

# COMMON CAUSE: CHINA'S STATE-SOCIETY RESPONSE TO ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

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The Chinese government's recognition of the need for public input in solving the environmental crisis may offer a test for greater public participation in other areas.

"Without real democracy there can be no everlasting green hills and clear waters. I am convinced that nature conservation is a cause for a whole nation. It won't do to depend on a wise emperor or president. Hundreds of millions of people must realize and show their concern for this problem."

—Passage censored from *A Green World Tour*  
by Tang Xiyang, 1999<sup>1</sup>

"Environmental protection issues are of public interest and are the least politically sensitive. [Environmental protection] is the best area for experiments in socialist democracy and rule of law."

—Pan Yue, vice-director,  
State Environmental Protection Administration,  
February 9, 2006<sup>2</sup>

## China's environmental crisis

In September 2005, *The Washington Post* reported in a front-page article that residents of a village on China's Chaoshui River were finding their rice paddy livelihood ruined by toxic silt, their fish dying in black rivers and their children developing skin rashes from swimming.<sup>3</sup> The poisons responsible flowed from upstream mines, which the county government kept open, despite clear indications of harm to environment and health, because of the high profits brought by minerals. Having reached the boundaries of their tolerance, villagers mobilized to raid and destroy the mines with their farm tools and hands. Their local leadership did not stop them.

Similar "farmer rebellions" are playing out in cities and villages across China. In some cases, village chiefs and Party officials break ranks to condone or support uprisings; in other cases, they join paramilitary troops in violent suppression.<sup>4</sup> Locally, lines of allegiance seem to be drawn according to how a village leader or local Party chief is personally affected by

economic development and its related pollution. If he lives and works beside his villagers, as did the village leaders on the Chaoshui, he shares the financial and physical hardship of catching toxic fish; on the other hand, if he receives personal financial benefit from local industry, he may be in a position to buy bottled water and physically remove himself from pollution-induced "cancer clusters" such as those near Zhongshan in Guangdong Province.<sup>5</sup>

Dispatches from Howard French and Joseph Kahn in *The New York Times* suggest that intense popular discontent with such economic and environmental inequity is roiling through the rural interior and spreading to central cities.<sup>6</sup> Environmental and related social crises in China now attract international media attention on a regular basis (see sidebar next page).

China's central leadership can no longer deny the need for measures to protect environmental health and natural resources. In response to unrest, civic engagement and public participation on issues of environmental grievance increasingly represent a strategic vision that the government can employ to protect the environment while maintaining stability. This is an idea that Chinese environmentalist-philosophers such as Tang Xiyang have long promoted, and which government officials such as Pan Yue now seem to share. Articulation of this view by Beijing officials suggests improved prospects for the development of environmental civil society in China, as well as an opportunity for cautious forays into political expression on environmental and other issues.

## Environmental protection and democracy

Although acts of political organizing considered disruptive are still prohibited by the government, support seems to be growing in Beijing and beyond for the idea that an increasingly open state-society partnership will bring better environmental protection. State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) vice-director Pan Yue observed on February 9 that China's environmental nightmares call for an "open and sunshine administration."<sup>7</sup> Put into a broad political context, Pan said, environmental activism may be a proving ground for the central government to test greater civic engagement on issues for the common national good. "Environmental protection issues are of public interest and are the least politically sensitive," Pan wrote. "[Environmental protec-

## China's Internationally Known Environmental Crises, 2005–early 2006

**August 2005:** Demonstrators demanded the shutdown of a lead-emitting battery factory in Zhejiang Province. Some protestors used violence; police tear-gassed the crowd and “beat innocent bystanders,” according to an anonymous phone interview. (Source: “Dozens hurt after China factory protest,” *The Boston Globe*, 21 August 2005.)

**November 13, 2005:** A chemical plant blast dumped 100 tons of benzene into Jilin Province's Songhua River, a waterway that is shared by Russia and later becomes Russia's Amur River before flowing into the Sea of Okhotsk. (Source: United Nations Environment Programme, “The Songhua River Spill Field Mission Report,” December 2005)

**Mid-December 2005:** A smelter's discharge of cadmium into Guangdong Province's Bei River required shut-off of water for 500,000 people. (Source: “Toxic spill in second China river,” BBC News, 21 December 2005)

**December 6, 2005:** Protests over land requisitions and other issues related to a power plant in Dongzhou Village, Guangdong Province lasted seven months; on December 6, police opened fire on protesters and killed at least three villagers. (Source: Human Rights Watch, “China: Dongzhou Killings Need Independent Investigation,” Human Rights News, 15 Dec 2005.)

