

# THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS

*Edited by Maria Grasso and Marco Giugni*

First published 2022

ISBN: 978-0-367-42878-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-17152-4 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-367-85568-0 (ebk)

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## ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS IN ASIA

Divergent relationship with political  
liberalization

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DOI: 10.4324/9780367855680-7

The funder of the Open Access version of this chapter is Fengshi Wu.

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

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## ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS IN ASIA

### Divergent relationship with political liberalization

*Fengshi Wu*

#### **Introduction**

As in other regions across the globe, public awareness of environmental degradation and climate change and social mobilization for environmental protection have been on the rise in Asia in recent decades. The Goldman Environmental Prize, a most reputable award to honor “grassroots environmental heroes”, has since 1990 recognized 180 distinguished environmentalists around the world such as Wangari Muta Maathai from Kenya (winner in 1991), who later became the first African woman Nobel prize winner in 2004. By 2019, one-sixth of the Goldman awardees were from the greater Asia region.<sup>1</sup> As a result, an increasing number of publications have emerged that either explore environmental activism and movements in a single Asian country or compare such movements across countries within the Asian region. However, scholarly effort is still limited in conceptualizing environmental movements in Asia – their origins, developments, and impacts – as a whole and possibly identifying an “Asian way” of environmental struggle and policy advocacy. This lacuna in the existing literature in a way is not surprising and may accurately indicate the high level of intra-regional diversity in Asia. As the largest continent on the planet, Asia is home to diverse cultures, peoples, polities, and ecosystems. Therefore, it makes theoretical sense to study a sub-region, or a cluster of countries in Asia. For example, the Northeast Asia cluster (Japan, South Korea, mainland China, and Taiwan) and the Central Asia cluster (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan).

Given this research background, this chapter focuses on the impact of political liberalization on the rise of environmentalism as a main form of broad social mobilization in contemporary Asia and approaches the topic in the following steps. It first introduces a theoretical inquiry on the relationship between political regime and transition and the development of modern environmental movements in the Asian context. Keeping the intra-regional diversity in mind, case selection for this research is guided by both the call for broad coverage of Asia and the logic of comparative politics so that findings from the cases will be able to generate a level of theoretical discussion. After presenting the empirical evidence from the specific Asian countries, the chapter endeavors to offer discussion of not only the shared patterns of the dual transition of politics and environmental movement in the focused countries but also the key intervening factors that contribute to the incongruent development of the opening up of the political system and, on

the other hand, of the development of environmental movements. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future studies on the topic.

### **Environmental movement and political liberalization: research context**

Political liberalization in this research is conceptualized as a continual spectrum, not defined by the presence or lack of democratization (Brynen et al., 1995: 3–6). Essentially, political liberalization entails the expansion of the public sphere where ordinary citizens can become self-organized and participate in public affairs and collective decision-making without substantial interference by the state and political authorities, which can include a broad range of activities and informal institutional formations. Democratization, in comparison, is marked by more definite and formal political events and institution building such as general elections and independence of the judicial system. It is particularly important for students of social mobilization in the Asian context to note that political liberalization and public participation in policy making can happen without the concomitant ticking of all the conceptual boxes of democratization occurring, and, vice versa, having general elections and formal democratic institutions in some contexts does not lead to better protection of civil or political liberties (Bell et al., 1995). As the following case analysis of some longstanding non-democratic states in Asia will show, public space for activism, policy advocacy, and social mobilization in the name of nature conservation and mitigation of environmental crisis have been opened up, which in turn has led to significant changes in politics and policy making in a broader scope.

To compare environmental movements across cases more systematically, the research emphasizes two aspects: one, the scope of the movements, particularly whether there is any form of linking up across localities and small-scale initiatives or protests that *transcend* specific social ties, causes, and victimhood or solidarities and two, the *transformative* potential of such movements, which could lead the movements to aspire to and achieve broader public and environmental good. A transformative environmental movement, as a type of “new social movement” broadly defined (Inglehart, 1977; Offe, 1985, cited in Ku, 1996: 159–161), promotes new political ideas and ideologies that aim at comprehensive and sustainable changes in politics, economics, and culture while not limited to solving the immediate environmental problems and assisting pollution victims.

Unlike their counterparts in post-World War II Western democratic societies, leaders of environmental activism and movements in the rest of the world often find themselves caught in more complex political struggles against several interconnected fundamental issues such as decolonization and nation building, economic development and global market integration, and political stabilization and post-conflict reconciliation. Environmentalist narratives do not always synchronize well with the chorus of multiple concurrent socio-political transformations. Existing scholarship on the topic outlines at least three possible trajectories of environmental movements and governance building in the vast developing world: ecological modernization, authoritarian environmentalism, and environmental democracy.

