Cultural encounters among Chinese environmental NGOs and recipient communities.

Development and environment conservation projects can be described as cultural encounters between NGOs and recipients representing different worldviews, strategies, and interests

By Stine Lykke Nielsen

The extraordinary economic growth that China has experienced since the late 1970s has taken its toll on the environment. Today the country struggles with almost the entire spectrum of environmental problems. This creates great challenges for the government. After years of neglect and periods of disastrous maltreatment under Maoist rule, the environment has become a central issue in current Chinese political and public debate. Partly resulting from the increased public attention focused on the environment, a large number of environmental NGOs have emerged in China during the past decade.

Many scholars have discussed the emergence and presence of NGOs in Chinese society. Often, the focus has been on the NGOs' possible impact on the emergence of a civil society in China, which was one of the buzzwords in political and social studies in China in the 1990s. Much has been said about NGOs in China, but only few studies address this question from the perspective of the organisations themselves[1]. This article discusses how the staffs of three Chinese environmental NGOs describe their interaction with recipient communities during implementation of different development and environmental protection projects[2]. These questions are relevant both for Chinese observers, and Western organisations, funds, and governments seeking to improve and expand their co-operation with Chinese NGOs. Furthermore, research into relations between Chinese NGOs and local communities is of importance to our understanding of the future social and political consequences of the emergence of the new environmental NGO sector in China.

The article builds on interviews conducted with staff from three Chinese environmental NGOs in February 2004:

- *Friends of Nature, Beijing*

This organisation was founded in 1994 and works with environmental education, mainly in elementary schools. In addition, the NGO sponsors wildlife conservation campaigns, with a special focus on the Tibetan antelope, and organises bird watching groups,

- *Centre for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge (CBIK), Kunming, Yunnan province*

Founded in 1995, this NGO works with issues of natural resource management research, community-based development among indigenous people, and preservation and dissemination of indigenous knowledge,

- *Pesticide Eco-Alternative Centre (PEAC), Kunming, Yunnan province*

PEAC was founded in 2002. Activities include research, training and information on pesticide issues and ecological alternatives to pesticides, consumer advocacy, gender equity, and indigenous pest reduction practices.

Though Chinese NGOs are generally closely entwined with the state apparatus due to strict state control, they still define themselves as providing a clear alternative to the state. Asian environmental movements are part of a global environmental discourse, which has arisen and gained momentum during the past 30 years or so (Kalland and Persoon 1998). This is also the case with the three NGOs portrayed in this article, which all co-operate extensively with international organisations and consultants.

Partly as a result of the co-operation with international development organisations, these NGOs focus on 'softer' issues of environmental protection, such as participation, education, indigenous culture, and gender issues. They see themselves as offering recipients new opportunities and means for shaping their lives through education and information, and, in a broader sense, offering new visions for China's future development.

The article examines how the Chinese NGO staff describes their encounters with the worldviews and perceptions of Chinese recipient communities and how these encounters influence the outcome of development projects. The adoption of discourses and methods from international development theory at times complicates

[1] Two recent MA theses analyse Chinese Environmental NGOs. One is based on interviews with NGO staff (See Cooper, no date). However, the theses deal with numerous issues regarding NGO-state relations and do not go very deeply into how the NGOs define their role in society. See Cooper (no date) and Blichfeldt (2003).

[2] This article is a rewritten version of my MA thesis entitled *"A Different View of* the *World": the Self-perception of Chinese Environmental NGOs.* The thesis builds on interviews with staff members of a number of Chinese environmental NGOs and discusses how they perceive their role in society vis-à-vis the political system, recipients, and ordinary citizens.

project implementation due to recipients' difficulties understanding the objectives and methods of projects, because of differences in interests and worldviews. Furthermore, problems arise from differences in language as well as ethnic and social characteristics between NGO staff and recipients. Thus, though the encounters during projects described here do not occur between donor countries and recipient states, nor between recipient communities and international development organisations, it still makes sense to discuss the problems the NGOs face as implications arising from a cultural encounter.

According to a staff member of Greenpeace in Beijing, the number of cars in Beijing has doubled since 1997, to amount more then one million vehicles. One of the consequences is heavy air pollution. Here, it is rush hour in Wudaokou, Beijing.
Photo: Stine Lykke Nielsen.

