

THINKING STRATEGICALLY ABOUT CIVIL SOCIETY ASSISTANCE IN CHINA



Encouraging people with skills and resources to solve the environmental problems we have created

Guo Xia, SEE Conservation & SEE Foundation, Deputy Secretary General



CHINA
DEVELOPMENT
BRIEF



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Highlights from the interview

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From 2004 until 2008 we focused on combating desertification. In 2008 everyone felt that we had already worked on this for many years and that we now understood how to run a public organisation. We learned how to set up our internal governance and how to reach a consensus among a lot of people. We learned how to move forwards and also gained a lot of experiences and lessons with our projects. We gradually learned how to do environmental protection projects from a civil society perspective. By 2008 everyone felt that we should establish a foundation. This would allow us to realise our initial plan to engage in environmental protection all across China.

We are very specialized and only do environmental protection projects. This means that in the field of environmental protection we are very complete and provide both project support as well as personnel support. This includes support for leaders as well as support for the development of their organisations. We even provide support for the establishment of environmental public interest organisations, a little bit like an angel investor. In terms of these start-ups we mostly provide support for individuals and organisations.

Our donors care a lot. They care about the money, but they also care about more than just money. They are very idealistic in that they hope that through their participation and effort they can help Chinese society to develop a healthy and sustainable public interest model.

I think that there is a big trend in civil society or public participation. More and more societal elites want to do something or get more involved in this kind of work. I personally think, regardless of whether it is environmental protection or whether it is manifold social initiatives, it should not be about vulnerable people helping vulnerable people. It should be about societal elites who do this by spending their money, energy, wisdom and technical skills. Especially with environmental problems, they are not something which can be tackled by people who basically lack everything. We should not let people who should receive help in the first place, for example victims of environmental degradation, we should not ask them to tackle these problems. Such problems should be dealt by people who have more skills and more resources.

This interview was conducted by Dr Andreas Fulda in Beijing, China on 14 July 2014. Translated by Sujing Xu and Andreas Fulda.



Interview transcript | Guo Xia

Andreas Fulda (AF): SEE Conservation was established in 2004, followed by the SEE Foundation in December 2008. What kind of problems did the founders of the SEE Conservation and SEE Foundation try to solve? What was their motivation?

Sandstorms

Guo Xia (GX): We are a special kind of environmental public interest organisation. Friends from home and abroad may consider us a special organisation, not only within China but also internationally. Normally, foundations are either family-based or come into being through public donations. Our organisation, on the other hand, was established on 5 June 2004 by various entrepreneurs. This all dates back to 2003. Starting from 2002 Beijing experienced severe sandstorms. Of course this problem existed before as well. During this time some entrepreneurs convened a business meeting in Alashanmeng in Inner Mongolia. They learned that this region was the origin of most of the sand storms that affected Beijing.

The desert left a deep impression on people. The key reason may be that Chinese businesses began to develop 20 or 30 years ago. Initially, they were uncertain whether they could survive or make money. By 2003 a number of businesses had developed rather well. During their everyday struggle to survive they suddenly looked up and realised that for all those years they had only cared about money making. They had not considered how they could really solve some societal problems and give back to society.

Chinese philanthropists

Some of the entrepreneurs felt that during the past ten or twenty years they had developed their companies but at the same time also destroyed the environment. They saw that as they had built an economic foundation, found some stability and were doing rather well, they also needed to think about how they can help improve the environment rather than simply destroying the environment and making money. Previously Chinese entrepreneurs or philanthropists had mostly donated money to children or for education. They had not yet become actively involved in public interest work or involved in the process of solving problems of the public. At that moment of time everyone felt moved and wanted to do something. They thus decided to establish an environmental protection public organisation. When they went back to Beijing they started to prepare and asked a lot of entrepreneurs to join this organisation.

When our organisation was established on 5 June 2004 we already had 60 to 70 entrepreneurs participating. We sat down and held a meeting and discussed our constitution. We discussed the process of how to elect our board. At that time there were some debates. Some people said that we should only combat desertification in order to help Beijing with the sand storms. Other entrepreneurs said that they came from other parts of China and represented all kinds of companies. They argued that there were so many entrepreneurs which together had great capabilities and could have greater social impact. They asked whether it was possible to engage in all sorts of environmental protection activities. They wanted to promote environmental protection in their given localities. We had a big debate and when it came to vote, the decision came down to three or four votes. In the end everyone decided that we

should start with projects which help combat desertification in the Alashan area. No one had done this work before, since we were very pragmatic private entrepreneurs. So we first established an association, the Society of Entrepreneurs & Ecology (SEE). We started with projects that aimed to combat desertification. Once we gained some confidence and learned how to go about this work we started to look at environmental problems in other parts of China. It was not that we did not want to do more, but it was a question of sequencing our work.

From 2004 until 2008 we focused on combating desertification. In 2008 everyone felt that we had already worked on this for many years and that we now understood how to run a public organisation. We learned how to set up our internal governance and how to reach a consensus among a lot of people. We learned how to move forwards and also gained a lot of experiences and lessons with our projects. We gradually learned how to do environmental protection projects from a civil society perspective. By 2008 everyone felt that we should establish a foundation. This would allow us to realise our initial plan to engage in environmental protection all across China. In the second half of 2008 we organised 20 members to go to the United States and visit various big foundations. For example we also visited the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and learned from the example of such big foundations. That was probably the first time Chinese people went to America to learn how to spend money. We visited a number of big foundations, such as The Nature Conservancy. All in all we visited ten organisations. They were really excited to host Chinese entrepreneurs for the first time who were not interested in making money but keen to learn how to spend money. So in the second half of 2008 we established the foundation. From 2008 onwards we started to explore. We started to fund projects in earnest in early 2009. This work continues until the present day. Of course we are still running projects in the Alashan region. So by now we have two organisations: one is the association and the other is the foundation. Both are moving forward. The association has its own vision and goals, whereas the foundation has its own goals and activity fields.

AF: After the establishment of the foundation and for the past five years, how did you select your projects and programmes? When making your decisions, did you consider the position of the government? Or is this something you would not give much thought? After all this is what you are planning to do.

