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Transnational Environmental Movement: impacts on the green civil society in China

JIE CHEN*

China has become part of the global trend of solidarity and networking among grassroots non-governmental organisations across national borders. This paper examines the social and political implications for Chinese green civil society from the activities in the country by international environmental NGOs. Following a historical, statistical and geographical profile of transnational civil society’s penetration in China, it investigates closely the material and ideational benefits received by Chinese activist organisations from transnational collaboration, against the complex and often nebulous interactions between Chinese NGOs, their global partners and the government authorities. The paper argues that transnational civil society’s presence and achievements in China have helped legitimise and strengthen the burgeoning civil society in the country, and this is meaningful beyond the environmental field.

Introduction

Major social events and natural disasters have brought fresh attention to the development of Chinese civil society. In January last year, thousands protested in Shanghai against plans to extend the city’s high-speed and noisy maglev train line through part of a residential neighbourhood, leading to suspension of the plan, reminiscent of a similar 2007 protest in Xiamen which halted construction of a toxic petrochemical plant manufacturing paraxylene in the city. These were powerful examples of pressure from the rising middle class for a more transparent and accountable system of governance. Then a major earthquake, 7.9 on the Richter scale and devastating part of Sichuan Province in May 2008, energised private charity campaigns and volunteer work in the entire country. Optimism started to decline when the government stepped up its control over those bottom-up activities. Monitoring of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) became tighter in the lead up

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to the Olympics. However, debates on the trajectory of China’s civil society, its participation in the policy process, and its roles in expanding public space, continue.¹

This paper joins this discursive momentum by exploring an under-researched perspective, namely the impacts on the Chinese civil society from transnational civil society (TCS). TCS alludes to the growing cross-border collaboration and networking by NGOs and private foundations from various countries, though Western groups, particularly Western-headquartered large international NGOs (or INGOs) which maintain their own branch offices worldwide, such as Oxfam and Greenpeace, play the leading roles in TCS due to their strong position in funding, information and access to inter-governmental bodies such as the United Nations (UN). Over recent years scholars have started to discuss Chinese NGOs’ transnational engagement but few have tried a comprehensive and focused investigation of this new trend in the country’s international relations. Among the exceptions, Morton highlights Chinese NGOs’ growing relations with their international partners by presenting information regarding three transnational campaigns in China (AIDS awareness, antelope protection, and Nujiang River conservation), in order to obtain a more comprehensive picture of China’s ongoing process of reform and opening to the outside world.² Chen examines socio-political influences of the China operations of a group of humanitarian INGOs (including Orbis and Project Hope), with special reference to their interactions with local NGOs.³ Overall, in both breadth and depth, there is definitely a need for further empirical and conceptual exploration of this seemingly nebulous world of NGOs’ transnational engagement. A project like this can also enrich the study of China’s international relations which remains dominated by focuses on the state and business, and the study of TCS, which rarely looks at the case of China.

This paper concentrates on the environmental field, which has seen the most robust growth of Chinese NGOs and their transnational collaboration. It investigates the environmental INGOs’ interactions with, and impacts on, the bottom-up and self-governing autonomous NGOs in China, not the government-initiated and semi-official organisations, or GONGOs (Government Organised NGOs). Analysis and arguments are formed mainly on the basis of field observations and personal interviews with the China directors or programme managers of major environmental INGOs which run projects in the country, including World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Conservation International (CI), and The Mountain Institute (TMI). Interviews were also conducted with some of their leading Chinese partners based in Beijing, including Friends of Nature (FON), Global Village of Beijing (GVB), and Green Earth Volunteers (GEV), and those based in Kunming, capital city of Yunnan Province, including Green Watershed (GW), Yunnan EcoNetwork (YEN), and Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge (CBIK). Interviews with a range of activist groups formed by Tibetans in remote

¹ For debates on Chinese civil society in light of those events, see Geoff Dyer, ‘Stirrings in the suburbs’, Financial Times, (20 July 2008); and Minxin Pei, ‘China’s repression of civil society will haunt it’, Financial Times, (4 August 2008).
regional Yunnan and Qinghai provinces have also brought in fresh issues to be explored.\(^4\)

The following discussion starts with a historical, statistical and geographical profile of TCS’s presence in China, including the environmental scene as part of the picture. This is followed by a close examination of INGOs’ impacts on the Chinese green civil society from multiple angles, highlighting the crucial benefits received by Chinese activists from transnational cooperation and ascertaining its socio-political implications, thus projecting the transnational contributions to the rise of Chinese NGOs and their democratic functions. To balance the analysis of a complex phenomenon, the paper then presents a critical discussion of the major problems and challenges faced by transnational actors in China, including their dilemma in Tibet, which started to plague their operations before the 2008 riots in the autonomous region. The paper concludes by introducing several important and broader topics for further research.

**Transnational civil society penetrating China: a general profile**

Reflecting a world-wide trend, globalisation in China has shown three stages. Until the 1980s, the state and its foreign policy monopolised the country’s international relations. Since then, international trade, investment and both domestic and multinational business sectors have become robust elements in China’s enmeshment with the world. From the mid-1990s, however, there have been increasing signs of the country’s growing community of NGOs actively participating in the affairs of the international NGO world, and foreign NGOs penetrating into China with an ever increasing number of projects and personnel. If the NGO Forum of The Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) witnessed the TCS descending on China en mass for the first time, active participation by more than 100 Chinese environmental groups at the NGO Forum of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, 2002) saw a debut of China’s still developing civil society on the international stage. China is no longer outside the global trend of solidarity and networking among NGOs across national borders. Chinese NGOs have expanded their cooperation with foreign NGOs, particularly INGOs. In the age of globalisation, communities share many similar economic, social, cultural, environmental and political concerns which require collaborative transnational responses by civil societies, since governments are limited in their ability and hamstrung by diplomatic sensitivity in dealing with global issues. Technological advances in communication and transportation have also facilitated the growing transnational networks and collaborative arrangements. In the environmental field, alarming implications of China’s rapid industrialisation for the global climate change and the world’s biodiversity and endangered species have galvanised activists both at home and abroad. However, shared concerns do not mean that transnational collaboration generates similar benefits to both sides, considering that Chinese civil society is still developing under the watchful eyes of the authorities. While INGOs receive valuable

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4. I’d like to express profound gratitude to those leaders and activists representing Chinese and international environmental organisations who kindly received me for interview during May–June 2007. However, I am solely responsible for the arguments and analysis created after interpreting their information.
country-specific knowledge from their Chinese partners’ grassroots experiences, the latter receive from an evolving symbiotic relationship assistance which helps them grow and become more mature as dynamic civil society actors as elaborately discussed later.

