China’s Embedded Activism
Opportunities and constraints of a social movement

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NGO cooperation at the Sino-Russian border

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Introduction

The international nature of many environmental problems calls for both regional and global cooperation. As many nation-states are, by themselves, inadequately prepared to deal with transboundary environmental problems, the potential solutions lie not only with multinational governmental treaties, but also in the emergence of a transboundary civil society, particularly through non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Scholary work has highlighted the role of elite international environmental NGOs, such as Greenpeace, WWF, and Friends of the Earth, who have played a huge role in global environmental politics and networks. Yet, often, such research has paid insufficient attention to the agency of local NGOs in this global activist structure. Studies on transnational social movement organizations have noted the growing role of transnational local people's movements. However, most of these studies selected cases in which local NGOs were actively seeking and/or successfully integrated into the transnational movement network, possibly leading to the underestimation of the difficulties entailed in forming and maintaining cross-boundary cooperative ties. The cases studied in this paper demonstrate that despite the transnational nature of many environmental problems, Chinese and Russian NGOs are still largely confined within national boundaries.

The majority of the literature that discusses the involvement of NGOs from developing countries in the global network is about international environmental activist groups joining forces with local environmental groups to protest the commercial activities of multi-national corporations or the gigantic national development projects in developing countries that will hazardously affect the ecology and the indigenous people. Nonetheless, increasingly many cross-border environmental problems are taking place between developing countries themselves. The aggressive economic development is accompanied by serious environmental problems, which impact neighboring countries as well. Are environmental NGOs in the developing countries able to cooperate in face of this? What factors contribute to the success or failure of cross-boundary network formation? What roles do international NGOs play? Through a case study of the environmental NGOs in the Sino-Russian border regions, we hope to address the above questions.
Transboundary environmental problems on the Sino-Russian border

The border between China and Russia measures approximately 4,300 km. The region extends from the southwestern Primorsky region (Maritime Province) in the Russian Far East (RFE) to Chita borders on China’s Jilin and Heilongjiang provinces, and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. This paper focuses on the section where the RFE borders on China’s Northeast, formerly known as Manchuria. See Figure 8.1.

Figure 8.1 The Sino-Russian border regions in the Eastern Section.

Illegal logging and timber trade

As a result of momentous economic growth, housing reforms, the booming construction and furniture industry, and improved consumption capacity, China’s demand for wood products has increased drastically since the late 1980s. The limited domestic timber supply pushed China to turn to other countries to meet its expanding timber demand. China’s appetite for timber imports was further expanded due to the state’s 1998 logging ban on domestic natural forests and tariff reduction on forest products. In recent years, over 40 percent of total commercial timber consumed domestically has been imported and China has become second only to the United States in total import of forest products.

Russia is one of China’s major timber suppliers, ranking among the first three in the last two decades and ranking first in recent years. In 2002, China’s log imports from Russia reached 14.8 million cu m, up by 1,460 percent since 1997. The majority of the timber trade is in raw logs. About a half of this timber came from provinces of the Amur basin.

The RFE timber industry, due to the shrinking Russian domestic market and the higher transportation cost to the European part of Russia, is growingly dependent on exports to Asian markets. The timber industry has become the sole revenue source of many enterprises in the RFE. Many accessible forests, particularly those around railroads and near population centers, have been overlogged. Ineffective law enforcement and rampant corruption have made illegal logging practices widespread. Illegal logging and trade are found not only among organized crime networks, but also among villagers who resort to them.
Illegal harvesting wild plants, poaching and trafficking

In a similar fashion the growing Chinese demand for certain wild plants and animals which are traditionally believed by the Chinese to have healing powers or to be culinary delicacies poses great threats to the wildlife and ecosystems in the RFE. Illegal harvesting of wild plants and poaching occur in all parts of the RFE along the Chinese border. In some cases, Chinese men cross over borders to illegally harvest and poach themselves; in other cases, Chinese traders purchase the wildlife products from Russian locals. Wild ginseng (Panax ginseng), extinct in Asia except in the Primorsky Kray and the south of Khabarovsky territory of the RFE, is among the illegally harvested Red Data Book plants. According to expert estimates, in 1996–8 the volume of wild ginseng roots illegally procured and smuggled into China has reached an annual level of 500–600 kg (in crude weight) while the Russian government export quota was set at 50 kg in 1997.15

Wild animals being poached and trafficked from the RFE to China range from endangered rare species, such as tiger, leopard, and musk deer, to more common species, such as fish, frog, sea cucumber, and sea urchin. In recent years, the Chinese demand for Siberian frogs (Rana Chensinis), which are used in cosmetics, traditional medicine, and gourmet dishes in China, has generated poaching and trafficking of this kind of amphibian widely distributed in the RFE. In several incidents, Chinese poachers crossed borders to catch frogs by spreading herbicides in the rivers and thus threatened the ecosystem and the public health of local residents.16 Interception by Russian customs of illegal wild animal products bound for China occurred from time to time. However, the confiscated volume, already very astonishing, was only the tip of the iceberg.17