The Emergence of Chinese Environmental NGOs
Since the mid-1990s, hundreds of environmental NGOs have been established in China. Scholars ascribe the emergence of the NGO sector to a growing environmental sensitivity on the part of the Chinese government, combined with political and institutional changes since the economic reforms in 1978. China's unprecedented economic growth following the reforms, which opened up the country to the surrounding world, has taken its toll on the country's environment. China today suffers from the gamut of environmental problems, including air and soil pollution, deforestation, and desertification. The World Bank has estimated that the cost of environmental degradation is eight to twelve per cent of China's GDP each year due to resource depletion, health system expenditures, etc. (*Economist*. August 21st 2004). The closure of state-owned enterprises and reforms of the health care system have led to widespread unemployment and social insecurity.
The social and environmental impacts of the economic reforms, combined with limited state capacity to manage these problems, led the central government to turn to the NGO sector in the mid-1990's for assistance in environmental protection and the provision of welfare services to marginalized social groups (Yang 2005; Knup 1997).

At the same time, the state seeks to keep the NGOs under tight control due to fear that the NGO sector may become a breeding ground for political opposition beyond the government's control (Saich 2000). The cumbersome registration process for NGOs is one means of controlling their activities. The state Regulation on Social Organisations Registration Management from 1998 requires that all NGOs in China register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs. The term *social organisations* is rather vague, but generally include associations, societies, federations, research associations, etc. working within areas such as education, social welfare and public service, and culture and arts. One prerequisite for registration is that the NGO obtain a state or Party sponsor usually consisting of a state bureau or academic institution. The sponsor must endorse the NGO's registration, supervise its activities after registration, and act as the NGO's intermediary with the Ministry of Civil Affairs (Knup 1997).

The registration system means that Chinese NGOs are tied more closely to the government than NGOs in many other societies. To a non-Chinese observer, the system of registration is in some sense contradictory to the whole idea of grassroots organisations, which by their very nature should be wholly independent of the government. However, according to the NGOs portrayed in this article, Chinese NGOs actually have a relatively high degree of autonomy in their daily work, as long as they stay within the boundaries of officially sanctioned activities and discourses (See also Knup 1997).

Alternative Visions of China's Future Development
The NGOs portrayed in this article describe themselves as an alternative to the state offering new solutions to China's environmental problems. Like their Western counterparts, Chinese environmental NGOs see themselves as presenting a sustainable alternative to mainstream perceptions of the world:

> I think that people who work for an NGO like CBIK have a different view of the world, very different. You are not thinking in terms of money, which is very unusual for our times. And, working with community development opens up a person, so that you begin to understand things that you didn't understand before, and you learn to respect different people (Ms. Wang Yu, CBIK).

The alternative visions of China's future development that the NGOs offer are rooted in ideas, which are derived from or inspired by international development theories and discourses.

Many people, both Chinese and non-Chinese, commonly assume that China has a time honored tradition for living in harmony with nature (See, e.g., Bruun 1995). Currents in traditional Chinese thought, advocating harmony between mankind and nature have certainly led to practices of environmental conservation in some parts of China during certain periods of Chinese history. Chinese and Western scholars have suggested

that these traditions should be nurtured and used in information campaigns to strengthen an environmental consciousness in the Chinese population today. Thus, one might expect that the NGOs portrayed here would draw on perceptions and discourses of Chinese tradition to gain legitimacy and support for the NGO's values or overall agenda. This, however, is not the case. Liang Congjie, founder of Friends of Nature actually disagrees entirely with the idea that Chinese tradition is the foundation of environmental awareness in modern China: "I am sorry to say that the idea of environmental protection is a Western concept. The more I learn, the more I see traditional Chinese culture is so unfriendly to nature" (McCarthy and Jaime Florcruz 1999: 3. Quoted in Blichfeldt 2003).

Wang Jianhong, a project officer at Friends of Nature does not think that currents within Chinese tradition contain elements that are directly conducive to environmental protection either. The interviewee was asked whether the strong presence of tradition in poor rural areas made recipients more environmentally aware. He responded that it did not. From his point of view, tradition is indirectly conducive to environmental protection, as it constitutes an alternative to the unsustainable profit seeking of mainstream Chinese culture today. However, Chinese tradition *per se* does not emphasise environmental protection. Instead, it is the meeting with modern environmental education that opens the eyes of the rural poor toward the importance of protecting the environment (Mr. Wang Jianhong, Friends of Nature).

