs however were officially registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs and two of them actively collaborated with the respective governmental departments. As described in this study, ENGOs are often asked by the local government to partner in projects with different purposes. Despite often working informally, we found that ENGOs carry out the function of environmental supervisors on behalf of the local governments. In this regard, one ENGO affirmed to keep informal ties with local government officers to gain a certain status and visibility, which validates the resource dependence theory according to which an organization needs resources to survive and these resources can be obtained from the surrounding environment, or other organizations (Malatesta & Smith, 2014) – local governments in this case. Yet, this did not prevent the aforementioned organizations to be critical of local governments.

Reducing the discourse on government-ENGOs relationship to a matter of alliance or opposition, however, is simplistic. Drawing on the literature on embedded activism, we have demonstrated that the case of China is worth studying due to its uniqueness. It represents a combination of the government's willingness to draw on ENGOs to help address environmental challenges and the constant attempts by the Party-state to control their activities. Chinese environmental authoritarianism accepts ENGOs inputs only when they prove sufficiently in line with the government's judgment. This does not guarantee that their voices will be considered. From the research conducted for this study, we can deduce that, overall, the situation has not improved and ENGOs continue to struggle to carve out a political space in environmental governance, trying at the same time to make the most of the opportunities provided by the political framework. What is important is that Chinese ENGOs make great contribution to the spread of a green culture, especially in China where environmental protection is still a huge problem and government propaganda seems not sufficient to provide the Chinese population with the proper environmental education.

The findings of this study have to be seen in light of its scope limitation. First, in this study we reported the experience of four social organizations that despite declaring their independence from

the government still acknowledge its importance and, in most cases, seek to collaborate with it - or at least avoid open opposition. We are therefore aware that the respondents might have hold information back so as not to compromise their positions. Speaking on behalf of their organizations, respondents might have felt uncomfortable in answering more sensitive questions during the interviews. Another limit is the very small sample which prevent us from generalizing the research findings. As this study was conducted as a qualitative study on four particular ENGOs, it is impossible to provide a definite answer to whether or not our findings do reflect and represent general traits in all Chinese ENGOs, or if our findings are merely applicable to the organizations in this study. However, despite the limited sample size, we found some common patterns that validate the existing literature on the Chinese non-governmental sector. Also, we faced some communication constraints when addressing the research respondents. First, the language. Excluding foreign-run ENGOs, the number of English-speaking members within domestic ENGOs is apparently low. Second, most of the contacted ENGOs explicitly rejected our requests by saying that they could not release interviews, which may be significant in itself. Therefore, we hereby acknowledge the need for future research to test the developments of the non-governmental environmental sector, especially given the growing commitment of China to sustainable development.

Accordingly, the findings gathered here suggest that the understandable enthusiasm for China's green revolution should be tempered by a dose of skepticism about the road ahead. The environmental authoritarianism promoted by Beijing might be the best way to tackle the challenges posed by climate change, water pollution, waste management and other environmental issues. However, in a vast and variegated territory like the Chinese one, top-down centralized policies should be complemented by bottom-up inputs, which could help to address specific local issues. The coming decades will be crucial for the study of China's environmental governance and climate change.