GX: Of course we consider this, but it is maybe not the most important thing for us to consider. After working on these issues for so many years, we ourselves want to solve some environmental problems. The more professional you are as an organisation to solve some problems the less likely the government is going to consider you as a sensitive organisation. We focus on our projects, we look at the capacity of an organisation, their projects as well as the long term development. This problem is therefore even less relevant, and there are naturally very few problems.

AF: When you provide project support to what extent do you support government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs), and to what extent do you support grassroots NGOs? What is the ratio between the two types of partner organisations?

Blurred organisational boundaries

GX: When we provide support we usually do not only look at the organisation's background. We start from our own project objectives and strategies and see whether or not there are suitable organisations. In terms of the results we can see that until now we have mostly supported civic organisations at the grassroots level. I feel that the organisational boundaries are quite blurred. In many places an organisation may have been initially established by the government. But then the government has pushed these institutions outside and they have become more and more civic in nature. When providing funding we have also encountered such organisations. A government has established an association ten years ago, but for all this time this organisation has sat there idly. It never really sprang into action and only after some civic-minded individuals took over these brands from the government they started to operate them as civic organisations. They do so whilst hanging on to the government's original name of the organisation. This is why I think that the boundaries are not that clear cut anymore.

AF: Many changes have occurred among Chinese foundations in recent years. Some foundations provide seed funding, whereas others provide project funding. Do you provide both types of funding? If this is the case, what is the ratio? How much can cooperation partners claim in management fees and human resources costs? What is the funding ratio?

Environmental protection projects

GX: We are very specialized and only do environmental protection projects. This means that in the field of environmental protection we are very complete and provide both project support as well as personnel support. This includes support for leaders as well as support for the development of their organisations. We even provide support for the establishment of environmental public interest organisations, a little bit like an angel investor. In terms of these start-ups we mostly provide support for individuals and organisations. Of course they can also do some projects. Such support falls under the rubric of our projects or our various platforms. We make very clear distinctions. We gained a lot of experiences and now separate different objectives according to different lines of work. We have some big programmes which entirely look at environmental initiatives. We also have some programmes that specifically aim to support people and help with organisational start-ups.

Three Rivers

When you apply for a grant you will see that we have specific indicators according to which we will assess the proposal. So in terms of your questions we address this within each of our various segments. So for example we support projects. Here we only focus on projects, for example the Three Rivers protection project. In the context of this project we support a great number of cooperation partners. When these partners implement their projects we support their personnel and office costs, they are all part of the project support. We also have a separate line of support for personnel. So we support leaders, their own development, and the development of their organisation as well as some training. For all big projects we provide funding for capacity building trainings. So we have it all included. We have not yet calculated the ratio of all these various expenses, but I estimate it is about fifty-fifty. This means that the investment for projects and the support for people, organisations and the management are about fifty-fifty.

AF: Let us talk a bit more about cooperation models. You just mentioned that in some projects you are cooperating with a number of partners. How do square the circle of donorship (e.g. the definition of key criteria for the selection of civil society initiatives in China by the funder) and ownership of civil society initiatives (e.g. the steering competency of Chinese partners and their desire to pursue their own goals)? Sometimes donorship and ownership are at odds. It can be that the foundation's goals and the goals of your partners may overlap but that they are not exactly the same.

GX: I understand. This is indeed a very complicated and complex problem. When we go about our work this problem often puzzles us. When moving forward we always try find a good balance between donorship and ownership. This problem can be seen from two angles. The first is what you referred to as the objective. We are most likely to have our own objective. For example in the context of the Three River protection project we have a project that aims at industrial pollution control as well as a project to protect the wetlands. For us as a foundation this is a big objective. Under this objective we support a lot of partners. But as you say it can be that we have our own objective and the partners have different objectives. Maybe there is some overlap, but I am sure that there are also differences.

Donorship and ownership

But there is also a second problem that puzzles us, where we see problems in balancing donorship and ownership. Even when our objectives are the same, when we are sitting down to discuss a project and we are implementing it, there can be problems. Just last week we had a discussion among our colleagues about the problem of backseat driving. What is the role that foundations should play? What is the role for NGOs? There is a grey area in between. Is the problem that sometimes the arms of the foundation are too long? Does the overreach of the foundation lead to a situation where although the goals are the same, the partners feel that it is very hard to implement the project? They then ask the question whether this is your project or mine. At times it may be the opposite and we are too far removed. The NGO partner then moves forward too quickly. For us as a foundation, especially as a foundation which has to raise funds, we face the questions of our funders who ask us what we have done. So what role should foundations play? And of course we can ask the question whether the NGOs have done their work according to their commitments? This raises the question about the brands of foundations. If you as a foundation do not have a brand, your donors are unlikely to continue to provide you with funding. Because all they see is a bunch of scattered NGOs doing something, they will then ask where the brand of the foundation is. When a foundation does not have a brand donors are unlikely to agree with you.

For both problems we need to find a good balance, which is a real challenge to our work. Whether or not we work well as a foundation depends to a large extent on whether or not we can solve these problems. In terms of the first problem of goal setting I feel that we have performed rather well over the past couple of years. The reason is that at the very beginning, we did not set ourselves any goals. When we started providing funding in earnest in 2009, the road we travelled did not include fixed goals. Instead we supported whoever was applying. This meant that it was all their goals, their projects, and we provided funding support. At the beginning this is

Goal setting

how we worked. So in terms of the NGOs, we did not tell them what they had to do or what they should not do. Only gradually did we realize that this approach was too broad. Our funders could not understand what we were doing. They were asking how we spend their money. We could not tell them that we were supporting projects with one hundred different objectives in different localities. They would not listen to such long explanations. If you do not find a common objective and a way to measure it, you will have a hard time communicating with your donors.

But I am glad we started out with this approach, since it allowed us to see what kind of environmental NGOs are dealing with what kind of environmental issues in China. We realized that in fact there are many common initiatives. Although in terms of environmental problems we can see that China is very big, but since these problems occur under the same system and under the same model of economic development, we can see that there also exist many similarities. For example we realized that in various parts of China there were people working on water pollution, industrial pollution or environmental information disclosure. A lot of organisations do very similar things, for example some are trying to protect wetlands. The destruction or atrophy of wetlands is a problem that we can see all over China. So gradually and in cooperation with our partners we turned these into big programmes. Since everybody is working on similar issues, the projects are also very similar, and there is only so many ways you can go about your work. What we thus did is to build on the work of our partners. We put their work in order to make it more clear to everyone involved. We identified the common objective and our common strategy. Under every strategy our partners then would come up with their own specific objectives. We then try to quantify things or try to describe their successes as much as possible, discuss with them how to measure success. When we set up a system like this, our cooperation partners can see how they fit into the system. This way they naturally find something in line with their work, and within this system they have some choice. So for example a cooperation partner, an NGO, if they want to act as an NGO in Hunan doing pollution control, they can enter the big project of SEE. They do not have to do everything, but within the framework provided by SEE they can choose their activity area. Every organisation has its choice. From our end this allows us to combine together the activities of everyone and describe all activities under one objective. When we realised that our projects are now conducted this way we saw that this way we created a network.

