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NGOs and other voluntary environmental groups

Voluntary environmental organizations are very active when it comes to developing activities aimed at raising the consciousness of the population concerning garbage disposal, garbage classification and separation, and the benefits these activities have for improving the living environment. International organizations like Greenpeace International and domestic ones such as Friends of Nature, Green Beagle, and (many) others are taking the lead in these fields in urban China. All non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have to fight a battle on two fronts, particularly when they concern themselves with causes that can be construed as having a political impact. As environment-related causes tend to be intimately linked with political concerns, this also applies to those NGOs that are working in the field of the environment (ENGOS). Aside from encountering interference while engaging in their core business of educational and activist work, they also face continuous and stiff obstruction from official quarters to be active at all. The Chinese party-state considers organizations like NGOs as a threat to its existence and monopoly on power. This seems to make the work of these organizations extremely difficult, but practice has shown that many of them have still found ways to engage in relevant action. NGOs generally need to work in the background as much as they can; they must try and avoid too much publicity for their actions; they must ensure that their activities carry no political implications; they have to arrange for financial resources while avoiding funding from abroad, etc. At the same time and despite such constraints, some NGOs are able to successfully negotiate the divide between the people and the political system. Some are even appreciated by that system, albeit incidentally and grudgingly, for their contributions (Lu, 2007; Salmenkari, 2008; Wu and Chan, 2012; Johnson, 2013a; Kostka, 2014; Teets, 2014). As Dai and Spires conclude, over time some ENGOS have been able to carve out a position ‘as watchdogs to government policies, calling for implementation of existing regulations, critiquing and campaigning against undesirable policies, and exerting pressure on government to solve environmental problems’ (2017: 63). Others have provided invaluable assistance in the implementation of government initiatives by going into communities, linking up with the residents, and mobilizing support – activities that the government bodies are not able or willing to do.
The phenomenon of the environmental NGO made its appearance in China fairly recently. The first independent environmental NGO, now known as Friends of Nature (FoN), was officially registered in 1994, following the unsuccessful Chinese bid to host the 2000 Olympic Games. The fact that China did not have NGOs at the time of the bidding process is said to have contributed to its loss. FoN was set up by the late Liang Congjie, the grandson of Liang Qichao, a reformer during the waning days of the Empire. He was also the son of Liang Sicheng, an architect who tried to preserve the historic city walls of Beijing as much as possible when the new government wanted to tear them down and turn the city into a showcase for socialism after 1949 (Larson, 2010; Tsang and Lee, 2013). Moreover, Liang Congjie served as a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, the highest advisory body for the government (Schwartz, 2004). Liang’s commitment to environmental advocacy resulted from his awareness that it was one of the causes around which it was safe to organize. An effort to protect the Tibetan antelope from poachers organized by FoN in the 1990s proved successful; campaigns to stop dam construction in the Nujiang River (Yunnan Province) and to preserve a scenic section of the Yangtze River called the Tiger Leaping Gorge, organized in the 2000s, also ended in victory. In 2004, former Premier Wen Jiabao personally stepped in to put the Nujiang dam plans on hold (Larson, 2010).