It is impossible to calculate the exact number of international groups operating in China because many do not have offices or staff permanently based in China, or are simply unregistered, considering the still restrictive regulatory framework within which civil society actors operate. In its online survey database, the Directory of International NGOs (DINGO), *China Development Brief (CDB)* lists 212 INGOs, including implementing groups (such as Save the Children, Oxfam, and the Lions) and major international foundations (including Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Brothers Fund), which have set up projects and/or opened offices in China. This is a conservative listing because it does not include organisations which are unregistered and/or hesitant to respond to the survey for various reasons including attracting unsolicited grant applications once being listed in the directory.\(^5\)

A survey published in 2007 by All-China Environment Federation captures the growing presence of environmental INGOs in China. Establishment of The Ford Foundation’s Beijing office in 1988 is regarded as the earliest example of China operation from transnational civil society as a whole since the foundation supports many fields including the environment. Since the mid-1990s, the number of INGOs and foundations working on or funding environmental work increased dramatically. For example, in 1994 there were only 11 such organisations with offices in China, but the number shot to 25 in 1997, and reached 68 by the end of 2005. The survey also records the remarkable growth in the size and resources of those offices. For example, WWF started off in China with nine staff members in its Beijing office in 1996, but possessed six offices in the country with more than 80 staff members by the end of 2005.\(^6\) *CDB*’s DINGO database lists a smaller total of 45 environmental INGOs having offices in China, but has established the environmental area as having the largest number of INGOs working in China, followed by rural and community development (42) and education (38).

As for the percentage of Chinese NGOs that have developed transnational linkages, again one can only provide a proxy indicator. Based on survey data collected from NGOs from various sectors in multiple provinces/cities from October 2003 to January 2004, Yang provides the first systematic empirical analysis of Internet use in those organisations. The survey shows that 90 (or 71%) out of 126 surveyed NGOs reported having contact with foreign NGOs. Fifty-one organisations reported having contact with fewer than five international organisations, 28 reported contact with between six and ten international organisations, and seven reported contact with 11–30. Chinese NGOs interact with their foreign partners for various purposes such as information exchange, project collaboration, mutual visits and

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5. See http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.com/dingo/. *CDB* is a Beijing-based magazine on NGO affairs which also functions as an international consultancy group providing information and services to facilitate international NGOs’ exchanges with Chinese groups.

consultation. Yang specifically identifies the environment as being among the sectors which have developed the highest level of transnational relations.\(^7\)

Distribution of INGOs is not even between the provinces. According to the DINGO database, Yunnan hosts the largest number of INGOs of all provinces (45), followed by Beijing (43), Sichuan (40) and Tibet (27). In the environmental area, INGOs are predominantly concentrated in south-western China. DINGO indicates that when the 45 environmental INGOs operating in China were surveyed about which provinces they operated in, 25 mentioned specific provinces, while the rest mainly said ‘nationwide’ in their responses. Yunnan was mentioned by 13 organisations, followed by Sichuan, mentioned by ten, Beijing by eight, and Tibet by six. In addition, Guizhou, Qinghai, Shanghai and Guangdong were each mentioned by four.

Thus in general INGOs operating in China appear to mostly base their programmes in poor regions, particularly south-western China such as Yunnan Province, while also maintaining representation in Beijing. A Beijing office helps in connecting to the central political system and coordinating their country-wide operations, but concentration in the poor provinces reflects China’s overall restrictive policy towards civil society. Although generally there is more space for an autonomous NGO sector to develop, the government harbours anxieties about social ‘instability’, imposes severe restrictions on NGOs’ activities and bans the formation of any bottom-up activist organisations in politically sensitive issue areas such as human rights. Thus autonomous citizen groups are predominantly concentrated in what the authorities deem to be less threatening areas of social service provision, poverty alleviation, gender equality and domestic violence, environment, migrant workers, children, the disabled, and animal protection. Such restrictions on the nature and scope of domestic NGOs naturally translate into the sort of transnational relations between Chinese and international groups. Thus transnational projects of Chinese NGOs cannot take place in any politically sensitive issue area and cannot engage any political or militant INGOs. Co-operative projects are concentrated on the issues of environment, gender, public health, poverty and education, where the government avidly seeks assistance to tackle a range of social, environmental and rural headaches. Under this policy, INGOs that are allowed to work within China are mostly environmental, humanitarian and developmental groups that usually take less interest in rich provinces and set their sights on the poor, biologically diverse but increasingly fragile Yunnan, Sichuan and Tibet instead. Also, conservation work in the south-west is seen as more fulfilling since the region has many biodiversity hotspots inhabited by indigenous communities whose cultural traditions, native animals and plants are all parts of a living ecosystem.

**Transnational impacts on the Chinese green civil society**

Restrictive policies towards civil society do not detract from Chinese environmental NGOs’ roles in opening up the political field and expanding civil society in a dynaminic interaction with the state, as well as constituting an effective force in tackling environmental issues. According to an incomplete survey, by 1994 there

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were only two bottom-up voluntary environmental NGOs in the country, but this increased to 202 by the end of 2005.\textsuperscript{8} Both the rise and democratic socio-political functions of Chinese civil society have benefited from transnational connections, a point not systemically or sufficiently captured by the existing literature discussing TCS’s work in China. General TCS literature investigating INGOs’ influence on civil societies in transitioning countries has generated analytical frameworks, after studying transnational campaigns coordinated by political and/or militant INGOs and their strong and fully mobilised national counterparts in promoting international human rights standards and/or bringing about regime changes (for example, in some former Soviet bloc states). Insights from such case studies do not apply to the present China.\textsuperscript{9} In this analysis, I will use activists’ own views to elucidate TCS’s broad impacts on the rise of Chinese environmental civil society. Then I will review and synthesize the arguments in the scholarly discussions of Chinese green NGOs’ democratic impacts, and use these as a guide to examine transnational contributions by arguing that INGOs’ relations with, and their influences upon, Chinese NGOs and the state, have reinforced or brought about some of those impacts.

There are multiple driving forces for the emergence and development of environmental NGOs in China, such as increasing environmental disasters and new political opportunities created by the reforming party-state as discussed in numerous literatures. However, what needs to be more systematically assessed is the TCS factor. The following discussion examines the various areas, including ‘organisational entrepreneurs’ (founders and leaders of activist NGOs), exposure to global governance, capacity building, and government’s strategic attitude towards civil society, where INGOs directly assisted the rise of Chinese green civil society.

