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NGOs AND THE SEARCH FOR CHINESE CIVIL SOCIETY ENVIRONMENTAL NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS IN THE NUJIANG CAMPAIGN

Michael Büsgen

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ORGANISATIONS IN THE NUJIANG CAMPAIGN***

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谷神不死

用之不勤

The spirit of the valley never dies.

When putting it into use, don't force it.

Laozi, Daodejing, chapter 6

ABBREVIATIONS

CASS	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CPPCC	Chinese Peoples' Political Consultative Conference
CSCP	China State Power Corporation
ENGO	Environmental Non-Governmental Organisation
GCSF	Global Civil Society Forum (under UNEP)
GWD	Great Western Development campaign
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
MOCA	Ministry of Civil Affairs
MOWR	Ministry of Water Resources
NDRC	National Development and Reform Commission
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NPC	National People's Congress
SEPA	State Environmental Protection Agency
SERC	State Electricity Regulation Commission
YASS	Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences
YEPA	Yunnan Provincial Environmental Protection Agency
YRDC	Yunnan Provincial Reform and Development Commission

NGOs

BGV	Beijing Global Village
CBIK	Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge
CI	Conservation International
CRN	China River Network
FON	Friends of Nature
GI	Green Island
GV	Green Volunteers
GWS	Green Watershed
IRN	International River Network
TNC	The Nature Conservancy
WWF	World Wildlife Fund for Nature

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1 INTRODUCTION

The so-called ‘associational revolution’ (Salomon, 1994) going on worldwide has also affected China, where the last two decades have seen a rapid increase in the number of social organisations, mostly referred to as ‘NGOs’ (Non-Governmental Organisations), which according to some estimates have grown to somewhere between 1.5 and 2 Million.¹

These developments may come to the surprise of many, who (e.g.: Mathews, 1997) believe that associational life in non-democratic communist regimes is “widely repressed and therefore insignificant” (Wang et al. 2004).

1.1 The Difficulties of Understanding NGOs in China

But despite the fact that China’s NGO sector is growing, there remains a lack of clarity on the nature of these organisations, their relation with the state and eventually the question whether this signals the formation of a civil society in China. While some commentators see the emergence of NGOs as a sign of growing pluralism and democratisation in China, many still portray China as a country under a totalitarian regime where any attempt of autonomous association is either suppressed or co-opted into the agenda of the “Leninist party-state” (Baum et al., 1999: 348).

Why is it so difficult to get more clarity about these processes in the most populous nation of the world? Part of the challenge lies in the tensions between the relatively static and intrinsically western concepts of civil society and the diverse and highly context-specific realities of social developments in non-western societies.

The most widely used criteria in assessing whether NGOs are a sign of an emerging civil society in China has been the degree of independence of NGOs from the state. Here, most studies come to the conclusion that Chinese NGOs are lacking the independence of western NGOs and therefore can not be considered part of an autonomous civil society.

Most frameworks which assess civil societies in general are based on the assumption of a dichotomy of state-society relations. Particularly in former socialist countries, the growth of civil society is explained in the context of shrinking and weakened states as a result of so-called structural reforms (Zimmer et al., 2004). This

¹ Figures acc. to Prof. Wang Ming from the NGO research Center at Tsinghua University (Interview with N. Young, CDB).

line of thought suggests the following equation: the smaller and weaker the state, the bigger and stronger civil society. But while the Chinese state has over the last two decades drastically downsized its functions, it still is anything but weak.

The China-specific problem in understanding state-society relations lies in the complex transition process through which China is going since the introduction of far-reaching economic, social and political reforms in the early 1980s. In this process, the state's attitude towards NGOs has remained contradictory: On the one hand, structural reforms of the government apparatus and the state's withdrawal from many of its former service-provision functions have created new social spaces for various forms of auto-organisation outside the realm of the state. In this context, the Chinese state has welcomed the contributions of social organisations to "economic growth, poverty alleviation, environmental conservation and social service delivery" (interview with anonymous official from Ministry of Civil Affairs, MOCA).

But while the reforms are an important factor of *change*, China – unlike other former socialist states – has still retained a strong element of *continuity*, most obviously embodied in the remaining rule of a strong Leninist-style party-state. This party-state, rooted in an autocratic and non-pluralistic tradition, has continuously tried to maintain a high degree of control over social organisations through different forms of 'state-patronage' (Saich, 2000:124).

While most researches apply a relational approach in their analysis, and subsequently conclude that civil society in China is still weak, this research takes a non-relational approach. It instead assesses China's civil society based on the functional contributions of environmental NGOs (ENGOs) towards promoting participation, debate and pluralism. The Nujiang campaign, which has evolved since 2003, provides the background for this case-study.

1.2 Developments in the Field during my Research

The different dynamics and factors which shape the spaces for social organisations in China became very apparent during my visit to Beijing and Kunming for this research in July and August 2005. This time coincided with what many local NGO activists described to me as the most difficult period in the history of grassroots NGOs in China. Almost all of the NGOs, which I met during that month, had in the previous weeks been visited by State Security officials, who inquired about their funding sources and the nature and objectives of their work. All organisations who previously

had failed to register under MOCA, and therefore had no legal status, were asked to reregister – even though the possibility of getting official approval appeared fainter than ever.

An official from the MOCA indicated that by the end of the year new regulations for the registration of NGOs would be announced. Many NGOs feared that this constituted an attempt by the state to restrict the growing number of unregistered and independent NGOs. Particularly ENGOs were coming under pressure, with some being singled-out and attacked openly by Chinese scholars, who accused them of opposing the interest of the state.²

It appeared that grassroots NGOs, which were widely ignored by the government since the mid 1990s when they started to emerge, had come under systematic scrutiny for the first time. The NGO-scene was ripe with all sorts of speculations and rumours about the reasons for this development. One informant, related to the security apparatus, indicated that a National State Council meeting was scheduled for some time later in the year, to take some major decisions to regulate the expanding sector of independent NGOs.

Behind all this appears to be a growing concern by China's leaders about social and, probably more importantly, political stability. These worries are fuelled by the potential threat of a 'Colour Revolution' in China (Nick Young, 2005b), following the recent examples in the Ukraine, Georgia and Czechoslovakia, where NGOs supposedly acted as vehicles of what is perceived by the Chinese government as anti-socialist foreign hostile forces.

Due to these developments, my research took place in a rather tense atmosphere – not only among NGOs, but also within government departments. A very nervous senior official at the department for NGOs under MOCA told me that NGOs which are not formally registered are seen as “not legal”. He then abruptly ended the interview, when I began asking about the relation between the ongoing inquiries into NGOs and the perceived threat of Colour Revolutions.

These recent events are followed with some concern among NGOs, because they may lead to a significant narrowing-down of the spaces for independent auto-

² The ENGO Beijing Global Village (BGV) was attacked by the Chinese scholar Fang Zhouzi of the Chinese Academy of Science, after they had published their funding sources on their web-site. Among the donors was the Heinrich-Böll-Foundation, which is closely affiliated with the German Green Party. Source: Interview with Liao Xiaoyi, Founder of BGV, July 29, 2005.

organisation. Others are less pessimistic and rather see them as a sign of growing recognition by the government of autonomous NGOs. These latest developments reflect to what extent China is still torn between an autocratic past and the dynamics of an increasingly active and pluralistic society.

1.3 Research Objectives and Questions

While China is rapidly gaining importance as a key player on the international political stage and emerges as the powerhouse of global economic growth, there is still relatively little understanding about the dynamics of China's state-society relations. The often contradictory reports from a country somewhere between economic miracle, gradual democratisation and sustained repression of pluralism and dissent are still puzzling many analysts. There appears to be a need for a more context-specific and up-to-date understanding of the recent dynamics and specificities of China's associational growth and its contribution to civil society development.

By drawing attention to recent developments and applying an alternative analytical approach, this research wants to assess to what extent Chinese grassroots NGOs play a role in the formation of a civil society in China and if so, what kind of civil society they promote. Based on the functional analysis of NGOs as actors in promoting a more pluralistic and participatory society through advocacy, this study wants to critically review some of the widespread perceptions on NGOs, civil society and the relation of both in the Chinese context.

The focus of this research is a case-study of Chinese so-called 'grass-roots' ENGOs, which since 2003 have been involved in a campaign against plans to construct a cascade of dams on the Nujiang (Nu-River) in China's south-western Yunnan Province. By examining the activities (what), objectives and strategies (how), motivations (why), affects, and boundaries of environmental advocacy by ENGOs in the Nujiang campaign, this research will try to give some new insights into the underlying question of the contribution of NGOs towards building a Chinese civil society.

1.4 Case-study: ENGOs in the Nujiang Campaign

This research looks at NGOs from the inside in order to gain a greater appreciation of the motivations and strategies of the involved actors. It aims to arrive at an empirically grounded explanation of why things happen and attempt to provide an explanation of the situated rationality of actors, their constraints and opportunities, and the responses to them.

This case-study is primarily based upon the perceptions of the key actors involved in the Nujiang campaign (see appendix for the list of interviewees). The majority of informants are themselves members of grassroots ENGOs in China. In addition, I also met with scientists, journalists, and government officials related to the Nujiang dam, and some long-term observers of the Chinese NGO-scene. Some of the informants are friends and colleagues, whom I got to know through my work as a representative for a German funding-agency in China between 2000 and 2004. Most of the others were introduced to me by these former friends and colleagues as ‘key actors’ in the Nujiang campaign.

The (semi-structured) interviews for this research were held during a four-week period in July and August 2005 in Beijing and Kunming. In addition to the interviews, I was also invited to participate in activities, organised by the involved ENGOs during the time of my research, such as an ENGO media training workshop, a strategic planning workshop of the China Rivers Network (CRN), lectures on dam-related issues and one meeting between dam opponents and the State Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA).

In addition, this study also draws on secondary data from recent articles which discuss the development of ENGOs in China and the Nujiang campaign (Yang 2004, Lu 2005, Litzinger 2004). It also uses a wide range of documents which were written by NGO activists, journalists and academics throughout the campaign.

My own position in this research is not neutral. Throughout my work in China, I have come into contact with dozens of NGOs which I always considered independent and critical voices of an emerging civil society in China. The western bias and academic reductionism with which many analysts question the existence of a genuine civil society in China and portray Chinese NGOs as state-led and non-confrontational has always puzzled and sometimes angered me. This experience has certainly played a role in directing this research and may also have influenced the data obtained from my informants.

The limitations of this research are defined by the actor-oriented approach as well as the fact, that this study only looks at the specific (and limited) group of autonomous ENGOs involved in the specific case of the Nujiang campaign. The information presented in this research thereby is largely selective and based first and foremost on the views and experiences of the group of dam-opponents. This research therefore does not claim to give an objective picture of the events around the campaign, but rather one which is based on the perception of one particular group in it. Hence, this study is not representative for developments among all NGOs in China, nor does it allow generalisations over the state of China's civil society. This research is also limited by the fact, that the campaign is still ongoing and therefore does not yet allow any post-ex conclusions.

The reason for selecting the Nujiang campaign as a case-study lies in the fact, that it is one of the most high-profile advocacy campaigns in which Chinese NGOs have been involved so far. It represents one of the most controversial cases of NGO advocacy as yet and thereby may indicate trends, dynamics and limitations within China's rapidly changing realities. Additionally, the construction of a mega-dam touches upon a wide range of issues which go far beyond the immediate environmental impacts: What are the real economic, environmental and social costs of dams? Who is bearing these costs and who benefits from a dam? Is social equity addressed? What impact does a dam have on the livelihoods of the affected local communities? Are dam-migrants taken care of? How participatory and transparent are the governance processes, which lead to the decision on a dam? Are regulations and legal procedures in place and enforced?³

All these are highly political questions. In a context where NGOs have been widely portrayed as apolitical, this case therefore provides a good example to assess whether and to what extent this image is still valid.