In the past everyone would do things independently from other organisations. This meant that in every locality organisations would go about their own affairs. They would have to find out by themselves whether what they do is right or wrong and would have to build up their experiences and lessons all by themselves. Only through trial and error would they gradually learn how they can do things better. But under the umbrella of a big programme where many organisations do similar things in different localities, there are organisations with different functions. Some organisations are measuring pollution levels and have contacts with the local Environmental Protection Bureaus. Other organisations such as Ma Jun's organisation in Beijing do some data analysis and promote work in certain sectors. Within a network like this, we can promote mutual communication, mutual learning and help everyone learn from each other. Some organisations are very specialized and can measure pollution levels. Other organisations focus more on the mobilisation of the public and volunteers and

are less specialized. They can invite other specialized organisations to provide volunteer training for example. This way a lot of organisations at the periphery, organisations which have not yet joined the network, can look at organisations supported by SEE and see what speciality they have and learn from them.

AF: Networks seem to have become a new development trend, which differs from the past. What you have just described is a learning process. It can also be described as a process of mutual adaptation. When preparing for this interview I also read a couple of reports about the SEE Foundation. If you do not mind I would like ask you about this process of mutual adaptation. Feng Yongfeng published an article in 2011 in which he criticized the SEE Foundation.

GX: He always criticizes us in his articles.

AF: The way I understand his critique he considers the SEE Foundation to be a very modern foundation, comparable to the One Foundation. He made the case that during the growth process of the foundation changes to the internal governance structure may have affected the grantees. He also touched upon the relationship between the board and the secretariat. As a third party observer I am not quite clear what the specific issues are. Would you be at ease to describe the relationship between the board of directors and the secretariat? This could be useful since you also mentioned the importance of donors previously.

Feng Yongfeng's
critique of SEE

GX: No problem. We actually have cooperated with Feng Yongfeng on various specific issues. We always feel that all the things he writes about in his essays actually reflect the high hopes that many Chinese grassroots NGOs have towards SEE. They do have very high expectations. In the field of environmental protection there are not too many foundations. In China there are even less foundations. This means that everyone has very high expectations towards SEE and hopes that SEE can support everything. But as a matter of fact we are a very small foundation. If you compare us with the big American foundations, we are actually a very small foundation. Also, we are very new; we have only existed for five years now. As a foundation, we also need to gradually learn and develop in order to grow our sector in a sustainable way. Only in this way can NGOs obtain support in a sustainable way. We take the issue of sustainability very seriously. We do not want to simply disburse money in one go and think that we have been very impressive, that we are the big boss among the NGOs.

You must not forget that foundations have the function to provide a sustainable platform which adds value and allows for the interaction between NGOs and donors. When Feng Yongfeng wrote his piece in 2011 we had only started as a foundation in 2009. Up until now no one had actually worked at a foundation. So we went to America to conduct visits and learn. There people have been doing this kind of work for many decades, a century even. And then you learn about certain principles, but the moment you come back you are facing different circumstances. Also we are quite special insofar as we have 300 donors. Every donor donates 100,000 RMB per year. They also participate in our internal governance. They have the right to elect and to be elected. Every two years they select their board of directors as well as a president.

Interaction between
NGOs and donors

We do not only have a board of directors, but also a board of supervisors, as well as a rules committee. Here we have learned the separation of powers from the United States. I have been working in this organisation for about ten years now. Working as a member of the secretariat has been quite a complex struggle. It is as if every day there are a couple of hundred eyes staring at you. Every day different people come to you and ask you whether a certain project is working fine or whether it is encountering some problems. This is a difficult job. But on the other hand this process is also very important. First of all this shows that the donors really care about the work, which is very hard to come by. A lot of donors, once they have donated their money, are quite content with their enhanced reputation. When you give them a brand, when you have a commercial exchange, they then go away and do not bother you any more. I think that this kind of donor behavior is not very good for the initial development of the sector of Chinese foundations or of the public benefit sector. Only when donors care about their money, only when they care about the work, only this way can they objectively help build a more healthy and benign mechanism and system.

Role of donors

Our donors care a lot. They care about the money, but they also care about more than just money. They are very idealistic in that they hope that through their participation and effort they can help Chinese society to develop a healthy and sustainable public interest model. This is why they are all very careful, since public interest work is a new thing. When 300 people come together and a problem arises, they may all disband and the platform would no longer exist. As this organisation is growing up, more and more people care about this platform. They all feel that this is something they helped build and they treasure this platform a lot. Since our initial beginning in 2009, we can see that our board of directors have elected all sorts of committees. Every board member has been leading some kind of committee. The board members have also attracted a lot of new members. These are the donors who are now joining this cause. Since we established the foundation there has been a committee called the project review committee. This committee is specifically dealing with the daily review of projects and also looks at our work flow structures.

What we can see, especially during the initial stage, is that everybody is very cautious, very careful. Of course they also gave us a lot of space. The initial committee, including our board of directors, did not tell us what kind of theoretical system we should establish before we spend the money. They told us to start first, to give money first. I just told you how we started our work, and the board of directors gave us this space. If we had not made this decision, and decided that we would need to develop a scientific and professional system like the one of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), I think we would not have spent any money in the first three years. We would have only done research at home. But this is not how we thought about it, we simply started giving. But at the beginning we also did not give much. We tried first and learned along the way. We did not want to follow something highly imaginative. In this process, we wanted to find out how we do things. We wanted to see what can help us establish a genuinely good system. This is why we asked our donors to join in the decision making process. In the very beginning we asked the committee to review very small projects. These projects were sometimes worth only 50,000 RMB. Later this sum was increased to 100,000 RMB. Now we have projects worth more than 500,000 RMB.