Scholars of ecological modernization theory emphasize the possible synergy between the state, regardless of its regime type, and civil society and the balance between economic taking off and environmental protection for newly independent and/or post-conflict countries (e.g., Carter and Mol, 2006). It is not just possible but also necessary that state-led reforms and bottom-up activism go in tandem to reshape and modernize a country’s environmental governance. In sharp contrast, scholars of environmental authoritarianism remain cautious, if not doubtful, about the governments in developing countries, especially under an authoritarian regime, and

their initial acceptance of environmental activism and willingness to enhance environmental governance. For example, some observe that taking a lead in developing renewable energy and constructing a domestic narrative on climate change has made the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) more resilient at home, more assertive on the global stage, and even more popular in neighboring countries (Beeson, 2010; Gilley, 2012). Finally, the framework of environmental democracy highlights that environmental protection hinges on social justice, human rights, rule of law, and other key elements of modern democratic systems, and therefore, a full-fledged environmental movement will eventually usher in more fundamental political development and demand for democratization. Case evidence of regime change and social mobilization from the former Soviet Union, South Korea, Taiwan, and Brazil in the past decades suggests that environmental activism in authoritarian regimes ultimately converges with broad resistance and pro-democracy movements (Weiner, 1999; Hochstetler, 2000; Schreurs, 2002). The environmental democracy theory and authoritarian environmentalism challenge, from two angles, the hypothesis that environmental movements can coexist and co-evolve with authoritarian rule in the long run, which is highly relevant to understand the current trends in Asia.

Instead of testing or eliminating any of these theoretical lenses, this research incorporates all three lines of logic in the following comparative analysis to best present the status of ongoing political struggles related to environmental movements in Asia. Given the high level of diversity in political, economic, historic, and cultural terms, the “Asian experience” may well be plural and represent variations and various combinations of the three noted patterns. Limited in length, this research selected eight cases to both broaden geographical coverage and control political structural variation (Table 6.1). Cases were first selected across three main sub-regions of Asia – East Asia, Central and Inner Asia, and Southeast Asia. Then, for each sub-region, one or two representative case(s) of both authoritarianism and democracy were chosen. Most of the democratic cases are young and fresh out of pro-democracy movement and transition, and they offer a unique research opportunity to observe the co-evolution of political liberalization and environmental movements.

### **From South Korea to Mongolia: many fates of environmental movements**

The case analysis for this research starts with South Korea as it demonstrates the co-evolution of the environmental movement and political structural change to a great extent. Politics in the

*Table 6.1* Political context of environmental movements in contemporary Asia

<i>Sub-region</i>	<i>Cases</i>	<i>Political context</i>
Northeast Asia	China (mainland)	Communist regime, political liberalization without democratization since 1978
	Japan	Democracy with one dominant party since 1945
	South Korea	Democratic transition and consolidation since the late 1990s
Southeast Asia	Indonesia	Democratic transition since 1998
	Singapore	Electoral authoritarian regime since 1965
	Vietnam	Communist regime, political liberalization without democratization since 1986
Inner and Central Asia	Kazakhstan	Electoral authoritarian regime since independence in 1991
	Mongolia	Democratic transition since early 1990s

southern half of the Korean peninsula has experienced a sea change from authoritarian rule after the devastating war in the 1950s to a consolidated democracy in the new millennium. Environmental protesters and activism leaders, first triggered by internationally reported pollution and health crises in Seoul, such as the case of “Onsan illness”, later became a crucial force in the broad spectrum of social resistance and the pro-democracy movement from the 1980s to 1990s. Umbrella organizations such as the Anti-Pollution Movement Association and Korean Federation for Environmental Movement and critical non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Pollution Research Institute provided necessary leadership (e.g., Yul Choi, 1995 Goldman Prize winner) for the environmental movement and anti-regime resistance as well.

According to Ku (1996), the environmental movement in South Korea had already achieved structural transformation, expanded beyond victim-based social organizations, and transcended to incorporate more broad political claims and goals by the end of the 1980s. After the democratic transition, like their counterparts in other young democracies such as Taiwan and Brazil, Korean environmental activists gradually got elected or appointed into the governing administration. Nevertheless, new generations of movement leaders have emerged, and the original bottom-up mobilizational momentum has been retained. In December 2005, the news of farmers from South Korea jumping in the waters at the Victoria Harbor, Hong Kong, made front pages around the world and marked the history of a global-scale anti-WTO, anti-globalization, and pro-environment movement. Korean activists have creatively used public spectacles to popularize their environmental causes, from local river conservation and anti-nuclear power plants to climate change and a green lifestyle (Wu and Wen, 2015: 109–110). It can be argued that the push and pull from both pro-environment politicians within the state system and broad-based environmental activism and resistance outside the state together contribute to the rise of “developmental environmentalism” and the “green economy”, as new national-level policy narratives in contemporary South Korea (Death, 2015; Kim and Thurbon, 2015).