Finally, the dam project along the Nujiang provides an opportunity for comparisons to previous mega projects, most notably the (in-)famous Three-Gorges dam on the Yangtze, which was approved more than a decade ago, but remains equally controversial. This will allow me to highlight some of the dynamics and changes, which have occurred over the recent past in China.

³ On the wide-ranging implications of large dams, see for example: World Commission on Dams (2000).

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter I will discuss the relevant concepts for this study, give an overview of the academic debate on Chinese NGOs and civil society in the literature review and assess the existing gaps in it. Based on the critique of the literature, I will develop the analytical framework for this study.

2.1 Concepts and Analytical Framework

(a) NGO

NGO is what Biekart calls a ‘container concept’ (1999:38f). The term ‘NGO’ itself appears useless for capturing what an NGO actually *is*, since it only describes what it *is not*. Ian Smillie (1995:22) has quite aptly pointed toward the inherent shortcoming of this terminology: “It is commonly held that defining something in negative terminology is both inappropriate and unimaginative“.

While there is no commonly accepted definition of what constitutes NGOs (Willems, 2002), there are three key features, which are generally used to identify an NGO: (1) their *private* nature (autonomy from the state/’self-governance’), (2) their not-for-profit character, and (3) some form of public benefit/interest derived from their activities (see for example: Kane, 1990:14-15; Willems, 2002; Salamon,1994).

In order to avoid normative generalisations, capturing diversity becomes particularly important when looking at NGOs operating in distinct (non-western) socio-political contexts. This can be done according to different criteria, ranging from the field of activity, the geographic scope of activities and sources of funding, to the relation of the NGO with the state, its generational status, form of association and/or their formal status. This is often expressed by adding an adjective to the term NGO, such as *environmental* NGO, *grass-roots* NGO, *membership* NGO or *international* NGO, etc.

Chinese researchers and NGO practitioners generally divide NGOs into two broad categories, according to their institutional roots: ‘officially-organised’ (*guanban*) or ‘top-down’ (*zi shang er xia*) NGOs and ‘popular’ (*minban*) or ‘bottom-up’ (*zi xia er shang*) (Lu, 2005:17f) NGOs. The former are initiated by the government and receive government subsidies. Their staffs are often on some government’s payroll, and their leadership positions are usually held by government

officials. By contrast, ‘popular NGOs’ are initiated by individual citizens, receive no government subsidies and their staff are not government employees.

The NGOs in this study all belong to the group of ‘bottom-up’ NGOs, which have been independently and voluntarily set-up, are based on the values of their members, and are non-profit organisations. Despite these commonalities, they have different registrational status, with some being formally registered as an NGO under the MOCA (e.g. CBIK, GWS), others registered as secondary organisations directly under another organisation (FON), as a commercial enterprise (BGV), or are entirely unregistered (GV, CRN).

(b) Civil society

There are many different – largely normative – interpretations and no commonly agreed definition. Some features are nonetheless widely reflected in the numerous existing definitions: The general characteristics of civil society are that it is a ‘space’ or ‘arena’ in which associations and relations form independently of the state and the market for the sake of public action and debate, based on public interests, values, rights and/or needs. This highlights the two different aspects of civil society: (1) the relational aspect (independence of civil society actors from the state) and the functional aspect (promoting public participation based on the principle of pluralism of actors).

The specific roles of civil society are highly contested and underlie different ideological agendas. Howell and Pearce (2002:13-36) have developed a framework, which suggests a continuum of two contrasting views on civil society between a so-called ‘mainstream approach’ and an ‘alternative approach’. The mainstream approach pictures civil society as largely non-confrontational in nature and as a mechanism which replaces state service-delivery in the context of the neo-liberal structural adjustment programs (SAPs). The alternative view suggests a more confrontational role of civil society, which is seen as a response to growing inequality and exploitation, aimed at redirecting global development trends.

While value-driven, autonomous NGOs are generally seen as the formal institutional component of civil society (Edwards et al, 1996; Kocka, 2003), NGOs cannot generally be equated with the existence of a civil society (Herberer et al. 2004). An increasing trend of NGOs in many parts of the world towards becoming more state- and donor-dependent service delivery mechanisms (Edwards et al., 1996b)

has led several authors to question the contribution of NGOs towards civil society in terms of building citizenship and promoting pluralism.

This becomes very apparent in the specific case of China, where civil society has been described by most analysts as ‘non-existent’, ‘incomplete’ or at best ‘in-the-making’ (see following chapter: 2.2 Literature Review) despite the vibrant growth of the associational sector. This reluctance to recognise the existence of a genuine civil society is primarily based on the claim that potential civil society actors in China, like NGOs, are lacking independence and distance from the state. They are therefore not seen as having the “political function of civil society with a critical eye on both state and market” (Howell et al., 2001:64).

In the light of the highly normative nature of the concept of civil society, one wonders about the relevance of a debate over whether or not a civil society is existing in China. This research is rather focusing on the question *what kind* of civil society is emerging in the case-study of the Nujiang campaign. The indicators for assessing these questions are developed in the following paragraph:

(c) Advocacy

Advocacy describes a strategy to either directly or indirectly influence policies, legislation and social behaviour (see for example: Kampen, no year:3). Advocacy is a mechanism of ‘scaling-up’ the impact of NGOs (Edwards et al., 2002:59) and based on the objective to overcome the limitations inherent in the usually localised interventions of NGOs. This is generally done by NGOs through establishing “linkages between their work on a micro-level and the wider systems and structures of which they form a small part” (Edwards et al., 2002:53). NGO-advocacy thereby goes beyond the role of service delivery and usually addresses underlying causes of a particular problem.

I will analyse ENGO advocacy in the Nujiang campaign along the framework of Wilkes (forthcoming), who has identified three different clashing development visions for Yunnan: (1) A ‘mainstream’ view, which views ethnic cultures as essentially backward and promotes development as expert-driven modernisation along the lines of the dominant Han-Chinese livelihoods. In this approach, Yunnan’s natural resources are seen as an asset for economic transformation, rather than a means which is sustaining traditional livelihoods. (2) The ‘new mainstream’ of Yunnan’s state-sponsored multiculturalism, in which “ethnic cultures are seen as commercializable

resources that can and should be used much as other resources to fuel economic growth in the province” (Wilkes, forthcoming:3). Ethnic culture in this view is no longer labelled backward, but becomes just another exploitable and renewable resource for the province’s future economic development.

(3) The third discourse is promoting an ‘alternative bioculturalism’ (Wilkes, forthcoming:4). “In contrast to the mainstream discourse which orders cultures according to levels of productivity, this discourse insists on the rationality of many indigenous practices, and the need for appropriate governance structures to allow local knowledge and practices to come into play in sustaining contemporary livelihoods”. This view promotes a notion of diverse development, determined by the indigenous communities themselves rather than through expert-led interventions and national policies. It thereby fundamentally challenges the dominant economic-growth-driven development paradigm and instead promotes a model of *people-centred development* (Korten, 1987; Heyzer, 1995). This discourse focuses on underlying social causes by addressing power differentials, and by promoting participation, accountability, social equity and sustainability through more pluralistic forms of debate and contestation.

The activities and strategies of the campaign are analysed according to the question, how they aim to bring about change: (1) Advocating *behavioural change* of individuals or groups of individuals, (2) advocating *institutional change* through demanding adherence with or expansion of existing legal and administrative procedures or (3) advocating *structural change* through political reorientation. These three strategies are used as indicators for the degree of ‘politicisation’ of ENGOs by pointing at the hierarchy of underlying causes which they address.

2.2 Views on Chinese NGOs

(a) The Western academic literature on Chinese NGOs

In the case of China, two major theories have been developed in the Western academic literature to explain the phenomenon of an emerging NGO-sector in this still largely authoritarian and non-democratic state after the 1980s. All of them are dealing with the same dilemma: How “simultaneously to acknowledge the pluralizing socioeconomic changes induced by market reforms and the continued dominance of the Leninist party-state.” (Baum et al., 1999:348).

A small number of authors emphasise the change-factor in Chinese governance and view emerging forms of auto-organization in China as the advent of a liberal civil society (Sullivan, 1990). But the overwhelming majority of researchers have rejected the concept of ‘civil society’, as an analytical framework for Chinese NGOs. They have based this rejection on the claim that Chinese NGOs are in fact hybrid organisations in which state and society are interwoven and only enjoy limited autonomy. Therefore they are seen as non-conform with the definition of civil society, which requires autonomy and the separation of associations from the state (White, 1994).

Furthermore the notion of civil society is closely linked to political democratisation, with civil society organisations as agents of democratization. But while NGOs in China are seen as catering to the immediate needs of their constituencies, they are in general not perceived as a mechanism for representing and pursuing the interests of these constituencies towards the state (Nevitt, 1996; Pearson, 1997; White, 1994; Yep, 2000; White, Howell and Shang, 1996).

In contrast to the – widely dismissed – analytical framework of civil society, which stresses the *change*-factor in NGO-state relations, researchers have applied “various tunes on the theme of corporatism to explain state-society relations.” (Saich, 2000:124), which focuses more on the continuities of state dominance in China: Most notably in this regard is the concept of ‘state-corporatism’, which Schmitter (1974:93f) defined as

(...) a system of interest representation in which the constituent units are organized into a limited number of singular, compulsory, non-competitive, hierarchically ordered and functionally differentiated categories, recognized or licensed (if not created) by the state and granted a deliberate monopoly within their respective categories in exchange for observing certain controls on their selection of leaders and articulation of demands and support” (quoted from: Howell, 2004:169).

This approach is stressing the lack of independence of Chinese NGOs versus the state and describes NGOs as largely co-opted into the state-agenda and therefore denies the existence of a *real* (independent) civil society in China. Subsequent analyses have emphasized the limitations of emerging organizations in terms of insufficient independence and their inability to contest state/Party policies.

Frolic (1997) uses the notion of the ‘state-led civil society’, in which he claims that “civil society was created by the state, to help it govern, co-opt and socialize potentially politically active elements in the society” (quoted from: Saich, 2004: 228).

Unger and Chan (1996) have used the concept of 'state-corporatism' to describe the co-optation of social organisations into the state agenda, thereby emphasizing the role of the state in promoting the development of civil society and its control from above (Saich, 2004: 227f), aiming at 'depoliticizing civil society' (Howell, 2004: 162). This lack of independence has been largely equated with a lack of autonomy (Lu, 2005).

The more specific literature on the role of environmental NGOs in China clearly echoes this analysis: In most of the literature, they are portrayed as non-confrontational (Ho, 2002; Turner, 2003) and tied closely to the government (Knup, 1997). Their relation with the state is described as cooperative (Turner et al., 2002). Elizabeth Economy states that green NGOs have so far avoided government crackdown, because "they have yet to challenge central government policy" (Economy, 2004: 136). Nick Young describes them as "light on ideology" and their activities as mostly "public conscientisation, (which) lie comfortably within the parameters of central government policy" (Young, 2001:7). Only the most recent work on Chinese ENGOs (Yang, 2004; Lu 2005b, Economy, 2005) acknowledges a growing trend among ENGOs towards policy contestation.

