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# Embedded Activism and Political Change in a Semiauthoritarian Context

PETER HO

**Abstract** This article provides a theoretical introduction to the other contributions in this special issue. The emergence of social movements is generally seen as an indicator of democratization. The article argues that such a view overlooks the nature of political change in China, which entails a more gradual transition. In this light, the collection of articles is organized around several questions. What does the limited political space imply for the development of a social movement in China? Is the possibility for a social movement a precondition for the development of civil society? What are the prospects for the emergence of a social movement in China, and how would it relate to international forces? These questions are explored by focusing on one of the most active areas of civil society in contemporary China: the environmental realm. The argument linking the articles in this special issue is that China's semiauthoritarian political setup in association with increased social spaces for civic action has created a milieu for embeddedness in social movement. Contrary to totalitarian control, the semiauthoritarian environment is restrictive, but paradoxically, it is also conducive to nationwide, voluntary collective action.

**Keywords** social movement, civil society, democratization, NGO, political change

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One of the great enigmas of China's reform experience is its economic metamorphosis without fundamental political change. In fact, since the end of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, social movements that tried to mobilize the Chinese masses have met a similar fate: suppression and delegitimization. The protesters of the Democracy Wall movement of 1979, the student movement at Tian'anmen Square in 1989, the Chinese Democratic Party, and the Falun Gong sect of the late 1990s have without exception been

repressed and/or forced into exile.<sup>1</sup> For many observers, this demonstrates the weakness of Chinese civil society. In 2005 a renowned columnist noted with disappointment that the lack of a nationwide demand for political change dashes any hopes for democracy in China.<sup>2</sup>

However, the impression that political change in China has resulted from a broadly supported social movement in essence derives from media hype. Indeed, a sole protester defying a Chinese tank and hordes of students surrounding a “Statue of Liberty” at Tian’anmen Square are forceful images that appeal to a widely imagined idea of how democratic change should come about. Yet, perhaps because of its recent turbulent past of mass campaigns and a longer period of political upheaval, China seems keen to avoid any new revolutions or to commit itself to sudden political change. For one thing, it is obvious that since the start of the economic reforms in the late 1970s, profound changes in China’s polity and society have taken place. Many scholars have documented the increased importance of the People’s Congresses at various levels,<sup>3</sup> the development of village democracy,<sup>4</sup> the shifts in citizenship and its perceptions thereof,<sup>5</sup> and the burgeoning of civil society.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the idea of democracy as multitudes of citizens take to the streets may be attractive but simultaneously misleading as it disregards the nature and course of political change that is taking place in China today: a gradual shift towards a polity adapted to an increasingly complex and pluralist society. Having said this, it is critical to ask ourselves the following questions. What does the limited political space imply for the development and dynamics of a social movement in China? Is the possibility for or the actual occurrence of a social movement a precondition for political change and the development of civil society? What are the prospects for the emergence of a social movement in China, and how would it relate to international forces?

These are the questions that this special issue will explore, by focusing on one of the earliest and most active areas of civil society in modern China: the environmental realm. By narrowing down on the Chinese case, this special issue of *China Information* takes an area studies approach in its theorizing efforts. However, we do not want to argue that the concepts developed here are restricted to China alone. Rather we believe that China’s society—an apparently restrictive political environment in which rapid socioeconomic and cultural changes are taking place—provides an interesting context for the study of social movements. However, further research on social movements in comparable settings such as the Chinese one will definitely be necessary. We argue that China’s semiauthoritarian political setup in

association with increased social spaces for civic and voluntary action has created a milieu for embeddedness in social movement.<sup>7</sup> Contrary to a fully authoritarian context in which the state wields virtually totalitarian control over society,<sup>8</sup> the semiauthoritarian environment is restrictive, but paradoxically, it is also conducive to nationwide, voluntary collective action with less risk of social instability and repression by the governing elite.

On the one hand, China's restrictive political environment causes social movements to be almost invisible, which is achieved through self-imposed censorship and a conscious depoliticization of environmental politics. Social movements<sup>9</sup> in China are forced to keep a low profile or to lead a semiclandestine existence.<sup>10</sup> For survival they rely heavily on the party-state for legitimacy, which restrains them from developing all too intimate linkages with citizens and international donors. Activists need to adopt a nonconfrontational strategy that is bereft of even the slightest hint of organized opposition against the central party-state. Note, however, that this is much less the case for the local state authorities. Regarding environmental protection, the central authorities and environmentalists often find themselves to be partners in the same struggle against local government.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, however, the semiauthoritarian context has created an environment in which the divide between civic organizations, state, and Party is extremely blurred. Contradictorily, this context is conducive to green activism that can be seen from the rapid growth in environmental NGOs over the past years. By establishing informal organizations, facade institutions, or "companies," environmental NGOs are capable of circumventing the stringent regulations for NGO registration. In addition, green activists make avid use of informal networking with Party and state officials. Through a web of informal ties, social structures can develop that are capable of effectively mobilizing resources, appealing to citizens' newly perceived or desired identities, and building up a modest level of counter-expertise against state-dominated information on social cleavages and problems—be they labor rights, gender issues, dam building, or nuclear energy.