Japan, the next-door neighbor of South Korea, is a rare case of stable constitutional monarchy and democracy, though dominated by the Liberal Democratic Party, in Asia. After World War II, Japan’s industrialization took off swiftly, and, in turn, environmental accidents and pollution soared to the degree that Tokyo suffered the world’s worst air pollution in the early 1960s. Resistance by pollution victims and mass protests, sometimes highly contentious, against pollution broke out in Tokyo and across the country at that time.<sup>2</sup> The Japanese state eventually responded by the 1970 “pollution diet”, a package of multiple national-level laws, and the establishment of the state environmental agency in the following year. This wave of social mobilization not only engendered a generation of environmental activists and movement leaders but also led to the transformation of the overall governance structures in post-war Japan (Schreurs, 2003). Furthermore, Japanese environmentalists such as Ui Jun, who attended the NGO forum and staged demonstrations to expose Japan’s domestic pollution problems at the United Nation’s Conference on Human Development in Stockholm in 1972, also pioneered transnational advocacy networks in Asia after they learned from fellow Asian NGO leaders and activists at the Conference about the environmental damages created by Japanese industries overseas (Avenell, 2017).

However, the transformative power of the first wave of the environmental movement in Japan gradually receded, and public contestation against state and corporate power evolved into other forms of activism led by community-based associations, local environmentally friendly politicians, and a pro-environmentalism circle of “soft elite” – technocrats and academicians – embedded in all levels of formal environmental governance, most of whom took part in the environmental protests in the 1960s (Wu and Wen, 2015: 106–108). The downside of Japan’s “quiet”, though “far from impotent”, environmentalism is that at the national level, it has

become “politically marginalized” over time (Mason, 1999: 188). This partially explains why even after the Fukushima nuclear disaster, which spurred anti-nuclear protests around the world and led to major policy shifts in Germany, environmental civil society and protests in Japan were not able to thwart then Prime Minister Abe, who authorized the resumption of the nuclear power sector. Although the anti-nuclear movement sustains, it would require more than a “business as usual” type of social mobilization in post-Abe Japan to break down the pro-nuclear state-corporate coalition, which has a long history in the country (Valentine and Sovacool, 2010).

In contrast to South Korea and Japan, the political structure in China for the past seven decades has remained authoritarian and centered on the CCP *nomenklatura*. Nevertheless, civil society and social activism were sprouting after the death of Chairman Mao in 1976 and during the early years of the “Open and Reform” era, which became evident with all the events leading to the Tian’anmen anti-corruption and pro-democracy protests in 1989. In the wake of the state’s repression, resulting in an international embargo and a diplomatic freeze, the Chinese society was silenced, and the space of civil society shrank. It was not until the year 1994 that a group of Beijing-based university professors, intellectuals, and environmentalists established the first environmental NGO, Friends of Nature, to openly conduct public education programs on wildlife conservation, recycling, and environmental protection. In the next 25 years, the environmental activism community not only survived the communist rule but also, in relative terms, thrived, with a broad geographic spread of NGOs and networks, a high level of international support, and a large number of successful cases of public campaign and policy advocacy (Steinhardt and Wu, 2016; Dai et al., 2017; Dai and Spires, 2018). According to the China Environmental Organization Map, there are over 2,000 active grassroots environmental NGOs across the country.<sup>3</sup> The anti-large dam campaign to protect the Nu River (upstream of the Mekong River), led by an international award-winning Chinese environmentalist, Wang Yongchen, and a transnational network of activists from China, Southeast Asia, Japan, North America, and Europe, is one of the most reported examples of the expanding environmental movement in China, which started in 2004 and continues today.<sup>4</sup>

A main quality of the environmental NGO community in China is the high level of inter-organizational connections and a relatively strong sense of “having peers” and social belonging across localities and/or issue specializations (Wu, 2017). There are by now tens of nationwide and broadly focused networks, such as the China Zero Waste Alliance, targeting recycling and sustainable urban civil waste management (Lu and Steinhardt *forthcoming*); the public pollution-monitoring network centered around the Institute for Public and Environmental Affairs, the mangrove alliance along China’s southern coastal regions, and the loose alliance of various “river stewardship” groups along the Yangtze River supported by the Alibaba Foundation. Memberships in these resourceful alliances and networks often overlap, which further strengthens social solidarity within the environmental activism community. A connected and effective NGO community with leadership and shared visions has been argued as a major explanation for the emergence of public interest-oriented, large-scale environmental protests and partially explains why and how the Chinese environmental movement by and large has been able to sustain its capacity and relevance in spite of a series of restrictive regulations and policy changes since Xi Jinping took power in 2012 (Wu and Martus, 2021).