## REFERENCES

- Ball, M. (2014, October 14). *Chinese Waterkeeper Hao Xin to Speak at Inter-Water*. Informed Infrastructure. <https://informedinfrastructure.com/11203/chinese-waterkeeper-hao-xin-to-speak-at-inter-water/> (Accessed 22/ 7/2020)
- Baur, D., & Palazzo, G. (2011). The Moral Legitimacy of NGOs as Partners of Corporations. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 21(4), 579-604. doi:10.5840/beq201121437
- CBCGDF. (2020, October,7). CBCGDF Filed an EPIL Case Against a Well-Known Moon Cake Company for Excessive Packaging. <http://www.cbcdgf.org/English/NewsShow/5001/14003.html>
- CBCGDF. (2020, August 31). The Supreme People's Court Decides to Retrial the Maritime Public Interest Litigation Filed by CBCGDF <http://www.cbcdgf.org/English/NewsShow/5001/13661.html> (English version)
- China Daily. (2017, November 11). *Full text of Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress*. [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content\\_34115212.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm) (Accessed 24/06/2020)
- China Development Brief. (2013). An Analysis of the Diverse Forms of Public Advocacy in China. <http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.org.cn/upload/userfiles/files/Advocacy%20Report%20English.pdf>
- CPCnews. (2019, March 29). 习近平：共谋绿色生活，共建美丽家园. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0429/c64094-31055863.html> (Accessed 24/06/2020)
- Baum, S., & Mahizhnan, A. (2010). Public participation in e-government: Some questions about social inclusion in the Singapore model. In *Handbook of Research on E-Planning: ICTs for Urban Development and Monitoring* (pp. 324-339). Pennsylvania: IGI Global.
- Baum, R., & Zhang, X. (2007). "Civil society" revisited: the anatomy of a rural NGO in Qinghai. In M. Mohanty, G. Mathew, R. Baum & R. Ma (Eds.), *Grass-roots democracy in India and China: the right to participate*. New Delhi: SAGE.
- Boland, A., & Zhu, J. (2012). Public participation in China's green communities: Mobilizing memories and structuring incentives. *Geoforum*, 43(1), 147-157. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2011.07.010>
- Bonnin, M., & Chevrier, Y. (1991). The intellectual and the state: social dynamics of intellectual

autonomy during the post-Mao era. *The China Quarterly*, 127, 569-593.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741000031064>

Brettell, A. M. (2003). *The politics of public participation and the emergence of environmental proto movements in China* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Mariland]. Digital Repository at the University of Maryland. <http://hdl.handle.net/1903/70>

Brook, T. (1997). Auto-organization in Chinese society. In T. Brook & B. M. Frolic (Eds.), *Civil society in China* (pp.19-45). New York: ME Sharpe.

Buckley, C. (2013, August 19). *China Takes Aim at Western Ideas*. The New York Times.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/20/world/asia/chinas-new-leadership-takes-hard-line-in-secret-memo.html>. (Accessed 05/6/2020)

Cai, Y. (2010). *Collective resistance in China: Why popular protests succeed or fail*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Chamberlain, H. B. (1993). On the search for civil society in China. *Modern China*, 19(2), 199-215.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/009770049301900206>

Chen, X. (2012). *Social protest and contentious authoritarianism in China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dai, J., & Spires, A. J. (2018). Advocacy in an authoritarian state: How grassroots environmental NGOs influence local governments in China. *The China Journal*, 79(1), 62-83.

<https://doi.org/10.1086/693440>

Davis, S. M., & Moosmayer, D. C. (2014). Greening the field? How NGOs are shaping corporate social responsibility in China. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 43(4), 75-110.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/186810261404300404>

Diamond, L. (1989). Beyond authoritarianism and totalitarianism: strategies for democratization.

*Washington Quarterly*, 12(1), 141-163. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01636608909443713>

Diamond, L. (1994). Rethinking civil society: Toward democratic consolidation. *Journal of democracy*, 5(3), 4-17. DOI: 10.1353/jod.1994.0041

- Ding, Y. (2008). Community building in China: issues and directions. *Social Sciences in China*, 29(1), 152-159. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02529200801921051>
- Eaton, S., & Kostka, G. (2014). Authoritarian environmentalism undermined? Local leaders' time horizons and environmental policy implementation in China. *The China Quarterly*, (218), 359-380. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24741815>
- Economy, E. C. (2011). *The river runs black: the environmental challenge to China's future*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Evans, P. P., Evans, P. B., Rueschemeyer, D., & Skocpol, T. (Eds.). (1985). *Bringing the state back in*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fewsmith, J., & Rosen, S. (1978). The domestic context of Chinese foreign policy: does 'public opinion' matter? *The making of Chinese foreign and security policy in the era of reform, 2000*, 151-187.
- Fishman, R. M. (2017). How civil society matters in democratization: Setting the boundaries of post-transition political inclusion. *Comparative Politics*, 49(3), 391-409. <https://doi.org/10.5129/001041517820934294>
- Freedom House. (2020). *China*. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/china/freedom-world/2020>. (Accessed 21/07/2020)
- Froissart, C. (2017). Changing patterns of Chinese civil society: Comparing the Hu-Wen and Xi Jinping eras. In W. W. L. Lam (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Communist Party* (pp. 352-371). London: Routledge.
- Frolic, B. M. (1997). State-led civil society. In T. Brook, & B.M. Frolic (Eds.), *Civil society in China* (pp.46-67). New York: ME Sharpe.
- Fu, D. (2017). Disguised collective action in China. *Comparative Political Studies*, 50(4), 499-527. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414015626437>
- Fu, D., & Distelhorst, G. (2017). Grassroots participation and repression under Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping. *The China Journal*, 79(1), 100-122. <https://doi.org/10.1086/694299>