**February 14, 2006:** A chlorine plant spilled 2,000 tons of alkaline into the Wuding River near Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, but the incident was not reported until ten days later. (Source: “China Spill May Affect Groundwater, Official Says,” Bloomberg News, 14 February 2006)

tion] is the best area for experiments in socialist democracy and rule of law.”

Human rights advocates can celebrate these comments as an opportunity to advance dialogue on multiple rights, as well as on movement toward rule of law. Advocates for the right of association, right to participatory development and access to environmental justice can potentially make inroads based on this semi-official environment-and-democracy framework.

For the Chinese leadership, however, it seems that this approach to environmental protection is more a matter of practicality than it is an endorsement of individual “rights.” The government has long needed support in environmental protection; according to Elizabeth Economy, SEPA is “grossly understaffed and underfunded,” with a total agency workforce of only 300 individuals.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the urgent rhetoric in Pan's statements about “battling the scourge of pollution”<sup>9</sup> in capitalist China is not new. Political crisis over the environment has built up from a long history of disconnect between Beijing

and local officials in implementing China's myriad national environmental laws.<sup>10</sup> Success in applying environmental policies has been sporadic across the country, with some local officials in remote areas committing crimes against nature and their people for the sake of personal financial gain, and leaders in other areas uniting with residents to protect their community and environment. Thus for SEPA, in particular, collaboration with society and individuals is a highly practical way to achieve environmentally and socially sustainable economic development.

Working toward widespread public consciousness and involvement in environmental protection is consistent with modern philosophies of environmentalism worldwide. American environmental advocate Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. has joined numerous others in echoing Garrett Hardin's 1968 work on the environmental “tragedy” of predominant Western political economy: “Laissez-faire capitalism does not work, particularly in the commons. Individuals pursuing their own self-interest will devour the commons very quickly. That's the economic law—the tragedy of the commons. You have to force companies to internalize costs.” In a capitalist democracy, wrote Hardin in his original commentary, only “mutual coercion mutually agreed upon” can keep individuals from destroying their shared resources.<sup>11</sup>

Before the recent realization of reformist Deng Xiaoping's socialism (or, arguably, outright capitalism) “with Chinese characteristics,” one might have reasonably expected such coercion in China to have been less than mutually agreed upon. Even now, it would be consistent with China's current economic system to forge a resolution of environmental crisis by forcing companies and other political-economic actors to account for the social and environmental results of their behavior. However, as polluting state-owned enterprises are privatized and the political-economic decisions of China's central leadership lose their command-and-control certainty, attempts to enforce environmental policy have proven neither uniform nor effective. It appears that China's capitalist reforms call for private participation not only in industry, but also in monitoring the environmental problems that industry brings—perhaps something like “participatory environmentalism with Chinese characteristics.”

The practical importance and current lack of robust environmental civil society has apparently become painfully clear not only to the SEPA leadership. One student environmentalist in Lanzhou explained her commitment to environmental education by saying, “So many Chinese have poor minds about the environment!” The “poor mind” problem incriminates more than just rich polluters and high-consuming urban middle classes. Even Buddhist monks with whom I traveled from Xiahe (“Little Tibet”) to Lanzhou in Gansu Province threw their muffin wrappers out of a speeding minibus window without a second thought. As Tang Xiyang once wrote, “I am convinced that nature conservation is a cause for a whole nation. It won't do to depend on a wise emperor or president. Hundreds of millions of people must realize and show their concern for this problem.”

In line with these observations, the most positive results of



**Environmentalist Dai Qing found herself caught up in politics. Photo: AFP/Getty Images**

environmental protection in China have emerged from efforts to gain converts to this common cause—attempts to enlist members of the public to monitor both pollution-based business and local officials with vested interests. Effective applications of this approach have been undertaken by environmental NGOs in Yunnan Province and in response to laws encouraging public participation in environmental protection in municipalities such as Shenyang, Liaoning Province.<sup>12</sup> In turn, the government has taken greater notice of both civil society and official grievance processes as channels to effectively resolve environmental concerns without undermining or threatening government authority.

If Pan Yue's comments reflect a dominant view in the Party leadership that environmental civil society must be not only tolerated, but even created and fostered, then environmental education is the first critical step. Only partnership with outside NGOs can give SEPA the necessary network capacity to reach its enormous intended audience. The Chinese central government, beginning with SEPA, must work in common cause with grassroots environmentalists.