‘Organisational entrepreneurs’ are the backbone of environmental activism in China since many groups have been dominated by charismatic leaders. High profile NGOs such as FON were established by activists during the 1990s partly because they were inspired by Western NGOs’ enthusiasm to work on China’s environment. Furthermore, of the founders and leaders of such groups, except for the older generation people like the historian Liang Congjie, founder of FON, others either studied Western social sciences (such as Wang Yongchen, founder and director of GEV) or studied in Western universities (such as Liao Xiaoyi, founder and director of GVB) or simply worked in INGOs before setting up their own organisations—for example, Yu Xiaogang worked for TNC before founding GW—an experience through which they received training in activism and developed international exchanges which helped lay a good foundation for their own grassroots organisations.

The many prestigious international awards given to Chinese activists by international NGOs and foundations, such as The Goldman Environmental Prize (the world’s largest prize honouring grassroots environmentalists) (2006) to Yu Xiaogang, the Sophie Prize (2000) and the International Banksia Award for

\textsuperscript{8} This is from the survey by the All-China Environment Federation cited earlier. The result suggests that by the end of 2005 China had 2,768 environmental NGOs. Apart from the 202 bottom-up voluntary groups and 68 INGOs which had offices in China, there were also 1,382 government-initiated NGOs, and 1,116 student environmental groups and their coalitions. The Federation noted that the statistics were incomplete because the survey excluded NGOs which worked on the environment part time, and some of the unregistered NGOs avoided the survey for various reasons. See All-China Environment Federation, ed., \textit{2007 Green Book of Environment}, pp. 341–342.

\textsuperscript{9} For a relevant literature review, see Jie Chen, ‘NGO community in China’, p. 31.
Environment Protection (2001) to Liao Xiaoyi, and the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Public Service (2000) to Liang Congjie, enhanced their domestic reputation and improved their standing with the government. International fame for Liao and Liang made the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA, promoted to Environment Ministry in 2008) start to consult them, and they were invited to function as advisers for the green Olympics project.¹⁰

INGOs and foundations also helped their Chinese partners in getting connected to major events in global governance, some of which became important milestones in the growth trajectories of Chinese civil society. Just as foreign NGOs’ maverick behaviour at the NGO Forum of The Fourth World Conference on Women became a major catalyst for the strengthened dynamism of women NGOs in China, attending the NGO Forum of the World Summit on Sustainable Development became a turning point for China’s grassroots green NGOs for it enabled the activists to learn from numerous international NGOs the rules in relation to effective participation and presentation at UN meetings. Exchanges also reinforced their conviction that the issue of sustainable development must involve joint efforts by civil society as well as government and business.¹¹ On the other hand, according to Chen Yongsong, a Kunming-based environmentalist who coordinated the grassroots NGOs at the 2002 forum, while about 150 Chinese organisations went there the grassroots activist type acted separately from GONGOs. The international groups and media, which as a whole had been more familiar with larger GONGOs, became sharply aware of the different behaviour between the two faces of a broadly defined Chinese civil society. The fact that the grassroots groups were outspoken but GONGOs didn’t accept media interviews impressed the international community of the dynamism of what Chen, founder and director of YEN, called the ‘real NGOs’ in China.¹² This boosted the self-confidence of Chinese activists.

Leaders of prominent Chinese NGOs and their international partners have emphasised that a main contribution made by the latter to the former is to help build up the Chinese groups’ capacities, by organising overseas study tours, providing training in project management and assessment, offering assistance in using international standards in financial auditing and grant application, providing small grants, staging joint activities on such special occasions as the annual Earth Day, expanding the horizontal networking and cooperation among the Chinese activists themselves, and passing on expertise in recruitment and management of volunteers.¹³ International assistance in facilitating horizontal solidarity among the Chinese groups, often through INGOs-sponsored institutionalised forms (workshops, social gatherings and magazines), is a key niche contribution since Chinese civic NGOs are

¹¹. Interview with Chen Yongsong, Director of Yunnan EcoNetwork, Kunming, June 2007.
¹³. This is based on an integrated summary of interviews with Li Junhui, Mao Da, Chen Yongsong, Yu Xiaogang (Director of GW), Yin Lun (Programme Director of CBIK), Yang Fangyi (International Coordinator, CI Yunnan Office) and Li Qing (WWF China’s Programme Officer for Education and Capacity Building), in Beijing, Kunming and Lijiang, May–June 2007.
still legally restrained from establishing branches across the country, and this limits them to specific localities and makes nationwide collaboration difficult. International volunteers’ direct contributions to the operation of activist NGOs must also be appreciated. Li Junhui, FON’s Acting Director, pointed out that volunteers from Australia and the United States (US) played innovative roles in Chinese NGOs’ research work and project design. FON’s popular community project, ‘Urban Bike Tour’, was created by Australian volunteers after their serious research. Western volunteers also managed the English website and composed English publicity materials for FON, and this further boosted its transnational connections.14

A crucial part of capacity building is funding. Many large activist NGOs are financially sustained mainly by international funding, including regular budgetary and project funding from INGOs and foundations such as Ford Foundation, Misereor, Oxfam, Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF, managed by CI), The Energy Foundation and WWF. INGOs/foundations provided 44% of FON’s income in 2004–2005, and 60% in 2005–2006. International funding constituted 70–80% of GVB’s income in recent years. CBIK has 95% of its funding from international sources.15 With the rise of China’s power and wealth, INGOs as a sector are beginning to consider reducing their financial support for Chinese groups, following a trend of Western governments’ official development aid to Beijing. China’s own business community may emerge as a new source of funding. However, reliance on international funding will continue unless Beijing relaxes its stringent regulations restricting NGOs’ fundraising from the local communities. Precisely because they may not increase funding, INGOs have strong incentives to ensure that their Chinese counterparts’ capacities are beefed up for future cooperation. As for those remote regions in north-western Yunnan, western Qinghai and western Sichuan, environmental groups formed by Tibetans couldn’t start and survive without generous international support in terms of money, management, equipment and exchange opportunities. In those poverty-stricken areas, support for NGOs from the villagers and officials was very weak.16

It is conceivable that INGOs’ fruitful cooperation with the Chinese government itself, their charitable spirit and achievements on the ground, have been improving the authorities’ attitude towards civil society both as a concept and a reality. Many INGOs have impressed the officials with their dedication and effectiveness. Much of their work has also become indispensable for the government, central and local. The Ministry of Education adopted in 2003 an Environmental Education Implementation Guideline for Middle and Primary Schools, a textbook compiled by WWF to assist the government’s promotion of environmental awareness among school children. TNC has helped in legislation by both national and provincial People’s