This contradictory duality—a semiauthoritarian setting that is restrictive and conducive at the same time—forms the essence of the embeddedness of Chinese social activism. Furthermore, this embeddedness might provide the basis for incremental political changes in China, rather than the overnight revolutions as have occurred elsewhere in the former socialist world. The following discussion is divided into three main sections. The first section reviews the literature on the relation between social movements and political change, with particular reference to green activism. The second section discusses the

historical development of social and green activism in China, followed by another section which explains the embeddedness of Chinese environmentalism by means of the main concepts in social and green movements. The article concludes with a discussion of the other contributions to this special issue.

## **Change through movement?**

The various contributions in this special issue demonstrate that the dynamics of Chinese green activism and the means to take collective action diverge from what theory describes and predicts, and compel us to rethink certain concepts and ideas. This might be particularly true for the form in which social and green movements inject themselves—widely supported popular movements versus embedded, low-profile activism—as well as the type of political change these can effect—fundamental but abrupt, and thus potentially destabilizing changes versus incremental but certain changes.<sup>12</sup> In the international literature on social movements and environmentalism, it is hypothesized—albeit at times not explicitly—that the force of broad social and green movements can impel politicians to adopt new governance styles.

Fundamentally different from a slow, bureaucratic politics of “muddling through,” social movements are regarded as vested with the power to effect visible, fundamental change due to their noninstitutionalized nature and a close proximity to their grass-roots constituencies.<sup>13</sup> The ultimate consequence of social movements can, of course, be regime change: generally pictured as a change from an authoritarian setting to a pluralist, liberal-democratic polity.<sup>14</sup> After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, a large body of literature appeared on the role of environmental movements in democratization processes in states-in-transition.<sup>15</sup> In this view, NGOs and the occurrence of popular movements are seen as a sort of index of the “healthy” development of civil society and an integral component for political change, and eventually democratization. Writing about East and Central Europe, Cellarius and Staddon noted that “because environmental ‘groups’ and ‘movements’—later environmental NGOs—played such a large role in bringing about the dramatic changes of 1989–1990, these organizations should then be considered the vanguard of democratic transition.”<sup>16</sup>

As a variation on the theme of green social movements and NGOs as a lever for political change, we find studies on environmental reforms at the local, national, and transnational levels. In environmental studies of Northern and

Western Europe it is said that the industrial pollution control measures of the 1960s and 1970s suffered from severe implementation defects because policies relied primarily on a “command-and-control” and “end-of-pipe” type of regulation. Instead of mobilizing and stimulating consumers and producers to deal with environmental problems from the grass roots, the state merely “ordered” sustainable development by imposing emission quotas, administrative regulations, and prohibitions. Moreover, sustainable development was regarded as simply a matter of installing environmental technologies at the end of the polluting pipe, rather than effecting environmental restructuring throughout the entire chain of consumption and production processes. Yet, as the environment deteriorated, the traditional top-down environmental policies gradually yielded to a new and more effective kind of environmental governance.<sup>17</sup>

It is often claimed that because of its noninstitutional nature, the environmental movement played a critical role in the shift from an incremental and polluting polity towards this novel governance structure that could better safeguard sustainable development. As Doyle and McEachern noted,

Environmentalism in all its forms was born in environmental movements ... They occupy a political terrain that is often quite separate from more established institutionalized political forms such as pressure groups, parties, and the administrative and parliamentary systems of the state. It was within these noninstitutional, more informal realms of society and its politics that environmental movements emerged. It is safe to say that without the environmental movements there would be little or no ‘greening’ of government and corporations.<sup>18</sup>

Also the writings on global civil society and transnational environmentalism that have forced large international corporations into positive action, such as the controversy surrounding the Brent Star oil platform owned by Royal Dutch Shell, are clear illustrations of a similar line of argumentation.<sup>19</sup>

However, in this special issue we wish to steer away from the more normative assumptions on green social movements, NGOs, and civil society. Instead we wish to go back to try and acquire an understanding of the process and how green social movements maneuver within differing political contexts. In a different wording, *whether* green social movements and NGOs succeed in bringing about political change or sustainable development is of less importance to us than *how* they attempt to do this. Before turning to an analysis of Chinese environmentalism along this line, it is necessary to provide some background information on its development in the recent past.

## Green activism in China

The collectivist period (1956–1978) in communist China was characterized by a virtual absence of civil society. The prerevolutionary civic organizations—the guilds, the native-place associations, secret societies, clans, temple and peasant organizations in the countryside—were soon phased out after the communist takeover in 1949. The “mass organizations” that were established in later years and appeared to be “nongovernmental,” such as the Women’s Federation, the Communist Youth League, and trade unions, were in fact outposts of the Communist Party in society.<sup>20</sup> However, the economic reforms that started in the late 1970s unleashed great social changes initially unforeseen by the government.<sup>21</sup> Recently, a great variety of voluntary associations and nongovernmental organizations (termed “social organizations” or *shehui tuanti* in Chinese) have sprung up in China. The number of officially registered social organizations rose from 100 national and 6,000 regional organizations in 1965 to over 1,800 national and 165,600 regional at the close of the 20th century.<sup>22</sup>

The explosive growth of social organizations is due to the state’s retreat. The growing complexity of the economy has prompted the government to cut back on its expenditures. Moreover, the rapid increase in unemployment after a major restructuring of state industries and an axing of the state bureaucracy since the late 1990s have put an increasing strain on government resources. As a result, central and local state institutions have been privatized or disbanded altogether, opening up social spaces for voluntary civic action that were formerly in state hands, such as social welfare services, legal counseling, and cultural activities.<sup>23</sup> The central party-state has also grown more sensitive of its own reach and capacity, and the need for civil society. High officials have called for “intermediary social organizations” to become active in the space between state and society.<sup>24</sup> However, at this point it is necessary to note that the Chinese state’s notion of civil society and NGOs is quite different from the Western concept of voluntary organizations that can protect citizens’ rights or counterbalance state power. In fact, as Goldman noted, the Chinese government is willing “to grant political rights, not to recognize them. Moreover, political rights are to enable citizens to contribute to the state rather than to enable individuals to protect themselves against the state.”<sup>25</sup> Notwithstanding this difference in the interpretation of civil society, many civic organizations with varying degrees of independence from the state have emerged in China today.