Rather than evoking Chinese tradition, the NGOs have turned to the outer world to find the solutions to China's problems. As China has become increasingly integrated into the world community, the NGO sector has expanded its contact with international environmental movements and development agencies. Many Chinese environmental NGOs co-operate closely with foreign (mostly Western) development organisations, scholars, and consultants. Their staff members are trained at universities abroad and participate in international conferences and research. Furthermore, Chinese environmental NGOs largely depend on foreign funding. The NGOs portrayed here receive most of their funding from international foundations, such as the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers' Fund.

One reason for this is weaknesses in the public welfare donation law, which to some extent discourage donations from Chinese enterprises and individuals (Cooper, no date). Foreign organisations influence the priorities and objectives of Chinese NGOs through application of conditionalities, meaning that the allocation of funds is tied to demands for the NGOs to include a number of cross-cutting issues in their projects, according to the priorities of donors. In order to obtain funding from Western donors, the project proposals need to include certain key words, such as participatory decision-making processes, gender, and empowerment of local communities.

Thus, the NGOs have adopted and adapted to discourses and approaches from international development theory. The NGOs ascribe to *soft* and human-centred development goals, such as environmental protection, poverty alleviation, and empowerment of the poor and marginalised. Their projects are designed in a bottom-up manner, in which recipients participate in project planning and implementation as opposed to the earlier top-down approach of information delivery. This strategy is based on the rationale that participation is the most efficient way to ensure that projects are designed to meet the needs of the recipient. Simultaneously, strengthening the influence of recipients on their own material and physical well being enhances their self-esteem and political influence through an increased status in society (Ms. Yan Mei, PEAC. See also Degnbol-Martinussen and Engberg-Pedersen 1999).

Fields in Yangshuo, South China. Today most households apply chemical pesticides, some of them prohibited in Europe and the US. The massive use of pesticides has major impacts on the environment and human health in China.
Photo: Stine Lykke Nielsen

Development as Practice, Projects as Loci of Negotiation

Participatory approaches, however, are not always applied in a project without practical implications. Development projects are not a one-way process, in which NGOs communicate their messages to passive objects, who automatically absorb the ideas of the project. As discussed below, it is difficult for many Chinese to understand the values and objectives of the NGOs as the NGOs represent values imported from international development theory. (Mr. He Jun and Ms Wang Yu, CBIK and Mr. Wang Jianhong, Friends of Nature). The majority of NGO staff portrayed here are well educated and come from urban centres. Linguistic, social, and technical differences between recipients and NGOs may cause recipients to feel intimidated or even to view the NGO staff with suspicion.

According to one interviewee from PEAC, it has been difficult to adopt the bottom-up approaches of participatory theory due to the traditional way of conducting projects in China. Up to this point common practice has

been that the well-educated expert communicates information in a top-down manner without taking farmers' opinions into account. This strategy (which is certainly not only a Chinese phenomenon) is still to some extent maintained today. The NGOs train their staff in facilitating participatory development projects and communicating with farmers. This is to avoid the establishment of hierarchies of power among NGOs and recipients, in which the knowledge of modern science provides NGO staff with a rhetorical advantage over the "traditional" or "backwards" practices of the recipients (Ms. Wang Yu, CBIK. See also Croll and Parkin 1992).

However, according to a PEAC staff member, farmers themselves also contribute to sustaining these hierarchies of power. Farmers believe in authority and show a great deal of respect and admiration for the well-educated experts and graduate students, who visit the project sites. When experts are present it is difficult to make farmers offer their opinions during discussions or visits in the fields: "Farmers sometimes don't believe in themselves. They do not dare to talk to experts; instead they just listen […] When experts give a lecture, the farmers feel like they don't have the right to speak" (Ms. Yan Mei, PEAC).