15. Interviews with Li Junhui, Mao Da and Yin Lun, May–June 2007.
16. Based on interviews with: Luosang Ruiba, Director, Hamagu Center for the Protection of Indigenous Ecology and Culture; Zaxi Dengzhu, Director, Shangri-la Tibetan Cultural Protection and Development Society; Qilin Nuobu, Director, Napohai Lake Community Wetland Protection Society; and Gongbao Zaxi, Director, Wild Yak Environmental and Ecological Society, May–June 2007. The first three are based in north-western Yunnan, and the last one operates in Qinghai. Two other prominent Tibetan groups, Green Kangba (Sichuan) and Kawagebo Cultural Society (Yunnan) also received considerable international support (interviews with CI’s Yang Fangyi, Kunming, June 2007).
Congresses on national parks. In particular, from 2005, when the Environment and Resources Protection Committee of the National People’s Congress started to draft a Protected Area Law, TNC made active contributions by gathering the recommendations of international experts, introducing foreign countries’ legislations on protected areas, and submitting a Concept Paper. It also took initiatives to bring committee members to the US for a fact finding visit. In fact it is the TNC’s usual practice to organise for central, provincial and local officials in forestry and environmental fields to visit abroad in order to inspect various conservation projects and national parks, much to their appreciation. Similarly, in order to assist the above committee to design the Protected Area Law, in 2006 CI arranged for the committee chairman to visit Costa Rica to inspect successful protected area projects operated there by CI, particularly its effective implementation of an eco-compensation approach in that country. CI has also trained Yunnan Forestry Bureau officials on matters in relation to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna and the Kyoto Protocol, by way of international exchanges and study tours. Such purely environment-oriented cooperation and assistance has eased the government authorities’ perception of NGOs at large and improved the overall political environment for civil society in China. In particular, as Rose Niu, Director of TNC China, stressed, as a result of those international tours officials witnessed and became impressed by the workings of foreign civil society including TNC’s own global operations, and started to appreciate how the American NGOs, government and industry worked together. INGOs’ presence and contributions in China have provided a protective cover for, and helped legitimise, the local NGO community, even though their collaboration with the government may have also consolidated the state by channelling resources into the government system.

INGOs have also facilitated the Chinese environmental NGOs’ contributions to democratic social and political change. The following discussion will make this point by first reviewing those contributions. Scholars have already established that Chinese NGOs make use of, and push for, an increasingly pluralistic civic and political process. First, environmental NGOs offer institutionalised platforms for citizens to organise and participate in collective civic action, promote volunteerism, build reciprocal and trusting relationships with each other, thus creating new civic freedoms, expanding the public sphere and building up social capital. Second, since the environmental cause inherently draws on the rights to a sustainable living environment, activists’ launch of public debates and campaigns about environmental issues helps the empowerment of citizens to defend these interests. Third, the increased direct engagement by NGOs in various environmental decision-making arenas, utilising formal and informal channels for influencing government decisions, promotes a more open and democratic governance process and gradually induces changes in state–society relations.
The transnational environmental movement has facilitated the above liberalising social and political roles of the Chinese groups. This can be argued partly from the transnational impacts on the many facets of the emergence and development of Chinese environmental NGOs as presented above. First, transnational connections assist Chinese NGOs’ consolidation as institutionalised platforms to expand civic space by, among other things, influencing their leaders, building up their operational capacities, strengthening their horizontal solidarity, and assisting their volunteers’ training. Very often international groups served as role models inspiring local partners and communities. For example, one Sichuan-based international conservationist claimed that INGOs’ community education and awareness-raising programmes and their success in negotiating with the authorities had stimulated public interest in volunteering, spawned local conservation NGOs, and encouraged local activists to see the value of direct action. Second, TCS was the main source of the practice of community empowerment. The participatory model of environmental governance, prioritising community involvement in eco-management, was first introduced by the International Crane Foundation in the area of Caohai Lake of Guizhou Province in the 1990s to organise and empower the villagers to conserve the black-necked cranes, but has since been widely adopted by Chinese NGOs. Third, TCS contributed to the increase in their Chinese partners’ engagement in the decision-making arenas in that the government’s satisfaction with the benefit from INGOs’ own participation in the making of some policies and legislation generally opened up policy space for civil society at large by reinforcing the officials’ appreciation of the value of expertise from society. Also, as mentioned earlier, extensive transnational connections by FON and GVB were among the reasons why their leaders were consulted by the government and invited to serve as advisers for the green Olympics project. Some INGOs purposely introduced their Chinese partners into the policy process. For example, in Yunnan, one of CI’s tasks has been to facilitate local NGOs’ participation in the provincial government agencies’ decision-making process on major environmental issues.

Some benefits from transnational collaboration appear to have contributed to all dimensions of the Chinese NGOs’ democratic socio-democratic impacts. One is that the Chinese activists have learnt from international counterparts new and advanced concepts originating from the expanding forums of global governance, namely international standards and global rhetoric regarding sustainable development, endangered species, biodiversity, greenhouse emissions, climate change and energy, as contained in the various international treaties and UN conventions. Compared to the Chinese groups, INGOs have more access to, and more first-hand experience in, the process of international law-making in the UN’s specialised agencies, treaty bodies and programmes, where key concepts, norms and conventions are debated. This advantage over their Chinese partners is reinforced by the fact that the Chinese government itself usually does not reveal to citizens its own words and actions in international negotiations. Therefore, INGOs which enjoy consultative status with the UN mechanisms (as many INGOs working in China do) often function as a major

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21. Interview with Li Junhui.
22. Interview with Yang Fangyi.
transmission belt of international standards and norms to the burgeoning Chinese civil society. My field research in the leading environmental groups in Beijing and Yunnan found their leaders testifying that access to key information about international standards and norms was a major benefit of cooperation with INGOs, particularly pointing to the area of climate change where WWF and Greenpeace had far more information (compared to Chinese NGOs) thanks to their global network, direct involvement in international negotiations over the framework of climate change, and large financial and human resources.

Those international standards and global norms are vitally important to the Chinese NGOs. As Mertha argues, in order to achieve decisive policy change activists must articulate their positions by invoking an issue frame that can overwhelm the official state frame used to legitimise an environmentally unfriendly development project in the first place, in order to mobilise larger coalitions with political allies and mass constituencies.\(^{23}\) If the domestic discourse is framed by the norms of the international environmental regimes, it should be easier for compliance-promoting civil society actors to strengthen their positions vis-à-vis the state and achieve broad support for policy change. Issue framing by using international standards and foreign experiences also helps NGOs’ general efforts to sharpen public awareness of problems and galvanise community interest in direct action. In particular, since INGOs often have more knowledge than local groups about what the Chinese government itself has been doing in international standards making (it was Greenpeace which informed Chinese NGOs of their government’s actions in international climate change negotiations), they are in a position to assist Chinese activists’ attempts to monitor the government and hold it accountable to the international treaties and conventions it has signed and ratified. Activists interviewed for this study also stressed that Chinese groups keenly studied INGOs’ activities on Earth Day, and learned from them a range of specific ideas and tactics used in campaigns and mobilisation, such as bird watching, tree adoption, eco-compensation, wetland conservation, green consumption, environmental and social impact assessment, although some Chinese NGOs have gradually tried to marry the Western concepts with local socio-cultural circumstances.\(^{24}\)