During the early 1990s it had already become painfully clear that without fundamental restructuring China would be heading towards an environmen-

tal debacle.<sup>26</sup> The high political priority given to environmental protection lent environmental activism a certain legitimacy. Moreover, in contrast to civic associations organized along religious, ethnic, or political lines, organizations that engaged in environmental protection were regarded as “politically less harmful.” They could be employed to assist the state in achieving sustainable development goals. In some of the transition countries of East and Central Europe, environmentalism was allowed to flourish for similar reasons. Therefore, one of the earliest and most dynamic sectors of civil society in China has been the environmental realm.<sup>27</sup> Against this backdrop, it is important to study Chinese civil society through the various forms in which environmentalism has manifested itself, including green NGOs, environmental protests, citizens’ complaints, and residents’ movements.

The critical question, naturally, is whether the hordes of protesters that demonstrated against environmental ills in East Germany, Hungary, and Bulgaria can be likened to the semiprofessional green organizations and loose, informal groups in China that engage in media-attractive but localized protests, voluntary tree-planting, and waste collection campaigns. After all, the main feature of Chinese green activism that stands out to date is its absence of a geographically broadly supported, popular movement against the established order. Even more so, organizations lack any desire to openly confront the central authorities, and instead remain relatively small, fragmentary, and localized. Environmental activism in China is not an activity with a fair degree of autonomy and self-regulation, but occupies a social space that is enmeshed in a web of interpersonal relations and informal/formal rules between political and social actors. Yet, differently from a situation in which activism is merely repressed, the embedding conditions limit formal environmental organization, while also making it possible.

These embedding ties that can successfully cross the divides between the party-state and society have enabled environmental activism to play an increasingly critical role in the greening of industries, the government, and consumer lifestyles.<sup>28</sup> The various contributions in this special issue are a clear testimony to this. In order to understand the embeddedness of green activism in the Chinese semiauthoritarian context, we need to analyze it in terms of its form of organization and the tactics it employs.

## From grievances to mobilization

Many theorists have attempted to unravel the driving forces of social movements. The *primus inter pares* of social movement theorists is of course Karl



Marx, concerned as he was with the mobilization of the proletariat against capitalist entrepreneurs. After him, many others have delved into the question of collective action in general, and social movements in particular.<sup>29</sup> In the literature about social movements, several recurring themes can be discerned: the potential and current cleavages and conflicts in society that lead to popular dissatisfaction; the movement's overarching "ideology" and individuals' identification with that body of thought, beliefs, and values; the organization of the movement and its capacity to muster financial, personnel, and material resources; and lastly, the specific chances for collective or political action or the so-called "windows of opportunity." In the theories on social movements these issues are generally known under the notions of grievance, issue framing, resource mobilization, and political opportunities and constraints.<sup>30</sup>

### Grievances

The first precondition for any activism is the presence of areas of social conflict, be it around economic, social, or environmental issues. One of the questions that has worried many foreign and domestic observers is the emergence of social cleavages in Chinese society. The economic reforms have given rise to a rapidly widening gap between poor and rich, rising unemployment, and problems of governance as state capacity fails to keep pace with socio-economic developments. As a result, social conflict and popular protests have occurred more frequently over recent years.<sup>31</sup> A survey conducted by the China Statistical Bureau in 2002 found that the issues of greatest concern for leading Chinese officials included job layoffs, corruption, education, income and housing, and the environment.<sup>32</sup>

China's economic boom has been accompanied by serious air, water, soil, and noise pollution. Although the central government has been relatively quick in dealing with the environmental challenge, the initial positive effects of environmental policies have been completely offset by the sheer rise in the scale of production and consumption.<sup>33</sup> Major lakes, such as Dianchi Lake, Chaohu Lake, and Dongting Lake, have been heavily polluted by local industries and neighboring farms; in one-third of the main cities the air is seriously polluted; while the 24-hour economy and its construction activities frequently disrupt people's lives (particularly their night's rest). China's dismal environmental record is clearly reflected in the increase in popular discontent. For this reason, environmental activism finds fertile ground in China.