### **A Brief History of Chinese Environmentalism**

Long before official crisis mode, Chinese environmentalists such as Tang Xiyang and Dai Qing argued that governmental openness and environmental health are intertwined. Tang

Xiyang, the revered father of the “Green Camp” nature-tours that many of China's current top environmentalists attended as college students in the mid-1990s, pulled no punches in naming what he perceived as China's environmental solution: democracy. In the 1980s, Tang Xiyang felt that he was bringing a “green sutra” of environmentalist democracy to China, just as Sanzang had returned with Buddhist sutras from his Journey to the West in the Tang Dynasty. “Citizens should have the right to shout out that the emperor has no clothes...” Tang wrote in his 1999 reflections on traveling through nature conservation parks in the former Soviet Union, Europe and the United States. “Only when people are the real masters of their own destiny can they speak, discuss, criticize and select able persons [as leaders]. All this must be practiced, not mere form.”<sup>13</sup> These passages were censored at publication and never made accessible within China.

Even earlier, in 1989, Dai Qing published *Yangtze! Yangtze!*, a collection of interviews, essays and bold statements by Chinese scientists, intellectuals and journalists opposed to the Three Gorges dam. Her work shed light on opportunities for local-to-global networking to resist mega-dam construction, and on the importance of connections with international actors in domestic environmental work.<sup>14</sup> (The resistance of dams as icons of powerful state authority can be seen not only in China's thirty year-old case of the Dahe dam construction in Chongqing Municipality, but also in Arundhati Roy's work with river protection activists in India.<sup>15</sup>)

Dai Qing and her materials were highly influential in China's growing democracy movement in the months before the Tiananmen Square protests and the subsequent violent crackdown. For those inside the movement, the unfolding events of 1989 illustrated in real life the philosophical nexus between environmentalism and democratic vision, and how potent that pairing could be in a shaky political system.<sup>16</sup> The Chinese government's violent 1989 crackdown on pro-democracy protesters, many of whom were also environmentalists, silenced most civil society dialogue for many years. Until the blossoming of grassroots environmental NGOs in Yunnan Province several years ago, government-operated NGOs (GONGOs) or international NGOs (INGOs) represented the extent of civil society. And until Pan Yue's comments in mid-February 2006, the philosophical and practical environment-democracy connection went unspoken in official public dialogue.

Under this historical context, recent advances and prospects for a win-win situation in terms of both strategy and philosophy in China's state-society relations cannot be taken for granted. Although Pan Yue's comments about democracy seem to represent a turning point post-Tiananmen, the killing of several power plant protesters in Dongzhou on December 6, 2005 (see sidebar) was also a “first since Tiananmen”—the first reported instance of Chinese authorities opening fire to suppress a public gathering.

For that reason, it is with cautious optimism that human rights and democracy advocates and environmentalists are obliged to consider their overlapping interests, and with strategic restraint that grassroots environmentalists have been pursuing their critical work.

### Environmentalism in Western China—August 2005

Tang Xiyang has collaborated widely with other leading environmental activists in Beijing and abroad who are currently developing strategies for China's environmental protection. One example is Wen Bo, who worked extensively as coordinator of China Green Student Forum with colleagues such as Yan Jun to organize and execute Tang's first Green Camp, which brought young students to the threatened habitat of the *jinsiho*, the Yunnan snub-nosed monkey. Almost ten years later, Wen Bo now works with Pacific Environment, a San Francisco-based environmental group that partners with Global Greengrants Fund to help build the capacity of environmental groups across China. A 2004 *Wall Street Journal* article profiled Wen Bo as a savvy, strategic thinker and trainer of new leaders on how to effect positive environmental change.<sup>17</sup>

In August 2005, Wen Bo connected me with Green Camel Bell—a young, robust environmental group in Lanzhou, Gansu Province, whose leaders subsequently connected me with the Xinjiang Federation of Environmental Students in Urumqi. The groups are in full cross-country collaborative mode, but they make not so much as a whispered mention of democracy or human rights. For environmental advocates within China, linking green issues to a broader political discourse—especially one of human rights—is still risky and even dangerous. Accordingly, the groups with whom I met pursue a “straight-forward” environmental agenda, and while their work may have other ramifications, such as carving out political space for the agendas of others, they themselves are not employing environmental activism as a pretext, banner or springboard for

other issues—a point important to emphasize on their behalf.