This means that below 500,000 RMB there is not much space left. Back then and before 2011 our projects were still very much scattered. Back then a lot of people would come to review projects. There would be our own project officers, the entrepreneurs who support us and also the NGO people who applied for the grants. They would jointly discuss the projects. The specific knowledge of our entrepreneurs was limited, but as entrepreneurs, they would be able to judge. For example they could assess things like the organisation, the management and other common sense topics. In the case of some topics, such as climate change for example, they may not fully understand them. It is very difficult to understand these issues in a very short period of time. Since they did not understand, they would ask a lot of questions. Since they do not understand, they would continuously ask questions. I think this is where things get complicated. On the one hand the problem is that donors do not fully understand environmental protection. At the beginning, the donors were very impatient. After all they are entrepreneurs. They saw that China's economy developed very fast. Once a property was build it could be sold. Maybe they also hoped that public interest projects would also yield some quick results. So this could be part of the reason.

Impatience

But on the other hand there is also another reason. A lot of grassroots NGOs are not very professional. They may see parts of the problem and then speak about it. The entrepreneurs are actually very smart people. Even if they do not fully understand the issue at hand, they can ask all sorts of questions to learn about the part they need to understand. They can see if people are professional. They can see if something is clear to them or not. A lot of entrepreneurs engage in investments. When you invest, you may not fully know about the technology of the company that you are investing in. But when they invest they ask all these questions. This allows them to see whether the leaders who receive their investments have or have not thought about these things. That is why they ask. A lot of NGOs are not used to this type of questioning. In fact asking these kinds of questions does not mean that this is an unequal relationship. When these entrepreneurs engage in commercial investments, they also ask a lot of questions. But Chinese NGOs often feel very uncomfortable about this. They may see this as an unequal relationship. From the perspective of the entrepreneurs, from the perspective of the donor, they do not ask these questions to control you. They do not want you to do things in a particular way. Instead they want to understand, they want to learn about this. Only when they understand and acknowledge they will give you money and stop asking. But if they do not understand, they are unlikely to donate money. This is how people from a business background are.

This is why some NGOs feel uncomfortable with this. In addition, a lot of NGOs lack professionalism. They are asked some questions by entrepreneurs who themselves do not fully understand, but they still ask questions. The entrepreneurs may ask questions about the extent of polluting industries or they want to know about the extent of the problem all over China. Take the example of chromium, of which China has very little. They want to know what is going on about chromium, but then the NGO practitioners can only say very little. When you are not able to shed light on these issues, donors may think that since they do not know these things they also can not solve all kind of problems. They start questioning whether you have the capability to solve the problem through your actions. This also includes the problem that many NGOs are not yet very mature in their actions. From my point of view both sides face some complex problems. And both sides have different ways of expressing themselves,

Lack of professionalism

different ways of doing things, a different logic, including language. It appears that they are all speaking the same language and that they have some things in common. But even where they have things in common, since the language they use is so different, this leads to mutual misunderstanding. They can not mutually understand and trust one another, thus creating a rather complex problem.

Solving problems

But through the development of the past few years things have improved. Our donors have really touched me. They are all very successful in their business and they are fairly old. I think that people at older age find it difficult to change their way of thinking. But in recent years I have seen major changes among our donors. They have also changed very quickly, something that goes beyond my imagination. In the past an entrepreneur would come and selectively talk about an issue. But now the entrepreneurs come and sit down and ask us what they need to look at, what kind of problems need to be solved. What kinds of problems have already been solved by the secretariat. They do not think that they need to challenge us on those things. We solve the problems people asked us to solve. So when they want to know more about them, they would first ask us or ask our NGO partners before making up their mind. I think that this situation is already a huge improvement over the past. It is not just a technical progress, but a big step forward in terms of people's attitudes. Of course this is also because a lot of people have scolded us, this certainly had some effect. But I feel that in the whole process people have gradually learned something. Since 2010 and 2011 committee members are working very closely with us. Initially, they were very cautious. Why were they so cautious? Because they too were given the trust of a couple of hundred people and asked to do this work. They took the money of everyone and were in charge to spend everyone's money. This is why they were nervous. The money we are talking about is very little in comparison to the money they are dealing with in their companies. But it is not just about money. It is that everyone's hopes and trust is given to them, and they have this power. They want to use this power very carefully. Once they have this power, people become very nervous. Because if you misspend the money, a couple of hundred people around you will blame you. Since not everyone is clear about the whole process, some mistakes are bound to happen. It is the same with investments, you will always make a few wrong investments. Since there are checks and balances, we can check on each other. For example the board of supervisors can check what you are doing.

Checks and balances

AF: They investigate whether there are some wasteful or unsuccessful projects?

GX: They are less concerned about wasteful or unsuccessful projects. They are more afraid that people overspend or that that people embezzle funds. That is what people are most concerned about. When you have a couple of hundred rich people coming together you have a small society. This is a society where many things can happen. But from 2009 until 2011 we have been doing our work slowly and steadily. There have been successes and failures. This couple of hundred people are constantly discussing and they have now found a normal state of affairs. They understand that commercial investments are also sometimes successful and sometimes fail. Over time they have learned to deal with the psychological pressure and to release this pressure. In 2011 a committee members said to me not to worry too much and just continue working. He said that this decision was his. In case the project was to fail, he would explain this to

everyone else. This is what he had to do. So over time they have woken up to the fact that there are risks and responsibilities they have to bear. This moved me a lot, too. They actually provided a lot of space for us, and let us proceed. So from 2011 until 2014 the sums we have been dealing with have constantly increased.

AF: I am very happy to see that everyone is learning. In the public benefit sector the most important thing is to solve social and environmental problems.

GX: I agree. We at the secretariat, our members, donors and our partners, the NGOs, we are all moving forwards and we are all learning. For all actors involved this is a new thing we are dealing with. Take the NGOs for example who felt uncomfortable when we all came out and asked these questions. Why is that? What I have seen and based on my analysis I think that most organisations received support from international organisations in the past. These international organisations often resided abroad and did not have a representative office or people on the ground. So they simply transferred money to China. Their only requirement was that you communicated effectively. So as long as you did that they were satisfied. For these international organisations, the project funds were very small anyway. So for example they would implement many projects worth many million RMB. So when they supported projects worth 10,000 RMB they would not spend a lot of effort to manage a small project like that, to look into it, chase up reports and engage in auditing. This is how I see this. This does not mean that the requirements of international organisations are not high. But at that time it seemed that the strategy of international organisations was that civil society in China is still too weak.