River pollution

The Amur River's major tributaries include the Sungari River (Songhuajiang) and the Ussuri River. Tchookeanskaya Zvezda (Pacific Ocean Star), a regional newspaper of the RFE, highlights the condition of the Amur River, which is polluted by phenol compounds. In Khabarovsky, which is located near where the Ussuri River joins the Amur River, the pollution is so heavy that swimming in the river and drinking tap water is forbidden. Fish caught in the lower part of the Amur River have a specific smell.18 In the lower reaches of the Amur River where indigenous peoples live, many suffer from multiple diseases caused by phenol compounds.19 The Sungari River, which runs through an industrial zone of Northeast China and several major cities, is extremely polluted. The Tumen

Limited cooperation across borders

In face of the severe environmental problems troubling the border areas, cross-border NGO cooperation has been rare. A handful of visible attempts were made by international NGOs without significant long-lasting positive impacts on the environment. International NGOs, such as Pacific Environment (PERC), Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), the International Crane Foundation (ICF), WWF, Greenpeace, and Global Greengrants Fund (GGF), are operating in both China and Russia. The networks in which these organizations are nested provide them with natural advantages in working on cross-border environmental issues. For example, the offices of TRAFFIC-Russia and TRAFFIC-China
cross-border trade of musk deer glands. Similarly, the ICF facilitated a joint environmental program for school children in both Russia and China. It also implemented the Global Environmental Facility project on crane preservation, in which both Russia and China were participants.

WWF-RFE and WWF-China have tried to work together on several issues: for example, the creation of a transborder nature reserve around Lake Khasan in 1996. However, the cooperation was not well coordinated and did not last. Some links between WWF-Russia and WWF-China have occurred through IKEA, a multinational furniture corporation with subsidiaries in both Russia and China. IKEA partnered with WWF in globally promoting sustainable forestry. It has a policy of buying only legal and transparently harvested wood, and therefore is interested in promoting a sustainable, legal wood trade between Russia and China. The WWF–IKEA project in China involves activities along the border. However, it has not produced any results at the time of writing.

In addition to limited collaboration between branches or offices of the same organization, international NGOs also try to bring the local NGOs of the two sides together and help them to construct collaborative networks. Regrettably, no significant outcome has come out of such endeavors — no effective ties between local NGOs from the two sides have been forged. Perhaps the initiative with the greatest potential to leave a lasting impact is the Amur/Heilongjiang Ambassador Campaign, jointly sponsored and organized by WWF-RFE and WWF-China in the summer of 2005. It selected and funded student environmental groups from the border regions of both countries to conduct summer camps in different sites in the Amur River valley with research tasks. It encouraged and directed student groups to pay attention to cross-border environmental issues and rewarded groups with good collaborative plans. The international student workshop at Lake Khanka in October 2005 was specifically planned to promote future cooperation between student groups. Six concrete joint plans on cooperation on cross-border environmental issues were drafted when the workshop concluded. WWF-RFE’s consultant, who was studying Mandarin in the Northeast Forestry University and trying to befriend local NGOs and Chinese student groups in Heilongjiang, played a key role in coordinating this campaign. However, it is too early to say how long this project will last and what it will yield.

To analyze the constraints and potentials for the two sides to cooperate, we need to learn their situations first. Below, we will survey environmentalists’ activities in the border regions.22

**Student environmentalism in Northeast China**23

In terms of environmental activism, Northeast China, and in particular Heilongjiang province, portrays a different picture than the rest of the country. From the other contributions in this volume, we have learnt that green NGOs are active in a wide variety of places, such as Beijing (see Ru and Ortolano in this
NGOs in the Russian Far East

Environmental NGOs are much greater in numbers and more diverse in the RFE than in the China border region. In addition to green student groups, which we also found in Heilongjiang, the RFE features many international NGO offices.
period, CYL leaders just as in China were trying to promote their career advancement through promoting student engagement in nature protection initiatives. Usually conflicts between Nature Protection Corps and CYL occurred when CYL imposed their own ideas on how Nature Protection Corps should operate.34

The policy of glasnost35 and Perestroika36 introduced by Gorbachev in the late 1980s ushered in the freedom of speech and democratization. Nature Protection Corps soon declared their independence from both CYL and VOOP.37 Despite that, the movement declined rather quickly. As in China today, Nature Protection Corps in the 1960s and 1970s represented a safe outlet for public engagement against the backdrop of the juggernaut of the party-state apparatus – it was truly “a little corner of freedom” at the time. With glasnost unleashing broader social forces that were formerly quiescent, mass rallies and all kinds of social organizations erupted, and Nature Protection Corps lost their special status. Moreover, traditional Nature Protection Corps activities with a focus on nature conservation became insignificant in the face of the more pressing environmental issues such as radioactive pollution, especially after the Chernobyl accident. Yet most of the Nature Protection Corps failed to adapt to the new public concern and melted away. Many former members joined other causes, sometimes overtly political ones.38