INGOs also lent direct support for Chinese activists’ campaigns which opposed some major development projects by the government, and their roles in this regard contextualise much of the above arguments about transnational facilitation of Chinese NGOs’ democratic impact. The 2003–2004 campaign against the government’s ambitious plan to build a chain of 13 hydroelectric dams on the untouched Nujiang River, a world heritage site in south-west Yunnan Province, testified that it was possible for joint contention to span the political boundary. It was launched by GW, GEV and FON. While GEV’s Wang Yongchen actively stirred up the public debate in Beijing, GW’s Yu Xiaogang raised the awareness of local villagers, with a variety of ethnic backgrounds, to the potential damages to their traditional cultures and livelihood by the proposed mega-dams, and mobilised them to appeal against the


\(^{24}\) This discussion of transnational learning is based on information from interviews with Chen Yongsong, Yu Xiaogang, Wang Yongchen (director of GEV), Li Junhui and Mao Da.
project. When framing the issue and contemplating campaign tactics, activists were heavily influenced by The World Commission on Dams’ *Dams and Development: A New Framework for Decision Making*, launched in 2000 and seeking to reconcile economic growth, social equity, environmental conservation and political participation. The campaign enjoyed strong support from the existing global anti-dam network represented by International Rivers Network. CI directly funded and technically supported GW, GEV and GVB to boost their movement. Transnational solidarity helped connect the Chinese activists to the UN agencies and Western media, adding to the pressure on the government. In fact the campaign expanded broadly, featuring solidarity between Chinese activists and their transnational counterparts, sympathetic environmental officials in Beijing, scientists, intellectuals, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), domestic and international media, against economic development authorities and powerful energy companies at both the central and provincial level. Eventually Premier Wen Jiabao intervened to block the plan, requesting further environmental study.25

TCS’s roles in community participation and empowerment also have a ‘minority touch’, as a result of their focus on south-western provinces, traditional homelands of numerous ethnic communities. As mentioned earlier, INGOs have propped up many Tibetan NGOs. Meanwhile, for those remote ethnic villagers, INGOs-operated participatory projects often transfer or reinforce notions of autonomous citizenship, direct action and collective decision-making. Under its micro credit programme (Green Village Credit Project) in Yunnan’s north-west, TNC helped the ethnic Naxi villagers establish and structure Energy and Income Generation Associations, the idea being that the member households would minimise raw fire-wood consumption and thus contribute to the conservation of forest ecosystems by installing TNC-supported solar water heaters and biogas units, with TNC also providing loans to households to develop new and more profitable means of income generation (such as eco-tourism and pig farming) as alternatives to traditional farming and gathering which endangered plant and animal habitat. Local forestry authorities and TNC provide expertise on issues related to environmental protection, and TNC also monitors progress of the loan projects. However, councils of those associations operate autonomously in vetting loan applications, recruiting member households, organising training workshops and selecting trainers, and arranging membership meetings. Under a participatory model, members contribute to the associations’ major decisions, and elections have been held regularly to choose council members and a president. This complements the existing village elections and gives more opportunities for villagers to take up leadership roles. For example, in 2006, although he failed to be re-elected as the head of Haixi Village, of ethnic Naxi background in rural Lijiang, and retain his position as the secretary of the village committee of the communist party, He Ruanjun managed to get elected as the President of the Council of Energy and Income Generation Association of that village.26


The WWF-funded Hamagu Center for the Protection of Indigenous Ecology and Culture is a similar example of democratic governance as a result of local villagers’ self-interest combined with an international organisation’s environmental cause. Based on the natural Tibetan village of Hamagu in Shangri-la county of northwestern Yunnan, the project was intended for the villagers to develop eco-tourism and handicraft skills in order to mitigate overgrazing and over-gathering (of fuel and construction wood). WWF assisted its establishment and donated RMB150,000 for the construction of the main infrastructure, a Tibetan style building which contains meeting halls, cultural show spaces, and 22 guest rooms of various standards, while the villagers contributed labour to build this complex. WWF has continued to provide training in eco-tourism and foreign languages, to organise training workshops on craft skills, to help in publicity, and to supply some equipment, but villagers are the real decision makers in the Center. Major issues are collectively discussed and decided. Elections have been held regularly. Decisions and each household’s duties are clearly written down and posted on the walls in the main building. All villagers are mobilised to cater for the tourists, stage cultural performances and guide the guests to the surrounding ‘sacred mountains’ and ‘sacred waters’, but rotate their roles on the basis of collective discussion.27 In both the Naxi and Tibetan cases, some form of democratic governance became inevitable due to the conjunction of these factors: international organisations must account to their own (Western) donors for the use of funds and equipment; most of them must at least be seen (by their mainly Western supporters) to be educating or mobilising the grassroots communities, respecting their initiatives and letting the locals own the relevant projects; and villagers are eager to reap material benefit to alleviate poverty. Thus some level of organisation, empowerment, accountability and transparency must be implemented.

It is true that INGOs’ interest in cooperating with Chinese civil society varies from each other, reflecting their different preferences towards activists and the Chinese government by virtue or necessity. As mentioned earlier, CI has facilitated local NGOs’ participation in Yunnan government agencies’ decision-making process. In fact, Yunnan’s Forestry Bureau and several government research institutions are members of the CI-managed CEPF’s assessment committee to vet grant applications it receives. At the central level, CI has also maintained good relations with the Environment and Resources Protection Committee of the National People’s Congress and SEPA. On the other hand, CI’s support for the anti-dam campaign demonstrated a strong conviction in the value of extensive cooperation with grassroots NGOs. It has actively shored up a range of Chinese and Tibetan conservation groups through CEPF. It has also let conservation groups such as CBIK become members of CEPF’s assessment committee and has promoted their collaboration with various other INGOs. In Yunnan CI believes that since ethnic minorities have their own traditional conservation methods, CI should utilise them and mobilise grassroots communities to protect their own living conditions. This is particularly important when the government’s selective listing of nature reserves doesn’t incorporate some areas

