

Weaving a Green Web: The Internet and Environmental Activism in China

By Guobin Yang

The rise of Web-based voluntary groups in China signals a gradual change in citizens' relationship to state politics, a trend that has been quietly under way for some time. This trend is discernible in other areas of contemporary Chinese life, but seems especially visible in the environmental protection field. If traditional Chinese politics is top-down, the environmental movement represents the rise of a bottom-up, grassroots politics. This grassroots politics is characterized by direct participation (in words and deeds), self-organizing, and community action.

Friends of Nature, the first and one of the most influential environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in China, was founded in 1994, the same year China was connected to the Internet.¹ It is thus not surprising that as environmental activism has grown, Web sites devoted to environmental issues also have proliferated. While recent research and writings on the environmental movement in China have outlined the rise of NGOs and voluntary community action,² the role of the Internet in this movement has been overlooked.

In China, environmental Web sites have been created not only by green NGOs, but also by government agencies and research centers. In addition, personal homepages on environmental topics—ranging from green lifestyles to the protection of endangered species—have mushroomed. With the rise in public interest for the environment even commercial portal sites such as Netease.com run “green” on-line forums. Environmental Web sites also have begun to multiply among loosely organized groups of volunteers. Usually unregistered and with no full-time staff, these Web-based environmental volunteer groups represent a new trend and potentially powerful new direction for China's environmental movement. Counting such groups is challenging, for many are affiliated with university green groups, are outgrowths of existing NGOs, or simply are the initiatives of some highly motivated individuals.

In the hot summer of 2002 I traveled to China to learn about Web-based environmental groups. My field research, especially the lively conversations with environmentalists, informs the observations below on the character and potential of Internet environmental activism in China.

Four Web-Based Environmental Groups

During June and July of 2002 I tracked down the principal members of four Web-based environmental groups in Beijing, who candidly shared with me the goals and challenges of their groups. The first two groups were born on-line, while the latter two metamorphosed from “off-line” green activist initiatives.

Greener Beijing

Mr. Song Gang launched the Web site Greener Beijing (<http://gbj.grchina.net/greenerbj.htm>) in November 1998, which is now run mainly by his brother Song Xinzhou with the help of volunteers. During the first few years of its existence this site won prizes in national Web design competitions and was widely publicized in newspapers and TV news programs. Greener Beijing's “Environmental Forum” became a popular on-line bulletin board attracting 2,700 registered members. Members of Greener Beijing engage in three kinds of activities to promote a green culture—operating a Web site, conducting environmental protection projects, and organizing volunteer environmental awareness activities. While Greener Beijing does do some on-the-ground work, its central activity is maintaining and expanding the Web site, which has more than 12 informative sections including “Environmental Focus,” “Laws and Regulations,” “Environmental Forum,” and a page featuring the influential environmental writer and activist Tang Xiyang.³ This information packed site, which also has an English version, clearly reflects a significant time commitment of the volunteers.

Greener Beijing's on-line discussion forums have been catalysts for “off-line” environmental activism. For example, in 1999 one of the early on-line discussions on the recycling of used batteries sparked students at the Number One Middle School in Xiamen city (Fujian province) to organize a successful community battery recycling program. Another impressive on-line project of Greener Beijing was the launching of a “Save Tibetan Antelope Website Union” in January 2000, which drew national attention to this endangered species. The creation of the Website union helped Greener Beijing and environmentalists from 27 universities in Beijing to jointly organize environmental exhibit tours on many university campuses.

Green-Web

Green-Web (www.green-web.org) was launched in December 1999. Its main founder, Mr. Gao Tian, previously spent two years as a volunteer Web master for the “Green Forum” of the influential portal site Netease.com. The idea of launching this independent environmental Web site first arose from discussions on the “Green Forum.” Green-Web is first and foremost a virtual community composed of about 4,000 registered users. The Web site currently functions as a space for on-line discussions and exchange on environmental issues, but aims to develop into a portal site on environmental protection in China.

topics on environmental protection, and useful links to other environmental Web sites.