## Issue framing

In the framing of environmental issues, there is one noteworthy feature of Chinese green activism that we might term the “depoliticization of environmental politics.” This sounds like a contradiction in terms because if there is one thing that the East and Central European experiences have proven, it is that the environmental question is inseparably linked to politics. However, in China’s semiauthoritarian context the overall majority of green activists stay clear from any suggestion that political objectives are involved even though inevitably there is a political aspect within each movement. This nonconfrontational strategy implies that: green activists portray themselves as partners, rather than opponents of the central authorities; they skirt certain sensitive environmental questions, such as nuclear energy and agricultural biotechnology;<sup>34</sup> and they avoid any connotation with broad, popular movements, for instance, by underreporting membership numbers to authorities. Some observers dubbed this self-imposed censorship the “female mildness” of Chinese environmentalism. As one of China’s foremost environmental activists Liao Xiaoyi, the founder of the Beijing-based NGO Global Village, professed:

We guide the public instead of blaming them and help the government instead of complaining about it. This, perhaps, is the ‘female mildness’ referred to by the media. I don’t appreciate extremist methods. I’m engaged in environmental protection and don’t want to use it for political aims. This is my way, and my principle too.<sup>35</sup>

However, this self-imposed censorship does not really hamper green activism, but rather the former enables the latter. Put differently, as long as one does not openly oppose the central state, many things are possible in China. For one thing, environmental NGOs and activists are relatively successful in attracting the state’s attention and getting certain issues on the political agenda. The vivid account of green NGOs and environmental organizations by Seungho Lee in this special issue demonstrates this political leverage. Of course, this is also due to the high political priority that the Chinese state attaches to solving the environmental question. In addition, Chinese citizens’ environmental awareness and the perceived urgency for environmental protection are significant. From a survey conducted in 1999 it was found that environmental protection ranked fifth among issues of greatest concern.<sup>36</sup> Another survey done in 2002 found that approximately 63 percent of Chinese respondents deemed environmental protection “extremely important.”<sup>37</sup> The

high environmental awareness among Chinese people can mostly be attributed to the government's vigorous campaigns. In this special issue, Guobin Yang and Craig Calhoun note a proliferation of "greenspeak" in Chinese society, as can be seen in newspapers, television, and radio, and particularly on the internet. Green NGOs and voluntary groups make avid use of the popularity of the environment as a social issue to push it further on the agenda of politicians and decision makers.

In terms of framing, it is interesting to look at the potential links between environmentalism and traditional Chinese religion and culture. For instance, making reference to Chinese folk religion has greatly assisted environmental activists in furthering their political cause in Taiwan.<sup>38</sup> During the eventful year of 1987, environmental protests against the China Petrochemical Plant in Kaohsiung City clearly referred to Buddhist and Taoist symbols. Environmental activists claimed they had petitioned Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy, and Shen Nong, the God of Agriculture, to bless their demonstrations. In addition, a traditional spirit altar was erected at the gate of the factory. When the police arrived in an attempt to break the blockade, they were driven away by groups of traditional martial arts exponents clad in traditional Chinese attire and armed with cudgels, broadswords, and spears. The alliance between environmentalists and religious institutions proved successful in many ways: the local temple associations helped to mobilize their members against the authorities; paid substantial sums of money to bail out those who had been arrested; and in fact, greatly facilitated the protests in Taiwan since "religious parades" usually receive formal approval in contrast to public demonstrations.<sup>39</sup> In the current context, it seems unlikely that activists in mainland China will make widespread use of religious symbols in the framing of environmental issues.<sup>40</sup> Particularly, the recent incidents around the Falun Gong sect and its subsequent repression have turned such actions into a sensitive issue. On the other hand, there are signs that certain green groups carefully organize themselves around traditional religious lines as well.<sup>41</sup>

### **Opportunities, constraints, and mobilization**

The manner in which green NGOs can muster financial, material, and personnel resources in the Chinese context is bound up with political opportunities and constraints. For this reason, we will deal with these parameters in a joint discussion. NGOs face a restrictive institutional and political environment in China. NGOs currently have to register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs or its subordinate institutions, as well as with a sponsoring institution (*zhuguan*

*bumen*).<sup>42</sup> This two-tiered administrative system of control (*shuangchong guanli tizhi* in Chinese) has often proven to be a bottleneck for NGOs and voluntary associations. Rather than going through these troublesome and protracted registration procedures, NGOs and voluntary associations opt either to avoid registration or to register as a legal entity, which they are not, such as a research institute or a company. Green NGOs that have failed to formally register are by law not regarded as a legal person, and thus are not entitled to an independent financial account or to sign contracts on their own accord.

Furthermore, the recent “color revolutions” in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan have led to an increase in state control over NGOs and voluntary organizations in China. A recent illustration of this is the case of Green Watch, an environmental group founded by a certain Tan Kai in the municipality of Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province. Green Watch was established as an informal organization after successful protests mounted by farmers against a polluting chemical plant in Huaxi, near Dongyang City. Tan Kai and five other activists were detained on 19 October 2005 after opening a bank account to collect funds for their cause. By doing so, Tan Kai had broken the law because he is not allowed to fund-raise unless his organization is officially registered—deposits of RMB 100,000 and RMB 30,000 are required for national and local organizations respectively, which is a substantial sum for most Chinese. According to Stacy Mosher, communications director of the New York branch of Human Rights in China, this poses a Catch-22 situation as “unless you have very deep pockets to begin with, you have no way of reaching out to local or foreign organisations who might want to contribute.”<sup>43</sup>

At the same time, however, “windows of opportunities” have clearly opened up for Chinese environmental groups. The China of the 1980s is definitely not the same as the China of today. First, this is due to what Ho and Vermeer termed the “greening of the Chinese state” over the past years—as is visible in the proclamation of an impressive body of environmental laws and regulations and the strengthening of the environmental bureaucracy.<sup>44</sup> Green NGOs have strongly profited from this trend. Second, despite the fact that the Chinese Communist Party still rules supreme, many social areas that were closed off from political activities have gradually become accessible to citizens, including labor issues, poverty alleviation, and legal protection. Moreover, the internet revolution has heralded profound changes in the available channels for airing certain political views and popular discontent.<sup>45</sup> In this regard, the crucial question is how one can make use of these windows of opportunities, and here the issue of embeddedness surfaces once more.