- Ge, J., Jun, B., & Shi, W. (2009). Public participation in China's environmental protection. In Bi Jun and Otsuka Kenji (Eds.). *Building Effective Governance for Water Environment Conservation* (1-15). (Report No.153 IDE-JETRO) Institute of Developing Economies Japan External Trade Organization. [https://www.ide.go.jp/library/English/Publish/Download/Jrp/pdf/153\\_ch2.pdf](https://www.ide.go.jp/library/English/Publish/Download/Jrp/pdf/153_ch2.pdf)
- Gilley, B. (2012). Authoritarian environmentalism and China's response to climate change. *Environmental Politics*, 21(2), 287-307. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2012.651904>
- Goldman, M. (1991). Hu Yaobang's intellectual network and the theory conference of 1979. *The China Quarterly*, 126, 219-242. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574100000518X>
- Gu, H. (2008). *Participatory citizenship and sustainable development: redefining 'public' in contemporary China and Japan*. 17th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia, Melbourne, Australia, July 2008, pp.1-16. <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.573.7769&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- Guo, B. (2017). China's administrative governance reform in the era of "new normal". *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 22(3), 357-373. DOI: 10.1007/s11366-017-9483-x
- Guo, H., McDonald, K., & Zhao, Z. (2018, February 14). *Increasing Public Participation in China's Environment*. China Water Risk. <https://www.chinawaterrisk.org/opinions/increasing-public-participation-in-chinas-environment/> (Accessed 14/08/2020)
- Han, H. (2018). Legal governance of NGOs in China under Xi Jinping: Reinforcing divide and rule. *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 26(3), 390-409. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2018.1506994>
- Han, H., Swedlow, B., & Unger, D. (2014). Policy advocacy coalitions as causes of policy change in China? Analyzing evidence from contemporary environmental politics. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, 16(4), 313-334. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13876988.2013.857065>
- Hasmath, R., & Hsu, J. Y. (Eds.). (2015). *NGO governance and management in China*. London: Routledge.
- He, B. (1996). Dilemmas of pluralist development and democratization in China. *Democratization*, 3(3), 287-305. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510349608403480>
- He, B. (1997). The Limits of Semi-Civil Society. In *The Democratic Implications of Civil Society in China* (pp.147-165). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