Despite Liang Congjie’s stellar pedigree and political connections, the registration process of his organization was not without problems, as Tony Saich recounts: after waiting for ten months upon handing in their request for sponsorship, FoN received a reply from the National Environment Protection Agency, the administrative level that was to serve as their sponsor. Liang learned that his organization could only be registered if it would take on the responsibility of representing the interests of all Chinese who shared its environmental concerns. Liang declined these demands and instead registered in 1994 as a secondary organization with the Academy of Chinese Culture, the institution where he served as a professor and vice-president (Saich, 2000: 131, 138). In the wake of FoN’s recognition, many other environmental NGOs became active, including Global Village of Beijing. The Bureau for the Administration of Non-Governmental Organizations under the Ministry of Civil Affairs, is the organization responsible for formal registration. Being formally registered is extremely important for an NGO to be able to function properly. The most preferred registration status for NGOs is that of ‘social organizations with tax-exemption status’, but in every local jurisdiction only one social organization is allowed to obtain such status for the theme in which it is active. At the
Beijing municipal level, for example, this means that only one environmental protection association in the entire city can be granted approval (Wu and Chan, 2012: 10). To register for that status, an NGO must find a sponsor organization that is either a governmental agency or a government-affiliated organization. It is not allowed to set up branch offices and has to submit an annual financial report (Schwartz, 2004; Hildebrandt, 2011; Wu and Chan, 2012; Zhan and Tang, 2013: 385). Non-registration means that the NGO does not occupy a niche within the existing administrative framework. In the eyes of the state, this means that it is difficult to control and potentially threatening to social stability. This has a bearing on its ability to build public trust and social acceptance, on its fundraising and personnel recruitment and, eventually, on the effects of its policy advocacy (Hildebrandt, 2011; Zhan and Tang, 2013: 385). Some NGOs consciously refrain from registering, opting to work on the margins; others insist that registration is not worth the trouble, as the organization's aims are limited in scope and time. But as Hsu and Hasmath argue, an NGO’s official registration can be interpreted as confirmation of the value that the government attaches to the organization’s work, which can result in social or political capital that helps the NGO in its activities (2014: 529).

The registration process is complex and time consuming. An organization must first be examined by a government bureau with a connection to the NGO’s area of interest. After this screening, the actual application can be made to the Ministry of Civil Affairs. The relevant government bureau then plays a supervisory and leadership role for the NGO, assuming the responsibility for its financial and political affairs. Registration must be renewed annually, with the possibility that an application for renewal is rejected (Schwartz, 2004: 37-38). Some of the problems NGOs encounter in the registration process is also reflected in the fact that the term fei zhengfu zuzhi (‘NGO’) does not have a particularly clear or consistent definition, either legally or popularly. It is regularly used interchangeably with shehui zuzhi (‘social organization’), gongyi zuzhi (‘public benefit organization’), cishan zuzhi (‘charitable organization’), and minjian zuzhi (‘popular organization’), which indeed are all domains in which NGOs can be active (Hsu, Hsu, and Hasmath, 2017: 1158-1159). In terms of staff members, NGOs tend to be quite small (Teets, 2013).

GONGOs

Over time, NGOs have become very active players, or at least try to be, in many sectors of Chinese society. Data on the number of domestic NGOs are difficult to collect and often contradictory. The frequently quoted number
of 431,000 officially, government-registered NGOs in 2009 sounds plausible, but it leaves out the NGOs that find the process of registration impossible to comply with, or that have decided to continue their work unofficially. In 2008, there were 3298 ENGOs active in China (Gao, 2013; Tsang and Lee, 2013: 155, 156, 157). Estimates from 2013 arrive at a total number of active NGOs of 546,000, but do not distinguish in which fields these organizations are active (Hsu, Hsu, and Hasmath, 2017: 1158). Apart from these organizations, a number of groups that are active in the environmental field and elsewhere are better identified as government-organized NGOs, or GONGOs; alternatively, these groups are known as PONGOs, or Party-organized NGOs (Yuen, 2018). GONGOs are financially dependent on the government and ‘operate in the policy domains related to the agendas of their official supervisory agencies, i.e., government mandated functions such as disease prevention and social-welfare matters’ (Tsang and Lee, 2013: 156-157; Schwartz, 2004). GONGO leaders as well as staff members have sometimes served previously in official state capacities, and the contacts they built in their earlier positions can make their GONGO work easier and more successful (Schwartz, 2004). Well-known early examples of GONGOs include the All-China Women’s Federation and the Chinese Youth League, which originally started out as CCP mass organizations reaching out to discrete segments of the population (Ho, 2008). As a result of decentralization, professionalization, and the withering away of the bottomless funding that supported their work, these mass organizations have been forced to more actively find relevance without state backing. Because of their close ties with the state, it sees GONGOs as ‘safe’, and this often makes them more successful in advocating policy changes (Teets, 2014). At other times, their state connection forces them to take on government tasks they would rather not engage in. Although they can be critical of the actions of lower administrative organizations, the central leadership and its decisions are out of bounds (Schwartz, 2004; Dai and Spires, 2017). GONGOs encounter less problems when interacting with foreign counterparts, have easier access to government officials and official data, and are able to obtain financial support from both international and domestic organizations (Ewoh and Rollins, 2011). Domestic NGOs, on the other hand, ideally stay clear of foreign financial support, as this creates suspicions in the party-state. To function, they have to avoid any suggestion that they are manipulated by foreign interests that seek to create a process of peaceful evolution (or transformation) that is harmful to both social stability and regime legitimacy (Teets, 2013). Well-known examples of environmental GONGOs are the Centre for Environmental Education and Communications (CEEC), the Policy Research
Centre for Environment and Economy (PRCEE), and the China Environmental Protection Foundation (CEPF) (Schwartz, 2004). They all resorted under SEPA, then MEP, and now MEE. The CEPF was created in 1993 under the wings of the State Environmental Protection Agency and financed with the United Nations Environmental Protection Prize that had been awarded to Qu Geping, chair of the Environmental Protection Committee of the National People's Congress and a former administrator of the Administration. The Foundation's main goal is to facilitate the donations of funds and goods to help develop environmental protection projects (Schwartz, 2004; Ewoh and Rollins, 2011: 50; Tsang and Lee, 2017).