An increasing degree of diversification among NGOs and in NGO-state relations is also recognised in some recent analysis (Ho, 2001; Young, 2001). Most notably in this regard is the work by Jude Howell, who states that the empirical analysis of NGO-state relations indicates that the corporatist approach to regulate society in China is failing (Howell, 2004: 162). Howell depicts governance processes as being increasingly fragmented, localized and messy (Howell, 2004: 163). This analysis is also shared by Saich (2000:124ff; 2004: 222-226), who uses the term 'negotiated state' to describe the increasingly diverse and fluid spaces in which state-society relations are contested and constantly (re)negotiated.

Howell suggests that it is "no longer appropriate to think in terms of one single civil society or public sphere, or a unified predictable process of governance. The corporatist framework fails in part because it is a unitary response to an increasingly diverse and differentiated reality, a modernist response to a postmodern reality" (Howell 2004: 164). This suggests that states, NGOs as well as the relation between them are contested and constantly shifting. Howell calls this state an 'embryonic protopublic sphere' (Howell 2004: 163).

(b) The Chinese academic literature

The Chinese academic literature on NGOs as a whole shows little interest in the categories of state-corporatism and civil society (Lu, 2005a:48). While most Western analyses have a rather narrow focus on a particular group of organisations – mostly business and trade associations (Nevitt, 1996) and mass organisations (Unger et al., 1995) –, and pay much less attention to social service organisations, membership groups and foundations, Chinese studies tend to take a much wider look and reflect a higher degree of diversity (Lu, 2005a:47).

In terms of state-society relations, most of the Chinese analytical literature rejects the notion of a civil society as a confrontational entity directed against the state (Herberer et al., 2004:9) and rather looks at the extent to which NGOs draw on state and government resources (Sun et al., 1999) and whether they are reaching out to society directly or through the state apparatus (Lu, 2005a:50). The conclusion appears to be that the majority of NGOs are in fact hybrids, so called ‘semi-popular, semi-official’ (*Ban-Guan Ban-Min*) organisations. Yu Keping (2003:27) concludes that “China’s civil society is a typical government-led one and has an obvious official-civil duality”. While this ‘dual nature’ (Sun, Wang and Zhe, 1993), similar to the Western reading, implies a high degree of dependence, it tends to view this relation as more positive (Kang, 1997), because of the extended access to resources which this proximity implies.

2.3 “Recipes are only good for baking cake”⁴

The Chinese literature on NGOs shows, that proximity between the state and social organisations not only needs to be seen as a factor which is limiting NGOs, but instead also has an enabling aspect to it. This is generally overlooked in the western academic literature, which assumes that proximity to the state implies a lack of independence from the state and automatically means a lack of autonomy of social organisations (Lu, 2005a).

In contrast, the majority of the western analysts have “concentrated on the capacity of party and state organizations to organize and compartmentalize society, to frustrate genuine organizational pluralism” (Saich, 2000:124) and therefore conclude a non-pluralistic and hierarchical nature of state-society relations. These are portrayed

⁴ Czech football coach Karel Bruckner

as being shaped by the state in a top-down process of co-optation through “various forms of state patronage” (Saich, 2000:124). Thereby Chinese social organisations have been widely depicted as state-led, un-political, non-confrontational, and as lacking independence and autonomy.

My main critique is based on the fact that all the dominant frameworks in the western and the Chinese literature alike, attempt to capture Chinese NGOs and civil society, based on a *relational* analysis. This approach links the question of civil society to the independence of its actors from the state, and thereby fails to capture the *functional* aspect of what NGOs *do* towards promoting active citizenship.

Altogether there are at least three major gaps in the frameworks which dominate the academic literature on Chinese NGOs:

- (1) They are predominantly based on the notion of a state-society dichotomy and top-down structures which define spaces for non-state actors. They are thereby overlooking the factor of agency for the creation of independent spaces from below. This view also overlooks other actors and factors outside the state which potentially play a role in determining spaces for the development of civil society, such as market forces or processes of globalisation.
- (2) There is a lack of differentiated analysis of the growing diversity of NGOs, the state and subsequently NGO-state relations and the impact of the rapidly changing context in which Chinese NGOs operate.
- (3) There is a lack of focus on what NGOs *do* in terms of promoting pluralism, rather than what they *are* in terms of their relation to the state.

It has to be said though, that a number of authors (Howell, 2004; Lu, 2005, Saich, 2000 and 2004) have pointed toward many of the inadequacies of the dominant concepts. Still, until now no alternative approach, which accounts for the complexity and context specificity of the Chinese reality and assesses civil society in terms of their actions rather than their relations, has been established. One possible explanation for this failure is given by Saich (2004:232) himself:

Social scientists tend to dislike open-ended theories and seek to close down the range of options available for interpretation through a process of imposing order and logic. (...) In the field of state-society relations, we need to develop explanations that allow for the shifting complexities of the current system and the institutional fluidity, ambiguity and messiness that operate at all levels in China.

2.4 Conclusion

Based on the above discussion, my framework for analysing NGOs and their contribution towards building a civil society is not taking a *relational* but a *functional* approach, which assesses the role of NGOs in advancing pluralism through participation and debate. This analysis focuses on the roles of ENGOs in promoting the free flow of demands and opinions in the specific case of the Nujiang campaign. It assesses whether ENGOs promote an alternative approach, which deviates from the dominant view of hydropower development as a means for poverty alleviation and economic growth. Thereby this study assumes that the relational analysis of NGOs is not the most relevant factor in the Chinese context for determining their nature and contribution towards civil society, but rather what they do. Given the normative nature of the concept of civil society, this study also attributes more relevance to the question of *what kind* of civil society NGOs promote through their actions than whether or not there is a link between both.

3 A DIVIDED COUNTRY

In order to understand the geographic, social, economic and political context and the diverse contesting interests at play, this chapter is going to provide the basic background information concerning the Nujiang dam and the campaign surrounding its construction.

3.1 Pristine Borderlands

The planned 13-stage Nujiang dam is located in China's most south-western Yunnan Province, which covers an area of almost 400.000 km² (roughly ten times the size of the Netherlands). Yunnan belongs to China's less developed *hinterland* and is bordering Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam. 94 % of the province is mountainous. Geographically and ethnically, it is China's most diverse province. From tropical rainforests to snow-capped mountains above 6000 meters, Yunnan is home to an extremely wide range of different eco-systems, climates and landscapes.

This natural diversity has shaped a wide variety of different cultures and livelihoods throughout the province. Among the 43 million people (2000 population census) living in Yunnan, more than 10 million belong to one of China's 55 officially

recognized so-called *ethnic minorities*, out of which 51 can be found in Yunnan. 15 of those 51 are indigenous to Yunnan, including the *Dulong* from the Nujiang Prefecture.

Agriculture is the major livelihood for the majority of the population with a high proportion of the rural people living mostly from subsistence agriculture. Per capita net annual income in Yunnan ranks the third lowest among all Chinese provinces with 1479 CNY.⁵ More than half of the 140 counties in Yunnan are nationally designated poverty counties (ADB, 2004:33) and 36% of the population is living under the official Chinese poverty line of 77 US\$/year (in 1997) (Dore et al., 2004:3).

The remote Nujiang Region is an extreme example of what characterises Yunnan province. Its mountains are even higher, the valleys still deeper, bio-diversity greater, the share of minorities larger, indigenous livelihoods more widespread and its poverty even more pronounced than in the rest of the province. 92% of the region's population belong to ethnic minorities (Haggart, 2005), among which up to 90% are living below the official poverty-line (Gesang, 2004:46). The Nujiang region is also seen as one of the more outstanding examples for the failures of decades of government-driven and outside expert-led development interventions, which have brought much disruption and little improvements to local communities (Wang, 2000; Wilkes, forthcoming).

The Nujiang River is the key life-line for the local communities in that region and the last of two unregulated 'virgin-rivers' in China. It winds down some 2400 km from the Tibet plateau into China's south-western Yunnan Province and then further through Myanmar, where it is called the *Salween* before it finally flows into the Andaman Sea. The Chinese section stretches over 2018 km. The Nujiang valley belongs to one of the biologically and ethnically most diverse regions of the world. A 1.7 Million *ha* large area, which includes the upper section of the middle reaches of the Nujiang has been approved formally as a world heritage site, called the 'Three Parallel Rivers', by UNESCO on July 3, 2003.⁶

⁵ Based on the 2000 National Bureau of Statistics Household Survey, Source: ADB, May 2004, Poverty Profile of the People's Republic of China, p.121. 1 US\$ = 8.08320 CNY

⁶ This World Heritage Site, includes parallel sections of the Nujiang, Lancangjiang (Mekong) and Jinshajiang (Yangtze).

3.2 Increasing Stratification and Social Tensions

China has in the past two decades seen unprecedented economic growth. While this has led to an aggregated increase of incomes and contributed to a significant reduction of absolute poverty it has also fundamentally transformed China's formally highly egalitarian society (Khan et al., 2001:121), with the gap between the poor and the wealthy, rural and urban, western and coastal regions growing at a high speed (Li, 2003:55).⁷ The overwhelming majority of the poor are peasants who live in the mountainous western regions of China and a large proportion of them belong to one of China's 55 so-called 'ethnic minorities'.

One of the more urgent social consequences of this transition has been increasing rural unrest (Perry et al., 2000), ranging from labour conflicts about unpaid wages of rural migrant workers (Mallee, 2000), compensation disputes over rural land use (Ho, forthcoming), increasing rural tax burden (Bernstein, 2004) to an ever-rising number of environmental and resource conflicts (Jun, 2000).⁸ This also includes violent clashes on dams: In autumn 2004, hundreds of villagers, who were protesting against the construction of a dam on the Dadu River in China's Sichuan Province, were detained, and several dozen had been hospitalized after violent clashes with the police (Haggart, 2004). In September 2005, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security declared that income disparity is at 'yellow alert', its second-most serious level, and warned it may soon reach 'red alert'.⁹ These developments are increasingly worrying governments in China, if not for ideological reasons, than certainly for their potential threat to political stability.

While governments' responses to conflicts are not unified, central authorities have in recent years tried to narrow the growing social gap with the 2000 *Great Western Development* (GWD) campaign as a 'centrepiece' in China's present Five-Year Plan (Magee, 2005:4). Yunnan is one of the 12 provinces included in this campaign and Energy development forms one of the pillars of the provincial development strategy within the GWD (ADB, 2002:147).

⁷ Since the beginning of the reform policy, the official number of the poor has been reduced from over 300 Million in 1978 to 130 Million in 1986 and 30 Million in 2002 (Li, 2003)

⁸ China's migrant workers – estimated to number between 100 and 150 million – are collectively owed 100 billion CNY in unpaid wages. Nearly half of the surveyed migrants have had their wages held back at some point (China Youth Daily, June 9, 2005, 'Nongmin weiquan chengben diaocha: zhuitao 1 qiayi qianxin xu 3 qianyi chengben')

⁹ BBC News, World Edition, September 21, 2005, 'China warns on wage gap "unrest"', (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/4266964.stm>).

In addition, legal appeal mechanisms and more participatory decision-making were introduced to deal with disgruntled communities. One such attempt has been the encouragement of public hearings in policy-making through the 2000 Legislation Law (J. Yang, 2005). But as so often, these mechanisms are either not mandatory, institutionalised or binding, or simply not known to affected people. In the local realities, unrest is more often silenced through a ‘carrot-and-stick-strategy’, which usually consists of some symbolic financial compensation and the threat of harsh suppression.