The distinction between party-state versus civil society in China is a blurred one, indeed. “True” environmental NGOs establish themselves as entities that they are not, such as companies, informal salons, or research institutes. In addition, the state also sets up its own environmental NGOs: the Chinese phenomenon of “government-organized NGOs” or GONGOs. However, the blurred divide can also work to the advantage of NGOs if they know how to make use of it.

By developing informal ties with the central (and local) party-state, environmental NGOs have managed to gain considerable political leverage and maneuvering space. At this point, we touch on the crucial Chinese notion of *guanxi* (literal meaning: “relation”), a complex Chinese notion that is inextricably connected to family ties, patron–client relations, and the art of gift-giving.<sup>46</sup> Through their *guanxi*, NGO leaders and politicians are tied together in a symbiotic situation in which they are mutually dependent on each other: the NGOs for their legitimacy and political influence granted by the central state, while the central state relies on the NGOs for their contacts with society,<sup>47</sup> and for exerting pressure on local authorities and polluting industries. Furthermore, in the case of the more prominent, but also successful environmental NGOs, we often see that their leadership is part and parcel of a structure in which environmentalism is embedded in the party-state. For example, Liang Congjie of Friends of Nature was until recently a member of the People’s Political Consultative Conference; Wang Canfa of the Center for Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims is a frequent government advisor and co-drafter of national environmental legislation; and Jiang Xiaoke of the Beijing Environmental Protection Foundation was a member of the National People’s Congress (NPC) and concurrently a commissioner in the NPC Commission on Environmental and Natural Resources Protection. This commission is the highest state organ responsible for policies on environmental protection and natural resource management, supervises the State Environmental Protection Agency, and assists in the drafting of new environmental laws and regulations.

Rather than limiting their autonomy vis-a-vis the state, these embedding ties have enabled green activists to play an increasingly critical role in China’s environmental governance. Against this backdrop, scholar Wu Fengshi noted that even the “environmental government-organized NGOs have come to realize their own organizational missions, negotiate with the state for more self-governance, and facilitate trans-societal cooperation.” In fact, they are “situated in between the state and society, and as a result they can influence the formation of new collective identities and political coalitions.”<sup>48</sup>

## The contributions

The article by Yang and Calhoun analyzes one of China's foremost anti-dam campaigns. In early 2004, however, public controversies surrounding dam building on the Nu River in southwest China prompted the government to halt a proposed hydropower project. The occurrence of such public debates indicates the rise of a critical green public for whom environmental nongovernmental organizations are the main social actors in producing and disseminating their views. Yang and Calhoun describe how official mass media, the internet, and "alternative media" contribute to this green sphere in different ways. Historical aspects of state–society conflict are discussed by Ho-fung Hung. Based on a survey of protest events derived from archival sources, Hung analyzes how the mounting ecological crisis and weakening capacity of the imperial Qing state in the 18th and 19th centuries generated changing forms of popular protests as responses to the "externalities of development." Hung finds that when the Qing regime's capacity peaked in the early 18th century, most popular protests were peaceful and were resolved through compromises between officials and protesters. Amid the administrative breakdown in the 19th century, however, many protests escalated into violent confrontations. Remarkably, some repertoires and patterns of environmental protests in contemporary China might be traced back to the Qing times, and thus Hung's contribution raises questions about whether today's environmental protests are completely new to China, or whether there are certain changes and continuities with the deep-seated tradition of state–society conflict and negotiation in China's late imperial history.

Returning to modern times, Mara Warwick and Leonard Ortolano elucidate the workings of China's environmental complaints system through a study in Shanghai. Using both statistical data and case studies, they show that there is no evidence to support the claim of many Shanghai environmental officials that the complaints system allows individual citizens to report environmental problems to local authorities and provides citizens with timely information regarding how their complaints have been resolved. Analysis of patterns in 14 case studies provides the basis for constructing a set of hypotheses concerning whether a particular pollution problem is likely to be the subject of complaints. The overall analysis demonstrates that the complaints system has the unintended effect of diverting significant government resources to responding to many complaints that are either trivial or without significance to environmental quality except at a very limited geographical scale. The contribution by Seungho Lee aims to analyze environmental movements of various social

organizations in Shanghai since the late 1990s. His study reveals that civil society in Shanghai has increasingly had an impact on environmentally unfriendly policies, but it is more restricted than elsewhere in China. Lee found that university students spearheaded most of the NGOs engaged in environmental protection in Shanghai, which implies that NGOs had no significant influence on environmental policies beyond that point. In addition to student-based environmental NGOs, Lee identified other types of social organizations active in Shanghai, including government-organized NGOs, local communities, the media, and international NGOs.