**Embeddedness versus consultative authoritarianism**

While NGOs with political missions and activities tend to run into major obstacles and meet active political obstruction, environmental NGOs that focus on a wide variety of environmental activities and garbage disposal-related initiatives are occasionally more successful, as their work complements state policies and policy goals (Hildebrandt, 2011; Wu and Chan, 2012). Friends of Nature, for example, collaborated with the Beijing municipal government in a waste classification and separation project in 2012. They entered a number of residential communities and struck camp there for an extended period of time to spread the gospel of garbage classification and separation and educate the residents (Friends of Nature, 2013). But these are exceptions, as NGOs try to stay in the background as much as possible, concerned as they are about maintaining good relations with the government and avoiding potential trouble as much as they can (Teets, 2013). As a result, they shy away from actively and openly supporting citizens' protests or actions. NGO participation in public protests and actions largely depends on the nature of the events, but also on where they take place. In some parts of the country there is a friendlier climate for ENGOs than in others; the Beijing climate is not friendly toward NGO activities (Spires, 2011). This general reticence leads to grumblings among the people that ENGOs are seemingly more interested in creating a united front with the government than siding openly with their demands, of whatever type. However, by adopting such strategies and accepting the fact that they are embedded in a broader political structure, they are able to circumvent the stringent regulations that make their activities so problematic in the eyes of the state (Ho, 2007; Teets, 2013; Yuen, 2018). In addition, green activists make avid use of informal networking opportunities with Party and state officials, as this
can increase the effectiveness of their campaigns. With great hesitation, the state has even allowed some NGOs at the negotiating table. This has brought forth what Jessica Teets calls consultative authoritarianism, a system that encourages the simultaneous expansion of a fairly autonomous civil society and the development of indirect tools of state control, ultimately leading to more regime legitimacy (Teets, 2013: 2, 3). This mode of operation works especially well at the levels of the local governments. It also offers opportunities to NGO staffers to cross the divide and join the other camp to embark on a more rewarding, or at least more socially respected, career than activism.

A number of independent ENGOs are also stepping up their activities, sharing their knowledge with government agencies, offering policy suggestions, writing petitions, using media outlets and social media to draw attention to urgent cases, discussing policy alternatives with officials, and providing legal assistance to pollution victims (Yuen, 2018). None of these activities are appreciated by local governments, particularly when these ENGOs play an active watchdog role on governmental compliance with environmental legislation. Yet these same lower levels of government are also very keen to cooperate with ENGOs, particularly when they are under pressure to follow up a drive organized by the central levels. Lower administrative bodies then turn to ENGOs to help solidify practices and strengthen the implementation, control, and enforcement of existing policies and projects, as ENGOs are much more familiar with local conditions and aware of relevant activist sections of the population that can make a drive successful in practice. In short, ENGOs are occasionally invited to support government policies, but they are never asked to participate in the design and formulation of the policies, or to make the voices and opinions of the people heard during the decision-making process.