In this article development is not seen as a universal goal of economic growth or material wealth in poor countries, but as something that is defined differently by different actors, according to their worldview, perceived needs, and economic and political interests. In this regard, this definition is in concordance with Botchway, who defines development as practice, that is, something socially constructed through discussion and interaction:

> I do not use the term development as that which is self-evident and needed by all poor societies no matter their peculiar needs, circumstances and history. On the contrary, I problematize the notion of development and propose to understand development as a practice. That is to say, development should be understood as an arena of negotiations and struggle, which is historically constructed and may take unpredictable turns but usually involves interaction between different social actors (Botchway 2001: 136).

Seen in this light development projects are loci of negotiation and construction of meaning between NGOs and recipients representing different world-views, strategies, and interests. It might be difficult to bring about change in a given society, if the issues that are promoted are at odds with the ideas of recipients. According to the interviewees in this article, problems often arise during projects, because of diverging interests, perceptions, and discourses.

In the following sections I discuss one important issue that CBIK and PEAC address, that is, empowerment of farmers and ethnic minorities. I examine their strategies and methods for promoting empowerment, and how they perceive their own role in the process. Furthermore, I discuss which challenges the NGOs meet during the application of these methods and how they seek to solve the problems that arise during projects.

Empowering Farmers through Education and Information

According to staff from the Pesticide Eco-Alternative Centre (PEAC), their work to disseminate organic agriculture in rural communities is impeded by the strong influence of modern, chemical agriculture. In discussions with older farmers, PEAC has discovered that people who engaged in indigenous farming and pest control practices when they were young still live in China today. However, after pesticides and chemical fertiliser were introduced to the Chinese market, chemical agriculture superseded traditional and indigenous farming techniques. Many of the older farmers had forgotten their indigenous farming skills and PEAC had to help them revive these techniques in order for them to come back into use (Ms. Dou Hong, PEAC). Farmers in today's China do not know much about ecology and are not very interested in it either. In their pursuit of economic profit, farmers "only care about how pesticides can kill pests" (Ms. Dou Hong, PEAC), and chemical farming is perceived as the most efficient way of saving time and money in agricultural production.

Another reason for farmers' reluctance to return to practices of organic farming is connected to discourses of modernisation and advancement that surround chemical agriculture. To facilitate this discussion it may be useful to evoke the concept of discourse. Doing so, I am aware of the plethora of definitions and uses of the term in present academic research and debate. The discourse concept as defined by Benton and Short is applied in the sense of

> […] a framework that includes whole sets of ideas, words, concepts, and practices. Discourses are the general context in which ideas take on a specific meaning and inform particular practices. A discourse is a set of widely held ideas that a society relies on to make sense of the world, a set of general beliefs about the nature of reality (Benton and Short 1999: 1).

Discourse is a linguistic construct, as individuals give meaning to reality by describing it. The ways we perceive, understand, describe, and explain the world influence the ways we act upon it and vice versa. This definition of discourse is close to the definitions found in critical discourse analysis represented, for instance, by Norman Fairclough's *Discourse and Social Practice* (Fairclough 1995). Unlike approaches that see everything as a linguistic construct, critical discourse analysis distinguishes between discourse and practice happening *out there* in a social system. I choose this definition as the theoretical concept of discourse quite precisely captures and illustrates how perceptions and practices, for example, of farming methods or natural resource extraction, are mutually constituting and reinforcing.

According to PEAC, a great amount of prestige is attached to chemical agriculture, as this is perceived as a sign of modernisation. Since chemicals are considered modern and scientific, households, which are unable to buy chemicals, are perceived as poor and backwards (Ms. Dou Hong, PEAC). Today most households, even the poorest ones, use chemical farming as, naturally, no one wants to be left out of the modernisation process, at least in terms of definition. One reason for the prestige connected to chemical farming can be found in the discourse of the official agriculture extension system (Ms. Dou Hong, PEAC): During interviews with farmers, PEAC found out that many farmers base their decision to purchase a particular brand of pesticides on the recommendation of agricultural extensionists from state offices, though this is illegal according to Chinese law.

> Since the 1980s, extension workers told the farmers that pesticides are scientific and the traditional ways are very backward. They have talked about this ever since the 1980s, so for us it's very hard to change the farmers' perceptions (Ms. Dou Hong, PEAC).