In the conclusion to this issue, Peter Ho and Richard Louis Edmonds review the main theoretical implications of the various contributions in line with the overall research questions of this special issue: what does the limited political space imply for the development and dynamics of a social movement in China? Is the occurrence of a green social movement a precondition for improved governance in terms of transparency and accountability? What are the prospects for the emergence of a broadly supported environmental movement in China, and how would it relate to international environmental forces? China's semiauthoritarian context forms the basis of the specific features of social activism today—a fragmentary, highly localized, and nonconfrontational form of environmentalism. However, despite these features it would be a misconception to state that embedded environmentalism is a docile, silenced movement. On the contrary, it is a continuously negotiated, and therefore, highly effective adaptation to the current polity through which considerable political influence can be wielded. The main feature and success of China's reforms lies in a strategy of gradual change. In this respect, Ho and Edmonds argue, embedded environmentalism should be regarded as a transitory phase, a changing characteristic of an emerging civil society in a semiauthoritarian environment. Since environmental activism made its first appearance on the Chinese political stage, it has gained considerable political leverage, and it has developed increasing international linkages as a result of its embeddedness. The critical question that one should ask is therefore not whether the Chinese state will allow activists and NGOs to employ confrontational, radical, and mass mobilization tactics, but rather under what circumstances and at what time in the course of reforms.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Teresa Wright, "The China Democracy Party and the Politics of Protest in the 1980s–1990s," *The China Quarterly*, no. 172 (2002): 906–26; Jan van der

Putten “Chinese dissidenten opgepakt” (Chinese dissidents arrested), *de Volkskrant* (The people’s newspaper), 1 December 1998, 4; Jan van der Putten “Bewind China vreest een naderende protestgolf” (China’s regime fears an approaching gulf of protest), *de Volkskrant* (The people’s newspaper), 28 December 1998, 5; Jan van der Putten, “De mens is nog nooit zo diep gezonken” (Man has never sunk so low), *de Volkskrant* (The people’s newspaper), 27 April 1999, 5.

<sup>2</sup> See Jonathan Power, “Will Democracy Be Another 30 Years in Coming in China?,” *Daily Times*, 3 June 2005, 3–4. This article also appeared in the *New York Times*, 4 June 2005.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, Manion notes that although voters’ choices for candidates for township People’s Congresses are constrained by Party organizations, their role is not trivial. She states that “the alignment of voter and Party committee preferences in these elections reflects a perspective quite different from an orthodox Leninist view of the appropriate relationship between Party and society, but also fundamentally different from pluralist visions of elections as instruments of democracy.” Melanie Manion, “Chinese Democratization in Perspective: Electorates and Selectorates at the Township Level,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 163 (2000): 765. An excellent overview of the literature on People’s Congresses is given in footnote 4 of Manion’s article.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Zhenyao Wang, “Village Committees: The Basis for China’s Democratization,” in *Cooperative and Development in China’s Rural Collective: Between State and Private Interests*, ed. Eduard B. Vermeer, Frank N. Pieke, and Woei Lien Chong (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), 239–55.

<sup>5</sup> For information on citizenship and civil society, see also Merle Goldman and Elizabeth J. Perry, eds, *Changing Meanings of Citizenship in Modern China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Robert P. Weller, *Alternate Civilities: Democracy and Culture in China and Taiwan* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001); and Peter Ho, “Greening without Conflict? Environmentalism, Green NGOs and Civil Society in China,” *Development and Change* 32, no. 5 (2001): 893–921.

<sup>7</sup> Through which we trace back to the idea of embeddedness in the “Polanyian” interpretation of the contextualization of social action. See Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1944). In the conclusion to this volume, a more detailed discussion of embeddedness in the social sciences literature is provided.

<sup>8</sup> The fully authoritarian state is in fact an abstraction, as no state is capable of exerting complete totalitarian control. Also in Maoist China this was not the case. See, for instance, David Crook and Isabel Crook, *Revolution in a Chinese Village: Ten Mile Inn* (London: Routledge, 1959); and Paul Kegan, Anita Chan, Richard Madsen, and Jonathan Unger, *Chen Village under Mao and Deng*, revised ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 32–3.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the concept of a social movement, see Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, eds, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 13–17.

<sup>10</sup> See also Dingxin Zhao, *The Power of Tiananmen: State–Society Relations and the 1989 Beijing Student Movement* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> For instance, the local state generally tends to protect polluting industries because of much-needed revenue and the employment of workers, whereas the central state and



green activists are more likely to find themselves on the same side in environmental protection. It is often difficult to close down polluting factories. See also Benjamin van Rooij, "Implementation of Chinese Environmental Law: Regular Enforcement and Political Campaigns," *Development and Change* 37, no. 1 (2006): 57–74.

<sup>12</sup> Broad social movements versus embedded movements, as well as sudden versus gradual changes are of course ideal types, as the forms and the types of political changes should be seen more as a continuum that can change over time and place.

<sup>13</sup> See Charles Lindblom, "Still Muddling, not Yet through," *Public Administration Review* 39 (1979): 517–37; Charles Lindblom, "The Science of 'Muddling through,'" in *Classics of Public Administration*, 3rd ed., ed. Jay M. Shafritz and Albert C. Hyde (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1992), 224–35. About social movements as an instrument for new governance and politics, Jamison et al. wrote that "the social movements which emerged in all the countries of Western Europe and North America in the early 1970s had in common the intention of broadening the limits of existing national political cultures by creating a 'new politics'. By this was meant that these social movements were not primarily composed of new interest groups seeking incorporation into the established political discourse. Rather they were new social movements which sought to explode it: to expose its shortcomings and limitations, and to open up new spaces for political activity." See Andrew Jamison, Ron Eyerman, Jacqueline Cramer, with Jeppe Laessøe, *The Making of the New Environmental Consciousness: A Comparative Study of the Environmental Movements in Sweden, Denmark and The Netherlands* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 192.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, chapters four and five in McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, eds, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*; for sociopolitical change at the global level, see Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); John A. Guidry, Michael D. Kennedy, and Mayer N. Zald, eds, *Globalizations and Social Movements: Culture, Power and the Transnational Public Sphere* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> For instance, Susan Baker and Petr Jehlicka, "Dilemmas of Transition: The Environment, Democracy and Economic Reform in East Central Europe," *Environmental Politics* 7, no. 1 (1998): 1–26.