During the Soviet era, there existed another source of environmental activism: critical, scientist-led professional societies for nature conservation and protection. We have already mentioned the Society of Naturalists and VOOP. These organizations played an important role in the Soviet environmental movement. The state itself initiated these organizations and controlled their operations. VOOP was the most prominent and in terms of its organizational structure and function the most comparable with current GONGOS in China. VOOP was founded in 1925. The People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs approved VOOP’s charter along with financial support and mandated it to be a mostly educational society. VOOP was authorized to be a membership organization and to collect membership dues. The purpose of the state was to use membership dues to support nature reserves and other environmental protection activities. VOOP was the largest society of the USSR, as almost the entire population of the Soviet Union were mandatory members. VOOP worked closely with the Young Pioneers and CYLs, hosted many Nature Protection Corps brigades and was always at the core of government-organized environmental initiatives. It had a highly hierarchical structure with the head office in Moscow and branches all over the country. VOOP capacity and significance declined dramatically during Gorbachev’s Perestroika years, after which they almost totally lost their state funding and membership. VOOP was not prepared to do fundraising when funding ended. Therefore, many of the VOOP branches that survived became independent NGOs, which maintain close ties with governmental agencies. The RFE branch of VOOP survived the reform period and is currently focusing on

Currently, the zapovedniki or nature reserves are weakly supported by the government. Although they continue to be part of federal state structures, they often act as NGOs. Many of them are supported by grants from international NGOs, such as WCS, WWF, or directly funded by foreign foundations. Throughout the history of zapovedniki, there was a constant fight between conservationists and other state authorities over their existence. During Putin’s presidency this fight continues and zapovedniki face the threat of being converted into national parks. Currently the mechanisms for public participation are in place. Therefore, zapovedniki have turned to NGOs and civil society for support. Zapovedniki have public outreach programs. They work with universities and schools, and administer Nature Protection Corps. For example, USSR zapovednik is very actively involved in environmental education of high school and university students. Its public outreach program works with many schools and universities. It even organizes commercial tours. It promotes ecological tourism, has its own museum and hotel, and manages an ecological trail in the zapovednik buffer zone.39 USSR zapovednik, like many others, maintains a Soviet tradition of hosting and educating Nature Protection Corps activists who help rangers during the summer. Today, support for such activities comes not from the state, but from international NGOs. In the future, zapovedniki and other reserves can be potentially good partners for Russia-China collaborative initiatives, especially for joint educational activities.

Russian and international NGOs in the RFE

In the RFE, the two most powerful activist forces are the international NGOs, as well as the established Russian NGOs. During Perestroika, numerous NGOs emerged in the RFE, thanks to the opened public sphere and the huge influx of Western funds. Compared to China, NGO registration is relatively easy, although much paperwork has to be done, and the NGO is required to have a bank account in order to get registered. Yet, since the Russian Duma (the national parliament) passed a new law on NGOs on 21 December 2005, control over NGOs has been stepped up. Under a revised version, international NGOs no longer have to register as a Russian organization as originally stipulated. The approximately 450,000 NGOs in Russia, however, will have to reregister with the Federal Registration Agency, which can close down organizations if their missions or activities damage “Russian sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, national unity, cultural heritage, and national interest.”40 It is uncertain what the effect of the new NGO law on NGOs will be.

During the early years of NGO development, many were evanescent, although a number of them grew, matured over time, and went through an increasing process of professionalization. The Bureau of Regional Public
works with the media and has considerable experience in organizing mass awareness campaigns in the press. The group was created by a journalist and almost all of its staff members are young university graduates or students. BROC is known as a very radical environmental organization, which can be seen in their statements, for example, "We are at war, at war for our environment." It has never flinched from openly berating the government, industry, and even WWF-RFE. Believing that WWF-RFE failed to honestly address current forestry problems, BROC often criticized WWF’s "compromising" partnership building, and not-so-radical stance on environmental issues. BROC solicits funding directly from Western foundations and does not rely on international NGOs operating in the RFE. It has its own network with multiple Western sources of funding, as well as local small student groups and journalists. For this reason, it is able to harshly criticize other NGOs without fear of losing funding. Most often they criticize NGOs for ineffectiveness in using Western money. As one activist stated in an interview:

Thanks to Western Foundations, the money per day spent on every tiger in the Far East is around $250. Wouldn’t you like to have such a salary? I guess, yes! However, tigers still do not flourish and multiply. This is because NGOs need money, and if the tiger population grows, the problem is gone, and money from the West stops coming. What will happen with the NGOs then?

BROC activists often operate as detectives, secretly following illegal traders heading for China or corrupt Russian state employees. When they acquire secret information, they disclose it to the public. BROC consistently releases "hot" (i.e. interesting and often scandalous) information related to various environmental violations. BROC is one of the few Russian NGOs that has actually made attempts to cope with China–Russia border environmental problems.

