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China's Emerging Environmental Movement

Quietly and somewhat surprisingly, green groups are cropping up throughout China and are starting to have an impact. In the first in a series on Chinese environmentalists, journalist Christina Larson visits with Zhao Zhong, who is leading the fight to save the Yellow River.

BY CHRISTINA LARSON

The northern route of the old Silk Road winds through a golden desert region of western China once renowned for its rugged beauty. But in many cities and villages along the route today, the view is far less picturesque: black plumes rising from smokestacks, mountains of trash massed along streambeds, and drainage pipes seeping untreated sewage into canals and rivers. In some areas, the streams are too badly polluted “even for cows to drink,” as one villager in western Gansu province told me, and so clean water must be brought in by truck.

China today is struggling with unprecedented environmental challenges. Ninety percent of the country's cities have contaminated groundwater. An estimated 750,000 people die prematurely each year from diseases triggered by air and water pollution. The United Nations predicts that by 2010, degraded water and soil in China will create 50 million “environmental refugees,” who will be forced to move from their homelands in search of potable water and arable farmland. The country's current environmental crisis is looming as a humanitarian one.

The Silk Road crosses the Yellow River, the northern of China's two great rivers, at Lanzhou, a city that recent decades have transformed from a remote trading post into a hub for petrochemical plants in northwest China. In the past two years, three industrial accidents at local factories have turned the great river an ominous red, and a recent report found that in some places the river is now 10 percent sewage.

This disquieting reality is why, one snowy morning last winter, I drove along the course of the Yellow River with Zhao Zhong, an energetic 26-year-old grassroots environmentalist from Lanzhou. Four years ago, he founded the city's first citizen environmental group, “Green Camel Bell”; for the past two years, he has been using GPS equipment (borrowed from a local university) to map the locations of factories that dump waste into the Yellow River.

[Enlarge image](#)



Christina Larson

Zhao Zhong, 26, founded Green Camel Bell when he

Green Camel Bell is one of approximately 3,000 grassroots environmental groups active in China today. These groups occupy a relatively unique, and fragile, place in the country's political landscape. Even as China's authoritarian government jails activists advocating such causes as human rights and Tibetan independence, the authorities have tolerated, albeit with troubling restrictions, the

moved to Lanzhou four years ago.

development of grassroots environmental organizations across China.

The country's first legal nonprofit group, founded in 1994, was the environmental organization Friends of Nature. Today green groups constitute the largest and most developed sector of the country's nascent civil society. Activists like Zhao Zhong are on the leading edge of both environmental campaigns and a remarkable evolution in how people in China think about watchdogs, the public sphere, and government accountability.

Zhao, like most Chinese environmentalists I met, tends to focus on the practical, not the philosophical. When I asked him what he thought about living in Lanzhou — and transformations across China today — he seemed surprised by the question. "I do not like it or not like it. It is where I live," he said. Then he added, "I will do what I can."

I first met Zhao after an epic plane flight from northeastern China to Lanzhou. During a nine-hour plane ride, with a transfer in Inner Mongolia, I had watched snow-covered mountains turn to green valleys, and finally to golden sand dunes. The staggering vastness and variety of China's geography defies comparison with most national landscapes.

It was long past sunset when I called him from the Lanzhou airport. But Zhao, no stranger to late nights, insisted it wasn't too late to show me his new office. Around 11 p. m. he greeted me at the door of Green Camel Bell's headquarters: a humble two-room apartment on the rundown western side of town. The group had purchased it the previous year with a start-up grant, for about \$20,000. The room had bare light bulbs and austere concrete floors, but as Zhao pointed out, it was a hearty advance from the days when his staffers had to work from their bedrooms. It wasn't fancy, but it was theirs.

A giant hand-drawn map of Lanzhou showing the Yellow River and nearby factories hung on one wall; a whiteboard with names and assigned tasks was mounted on another. The office's few bookcases were crammed with volumes on environmental science, geology, and the history of the region. Around one table, over a late take-out dinner, a group of 20-something staffers and volunteers was discussing the environmental curriculum they were teaching in local primary schools.

Zhao Zhong and his colleagues represent a new breed in China: idealistic young people. Control over one's personal future is a new concept in China. "Ten or twenty years ago, students would graduate and simply be allocated to a job," explains Jane Pierini, executive director of PeopleLink, a group in Beijing that helps domestic nonprofits build organizational capacity. Factories would determine where you worked, when you could travel, and even whether you were allocated to single or married housing. "Everything was set, even the time when one could marry."