3.3 China’s changing political economy

The new development paradigm which China is pursuing since the 1980s represents a dramatic shift away from food security and social equity towards rapid industrialisation and urbanisation. The beginning of China’s reforms fell right in the heydays of the new emerging neo-liberal development paradigm. Like many other developing countries, China also embarked on the road of structural adjustment, privatisation, market liberalisations and the commercialisation of social services. In the meantime, reforms have generated their own dynamics: China is under enormous pressure to keep generating substantial economic growth in order to provide new employment opportunities. A drop below 8% of annual economic growth is feared to increase the urban unemployment problem ‘to levels that would jeopardize social stability’ (Cheow, 2005).

But while the first two decades of China’s reforms have been mostly characterized by a pursuit of economic growth and integration into the global economy, the environmental externalities of this process are increasingly daunting China. The cost of pollution alone is estimated to amount up to 15% of China’s GDP; desertification and urbanisation have halved habitable and usable land during the past two decades, and a quarter of the population has no access to clean drinking water (Pan Yue, in Lorenz, 2005). This crisis has led to what Peter Ho (2001:899ff) calls the ‘greening of the state’, referring to the process through which the state has created policies, institutions and laws to promote environmental protection.

But these efforts have not reversed the trend of diverting natural resources, which used to sustain livelihoods over generations in China’s remote western regions away to the highly industrialized and wealthier, but resource constraint coastal regions. Energy production in Yunnan is a typical example in this regard: While the

province has one of China's lowest average living standards, it possesses a huge hydropower potential. At present levels, Yunnan already provides roughly 10% of China's total hydropower, but the overall exploitable capacity is estimated to be ten times higher (Dore et al, 2003:4). While proponents argue, that tapping this potential would bring development opportunities to China's poorest western regions, critics view this form of resource transfer as reinforcing regional differentials at the expense of local people's livelihoods and a form of 'internal colonialisation' (Magee, 2005:4-5).

While the pressure on Yunnan's natural resources is primarily the result of a growing domestic and regional energy demand, this trend has been further accelerated by the deregulation and privatisation of the energy sector since the 1990s. This process has led to a shift "*from politics to money*" (interview with Dai Qing) as the driving force behind electricity development. While previous mega projects, like the Three-Gorges Dam, were still pushed by the central government, they are nowadays mostly advanced by corporate interests, driven by their shareholders' quest for investment opportunities and quick returns.

Restructuring of the energy sector began with the transformation of the Ministry of Electric Power into the China State Power Corporation (CSCP) in 1998 and was continued in 2002, when the monopoly of the CSCP was further broken-up into five large companies, which are now listed through subsidiaries on foreign stock markets (Dore et al., 2004:17, Magee, 2005:16).

Although these corporations are formally independent from the state, there remain strong personal linkages to the government. Li Xiaopeng, the Chairman of the Huaneng Group, is the son of China's previous Premier Li Peng, who himself was one of the key promoters of the controversial Three-Gorges dam on the Yangtze in the early 1990s. These linkages between politics and economics have led to serious allegations of corruption. One such example is the former Yunnan Province Party Secretary and CPCC member, Gao Yan, who served as the first Director of the CSCP. Gao fled China in 2002 after he was suspected of large fraud related to his position in CSCP. A report by China's Auditor General in 2004 revealed widespread abuse at the power company and stated that China State Power had incurred losses of \$947 million between 1998 to 2002. The report suggests that up to \$386 million on losses is traceable to Gao Yan (Chen, 2004).

Along with this process of privatisation, the State Council has assigned the development rights on major watersheds to each of these corporations. Out of the big five hydropower corporations created through this process of deregulation, the two particularly active in Yunnan's hydropower development are the Huaneng Group, which holds the majority of development rights on the Lancangjiang (Mekong) and Jinshajiang (upper reaches of the Yangtze), and Huadian, which holds the development rights over the Nujiang (Dore et al. 2003:4). Their push for new projects has created a surge in hydropower development in Southwest China over the past years with hydro-projects being built or planned on almost every river, including the Jinshajiang, the Zhujiang, the Lancangjiang and the Nujiang. Many of these are advanced without any official approval or having conducted the required Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) (Chen, 2005). "The situation is reminiscent of the Great Leap Forward in the 1950s, when crude steel smelters cropped up in every backyard" (Chen, 2005).

3.4 Conclusion

China's reforms have created an enormous potential for conflict in a geographically and socially more and more stratified society. In dealing with this challenge, the state is increasingly facing contentious trade-offs between the social and environmental externalities which threaten political stability on the one hand and the dynamics of the new market economy on the other. Only last month, in October 2005, the Chinese government released the draft of its latest five-year development plan, which is "urging a halt to environmental destruction while still pushing for rapid economic growth" (Buckley, 2005). These inherent tensions are accelerated by the growing influence of corporate interests, which are pushing the boundaries of marketisation further westward and a blurring of public and private interests at the local level (Dore et al., 2004:i). It remains unclear and highly contested how to reconcile these competing objectives (Cheow, 2005).

The Nujiang region is a typical example of an area which has gained little from China's rapid development and yet has still much to lose. With development along the Nujiang being increasingly dominated by powerful economic interests and political agendas, one indeed wonders where this leaves the affected people. There are few institutionalised opportunities for participation and with many of the Nujiang people not being able to speak Chinese; even access to basic information can be extremely

difficult for them. Will these communities have a say in the Nujiang dam mega-project, which is likely to fundamentally transform their livelihoods and is estimated to create some 50.000 dam-migrants?

4 THE NUJIANG CAMPAIGN

4.1 Timeline¹⁰

Shortly after the UNESCO listed ‘The Three Parallel Rivers’ as a world-heritage site in July 2003, the Yunnan Provincial Government announced plans to build a 13-stage dam, partly inside the protected area, with a projected total capacity of 23.320 MW – an amount which would more than double the world’s largest Three-Gorges dam on the Yangtze river.

The following month, on September 1, 2003, the new EIA law took effect, after which SEPA convened a first expert panel to review the plans to develop hydropower on the Nujiang. Based on concerns over a loss of biodiversity, geological instabilities, cultural impacts and doubts on the positive affect for poverty alleviation, SEPA proclaimed serious reservations towards the plans (Dore et al. 2003).

In order to counter the critique of the SEPA expert panel, the Yunnan government convened their own ‘Yunnan expert meeting’, at which none of the critics from Beijing were present. Unsurprisingly, the Yunnan experts found that the concerns were either unsubstantiated or manageable and the plan should go ahead. It was argued that hydropower development on the Nujiang would bring development and a significant reduction of poverty to this remote and poor region of Yunnan and increase government revenues.¹¹ The local media in Yunnan was widely used during these months to propagate the benefits of the dam.

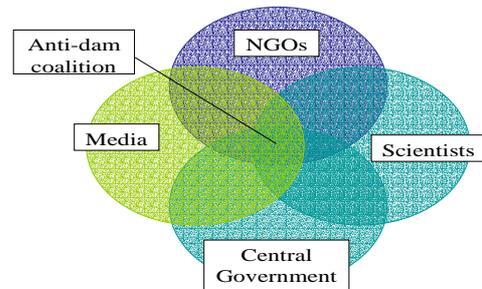
These conflicting views among different levels of government provided an opening for a public debate on this issue. Subsequently a coalition of ENGOs (mostly from Beijing and Yunnan), scientists and journalists (see graph 1) joined forces with critics inside the government (mostly within SEPA) and began to launch what evolved into a ‘Chinese anti-dam movement’ (Litzinger, 2005:1). The public debate which followed and the participation by a wide range of different interest groups in it,

¹⁰ Unless otherwise referenced, information in this chapter is based on Dore et al., 2003.

¹¹ According to claims by the director of the Nujiang Strategic Committee Office, the Nujiang dam will increase the annual income of the local administration by 2.7 Billion CNY (Zhao, 2004).

signals a marked change in decision-making processes in China and stands in stark contrast to the intransparent manner in which such issues had previously been decided behind closed doors.

Graph 1: The Composition of the Nujiang Campaign Coalition



SEPA's opposition had led to a first delay of the construction. By March 2004 dozens of conferences and workshops had been held on the issue, petition letters written, numerous news reports filed, websites set up, and public exhibitions organised. At the beginning of April 2004, the campaign had a first unexpected success, when Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao ordered a suspension of the construction plans and demanded further investigation, based on the 'controversial' debate it had triggered.

We should carefully consider and make scientific decision about major hydro-electric projects like this that have aroused a high level of concern in society, and with which the environmental protection side disagrees (Wen Jiabao, quoted from Yardley, 2004:1).

But it soon becomes clear that this had only temporarily halted the construction. The Yunnan government and the hydropower corporations continued to develop their plans for the exploitation of Yunnan's biggest rivers, revised plans for hydropower development on the Nujiang and resubmitted the previously rejected EIA (Huang, 2004:1).

In August 2005, after two years of opposition, SEPA finally approved the revised EIA for the Nujiang "amid signs of revived official favour for the project" (Buckley, 2005). ENGOs are presently demanding to make the EIA report and the revised plans for the development of the Nujiang open for public scrutiny. The struggle over the Nujiang is continuing.

4.2 The ENGO coalition

The Nujiang campaign could build on a gradual trend of increased cooperation and environmental advocacy among ENGOs which had begun to emerge gradually since the year 2000, when a group of grass-roots ENGOs had jointly participated in the Johannesburg World Summit (Interview with Liao Xiaoyi, BGV). While previous ENGO advocacy focused on less controversial and mostly local issues (Hu et al., 2005:127), the Nujiang dam was different: Due to its scope it affected central level government departments, and it challenged the interests of very influential actors. The participating ENGOs knew that they were rather weak and that more unity would mean more strength in this challenging confrontation.

Closer networking emerged gradually. At the beginning of the campaign in 2003, most of the activities were driven by a few committed individuals – particularly through Wang Yongchen in Beijing and Yu Xiaogang in Kunming and supported by four ENGOs (GV, FON, BGV in Beijing and GWS in Kunming) as a core group. The two ENGOs, BGV and FON let the other two take the lead in it. They respected and trusted Wang and Yu, and they felt that their own organisations lacked expertise on dam related issues (interviews with Liao Xiaoyi, BGV and Liang Congjie, FON).

A number of other ENGOs (such as CBIK) were also involved in the campaign without affiliating themselves closely with the emerging network (interview with Li Bo, CBIK). The strong academic background of CBIK (which evolved out of the Yunnan Institute of Ethno-Botany) separated them from the activism of the other ENGOs (Interview with Li Bo, CBIK). It is also interesting to note that while some foreign NGOs supported the Chinese ENGOs from abroad (such as the IRN which linked them to the global anti-dam movement and made large amounts of information available) and some international donors provided small funding support for campaign-related activities (such as Oxfam-Hongkong and CI), none of the big international ENGOs active in China (WWF, TNC, Greenpeace) ever formally joined the campaign and remained largely silent on the Nujiang dam (Interviews with Shi Lihong, CRN; Xue Ye, FON).

After a joint trip with NGO activists, scholars and journalists to the Nujiang in February 2004 and the subsequent photo exhibitions, the campaign started to attract the interest of more local environmental groups in China. Apparently a sense of a common goal and a joint agenda had emerged (interview with Shi Lihong, CRN).

The ‘Journalist Salon’ (*jizhe shalong*), which was initiated in 2000 by the two ENGO activists Wang Yongchen and Zhang Kejia from Green Island (GI), provided a forum which brought ENGOs, scientist and journalists together on a monthly basis. In August 2004 during a meeting of the Journalist Salon, the proposal was put forward to set up a more formal structure for the coordination of dam-related activities, which led to the formation of the *China River Network* (CRN). CRN now has its own office space at the office at FON, employs one fulltime staff and a number of volunteers. It has set-up a website (www.chinarivers.ngo.cn), which is linked to the website of the IRN. CRN is supported by its eight member-ENGOs, which all contribute to the financing of the network.¹²

4.3 The Goals of the Nujiang Campaign

The campaign goals of the ENGOs were never explicitly defined collectively, but in retrospective a clear shift of focus emerges. On its onset the campaign was primarily directed against the construction of the dam on the Nujiang, motivated by the concern over its pristine environment and rich bio-diversity. But during the course of campaigning, there was increasing concern over non-conservationist issues related to the dam, such as its impact on the livelihoods of local communities and the fate of ten thousands of potential dam migrants. This process led to what Wang Yongchen called a “shift from biodiversity to people”. It made the construction of the dam less of an issue, but rather focused on the process leading to a decision.

