

# Research on the NGO-Government Relations in Chinese Environmental Affairs from the Perspective of Corporatism: Take Friends of Nature as an Example

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## ABSTRACT

After the socialist market economy model established in China, the interest demands of various interest groups have shown a trend of “multi-point triggering”, and the majority of the social organizations have begun to gradually participate in the process of public affairs. NGOs are among them and acting as the rising star. From the perspective of corporatism, the emergence of social organizations is the result of the differentiation of social interests, and the government plays a major role in the relationship with the society. Therefore, if NGOs intend to participate in public affairs as a third-party, such as the environmental protection, they must improve their relations with the government. This article will briefly discuss the issues above, and take Friends of Nature as an example to analyze the relationship between the environmental NGOs and the government in China.

**Keywords:** Corporatism; NGOs; Government; NGO-government relations; Friends of Nature

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of the transformation and upgrading of Chinese current economic development model, measures to promote ecological protection and environmental restoration are regarded as one of the first choices in the policy toolbox for sustainable development. Since they are mainly promoted by the government, and its related contents are concerned with social and public interests, consequently, environmental protection issues are usually both political and social, which provide theoretical support for social organizations, represented by environment NGOs, to intervene in related affairs. Whereas in the actual operation process, the traditional concepts of “strong state” or “strong government”, as well as “weak society”, are the factors that make the social organizations always in a relatively low position in environmental protection issues where the government and the market play as the leading roles. Even if social organizations may have obtained admission to participate in environmental issues in several areas, they are always on the weaker side than the government in terms of resource share and comprehensive influence, the effectiveness of social organizations have been relatively restrained. Nevertheless, the government is still in the stage of improvement in terms of decentralization of management authority and transformation of

management methods, the roles of social organizations and the construction of cooperation models are also in a state of clarification, which make the interaction mechanism between the government and the social organizations still under improving.

Among the theories about the relationship between government and social organizations, there are three main types[1]: The first is the theory of organizational decision analysis, which tends to focus on the action strategies of actors and the thinking logic and specific means of implementation they rely on to formulate action strategies[2]. In the decision-making process, social actors are important players in the game. On the one hand, the actors formulate the system or organization, on the other hand, the system or organization in turn dominates the actors. The second is the theory of state-society interaction[3]. Its core idea is to emphasize the interdependence between them, that is, neither can exist without the other. Finally, the theory of cooperative governance. It believes that there is a certain complementation between NGOs and the government. The theory holds that the government should take the initiative to strengthen the cooperative relationship with NGOs and encourage social forces to participate in it, the government could establish a supplementary or alternative role of itself in the micro field. In addition,

the interdependent structure of resources and the institutional details determine whether an effective pluralistic cooperation can be formed and sustained. Corporatism manifests the main points of the second theory, the interaction mechanism between state and society is realized through the two-way attachment[4], “state socialization” and “social nationalization”, which provides a relatively controllable path for the construction of the interaction mechanism between social organizations and the government. Therefore, analyzing NGO-government relations from the perspective of corporatism has the significance of theory and practice.

## 2. ANALYSIS AND METHODS

As a sub-branch of the theoretical framework of social-political structure in the field of comparative politics, corporatism, together with theories such as pluralism and elitism, constitute a paradigm spectrum for analyzing the relations between social strata and interest groups. The evolution from elitism to corporatism and then to pluralism basically explains the evolution of social resource distribution from strong center to multi-center. Compared with pluralism and elitism, corporatism has the core elements of both theories to a certain extent, which makes its “moderation” color stronger. It has been using in some public affairs, and its process of dealing with interest issues may be more in line with social reality.