The 2015 ‘Opinions of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Further Promoting the Development of Ecological Civilization’ hold out the promise that the role of public participation will be expanded, specifically referring to the participation of ENGOs in environmental governance and greater environmental transparency (Central Committee, 2015; Geall, 2015a). These ‘Opinions’ are the first instance where the term ‘civil society’ is officially mentioned, with the declaration that the government should ‘actively promote the third-party treatment of environmental pollution and introduce non-governmental organizations to take part in the treatment of environmental pollution’ (Geall, 2015c). It promises that ecological civilization ‘will expand public participation in the initiation, implementation and postassessment of construction projects in an orderly manner’ and that it
will ‘guide all types of social organizations [...] to pursue healthy and orderly development and give play to the role of NGOs and volunteers’ (Geall, 2015c). In practice, however, none of the promises held out in the ‘Opinions’ have been followed up by an actual improvement of the conditions that ENGOs are forced to work under.

**ENGOs in Beijing**

For this project, I contacted a number of domestic ENGOs in Beijing that had been very active in raising the consciousness of the population concerning garbage disposal, garbage separation, and the benefits of these activities for improving the living environment. I had the pleasure to meet with representatives of Friends of Nature China, the Green Beagle/Darwin Institute, Huan You Science and Technology, and Hong Chao, who were willing to exchange their views and opinions with me. Hong Chao is not an ENGO in the strict sense of the word, but rather an environmental entrepreneurial player; their Red Nest project was discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. Following Tsang and Lee’s typology, Hong Chao can be seen as representing that part of the middle class that is making use of ENGO activities to ride the wave of environmentalism. It is more focused on expanding its relations with government officials and companies to support its own business interests than on advocating for any specific environmental interests (Tsang and Lee, 2013: 158).

Aside from wanting to find out more about the activities these organizations had been engaged in, or were planning to start, I was interested in particular about their impressions and evaluations of the app-using O2O recycling companies like Incom, Taoqibao, and Zaishenghuo that were introduced in Chapter 2. I wanted to know whether the ENGOs thought these initiatives offered new and relevant ways to abate the waste crisis; whether they contemplated cooperating with them or even support them; whether they thought these companies would be able to improve the classification and separation of waste; and whether they had an opinion on whether these companies could play a role in improving the lives and working conditions of the waste pickers they employed. Moreover, I was interested in their attitudes towards the incineration projects contemplated by the government, and their impression of and potential involvement in popular actions organized against these projects.

Much to my disappointment, I discovered that while all of these ENGOs had initially focused on waste and garbage disposal and the wellbeing of
those working in the business, their attention had now shifted to other campaign objectives. Some of them had reacted to the increased concerns about air pollution and ‘blue days’, particularly PM2.5 (particulate matter) pollution, as voiced by both urban residents as well as the local and national governments (Wang, 2016; Kennedy and Chen, 2018). In light of the blue sky push, coupled with explicit utterances by national and municipal leaders that PM2.5 pollution needed to be dealt with as soon as possible – up to the point where local administrators were threatened by dismissal when they were not able to improve local air quality – the ENGOs were aware that this was a topic that was not contested and there would not be problems in the activities they planned related to it (Kostka, 2014; Kennedy and Chen, 2018). Some ENGOs explained that while the waste problem continued to be urgent and needed to be solved, and while they continued to be worried about the fate of the waste pickers, it was no longer the main concern of their organization. Friends of Nature, for example, was still engaged in various drives in Beijing aimed at education and raising popular awareness about the need to separate garbage and produce less waste. This was translated into various zero-waste activities they organized in individual residential communities. On a national level, however, they had become active in broader environmental campaigns, such as an effort to save the Yunnan peacock, at the time I interviewed one of their staff members (Interview Friends of Nature, 2017).