- He, B. (2006). Participatory and Deliberative Institutions in China. In E. Leib & B. He (Eds.), *The search for deliberative democracy in China* (pp. 175-196). Berlin: Springer
- He, J. (n.d.). *Mapping the Chinese NGO Sector*. Books&Ideas.net.  
<http://www.booksandideas.net/Mapping-the-Chinese-NGO-Sector.html>. (Accessed 09/07/2020)
- HEYI Institute. *China Environmental Organizations Map*. <http://www.hyi.org.cn/en/epngo>.  
 (Accessed 19/7/2020)
- Hildebrandt, T. (2013). *Social organizations and the authoritarian state in China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ho, P. (2007). Introduction: Embedded activism and political change in a semi-authoritarian context. In P. Ho & R. Edmonds (Eds.), *China's embedded activism: Opportunities and constraints of a social movement* (pp.119). London, UK: Routledge.
- Ho, P. (2001). Greening without conflict? Environmentalism, NGOs, and civil society in China. *Development and Change*, 32(5), 893-921. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00231>
- Ho, P. (2007). Embedded activism and political change in a semi-authoritarian context. *China Information*, 21(2), 187-209. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X07079643>
- Ho, P. (2007). Self-imposed censorship and de-politicized politics in China: Green activism or a color revolution?. In P. Ho & R. Edmonds (Eds.). *China's embedded activism: Opportunities and constraints of a social movement* (pp. 37-61). London, UK: Routledge.
- Howell, J. (1994). Striking a new balance: new social organisations in post-Mao China. *Capital & Class*, 18(3), 89-111. <https://doi.org/10.1177/030981689405400105>
- Hsu, C. (2010). Beyond civil society: An organizational perspective on state–NGO relations in the People's Republic of China. *Journal of Civil Society*, 6(3), 259-277.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2010.528949>
- Hsu, C. L., & Jiang, Y. (2015). An institutional approach to Chinese NGOs: State alliance versus state avoidance resource strategies. *The China Quarterly*, (221), 100-122.  
 DOI:10.1017/S0305741014001568
- Hsu, J. Y., & Hasmath, R. (2017). A maturing civil society in China? The role of knowledge and

professionalization in the development of NGOs. *China Information*, 31(1), 22-42.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X16676995>

Huang, P. C. (1993). "Public Sphere"/"Civil Society" in China? The Third Realm between State and Society. *Modern China*, 19(2), 216-240. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009770049301900207>

Innovative Green Development Program. (2018). Low-carbon city public awareness survey project report. file:///C:/Users/chiar/OneDrive/Desktop/documenti\_usati/iGDP%E4%BD%8E%E7%A2%B3%E5%9F%8E%E5%B8%82%E5%85%AC%E4%BC%97%E8%B0%83%E6%9F%A5%E9%A1%B9%E7%9B%AE%E6%8A%A5%E5%91%8A-Final.pdf

Jahiel, A. (1998). The Organization of Environmental Protection in China. *The China Quarterly*, (156), 757-787. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/656124>

Jezard, A. (2018, April 23). *Who and what is 'civil society'?*. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/04/what-is-civil-society/> (Accessed 4/06/2020)

Jia, X. (2007). An analysis of NGO avenues for civil participation in China. *Social Sciences in China*, 28(2), 137-146.

Jiang, B. (2018, February 01). *To strengthen and innovate social governance under the guidance of the spirit of the 19th CPC National Congress*. CPCnews. <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0201/c40531-29800096.html> (Accessed 19/05/2020).

Johnston, A. I. (2008). *Social states: China in international institutions, 1980-2000* (Vol. 144). Princeton, United States: Princeton University Press.

Kim, Y. K. (1978). Hegel's criticism of Chinese philosophy. *Philosophy East and West*, 28(2), 173-180.  
DOI: 10.2307/1397741

Kenny, M. (2016). Civil Society. In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/civil-society> (Accessed 26/10/2020)

Kostka, G., & Mol, A. P. (2013). Implementation and participation in China's local environmental politics: challenges and innovations. *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, 15(1), 3-16.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2013.763629>

Kostka, G., & Nahm, J. (2017). Central–local relations: Recentralization and environmental governance in