The Tibetan Antelope Information Center

Mr. Hu Jia together with a small group of individuals also interested in protecting endangered species set up the Tibetan Antelope Information Center (TAIC, www.taic.org) at the end of 1998. The Web site is maintained by volunteers on rented server space with grant support from the International Fund for Animal Welfare, the Worldwide Fund for Nature, and the Global Greengrants Fund. Since TAIC launched its site, more than 30 volunteers have contributed time and effort to

For groups of volunteer environmentalists lacking both official status and office space, an on-line presence is a key sign of their existence.

Like Greener Beijing, Green-Web volunteers also have begun to organize community environmental activities. One recent activity was a community education initiative called “Green Summer Night.” Usually with borrowed audiovisual equipment, Green-Web volunteers go into parks in Beijing to put on environmental exhibits or show environmental documentaries.

Green-Web also organizes bird-watching, recycling, and tree-planting activities. One of the most aggressive actions of Green-Web was the February 2002 launch of an on-line petition campaign to protect some wetlands in Shunyi county in suburban Beijing, a habitat of many birds and popular with birdwatchers. The local government planned to build an entertainment center and a golf course neighboring the wetlands—construction that threatened to destroy the habitat. This plan was exposed by the news media in October 2001. Joining a rising campaign against the development plan, Green-Web organized an on-line petition from 2 February to 12 April 2002. Green-Web’s campaign collected hundreds of on-line signatures and sent petition letters to about ten government agencies actions which were covered by the news media. According to the summary report published by Green-Web, the local government eventually canceled its development plan.

As of July 2002, Green-Web had about 20 core members in three cities—Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Beijing. This small group operates on a shoestring—their only computer was donated by a volunteer member and the Web site runs on donated commercial server space. Despite the limited resources, the Web site is beautifully designed and rich in content, with a discussion forum, an information center, an electronic newsletter, special

its construction and maintenance. The Web site serves as an information and communication center on the protection of the Tibetan antelope and some other endangered species in China. TAIC has recently launched a newly designed Web site containing eight links, including Archives on Tibetan Antelope, Research, People, Data Center, News, and a link on how to help in the protection efforts. The News link carries reports about what is happening in the “battlefield” (e.g., the fights against illegal poaching on the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau).

Although in June 2002 TAIC still only had one computer, TAIC has been at the forefront of fighting poaching on the ground. Its members maintain close contact with anti-poaching patrols on the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau and have been working hard to assist local environmental protection efforts by helping to set up local environmental organizations.

Han Hai Sha

The newest of the four Web-based groups, Han Hai Sha (literally Boundless Ocean of Sand, www.desert.org.cn) is a volunteer network devoted to desertification problems. Mr. Yang Hao led several other young environmentalists in Beijing (some of whom were members of Friends of Nature and Green-Web) to begin planning the network at the end of 2001. In March 2002, the first group of 50 volunteers was recruited through group e-mails and posted announcements in the on-line bulletin boards of Friends of Nature and Green-Web. These volunteers met twice over four months and launched the Han Hai Sha Web site and an electronic newsletter in June 2002.

Han Hai Sha aims to promote public awareness of desertification and mobilize community efforts to solve

practical problems. It emphasizes the gathering and dissemination of information through the Internet and works closely with experts and volunteers in areas plagued or threatened by desertification. Yang Hao has focused his group's outreach in two rural communities in Inner Mongolia and Sichuan province. Among other activities, it partners with the Institute of Desert Green Engineering of Chifeng city—a local environmental NGO in Inner Mongolia—to enhance public awareness of the challenges of desertification and related problems of rural poverty.

As of July 2002, Han Hai Sha did not own a computer and was completely reliant on volunteers. Despite this lack of resources, the Han Hai Sha Web site is quite rich in content. It contains a collection of historical writings about China's desert areas and an archive of commentaries and analyses of sandstorms.