Organisational learning

It is similar to angel investments. When you spend projects worth a couple of 10,000 RMB you want people to first do something. There is no need to do too many audits and manage these initiatives. But the thing is that people get used to this way of doing things. In addition, while some international organisations do have offices in China and they provide funding, these offices are actually project offices. The people who work in these offices do not face the donors themselves. They deal with their headquarters abroad. Only the people in their headquarters deal with the donors. This means that much of the communication with the donors is being taken care of by the people in headquarters. This means that people in the project offices only deal with part of the bigger picture. They do not have to face the pressure from the donors. Their pressure is to spend the money. At the end of the calendar year a lot of international organisations have to spend the remaining money, so that is what they do, they spend it very quickly. So when people take this money, take too much of this money, they get used to this. People then naturally start thinking that the role of foundations is to give money. And once you have received the money they should not interfere anymore. They should not interfere at all. People then think that their own objectives, their strategies and project activities can all be changed at will. Consequently even the finances do not need to be very clear, since people believe that they do not need to engage in financial reporting.

Angel investments

In terms of our projects we insisted that all projects needed to be audited. When we carried out the audits, a lot of people felt very uncomfortable about this. We also realised that among the great majority of NGOs the financial management capacities

Audits

have been very low for a very long time now. In the long run this has limited their development. Because now you have more and more domestic donors, like Alibaba for example or other foundations set up by entrepreneurs. These Chinese enterprises, these donors are sitting just in front of you, and they live on the same area as you. They may understand society even better than you. So there is no way you can simply use written reports to avoid engaging with them. In terms of the finances, due to the overall situation of the charitable and public benefit sector, a lot of people do not trust charity.

Finances

A lot of donors can accept that a project is not successful. But your project finances need to be very clear. If you misspend these funds, you are kind of defeating the whole purpose. What we are trying to do is to encourage Chinese donors to donate even more money. But when our finances are not in order, this will hurt our donors most. They will no longer dare to engage in this activity. They will no longer trust you and do not dare to give money. This outcome would mean that we all lose. When a society develops you need to have these Chinese foundations developing. It is a comprehensive process where you need to find people who are committed, whether it is within foundations or among donors. You also need to spread the word about these activities. This is something we need to confront together. It is not just a task for foundations, but this is something we need to confront together with the NGOs.

AF: Does the SEE foundation prefer one particular type of cooperation model? For example do you prefer working with a multitude of partners or do you prefer to work with one partner at a time?

Networks

GX: We are still in a phase of exploration. Initially we supported pretty much any kind of initiative. We later we structured our work more. We now have different objectives and clear strategies. We also work with partners in networks. This year we have moved further still. We have identified a topic for our own work. In comparison to our previous work we now have the advantage that our thinking is much clearer now. We now have to spend less energy on managing close to one hundred different projects. This also allows us to state much clearer what we have achieved in every activity area and what our networks do. But we have also encountered a new problem. The new problem is that while we have these networks, there are still many things that do not quite add up. The management costs of these networks are still quite high. In addition, every network is still quite weak. None of them are particularly strong, they are all still in the growing stage. What are the biggest problems with these networks? Once established, they have a tendency to become closed networks. The network members just do this kind of work on a daily basis. And while in the first year you have four partners, in the second year six and in the third year eight partners - that's pretty much it. It is very hard to develop this network into an open system. Once a network is closed there will be problems. So for example you have a partner who knows that you are going to support him. So they have a lot of space to engage in negotiations with us. They will then say that apart from the support you already provide you also need to help them develop. They will ask for support for this development.

In the beginning we were quite relaxed about this. But we later found out that once you have eight cooperation partners, they all will come and talk to you and say that they have special demands. They will say that they have a special plan. This then makes it hard to manage. What it leads to is that they will ask why do you support the plan of this person and not the plan of another person? This is a big problem. Our funds are limited and we do not have infinite amount of funding to disburse. So what shall we do? So I would assume that in the next one or two years we will update this form of funding. This is what we hope to do. We hope to build on our organisation and provide more support for some important platforms. What do I mean by platform? We have defined it to mean a specific topic for which we have an objective as well as an overall strategy. On the basis of this, we hope to develop open platforms. The idea is that everyone can come and try to get some resources. These platforms should be open to NGOs and donors alike. Such platforms should attract more and more donors who are willing to support this kind of initiative. Only this way will we be able to open up resources on both sides. This way we can overcome the problem that it is only us providing a little bit of funding for everyone. This will require our platforms to add some value. It is no longer sufficient to say that here is some money donated by our donors that we can give you and then we will manage this. It will require us to add some value. We need to make it easier for donors to donate. It also needs to be easier for NGOs to receive resources. At the same time we need to ensure the quality of the work. This is the challenge we will need to face. We need to develop new support mechanisms. From this year onwards we are exploring these new possibilities. So for example for air pollution control projects, we are planning to develop such a platform by the end of this year or beginning of next year. Of course we also want to do this with the help of the internet and utilize some new ideas and techniques to go about this. The principle that will not change is that we will give NGOs sufficient space. Of course we will still have our own big objective, which will help explain what we are doing. But we will still give them sufficient independent space. At the same time we will ensure an effective management. What matters most is that on this basis we enhance the efficiency and that we enhance everyone's impact on society. This is the problem we need to solve next.

Platform

AF: Have you thought about using market mechanisms to run these platforms or networks? Maybe some more competition would help.

GX: This is something I am really looking forward to. This is also something that we have learned while providing funds. We realised that this problem exists. NGOs need some form of competition. Many people with rich experiences in this sector have said this before. Some NGOs are not actually starving to death, but they have been overfed. Of course there are two types of situations. There are some NGOs who are starving to death despite doing great work. They just can't get money, which makes their lives very difficult. The more they struggle to survive the more they lack resources. For them it is very hard to improve their work and they encounter a vicious circle. But the vicious circle can either be that they lack resources or that they have too many. If you constantly provide resources, this inhibits the organisation's ability to move forward. This is also a problem that we ourselves face. From the perspective of our foundation in the past five years we have been spending the money of our regular donors. Every donor provides 100,000 RMB per year. This means that every year we can spend a couple of million RMB. This has also led to a situation where we

Competition

ourselves have only thought about how to spend the money. We have not thought about how to raise more. After we spend the money we need to think of ways to make the donations more sustainable. So even we ourselves have not thought about this.