- China. *The China Quarterly*, 231, 567-582. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741017001011>
- Kostka, G., & Zhang, C. (2018). Tightening the grip: environmental governance under Xi Jinping. *Environmental Politics*, 27 (5), 769-781. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2018.1491116>
- Kuhn, B. (2018). Changing Spaces for Civil Society Organizations in China. *Open Journal of Political Science*, 8, 467-494. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojps.2018.84030>
- Kvale, S. (1983). The qualitative research interview. *Journal of phenomenological psychology*, 14(1-2), 171-196. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/156916283X00090>
- Kvale, S. (2008). Conducting an interview. In S. Kvale, *Doing interviews* (pp. 51-66). London: Sage.
- Li, X., Yang, X., Wei, Q., & Zhang, B. (2019). Authoritarian environmentalism and environmental policy implementation in China. *Resources, Conservation and Recycling*, 145, 86-93. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resconrec.2019.02.011>
- Lieberthal, K., & Oksenberg, M. (1988). *Policy making in China: Leaders, structures, and processes*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lin, H. (2018). Constructing Legitimacy: How Do Chinese NGOs Become Legitimate Participants. In Environmental Governance? The Case of Environmental Protection Law Revision. *The Journal of Chinese Sociology*, 5(1), 6. DOI <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40711-018-0076-7>
- Liu, J. (2011). Picturing a green virtual public space for social change: A study of Internet activism and Web-based environmental collective actions in China. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 4(02), 137-166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2011.565674>
- Liu, J. (2014). From social management to social governance: social conflict mediation in China. *Journal of Public Affairs*, 14(2), 93-104. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.1514>
- Liu, X. (2017, October 27). Wang Zhenyao analysis of the Congress Report. China Development Brief. <http://chinadevelopmentbrief.cn/reports/news/wang-zhenyaos-analysis-of-the-congress-report/> (Accessed 25 January 2020)
- Lo, C. W. H., & Leung, S. W. (2000). Environmental agency and public opinion in Guangzhou: the limits of

a popular approach to environmental governance. *China Quarterly*, 677-704.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/655794>

- Ma, Q. (2002a). Defining Chinese Nongovernmental Organizations. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 13(2), 113-130. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1016051604920>
- Ma, Q. (2002b). The governance of NGOs in China since 1978: how much autonomy? *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 31(3), 305-328. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764002313001>
- Ma Tianna. (2017). Manual for law-based environmental advocacy in China. Intellectual property publishing house.
- Malatesta, D., & Smith, C. R. (2014). Lessons from resource dependence theory for contemporary public and non-profit management. *Public Administration Review*, 74(1), 14-25.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.12181>
- Matsuzawa, S. (2012). Citizen environmental activism in China: Legitimacy, alliances, and rights-based discourses. *ASIANetwork Exchange: A Journal for Asian Studies in the Liberal Arts*, 19(2), 81-91.
- Mertha, A. (2008). China's water warriors: Citizen action and policy change. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Mertha, A. (2009). "Fragmented authoritarianism 2.0": Political pluralization in the Chinese policy process. *The China Quarterly*, 200, 995-1012. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741009990592>
- Ministry of Ecology and Environment of the PRC. (2015, July 13). *Measures for Public Participation in Environmental Protection*. [https://www.mee.gov.cn/gkml/hbb/bl/201507/t20150720\\_306928.htm](https://www.mee.gov.cn/gkml/hbb/bl/201507/t20150720_306928.htm). (Accessed 24/06/2020)
- Ministry of Ecology and Environment of the People's Republic of China. (2019, June 03). *Investigation Report on Citizens' Ecological Environmental Behavior* (2019). <http://www.prcee.org/zyhd/201906/t20190603705428.html> (Accessed 19/08/2020)
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2016, September 23). *Keynote Speech by H.E. Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China, at the Opening Ceremony of the B20 Summit* [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1396112.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1396112.shtml) (Accessed 15/02/2020)