The Key Roles of the Internet in Environmental Activism

Based upon the experiences of these small innovative Web groups, three general observations can be made about the role of the Internet in China's environmental movement:

The Internet enables voluntary environmental activity with minimal financial resources and in a restrictive political climate. All four groups except for Han Hai Sha have received small grant support from domestic or international environmental organizations, yet one common challenge for all of them is the lack of resources. Thus they depend on volunteers who have personal access to the Internet to gather information, edit material, as well as undertake Web design, and maintenance. Citizen volunteer groups also face obstacles in obtaining legal registration in China. In 1998, the State Council promulgated two regulations concerning the registration and management of social organizations and nonprofit enterprises. The regulations require that applicants have a sponsoring institution and that within the same administrative area there should not be more than one organization for any specific type of work (e.g., Beijing would need only one NGO working on endangered species). Facing these barriers, some environmental and other types of aspiring social groups forgo registration and opt to organize on the Internet.

The Internet can be used for organizing both on- and off-line activities. Web sites can help organizations recruit volunteers for implementing off-line community projects (e.g., tree planting, exhibitions, and battery collection). Whereas virtual volunteering is done on personal, school, or public computers and includes designing and maintaining Web sites, hosting on-line forums, gathering

information for on-line publishing, and editing and distributing electronic newsletters. Virtual volunteering is essential for the operations of environmental Web groups, because they usually lack the office space or resources to bring volunteers together.

Web sites play a crucial role in providing environmental groups a presence and creating public visibility. For groups of volunteer environmentalists lacking both official status and office space, an on-line presence is a key sign of their existence. Because China's environmental movement is still small this sign is as important to the volunteers as to the outside world. The Web sites of these groups also provide a window into their environmental efforts at the community level—all four Web sites described above devote considerable space to showcasing their off-line activities. Disseminating stories of off-line activities and providing up-to-date information on environmental problems and trends on their Web sites give these groups and their causes greater public visibility. Greener Beijing, for example, increased its public influence by winning Web design competitions.

The Role of Web-based Groups in Environmental Problem Solving

These Web-based groups play two key roles in environmental problem solving: they raise environmental consciousness and help mobilize the public.

Raising Environmental Consciousness

Through their Web sites, electronic newsletters, forums, and on-line projects (such as petitions and publicity campaigns) these Web-based groups publicize environmental activist initiatives and raise the consciousness about China's environmental problems. Particularly important in this respect is the environmental discourse that these Web-based groups produce and circulate on-line. As even the names of Green-Web and Greener Beijing indicate, this discourse celebrates a green cultural consciousness and advocates a set of corresponding practices. In some cases, the discourse produced on-line spurs public action or grabs public attention beyond the audience of the Internet. For example, Greener Beijing's on-line campaign to save the Tibetan antelope was much publicized in national newspapers and TV programs.

How Internet environmental discourse is produced is also notable. Compared with the traditional mass media, the Internet is more open to public participation and interaction. It is therefore not surprising that the Web sites of these groups provide a space for common citizens to share information or voice their opinions. Admittedly,

the size of this public is still modest given that only a small percentage of the Chinese population owns a computer with Internet connection. Internet censorship is another potential challenge, though I did not hear complaints about such censorship from China's environmentalists during my field research in 2002.⁴ Nevertheless, China's Internet population has been growing rapidly, from one million in June 1998 to 45.8 million in June 2002.⁵ China's on-line environmental communities should expand along with the steady growth of the Internet population.

Public Mobilization

Web-based groups also contribute to environmental problem solving by mobilizing and organizing community efforts and resources. All the four groups discussed above move between the virtual and the "real" world to deal with environmental problems by undertaking community-based projects. Using the Internet has enabled these groups to reach and mobilize potential volunteers for educational and advocacy projects:

- The Tibetan Antelope Information Center uses its Web site to recruit volunteers for the Kekexili Nature Reserve;
- Greener Beijing uses its Web site to campaign for the protection of endangered species; and,
- Green-Web mobilized public support for its on-line petition for the protection of wetlands.

Off-line activities of these groups are constrained by their lack of financial and material resources. In the long run these Web-based green groups will need to overcome resource constraints in order to sustain their community efforts.