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which are nonetheless worshiped by Tibetans as scared areas.\textsuperscript{28} So far as TNC is concerned, its official motto states that the organisation is committed to empowering the community to have greater involvement in the conservation of their natural heritage. It claims that since most of the world’s biodiversity exists in areas inhabited by people, effective conservation cannot be achieved unless the people who live and rely on those lands are an integral part of the conservation process.\textsuperscript{29} Indeed, the above-mentioned village project reflects such values. Director Niu has convincingly presented information proving TNC’s assistance in building up the capacities of Chinese NGOs and organising international study tours for their activists.\textsuperscript{30} However, TNC’s overall approach in China is widely seen to favour dealing with the authorities. Regarding the Nujiang River campaign, TNC didn’t want to be part of what Niu perceived as a ‘confrontational’ movement against the authorities. She argued that it was difficult to cooperate with what she called ‘radical’ anti-dam activists although what they did was well within the Chinese laws. Instead the then TNC Chairman, Henry Paulson (later to become the Treasury Secretary during the second Bush Administration), chose to write a letter to Premier Wen Jiabao expressing concerns privately. TNC preferred to give quiet advice to Beijing and was interested in organising conferences to discuss the ecological implications of the construction of dams on Chinese rivers.\textsuperscript{31} It is revealing of TNC’s approach that directors of TNC offices in regional Yunnan, the organisation’s focus in its China operation, are mostly retired officials who retain good connections with the establishment. For example, Gao Huaili, who heads TNC’s Lijiang office, is the former chief of the local Forestry Bureau and former deputy president of the local People’s Congress. WWF’s approach is similar in that while it has cooperated with grassroots NGOs including FON and GVB in capacity building, particularly providing technical support and transferring international concepts, it seems to be more interested in cooperating with the authorities and participating in decision-making processes than most other INGOs. Li Qing, WWF China’s Programme Officer for Education and Capacity Building, emphasised that this was how WWF pursued its issue-oriented strategy after reading China’s unique national situation.\textsuperscript{32}

Indeed, INGOs’ different balancing acts between civil society and the state result from each having its own answer to the larger question of under what circumstances transnational actors may succeed or fail in their advocacy and reform attempt in the ‘target country’. TCS scholars argue that the quality of transnational actors’ presence in general and their impact on state policies in particular is likely to vary according to differences in domestic and international structures of the ‘target country’. Domestic structures refer to various factors in the country’s socio-political system and culture. The concept of international structures looks at the degree of a state’s integration in multilateral agreements, treaties and international organisations regulating the specific issue areas. Those international institutions, just like an open and liberal socio-political system, are expected to increase the availability of channels which

\textsuperscript{28} Interview with Yang Fangyi.

\textsuperscript{29} See http://www.nature.org/partners/.

\textsuperscript{30} Interview with Rose Niu.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{32} Interview with Li Qing.
transnational actors can use to access the national political processes to advocate compliance with international norms. The idea of ‘mobilising structures’ postulates that domestic and international structures are likely to interact in determining the ability of transnational actors to bring about the desired social and policy change, by providing or limiting their opportunities to gain political access and generate coalitions in order to campaign effectively.\(^{33}\) It is not for this paper to give a detailed account of China’s mobilising structures since what is under this general discussion is a broad phenomenon (different weight that the various INGOs have given to civil society and the state in their cooperation with China). To put it simply, transnational actors face highly dynamic transitioning mobilising structures in China. Opportunities have been opened up by an expanding space for civil society, decentralisation of the political system, an increasingly liberal media, and Beijing’s increasing commitment to international environmental standards and sensitivity to being accused of violating international norms. However, these considerations must be balanced against a still restrained civic space, China’s dramatically rising status in the world’s power hierarchy, and Beijing’s post-Cold War wariness of negative international perceptions of its political regime and foreign interference in its ‘domestic affairs’ including the issue of Tibet. INGOs’ different approaches in prioritising between civil society and the state reflect their own individual judgement of the opportunities, risks and prospects of those circumstances. However, their approaches are also determined by their own socio-political background and work priorities. It is the combination of all these that condition their preferences. Thus in explaining TNC’s approach in China, Niu pointed out that unlike most INGOs, TNC was first established in the US by scientists not grassroots activists, and its board members included prominent business and social figures. In the US and other Western countries like Australia, one of TNC’s main works has been to buy land and turn them into TNC reserves. Niu said that these factors determined TNC’s non-confrontational attitude towards governments. In China’s case, although land is not for private or corporate ownership, TNC has maintained its interest in nature reserves. This ensures that it must cooperate with the decision-makers since the government is the only landlord of reserves.\(^{34}\) Ultimately, differences in INGOs’ interest in Chinese civil society are just a matter of degree. In fact, some INGOs are more people-oriented in their operations outside China compared to their style inside the country. TNC, which follows a more participatory model in its conservation work in Latin America, is itself a case in point. Greenpeace, which had to moderate its usual confrontational style in order to operate inside China, is another. It is, however, unthinkable that any major transnational social movement organisation, originating from developed Western civil society, would totally drop a commitment to the ideals of public participation and community mobilisation.

34. Interview with Rose Niu.
Problems, challenges and hope

To manoeuvre around in China’s transitioning mobilising structures has not been easy. INGOs’ interactions with Chinese activists have not always been plain sailing. Their relations with the government have gone through problematic situations. Meanwhile, transnationalism has further complicated Chinese NGOs’ relations with authorities. In a way INGOs are natural competitors of Chinese NGOs for staff, such that a high performing staff member in the latter may move to the former due to their better working conditions and greater career opportunities. Also, the two compete for grants from some funding agencies such as the Ford Foundation and CEPF. However, this needs to be judged against the overall situation where INGOs themselves are the leading providers of staff training and funding for the Chinese groups, and Yu Xiaogang is just one example of staff members in an INGO (in Yu’s case, it is TNC, the world’s richest environmental NGO in terms of annual budget) leaving their jobs to set up their own grassroots organisations. Those Chinese ‘organisational entrepreneurs’ who have been receiving international publicity and awards are most unlikely to ditch their own base. In fact, competition can help the Chinese activists grow.

A few Chinese activists argue that some INGOs have tried to impose a global agenda on local groups as a precondition for aid, ignoring China’s own situation and their own priorities. For example, while international activists prioritise climate change, some Chinese NGOs regard industrial pollution as more relevant and important to China. Apart from disagreement on issue focus, Chinese activists also believe that international ideas on sustainable development should be combined with the Chinese context. In particular, the Tibetan environmentalists treat some complicated Western conservation theories as imported like McDonalds and KFCs, and strongly argue that they will be better served with a large dose of local ingredients. Thus while cooperating closely with INGOs like WWF, Tibetan environmentalists in Shangri-la heavily use the icons and ideas in their own traditional culture, such as temples, living Buddhas and ancient songs, believing that only by revitalising traditional values can the environment be protected. However, tension between the global and national/local should not be exaggerated. Critical borrowing is normal in a cooperative relationship. None of the Chinese NGOs interviewed for this study has always dropped or fundamentally shifted their own mission and practice as a result of transnational imposition. Similarly, none of the INGOs interviewed does not see in one way or another the inherent value of Chinese and Tibetan cultural traditions for their own ‘global agenda’. Tension has been occasional and situational, not persistent and across the board. Today there is no shortage of Chinese activists capable of conceptualising the link between what looks like China’s immediate problems, such as industrial pollution, and the so-called global issues, such as climate change, in the context of a global village. In fact all Chinese activists profoundly appreciate the advanced universal concepts and ideas they have received from INGOs. As for Tibetans, local activists in Shangri-la are quite happy to urge fellow villagers to reform