Sharing many political structural features with neighboring China, Vietnam also embarked on systematic reforms, “Doi Moi”, in 1986 and subsequently witnessed the revival of associational lives and prototype civil society organizations (Wells-Dang, 2012). Locally rooted and single-incident-focused protests at the community level, in a way, are not something completely new to Vietnamese society, partially due to a long history of labor activism. The anti-bauxite

campaign in 2009, which emerged rather incidentally as a response to the central government's planning, led to widespread criticism and activism by ordinary citizens, religious communities, and even political elites. Despite its minor policy impact, this campaign is viewed by many as "one of the most significant expression of public dissent against the single-party state since the end of the Vietnam War" (Morris-Jung, 2011, as cited in Ortmann, 2017: 154) and marked a new page of environmentalism in the country. Between 2010 to 2015, at least 14 protests against various pollution incidents and development projects took place across the country, ranging from landfill construction, cement plants, and coal power plants to steel and textile mills, all of which amassed hundreds, sometimes thousands, of local participants (Ortmann, 2017: 139).

However, establishing NGOs outside the Vietnamese Communist Party system and developing independent environmental and professional capacities are new to Vietnamese society. With support from international donors and NGOs and occasional empathy from the reformist wing of the Vietnamese state, environmental NGOs and activism networks have emerged and continued to grow in numbers in the last decade (Wells-Dang, 2010). Like their counterparts in China, many of these NGOs seek formal and informal ties with the authorities to survive and be exempted from political suppression and devote most of their energy to developing expertise in specific areas, such as the Vietnam Association for Conservation of Nature and Environment – one of the oldest of its kind, established in the 1980s (Vu, 2019).

In more recent years, the introduction of Facebook and other types of social media has ushered in a new wave of environmental activism and social mobilization, in which cross-locality networking and collective actions become more possible. The "tree movement" in Hanoi in 2015, sharing many characteristics with the new social movements in other parts of the world, where young netizens and social media play a critical role and no specific social movement organization can be identified as the sole leader, has prompted scholars such as Vu (2017) to argue for "more deliberative and accountable politics in the same country [Vietnam] in the long run". The ongoing anti-Formosa steel plant movement, triggered by the massive fish death along Vietnam's central coasts in 2016, is the most significant case so far and in many ways has pushed the political redlines, with multiple large-scale protests taking place in main cities across the country, including in both Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City. Although the government reacted to the protests and activism harshly by quickly arresting over 100 environmentalists, Catholic priests, bloggers, and concerned citizens, the movement has been able to maintain parts of its momentum and even inspired other anti-pollution protests over the years (Nguyen and Datzberger, 2018).

Moving on to the other side of the Southeast Asian region, the archipelago country, Indonesia, has gone through a crisscross process of political liberalization and democratization in the past decades. Social mobilization and localized resistance already were on the rise at the peak of the authoritarian rule by Suharto in the 1970s, similar to the South Korean case. However, more than their Korean counterparts, Indonesian environmental activists and technocrats were able to carve out more political space and in many ways aided resistance in other social sectors, particularly the agrarian movements and student movements, which became critical forces in the ousting of Suharto at the end of 1990s (Peluso et al., 2008).

Much of the start of environmentalism in post-independence Indonesia can be attributed to a single politician and environmentalist, Emil Salim (Minister of Development Supervision and the Environment from 1978 to 1983 and Minister of Population and the Environment from 1983 to 1993), who founded the first nationwide environmental NGO in the country, Indonesian Forum for Environment (*Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia*, WALHI). Since its beginning, WALHI has been the flagship organization for all environmentalists and NGOs and played the critical role of providing leadership and protection for bottom-up initiatives. In the broad



context that the American government was tolerant toward Suharto's regime during the Cold War, environmental NGOs from the West, such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), were permitted to operate in Indonesia since the end of the 1970s, which incidentally provided an extra boost to the emergence of domestic environmentalism in the country (Nomura, 2007: 500). By the late 1990s, environmental NGOs and activism had developed in Indonesia far beyond major cities and reached the Outer Islands. Environmental civil society has grown steadily in the post-1998 *reformasi* era in Indonesia, not merely in quantity but also in quality, measured by their increasing presence in formal politics and policy-making processes and, more importantly, their commitment to public accountability, representation, and intra-organizational democracy (Nomura, 2007: 508–513).

Being one of the most climate-vulnerable countries and home to some of the last remaining large-scale rainforests on the planet, Indonesia has become a hot destination for international donors and funding agencies in recent decades. Some of these funding opportunities – e.g., the WWF, mentioned earlier, and the small-grant program of the Global Environment Facility in the 1990s (or even earlier) – have provided much-needed support to local environmental activism. However, experts observe the double-sided impact of the significant flow of zest and funds from international realms to local Indonesian communities, channeled through decentralized, sometimes excessively fragmented and contradictory, domestic political institutions (Gellert, 2010). Furthermore, Jokowi's leadership, coupled with the resurgent political Islam, has introduced new twists to post-transition Indonesian politics, which will affect the future trajectories of environmentalism in the country. For example, based on interview evidence, Nilan (2020) has found that many young Indonesian environmental activists base their environmentalist commitments “firmly on their Muslim faith”, seeing themselves as *khalifah* – God's lieutenants on earth. The deep impact on environmental governance and outcomes of this companionship between Islam faith and environmentalism in Indonesia remains to be seen.