In 2000, BROC, in conjunction with the Russian NGO Dauria and several American NGOs (Forest Trends, Coastal Rainforest Coalition, and PERC), organized a conference on the Russia–China timber trade. They also included the participation of Chinese researchers and Chinese NGO representatives. Experts from BROC participated in a study on the Russia–China timber trade, initiated by Forest Trends in 2004. The conference assessed the current situation and discussed possibilities of organizing a campaign to promote sustainable forestry and responsible trade between the countries. A few other examples of NGOs active in the RFE, are Ecodeal and the Phoenix Foundation. The former consists of scientists and lawyers in the Khabarovsk region. They work on amendments to the Forest Code of Khabarovsk Krai, conduct scientific research, initiate lawsuits in order to protect citizen’s environmental rights and act on behalf of pollution victims. The Phoenix Foundation has, uncharacteristically, grown to be a grant-giver itself. This NGO solicits funds from Western foundations and redistributes them in the form of small grants to small grass-roots species, especially the Amur tiger. They organize annual tiger festivals, support tiger education programs, and work with anti-poaching brigades that were originally created by WWF.

Apart from the Russian NGOs, the RFE is also the working area of international NGOs. In fact, virtually all international foundations consider the RFE a hot spot for biodiversity conservation. In particular, they focus on the preservation of oldgrowth cedar forests and endangered species, such as leopards and tigers, and their habitats. There is a high concentration of international NGOs in Vladivostok. Many foundations invest in conservation within this region, as well as the empowerment of the Russian NGO community to promote preservation. WWF-RFE, the Initiative for Social Action and Renewal (ISAR) of the Far East, Reproduction of Lessons Learned (ROLL), WCS, PERC, GGF and ICF are the major funding agencies of environmental initiatives in the region. Each of these funding agencies is a node around which a whole variety of smaller NGOs groups operate due to the small grant programs.

WWF-RFE is one of the most prominent NGOs in the region. WWF’s work in the RFE began in 1994. They have four major programmatic themes: forest, marine, preservation of rare and endangered species, and protecting freshwater ecosystems of the Amur River. In the mid-1990s, WWF created a state inspection team called Tiger to prevent illegal poaching and trade with China. Later on, its focus shifted to disrupting criminal networks and mafia control of the region’s forest sector. For this purpose, another brigade, Kedr, was created. Initially, Tiger and Kedr were affiliated with and supervised by government agencies, but all funds, equipment, training, legal counseling, and salaries came from WWF-RFE. WWF made considerable efforts to promote sustainable forestry practices in the RFE by promoting model forest territories, fostering forest certification and assisting and monitoring companies that decided to take the certification path. WWF also actively works with media to notify the public about its activities.

Similar to the Chinese NGO community, competition for funding among environmental activists fosters conflict and has diminished the mobilization capacity of NGOs in coping with severe cross-border problems. The following statements from our interviews demonstrate this isolationism tendency among NGOs: "We are working, but they [other NGOs] are only washing money", "we are working, but they are only making noise," while another interviewee stated: "we are working, but they ignore our work and think that they are the only ones working" (italics added). The isolationist character of the NGO community in the RFE can be considered a negative externality to the foundation’s hot-spot strategy, as is also shown by other Russian regions which host much less conflict within the NGO community.

International NGO branches of the RFE, primarily WWF, TRAFFIC, ISAR, ROLL, ICF, mainly network with their Moscow offices, Western offices, Jewish partners, and with NGOs in the Far East to whom they provide support. Those international NGOs that do not have offices in Moscow, such as PERC
Russian perceptions of China: constraints to cooperation

The NGOs that are expected to take the lead to forge ties with China are understandably the two most powerful forces in the RFE, namely the established Russian NGOs and the international NGOs. Most NGO representatives acknowledge the cross-boundary nature of environmental problems in the border region, but simultaneously frame it as a Chinese problem. In almost every interview with NGO representatives in the RFE, statements such as “our major environmental problem is the Chinese,” “closeness to China,” or even “the Chinese invasion” were blurted out.

Some attribute the environmental problems in the RFE to the asymmetrical population density between the Chinese and Russian border zones. As one interviewee put it: “Environmental problems are created by people, and on our side of the border we have ten times fewer people than in China. That is why the Chinese consider our region practically a zapovednik.” Others pointed to imbalanced human activities, as an activist stated: “If you come to the bank of the Ussuri River, you can see that on our side there is forest, while on their side there are only agricultural fields, roads, settlements, and towns.”44 Russian environmentalists also note that China is increasingly becoming a source of pollution for Russia as a result of the rapid Chinese urbanization and industrialization. One of them lamented:

The city of Fuyuan has developed very quickly in the last decade. The Sungari River from China flows into the Amur River. Along the Sungari River, many paper and metallurgical plants have been during this time. They discharge everything without treatment plants... Everything comes to us in Khabarovsk.45

And indeed, the words of this interviewee became a grim reality in November 2005, when due to an explosion in a state factory in Jilin tons of toxic benzene spilled into the Sungari, and killed all aquatic life.