Web Activism and Political Change in China

The rise of Web-based environmental groups signals two striking political trends in contemporary China. First, Internet technology is facilitating the creation of new institutions for social change. Specifically, the Internet has enabled Web-based green groups to practice new ways of voluntary organizing and collective action. Two of the groups, Green-Web and Greener Beijing, started as exclusively on-line communities before expanding into on-the-ground environmental activism. For both, the Internet first brought together previously unorganized individuals. The other two groups, TAIC and Han Hai Sha, first organized off-line and then went on-line, yet

they emphasize the use of the Internet no less than the other two groups. For all four groups, therefore, the Internet provides a space for ordinary citizens to organize and act collectively and practice bottom-up politics. This was unimaginable even as recent as ten years ago. China watchers should monitor the long-term consequences of this new type of Internet-enabled associational life.

This grassroots politics is also practiced by other elements of the environmental movement in China, notably formally registered environmental NGOs such as Friends of Nature and Global Village of Beijing. It merits mention that registered social organizations in China are not permitted to open branch offices outside their city, therefore such groups may turn to the Internet to enhance their environmental education and outreach work. The four Web-based groups described in this paper provide innovative models in creating grassroots activism, which other Chinese NGOs may follow. Over time the green Web that Chinese environmentalists are weaving may reach far and wide.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research for this study was made possible by a grant from the University Research Council of the University of Hawaii at Manoa. I wish to thank Jennifer Turner for providing me with initial contacts for my field research.

Guobin Yang is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and a faculty member of the Center for Chinese Studies at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. His recent publications include articles on China's Red Guard Movement, the 1989 Chinese student movement, and the impact of the Internet on civil society in China. He can be reached at: guobin@hawaii.edu

ENDNOTES

¹ For a list of the various technical steps, research initiatives, and agreements that took place in 1994 to create and facilitate Internet access in China see the China Internet Network Information Center Web site: <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/evolution.shtml>

²For studies of environmental NGOs in China, see Elizabeth Knup, "Environmental NGOs in China: An Overview," *China Environmental Series*, Issue 1 (1997), pp. 9-15; Zhao Xiumei, "Guanyu Beijing Huanbao de Diaocha Fenxi" (A Survey and Analysis of Environmental NGOs in Beijing), in Wang Ming (ed.), *Zhongguo NGO Yanjiu* (Studies of Chinese NGOs)

(Beijing: UNCRD and Tsinghua University, 2000), pp. 37-50; Peter Ho, "Greening Without Conflict? Environmentalism, NGOs and Civil Society in China," *Development and Change* Vol. 32, No.5 (2001), pp.893-921; Jennifer Turner and Fengshi Wu (eds.), *Green NGO and Environmental Journalist Forum: A Meeting of Environmentalists in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan*, (Washington, D.C.: The Woodrow Wilson Center, 2002); and Fengshi Wu, "New Partners or Old Brothers? GONGOs in Transnational Environmental Advocacy in China," *China Environment Series*, Issue 5 (2002), pp. 45-58.

³ Tang Xiyang is a well-known writer and nature conservation activist in China, who was editor-in-chief of *Nature*, a magazine

established by the Beijing Nature Museum.

⁴ For a broader discussion of Internet censorship issues in China see Guobin Yang. (2003, forthcoming). "The Internet and Civil Society in China: A Preliminary Assessment." *The Journal of Contemporary China*.

⁵ The China Internet Network Information Center has been conducting semi-annual surveys of Internet development in China since October 1997. All survey reports are published at: <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/develst/report.shtml>

Looking for the China Environment Forum on the Web?



Our Web site at www.wilsoncenter.org/cef has the latest China Environment Forum news, event listings and summaries and publications!

Jennifer Turner, Senior Project Associate: chinaenv@erols.com
Richard Thomas, Production Editor: thomasr@wwic.si.edu
Timothy Hildebrandt, Project Assistant:
hildebrandtt@wwic.si.edu