Singapore, a city-state situated at the heart of Southeast Asia, may seem to be an outlier case in this study; nevertheless, it exemplifies a few underlining patterns of environmental politics shared by many Asian societies. The concept of the electoral authoritarian state – repeated incumbent successes enabled by unfair elections and sustained by mostly authoritarian political institutions (Morse, 2012: 162) – best captures politics in Singapore under the continuous rule by the People's Action Party (PAP), with the premiership passed from the father to the son of the Lee family since 1965. Given this context, there are three different types of environmentalism, not necessarily merged yet, active in contemporary Singapore. First, an ultimately anti-authoritarian, moral-environmental movement started by the Nature Society Singapore (NSS), which has protested many PAP developmentalist ideologies and policies since the late 1980s. Back then, concerned with government-led large-scale infrastructure projects, a group of NSS members, including scientists and amateur naturalists, “embarked on detailed area surveys, drew up conservation proposals and lobbied the government”. These initiatives marked the policy advocacy turn of the organization (Goh, 2001). Second, resembling the government-organized and sponsored NGOs (GONGOs) in China and Vietnam, particularly at the local levels, Singapore has a vast network of residential community-based “people's associations” that are becoming more proactive in implementing environmental related policies. Some even argue that these community associations have pushed environmental protection beyond what the policy makers may have originally envisioned, when conditions are met (Han and Tan, 2019). Last, but not least, mirroring the trends in other parts of the world, a new wave of social activism, mainly driven by the youth and facilitated by social media, is fast growing and calls for fundamental change in environmental thinking and policy making, which has the potential to mobilize across sectoral boundaries and bring about more broad socio-political transformations (LJY, 2019).



Student movements have a strong track record of tipping off authoritarian figures and shaking existing political systems in Singapore's neighboring regions, including China, Taiwan, South Korea, the Philippines, Indonesia, and most recently Hong Kong. Therefore, experts shall watch closely whether and how young greens in Singapore grow their social outreach and merge with both the senior generation of environmental activists and community-rooted associational leaders. A first public demonstration for more progressive climate actions took place on 21 September 2019, and over 2,000 citizens attended with enthusiasm, which could be a milestone in Singapore's environmental movement or even the beginning of the dual transformation exemplified by the South Korean experience, as the general election in the following July ushered in a batch of non-PAP, young, women, minority, and progressive politicians as the newest members of the parliament and marked a historically low popular vote for PAP.

During the first decade after its independence in 1991, the environmental NGO community, which share the origins with the anti-nuclear movement in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, thrived in Kazakhstan with sufficient support from the UN, EU, and international NGOs (Weinthal and Luong, 2002). As Nazarbayev's government evolved, the green civil society in Kazakhstan shrank in terms of overall scale and quality. According to the director of the Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan (ACBK) – the largest conservation NGO in the country – despite the significant decline, there is still a decent-size, loosely connected community of environmental NGOs and activists in today's Kazakhstan, particularly in Almaty and Astana.<sup>5</sup> These NGOs, such as GS and ACBK, have reached out to local communities and victim groups and successfully leveraged their resources not only to alter the outcomes of state-backed development projects but also to contribute to environmental law enforcement and policy implementation. In some specific policy areas, environmental NGOs have been invited and/or permitted to participate in formal policy making and implementation processes (Soltys, 2013).

Since its independence, Kazakhstan has joined many international environment-related agreements (e.g., the Aarhus Convention on the Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters) and enacted a large body of environmental regulations to formally ensure public participation in environmental governance (Cherp, 2000). This legal-political background is critical to understanding the partial success of some environmental NGOs' advocacy work and local resistance to large developmental projects. Almaty-based Green Salvation (GS), the largest and most reputable environmental law NGO in the country, for example, has always exercised its legal rights to access environmental information and even initiated and won court hearings and suits against both governmental agencies and industries, which led to the slowing down or even cancellation of economic projects that could have significant detrimental ecological and social impacts.<sup>6</sup> Coalitions of activists inside and beyond the country have used Kazakhstan's official membership and signatory status in international environmental treaties as leverage to launch transnational policy advocacy and assert pressure on various governmental agencies (Weinthal and Watters, 2010).

Unlike Kazakhstan, the other landlocked inner-Asian country, Mongolia, went through a swift transition to democracy with mass protests and hunger strikes concentrated in the capital city, Ulaanbaatar, during the period from the end of the 1980s to the first half of the 1990s. However, the old political ecology has not fundamentally changed since then, as the former Communist Party metamorphosed itself into the Mongolian People's Party and held on to public appeal and political power. Along with the regular elections, power shifts between the two leading parties, and subsequent reshufflings of the central administration, Mongolia has had many rounds of changes of environmental regulatory agencies, which has fundamentally weakened the credibility and capacity of environmental law and policy enforcement institutions.

