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Liang Congjie, Public Intellectuals, and Civil Society in China

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Liang Congjie, professor of history and founder of China’s first environmental NGO, Friends of Nature, died on October 28, 2010 at the age of 78. His death was widely noted in the Chinese and international media: obituaries appeared in the *New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, and other major English newspapers and magazines. The major web portal Sina.com dedicated a special section on its web site to Professor Liang. Friends of Nature, the organization which Professor Liang co-founded and led for many years, has posted a collection of commemorative essays from his former colleagues, friends, and followers and admirers. Much has been written about the man and his work by those who knew him best.

I met Professor Liang only once, when I interviewed him in his office in Beijing on December 20, 2004. Yet I have read his essay collections and occasional writings. I have followed the work of Friends of Nature for many years and interviewed some of its staff and volunteers. I receive and read regularly the newsletters sent by Friends of Nature. In 2007, when Brill began to publish the English version of the annual *China Environment Yearbook* edited by Friends of Nature, I had the honor of becoming a member of its international advisory board (the other member being Judith Shapiro) and have read all of the four yearbooks published so far. All this provides the “data,” so to speak, for my understanding of Professor Liang and his social impact.

Professor Liang’s role in the founding of Friends of Nature is well known. In my view, the significance of this event can only be fully appreciated by putting it in its historical context. Liang and his colleagues (Yang Dongping, Liang Xiaoyan, and Wang Lixiong) began to “lobby” government officials to establish such an organization in 1993. Still in the dark shadows of June Fourth, Chinese intellectual life at that time was quite dull. Between the aftershock of June Fourth and the rising tide of commercialism and market economy, the Chinese intellectual world was splintering. Many university faculty and graduate students left academia to “jump into the sea” of business, as others desperately tried to give meaning and relevance to a life in the ivory tower. In magnitude, the collapse of this intellectual world had few historical parallels. It may not be too much of an exaggeration to say that it comes close to the collapse of the Confucian world as captured by Joseph Levenson.

It was under these circumstances that Liang Congjie and his colleagues started to plan an environmental NGO. In a sense, the idea was perfectly natural: it was a logical way of seeking meaning at a time of intellectual crisis. Yet to choose neither money-making nor the proclamation of new manifestos, but such mundane action as building a small NGO working on environmental issues, was a radical step. China had long had environmental problems and intellectuals had long used their pens to lament them. In 1988, for example, Xu Gang’s work of environmental reportage
literature, *Woodcutter, Wake up!* (Fa mu zhe, xing lai!), had had enormous impact. Yet environmental campaigns had always been organized by the government, and environmental protection was supposed to be the government's responsibility. When Liang Congjie left the comfortable zone of using words to understand and change the world and turned instead to grassroots citizen organizing, he became a new type of intellectual, a public intellectual. In so doing, he changed the meaning of being an intellectual in China. By launching an environmental group independent of the government, he and his colleagues also changed the meaning of the relationship among citizens, the state, and nature. The message of this action is that citizens must participate in the governance of their own affairs.

Professor Liang was often viewed as a cosmopolitan. His parents attended the University of Pennsylvania for college, and he spoke fluent English, could be critical of elements of traditional Chinese culture, and decried anthropocentric developmentalism and scientism. Like many of his generation, however, Professor Liang seemed to be still a Confucian at heart. One might say he was a cosmopolitan Confucian. One of the most common words used to describe him by those who know him is 儒雅 *ruya*, which may be translated literally as "Confucian gentility." He combined a sense of humility and human sympathy with the courage to speak out. In this, he reminded us of the Confucian official-literati in the imperial court. Reflecting the Confucian emphasis on education, Professor Liang and Friends of Nature attached special importance to the role of environmental education, running many such educational programs in Chinese schools.

Even his leadership style had a Confucian flavor. As a true Confucian teacher might do, he led by example and practiced what he taught. His business cards were made from recycled waste paper. The organization he built, he wanted to serve as a model for those who would follow. When I interviewed Professor Liang on December 20, 2004, he explained to me how seriously he treated his NGO work from the very beginning:

After its [Friends of Nature’s] establishment, I had discussions with several people. I said we must walk a very straight path (这条路一定要走得非常正), right. "Straight" has two connotations here. One is to set an example for other NGOs. The other is to show to the government that we are truly in the service of society and the public. I said that if we took one wrong step, then the government would say [to later NGOs], "Forget about it. Friends of Nature started many years earlier than you. Look at the mess it has made." If this happens, it will block the development of NGOs in China. Therefore, we were really, eh, full of trepidation.

At the time of interview, Friends of Nature had a history of ten years. I asked Professor Liang what he considered the group’s most important contribution thus far. He said without hesitation that it was "the launching of the first grassroots NGO in China, a truly independent NGO." When I asked him whether he thought there was an environmental movement in China, he responded, "There are several hundred environmental groups alone. How can people say there is no environmental movement in China? Only that the forms of our movement are definitely different from those in the West."

It is important that Liang emphasized the *founding* of Friends of Nature as its most important contribution to Chinese society. In the years after its establishment, Friends of Nature became the kind of exemplar envisioned by Liang and his colleagues at the beginning. It demonstrated the possibility of civil society development in a state-dominated society and inspired many other grassroots groups to follow suit.

Liang explained to me in detail how delicately the group tried to manage its relations with the government:

In China, the government is dominant in everything.... Our relationship with the government would have to be one of cooperation. But if there is only cooperation and no criticism and supervision, what is the use of an NGO? Therefore, under the major premise of cooperation, we also supervise and criticize. This is a work of art.
An important outcome of this “work of art” is the diffusion of a new model of citizen action, a cooperative, but no less assertive, form of citizen participation and organizing at the grassroots level. Concrete in goal and moderate in means, this model has proved its efficacy and been adopted by many other citizen organizations. The re-articulation of the goals and methods of organized citizen action in China is among Professor Liang’s major contributions to Chinese civil society.

While pleased with the way Friends of Nature had grown, Liang lamented that “our organization is too small and our influence is too limited.” He felt he and his NGO colleagues were working against the powerful currents of commercialism, consumerism, and developmentalism. About China’s future, he could not help but show a deep sense of pessimism.

Yet for more than ten years, his courage kept him going against the tide in his mundane ways. He committed himself to practical action of the most ordinary kind, and believed that the world could not be saved by one saint or another, but only through the collective action of ordinary citizens. In an essay first published in 1995, one year after the founding of Friends of Nature, he wrote, “government management without public supervision and participation cannot possibly sustain environmental protection well in a country, a city, or a region.” More than ten years later, in 2006, at an award ceremony honoring Friends of Nature and other NGOs, he said the following:

Over the past twelve years, Friends of Nature has been dedicated to promoting public environmental awareness and encouraging the public to improve the environment by feasible means and actively participate in environmental decision-making and management. We strongly believe that the environmental awareness and participatory capacity of the general public are essential elements for the construction of a harmonious society.

Perhaps more than anything else, the combination of the image of an active and participatory citizenry with the Confucian image of a world of human-nature harmony epitomizes Liang Congjie’s vision as a scholar-environmentalist in action.

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Photo via the New York Times.