In terms of the conceptual definition, Philippe C. Schmitter[5] had defined corporatism as one of the derivatives of interest representation system, which is composed of a certain number of interest groups with different functions, and they are subject to the relevant control from the government, that is, the state. Alan Liphart[6] further pointed out that corporatism is a system of interest groups, which is incorporated into the policy-making process. Chinese scholar Zhang Jing[7] believed that corporatism reflects the structural arrangement of the respective rights of the state and society at the theoretical level, and it takes the institutional arrangement of clarifying the distribution of rights as its specific form of political practice. Generally speaking, corporatism is concerned with the two-way interaction in which interest groups in society accept state management while affecting their policy-making. From the theoretical perspective of corporatism, the state endows interest groups with certain discourse and intervention authority in related fields, while interest groups exert influence from third-party institutions for the establishment and promotion of the policies.

A deeper understanding of the connotation of corporatism can be achieved through the analysis of its basic characteristics. Firstly, corporatism, as an institutional arrangement of interest representation, is the product of the gradual differentiation of social interests, the form of resource distribution of corporatism is

between the cohesive state of elitism and the discrete state of pluralism, and it provides a general analytical perspective for observing the evolution of institutions in different time and space. Secondly, as one of the main bodies of corporatism, interest groups have certain professional and even monopolistic characteristics in their related fields, providing certain material basis and intellectual support for their involvement in the policy arrangements, and the interests of the gradual advancement of differentiation will gradually reveal its hierarchical characteristics. Finally, the state, who plays a major role in corporatism, endows the relevant interest groups with the legitimacy of their monopoly status in their respective fields, and provides these social organizations with a passport for political access.

In terms of defining the concept of NGO, Chinese academic circles tend to adopt Thomas Wolf’s definition[8], that is, the non-profit social organizations that have legal tax exemption qualifications and provide donors with tax reduction or exemption status to serve the public interest. Combined with the general characteristics of monopoly and professionalism possessed by social organizations in specific fields, the connotation of NGO is formed. Consequently, environmental NGOs can be defined as the non-profit social organizations that provide ecological and environmental services for the purpose of environmental protection. In the division of the relations between NGOs and the government, Stein Kuhnle and Per Selle[9] constructed its framework from two dimensions: communication and contracts, fiances and control. The Separate type and Integrated type are differentiated from the degree of intimacy, the Dependence type and the Autonomy type are formed in the degree of independence. Finally, these four models that presented in Table 1 are constructed.

**Table 1** Models of NGO-Government Relations.

Communication and Contracts Fiances and Control	Separate	Integrated
Dependence	I. Separate Depende nce	III. Integrated Dependenc e
Autonomy	II. Separate Autonom y	IV. Integrated Autonomy

Model I and II in the Separate column indicate that the relations between NGOs and the government have

room to be improved. When NGOs are strongly controlled by the government in terms of finance and social access, and when there is a situation in which the government and market management are out of balance, NGOs would form a confrontation with the government in order to ensure its own continuation. Model III and IV in the Integrated column manifest that the relations between NGOs and the government are more sustainable. When NGOs are financially independent and have certain professional qualities, they would form a complementary and cooperative relationship with the government. To a certain extent, model I and IV could be regarded as the two ends of the spectrum of NGO-government relations, while model II and III are in the middle range as the transitional forms.

Depending on several scholars' viewpoints, the classification proposed by Stein Kuhnle and Per Selle could well carry out regional research and comparative study of NGO-government relations[10], especially for the research on the process of the development of their relations in specific countries. The progression stage of the interaction mechanism between NGOs and the government can be divided according to the maturing status of NGOs and the maturity of relations with the government. The first stage can be regarded as the application of model I. It is quite necessary for NGOs at this stage to actively respond to the policies established by the government in related fields and publicize them, so as to obtain resource support and political access from the government. The second stage is when NGOs' professionalism and monopoly have been initially established, they start negotiating with the government[11]. At this stage, NGOs have gained a certain right of speech, in the meanwhile, the government also needs to further improve the scientific decision-making on the basis of taking into account the reasonable interests of NGOs. Generally speaking, the NGO-government relations at this stage transform into the combination of model II and III, which marked the tone of win-win cooperation has been established, whereas the confrontation between them still exists. At the third stage, their relations are adjusted to model IV, manifesting the NGOs comprehensively mobilize the public to spontaneously participate in the formulation and implementation of relevant policies, and play a supervisory role; the government makes better use of the third-party identity of NGOs to inject positive factors into its own decision-making and credibility.