The widespread corruption and power abuse (Boone et al., 1997) further exacerbates the low effectiveness of governance across the board and, in turn, contributes to the highly contentious forms of environmental activism, yet with little sustaining policy impact even when the activism and public protest succeeded.

Evidence from Mongolia's mining and water sectors illustrates this vicious circle. Several different ministries share the responsibility of regulating water use and conservation in the country, suffering from the lack of effective horizontal coordination. With rare exceptions, water activism in Mongolia is highly localized and isolated, carried out usually by lone activists with no support network and often in a highly contentious manner instead of institutionalized public participation. One of the high-profile cases took place in 2010 when Ts. Munkhbayar was reported to have used firearms at the properties of the (Canadian) Centerra Gold and (Chinese) Puraam mining companies to protest their violation of local laws that prohibit mining near water sources. Ts. Munkhbayar was later sentenced to 12 years in jail for his action.

Many international NGOs have worked closely with local nomadic communities resisting mining projects, contributing to the decline of the total percentage of land licensed to mining in recent years. However, scholars argue that such transnational networks have had unintended consequences that may further fragment Mongolian society and politics due to the ideological gaps between the local communities and the international NGOs (Byambajav, 2015). This is an ongoing trend, not exclusive to Mongolia, that needs more systematic studies and will be touched upon again in the next section.

### **Comparative discussion**

The many routes of environment-related resistance and movements in contemporary Asia (summarized in Table 6.2) have offered an opportunity to explore the relationship between political opening up and democratic transition and the emergence and outcome of environmentalism. The main finding of the research is that political liberalization is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for a broad and transformative environmental movement to emerge and sustain. While there are encouraging cases, notably South Korea and Indonesia, where political reforms and environmental movements have worked out in tandem, the majority of the cases studied here, and in Asia in general, present non-optimal co-evolution where strong social activism and contention related to over-exploitation of natural resource and ecosystems in fact have led to political stalemate or made it hard for local environmentalism to grow broad political relevance. There is strong evidence from post-totalitarian China, authoritarian Vietnam, and electoral-authoritarian Singapore to indicate that some level of political reform and opening up for public participation, NGO development, and transnational civic linkages has made it possible for environmental activists to break the taboo and become the frontrunners of social mobilization, public campaigns, and policy advocacy. However, after the initial breakthrough, the trajectory of environmental movements in these non-democratic countries remains uncertain: it could further take off like in South Korea and Indonesia or wither away like in Kazakhstan and Mongolia.

Flipping the equation, mounting evidence from this study points to the pattern that environmental activism and social mobilization have played a critical role in the long, often interrupted journey of political liberalization and democratization in Asian societies. In pre-transition South Korea and Indonesia and current China, Vietnam, and Singapore, the environmental sector hosts some of the most vibrant and broadest networks of activists and NGOs to the extent that

*Environmental movements in Asia*

Table 6.2 Environmental movements in selected Asian countries

<i>Case</i>	<i>Timeline</i>	<i>Scope</i>	<i>Transformative impact</i>
China (mainland)	Emerged in the mid-1990s	Nationwide networks, campaigns	Mostly reactive with early signs of transformative potential
Japan	Emerged in the 1960s	Notable nationwide networks with a large number of strong and localized environmental movements	Significant transformative impact in the 1960s and 1970s, but now less so
South Korea	Emerged together with the pro-democracy movement in the 1980s	Many nationwide broad associations and networks	Has been transformative throughout the democratization process
Indonesia	Emerged in the early 1970s under dictatorship	Mostly local movements and groups, but there are notable nationwide associations and networks	Contributing to transformative politics with movements from other sectors
Singapore	Became publicly visible since the 1990s	Mostly localized initiatives	Mostly reactive initiatives
Vietnam	On the rise since the 2000s	Limited nationwide events	Reactive and localized
Kazakhstan	Shared origins with the anti-nuclear and environmental movement in the Soviet Union and East European countries in the 1980s (or earlier)	Mostly locally rooted protests and campaigns, some but not many nationwide networks	Had the potential to be transformative in the 1990s, but now mostly reactive and in decline
Mongolia	Became present since the 1990s	Mostly localized, issue specific initiatives	Not transformative and in decline

other dissidents and activists, promoting more politically sensitive causes such as human rights, minority rights, and labor rights, would strategize and embed themselves in the environmental activism circles. Because of their shared roots in the widespread anti-nuclear protests in the former Soviet Union, environmental activists were among the most prominent pro-democracy social leaders and organizers in the first decade of independent Kazakhstan. Politics in the first few decades of post-war Japan was mostly democratic in name, and the sweeping anti-pollution protests in the 1960s and effective policy advocacy achieved by leading environmentalists in the 1970s generated a significant impact on the Japanese political system to allow for more accountability, transparency, and public participation in the future.