Many of our respondents from environmental organizations blamed much of the environmental problems on the influx of Chinese businessmen into the RFE. One interviewee depicted the Chinese businessmen as people who carried a suitcase full of money, in search of cheap timber. One respondent from WWF-RFE said: “It is a kind of a slogging expansion of China into the RFE. They are coming here, legalizing their visas, and infiltrating our economy.”46 Russian

People are poor in our villages. They just want cars, prostitutes [sic], and houses like in China. And so, here you have a normal village where people finally figured out how to get easy and quick money. So, they go to the forest and they cut trees. There is little work in the villages and so people live there on growing marijuana, on illegal logging, and on golden root [an endangered Red Data Book plant with, medicinal roots]. Their money is illegal. In our region, it is impossible to get money legally and fast. Because of the Chinese market demand you cut a tree and get 100 dollars right away.49

Russian environmentalists expressed their abhorrence and fear about the rapid expansion of China’s market economy. A member of WWF called China’s commerce “a bottomless market that swallows everything.”50 Another informant compared China with a vacuum-cleaner, devouring everything. Aversion towards the environmentally insensitive and exploitative behavior of Chinese sojourners who are investing and working in the RFE is not unusual among the interviewees. One interviewee burst out:

Chinese citizens under the name of Russian helpers are taking territory for agriculture! According to the law Chinese citizen cannot do this, but Russians can, so they pay Russians and then use the land. In order to build greenhouses they cut trees along the streams. In Russia it is prohibited to do so along the waterways. They do not even think about Russian legislation!...

They catch whatever moves and eat, soon there will be no frogs in the area!51

Given the gravity of the situation, almost every Russian NGO that we visited in Vladivostok and its precincts expressed genuine desire and a sense of urgency to partner with Chinese NGOs in combating cross-boundary environmental problems. In spite of this, very few have taken the initiative to forge cooperative ties with Chinese NGOs. Attempts that have been made by Russian NGOs can best be said to be sporadic. For instance, BROC participated in a few international conferences on border environmental issues but no further actions were made to forge ties with the Chinese side. The Amur-SEU sent a student who speaks Chinese to look for Chinese NGOs in Harbin but she returned without results. To date, the most promising attempt that is likely to foster ties between NGOs of two sides is the Amur/Heilongjiang Ambassador Campaign that started in June 2005:

When asked why they have not formed cooperative ties with their Chinese counterparts, some Russian NGOs in the RFE pointed to the language barrier as the primary reason. It is true that few Russian NGO members can speak Chinese
poor English communicative ability of the Chinese NGOs. Due to financial dependence on the West, the working language of big environmental NGOs in the RFE is English. Many local small NGOs, however, do not interact at the international level, and cannot speak English. Language can truly create problems when small local environmental groups of the two sides try to communicate, but this is less of a problem for student groups. For established NGOs, language should not be an insurmountable barrier if they earnestly want to reach the Chinese counterparts.

While small Russian NGOs in the RFE had little knowledge of Chinese NGOs, big Russian NGOs often complained that they could not find Chinese counterparts with which to cooperate. A few NGO representatives we interviewed in April 2004 did not even think that there was an environmental movement in China. In their opinion, since the Chinese environmental NGOs dared not confront their own government, they should not be counted as a vital force. They also did not value the student environmental groups very highly. One NGO representative, when asked about his opinion of the NGOs in China, said that there were only a number of student groups on the other side of the border, whose role was trivial and insignificant. The Russian NGOs doubt what these “handful of tree-planting, swamp cleaning” student groups on the other side of the Amur River could do to help solve the border environmental problems. Such an assessment and attitude partly explains why the more established Russian NGOs while crying for the help of Chinese NGOs were not particularly enthusiastic about taking practical steps to facilitate partnership.

Unfortunately, the Russian NGOs’ indignant view can potentially stymie cross-border cooperation. Especially as some of the criticisms turned “the Chinese” into an abstract object, and prevented the Russians from actively seeking Chinese partnership, and it would very likely turn away the Chinese NGOs. A historical and structural analysis of the border situations, in which their position and views are reflected and contextualized, is much needed for the Russian NGOs. It must be pointed out that the way in which Russian NGOs framed “Chinese guilt” reflects the fear and abhorrence of the population at large in the RFE towards the Chinese “demographic expansion.” This fear has historical roots and it has emerged again, this time against the background of a severe post-Soviet economic crisis, a decrease in production across the board, a significant population flight from the RFE, and an internationally weakened Russia. Human history has proven once and again that during difficult times, a seaport, usually an outsider, is found to account for abysmal conditions and to strengthen in-group solidarity.

Concluding observations: perspectives for cooperation?

In this contribution, we have reviewed the situation of NGOs in the RFE and Northeast China. It seems that there is a significant asymmetry between the two RFE border region are substantially greater in number than those in neighboring Northeast China. Furthermore, in the RFE, there exist a number of environmental NGOs that are professional, well connected to Western foundations, and skillful in securing grants. Chinese NGOs of this level are concentrated mainly in other places, such as Beijing, Shanghai, or Yunnan. Russian NGOs and branches of international NGOs are, to a large extent, independent of state control. They are therefore ready and willing to adopt a critical attitude toward the government and to confront it over environmental issues. They command substantial resources and mobilization power. These environmental organizations are the most active and powerful players in the RFE, and are also the ones most likely to approach the Chinese NGOs.