By the time of my visit, the environmental crises and drivers of this fall's social unrest were well underway, but student leaders I visited in Urumqi and Lanzhou were quick to define their work as strictly environmental and non-threatening to Beijing and their provincial regimes. Rather, they have worked assiduously and collaboratively with the government to mobilize student peers and local residents in recycling programs, wildlife education and even investigations of radioactive pollution. Unlike pollution protests erupting in angry opposition to a cancer-causing factories and land grabs, these students have demonstrated a particularly strategic strain of advocacy: decidedly circumspect, focused environmentalism.

Like the rest of China, people in the western regions from Gansu Province to the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region are suffering a barrage of environmental assaults. Rapid economic development and population growth have led to deforestation, desertification and widespread pollution, generally threatening biodiversity and increasing the ecological fragility of the region. In turn, reduced human access to clean water and fertile soil for drinking, irrigation and agriculture, respectively, has destabilized livelihoods and society.

Xinjiang's Tarim River Watershed is in the gravest environmental condition possible, demonstrating acute symptoms of deforestation.<sup>18</sup> Forest oases unique to Xinjiang's desert and historically important to its regional economic and social development are now being degraded by agricultural reclamation and construction of large-scale (unmapped) reservoirs, both of which draw down groundwater necessary for the



Workers dig a well in the Xinjiang desert. Photo: Reuters



area's "green corridor." Drying of lakes such as Manas and Lop Nur—an infamous site of atomic bomb testing—has also undermined ecological resilience in an already arid region. For all of these reasons, local environmental NGOs advocate particularly for holistic consideration of watershed environmental issues in agricultural policy-making, and warn the government of the potential for local people dependent on the land becoming environmental refugees.

The Xinjiang government has responded with forest protection projects and environmental education for local officials, but without any real progress to date in stemming deforestation or desertification. The U.S. Embassy in China reports that arable land per capita was in decline as of the 1990s, and Xinjiang's food supply "hovers near a deficit" as a result.<sup>19</sup> Snowmelt from the mountains surrounding Xinjiang should ideally be an adequate source of irrigation for the oasis agriculture on which many local livelihoods depend, but oasis population growth has in fact outstripped the capacities of this key source. Poverty and environmental fragility are now hallmarks of the region.

Xinjiang also has an especially challenging social history. Ethnic Han migration into the region has diluted the population density of local Uighur Muslims, while achieving only partial success in making Uighurs feel part of the Chinese "motherland."<sup>20</sup> Han farmer-soldiers of the Xinjiang *bingtuan*, established in 1949 as an instrument of regional ethnic stability and employment for veterans of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), now occupy nearly a third of the region's arable land, even though they account for only one-seventh of the regional population.<sup>21</sup> The presence and activities of the PLA and paramilitary troops weigh the region with a repressive air in response to Uighur uprisings and to ensure smooth implementation of the Great Western Development scheme. It is well documented that extreme measures are taken in Xinjiang in order to maintain regional control over possible "splittist" or "terrorist" elements in the region and beyond.<sup>22</sup>

As a result, although Xinjiang arguably needs civil and official collaboration on environmental protection more than any other part of China, the growth of environmental civil society has been constrained by a repressive political climate. Environmental non-governmental organizations are limited in number, and the operational scope of those that do exist is restricted to "safe" issues. Written environmentalist materials I was able to collect there focused heavily on biodiversity protection; for example, collaboration between the Xinjiang Conservation Fund and International Snow Leopard Trust on habitat protection, and multiple books on the Xinjiang ground jay, a species indigenous to Xinjiang's Taklimakan desert.

Groups with which I came into contact in August 2005 included the Xinjiang Federation of Environmental Students, based in a technical university; the Xinjiang Conservation Fund, led by an ecologist of the Xinjiang Institute of Ecology and Geography at the Chinese Academy of Sciences; Volunteers for Western China Environmental Protection; and the U.S.-based International Snow Leopard Trust. Among these, only the Xinjiang Federation of Environmental Students could be considered a grassroots NGO.

Collaboration with the environmental education outreach

## Green Camel Bell—A Network Model of Environmentalism

Green Camel Bell has developed from a student organization at Lanzhou University into the hub of a larger university-based network of individuals and groups across China and the world. Members of its network include:

- Lanzhou University's Darwin Association;
- Northwest Normal University's Environmental Protection Association; and
- Lanzhou Polytechnical College's Green Association.