36. Interview with Mao Da.
some customs in their traditional way of life in order to better protect their own ‘sacred mountains and holy lakes’ and adopt the ‘imported’ practice of eco-tourism to benefit themselves from such landscapes, as discussed earlier. Chinese NGOs and their Western donors have also gone through a process of mutual accommodation about how the former should operate as a proper civil society sector. For example, in a capacity building programme during 2003–2005, the Ford Foundation hired international experts to train Chinese NGOs including FON and GVB, using translated Western textbooks during the first two years, but leaders from the two Chinese organisations gradually realised that some Western ideas, including those about how to govern an organisation’s board of directors, were too idealistic in the Chinese political context. Upon their request, Chinese trainers dominated the 2005 training sessions to achieve a desirable synthesis. Some activists also struggled with their Western donors on particular campaign tactics. For example, Oxfam USA urged CBIK to join the other NGOs in the anti-dam campaign, yet the Kunming-based organisation sensed that it could ‘vanish’, in the words of Yin Lun, CBIK’s Programme Director, if becoming part of this high profile movement against the authorities. It eventually persuaded Oxfam USA to drop its pressure by convincing this major donor of the differences between CBIK, which used scientific research for its advocacy work, and other campaign-oriented groups.

Transnational connections can invite government’s unwarranted attention to Chinese activists. Even the well-regarded FON had a major international event it hosted (Northeast Asian Environmental Youth Forum, a UN Environment Programme initiative, 2005) interrupted by state security officials. Chinese NGOs which regularly receive international funding are sometimes accused of acting like unpatriotic compradors, harbouring suspicious motives behind their charitable projects, as if only the authorities’ own environmental protection agencies can maintain patriotic credentials despite receiving foreign funding. However, the relationship with the Chinese authorities has been a major challenge confronting INGOs. This reflects not only the country’s overall still restrictive environment for civil society but also Beijing’s sudden change of mood caused by world events. For example, President Bush’s rhetoric on worldwide democracy promotion in his 2005 State of the Union address, and the ‘colour revolution’ in 2004–2005, when civil society became a leading force toppling the authoritarian regimes in Ukraine and some former Soviet republics in Central Asia under Western encouragement, made Beijing sensitive towards INGOs’ connections with their Chinese partners. One prominent casualty was China Development Brief, which was forced to close down in 2007, with editor Nick Young expelled from the country having lived in Beijing for 12 years, for alleged illegal social surveys. INGOs can tread on a thin line in their collaborative projects with the government. For example, in the case mentioned earlier of the government accepting the textbook Environmental Education Implementation Guideline for Middle and Primary Schools composed by WWF, it didn’t happen before the draft had to drop some keywords. In urging public

38. Interviews with Li Junhui and Mao Da.
39. Interview with Yin Lun.
40. For his own account of the event, see Nick Young, ‘Why China cracked down on my nonprofit’, The Christian Science Monitor, (4 December 2007).
participation in nature reserves’ governance, WWF used the words ‘democratic participation’ in its draft, but ended up recommending a participatory model without the democracy word after being criticised by officials for contemplating staging a social reform.41

The issue of ethnic minorities is particularly sensitive. The Yunnan government keeps an eye on INGOs’ operations due to the province’s large areas of ethnic minorities (including Tibetans) and its long international borders. In the late-1990s one organisation (which does not want to be identified) learnt a lesson from the authorities for mentioning the Dalai Lama’s religious teaching in a handbook targeting the Tibetans and encouraging them to use their own cultural values for environmental protection. The lesson was that while it was fine to encourage Tibetans to resort to their own religious beliefs, the Dalai Lama should not be cited. INGOs can also get caught inadvertently in unpredictable political situations. In 2006 the Dalai Lama made a speech on environmental and ecological issues in which His Holiness urged Tibetans to give up using tiger and leopard skin to make clothes, and many Tibetans followed their spiritual leader’s call. Consequently INGOs working in Tibet (including CI, TNC and WWF) came under investigation for possible involvement in creating propaganda for the Dalai Lama since they happened to push similar ideas in their own community projects. The fact that CI and TNC are headquartered in the US, the main international backer of the Dalai Lama government in exile, merely added to the authorities’ sensitivity. TMI, another US-based INGO, was asked to leave Tibet in the same year because their main source of funding was USAID, and this became a problem due to the US Congressional discussion of a few Tibet resolutions that year.42 The March 2008 riots in Tibet caused a new round of investigation of international organisations’ projects in the autonomous region. Trace Foundation, a New York-based American NGO specifically working on Tibetan rural development, with Andrea Soros as the founder and president, was hinted by the official Xinhua News Agency as being a tool for use by her father George Soros to instigate the riots.43

However, the overall environment for TCS has improved, partly as a result of NGOs (Chinese and transnational) themselves making use of and facilitating socio-political pluralism in the country. With China becoming ever more integrated in international regimes, and considering the government’s rapidly increasing need of assistance to mitigate social and environmental grievances, a ‘two steps forward, one step backward’ trajectory defines a growing transnational presence in China and the development of China’s own NGO community. Operations of INGOs have become far more institutionalised and accepted in the country compared to the situation in the 1990s. As TNC’s evolving relationship with the government testifies, confidence and trust takes time to build. When TNC first started in China in 1997 by setting up projects in Yunnan, local authorities suspected this foreign organisation’s motives and closely monitored its activities, even though its China director Rose Niu was a native Naxi person. Officials’ perceptions started to soften only after they saw TNC’s achievement in helping the government in environmental protection. Relations

41. Interview with Li Qing.
42. Interview with Andreas Wilkes.
warmed up also because TNC brought central, provincial and local governmental
delegations to inspect environmental projects and national parks abroad. The climax
came in 2002, when Niu was received by the then President Jiang Zemin. Jiang
wanted to meet representatives of American business and organisations based in
China before an imminent visit by President Bush. Since the World Summit on
Sustainable Development was also to be held that year, Niu was invited to the
meeting to represent the US-headquartered environmental organisations.44 This event
led Yunnan’s state security agencies to suspend their restrictions on foreign NGOs.