Our purpose is not about stopping the damming of one or two rivers. Our real goal is to let all ordinary people participate in the decision-making process on China’s hydroelectric projects (Yu Xiaogang, GWS, in: Tang, 2005).

This shift of focus implied that the campaign was increasingly looking at the underlying problems for what the ENGOs called the ‘hydropower-hype’ in Yunnan and to address the structural factors behind it. This also led to the realisation that the Nujiang was not unique, and that hydropower development was going on or being planned in other parts of southwest China for similar reasons. The contestation began to include calls for a review of the national energy policy and an overhaul of the governance processes for energy development (Dore et al., 2004:29) as well as an

¹² These eight organisations are: GWS, GV, FON, BGV, IED, Luse Hanjiang, Tianxiaqi and GI.

increased focus on the social and cultural impacts of dam-building (which are not covered by the EIA) and not a requirement for a formal approval of a dam.

There were differences among the NGOs regarding the question, whether these governance issues were a means for the final objective of *conservation*, or if the environmental issue, in this case the Nujiang dam, was a means for the final objective of political change and democratisation. While only one interviewee believed, that ENGOs should not become ‘politicised’, and stick to their mandate of conservation (interview with Wang Jianghong, FON), the majority of NGO activists interviewed in this research saw the two goals of conservation and democratisation as inseparably linked. Some interviewees raised the question of the hierarchy among these two goals. Liao Xiaoyi (who had spent many years in the US) said:

We need both: harmony between humans and nature, *and* democracy. But if democracy only means the right to recklessly consume natural resources, like in the US, it has no value for us. The goal of harmony between humans and nature should be above the goal of democracy (interview Liao Xiaoyi, BGV).

In contrast, Tang Xiyang, founder of the ENGO *Green Camp*, describes democracy as a precondition for successful conservation: “without real democratic life, there will not be everlasting green rivers or mountains”.¹³ Likewise Shi Lihong said that her motivation to join the environmental movement in China was never out of pure environmentalism:

openly we can only say that environmental protection is our objective, but in reality we all know that this is intrinsically related to governance and political issues (interview with Shi Lihong, CRN).

This shifting of goals is not only limited to the Nujiang campaign, but also characterises the general trend of development within the involved ENGOs. Wang Yongchen has described this as a process from “collecting garbage, watching birds and planting trees to promoting public participation”. While the diverse nature of campaigns with evolving and shifting goals has been described in other case studies outside of China (see for example: Chapmann et al, 2000), this process in the Nujiang campaign was widely supported by the different members of the campaign. It can be partly seen as a process of conscientisation and politicisation. At the same time it was probably also a strategic response against the critique of the dam proponents, who

¹³ Tang Xiyang, in an unpublished book manuscript *Cuo! Cuo! Cuo!*, quoted from Yang (2005:34f).

accused ENGOs of practicing ‘environmental fundamentalism’ (interview with anonymous MOWR official).

This led the ENGOs to promote the interests of local communities in a policy-making process, which was otherwise largely dominated by political and economic interests (Li Dajun, 2004:1). But while this shift represents a politicisation of ENGOs, it was never understood by them as directed against the central government. Most of the activists rather saw themselves in support of central authorities.

Our advocacy was never aimed at stirring up trouble for our government. Rather, we see advocacy and participation in policy-making processes as the only way to prevent trouble and harm (interview with Yu Xiaogang, GWS).

But at least parts of the government had a different interpretation of the role of the ENGOs. Why were ENGOs in China willing to involve themselves in this issue and venture into policy advocacy, despite being aware of the sensitive nature of this case, the interests of the powerful dam-proponents? What were their motivations?

4.4 The Motivations of the Nujiang Campaign

Because of the spontaneous character of the campaign and the lack of clearly defined campaign objectives by the ENGOs, individual and organisational motivations for joining the campaign appeared largely intertwined and sometimes difficult to separate in this research. Nonetheless, two kinds of motivations emerged from the interviews: the first kind related to the role of the respective ENGOs in China’s society. The second group was more related to alternative views on a number of social and political problems.

On the organisational side, one motivation expressed by most ENGO representatives, was a general desire to go beyond the previous stages of their activities and get involved in “more meaningful activities” (interview with Xue Ye, FON). Particularly among the younger ENGO members, there was a strong feeling that ten years after the first ENGOs in China were created, it was time to move beyond “bird-watching, tree planting and garbage collection” (interview with Xue Ye, FON), which Nick Young described as largely related to a ‘generation change’ within China’s NGOs.

The individual motivations of the involved activists to become active in the campaign cover a wide range. One key aspect here was the disbelieve in consumerism and materialist values and the refusal to accept a view of poverty defined only in

material terms and based on disrespect for traditional cultures (interview with Wang Yongchen, GV). Others were more motivated by their own interpretation of socialist values, like Yu Xiaogang, who calls himself “a fundamentalist communist” whose mission it is to fight for the “underprivileged” (quoted from Tang, 2005:1). This desire to rebalance power differentials was also expressed through a widely shared mistrust against corporate interests and their merging with local political elites: “our local governments have been hijacked by corporate interests and the communities lose out” (interview with Li Bo, CBIK). Underlying all these motivations is a strong desire for more than just superficial change:

China has changed so many emperors and dynasties, but in the end many things have remained the same. The lack of public participation is one such example (interview with Xue Ye, FON).

4.5 Conclusion

The Nujiang campaign is comprised of different actors, which include ENGOs, the media, scientists and parts of the government. The campaign coalition was initially based on informal and highly personalised connections between these different ‘fields’ of actors, but later began building more formal structures to sustain these linkages.

What started as an anti-dam campaign for the sake of environmental conservation, soon turned into advocating social equity and good governance for the sake of a more people-centred development. This shift is motivated by a range of institutional, social, environmental and political concerns and values, resulting in a desire for fundamental, but not radical change. It is characteristic for a more general trend of politicisation among Chinese grass-roots ENGOs and at least partly related to a generation-change within them.

5 THE ACTIVITIES AND STRATEGIES OF THE NUJIANG CAMPAIGN

5.1 Adversaries and Strategies

According to all NGO activists interviewed in this research, there was no clear strategy designed at the outset of the campaign, neither within any of the NGOs involved in the campaign, nor between them. Rather, the campaign evolved in the interaction of different actors and can best be described as ‘spontaneous’ (Hu et al.,

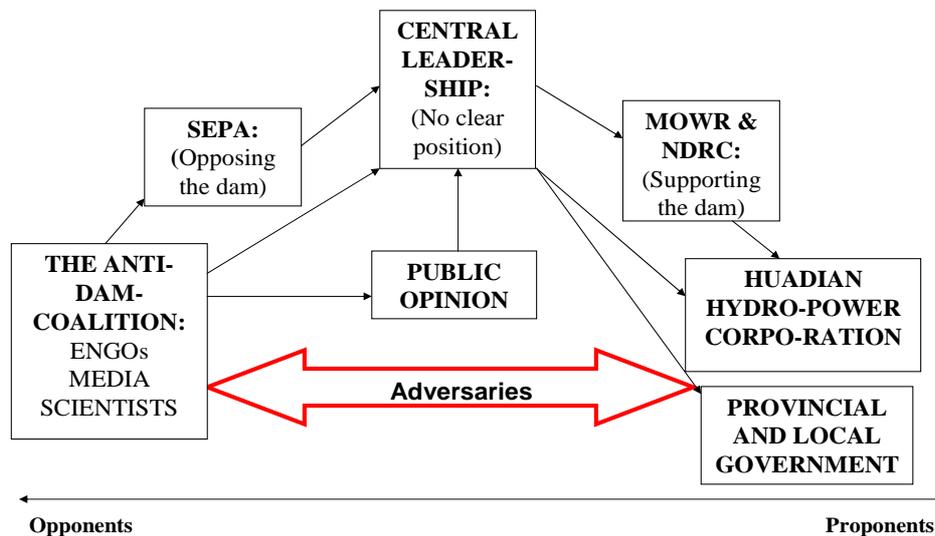
2005:129), and relied upon the dedication of individual members, rather than the collectively approved strategy of an entire organisation or network.¹⁴ Nonetheless, throughout the campaign, a number of key activities evolved, which in retro-perspective can be identified as a coherent strategy.

One of the interesting features of the campaign is, that while it was primarily aimed against the Huadian corporation and the Yunnan provincial government as key proponents of the dam construction, the contestation did hardly take place directly between them, but mostly indirectly through lobbying the central government.

The Nujiang dam is driven by corporations, and corporations are driven by the logic of investment and returns. They constantly need to find new projects to sustain themselves, but this has nothing to do with sustainable development. At the end of the day it is only the central government which can keep these corporations in check (interview with Xue Ye, FON).

Here a mix of *outsider* and *insider* strategies (Chapman et al., 2000) can be identified, through which the campaign-coalition either directly through SEPA or indirectly through the mobilisation of public opinion called upon central leadership to limit and redirect the thrust of the dam proponents (see graph 2).

Graph 2: The Campaign and its Institutional Setting



¹⁴ FON and CBIK are both examples where individual members in the organisation were very active in the campaign (without having been formally mandated), while the organisation as a whole was much less involved. See interviews with Xue Ye, FON, August 16, 2005; He Jun, CBIK, August 14, 2005 and Li Bo, CBIK, August 8, 2005

5.2 Mobilising Allies

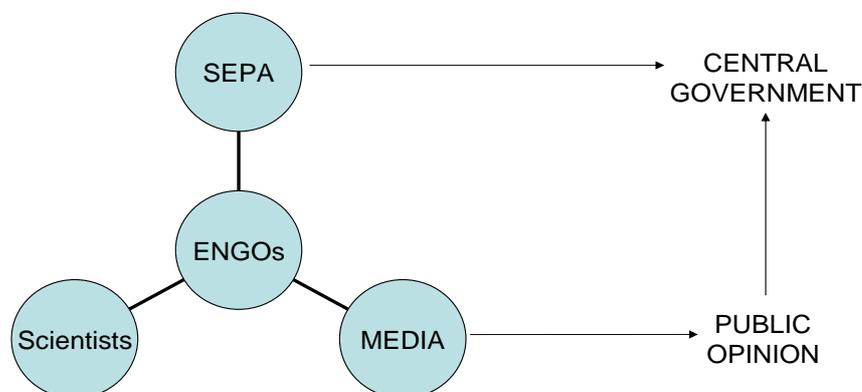
In the general absence of formal spaces for debate and contestation by NGOs, there was a need to mobilise other influential allies. This coalition-building was not only limited to other ENGOs, as discussed previously, but took place with a range of different actors, including, the media, scientists, and SEPA (see graph 3) and was primarily geared towards generating debate and opening spaces for participation.

(a) Lobbying through the inside - the relation between ENGOs and SEPA

Close cooperation between SEPA and ENGOs was not new to the Nujiang case. ENGOs had previously supported SEPA's call for 'green Olympics' in Beijing 2008, lobbied for SEPA's inclusion into the GWD leading group, and jointly conducted a campaign for energy conservation (Economy, 2005).