Fundraising

Starting from this year, our board of directors have given us some pressure. They have told us to find more money. Only this way have we realised that there are many functions that we should have in the first place, but which we now need to develop, for example in terms of communication or fundraising, in order to operate on a sustainable basis. All of this actually also applies to NGOs. For NGOs what matters most are their work standards, their degree of professionalism, and whether or not they are able to solve problems. If in the long run they can not say with certainty that they are making a difference, giving them money will become a problem. For these two problems I see only one solution, which is to use market mechanisms. But in terms of the market mechanism, we also need to carefully investigate it. The reason is that it will differ from the market mechanism in markets. In businesses there exists only one standard for a market mechanism, which is profit. Once you make money you can live on. When you do not make money, you are an unsuccessful company. This is a good measure. So the market itself provides the measurement. But in the case of NGOs, the market mechanism needs to provide a very clear basis of how to assess their results. Only this way can you introduce a market mechanism in a fair way. You will need to define what is success or failure, and you will need to be very careful. Otherwise you will only exacerbate the problems that already exist.

AF: This also relates to the problem of how to set appropriate goals. If the goals are set too high or too low this can all create problems. Your NGOs may complain that if you set the goals too high that they can not achieve them.

Goal setting

GX: That is right. But on the positive side we can argue that the objectives are not set by us. We only provide a general direction, an ultimate goal for all these initiatives. Our partners define on an annual basis how to quantify progress. They determine how much they want to move forward year by year. So they have to measure up to their own objectives, not our objective.

AF: Civil society is something new. Do you have an organisational view of Chinese civil society? If yes, how would you describe it? If not, who is framing the discourse about China's civil society in your organisation and how?

Civil society

GX: Generally speaking we do, but we basically do not use the term civil society. We are not an organisation that promotes development. We do environmental protection work. So we essentially fall into the category of civil society. When dealing with all sorts of initiatives we usually emphasize the importance of public participation. So for example when talking about air pollution, we would propose certain bottom-up policies. Here we would refer to various local NGOs, since NGOs are representing the public. We also discuss how NGOs can mobilize the public to participate. In our view civil society is very broad. It includes our donors, rich people, they are also citizens. A lot of private entrepreneurs in China are very vulnerable. Their development is constrained by various unjust or unfair or not very market-based systems. It also

includes our NGO partners. It also includes normal members of the public. We are now seeing the development of a middle class in China. We see all sorts of professionals, for example lawyers. These professionals are all citizens. So in terms of all of the various initiatives we see where we stand. SEE is an organisation that supports NGOs. When we support each individual initiative we have NGOs in mind. But when we support NGOs, we also value how to mobilise the public to participate in these initiatives in order to truly impact and promote these initiatives. This is something we emphasize. We have some common expressions within our organisations. For example we often talk about how to develop a platform for societal participation. This societal participation should include entrepreneurs, companies, NGOs, the public, local or specialized management departments. We want to see them jointly promote things. This is how we understand civil society.

As an environmental protection organisation, we do not see civil society for the sake of civil society. In a sense it is not very clear. When you look at history, when you look at global history, you could say that it works well in America but maybe not in other countries. And when you are too keen to develop it may not work out. For us, the key question is whether or not civil society participation can help promote some public initiatives, help them move forward and develop. If we do not have this ultimate result the whole process is meaningless.

AF: Whether we talk about civil society or public participation, what kind of changes do you anticipate in the next five to ten years? Will there be any changes? What kind of initial changes and trends can you already discern? One could argue that public participation these days differs greatly from five years ago.

GX: The difference is great.

AF: In which ways?

GX: I can think about something related to our own work. I just mentioned in the context of the “Green House Plan” we provide the first investment for environmental organisations. This is what we call an angel fund. It is a bit similar to angel investments by businesses. With this support of up to 200,000 RMB we cover annual operating cost of an organisation that is just coming into being. We give everyone an opportunity to give it a try and see if they can achieve things.

Future trends

We started with this platform at the end of 2012. Since then we have already supported close to seventy new groups. Among them some people had been involved in environmental NGOs before. They may have been department leaders in another organisation or some other form of partner. Once they obtained this kind of support they could do the kind of different work they always wanted to do. This allowed them to become more independent. But there are also other people. These people did not know what an environmental NGOs is. They were what we use to call members of the public. Maybe they were engineers before, or lawyers. Or maybe they were just an old lady from the community. So we are talking about all sorts of people here. Once we established this platform we promoted it quite extensively. Our hope was that we wanted to find such kinds of people. They just had to make up their minds and have

the desire to engage in environmental protection, regardless whether this is the separation of waste on the community level or something more specialised, such as a jewelry designer who wants to promote environmentally friendly pearls. It is people with these kinds of ideas we were looking for, all sorts of people. You then realise that these people are really able to run an environmental organisation, an environmental NGO. They are not satisfied simply being a volunteer for Friends of Nature or to be someone else's short term volunteer.

People with skills

While China's environmental problems are becoming more and more serious, China's propertied class is also increasing. These people have money, they have societal resources and societal experience. There are more and more people with skills. Under these conditions they are rethinking what it means to live. Some people are no longer simply satisfied by money. They want to do something meaningful. Among these people there are some who are interested in environmental protection, they have this specialty. These people are very happy to do something, but they may not be aware about environmental NGOs. They often think that they are the only people in China who want to do this kind of work. Through our projects we hope to find these people. The project helps them find a group of people, find the sector. This is often a big inspiration for people. They thought that it was only them wanting to do this kind of work. But then they realize that there is a whole environmental public benefit field, with many people and many organisations. This way they have more confidence to run an organisation. They see that there are many foundations and that there is both foreign and domestic funding available for people to apply for. They realize that they do not have to take out money from their own pocket and that this is originally a public topic. They then can use these public funds and do something and give it a try.