Returning to the three conceptual trajectories of political-environmental dual development, particularly in an authoritarian context, case evidence presented here could suggest that all three are relevant to understanding environmental movements in Asia, and, within a

single case, it is often the case that a particular trajectory is more visible at a time but subject to changes. Having mapped out this character of the environmental-political dual transformation, this research encounters a more intriguing question: Why would the initial synergy between political liberalization and the environmental movement evolve and diverge into two different paths? (See Figure 6.1) For example, this synergy has sustained and produced a mutually reinforcing relationship between democratic institutional building and the continuation of effective environmental movement in the case of South Korea and, to a less degree, also in Indonesia. However, in other cases, particularly Kazakhstan, China, Singapore, and even Japan, elements of authoritarian environmentalism can be found where the authoritarian state or anti-reform political forces have been able to absorb social pressure and reap parts of the success of the environmental movement to strengthen their own legitimacy and social control, which in turn has taken a heavy toll on the further growth of the environmental activism community. In some of the most disappointing scenarios, such as the case of Mongolia, there is a vicious circle between political reform and activism, where successful environmental activism has little impact on policy and institutional changes, and constant reshuffling of environmental bureaucracies cancels out policy modifications made by previous environmental activism and advocacy.

Borrowing a literary metaphor from the opening line of the novel *Anna Karenina*, “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way”, this research has found that environmental movement and political liberalization can go well in tandem, but when they fall out, as is very often the case in contemporary Asia, the causes are quite different. The rest of this section will discuss two relevant factors that could break the initial co-evolution of the opening up of political participation and the rise of environmental activism and lead to a deviant and regressive pathway, drawing on the case evidence from Asia.

First and foremost, the pressure of economic growth and the environmental costs of joining the global markets. Most Asian countries are overachievers in economic growth measured by global standards: for example, the “dragons and tigers” in the second half of the twentieth century<sup>7</sup> and China, to some extent Kazakhstan, and increasingly Vietnam since the new millennium. However, they lag behind when it comes to environmental protection. According to the Environmental Performance Index (EPI) published periodically by the Yale Center of Environmental Law and Policy, five out of the eight cases highlighted in this chapter on average in the past two decades have been in the bottom 50th percentile (Table 6.3).

To reduce poverty, embarking on industrialization and competing in global markets have not only dominated most Asian governments’ agendas but also become a quasi-ideology and mega-narrative affecting Asian societies’ collective consciousness, which diverts public attention

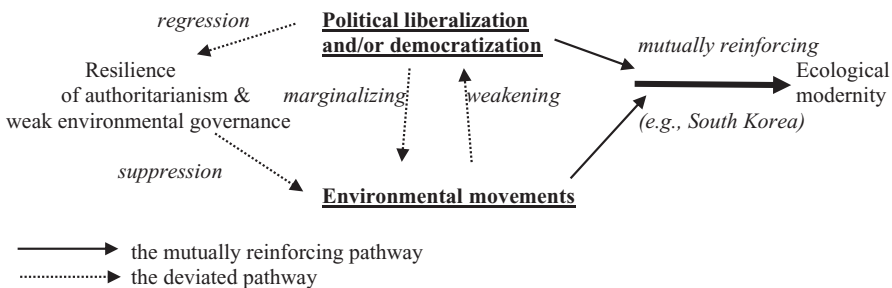


Figure 6.1 Two pathways of the dual evolution of political liberalization and environmental movements

from any other major socio-political tasks including, but not limited to, environmental protection. Moreover, this developmentalist mindset does not give way to democratic transition (Kim and Thurbon, 2015). As their main mandate is to respond to what the voters want, politicians in young democracies often find themselves even more pressed to boost the economy and find themselves less incentivized to strengthen environmental protection or align with environmentalists and pollution victims. When the massive fish death happened in 2016, local governments and politicians in central coastal Vietnam reacted to protests with harsh suppressive measures, fearing the resistance would lead to the departure of large foreign investments from Taiwan and, in turn, economic loss for the whole province. Many local governments across China, particularly in the rural area, are caught in the same quandary and in between lucrative business deals and development projects and environmental disasters and community grievances in the aftermath.