In the case of the Nujiang campaign, this cooperation was mostly based on two individuals within this state agency. The first is Mu Guangfeng, the former head of the EIA-department at SEPA, who is a close friend of ENGO- and media-activist Wang Yongchen. Mu got demoted when SEPA came under pressure after the so-called 'environmental storm', when it held 30 mega projects which did not comply with EIA law in 2004 (Lu, 2005b:2). Mu Guangfeng describes himself as "a government official for eight hours a day, while for the rest of the time I am an environmental activist" (interview with Mu Guangfeng, SEPA).

Graph 3: The Nujiang Campaign Coalition and its Principal Advocacy Channels



The second key person for the ENGOs in SEPA is Pan Yue, who was appointed Vice-Minister of SEPA in March 2003. Ever since, Pan is warning that blind economic growth in China is unsustainable. He has been advocating the introduction of a 'green GDP' (Lorenz, 2005) and is seen as the key driver behind the *environmental storm*, triggered by SEPA in 2004. Pan is equally unorthodox in promoting further democratisation for the sake of environmental sustainability:

Political co-determination should be part of any socialist democracy. I want more discussions with the people affected. (...) We need a law that enables and guarantees public participation, especially when it comes to environmental projects (interview with Pan Yue, in: Lorenz, 2005).

In this quest, Pan has described Chinese ENGOs as the 'natural allies of SEPA' and has hailed their promotion of people's participation not as a threat to social stability, but as a precondition for it (interview Xue Ye, FON).

The relative weakness of SEPA, the personal friendship between Mu and Wang, and a courageous Vice Minister provided the ENGOs with a key ally inside the government. In this phase of diverging views among different parts of the government, one key component of the ENGOs campaign was to strengthen the position of SEPA against the proponents of the dam. 'We never directly confront the government, but we support one department to oppose another' (interview with Wang Jianghong, FON). This alliance made sense for both sides. It was perceived by the ENGOs as a relation based on a common agenda and shared values of individuals.

(b) Direct lobbying of the government

Apart from the cooperation with SEPA, there were also some direct appeals to the central government, organised by ENGOs: The first one was a petition in October 2003, initiated by Wang Yongchen for which she mobilised the signatures of 62 well-known Chinese scientists, artists, journalists and NGO leaders, demanding to preserve China's 'last remaining virgin river'; in December 2003 the Green Volunteer League in Chongqing City mobilized 10.000 Students to sign a petition letter against the Nujiang dam and the most recent example is a joint appeal of more than 60 Chinese NGOs in August 2005 after the word got out that SEPA had finally approved the EIA.

In an open letter they demanded to make the content of the revised EIA for the Nuijiang public as a “prerequisite for public participation”.¹⁵

(c) Lobbying from the outside - mobilising the media

The mobilisation of allies outside the ENGOs themselves depended for a large part on the multiple professional backgrounds of ENGO activists. Many founders of Chinese ENGOs are themselves journalists, like Wang Yongchen (GV), or Zhang Kejia, (GI) and some organisations have made a great effort to recruit journalists into their ranks. At present four out of the eight board members of FON are from the media (Hu et al., 2005: 130), which leads many commentators to conclude a close ‘affinity’ and a ‘profound friendship’ (Hu et al. 2005:129) between Chinese ENGOs and the media.

In order to further this relationship and sensitise journalists for environmental issues, ENGOs organised a number of activities and forums throughout the campaign: The Journalist Salon brought different actors together and functioned as an information clearing house, which provided journalists with hard-to-access background information. In February 2004, GWS and GV organized an ‘investigative tour’ to the Nuijiang for journalist and scholars (Litzinger, 2004), which was one of the few opportunities for journalists outside of Yunnan to get first-hand information in one of China’s most remote regions. During my research in August 2005, GV organised a media workshop in Beijing, where ENGO activists, scientists, SEPA-officials and journalists were discussing strategies of reporting and framing dam-related news.

Through these contacts, many ENGO activists got the opportunity to express their views indirectly as well as directly through numerous interviews and even some high-profile China Central Television (CCTV) programs, such as *Xinwen Diaocha*.¹⁶ They also provided the space for affected communities to express their own concerns, and bring those to the attention of the public.¹⁷

¹⁵ Quoted from a translation of the open letter (source: Three Gorges Probe, <http://www.Threegorgesprobe.org/tgp/index.cfm?DSP=content&ContentID=13670>)

¹⁶ Wang Yongchen and Yu Xiaogang participated in the program in January 2004. Source: Interview with Huang Guangcheng, August 11, 2005

¹⁷ Like in a China Youth Daily front-page article from October 2004, which voiced many concerns of affected people who, through the support of the ENGOs, had participated in the UN symposium on sustainable hydro-power development in Beijing (Hu et al., 2005:137).

In addition, the ENGOs made extensive use of their own media-channels, such as newsletters or the internet. The websites of the involved ENGOs carried articles and discussions on bulletin-board-systems (BBS) and one website entirely dedicated to the Nujiang dam was set-up.^{18, 19}

(d) Linking with critical experts

Another set of activities focused on creating a critical debate with and within the scientific community. Similar to the media linkages, ENGOs maintained close contacts with critical academics and experts. After many of the dam-critical scientists in Yunnan were sidelined by the provincial government (interview with A. Wilkes, CBIK), the ENGOs and many of the forums which they had created, provided alternative spaces for them.

Towards the end of 2003 and the beginning of 2004 a whole series of local, national and international conferences and workshops were either organised by ENGOs themselves, or jointly with academic partner-organisations, where critical experts were given a space to speak out. The ENGOs also helped to establish contacts between scientists, opposed to the dam and SEPA. Through her personal contact with SEPA, Wang Yongchen facilitated the participation of one of the most outspoken critics, Yunnan scholar He Daming, in the expert meeting in September 2003 in Beijing. He reportedly played a key role in SEPA's decision not to approve the EIA for the dam (Cao, 2004). Another avenue for critical voices from the academic community was through scientific publications, which were addressing many of the underlying problems related to the Nujiang campaign: a critique of economic-growth-driven development (Zheng Yisheng, 2005:256 ff), governance problems (Li, 2004), or the absence of social and cultural impact assessments in mega projects (Huang, 2005:38ff).²⁰

¹⁸ In a survey of 74 Chinese ENGOs in March 2004, 40 were found to have an own website and 24 host BBS on their sites (Yang, 2004:7).

¹⁹ www.nujiang.ngo.cn, hosted by the Beijing 'Institute for Environment and Development'.

²⁰ One such example is: Zheng (2005).

5.3 Promoting Participation from the Grass-Roots

A last, but crucial set of activities was directed at the affected communities in Yunnan province, which until then had not only remained uninvolved in the debate and decision-making process, but were largely denied access to critical information through a news-blackout in the local and provincial media.

The Kunming-based ENGO Green Watershed (GWS) provided the link to these communities and organised a range of activities, which aimed at giving them a better understanding of the potential impact of a dam on their lives, and created opportunities which allowed them to directly voice their opinions and concerns. GWS organised a ‘village-to-village’ visit in May 2004 of 14 community representatives from the Nujiang to meet relocated villagers from the Manwan dam on Jinshajiang. Afterwards, Nujiang communities were given an opportunity by GWS to voice their opinions to the public through the media (Hu et al., 2005:134). In July 2004, GWS organised a training workshop for (potentially) dam-affected communities from the Nujiang, Jinshajiang and Lancangjiang. The workshop was covering issues of river protection and preservation by communities, concepts and strategies of the *World Commission on Dams* (WCD), information on Chinese resettlement policies, and a training on ‘Participatory Social Impact Assessment’ (Hu et al., 2005:134).

In October 2004, GWS, took representatives of five dam affected communities to participate in the United Nations Symposium on Hydropower and Sustainable Development, where the villagers used several opportunities to criticize the decision-making process and demanded more participation and more concern for sustainable development (Lu, 2005:3).

5.4 Conclusion

The above mentioned activities show that ENGOs were advocating for a wide range of different changes, largely in line with what Wilkes (forthcoming) describes as the alternative development view for Yunnan. The activities can be categorized according to a hierarchy of different advocacy objectives (see table 1), which illustrate a process of politicisation among ENGOs throughout the campaign by increasingly addressing the underlying problems and their causes related to the Nujiang dam. The table also highlights that the campaign was much more than just an ‘anti-dam campaign’, and for a large part addressed the structural problems and more fundamental issues of governance, social equity and sustainable development, underlying the Nujiang dam.

Table 1: Hierarchy of Advocacy Objectives in the Nujiang Campaign

<i>Advocacy objectives</i>	<i>Example of the Nujiang campaign</i>
1. Advocating environmental conservation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Petition to preserve ‘China’s last remaining virgin river’
2. Advocating adherence with existing legal and administrative procedures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocating for an EIA, conducted according to the EIA law • Advocating fair economic compensation for dam-migrants • Advocating that hydropower projects are only done in accordance with comprehensive watershed development plans and national plans for hydropower development (not the case in Yunnan)
3. Advocating an expansion of existing legal and administrative procedures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocating to conduct social and cultural impact analysis • Advocating to make the approved EIA public • Advocating that the EIA is conducted by independent experts
4. Advocating social equity through promoting participation and rights of affected communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bringing local communities to participate in debates and conferences on the dam • Organising workshops to inform local communities on potential environmental, social and economic impacts, and their rights • Advocating public hearings on construction plans
5. Advocating a change of dominant development paradigms which lead to unsustainable and un-equitable development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opposing exploitation of natural resources by profit-driven corporations • Advocating to factor-in social and environmental externalities in the feasibility study for the dam • Advocating to explore alternative development opportunities which are based on indigenous development potentials of the local communities and ensure direct benefit by them

6 THE EFFECTS AND BOUNDARIES OF THE CAMPAIGN

6.1 The Effects

After having assessed the objectives, motivations and strategies of the campaign in the previous part, this chapter looks at the effects and impacts of the campaign. This is difficult for several reasons: Firstly, effects in general are hard to measure and even harder to attribute to particular agents and activities (Dolzer et al., 1998). This becomes even more apparent, when trying to account not only for direct affects, but for the many side effects of complex interventions (ibid.). Secondly, affects are hard to determine with the campaign still ongoing and the final decision on the dam still outstanding. Finally, a clear analysis of the effects would require a disaggregation of the different actors and their relevant contributions to the effects. Given the complex composition of the campaign coalition, the task at hand becomes even more difficult. I therefore base this chapter primarily on the subjective judgements of the actors who have contributed to this research and not attempt an objective conclusion. In the following sub-chapter, I will then move on and assess the contributions of the ENGOs to the campaign.

The most immediate effect of the campaign was the temporary suspension of the construction through the announcement of the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao. Even in case of a go-ahead for the constructions, it seems likely that the campaign will have made an impact on the way the project is implemented. This becomes clear from a statement of an official in the MOWR:

NGO critique and media attention led to the rejection of the EIA and triggered an additional assessment visit by high level scientists and government officials. It also led to the inclusion of social scientists as consultants into the planning process. We had much more internal debate and critique in the second round of planning. The new plans we are working on will probably limit the scope of the project and readjust the distribution of benefits in favour of local population. The longer the planning process, the more equal the distribution of benefits and the more attention will be given to resettlement issues” (interview with anonymous official from the MOWR).

One of the politically more relevant implications has been expressed in an internal *urgent notice* of the NRDC, which insists on the integration of local hydropower development plans into comprehensive national plans and thereby may in the future prevent the unchecked rush of corporations without any political control (NDRC, 2004).