Social responsibilities of elites

I think that this is a big trend in civil society or public participation. More and more societal elites want to do something or get more involved in this kind of work. I personally think, regardless of whether it is environmental protection or whether it is manifold social initiatives, it should not be about vulnerable people helping vulnerable people. It should be about societal elites who do this by spending their money, energy, wisdom and technical skills. Especially with environmental problems, they are not something which can be tackled by people who basically lack everything. We should not let people who should receive help in the first place, for example victims of environmental degradation, we should not ask them to tackle these problems. Such problems should be dealt by people who have more skills and more resources. They should solve the environmental problems all of us created. I think that this is a new development trend. We will see more public participation. We already see this in the past two years in terms of environmental education, especially the education of children. Young parents already have a different level of education. They want a more comprehensive education for their children, too. In China many values are gradually precipitating. This is different from the past, where some new rich wanted their children learn a lot of technical skills. The younger generation of parents care about the psychological growth of their children, the growth of their mind and a healthy growth of their personality.

Environmental education

We have seen that environmental education, education about nature, has become part of children's education. This way it has also become an issue that more and more parents care about. It is not only an anxiety about the environment, but they see this

as beneficial for the mental and physical growth of their children. In the next two years we will see a new trend, a very positive development in terms of education. It will allow more and more members of the public to embrace these ideas and make them become part of the mainstream development.

AF: In a sense you have already answered my next question about what kind of changes you would like to see on the individual, organizational, societal and/or policy level. You mentioned the trend towards the mainstreaming, which could impact all of these levels. How do you assess which kind of projects and people are most appropriate to bring about such changes? Do you feel that to a certain extent you are also promoting social change?

GX: If we look at things from a wider angle, when we look at things across greater space and time, I think that not a single individual or organisation can promote such changes. It is a process involving a lot of people who have a sense of responsibility. This is something god has decided. All of the people and organisations which engage in this line of work, we only decided to follow the direction of god. No single person can decide these things. Let me give you an example. In the 1980s I said that we should not go the old way of developed nations of polluting first and cleaning up later. But when you see the present, we still went down that road. No one could do things differently. A market economy is such a development process, this is something god has decided. So all we can do is that during this process we try to find things that we can do. We use our strength to move forward along this development. When you look at things from the macro perspective this is what you will see.

When you look at specific issues such as our organisation, we of course need to be at the forefront of this trend. We should not be dragged behind, which is a horrible feeling. This is why I think that we have started talking about the 3.0 donor era. In the 1.0 era we were supporting any kind of initiative. The 2.0 era is the global network at work. We are now exploring the 3.0 way, which is the establishment of platforms. This is very much in line with the global development. We now have an open society marked by an increasing individualization. It is a society where more and more people with skills can do this kind of work. In this process we as a foundation need to reconsider our role. We need to provide better services, not just for the people who do things but also those who want to support such work. This is a task not only for Chinese foundations but also for American foundations, a global task. In this era, in this internet era, we all need to reconsider our position and think how we can create new value, I think this is absolutely necessary. When we went to the United States last year I could see that many of the older foundations are already contemplating this question.

3.0 donor era

AF: In terms of the future development of the SEE Foundation - or any other foundation for that matter - it appears to me that the biggest challenge is to become a learning organisation. Only this way you can achieve breakthroughs.

Learning organisation

GX: I think that this is not only the case for foundations but also for businesses. All bosses of companies can not sleep very well, Ma Yun also can not sleep well. We are

guarding these entrepreneurs, but even business face this challenge. In this era changes happen too fast. If today you can not create new value, if you do not find something where you can create value you may be overtaken by someone else the next day. Then you do not have any value and meaning anymore. As a foundation like ours we are carrying the expectations and ideals of more than three hundred very influential Chinese entrepreneurs. This is why we even more need to search for the best way to realize these ideals. Otherwise, if this organisation does not exist, we would give up the hopes for society of so many people. If this was the case I would feel we have not done our work properly.

AF: But as you said before, when reforming the market, China followed the old way and made mistakes, just like western nations. So maybe an organisation will also make mistakes, which are part of the growth and learning process.

GX: That is right.

AF: What conclusions do you draw when you realise that the anticipated change has not been achieved by the projects supported by your organisation? Do you allow failure? How do you view failure? Is failure the mother of success?

Success and failure

GX: Here we would distinguish between ourselves and our NGO partners. If we are talking about the project cooperation and an NGO was not that successful in some ways, I think that this is very normal. In such cases we would sit down with them and see whether the problem lies with the setting of the objective; or whether there are problems with the chosen approach; or whether there have been changes to the bigger environment which prevent using your original approach. All of these things can be discussed. When you proceed with the first, second and third phase of a project you will see that most cooperation partners will perform better and better and will be able to achieve their objectives. If under a big programme a lot of cooperation partners can not achieve their joint objectives then we need to review whether or not the problem lies with us. It could be that there is a problem with the programme design or that there is a problem with the whole set-up of the system. If the problem lies with us, we will then engage in a timely review and change our way of doing things. All of these things are quite normal for us. As an organisation supported by entrepreneurs, the entrepreneurs understand this perfectly well. They know that not everything will be successful. The key is that on this road you learn your lessons, and that you learn to quickly renew yourself.

AF: What do you consider realistic outreach goals for projects funded by your organisation? How do you ensure that the goals you set are not too high or too low? For example, you could have a project which in terms of public participation focuses on one urban community, one NGO, one partner organisation which can mobilize about 100 people. Or you could have another project which is a kind of campaign. Such a project may be able to reach out to millions of citizens through their cooperation partners, just like the 26 Degree Campaign in 2004. This was a nation-wide project which managed to achieve a great result.

GX: I think this is very difficult to achieve in China. Until now we are still in a process of exploration. It may be that you will never know whether the goals you are setting are too high or too low. Let me give you an example. In the beginning of 2013, or even in the second half of 2012, we and one of our partner organisations established a goal for the environmental information disclosure policy, more specifically about pollution information disclosure. Back then why did we decide to set such a goal? At that time we thought this was a very ambitious goal. Why would we set up such a goal? We saw that under the promotion of the public the PM2.5 figures were not only detected but also disclosed. This was something that even many NGO practitioners thought would take the government five to ten years to do. But then we saw that they would do this in one to two years.