<sup>16</sup> Barbara A. Cellarius and Caedmon Staddon, "Environmental Nongovernmental Organizations, Civil Society and Democratization in Bulgaria," *East European Politics and Societies* 16, no. 1 (2002): 183.

<sup>17</sup> Albert Weale, *The New Politics of Pollution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).

<sup>18</sup> Timothy Doyle and Doug McEachern, *Environment and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1998), 55.

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of environmentalism at a global level, see Gareth Porter and Janet Welsh Brown, *Global Environmental Politics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996). However, whether such shifts should occur through radical "ecotage" and militant "ecological guerrilla warfare," or through consensual, tripartite negotiations (state, businesses, and environmentalists) remains a scholarly bone of contention. See also William M. Lafferty and James Meadowcroft, eds, *Democracy and the Environment: Problems and Prospects* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1996).

<sup>20</sup> According to Whyte, "by the mid-1950s an organizational system had begun to emerge that made it possible to control and mobilize the citizenry much more effectively than before. The building blocks of pre-1949 cities—guilds, native-place associations,

clans, secret societies, neighborhood temple associations, and so forth—had either been eliminated or transformed. In their place a new urban infrastructure had been built that was firmly under Party control.” Martin King Whyte, “Urban Life in the People’s Republic,” in *The Cambridge History of China: The People’s Republic Part 2, Revolutions within the Chinese Revolution 1966–1982*, ed. Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 697.

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of the early developments of civil society in China, see Gordon White, *Riding the Tiger: The Politics of Economic Reform in Post-Mao China* (London: Macmillan Press, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> Statistics by Wu Zhongze, director-general of the Ministry of Civil Affairs—cited in Ming Wang, ed., *Zhongguo NGO yanjiu* (Research on NGOs in China), UNCRD Research Report Series no. 38 (Beijing: UNCRD, 2000). According to the *1997 China Law Yearbook*, there were 1,845 national and 184,821 regional social organizations in 1996; see Zhongguo falü nianjian bianji weiyuanhui (China law yearbook editorial committee), ed., *Zhongguo falü nianjian 1997* (1997 China law yearbook) (Beijing: Zhongguo falü nianjian chubanshe, 1997), 15–16.

<sup>23</sup> According to a survey of 104 Beijing-based NGOs by Tsinghua University, 32% were active as trade and commercial associations, and study and students’ societies; 7% were research and survey institutions; 6% provided social services; 6% were environmental NGOs; 5% focused on poverty alleviation; 4% engaged in international exchange; 27% belonged to other categories; and 13% did not respond. See Deng Guosheng, “Beijing NGO wenjuan diaocha fenxi” (Analysis of the questionnaires on NGOs in Beijing), in *Zhongguo NGO yanjiu*, 26.

<sup>24</sup> At the Ninth People’s Congress in March 1998, the secretary-general of the State Council, Luo Gan, declared that “government has taken up the management of many affairs which it should not have managed, is not in a position to manage, or actually cannot manage well”, which has hindered the efficiency and effectiveness of the government. It was therefore necessary, said Luo Gan, to expand the activities of “social intermediary organizations,” see Anthony J. Saich, “Negotiating the State: The Development of Social Organizations in China,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 161 (2000): 128.

<sup>25</sup> Merle Goldman, “The Reassertion of Political Citizenship in the Post-Mao Era: The Democracy Wall Movement,” in *Changing Meanings of Citizenship in Modern China*, ed. Merle Goldman and Elizabeth J. Perry (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 159.

<sup>26</sup> See Richard Louis Edmonds, *Pattens of Lost Harmony: A Survey of the Country’s Environmental Degradation and Protection* (London: Routledge, 1994); and Vaclav Smil, *China’s Environmental Crisis: An Inquiry into the Limits of National Development* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1993).

<sup>27</sup> One of the earliest civil initiatives in environmental protection was undertaken by a dissatisfied official who established the Association for the Research on Environmental Policy already in 1991. See Ho, “Greening without Conflict?”

<sup>28</sup> For some interesting examples in Taiwan where green NGOs have effected a clear “greening” of industries, see the chapters by Tu Wenling, “Environmental Governance in the Information Technology Sector. The Case of Hsinchu, Science-based Industrial Park in Taiwan”; and Li-Fang Yang, “Embedded Autonomy, Social Movements and Ecological Modernization in Taiwan,” in *Greening Industries in Newly Industrializing Countries: Asian-style Leapfrogging?*, ed. Peter Ho (London: Kegan Paul, 2007), 139–63 and 167–93, respectively.

<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), on the unintentionality of social movements; Neil J. Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behaviour* (New York: Free Press, 1963), distinguished six conditions underlying collective action: structural conduciveness; structural strain; generalized beliefs; precipitating factors; leadership and regular communication; and finally the operation of social control; and Alain Touraine, *The Voice and the Eye: An Analysis of Social Movements* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Touraine is known for formulating the concept of the “field of action”, which refers to the connections between a social movement and the forces or influences counteracting it. It is seen as a process of mutual negotiation among antagonists, which may lead to social changes.

<sup>30</sup> See also the useful overview provided in Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 10–25.

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden, eds, *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 93–112.