A second effect of the campaign is that it has triggered debate, increased awareness and promoted participation in a system, where most political decisions are taken behind closed doors by a small elite of decision makers. The campaign has actively brought a different set of views on the dam to the public, academics, decision-makers and local communities and has provided spaces for participation in the debate by different stakeholders. This also includes the communities affected by dams, who, largely through the work of the ENGOs, have become more aware of their rights.

Thereby the campaign has brought a range of issues to a much wider attention, which are not only limited to the negative environmental impacts of large dams, but equally include governance issues, such as a lack of transparency, participation, and accountability in decision-making processes as well as the crucial question regarding the distribution of benefits from China’s rapid development.

The campaign and particularly the public support it had triggered, have also led to some shifts in the influence of government departments. According to the interviewed official from SEPA, the campaign has contributed towards strengthening

the position of SEPA within the central government and versus local governments and corporate interests.

The campaign has also generated a range of side-effects. First of all, it has helped to raise the profile of NGOs within China. This is not only limited to an increased recognition of NGOs among the public, but also within those parts of the government, which previously had little contact with NGOs. One official said during the closing-remarks of the UNDP conference on sustainable hydropower development in Beijing that the most important new word he had learned during that conference was 'NGO' (interview with Wang Yongchen, GV).

The campaign has also further strengthened cooperation among ENGOs, including the setting-up of formal networking mechanisms like the CRN and has established alliances between ENGOs and other actors. These developments have culminated into what Litzinger (2005:1) calls a Chinese anti-dam movement.

For all the involved ENGOs the campaign has implied a process of political conscientisation, through which a much clearer understanding of underlying causes and conflicting interests have been brought about. Within some of the ENGOs, this awareness has led to a reorientation of their work, with a clearer focus on advocacy and the formulation of strategies for scaling-up their impact (interviews with Li Bo, A. Wilkes, CBIK and Xue Ye, FON).

From the perspective of the ENGOs, there are also some negative effects. Most apparent in this regard is the pressure which at least two of the involved organisations are facing presently, one being threatened with closure. The increased coordination and contestation of ENGOs is being increasingly countered by dam proponents who recently have embarked on a campaign to discredit NGOs as un-scientific, anti-development and un-patriotic. The active expansion of spaces during the campaign has clearly triggered a counter-response from parts of the government, some academic circles and different corporations (see chapter 6.4).

6.2 ENGOs in the Campaign – The Weakest Part but the Strongest Link

As becomes apparent from the above description of activities and strategies, the campaign was conducted by a quartet of actors, comprised of ENGOs, the media, scientist, and committed individuals within SEPA. Yang (2005:46) calls this 'the multi-institutional dynamics of civil society', where the interaction of different

‘institutional fields’ becomes the agent for change, rather than one single institutional field alone.

Among ENGO activists this joint nature of the campaign and the contributions of other actors, in particular the media is recognised, but there are different views among them regarding the question of how important ENGOS were in the campaign. The responses to this question ranged from “NGOs were of decisive importance” (Liang Congjie, FON) to statements like “it was a joint effort, in which NGOs were the weakest part” (Xue Ye, FON) or

It (*the Nujiang campaign*) is simply an illusion of increased NGO strength. Rather than saying that NGO actions have had some effect, it would be more accurate to say that the SEPA has been in action, and it successfully used NGOs to help achieve its objective” (an NGO director, quoted from Lu, 2005b:4).

Some of the activists in ‘dual roles’ found it difficult to separate between the impact of ENGOS in relation to the other ‘field’ which they represented. Nonetheless, one feature which quite clearly emerges from the responses is the role of ENGOS as a horizontal link between the different actors. Xue Ye, after depicting the ENGOS as the weakest part among the different allies, continues by saying “..., but we were the strongest link among them”.

Shi Lihong also stresses the role of ENGOS as ‘mobilisers’ of the media and the critical scientific community, and He Jun highlights the role of ENGOS as an information clearing house between the media and the scientists. Another perceived strength of the ENGOS is their relative freedom to speak out on controversial or sensitive topics: “NGOs can quickly come forth and say a lot of things which even the government would not dare to say” (Shi Lihong, CRN).

These statements together point towards the multiple roles played by the ENGOS in the campaign. The first one is the mobilisation of other influential actors. The second one lies in horizontal networking between these different actors and the third one in their ability to create spaces for contestation and to voice critique. In a society with traditionally very strong vertical hierarchies, characterised by a chronic shortage of public debate and contestation, the contribution of the ENGOS towards building horizontal linkages and generating debate, should not be underestimated.

Despite all this, ENGOS are still widely aware of their relative weakness and the need to find support from more influential allies. Li Bo (CBIK) said during the interview:

There is a Chinese proverb which says ‘even the most talented housewife can’t cook without ingredients’, but that’s exactly what Chinese NGOs are trying to do. I see this as their virtue!

6.3 The Boundaries of Advocacy in the Nujiang Campaign

Riker (1995:23) in his analysis of NGOs in south and southeast Asia states that the spaces in which NGOs operate are only partly determined by the parameters set by the state. They are also the outcome of interactions between different actors, including the state and NGOs (ibid). This stands in clear contrast to the theory of state corporatism, which suggests that spaces for NGOs are provided from ‘above’ by the state.

The Nujiang campaign shows, that the involved ENGOs were not only expanding into the spaces, which were opened-up by others (such as SEPA), but also actively expanded their operational spaces. The case-study also illustrates that the boundaries of spaces are not clearly defined, but are fluid, increasingly contested from different sides, and show significant regional and other differences.

There is a lot of variation. There are geographic differences and there are more or less sensitive issues. Boundaries of advocacy in Tibet are different from Yunnan, and Yunnan again is different from Beijing. Boundaries for contesting dams is different from advocacy on AIDS or poverty alleviation. Different departments and levels of Government can play very different roles in expanding or limiting the boundaries of NGOs” (interview Li Bo, CBIK).

Defining the boundaries of ENGO advocacy in the Nujiang campaign is indeed difficult, because the realities in which these organisations operate in the Nujiang campaign are what Robert Chambers (1995:173ff) calls ‘local, diverse, complex and dynamic’ and what Saich (2000:124ff) has described as the result of a complex process of negotiation. Based on my research, I find it impossible to clearly determine the boundaries of NGO advocacy – even for the limited case of the Nujiang campaign. But while the situation in which the ENGOs operate contains many elements of post-modern ‘messiness’, there are still identifiable factors and trends which have expanding or limiting effect on the spaces for ENGOs in the Nujiang campaign. I will therefore focus in this chapter on these factors and trends which have determined these spaces, rather than attempting to draw clear and fixed boundaries.

One of these trends is that spaces for debate and contestation have generally been expanding. This becomes particularly apparent, when one compares the Nujiang campaign with the opposition against the equally controversial Three-Gorges dam in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when opposition depended on a few individuals in the

media and the scientific community and was quickly and harshly silenced (on the Three-Gorges dam, see: Dai Qing, 1992).²¹ This expansion of spaces for debate and contestation in the Nujiang campaign manifests itself not only in the role of the associational sector, but even more so for the ENGO-allies, in particular the media, but also increasingly divergent positions within the government apparatus.

A second trend is, that ENGOs are no longer limiting their activities to ‘invited spaces’, but create alternative spaces and proactively explore the boundaries of existing spaces.

We have already pushed the boundaries of our activities much further. We started with planting trees and environmental education for school children. Now we are interfering into politics. (...) How far these boundaries of advocacy can be expanded by us, is hard to say, but we are exploring the limits of how far we can go (interview Liang Congjie, FON).

ENGOs in the Nujiang campaign simultaneously operate in different types of spaces. Following Gaventa’s (2004) continuum of invited, created and closed spaces, I have classified the ENGO activities (see table 2), in order to show the diversity of operational spaces as well as the trend to expand activities from the open ‘invited spaces’ into newly ‘created spaces’ and even venturing into what the ENGO activists still perceive as ‘closed spaces’.

Table 2: ENGO activities according to different types of spaces

<i>Type of space</i>	<i>Main characteristic</i>	<i>Relation with the state</i>	<i>Examples in the Nujiang campaign</i>
Invited space	NGO activities take place in spaces which are created by the government for NGOs, and are limited to activities explicitly desired by the state	State-led, non-confrontational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poverty alleviation for dam migrants • Non-confrontational environmental education (garbage collection, illegal logging/hunting by local communities)
Created space	NGOs activities take place in a space, which is created by NGOs outside the <i>invited</i> and <i>closed spaces</i> . The activities within that space are determined by the NGOs, based on the NGO values and/or the need of their constituencies.	Autonomous from the state; limiting state power by demanding more participation, accountability and transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • monitoring conformity of planning process with the EIA law • demanding participation of affected communities • advocating social equity
Closed space	NGOs are deliberately expanding their activities into spaces where non-governmental participation is not tolerated	Autonomous from the state; confrontational and challenging state-power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mobilising local communities against the interests of their local governments • (being perceived as) threatening social and political stability

²¹ The figure-head of the resistance against to the Three-Gorges dam, Dai Qing, had been imprisoned for one year in 1989/90 due to her opposition against the dam (Interview with Dai Qing)

Another emerging trend is that the attitude of the government towards ENGOs is becoming increasingly diverse.

It is hard to generalise what the government thinks about us. The government is not a monolithic block in that regard. SEPA supports us and has called us their 'natural ally'. The MOWR probably likes us much less and the provincial government in Yunnan undoubtedly hates us" (interview with Liang Congjie FON).

These trends indicate that the boundaries of advocacy by NGOs are not static and determined in principle, but are the outcome of a process of contestation, driven by conflicting interests, values and power differentials on a particular issue. Therefore, spaces for advocacy in different cases and localities are likely to differ too.

Regarding the factors which determine the boundaries, it appears not only relevant *what* is said or done, but also *who* says it and *how*. "A lot depends on packaging" (interview He Jun, CBIK) and on protective factors.

The style of how an organisation raises critique, is important. FON has always tried to maintain a cooperative attitude towards the government. My political status as a member of the NCPCC probably also functions as a protective factor. Equally, Wang Yongchen as a very well-known journalist has got this protective factor, which other organisations are maybe missing" (interview with Liang Congjie FON).

The Nujiang campaign also points towards the trend that the spaces are not only determined between NGOs and the state, but that corporate interests increasingly are playing a role in trying to limit the space of ENGOs in situations where they see their investment opportunities and revenues threatened.

6.4 The Response of the Dam Proponents

In order to illustrate the 'contestedness' of boundaries and spaces for ENGOs in this case-study, I will give a brief overview of the challenges which they have been facing since the second half of 2004, when opponents of the dam were coming under increasing pressure. This pressure was felt mostly in Yunnan and was applied to scientists, NGO activists and journalists alike.

Many critical academics, like He Daming, were sidelined in the ongoing dam debate (interview with A. Wilkes, CBIK), and others were put under pressure by their work units or received visits by security officials, telling them not to oppose the interests of provincial authorities (anonymous informant). Journalists were not allowed to cover anything negative about the Nujiang dam in Yunnan and the

provincial government imposed a complete news-blackout for several months in 2004 (Li, 2005).

Among the ENGOs, the most immediate victim of the counter offensive by dam proponents was GWS and its founder Yu Xiaogang. GWS was investigated by the police, computers were seized (Tang, 2005) and the organisation's registration subsequently not renewed by the Yunnan Provincial Department for Civil Affairs in 2005 (interview with Huang Guangcheng, YASS). Police confiscated Yu Xiaogang's passport last December and have since not allowed him to leave China. YASS, his former work unit, has advised him to consider voluntarily resignation under mounting political pressure (Tang, 2005).