On the Chinese side of the border, this type of established NGOs simply does not exist. College student environmental groups are the principal players of the NGO community in Heilongjiang. Although different student groups exhibit different degrees of independence, all student groups are under the control of the university CYLs, and thus are controlled by the state. GONGOs in this region are largely government-led entities. The few existing non-student local NGOs are not truly independent, and they generally describe themselves as “government helpers.” Most of these Chinese NGOs are not versed in grant application procedures and lack organizational skills. Their focus is local and their capacity weak. They are poorly connected with the international community.

This asymmetry has prevented Russian NGOs from viewing Chinese NGOs in the border region as equal and worthy partners. They have reservations about the capacity of the NGOs on the other side of the Amur River and wonder what they actually can do for the solution of the cross-border problems. As forging transnational ties with Chinese NGOs is a costly undertaking, the Russian NGOs are concerned that cost might greatly outweigh benefits. Moreover, if isomorphic organizations are more likely to form close ties than organizations with disparate structures and cultures, the asymmetry in terms of organizational structure, capacity, size, and degree of professionalism certainly does not encourage the formation of partnership between the parties on the two sides of the Sino-Russian border. Even among student NGOs within the city of Harbin, the one that is more independent from the CYL’s control will tend to think that the other organization, with less degree of organizational independence, is its inferior.

A question arises: Where did this asymmetry in organizational form and culture come from? This asymmetry has primarily been shaped by the differential participation and investment by Western foundations and NGOs in the RFE and China’s Northeast. In deciding where to carry out operations and invest resources, Western foundations and environmental NGOs often employ the “hot-spot strategy,” i.e. to highly concentrate their resources globally in a few sites which possess great ecological value. For example, Yunnan province in Southwest China, where the rich biodiversity has attracted a large number of
empowerment, is comparable with the capital Beijing in terms of its number and capacity of NGOs. Likewise, the ecological value of the ecosystems makes the RFE a high priority and a “hot spot” for Western funding. Therefore, a great number of Western foundations channeled money to the RFE and various international NGOs set up their offices there. International NGOs through small grant programs create and maintain a large number of grassroots NGOs in the RFE. By contrast, the China side of the China–Russia border, especially parts of Heilongjiang province, is primarily agricultural and industrial. As a result of industrialization and the state-organized large-scale land reclamation campaigns from the late 1950s to the 1970s, few places retain their pristine state, and so are not considered as biodiversity hot spots by international foundations. As a result, much less international funding or effort has come into China’s Northeast to foster the growth of a grassroots NGO community compared with that flowing into the RFE. In other words, the hot-spot strategy of Western foundations and international organizations, and the high dependency on Western funding of Russian and Chinese NGOs, as well as the different ecological compositions of the Russian and Chinese border areas, make the growth of local NGOs on the two sides of the border diverge. While the RFE has a vibrant NGO community in which many are well established, the Chinese NGOs in Heilongjiang are much fewer and less developed. Most of them are almost invisible at the international level.

Despite the positive results of the hot-spot strategy on the development of civic initiatives, there are also various negative impacts. First, the artificially accelerated development of local groups does not guarantee their drive to resolve the environmental problems. In addition, artificially created groups are usually disconnected with their communities. They primarily cater for the interests of their donor. They are also financially unstable and ephemeral. In response to the hot-spot strategy, there is a high density of NGOs in the RFE and a number of NGOs are located in the same niche. This intensifies their competition for funding. Instead of cooperating to resolve environmental issues, NGOs are engaged in petty conflicts and waste energy in promoting their image and logo. Lastly, meaningful conservation work can only be done in accurately delineated natural ecosystems. In the Amur Basin, all major natural ecosystem types go across the border. So if the hot spot is confined to just the RFE, it is defined improperly and less meaningfully. In addition, since the main root causes to various environmental problems in the RFE are transnational in nature, and China’s increasing economic influence on the RFE implies a rising negative environmental impact on the RFE, any solution to these problems that fails to address the Chinese side is bound to be partial and ineffective.46

It is not our intention to leave readers with an impression that the picture is all bleak. On the contrary, we want to show below there is potentially great room for both sides to come together. Chinese NGOs are not unwilling to develop cross-boundary ties. NGOs in developing countries welcome the opportunity to work with foreign NGOs, especially those that possess great resources that they badly need, but it will bring in international attention and new opportunities. Furthermore, NGOs view cooperation with foreign NGOs as a learning experience to improve their organizational skill and member competence. It will also become a highlight in the NGOs’ achievements, which is good for gaining social recognition and publicity. GONGOs show interest in cooperating with foreign NGOs, specifically from Hong Kong, Japan, and America. They have less interest in forging ties with Russia NGOs perhaps, but if cooperative projects can be demonstrated to be mutually beneficial, they could hardly resist.