<sup>32</sup> “Zhongguo lingdao ganbu zai 2002 nian zui guanxin de shiqing” (Issues of greatest concern for leading Chinese officials in 2002), *Zhongguo qingnian bao* (China youth daily), 18 December 2003, 14.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Ho and Eduard B. Vermeer, eds, *China's Limits to Growth: Greening State and Society* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2006); Richard Louis Edmonds, “China’s Environmental Problems,” in *Understanding Contemporary China*, ed. Robert E. Gamer (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2003), 268.

<sup>34</sup> For information on the political economy of biotechnology in China, see Jennifer H. Zhao and Peter Ho, “A Developmental Risk Society? Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) in China,” *International Journal for Environment and Sustainable Development* 4, no. 4 (2005): 370–94; and Peter Ho, Eduard B. Vermeer, and Jennifer H. Zhao, “Biotech and Food Safety in China: Consumers’ Acceptance or Resistance?,” *Development and Change* 37, no. 1 (2006): 227–53.

<sup>35</sup> Wei Huang, “Individuals Changing the World: An Interview with Sophie Prize 2000 Winner Liao Xiaoyi,” *Beijing Review*, no. 33, 14 August 2000, 17.

<sup>36</sup> Li Ningning, “Huanbao yishi yu huanbao xingwei” (Environmental consciousness and environmental behavior), *Xue hai* (Sea of learning), no. 1 (2001): 122–3. For a comparison with European attitudes about the environment, see European Opinion Research Group, *The Attitudes of Europeans towards the Environment*. Eurobarometer 58.0 (Brussels: Directorate-General Environment, European Union, 2002).

<sup>37</sup> It is important to note that environmental awareness and understanding are two different matters. In the same survey, urban residents’ average score on environmental knowledge issues was only 4.5 (out of a possible 13 points), with rural residents scoring even lower, namely 2.4. This survey was carried out in 2002 by the Social Survey Institute of Systems Reform Commission, see Cui Shuyi, “Gongzhong huanjing yishi: xianzhuang, wenti yu duice” (Public environmental consciousness: existing situation, problems, and strategy), *Li lun xue kan* (Journal for theory) 110, no. 4 (2002): 87.

<sup>38</sup> A description of environmentalism in Taiwan is provided in Li-Fang Yang, “Embedded Autonomy.”

<sup>39</sup> See also Robert P. Weller, *Discovering Nature: Globalization and Environmental Culture in China and Taiwan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 113–14; Robert P. Weller and Michael Hsiao, “Culture, Gender and Community in Taiwan’s Environmental

Movement," in *Environmental Movements in Asia*, ed. Arne Kalland and Gerard Persoon (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1998), 83–109; and Michael Hsiao, On-Kwok Lai, Hwa-jen Liu, Francisco A. Magno, Laura Edles, and Alvin Y. So, "Culture and Asian Styles of Environmental Movements," in *Asia's Environmental Movements: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Yok-shiu F. Lee and Alvin Y. So (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999), 210–24.

<sup>40</sup> See also Pitman B. Potter, "Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China," *The China Quarterly*, no. 174 (2003): 317–37.

<sup>41</sup> For instance, Zhao has made note of a Daoist "Club for Green Civilization," which was set up in 1993 in Sichuan Province. See Xiumei Zhao, *Fazhanzhong de huanjing baohu shehui tuanti* (Environmental social organizations in development), NGO Research Center Book Series (Beijing: Tsinghua University, 1999). For more information on the relation between Daoism and nature, see Nicole J. Girardot, James Miller, and Xiaogan Liu, eds, *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a Cosmic Landscape* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>42</sup> There have been discussions to enable a more liberalized way of control, which in practice would imply that NGOs need not register under a sponsoring institution in the same field, nor in the same administrative area. In other words, it would then also become possible for NGOs, for instance, in Beijing to register under a local sponsoring institution in a different province (Wang Ming, oral communication, February 2004). However, the recent clampdowns on NGOs after the color revolutions have made it rather uncertain whether, and if so, when and how a reform in the registration procedures might be expected.

<sup>43</sup> David Eimer, "China Clamps down on Environmental Monitoring Group," *The Independent*, 28 October 2005, 1–2.

<sup>44</sup> See the introduction in Ho and Vermeer, eds, *China's Limits to Growth*, 1–26.

<sup>45</sup> This, however, is not to say that the entire spectrum of environmental questions is open for civic action. For instance, biotechnology and nuclear energy still belong to social arenas that are largely out of bounds to green activism. See Ho, Vermeer, and Zhao, "Biotech and Food Safety in China"; and Zhao and Ho, "A Developmental Risk Society?"

<sup>46</sup> Gary G. Hamilton, ed., *Business Networks and Economic Development in East and Southeast Asia* (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1991); Yan Yunxiang, *The Flow of Gifts: Reciprocity and Social Networks in a Chinese Village* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996); Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang, *Gifts, Favors and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

<sup>47</sup> An article by Lo and Leung has shown that state environmental agencies face substantial problems in reaching out to the public, and actually need NGOs to do that for them. See Carlos Wing Hung Lo and Sai Wing Leung, "Environmental Agency and Public Opinion in Guangzhou: The Limits of a Popular Approach to Environmental Governance," *The China Quarterly*, no. 163 (2000): 677–704.

<sup>48</sup> Wu Fengshi, "New Partners or Old Brothers? GONGOs in Transnational Environmental Advocacy in China," *China Environment Series*, issue 5 (2002): 47 and 53.

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