Farmers often lack knowledge about the impact of chemical agriculture on their health and the environment, as well as about what alternatives to chemical farming actually exist. In order to make informed choices, farmers need access to information from other sources than the official system. By providing training in pesticide reduction and organic farming, PEAC offers an alternative to the authorities:

> I think that farmers need more access to outsiders, in order to know what happens outside. You know, our province is still a very backward place and chemical agriculture just started to gain a foothold here. Every one chooses to use it as they think it is scientific, and that it's very good. But, if someone from the outside can provide additional information, I think the farmers will benefit from it. Right now, all the information they can get is from the main media. That's only one voice. Besides, the governmental agriculture extension workers are also the ones who sell pesticides here, so if the farmers can't get more information, it is very hard for them to make the right decision (Ms. Yan Mei, PEAC).

Furthermore, "farmers' abilities to make informed choices about how they can best and most safely grow their crops are distorted by the aggressive marketing (and often deception) of pesticide companies" (PEAC homepage). According to PEAC, the British pesticide manufacturer Syngenta has invested in building their largest production line in China. The company sells its herbicide Paraquat in China, though the product is prohibited in most European countries, Malaysia, and the US. As PEAC's director Kuang Rongpin explains, the problem with Syngenta is due to a lack of political will to solve the problem, partly because of ignorance on the part of government officials: "the government doesn't know that the product is dangerous" and the company promotes it as very safe (Mr. Kuang Rongpin, PEAC).

PEAC works to raise public awareness of the dangers of Paraquat through lobbying and dissemination of information. The NGO had applied for, but not received, funding to provide training concerning the risks of the product, at the time of the interview. The NGO still attempts to raise the issue during farmer training and discussions with government officials in order to spread knowledge of the problem.

By providing farmers with knowledge of pesticide risks and organic farming, they are "empowered to operate eco-friendly alternatives [to pesticides] and to resist the pressures of large agrochemical manufactures" (PEAC homepage). Here education and information are described as a means of bringing about emancipation and empowerment of recipients, as is the case with CBIK's strategies of educating farmers on the value of indigenous culture, discussed below.

However, PEAC staff members describe it as challenging to change people's thinking and consciousness (Ms. Dou Hong, PEAC). People's perceptions of agriculture are connected to the modernisation discourse that has penetrated all aspects of Chinese official and individual thinking since the initial period of economic reforms. The educational system is also influenced by this discourse. Schools in rural China shape children's perceptions of environment and agriculture at an early age. Also here there is an emphasis on chemical farming:

> School children are a big problem […] When they finish junior middle school, some of them go to find a job in the cities, and some of them go back home to work in the fields. What they have learned for so many years is that modern chemical agriculture is good and that it symbolizes *science* and *advancement*. That's a big problem when they go back home, because they don't use organic farming and don't know anything about biocontrol. They seldom work in the fields and therefore don't have any experience regarding organic farming (Ms. Yan Mei, PEAC).

It is necessary to get in touch with children early in order to influence decision-making concerning environmental protection. As the next step in their campaigns, PEAC is planning to establish some kind of cooperation with local schools, especially primary schools. Changing children's attitudes might be easier if the organisation could provide the schools with general, practical information about environmental protection and eco-agriculture.

Re-negotiating Discourses of Culture: Empowering Ethnic Minorities

The Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge (CBIK), has as its primary focus the indigenous knowledge and culture of a number of ethnic minorities in south western China. The NGO applies the culture concept in a sense that is coherent with the way Western anthropologists and development organisations use it. According to this definition, the term involves certain connotations of value systems, beliefs, and social norms influencing natural resource management, agri-

cultural practices and the way societies and communities are organised.

However, the term in Mandarin Chinese for culture, (*wenhua*), is a word with somewhat different connotations. The word involves notions of something acquired or cultivated, of education and literacy. It is commonly expressed in Mandarin that a person with little or no formal education has *no culture*. Culture, then, is something that an individual acquires and can *have*, more than a system or structure that the individual belongs to. Thus, the concept of indigenous culture is hard to comprehend to many recipients, since it simply does not fit with their definition of the term. Many farmers do not understand how someone with little or no education can be said to have any culture. Not to speak of being part of a culture, which can contribute positively to development and environmental protection:

When we visited one villager, other villagers told us "oh, she has no *wenhua*, she can't understand you" […] In such cases we can tell them: "no, you can't say that she has no *wenhua*, because she belongs to the Naxi Minority and *wenhua* is a [mainstream] Chinese concept. Because she doesn't understand [Mandarin] Chinese and she didn't go to school to study, so [people say] that she has no *wenhua*. But, *wenhua* is a standard of the government or [Han] Chinese mainstream culture. She might not understand Chinese, but you can't say that she has no *wenhua*". […] Sometimes the villagers told me, "oh we have no *wenhua*" and I answered "[…] your minority has its own culture. This is *wenhua* too" (Ms. Zeng Yiqun, CBIK).