But in recent decades, with the advent of Deng Xiaoping's "Open Door" policy and the gradual dismantling of the state-controlled economy, new choices exist for young Chinese with adequate education. Each of Green Camel Bell's members share in a dream their parents could not have imagined: They can purchase an office, hold meetings, distribute informational pamphlets, and organize public activities, albeit confined by certain legal restrictions. "Civil society is now a phrase people in China are beginning to understand," Pierini says.

Many civic-minded young people in China gravitate toward environmentalism — in part because the country's environmental problems are so severe, and in part because the government has over the last decade passed laws that afford green groups a relatively unique degree of autonomy to operate. Some green NGO leaders are even consulted by

government officials and praised by the state-controlled media. Almost unheard of two decades ago, student environmental groups are today multiplying quickly on college campuses, with several hundred now operating nationwide.

Green Camel Bell grew out of a group Zhao founded in college called Green Anhui. An avid hiker who frequently sports a well-worn Northface knockoff jacket, Zhao told me that he had become worried that “the mountains were dying” in his native province because of polluted rivers and clear-cut forests.

After college, he took a job as a nuclear engineer and researcher in Lanzhou, a city the World Resources Institute once named the most polluted in the world. In addition to the sludge in the Yellow River, factory smoke makes lung disease a leading cause of death in Lanzhou (just breathing the city air is equivalent to smoking a pack of cigarettes a day).

[Enlarge image](#)



Christina Larson

Zhao's group marks the locations of waste pipes such as these using GPS.

In 2004, Zhao founded Green Camel Bell; “camel bell” refers to the Silk Road caravans that once traversed the region. With a series of small start-up grants from San Francisco-based Global Greengrants Fund, he was later able to hire a skeleton staff and purchase office space. To date, the group’s activities have included organizing trash clean-up campaigns, teaching environmental seminars in local schools, and now, somewhat more controversially,

monitoring local factories’ pollution records.

What all these undertakings share in common is the task of collecting and disseminating information. “China needs public participation to solve its environmental problems,” says Ma Jun, a leading environmentalist in Beijing and the author of *China’s Water Crisis*, a book many have likened to Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in its impact on the nation’s environmental consciousness. “The first step is access to environmental information. Without information, there can be no meaningful public involvement.”

Three years ago, Ma founded a Beijing-based nonprofit called the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs, and today he is working with grassroots groups across China, including Green Camel Bell, to track down data on regional air and water pollution. Recent laws in China have made more environmental data available to the public than ever before, though a broad exception exists for anything deemed a “state secret.”

In 2006, Ma launched China’s first online public database of water-quality information, followed by a similar online database for air pollution. These sets of data revealed, not surprisingly, that polluting factories are often in blatant violation of Chinese law. Ma says he hopes to generate new forms of citizen pressure to ensure greater compliance with China’s environmental regulations.

In many Chinese cities, public attitudes towards the environment are evolving as rapidly as new skyscrapers are rising. In a 2007 poll by the Pew Forum’s Global Attitudes Project, 70 percent of Chinese respondents named “environmental problems” as the “top global threat” in the world today. (That represents the highest percentage for any country surveyed except South Korea, which happens to get most of its air pollution from China.)

This is a transitional moment for China. For three decades, its government has passed increasingly strict environmental laws, but the expectation that these regulations would be upheld is still novel. It remains an open question to what degree the Chinese government, wary of having its record

challenged, will continue to expand the political space afforded to green civil society. And although the authorities condone citizen environmental education campaigns, tensions flare when independent researchers question plans in which the government has already invested resources and political capital, such as massive dam and water-diversion projects.

Wary of nationwide campaigns, Beijing forbids green groups from establishing branch chapters and collecting dues from a national membership. This means most groups scrape by on limited grant money, borrowed equipment, and the goodwill of volunteers. Only recently did Zhao draw any salary for his work at Green Camel Bell, which enabled him to quit his day job as a nuclear researcher and devote himself to the group full-time.

Yet Zhao and other pioneering activists may play an important role in determining whether China meets the environmental targets it sets for itself in the future. That's not just China's concern; it's also the rest of the world's.