This paper will use the methods of historical analysis and case analysis, take one of the NGOs in China, Friends of Nature, as an example, and use the four models and three stages proposed above to analyze its relations with the government, which could help us to have a general grasp of the evolution and adjustment of NGO-government relations in China.

### 3. CASE STUDY

#### *3.1. The Evolution of the relationship between Friends of Nature and the Government*

As one of the first environmental NGOs established during the formation of the socialist market economy model, Friends of Nature was officially recognized in 1994. In the face of NGO, a new field that with no precedent in China, Friends of Nature has been gradually exploring a new path of interacting with the government in the process of its social practice. Consequently taking it as an example is quite typical and representative. At the same time, its development stages are basically consistent with the pace of Chinese political and economic system reform, which can be grasped from three levels: germination, growth and improvement. These three levels are anastomose with the evolution stages of NGO-government relations from model I to model IV.

Between 1994 and 2000, Friends of Nature was in its germination. Under the influence of the concept of "strong government", most of the social resources were concentrated in the hands of the official governmental organizations, and the strength of Friends of Nature was feebleness, which made the relationship between Friends of Nature and the government in the form of model I. Therefore, it had to actively respond to the government's appeal, relied on the financial support of the government and donations from the society to obtain basic material resources. In this context, activities such as the protection of primeval forests and endangered animals in Yunnan Province had been carried out by the Friends of Nature. In 1995[12], Deqin County in northwestern Yunnan chose to cut down virgin forests to alleviate its fiscal deficit, this act seriously endangered the living conditions and regional environment of golden monkeys. After being informed of this information, Friends of Nature began to report back to the central government. Although the central government gave feedback, the Deqin County did not respond positively. By 1998, Friends of Nature chose to reveal the illegal logging of virgin forests by the Deqin County government through official media, which aroused great attention from public opinion, and finally brought the incident under control.

After 2000, the reform of Chinese political and economic system has been increasing year by year. During this period, Friends of Nature began to consciously expand their influence. In 2002, Friends of Nature, with several environmental groups in China to participate in a non-summit meeting on sustainable development in South Africa. Most of the delegates were government departments of relevant countries, China was attended by more than 100 delegates from the State Environmental Protection Administration and other departments, and this is the first time that Friends of Nature participated in an official meeting in an

unofficial capacity. After several years of advancing, Friends of Nature's ability to raise funds and comprehensive influence had been significantly improved, its relations with the government had converted into the combination of model II and III. For instance, in the case of Yuanmingyuan in 2005, Friends of Nature was able to mobilize certain social resources to publicly report, conduct timely investigations, participate in hearings, and optimize and rectify the Yuanmingyuan's actions to restrict lake water infiltration. At this stage, the conflict of interests between Friends of Nature and the government became more and more obvious, especially in the period when the argument of "GDP-only" was most popular. Some local governments did not hesitate to destroy the environment in order to achieve economic growth, while Friends of Nature was more inclined to the value orientation of sustainable development, whereas it still at a significant disadvantage in terms of social influence and resource controls, which made it form an elusive relationship with the government.