These associations joined with Green Camel Bell to host a "Green Olympics" event in April 2005.

On a similar front, Green Camel Bell's partners in government and international non-governmental organizations have included:

- Lanzhou University Community Development Center and the Gansu Office of Oxfam Hong Kong, both affiliated with Lanzhou University;
- Friends of Nature and other environmental education NGOs;
- Gansu Environmental Protection Bureau's Center for Environmental Education and Communication; and
- Gansu Forest Bureau.

Finally, Green Camel Bell has worked to develop capacity in 17 aspiring organizations from 14 colleges in Lanzhou and Zhangye. In May 2005, Green Camel Bell was instrumental in establishing the "Blue Dolphin" Environmental Protection Association at Lanzhou Resources and Environment Voc-Tech College.

arm of the provincial environmental protection agency has been of great importance to the Federation, as has networking with other environmental student groups at Beijing-based "summits," and these student leaders are working strategically within accepted limits. Energized by one student leader, a handful of students was able to galvanize campus support and expand their membership from six to 300 within the space of one year. They have begun to assemble closet-sized libraries of books to encourage self-education, and as of the start of their fall semester, they were branching out into a university-wide program of recycling and discouraging disposable chopstick use. Lack of funding, however, remains a primary concern.

Counterparts in Lanzhou, Gansu Province, also face classic problems of environmental protection: an extreme shortage of water resources, soil erosion and deteriorating conditions of vegetation, all of which are illustrated in the degradation and increased silting of the "mother" Yellow River. Desertification is a major concern, along with radioactive pollution of rivers,

## To register or not to register?

Registration with the local government was the main issue on the minds of student leaders when I left Lanzhou in August. It is a sticky subject that each group navigates individually. In the case of Green Camel Bell, *Women bu shi hefa bu hefa, women shi feifa* is the message that their leader was trying to communicate to the powers of his particular world: “We’re not legal or illegal. We’re outside of the law (i.e. the law should have nothing to do with us).” Green Camel Bell leaders were especially concerned about how much operational control would have to be ceded to the government after registration. But environmentalists do stand to gain from registration in terms of collaboration with and subsequent funding from the government. This seems to be the case for the collaboration Green Camel Bell has ultimately pursued with its local environmental protection bureau once its leaders finally registered last fall.

Even without registration, leaders of the Xinjiang Federation seem to have relied on collaboration with government—in particular, the environmental education outreach arm of a provincial agency—both for access to funding and as a means of maintaining a legitimate and apolitical image.

lakes and pastures, and the loss of unique species of wild horses and antelopes to development and illegal hunting.

Like the Xinjiang Federation, Green Camel Bell is a university-based environmentalist corps of volunteers started by one leader at Lanzhou University—an Anhui native in his late twenties who moved to western China because of his concern for regional environmental issues. He and the group’s other members have outlined an ambitious work plan, as required under the terms of their official registration, which includes an ecologically focused, investigative excursion (modeled on Tang Xiyang’s “Green Camp”) to the Great Wall; establishment of a small environmental library-database open to the public; environmental education trips to severely desertified counties; an environmental “culture” festival featuring a motivational speech from Tang Xiyang; an environmental policy forum on converting croplands to forest and grassland; a market survey of the antelope-hunting business; and investigation into possible radioactive pollution of water and air.

The group has completed many of these work items with robust support from its broad international, national and regional network of participants and supporters (see sidebar). It is hard to pinpoint the reasons for Green Camel Bell’s ability to pursue such a large range of issues and social organizing as compared with that of the Xinjiang Federation, but greater political freedom and access to funding appear to be major factors.

While environmentalists in Xinjiang currently exercise less range than Green Camel Bell in Lanzhou, this could change. What seems to be a consistent preoccupation of student leaders is that their groups not be seen as a potential source of political destabilization or a challenge to governmental rule in

a restive area of China. This caution existed in Lanzhou as well, though to a lesser degree. “We just want to have fun,” was the common refrain of Green Camel Bell’s leader during my visit.

Both groups also depend on cross-country cohorts for educational exchange and tips on social organizing via cell phone and China’s prevalent “instant messaging” technology, OICQ. The government-supported logic that environmental solutions and individual civic engagement go hand-in-hand seems to be an underlying factor in this *yige ren bi yige ren* (person-by-person) approach to network development.