- Mol, A. P., & Carter, N. T. (2006). China's environmental governance in transition. *Environmental politics*, 15(02), 149-170. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644010600562765>
- Muscat, S. (2018, March 07). *In Xi's China, the Party morphs into the state*. Merics Institute. <https://merics.org/en/analysis/xis-china-party-morphs-state> (Accessed 04/09/2020)
- Nathan, A. J. (1990). Is China ready for democracy? *Journal of Democracy*, 1(2), 50-61. 10.1353/jod.1990.0026
- Owen, C. (2020). Participatory authoritarianism: From bureaucratic transformation to civic participation in Russia and China. *Review of International Studies*, 46(4), 415-434. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210520000248>
- Qi, Y., & Zhang, L. (2014). Local environmental enforcement constrained by central–local relations in China. *Environmental Policy and Governance*, 24(3), 216-232. <https://doi.org/10.1002/eet.1640>
- Raab, M. (1996). "Social Development NGOs in China". Ford Foundation
- Ran, R. (2013). Perverse incentive structure and policy implementation gap in China's local environmental politics. *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, 15(1), 17-39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2012.752186>
- Reid, E. J. (2000). Understanding the word “advocacy”: Context and use. In E. J. Reid (Ed.). *Structuring the inquiry into advocacy*, (1-8). Washington DC: The Urban Institute.
- Saich, T. (2000). Negotiating the state: The development of social organizations in China. *The China Quarterly*, (161), 124-141. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/655983>
- Salamon, M., L., & Anheier, H., K. (1999). Civil Society in Comparative Perspective. In Lester M. Salamon *Global Civil Society: Dimensions of the Nonprofit Sector* (1-3). Sterling (Virginia), United States: Kumarian Press.
- Schwartz, J. (2004). Environmental NGOs in China: roles and limits. *Pacific Affairs*, 28-49. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40022273>
- Seligsohn, D., Liu, M., & Zhang, B. (2018). The sound of one hand clapping: transparency without accountability. *Environmental Politics*, 27(5), 804-829. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2018.1452522>
- Shapiro, J. (2016). Public participation and Civil Society: the view from below. In *China's Environmental Challenges*. J. Shapiro. Hoboken (New Jersey), United States: Wiley.

- Shi, Y. H. (2004). The issue of civil society in China and its complexity. *Growth and governance in Asia*, 225-232.
- Shieh, S. (2009). Beyond corporatism and civil society: Three modes of state–NGO interaction in China. In *State and society responses to social welfare needs in China* (pp. 38-58). London: Routledge.
- Shieh, S., & Deng, G. (2011). An emerging civil society: the impact of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake on grass-roots associations in China. *The China Journal*, (65), 181-194. DOI : <https://doi.org/10.1086/tcj.65.25790563>
- Sima, Y. (2011). Grassroots environmental activism and the Internet: Constructing a green public sphere in China. *Asian Studies Review*, 35(4), 477-497. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2011.628007>
- Smith, D. H., & Zhao, T. (2016). Review and assessment of China’s non-profit sector after Mao: Emerging civil society? *Voluntaristic Review*, 1(5), 1–67. <https://doi.org/10.1163/24054933-12340013>
- Sokolowski, S. W., & Salamon, L. M. (2004). *Global Civil Society: Dimensions of the Nonprofit Sector*. 2. New York, United States: Sterling.
- Strand, D. (1990). Protest in Beijing: civil society and public sphere in China. *Probs. Communism*, 39,1.
- Sullivan, J., & Xie, L. (2009). Environmental activism, social networks, and the internet. *The China Quarterly*, (198), 422-432. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27756459>
- Tang, H. (2018, February 2). *New regulation adopted on social organizations' credit information management*. China Development Brief <http://en2020.cdb.org.cn/reports/new-regulation-adopted-on-social-organizations-credit-information-management/>. (Accessed 22/09/2020).
- Truex, R. (2017). Consultative authoritarianism and its limits. *Comparative political studies*, 50(3), 329-361. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414014534196>
- Turner, J. (2004). Small Government, Big and Green Society: Emerging Partnership to Solve China's Environmental Problems. *Harvard Asia Quarterly*, 8 (2), 4-13.
- UNDP. (2015). Environmental Public Interest Litigation. <https://www.undp.org/content/dam/china/docs/Publications/UNDP-CH-ISSUE%20BRIEF%20on%20EPIL.pdf>
- Unger, J., Chan, A., & Chung, H. (2014). Deliberative Democracy at China’s Grassroots: Case Studies of a Hidden Phenomenon, *Politics & Society*,42(4), 513-535. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329214547344>
- Wang, A. L. (2017). Explaining environmental information disclosure in China. *Ecology LQ*, 44, 865.
- Wang, Z. (2007). Public support for democracy in China. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 16(53), 561-579. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670560701562283>
- White, G. (1993). Prospects for civil society in China: A case study of Xiaoshan City. *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, (29), 63-87. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2949952>