It is a mistake on the side of the Russian NGOs to underestimate the capacity and potential of the student groups in Northeast China. After all, a few prominent ones have been there for almost a decade and keep on growing. They are backed up by a supportive network which is constituted by the CYLs and school administrations, faculty advisers, alumni, student green groups nationwide, local media, and international NGOs like GGF. Some of these student groups, like Green Union of HIT, have built on their good legacy and entered a benign circle of development. They continue to attract fresh blood, expand their programs, and undergo institutionalization. Moreover, student groups, compared with local small groups and GONGOs, tend to be more globally conscious and would care more for the ecosystem of another country. Also, cooperation with student groups would perhaps be more manageable because language would be less of a barrier for the Chinese students who study Russian or English and are able to handle basic communication. The Amur/Heilong Ambassador Campaign, sponsored and organized by WWF-China and WWF-Russia in the summer of 2005, is a case that shows the great potential of the Chinese and Russian student groups to come together and for their interest to be directed to cross-border environmental issues. It is too early to assess the success of the project. Nonetheless it serves as a good start that hopefully more similar initiatives will follow.

The local small group’s focus is narrower. However, for the groups working close to the border, if there is an external agency or project to match them up with Russian NGOs on issues of similar interest, formation of cooperative ties is not impossible. There is a value to incorporating them since there is a possibility that poachers and illegal harvesters may come from these villages. On the Russian side, there is already a strong desire to cooperate with the Chinese NGOs. With the clear understanding that the solution of environmental problems in the RFE cannot be possibly achieved without cooperation from the Chinese side, Russian NGOs need to have more initiative, persistence and long-time commitment in their endeavors to form ties with Chinese counterparts and be prepared for all kinds of difficulties and frustrations that accompany this. The cooperative projects should involve different entities of the NGO community in the RFE. For example, zapovedniks, which have a long tradition of hosting Russian student groups, can consider hosting Chinese student groups and other Chinese groups as well. Through appreciating the wilderness and rich biodiversity of the RFE, the Chinese groups will be motivated to contribute to the
Notes

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work in Heilongjiang province. However, we now also extend to the Heilongjiang–Tiger–Leopard Reserve in Jilin province, which is separated only by mountains from the protected habitat in Borisovskoe and Barsovoy protected areas on the Russian side of the border.

24 For example, many of the activities organized by Green Union and Green Angel were beyond the confines of their campuses and had social impact. Green Union had hosted a Sunday radio program on the environment with the Harbin Art and Culture Radio Station for three consecutive years. Its yearly spring tree-planting attracted enthusiastic participation of students from other universities and Harbin citizens alike, with the number of participants ranging from 700 to 5,000. Green Angel published its own journal “Dandelion” (Pagonying) and organized its first summer camp to several nature reserves near the Chinese–Russian border area in July–August, 2004. The camp admitted members from other student green groups as well. Moreover, facilitated by the WWF–Russia consultant studying at NFU, Green Angel had an exchange program with the Russian student summer camps in the RF.

25 Among other things, both received grants from GGF. GGF in recent years has played a pivotal role, through the work of its China coordinator, in promoting the growth of grassroots environmental organizations, especially student environmental organizations, by distributing small grants to them.

26 For example, Green Union was honored as the Nation’s Exemplary Student Groups of Excellence (guangguo youxu xuexibing tiaoban) by CYYL of China, Ministry of Education and All-China Students’ Federation in March 2005. Five months later, Green Angel was awarded as one of the Nation’s Best Ten (Student) Environmental Groups of Excellence (guangguo xijia youxu huabao tengtai) by the Chinese Association for Promoting Environmental Culture (Zhongguo huanjing wenhua cujin xiehui).


28 In addition to disunion and attrition, Green Longjiang had to surmount yet another difficulty, i.e. to register with the Bureau of Civil Affairs in Heilongjiang in order to obtain legal status. The current governmental regulations permit only one NGO in a particular sphere of activity to be registered at each administrative level. Given that the Environmental Volunteers’ Association of Heilongjiang Province (EVAHP) was already registered as an environmental NGO at the provincial level, Green Longjiang was left with not much choice but to register as a secondary social organization affiliated with the EVAHP, which was a first-level social organization.

29 The roots of the Russian environmental movement can be traced back to as early as the 1920s. See D. Weiner, A Little Corner of Freedom, Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1999, pp. 312–29.

30 Known as Druchina in Russian.


32 Zapovedniks were created in the beginning of the twentieth century according to the climatic zones with the purpose predominantly for research. Human access for recreation as well as any commercial activity was prohibited.

33 The relationship between Nature Protection Corps and VOOP varied in universities, some more conflictive, others more cooperative. Cyl and VOOP often competed over the ability to control and influence Nature Protection Corps. Both Cyl and VOOP were interested in claiming credits for involving the youth. In certain cases this competition positively affected the operation of Nature Protection Corps as both entities helped Nature Protection Corps operations and Nature Protection Corps leaders were involved in both Cyl and VOOP, which allowed them through mediation and manipulation to receive additional resources. The relationship with university for Nature Protection Corps as universities protected the groups from Party-state threats, shaped their activities, provided knowledge on the environment, funding, access to libraries and other support. See O. Yanitsky, Russian Greens in a Risk Society, Helsinki: Kikimora Publications, 2000, p. 60.