**ENGOs, waste, and O2O-companies**

All the ENGOs I talked with were more or less familiar with the emergence of O2O initiatives in Beijing, but none of them had had seen them in action.

**Green Beagle**

Green Beagle had heard of the smartphone application developed by the Taoqibao company but had never seen it in actual practice and was not familiar with how it worked. Ms. He, the staff member, agreed that a mobile service looked like a good idea and might efficiently solve some of the problems that existed in the waste disposal situation. But Green Beagle was certain that the problem could not be solved in its totality by merely depending on apps; there was simply too much garbage that was dumped, and the demands to solve the issue were too complex and too many. Moreover, the size of the O2O companies suggested that they were operating on a level that was too
low and too limited. Their activities might bring some alleviation of the problem, but their scope was too small to make a big difference.

As for the contribution of smartphone apps to the improvement of the wellbeing of the people working in the waste picking business, earlier Green Beagle research had uncovered that these workers are generally exposed to the dangers of secondary pollution while they do their work. The O2O companies might have the opportunity to offer better worker protection, but this depended on the exact contents of the contracts they offered to their employees.

In terms of educating the people, Green Beagle was convinced that propaganda and public service advertising would make a difference in changing the minds and actions of the people, but that it would be a long process to engineer concrete changes. Ms. He suggested that adopting formal rules and regulations would be more effective. In other words, government actions would lead to more results than other initiatives. These government efforts might include rules that would lead to a decrease in garbage production; levying individual charges on the amount of garbage that is dumped, i.e., on the basis of the principle that the user pays; levying a charge on the use of plastic bags (on the basis of experiences gained in Taiwan and Japan), etc. The government could contemplate such initiatives, but they would only be effective as long as the people clearly knew what and what not to do.

Huan You Science and Technology

According to Mr. Zhang, who represented Huan You, the smartphone applications were inspired by big data operations such as TaoBao, the large and popular online shopping entity run by Alibaba. Because the use of the app is so similar to online shopping, Huan You was convinced that it would appeal more to the younger generations through its familiarity and convenience. Mr. Zhang was not convinced that the O2O companies and their apps would help decrease the amount of garbage, as he was confident of the public’s ability to recycle, particularly when there was money to be made. In Huan You’s view, the success of these apps ultimately depended on whether they would be able play a role in disposing of the garbage that was difficult to recycle and had no monetary value.

Regarding the improvement of the lives of the waste pickers who were absorbed into O2O companies, Huan You was cautiously optimistic. Ideally, the same people who were active as informal waste pickers would become O2O workers; in the best scenario, their work style would be updated, and their service levels would improve. This would have a positive influence on
the population’s willingness to turn to them. When it came to recycling and garbage disposal in general, however, Mr. Zhang sounded rather pessimistic. Residents might recycle and sell some valuable junk, but the rest would just be thrown away. Waste collectors might take some of the valuable recyclables out of the waste stream, but not all of it; they were certainly not as efficient as people tended to make out. As a result, the major part of the waste still ended up in landfills or incinerators.

In general, Huan You rued the lack of knowledge and awareness of the people concerning garbage production and reduction, although Mr. Zhang had to admit that the situation in the larger urban areas, i.e., the tier-one and tier-two cities, was much better than in the countryside. He recounted how in the past his organization had once converted the gutter oil they had collected into soap bars, to provide an educational experience in recycling. The public, unfortunately, thought this type of soap could not be hygienic and did not want to buy any of it. In the end, they decided to use the gutter oil to make fertilizer and enzymes instead. His organization was not actively involved in educational activities at the time of the interview and had no plans to so in the future.