Here, discussions with recipients about the concept of culture go beyond problems of simply translating a foreign term into a local language as it reflects underlying and deeper perceptions connected to the concept. According to staff from CBIK, the conventional Chinese definition of culture has led to the development of inferiority complexes among certain ethnic minorities in rural China, who do not fit into mainstream Chinese culture, because they have a low level of education and do not speak Mandarin:

In some ethnic areas, they always say "we don't have any culture". What they mean with culture is *education*. They have never received any higher education and [therefore think] that they don't have culture. But, it's people who have a very rich culture, who always say I don't have any culture". […] It's a misunderstanding of the values of different cultures. We are working very hard to build or advance a multicultural society. We are trying to support people's idea that there are different values of different cultures, of different groups of people […]. (Ms. Wang Yu, Project Officer, CBIK).

During discussions with recipients, CBIK so to speak, attempts to generate a new type of discourse among recipients by presenting them with other ways of understanding the concept: "Sometimes we try to explain recipients what our understanding of culture is: "how you look at the position of people in the universe, and how you look at the community, how you manage the natural resources"" (Ms. Wang Yu, Project Officer, CBIK). This definition makes it possible to let the meaning of culture encompass those, who so far have been defined out of the meaning of the term due to their lack of education, including China's ethnic minorities. Thus, the cultural and social standing of China's ethnic minorities is enhanced and their self-esteem strengthened.

According to China's Deputy Minister of the Environment, Pan Yue, less than 20 percent of waste in urban China is treated in an environmentally sustainable manner. In the cities, much of the sanitation is still conducted manually, with small carts and bamboo brooms as seen here.
Photo: Stine Lykke Nielsen.

By stressing that CBIK promotes respect for cultural diversity and works "very hard to build or advance a multicultural society", the interviewee expresses a vision for the role of NGOs that reaches beyond enhancing people's capabilities for creating a better livelihood and preserving the environment. In this way, the organisation assumes the role of a "societal transformer", not only in terms of strengthening environmental consciousness among the population, but also in influencing public thinking about the status of ethnic minorities in China today.

NGOs as Mediators

The NGOs portrayed above define themselves as an alternative to state and mainstream perceptions, empowering Chinese rural poor and ethnic minorities by offering them new visions of environmental protection, agriculture, and socio-ethnic equity through education and information.

International discourses constitute an important factor shaping the relations between the Chinese environmental NGOs portrayed here and local communities. The NGOs have adapted to discourses and methods imported from international development and environmental organisations as a result of their extensive co-operation with foreign organisations and advisors. The NGOs assume a role as a kind of mediator between local and global communities, channelling international discourses and development assistance into local communities.

Situated between global and local discourses, the NGO staff needs to learn to speak different languages in their daily work. On the one hand, the NGOs act as representatives for the interests and worldviews of the poor and underrepresented minorities toward the state and their donors and international partners. On the other hand, they translate international concepts and methods into a Chinese context when introducing their projects to local farmers. This has at times led to problems in the communication of project objectives and methods to recipients. The term *culture* (*wenhua*), constitutes a special challenge in this regard. The anthropological concept of culture, which is central to the approaches of CBIK, when literally translated into Mandarin, connotes something that must be cultivated and acquired through education. This definition of culture then works as a prism, through which ethnic minorities are seen as having lower social status. It is an important aspect of CBIK's work to change the existing discourses on culture and promote a multicultural society. Thereby the work of the NGO goes beyond promoting environmental protection and serves a transformational function. The NGOs assume the role of spokesmen of China's "underrepresented populace" and work for the equity for all ethnic groups in society.

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