In the 2010s, China's total GDP officially ranked second in the world, and it began to pay attention to the improvement of the quality of economic growth. The shaping of intensive and sustainable development models urgently needed to be accomplished, and the issue of protecting the ecological environment was raised again. During the same period, Friends of Nature had also made great progress in organizational construction, professional quality and social influence. By virtue of its several actions to actively safeguard environmental interests in the 10s, it had also accumulated a certain degree of social credibility. The common interests formed in the field of environmental protection have been gradually expanding, which also promoted the relations between them turned into model IV. At this stage, the conflicts of the interests between Friends of Nature and the government had decreased significantly, the frequency of the interactions had also improved steadily. Whereas the institutionalized form of the interaction mechanism has not yet been established. Overall, Chinese NGOs are still in their infancy, its internal governance mechanism also has many places to be improved[13]. In the past two decades, Friends of Nature has gradually formed a set of interactive systems accepted by both parties in the process of interaction with the government to guide the interactive behavior of environmental NGOs. Whereas the institutional changes often lag behind the development of practice. In order to realize the environmental governance function of environmental NGOs to a greater extent and more efficiently, they must increase their initiative and flexibility in the process of interacting with the government. The methods to deal with this kind of contradiction are also the main problem facing the Friends of Nature and the government at this stage.

### **3.2. Analysis on the development of the relationship between Friends of Nature and the Government**

For Friends of Nature, in the nearly 30 years since its establishment, the relationship between it and the government has basically shown the characteristics of unfolding from immaturity to maturity. It can be seen that in the weak stage of its early growth, it took corresponding development countermeasures, which could be regarded as "dormant standby", and needed to consolidate the legitimate basis of its own status, absorbed social resources from many aspects for its own elaboration. When its own strength could support more activities, it needed to actively participate in a number of government policies and broaden its influence in a way to enhance the sense of existence. For Friends of Nature, this stage contained the key points to determine whether it can develop continuously or die midway, thus it must act decisively for its own interests in some aspects, and it would inevitably form some conflicts of interests with the government. In the important stage related to its future and destiny, the most important thing is to adhere to its own value orientation, at the same time, reach a certain compromise with the government, and consciously expand its credibility and influence, which may help itself gradually gain bargaining chips to negotiate with the government in some areas. When the government paid more attention to the environmental affairs, Friends of Nature had grasped the olive branch handed out by the government to actively promote the implementation of several policies, participated in performance evaluation and the construction of brain trust.

To a certain extent, the evolution of the relationship between Friends of Nature and the government can be understood from the perspective of realism in international relations, which also provides reference for other social organizations to deal with the relationship with the government. As an aggregator of realistic theory, Hans Morgenthau proposed in the field of foreign policy philosophy that the best way to achieve balance of power and international stability is to achieve peace through compatibility, the means to achieve it is diplomacy. On this basis[14], the tasks of foreign policies are depending on the existing strength to establish national goals, and on this basis to judge the goal vision set by other countries, in order to judge the threshold for the two sides to achieve a compatible state, and finally to establish a way suitable for achieving national goals. Consequently, it is not difficult to perceive that when social organizations deal with the relationship between political power and social power, they should accurately locate their own goals, accurately grasp the interests of the government, actively make suggestions and accumulate strength in the case of "strong country, weak society". When the degree of diversification of social interests is initially activated,

the development strategy of social organizations should be timely adjusted, and promote the formation of a “strong state” and a “strong society”, seek a balance of power between the state and society, that is, to build a channel between the so-called “state socialization” and “social nationalization”.

### ***3.3. Comments on the development of the relationship between Friends of Nature and the Government***

For environmental NGOs such as Friends of Nature, due to the uneven situation of its professional level and capital turnover ability, some overseas NGOs will even carry out activities such as infiltration under the guise of promoting environmental protection issues, resulting in its inability to effectively safeguard public interest demands and even have a negative impact on it. Therefore, the government has always maintained a certain degree of vigilance to the existence and activities of these NGOs. Simultaneously, NGOs have some defects in its own publicity work. Most people in China even do not know about what NGO is, no wonder that there is just little response to its calling. To sum up, it comes down to several major dilemmas, the deficiencies in shaping their own credibility and influence. As far as the government is concerned, in the power system in which traditional Chinese ethical order still plays a residual role, the government occupies an absolutely dominant position in the field of public management and has concern about the interaction with social forces. NGOs and other social organizations who act as emerging groups, their demands for public interests will inevitably have an impact on the existing pattern of distribution of social interests. Thence, the predicament of the government is mainly reflected in the management methods and system construction.