Tibet also has its own share of dramas: in October 2008 the Trace Foundation
received an International Non-governmental Charity Achievement Award from the
China International Charity Foundation, at a ceremony staged at the grand People’s
Congress Convention Center in Beijing, an event sponsored by, among others, the
People’s Daily and China Central TV.45 This was just six months after it was
suspected of being an instigator of the Tibetan riots. Government’s post-riot
pragmatic approach also included seeking out the New York-based Louise Blouin
Foundation to help preserve and promote Tibetan culture. The experience of TMI is
equally revealing of China’s appreciation of INGOs’ good work, showing that the
crack-down has had its own limitations. After it was asked to leave Tibet because of
political sensitivities directly related to the governmental nature of its main funding
source (USAID), TMI simply relocated to Sichuan and Yunnan, but has continued the
same programmes in the Tibetan communities in these two provinces as it had been
doing in Tibet itself, trying to meet Tibetans’ socio-economic needs while conserving
the environment and preserving their cultural heritage, and TMI has continued to
implement its programmes in the same way, with official support. In fact, TMI was
offered the chance to stay in Tibet if it used less sensitive funding sources to finance
community programmes. However, since the USAID grant was large and important
to the NGO’s organisational funding, TMI decided to keep the USAID grant and
relocated outside Tibet. Still, TMI staff members were given assistance from
governmental agencies for relocation.46

The fact that activists and their international backers survived the anti-dam
movement well shows that social activism in the environmental area has clearly
pushed the political boundary in society–state relations beyond what was possible in
the 1980s–1990s. The Beijing-based Wang Yongchen, who made a crucial
contribution to the campaign by liaising with domestic and international media,
bringing in UNESCO and conducting and publishing regular surveys of the villagers
near Nujiang River whose lives were to be affected by the dam project, went on to
win the ‘2007 Figure of the Year for Green China’ award from China Environmental
Culture Promotion Association, a GONGO set up by SEPA. The award ceremony,
broadcast by China Central TV, highlighted her as representing NGOs, and praised
her efforts at environmental protection as symbolising NGOs’ contributions.

44. Interview with Rose Niu. Reportedly Jiang went on to personally designate a principle for the TNC’s tasks in
China, along the lines of balancing development and environmental protection, and leading the community’s
sustainable development (interview with Gao Huaili, Director of TNC’s Lijiang office, June 2007).
46. Correspondence with Andreas Wilkes, February 2009.
The halting of the construction of 13 mega-dams certainly created official hostility towards campaigners, yet as if to show cracks opened up by the decentralisation of the political system, the most bitter resentment came from the Yunnan authorities, which had been betting on the project to boost their economy. The provincial government started to crack down on the local activists in 2004, but its furore did not extend to any of the INGOs involved in the campaign, and the latter’s Yunnan-based projects were not affected. Organisations like CI had always maintained good relations with both SEPA and the provincial government itself, and this helped. The most threatening treatment was metered out to Yu Xiaogang, a Yunnan local who wrote and published critical reports assessing the social impact of the dams, mobilised villagers to campaign against the construction, and even organised their representatives to challenge the project at UN meetings, effectively creating an international controversy. While his heroic activism against a leading development project of the central and provincial governments won him The Goldman Environmental Prize, his organisation (Green Watershed) came under investigation, and officials tried to block his attendance at a Dams and Development Forum hosted by the UN Environment Programme in Nairobi, 2004. Provincial government’s resentment has lingered on and influenced lower level authorities’ attitudes towards Yu, so that Lashi Lake Watershed Management Committee, a conservation project Yu set up in rural Lijinag with support from Oxfam USA, has not received cooperation from the township government which became concerned that Yu’s mobilisational model could jeopardise local economic growth. However, Yu’s circumstance has been mixed. His organisation is still active. While the provincial authorities seized his passport in order to prevent him from collecting the international prize in San Francisco in 2006, he eventually received the green light from Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing. In the same year, he also managed to win a major grant from China Development Marketplace, a joint programme of the World Bank and Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs Department of NGO Administration aiming to identify and support innovative bottom-up development ideas. In fact Yu’s project, designed to implement participatory irrigation management in ethnic Dai areas, won the largest amount of funding of all 30 successful bidders nationwide. His comment ‘we have not been pinched to death’ speaks volumes of the enlarged civic and political space in China.

Conclusion and further research

Under testing circumstances and sometimes in tense interactions, transnational linkages have contributed to the growth and dynamism of Chinese environmental civil society in terms of the latter’s capacities, strategies, leadership and political outlook. Despite the apparent non-political or de-politicised nature of the projects and

47. Interview with Yang Fangyi.
48. Interview with Yu Xiaogang.
49. I appreciate the anonymous reviewer for reminding me of this fact.
actors involved, green activism (Chinese and transnational) nurtures a more liberal third sector, expands the public sphere and pluralises the political process, pushing the envelope but remaining within the formal and informal rules of political discourse. In the end, civil society alone cannot kick start a bona fide process of democratisation. However, a society with grassroots organisations well exercised in cause-oriented activism and campaigns and enjoying dense transnational collaboration is better prepared for democratic transition than a society ever waiting for a top-down political reform without first organising itself on basic ‘non-political’ issues. This seems to have been demonstrated by the experience of Taiwan during the 1980s in the lead up to a full process of democratisation partly initiated by the party-state.

In order to shed more light on TCS’s impact in China, one may explore what looks like a similar situation with Taiwan during the Chiang Ching-kuo era before Martial Law was lifted. Taiwan’s NGO sector at the time was generally similar to the current state of China’s, in terms of ‘non-political’ issue focus and an intriguing relationship between activist groups and the Kuomintang’s corporatist associations. Social movement activists played important roles in Taiwan’s political liberalisation through their programmes of empowerment and consciousness-raising in the issue areas which were seemingly not sensitive, such as consumer interests, environmental protection, and rights of women, children and indigenous peoples and the disabled. Organised coalitions and solidarity between transnational activists and Taiwan’s burgeoning environmental and women’s movements were evident during the 1980s. Research has uncovered evidence indicating that transnational collaboration made some contributions to the budding growth and democratic functions of Taiwan’s social movements during the Chiang Ching-kuo era, although further study is needed to more comprehensively make that point. Such research may draw lessons and gain insights for the China case today.

If INGOs’ operation in China goes beyond the civil society sphere, their Chinese counterparts’ transnational connections also extend beyond INGOs, although collaboration with INGOs is the most important aspect of Chinese activists’ transnational networking. They also cooperate with the UN agencies, the World Bank, foreign governments and universities. How interactions with those different nodes in global governance (including INGOs) affect each other needs further research. Furthermore, TCS has also penetrated other issue areas than the environment, as shown by CDB’s statistics cited earlier. It would be meaningful to study the transnational impacts on Chinese civil society across all issue areas in order to reach an integrated analysis of the comprehensive roles of globalisation-from-below in the country’s socio-political development.