

Title: Policy Advocacy and Global Climate

Governance: The Role of Chinese NGOs

Abstract

The policy advocacy of civil society actors has gained increasing relevance and is widely recognized as a significant force in shaping global policymaking processes. The issue area of climate change is one such example where states and civil society actors join forces. Although the participation of NGOs in global climate governance has expanded over the years, the consequences of climate change vary across countries, and the political opportunities and resource constraints for NGOs to participate in these processes differ significantly at both international and domestic levels. In China, NGOs have been actively engaged in environmental and climate affairs and are gradually seeking to amplify their voices in global climate governance.

The objective of this research is to explain how Chinese NGOs engage in policy advocacy within the structures of global climate governance—including the transnational, international, and domestic policy arenas—to influence climate and environmental policymaking. While existing literature often characterizes Chinese NGOs as constrained by a relatively restrictive domestic context, this research adopts a more nuanced approach by analyzing the conditions under which state–NGO cooperation emerges and evolves. Specifically, it draws on three key pillars identified in the literature—political culture, functionality, and legitimacy—to enhance our understanding of NGOs’ advocacy roles and the outcomes of their efforts. This research is a relevant academic quest in three dimensions: first, it adds Chinese NGOs’ participation in global governance to the discussion of state-NGO relations; second, as China is becoming increasingly significant in the climate change policy arena, it fills the knowledge gap on Chinese NGOs’ participation in the global climate governance; third, it sheds a light on understanding of NGOs’ advocacy strategy across different political contexts.

Using multiple case studies, the research examines how Chinese NGOs adopt various strategies and assume different roles to advocate for climate policy. Chinese NGOs rarely position themselves as a potential challenger to authority or employ confrontational tactics. Thus, they try to carve out more space for policy activities by utilizing other non-confrontational approaches, such as implementing policies, acting as policy experts, or initiating public interest litigation against polluters in the private sector. In each strategy, NGOs may assume various roles and functions, and they do so by cooperating closely with either respective government agencies or key policymakers and stakeholders in China. They contribute to the delivery of the state's international climate commitments by identifying local partners and implementing projects in recipient countries. They may also propose recommendations regarding China's environmental legislation informed by their own experiences with environmental public interest litigation (EPIL) cases. Expert organizations provide policy advice on specific issues to shape how key stakeholders understand the issue.

Drawing on qualitative empirical evidence collected through interviews, participant observation, surveys, and desk research, this research addresses the discussion concerning the conditions under which NGOs can achieve their policy objectives. Within the allowed boundaries, policy participation for NGOs is possible when favourable conditions are met. I found that when NGOs' function and policy suggestions are closely aligned with the state's agendas and interests, it is likely for them to achieve favourable outcomes or to cultivate a collaborative relationship with the state. In the meantime, organizations still experience rejection.

When their advice or activities fail to find that alignment, they may face a temporary "cold shoulder" and then redirect to new issues to work on. I discovered that the legal reforms pertaining to environmental protection in China allow for the legal participation of NGOs. At the same time, NGOs must meet the conditions of operating in policy priority areas, aligning their goals with the state's interests, securing stable government backing,

and operating within the law, while also being constrained by the ability to secure human resources, financial stability, and legal registration with government agencies. NGOs must consistently pursue alignment and diligently monitor the state's evolving climate policies and actions to recalibrate their policy initiatives.

This research also finds that cooperation between the Chinese state and NGOs is essential in determining the political space for NGOs' activities and operations globally. In China, although limited pluralism can be traced, however, the state remains the centre of climate and environmental policymaking. The state's legislation concerning the management of NGOs, along with its approach to climate change and environmental governance, creates a complicated terrain filled with both obstacles and opportunities for NGOs to navigate. This research reveals that Chinese NGOs have increasingly assumed complementary yet strategic roles in advancing China's climate agenda on the global stage. Political trust between the state and NGOs and among NGOs themselves is an important factor for NGOs to sustain their cooperative relationships with the state and with their NGO peers. The pillars of functionality and legitimacy primarily address how NGOs identify mutually beneficial grounds for cooperation with the state and subsequently negotiate for operational space. If NGOs were able to align their functions with the state's policy objectives and priorities, then it is likely that their policy efforts would be accepted. Such alignment may also help some organizations to carve out more political space for their global operation. Under the legitimacy pillar, seeking to increase the legitimacy for both the state and NGOs serves as a facilitative factor for state-NGO cooperation in climate change, especially internationally. The presence and participation of Chinese NGOs in global climate governance processes can contribute to the construction of the country's image as a responsible stakeholder, while at the same time, increasing NGOs' legitimacy at home and overseas.

Finally, in examining NGO activities across the three policy arenas, the study finds that Chinese NGOs and the state often advance their policy goals collaboratively in both

domestic and international contexts. Internationally, NGOs primarily play complementary roles by implementing China's overseas climate cooperation projects and supporting the promotion of China's climate interests in multilateral negotiations, thereby enhancing the legitimacy of China's global engagement. Domestically, the state leverages NGOs' expertise, grassroots networks, and field experience to address service delivery gaps and inform policy design and revision. In the transnational arena, the state continues to dominate, and NGO influence remains limited. However, some organizations are beginning to explore opportunities in this space by joining transnational NGO platforms and initiatives.

My experience tracking Chinese NGOs across these policy arenas has revealed shifts in regulatory frameworks—and corresponding changes in NGO activities—particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Leading environmental organizations appear to be experiencing growth, while those operating in more ambiguous or politically sensitive domains face increasingly stringent regulatory constraints. The evolving relationship between the state and NGOs will remain a critical factor in shaping how Chinese NGOs function and advocate for policy change in the future.