The pressure from dam proponents increased also on other ENGOs in 2005, probably in preparation of a re-launching of the dam-proposal (interview with Xue Ye, FON). In April 2005, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), a super-ministry in charge of economic policy, organised a conference at Yunnan University, during which Fang Zhouzi, an influential scholar from the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) and advisor of the central government, held a speech entitled 'a direct attack on fake-environmentalist dam opponents', in which he launched out at Chinese ENGOs involved in the Nujiang campaign as pursuing 'environmental fundamentalism' and ridiculing them for their lack of expertise (Fang, 2005). Instead, Fang promotes the view that "to really protect the environment there, the locals must escape from poverty to prosperity, and at present the only viable measure to take is developing hydro-electricity" (quoted from Buckley, 2005).²²

Fang and one of his colleagues from CAS, He Zuoxiu, later that month wrote a memorandum to the Central Committee in which they attacked ENGOs, based on their alleged lack of scientific capacity, being an obstacle for development, and receiving funding and representing the interests of 'foreign hostile forces' (interview with Shi Lihong, CRN). This memorandum is said to have been endorsed by the Chinese Premier (Buckley, 2005). Fang specifically singled out BGV as an example for this infiltration of foreign agendas through Chinese NGOs, based on the fact that BGV receives funding from the German Heinrich Böll Foundation, which is

²² Fang, a biochemist, is one of the most well known scholars in mainland China. He recently came into the limelight for his critique of Chinese scientists and their lack of 'academic integrity and scientific spirit'. Fang is also famous for his vicious attacks on the Falungong sect. His website 'New Threads' (<http://www.xys.org>), carries numerous articles and debates on issues ranging from the 'unethical conducts of researchers', to promoting the use of GM-food.

associated with the German Green Party and quite openly supports more controversial projects related to human rights, press freedom and the environment (interview with K. Beck, HBS).

As a reaction to this critique, BGV has recently withdrawn from the CRN. There is speculation among the ENGOs about the motivations of these scholars, and some, who wish to remain anonymous, claim to have evidence, that hydropower corporations are *buying* these scholars and instrumentalise them to push their agendas and discredit opponents.

The two specific cases of ENGOs which have come under pressure after their involvement in the Nujiang campaign point to different causes which highlight some of the factors which determine the boundaries for NGO advocacy. In the case of GWS, two factors appear to have inter-acted. The first one is, that as a local NGO, GWS is much more easily subjected to pressure from the Yunnan government than the NGOs in Beijing, which do not fall under its' jurisdiction. Given the strong stake of the Yunnan government in the construction of the dam, it is not surprising that pressure there is higher than in Beijing, where the government's attitude is either indifferent or more ambivalent.

The second factor is that the empowerment of communities by NGOs as what was perceived to be against the interests of their local governments, is crossing a line and seen as un-loyal behaviour. GWS apparently has been suspected by the Provincial Government to be behind local protests by resettled communities at the Manwan dam in 2004 (interview with Yu Xiaogang and Huang Guangcheng, GWS). Although neither GWS nor their founder Yu Xiaogang have been formally charged with any wrong-doings and despite the fact that they deny these accusations (interview Huang Guangcheng), this suspicion probably provided reason enough for the local government, not to renew the registration of an organisation which is seen as a 'trouble-maker'.

In the case of BGV, the organisation was not attacked for what they did, but simply based on their suspicious source of funding. BGV was singled out as an example of a local NGO, which is suspected of representing the interests of foreign hostile forces. This accusation was based solely on the fact that BGV's received funding support from the *Heinrich Böll Foundation*.

One reason why BGV was singled out, lies in the fact that it had published the information on their funding sources on its web-site. The founder of BGV, Liao

Xiaoyi, also suspects that a previous argument she had with the scholar Fang Zhouzi, has contributed to this attack on her organisation, while Liang Congjie suspects that BGV is lacking some of the ‘protective factors’, which has helped FON to stay largely out of the fire-line.

Both of these two cases illustrate that the boundaries are determined by a range of different factors which are often not only defined by what NGOs *do*, but also how they are perceived and whether they are seen as *easy prey*. Power differentials and the framing of controversial issues appear to be important factors here.

This framing or ‘packaging’ of opposition to the dam was therefore done with utmost care by most of the ENGOs and is certainly one reason, why they could go as far as they did in their opposition to the dam. Most of the arguments of the ENGO activists against the dam were framed in line with some government policy. With sustainability and people-centred development high on the agenda of central authorities, and authorities like SEPA on their side, this strategy made it much more difficult for the dam proponents to attack the ENGOs.

one strategy for protecting ourselves is to hide behind central government policies when we are criticising the local government” (interview with Shi Lihong, CRN).

6.5 Conclusion

Spaces for debate, participation and contestation have generally grown over the past two decades. The boundaries of these spaces have been actively expanded by the ENGOs throughout the Nujian campaign, but at the same time they remain fragile and contested. This does not only apply to NGOs, but also to their allies in the Nujian campaign – the media and the scientists. News can still be suppressed and critical scientists are frequently silenced or side-lined. The recent proactive expansion of spaces by ENGOs as highlighted in the Nujian campaign, may soon be challenged again by the CCP’s fear of a ‘colour revolution’ in China, vested interests of local governments or by the agendas of the increasingly powerful corporate sector.

7 CONCLUSION

The objective of this paper was to provide some new insights into the contributions of Chinese grassroots NGOs towards building a civil society in China. The background for this research was the analysis of the activities, objectives, strategies, effects and boundaries of environmental advocacy in the Nujiang campaign.

This analysis of ENGOS 'in action' during the Nujiang advocacy campaign shows that they have played a key role in promoting debate, participation and the free flow of demands and opinions. They have thereby not only affected policies, but also influenced the governance process leading to these policies.

Throughout the campaign, the ENGOS were increasingly addressing the political, social and economic causes, which are underlying environmental problems. By doing so, they were promoting transparency, accountability and participation in China's political system, for the sake of empowering the most marginalised groups in the conflict. The contestation by the ENGOS was based on values which clearly deviate from the mainstream views of economic-growth-driven development. Thereby the involved ENGOS have established themselves as a force for the promotion of pluralism and of an alternative view on development in China.

The Nujiang campaign shows that while the boundaries for this kind of NGO advocacy have generally expanded, they are still highly volatile and contested by competing interests and power differentials within and among the state, society and the corporate sector. All this makes the growing operational spaces for NGO advocacy increasingly insecure.

The study illustrates the maturing of at least part of Chinese NGOs. The active expansion of their operational spaces beyond uncontroversial service-delivery into promoting pluralism and participation, links the ENGOS in the Nujiang campaign to the promotion of a critical civil society in China. Civil society needs to be understood in its specific context. In the case of China this means locating it in a situation where not only the environment is in danger, but where also social and political stability are at stake. Chinese civil society is taking shape in a hierarchical political system in which the state is part of the problem and the solution at the same time. Good governance and social equity may be seen as surprising objectives for a campaign of environmental NGOs. But given the institutional weaknesses within the government to bring about a more people-centred development, this shift makes sense. Equally,

the proximity to parts of the state with which ENGOs promote alternative views through vertical multi-stakeholder integration, appears to be a sensible choice for NGOs promoting a critical civil society in this specific context.

While the close collaboration with SEPA shows the high degree of proximity between ENGOs and the state, it can not adequately be described in terms of the corporatist model. Cooperation was not based on hierarchical cooptation, but on shared interests and values and entirely voluntary. While the corporatist model suggest a top-down relationship between state and social organisations, ENGOs in the Nujiang campaign have frequently turned “the traditional ‘transmission belt’ function to their own advantage” (Saich, 2000:139) in a bottom-up direction. This case-study thereby confirms the position of Lu (2005a), who argues that state-proximity of NGOs can not be automatically equated with a lack of autonomy and is instead used as an asset by Chinese NGOs.

While most western analysts focus on independence of actors as a precondition for a functioning civil society, this research rather supports the view of civil society as an arena of inter-dependent linkages in which NGOs play an *intermediate* role between different actors, not an *independent* one. This was highlighted by one campaign activist: “NGOs in China which do not have any links to the media, politicians or scholars are rather insignificant” (interview with Huang Guangcheng, GWS/YASS). The Nujiang campaign suggests that state-proximity of NGOs and NGOs as part of an alternative civil society are not necessarily contradictory.

The case study shows that the dichotomy-based view of a small and weak state versus a big and strong civil society does not apply here. Rather than assuming monolithic blocs, it highlights the increasing complexity of interactions based on a diversity of interests and stakeholders. This research rather suggests that a strong civil society *and* a strong state may be necessary to counterbalance the increasingly powerful and largely unchecked interests of the corporate sector in order to ensure environmentally, socially and politically sustainable development in China. Here, further research on the impact of corporations on policy processes would be necessary and highly interesting for understanding the new dynamics in Chinese governance processes.

While the above observations only apply to the limited number of Chinese NGOs in this case study, and therefore do not allow generalisations, they clearly point towards a much higher degree of diversity within China’s NGO-sector than most of

the previous studies have suggested. This research also highlights that the widespread view on Chinese NGOs as apolitical and non-confrontational may no longer be tenable. Nick Young, one of the longest-standing observers of NGO in China, who in 2001 had still described ENGOS as “light on ideology” and their activities as “comfortably within the parameters of central government policy” (Young, 2001:7), now said in an interview:

When the ENGOS started to emerge, I always thought they were little pussy-cats. I saw them as representing the interests of middle-class, urban people, who are only concerned about maintaining a nice environment for themselves. I thought that all they will ever do is telling rural kids to preserve the environment and the Tibetan antelope, but probably never address issues of equity. But I believe that I was wrong with my judgement. It is very heartening to see how quickly especially youngsters in these organisations have made the transition from the antelope to the situation of local framers around a dam” (interview with Nick Young, CDB).

Their role in the Nujiang campaign clearly makes Chinese ENGOS political, - maybe more than many of their western counterparts, who have often de-linked environmental from social or political issues.²³ Particularly in the light of competing development models for Yunnan, which are mostly driven by commercial interests and political targets, the position of ENGOS in promoting people-centred, participatory approaches and opposing the dominant growth-driven development paradigm is of highly political (and *human!*) significance.

The forms of contestation by Chinese ENGOS in the Nujiang campaign are still very moderate. They are largely limited to stimulating ‘debate’ and making different voices heard. ENGOS have mostly framed their positions in line with central government policies for more sustainable and participatory development. By doing so, they attempt not to be perceived as confrontational by central government authorities. At the same time they established themselves as opposing the interests of parts of the state and as challenging the interests of powerful corporations. Whether this altogether makes them confrontational is largely a question of perspective and a matter of definition. While the forms of contestation may be tame, the content of the Nujiang campaign is touching upon the most urgent and sensitive aspects of present-day China politics: challenging powerful interests and deep-rooted hierarchical traditions.

²³ For a comparison of anti-dam campaigns in China, Australia and the US, see Mertha (2004)

What limits the role of ENGOs in the Nujiang campaign is not their proximity to the state, but rather the absence of more formal mechanisms for debate and participation in China's political system. While ENGOs have shown that they can provide some of the much needed institutional mechanisms to realise a more people-centred development, much still needs to be done on the part of the state to create a more enabling environment for NGOs to play this critical but constructive role.

Their contribution may prove crucial for an environmentally, economically and socially more sustainable development. This eventually will also contribute towards political stability in China. While NGOs are getting ready for the job, there remains growing uncertainty about whether and to what extent the government as a whole is committed towards allowing more pluralism in China. Recent signals appear contradictory at best.

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