**Friends of Nature (FoN)**

Ms. Lin, the representative I interviewed, was the most outspoken and expressive of the ENGO members I spoke with. FoN was cautiously positive about the O2O apps that were in use because they offered residents new ways and methods to deal with waste. When these companies were part of or owned a larger system of recycling and disposal, including large recycling facilities, this could lead to less secondary pollution overall. Moreover, in the experience of FoN, some of these companies actively cooperate with communities by absorbing the original informal garbage collectors into their ranks and making the market more professional on the whole. However, funding was needed for people to pick up recyclables at individual addresses; the companies either needed to explore alternative sources of financial support or turn to the government to subsidize them. FoN was also convinced that O2O companies were only interested in valuable recyclables like used smartphones. Finally, the organization expressed doubts about the effects of the educational materials that these companies sent to their application users.

FoN had actually been courted by some of the O2O companies, although not the ones that were looked at in this project. O2O companies are interested in collaborating with ENGOs because they have excellent lines of
communication with university authorities, departments, and students. On a side note, students are drawn to ENGOs like magnets. Many are attracted by the public visibility offered by the media. Most of the environmental activities also are seen as meaningful and fun experiences for self-exploration and socializing, including training in leadership, skills in interpersonal relations, and exposure to new horizons of life (Yang, 2005: 62). This base of young collaborators offers the companies opportunities for advertising as well as potential markets. Moreover, the companies are interested in making use of the volunteer resources of the ENGOs for their own promotions and activities. And, although they would probably never admit it, they need FoN's practical experience and contacts in setting up recycling drives within the residential communities.

In the field of education about separation and recycling, FoN has continued to be very active, organizing various online and offline activities to stimulate public awareness. They have come to the conclusion that merely putting up posters and distributing booklets and leaflets is not enough; people need to be taught in practice about all the details of recycling. FoN has developed many cooperative relationships with educational organizations and residential districts. As a result of these connections, they can offer lecture series and teaching programmes for elementary and high school audiences, as well as for a more mature public; cooperate with college clubs; and organize events where schools and families interact. Similar to the philosophy embraced by Ms. Zhang of the Solid Waste Management Office introduced in Chapter 5, FoN is committed to encouraging school children to influence their parents with the knowledge of garbage recycling that they have picked up in school. During recycling drives they organized in residential communities, FoN has given small financial rewards or gifts to residents who disposed of their recycled garbage at designated spots, or who have classified their garbage into bags with RFID-codes attached. During other local events, like sport tournaments, FoN has promoted awareness of the need to use fewer single-use glass and plastic containers. FoN also organizes tours to landfills and incinerator facilities, usually followed by feedback sessions (see FoN member Lianpeng’s review of a visit to the Gao’antun incinerator in Chapter 7).

FoN also proactively submits plans and proposals to local and national government bodies, hoping that they will be adopted and be discussed. On the whole, their track record has not been very successful in this respect. For the 13th Five Year Plan adopted in 2015, FoN submitted various proposals and amendments in collaboration with other organizations (i.e., the State Environmental Protection Volunteers Association from Wuhu City, the
Shenzhen Zero Waste Environmental Protection Public Welfare Development Centre, and others) (Friends of Nature, 2017a, 2017b). These focused, among other issues, on the need to pay more attention to the front-end generation of garbage rather than the back-end incineration, claiming that the planned steps would mean a retreat from the preceding 12th Plan, effectively negating any positive outcomes generated during the preceding planning period. None of the ENGO’s suggestions were adopted or referred to in the final version of the plan. One can debate whether continuing to provide these suggestions, or offer advice to government bodies in general, is worthwhile, as none of it ever seems to be picked up. On the other hand, showing that an ENGO is actively designing alternatives, is thinking with rather than against the government, certainly contributes to creating an impression of support. Publicizing these advisory efforts also demonstrates the relevance of the ENGO to its support base as well as other interested parties.

Hong Chao

Hong Chao did not have an opinion on the activities of the O2O companies. It had designed a smartphone application itself and was in the process of rolling out a garbage sorting system of its own, thus turning it into a competitor. Hong Chao stressed that in the Red Nest model that it had developed, waste picker welfare was considerably better than elsewhere and would leave the working conditions of O2O employees far behind (see Chapter 3).