So we saw a possibility there to open this channel and go down this road and disclose pollution information. We thus set a very high project goal. We hoped that the government would detect and disclose all major pollutants. We also wanted to establish a very open platform to let the public inquire about pollution levels of factories at any time. This is something that has been gradually established in Europe and North America during the past few years. Some platforms are not established by the government but voluntarily by the companies. Of course they have a different foundation in terms of their civil society. At that time we felt that our goal was very ambitious. We thought that it would take five years, in the most optimistic scenario at least three years to accomplish. In early 2013 we engaged with all sorts of people, including entrepreneurs. The entrepreneurs did not have a special status, since they are also part of the public. They appealed, advocated and took the initiative. Later our NGO partners joined this initiative, too. We managed to mobilize the public. We engaged in policy research or promoted the sector. We had interactions with people within the system, always with an eye on our objective. We later used all sorts of means, including proposals submitted during the two sessions of the National People's Congress (NPC) as well as the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). We published all sorts of reports. Through the media and during all sorts of business meetings, especially meetings that the media would pay a lot of attention to, we would let entrepreneurs talk about these issues. Later some of the NGOs we support would engage in interactions with local governments and apply for information disclosure. Of course this was not all our effort, and of course the central government also wanted to promote this, so this was an effort by a lot of people. The unexpected result was that in 2013 the Ministry of Environmental Protection established this new rule which was the same as the one we had outlined. They requested that any locality should disclose this information, that all businesses should disclose this information.

We then quickly changed our objective and focused on the implementation of these new regulations. We then thought about how we can assist the government. We even thought about establishing a platform which would collect all this data, so that the public can see the situation in all parts of China. This was a big challenge for us, since our initial goal was to be realized in five years. But then we realized it in one year. Just yesterday we were discussing this with a project partner in Guizhou. When your victory comes too quickly the ball is in your field again. You also need to prepare for this. But what will you do next? You can not just say that the government made their move and now you are here not knowing what to do. Rather than to simply stop we

then need to update our plans quickly, set up new objectives, and reconsider what we plan to do moving forward.

AF: That is a great example. To a certain extent it shows that in the fields of environmental protection it is possible to have an impact on policy. While many people complain about the present system and consider it to be imperfect, it may be that because of the particularities of the system such policy advocacy is possible. How do you view policy advocacy more generally?

Policy advocacy

GX: In terms of policy advocacy, it is difficult to talk about this in abstract terms. In terms of every initiative we first and foremost need to study their policy. We need to be professional and understand what we are doing. Look at organisations which aim to prevent water pollution for example. I think that a foundation like ours together with our NGOs we can add value. There are so many local organisations, but they can only say that along their river there are one thousand polluting factories. It will be close to impossible for them to check all these factories and to ask the Environmental Protection Bureau to fine these factories. So if we were only to do this kind of work, it would be hopeless. While you can manage to check one company, there are three new companies springing up at the same time. So what is this all good for? Every day you would be chasing the tail of the polluters. This is why we study policy. Which kind of policies can be further institutionalized and solve a lot of problems at once? In addition, what are the means to engage in both top-down and bottom-up supervision so that these problems can be solved? We need to see what happens above, what kind of policies are relevant to the environmental problem, which policies are very important. This is a very important stage. Once we understand the policy this provides a lot of space for the work of our NGOs. What are the policies that NGOs can use to promote specific work on the local level? This is what we need to study. During these studies, we need to constantly engage with our NGO partners and probe these questions with the help of professional organisations. We need to discuss this together with the entrepreneurs and donors. The question is how we can jointly promote these policies. This is also one of the strengths of an organisation like SEE, which is quite unique in China. We do not only have grassroots organisations representing civil society but we also have many societal elites who have the capacity and right to speak. Many of them are National People Congress delegates, or members of the Chinese Political Consultative Committee. They can engage with the government. And the government does care about their voices. So while they can engage with the government this is different from many NGOs who are trying to dodge the government. They don't want to touch the government but want to actively promote these causes. So when our donors promote policies and move us forward, this is a measure of our success, maybe even the biggest indicator.

AF: When talking about impact and sustainability we also need to talk about policy advocacy. In China it can be said that policies are party policies. Do you think that NGOs or foundations have the capability to influence party policies? What kind of channels do you find most obvious for this kind of work? You mentioned the NPC and CPPCC. Or do you think that local governments are a better entry point? Local governments often have to engage in innovation work. This may allow NGOs to get

involved in pilot initiatives. They can work with local governments and when they succeed with their pilots these experiences can be scaled up to the national level.

GX: In my opinion these channels are not the most important. For NGOs the most important thing is that they need to first do their research and be clear about it. You first need to identify which kind of policies you are going to promote. I think it is possible to push policies either at the local level or from above. This will depend on the resources you have as an organisation. The question is, what kind of policy are you promoting? It could be that you do not understand the system or the Chinese government, that you are the only one taking this stand and advocating a certain type of policy. You need to understand the general environment around a given policy and which departments have what kind of interests. You need to see whether this is a policy in the general development trend that everyone wants to promote, or whether this is a policy which you can not really engage with.

Actually, NGOs are not at the heart of policies. In China the government is at the heart of policies. This is how the situation is under China's current system. So the things we can do are similar to the example I gave you about the pollution information disclosure. We need to study these issues. If this issue faces too many obstacles due to various interest groups you will not be able to do anything about it. You can try whatever you want, whether it is top-down or bottom-up approaches. You can submit proposals or work through the media, all of this is very difficult. Unless you deal with an issue like the PM 2.5, which affects the livelihoods of everyone: This was an issue for the whole population, an issue for all Chinese. But as an NGO, when you want to influence a policy as such a weak force, whether it is about policy formulation or policy implementation, you really need to be clever and do your research. You need to decide what kinds of factors are most important for you work. But within the system, there might be some departments which are willing to cooperate whereas other departments pose stumbling blocks. But then you can often see that the promoters and blockers are engaging in a sort of game with one another, and there is not a great disparity. It does not mean if the obstacles are huge there is a game going on. Our participation may help the side on the policy formulation end. If we get involved in policy promotion, they may be able to succeed with their policies. In terms of what kind of method you use to push policies, whether it is a CPPCC proposal or an NPC proposal or whether you work through the media and let some stars speak on your behalf, whether you work through NGOs or the public to promote policies, I think all of these approaches are valid. I think in China there is not one kind of method that will do the trick, you could say that all methods are ineffective. But all these methods, when you hit the right spot, may be useful. ■

Government