34 For example, in Tomsk University one of the Cyl leaders tried to engage the Nature Protection Corps in monitoring university forest lands, while the Nature Protection Corps wanted to be involved in catching illegal fisherman in wilderness areas. The conflict ended with the dissolution of the Tomsk University Nature Protection Corps. In 1973 the Central Committee of Communist Youth League tried to co-opt Nature Protection Corps by converting Nature Protection Corps into mass action across all 900 universities and demand Nature Protection Corps to recruit all kinds of youths into their organization. Nature Protection Corps, however, were not prepared for such a massive mobilization effort, and they were interested in maintaining themselves with dedicated environmentalists who shared the same values. Therefore, they resisted the Central Committee of the Cyl demand and the Cyl finally acknowledged that Nature Protection Corps, although on a small scale, were anyway an effective mechanism for involving youth in nature protection activities. See S. Mukhachev, and S. Zabelin, 30 let dvizeniya, Neformal'noe prirodoobrazovannoe dvizenie v SSR: Fakti i dokumenti [30 Years of the Movement. Informal Nature Protection Movement in the USSR: Facts and Documents], Kazan: Sotsialno-Ekologicheskii Soiuz.

35 Glasnost was one of Mikhail Gorbachev’s policies introduced to the Soviet Union in 1985. The term in Russian means “publicity,” “openness.”

36 It is the Russian word (which passed into English) for the economic reforms introduced in June 1987 by the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Its literal meaning is “restructuring,” which refers to the restructuring of the Soviet economy.

37 Yanitsky, op. cit., 1996, p. 50


39 Interview with the public outreach officer of Ussuriiiski Zapovednik in Ussuriiisk and participant observation in the buffer zone in 2004.

40 See NRC correspondent, “Russland steitet NGOs unter staatskontrolle” [Russia places NGOs under state control], NRC Handelsblad, 22 December 2005, p. 4.

41 Interview with BROC activist, 2003.

42 A project of the Institute for Sustainable Communities with a central office in Vermont and a branch in Moscow.

43 It means “cedar” in Russian. Kedr was a group of four men in a jeep, equipped with communication technology, computer databases, and guns, while checking logging trucks for the wood’s legal documentation. Kedr existed as an individual brigade within Tiger, but dealt specifically with illegal logging.

44 Interview with BROC, 2003.


46 Interview with ISAR, 2003.

47 Interview with BROC representative in 2003.

48 Molodoi Dolnevestochinik [Young Far Easter], “Cholera remesto ribi” [Cholera instead of Fish], 4–11 July 2003.

49 Interview with WWF representative in 2003.

50 Interview with WWF, 2002.

51 Interview with WWF–RF’s Forest Program in 2002.

52 Interview with Amur–SEU representative in 2003.

heard from Chinese grassroots NGOs when they define their own role.
56 We would like to thank Eugene Simonov for his insights on this point.
57 Interviews with Phoenix, ROLL, and GGF-USA in 2003.

Grassroots
Benefits and risks of international cooperation

Katherine Morton

Over the past few years an increasing number of Chinese non-governmental organizations have established extensive international networks. They now participate in international conferences; promote Chinese concerns in international campaigns; and work with international partners to bring about change on the ground. Perhaps even more significant is the fact that many of China’s more autonomous NGOs are totally dependent upon international funding. Yet, few attempts have been made to examine the impact of international support for NGOs in China. This is a large and complex terrain that cannot be adequately mapped out without extensive research. It involves examining the roles and behavior of multiple agencies including multilateral and bilateral donors, NGOs and increasingly corporations. The purpose of this contribution is not to attempt such a challenge but rather to provide some insights into the evolving relationship between local and international NGOs (INGOs).

From an environmental perspective, it is important to examine this relationship for at least two reasons: first, the increasing density of local–international NGO linkages is a critical indicator of the extent to which Chinese environmental groups are able to move beyond purely local concerns to address the trans-boundary nature of China’s environmental degradation. Second, the overlap between transnational and local social spaces has implications for the development of greater openness and accountability within Chinese society, which in turn is likely to affect China’s capacity to deal with its environmental crisis, especially at the local level.

It is important to stress here that international support for environmental NGOs in China is highly contingent upon broader developments within Chinese civil society (gongmin shehui). As we have seen from the previous contribution, the potential for INGOs to act as a catalyst for environmental advocacy often exists but remains embedded in China’s current semi-authoritarian context. It is likely to vary considerably across regions and issues. Sun and Tysiachniouk suggest that the nature of local state–society relations together with the priorities and funding prerogatives of INGOs are key factors behind the failure to develop NGO advocacy across the China–Russia border. It may well be the case that the local associational space on the Chinese side needs to develop further before cross-border environmental issues can be effectively addressed. Clearly, without