- World Bank. (n.d.). *Civil Society*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/about/partners/civil-society/overview> (Accessed 13/06/2020).
- Wu, F. (2009). Environmental activism in China: Fifteen years in review, 1994-2008. Harvard-Yenching Institute Working Paper Series. [https://www.harvard-yenching.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy\\_files/featurefiles/WU%20Fengshi\\_Environmental%20Civil%20Society%20in%20China2.pdf](https://www.harvard-yenching.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy_files/featurefiles/WU%20Fengshi_Environmental%20Civil%20Society%20in%20China2.pdf)
- Xiang, B. (2018, March 17). *Backgrounder: Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era*. Xinhua. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/17/c\\_137046261.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/17/c_137046261.htm). (Accessed 22/06/2020)
- Xinhua. (2017-11-04). Full text of Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress. *Chinadaily*. [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content\\_34115212.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm) (Accessed 22/09/2020)
- Xie, L. (2016). Environmental governance and public participation in rural China. *China Information*, 30(2), 188-208. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X16653880>
- Xie, L., & Van Der Heijden, H. A. (2010). Environmental movements and political opportunities: The case of China. *Social movement studies*, 9(1), 51-68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742830903442527>
- Xie, Y., Meng, Y., Xiong, J., Xu, L., & Yan, J. (2020). Non-profits and the environment in China: struggling to expand their franchise. *Journal of Business Strategy*. Advance online publication <https://doi.org/10.1108/JBS-04-2020-0072>
- Yang, G. (2003a). The co-evolution of the Internet and civil society in China. *Asian Survey*, 43(3), 405-422. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2003.43.3.405>
- Yang, G. (2003b). Weaving a green web: The Internet and environmental activism in China. *China Environment Series*, 6, 89-93.
- Yang, G. (2005). Environmental NGOs and institutional dynamics in China. *The China Quarterly*, 181, 46-66. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741005000032>
- Yang, G., & Calhoun, C. (2007). Media, civil society, and the rise of a green public sphere in China. *China Information*, 21(2), 211-236. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X07079644>
- Yang, S. (2008). Public participation in the Chinese environmental impact assessment (EIA) system. *Journal of environmental assessment policy and management*, 10(01), 91-113. <https://doi.org/10.1142/S1464333208002932>
- Yang, Y., Wilkinson, M., & Zhang, X. (2016). Beyond the abolition of dual administration: The challenges to NGO governance in 21st century China. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 27(5), 2292-2310. P. 2292
- Yang, Y., Zhang, X., Tang, D., & Wilkinson, M. (2015). The abolition of dual administration of NGOs in

- China: Imperatives and challenges. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, 5(6), 546-552. <http://www.ijssh.org/papers/515-B1013.pdf>
- Yu, K. (2011). Good governance and legitimacy. In *China's search for good governance* (pp. 15-21). New York: Palgrave Macmillan
- Yu, Z. (December 5, 2016). *Environmental Public Interest Litigation (EPIL) in China – Background and Overview*. *The Comparative Jurist*. <https://comparativejurist.org/2016/12/05/environmental-public-interest-litigation-epil-in-china-background-and-overview/>
- Zhan, X., & Tang, S. Y. (2013). Political opportunities, resource constraints and policy advocacy of environmental NGOs in China. *Public Administration*, 91(2), 381-399 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.2011.02011.x>
- Zhang, Y. (2018). Allies in Action: Institutional Actors and Grassroots Environmental Activism in China. In *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, (9-38). Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S0163-786X20180000042002>
- Zhao, Y. (2010). Public Participation in China's EIA Regime: Rhetoric or Reality? *Journal of Environmental Law*, 22(1), 89-123. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jel/eqp034>
- Zhao, S. (2016). Xi Jinping's Maoist Revival. *Journal of Democracy*, 27(3),83-97. 10.1353/jod.2016.0051
- Zeng, M. J. (2018). *China's social credit system puts its people under pressure to be model citizens*. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/chinas-social-creditsystem-puts-its-people-under-pressure-to-be-model-citizens-89963> (Accessed 25/01/ 2020)