All the same, Green Camel Bell and the Xinjiang Federation still face significant financial challenges in building libraries and offering environmental education to a broader audience. Wen Bo’s “simple tips for environmental activism” make the environmentalist road seem easy at the outset, but lack of money is a major obstacle in further development. Greengrants China, which Wen Bo has led and which is sustained with assistance from international organizations such as Pacific Environment Forum, provides small grants to Green Camel Bell and its peer groups at the initial stage, but long-term funding is not a given. This position of financial disadvantage leads some groups to collaboration and registration with the government as a survival option.

It helps to have individual leaders who understand the dynamics of consistent but low-key activism in China. The establishment background of Green Camel Bell’s leader helps him to navigate this narrow path. Aided by his day job as a researcher at a local government academy and his persistence in maximizing the usefulness of his connections, he is able to make the best of China’s sociopolitical reality in exercising his commitment to the environment and ensuring the survival of his group.

### Conclusion

Governmental encouragement of environmental civil society seems to be a well-considered attempt to resolve a classic “tragedy of the commons”—with Chinese characteristics. Indeed, to speak productively about moving forward from environmental calamity in China requires addressing how to “close the gap,” as Elizabeth Economy writes, between what needs to be done and what the state can actually do. This gap is the space that environmental society groups are now beginning to inhabit when official “environmental enforcement remains unequal to the challenge” it confronts.<sup>23</sup>

Whether or not the government will support environmentalists as heroes of society remains to be seen, but relations are certainly warmer than in the past. The more interesting question now seems to be: how will environmentalists such as Green Camel Bell and the Xinjiang Federation of Environmental Students respond to this new official vision of an “open and sunshine administration”?

Certainly there are individuals “shouting out that the emperor has no clothes,” as Tang Xiyang has said, and the government’s eventual admission of the seriousness of the benzene spill in the Songhua River may indicate greater openness post-SARS on issues of public health. But the grassroots Chinese environmentalists I met in Western China seem not to have been lulled into a sense of security. Caution is the norm in the attitudes, discourses and organizational approaches of stu-

dent environmental groups, especially in Western provinces of Gansu and Xinjiang.

Student environmentalists in Western China, though schooled in the Green Camp spirit of Tang Xiyang, have not actively adopted his public pro-democracy discourse. In contrast to villagers who have expressed vocal resistance to unfair local government practices, the members of Green Camel Bell and their Xinjiang counterparts have worked strategically and carefully within a proscribed system of public education, in which consciousness-raising and productive but non-threatening Green Camps and educational exchanges are the trademark. Accordingly, Pan Yue's comments in early February seem to suggest that the government via SEPA will condone and even encourage Green Camel Bell, the Xinjiang Federation of Environmental Students and other groups as long as their environmental education of the general public serves society without presenting undue political risk. The realization of this vision would be notable especially for Xinjiang, arguably an illustration of China's most extreme societal constraints.

In areas less strictly controlled than Gansu and Xinjiang, growth of environmental civil society could potentially make space for the airing of other issues. How environmental associations fare in the coming years—whether they successfully avoid political destabilization or the government's perception of threat—will also set a critical precedent for other developments in governmental-societal openness. For advocates concerned with issues of sustainable development and human security, the new level of resolve articulated by SEPA leadership should inspire some hope that China's myriad environmental laws will be implemented with the public in a central, increasingly participatory role.<sup>24</sup> And although legal reform activists will continue to find the thorny "access to justice" metric difficult to achieve and track across the wildly varying conditions of China's provinces, counties and villages, growing official recognition of the right for individuals to voice concerns on environmental health is a critical indicator of social and political progress.

In sum, the government's current attitude toward environmental NGOs seems to reflect less an endorsement of individual rights than the recognition of a dire situation that is forcing the government into common cause with environmental civil society. However, the benefits of collaboration on environmental issues might factor into a new calculus on civil society that the government could apply to broader issues for the national good. The government's current collaborative attitude toward environmental NGOs in politically sensitive regions of Western China may represent a bellwether on this count.

## NOTES

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24. In the predominant vision of a "right to development" or "human security," individuals have ensured environmental health and a fair shot at economic prosperity, based on just access to natural resources. This collection of ideas was put forth by the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development ("the Brundtland Commission") and fleshed out by the 1993 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development ("Rio"), and its policy applications can be seen in the participatory development work of many United Nations sustainability programs. This framework fundamentally values participation as a defining element of sustainability.