Today many outside observers wonder whether Beijing will at some point commit to capping greenhouse gas emissions. But even if China's government accepts emission targets, that won't mean much unless there is also the political will and the capacity to convert those goals into reality. That's why our collective fate rests at least in part on the future success of Zhao Zhong and his scrappy colleagues.

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COMMENTS

It's great to hear that environmental groups are getting established there - especially considering that China has apparently become the #1 supplier of carbon credits in the world but are falling short of their environmental goals... a multi-prong approach is definitely needed and grassroots organizations can help.

Posted by [Chris Keys](#) on 04 Jun 2008

Wonderful to see thorough journalism at work in uncovering bottom-up efforts to conquer immense environmental challenges.

I believe China is quickly recognizing its contribution to the global environmental issues and I'm excited and encouraged that we'll continue to see initiatives large and small take shape.

It's an exciting time to be living in China and growing a principle-based business around renewable materials. We're working at building in environmental (and social) standards into everything we do. We get mild resistance from our producer groups only because it is not understood, and it costs more. Constant education.

Action in the form of public participation, government support, and focus from media will help build a greener and safer future for China.

Every day we are having new conversations with interesting people doing wonderfully positive things in this country.

When China puts its mind to something, stuff happens.

Posted by [Jeff Delkin](#) on 04 Jun 2008

China is beautiful, preserve it!
Schools there should start teaching more about environmental consciousness.
Great article!

Posted by [Ryan](#) on 04 Jun 2008

Take a look at what this company has been doing to help to clean up the HUGE pollution problem in china. Their revolutionary technology removes over 90% of the toxins from coal prior to burning it and thereby reducing the harmful toxins released into the air.

China is under scrutiny from other countries for their pollution problems that are causing early death rates and forcing people to move indoors for safety. We need more companies like this to bring new technology to the table and clean this planet up. Way to go!

Posted by [Richard Dane](#) on 04 Jun 2008

I first visited Hong Kong in 1990. I was shocked by how ignorant the populace were of environmental issues, and the "environment as dumping ground" mentality.

I have visited Hong Kong every few years since, and in that time I have witnessed a real change of heart in their society. Through a combination of government education and infrastructure programs, and grass-roots activity, the environment has become important in people's minds. I'd have to say that as far as I can see, Hong Kong has surpassed my own country (Australia).

While China may never be able to fix the damage already inflicted, what I've seen happen in Hong Kong gives me the hope and belief that it's really possible for a people as a whole to have a change of heart. I long for that day.

Posted by [Capn](#) on 05 Jun 2008

There is growing concern for significant action within the next 18 months to avoid catastrophic climate change. Please take a few minutes and look through the presentation on the Soil Carbon website. Very few people are aware of Soil Carbon and the critical role it can play in helping to reverse the impacts of global warming.

Did you know that just a 1% change in soil organic matter across just one-quarter of the World's land area could sequester 300 billion tonnes of physical CO2?

Recent Australian studies have shown that a 1% change can occur within a few years – and in fact up to 4% changes were measured in some areas. The management changes required to achieve these increases are very readily implemented. I hope you find the attached presentation of interest. There are Spanish, Mexican, Italian, English, Portuguese and German versions on our website.

http://www.soilcarbon.com.au/case_studies/index.html

Boosting soil organic matter levels is one of the only real ways to deal with the existing excess legacy load of carbon dioxide currently in the atmosphere.

Posted by [tony lovell](#) on 05 Jun 2008

Stand by, Amnesty International.

Posted by [weee](#) on 17 Jun 2008

Great article!

Posted by Nathan on 22 Jun 2008

Dear Zhao Zhong, I am glad you are letting others know about the Environment and Green Camel Bell. I know that many people don't understand how the environment and going green can help China and other countries. I live in North Carolina since Oct 07, before that I lived in Connecticut (worked at Yale at Ezra Stiles) where the state is declared a Green state. but many people don't know it yet.. Everyone needs to be educated on this matter and the ones who follow you will be rewarded in their life.

I am associated with a 52 year old company that is a Green company and will be opening up China very soon. So your job of environment will be helped.

May I find you and your staff in great health.

Posted by [Marge Carter](#) on 30 Jun 2008

i agree with every aspect and risk all of you may be taking.

Posted by Nichole on 02 Feb 2009

It is absolutely grand to hear of this!

Posted by Brett on 02 Feb 2009

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