Combined with the what was mentioned before, the two theoretical subjects of corporatism are the government and social organizations. In the field of environmental protection, it is necessary to propose effective solutions to their respective problems to build a virtuous circle of interaction between the government environmental NGOs. For these NGOs, the focus of their own reforms are still to build their own credibility and influence. In terms of credibility building, environmental NGOs must further improve their professionalism and introduce more favorable conditions to attract high-level talents. As far as management is concerned, it is difficult for the chaotic or weak performance to have a positive traction on the shaping of its own credibility. At the same time, some environmental NGOs have a poor grasp of their non-profit positioning, and their financial status has not been disclosed in a timely manner. Therefore, in order to shape its own credibility, it needs to be standardized in terms of management and finance. In terms of influence, it is necessary to attract enough

professionals, increase participation in environmental protection policies, and provide more comprehensive third-party opinions on related issues, so as to further enhance the voice of NGOs in the field of environmental protection.

For the government, it is of great significant to get rid of the shackles of the “state-centrism” framework to a certain extent, accept the overall trend of social interest diversification, and actively guide environmental protection NGOs to intervene in relevant issues. In the process of conducting the access mechanism, participation mechanism and even cooperation mechanism, trying to grasp the main contradiction and make appropriate concessions in some areas involving non-core interests, so as to encourage environmental NGOs to mobilize their professional capabilities. In consideration of the non-profit nature of NGOs, the government can provide them with certain financial support and social resource supply, and establish a relatively complete system to clearly regulate their activities to prevent some environmental protection NGOs from “contraband goods entrainment”, but also avoid the situation where it is too restrictive to its activities. All in all, as the two main bodies of the theoretical framework of corporatism, the interaction mechanism requires the joint efforts of both, rather than being caught in “one-man show” situation.

## **4. CONCLUSIONS**

Under the impetus of globalization and cultural diversity, the pattern of social rights is confronting the trade-off circumstances. In view of the status quo that social forces represented by social organizations are gradually being activated, the government, as the existing leader and distributor of social interests, there must be a response, acceptance or rejection. NGOs and other social organizations need to avoid disadvantageous conditions such as self-defeating and compromising, and expand their own development paths through diversified methods. Corporatism provides theoretical guidance for the two-way attachment of the NGOs and the government from a high-level perspective. Compared with the “polarized” color of elitism and pluralism, corporatism can take into account of the core essentials of the government and social organizations better. In the process of establishing and improving the interaction mechanism between NGOs and the government, corporatism can assess the situation and adjust the coping strategies in line with their respective burgeoning status, which could effectively avoid the embarrassing fettle of the fierce conflict of interests between them. In the case of Friends of Nature, it is not difficult to be perceived that in the current ambience that the institutional framework for the interaction mechanism between social organizations and the government in China has not yet taken shape, it is still necessary to learn from the

viewpoints of corporatism to adjust the relationship between the government and NGOs and other social organizations.

Generally speaking, the cooperative relationship between the government and NGOs depends on their respective conditions, and organizational autonomy, the initial state of interaction, resource dependence, and so on are included. As for autonomy, it means that NGOs and the government act in accordance with their own goals without being influenced by any other subject. At this level, autonomy is one of the preconditions for cooperation between the two. As for the basic initial conditions, it include an effective system of government or a society with wonderful social capital. In the end, we tend to believe that the interaction between other forms of social organizations and the government is also a typical social process, which can be deeply analyzed with the support of relevant theories of sociology and political science. Nevertheless, since different types of organizations have different development processes, the stages of interaction with the government and the formation mechanism of each stage need to be analyzed in depth with specific cases.

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