ENGOs and Beijing incinerators

Green Beagle

Green Beagle is convinced that the government prefers waste incineration over landfilling because of the limited space available and exorbitant land prices. Opting for landfills has many attendant problems related to the costs of the protective measures that have to be taken. The fact that incineration produces electricity also appeals to the government, although the Chinese diet produces wetter garbage, leading to a lower calorific value when it is incinerated. This problem could be offset by adding a combustion improver (kerosene, coal) or by introducing an extra step in the process, such as dehydrating the wet garbage before burning it. Both options make the process costlier, and adding a combustion improver leads to more potentially
toxic air pollution. As to the fierce NIMBY protests in Beijing and other urban areas against incineration that have been reported in the Chinese (social) media as well as in the West, Green Beagle was convinced that these events did not necessarily mean that the public prefers the use of landfills over incinerasors. Rather, the people are opposed to both solutions, particularly when they live close to such projects. Green Beagle asserted that sometimes public opinion is able to delay or change municipal plans for incineration or landfilling, referring to the postponing of the plans for the Liulitun and Dagongcun incinerasors, but criticized these protests because they were motivated only by the public’s self-interest and not by fundamental environmental concerns. In the end, these protests are unreasonable because when incinerasor factories are built in other, more distant locations, the residents will have to pay a higher sanitation fee. This in turn will also lead to popular dissatisfaction. On the whole, Green Beagle was not a supporter of NIMBY activism and did not participate in it.

Concerning the incineration technology that was presently in use, Green Beagle pointed out that the biggest problem was the public’s lack of trust in the government and the way it operates the facilities. Although the technology may be imported from abroad, may be state-of-the art, completely safe, and perform in agreement with international requirements, in practice all of the garbage recycling procedures remain too secretive and the control mechanisms contain too many loopholes. As a result, incidents and accidents continue to occur, and this leaves the public with a bad impression.

Huan You Science and Technology

Huan You is convinced that the Chinese government lacks a clear understanding of garbage, especially when compared to Western nations. The government has a preference for garbage incineration because it is convinced that it means they will not have to come up with or invest in methods of recycling. When applying the recycling standards that are in force in developed countries, 90 percent of the garbage produced in China should be recyclable. Mr. Zhang was certain that although incineration technology is well developed, in practice it does not perform well, and certainly not well enough to live up to the commitments that China has agreed to at the International Climate Change conferences. There is insufficient control and oversight in the incinerator facilities. Mixing large amounts of wet garbage and glass prior to incineration produces dioxin (TCDD). It would be easy to prevent or reduce the production of TCDD by separating the garbage more carefully. Moreover, the incinerator factories are established by companies
that have personal connections with the decision makers in government circles; this makes it a market where ordinary (i.e., unconnected) companies cannot compete freely on the basis of their qualities. This can lead to a situation where suboptimal solutions are chosen.

As for the potential effects of NIMBY protests and other popular actions against incineration, Mr. Zhang was not very hopeful. Like Ms. He at Green Beagle, he deplored the lack of fundamental awareness among the participants and lamented the fact that the government was all-powerful in pushing through its plans. Huan You did not actively support NIMBY activism.

Friends of Nature

The organization is worried about the speed of the development of incineration because, in its opinion, the front-end part of the recycling process is not completed, resulting in large amounts of garbage that are burnt in the back-end, leading to major problems of secondary pollution. The incinerators are funded by the government and solve the garbage problems that the government is supposed to deal with. It is hard to change this situation. Ms. Lin was convinced that the technology currently in use can burn much more garbage than is actually produced. And although incinerators are designed to decrease the amount of garbage that is generated, they in fact demand that more garbage be produced in order to be more profitable. As for the way the incinerator facilities operate, FoN finds it hard to ascertain whether they function as they say they do. It is extremely difficult to gather data, both at the level of the government and of the incinerators themselves. Monitoring systems, whether online or otherwise, allow room for fraud. Factory inspections, if they happen at all, only take place twice a year, when the external conditions are at their best and the lowest levels of secondary pollution are recorded.

As for popular protests against the construction of incinerators or landfills, FoN is convinced that the government’s overriding concern with maintaining social stability make any real action impossible. Ms. Lin explained that her organization does not dare to support public protests in fear of the political fallout. In the current climate that puts a premium on maintaining stability, organizing the public on a large scale to pursue environmental issues is impossible. Thomas Johnson wrote that although FoN explicitly did not support the Liulitun anti-incinerator protests in 2007, it did organize garbage classification and separation projects in the involved communities (Johnson, 2013b: 370). This manner and level of collaboration corresponds with the position FoN took in 2017.
However, FoN pointed out that in some more recent protest movements, the participants had announced that they were not opposing the construction of an incinerator because they did not want it in their neighbourhoods. Instead, they expressed a desire to supervise the work, so that it would operate in a more environmentally friendly and efficient way. If both the government and the ENGOs could lead protest movements toward such a direction, they would be more useful.

**Hong Chao**

Hong Chao, represented by Mr. Cui, was very supportive of the trend towards incineration. According to him, the technology is fully developed. However, the public does not know enough about the processes that take place in the incinerator. Hong Chao was convinced that the public will accept incineration once it understands how it works. Having said that, Mr. Cui suggested some improvements in the communication pattern between the public on the one hand and the government and the incinerator companies on the other. The government should listen more to the opinions of the people living near the sites selected for construction. And the companies operating the facilities should be open and above-board about the exact amounts and effects of the dioxins and smell that are released during the incineration process. Keeping the people in the dark about these aspects results in unnecessary panic and resistance.

**In support of popular actions**

Despite the hesitancy about supporting popular actions that I encountered among the ENGOs, they were not fundamentally opposed to them. Instead, they expressed their doubts about whether such actions would lead to any satisfactory results. After all, these organizations have been moderately successful in addressing concerns and grievances among the people on the one hand and the government on the other. Their embeddedness, however, has made it difficult for them to act openly (Van Rooij, 2010; Yew, 2017). Various studies have analysed how ENGOs, by operating in the background, have been able to defend the rights of inhabitants in local cases. These include the provision of legal advice and support in a number of environmental information disclosure requests related to air quality and pollution in which FoN and others were involved (Schwartz, 2004; Wang, 2016), support for the growing ‘no burn’ constituency that critically follows government plans
to construct new incinerators (Bondes and Johnson, 2017; Interview FoN, 2017), and legal assistance for pollution victims (Van Rooij, 2010). Lawful activism, i.e., suing local authorities in court, has been the mode of operation increasingly chosen by ENGOs. These processes are helpful in instilling legal awareness among participating residents, and show avenues for action that do not necessarily jeopardize the people who take part and still lead to results (Yew, 2017).

In all of these cases, the links between ENGOs and the (Chinese) media have played an important role in whether popular action of any kind will have an effect. When the media becomes aware of an event and decides to publicize a case, it can resonate with similar occurrences elsewhere in the country. This is a development that the party-state fears greatly, as it could galvanize larger groups of people into action – and this by itself is a threat to social stability. Media reporting also helps bring grievances to the attention of the government, which may (or may not) decide to step in. Moreover, ENGOs have been very successful in making use of the opportunities that social media such as Weibo and WeChat offer, particularly when it comes to mobilizing support among larger groups of likeminded people. This has been possible despite the fact that they have to negotiate endless suppression and censorship. Yet even positive and helpful media attention has a negative effect, as it can lead to government interference with NGO activities. An NGO’s premises may be searched or closed down; its staff members may be subjected to harassment or invited to ‘have a cup of tea’ at the police station – a euphemism for interrogation. In the worst case, NGO staff members can be prosecuted when an NGO’s activity is seen as overstepping the bounds (Spires, 2011; Teets, 2014).