The tale of the two central- and inner-Asian cases, Kazakhstan and Mongolia, further sheds light on the significant impact of the drive to jump-start the national economy by rapidly selling natural resources to the global markets in the process of establishing regulatory institutions both effective and responsive to the demands of environmental movements, especially in newly independent or transitioned developing countries. Even though Mongolia has seen some of the most courageous “water worriers” and impressive campaigns against mining pollution, these efforts have not been fruitful in terms of producing institutional changes to actually halt polluting practices, mainly due to the rampant corruption and close ties between political elites and the mining industry and, probably more devastatingly, the fact that Mongolia’s national economy is heavily dependent on mineral exports. A similar pattern can be found in Kazakhstan’s petroleum and increasing hydropower industries, but to a much less extent as its national economic structure is much more diversified and growth less contingent on resource extraction and export. For example, increasing investment from China in leasing agricultural lands and food production eventually urged the Kazakhstan central government to withdraw a law that permits foreigners to lease land (Sternberg et al., 2017).

Another important, yet so far understudied factor that has contributed to the divergent patterns of environmental movements in Asia is transnational advocacy and global civil society networks (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). In the context of climate change and ecological degradation

*Table 6.3* Global rankings of environmental performance

<i>Country</i>	<i>2006</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>2020</i>
China (mainland)	94	121	120
Indonesia	79	134	116
Japan	14	20	12
Kazakhstan	70	92	85
Mongolia	115	142	147
Singapore	n/a	28	39
South Korea	42	94	28
Vietnam	99	85	141

*Note:* Data extracted from Environmental Performance Index (EPI) 2006, 2010, and 2020 report (available at <https://epi.yale.edu/downloads>). For each round of the survey, both the total number of countries and the measurements vary.

in the twentieth century, environmental activism in individual countries and societies is increasingly linked to global-level mobilization, governance building, and narrative construction. Asia is not an exception in this respect. In fact, external non-state agencies and donors have been present and even influential in some Asian communities for a relatively long period due to the colonial history and great power penetration during the Cold War. More recent decades have seen the rise of transnational advocacy networks in which local activists and small-scale community resistance have reached out to form new partnerships and solidarity with well-endowed and positioned NGOs, foundations, and other institutions in Washington, DC; New York; Oxford; Tokyo; Taipei; Amsterdam; and more.

Related to the rise of such solidarity-based and value-laden transnational advocacy networks, at least two issues have emerged that further complicate the relationship between the political authorities and the environmental civil society in Asian countries. One, in the wake of the Color Revolutions in the former Soviet space and the Arab Spring in 2012, many governments in the developing world are becoming suspicious of, if not antagonistic toward, foreign NGOs, charities, and foundations. Political authorities in China, India, Myanmar, Cambodia, Indonesia, and more recently Hong Kong have introduced new laws, regulations, visa policies, and more to tighten up the monitoring and control over international NGOs' activities, seeing international NGO networks as one source of anti-regime, pro-democracy public sentiments and social mobilization. The other, internal disparities, in terms of either materialistic power or discursive knowledge within the transnational networks, between local and international NGOs further affect domestic state-society relations. At times, such disparities can have unintended ramifications that are detrimental to local communities. For example, the "brain drain" of local experts as observed in transnational environmental networks working in China (Litzinger, 2004) and divisive impacts caused by external donors on local communities in Indonesia (Gellert, 2010) and Mongolia (Byambajav, 2015), as discussed earlier.

## **Conclusions**

Environmental movements and environmental activism are on the rise in Asia, even though a majority of the states in the region are not stable democracies. This research has found that opening up the political system and deepening public participation in politics are critical for the early development of the environmental movement, yet not enough for the movement to sustain and become effective in the long run. Only few Asian societies, markedly South Korea and Indonesia, have seen continuous growth of the environmental movement after the fundamental political regime shift. For countries like Kazakhstan, Mongolia, or even Japan, the initial golden opportunity for the environmental movement and broad social mobilization to push for more sustained political liberalization has been missed, and environmental activism has been either mostly absorbed into the formal state apparatus or sidelined.

The research further found that the ideological urgency of economic development has contributed to the divergence of political reform and environmental movement in many Asian countries, even more so in young democracies. With rare exceptions, marketization and integration into the global economic system, managed by often unstable, if not corrupt, elected politicians, have taken a toll on the environment. Outstanding as a region, Asian countries are overachievers in economic development while lagging in environmental performance. In addition, attention and assistance from international agencies and environmental NGOs to Asian countries has not been consistently effective in supporting bottom-up activism and facilitating collaboration between the state and society in environmental protection. Instead, well-intended international NGOs often find themselves caught in problematic political

entanglements, which can result in the unintended weakening of environmental governance in the recipient country.

Limited by space, this research cannot explore in greater depth and more systematically the intertwined relationship between political liberalization, economic development, transnational activism, and bottom-up environmental movements. Further studies on the topic could employ various methods, qualitatively or quantitatively, to expand case numbers and enhance the understanding of the relationships across these important factors.

## Acknowledgments

Interviews conducted in Kazakhstan for this chapter were supported by the Ministry of Education, Singapore, under Tier-1 Grant number RG154/15.

## Notes

- 1 Asia here includes geographic Central, Inner, and Western Asian regions (e.g., Siberia, the Russian Far East, and the Asian parts of the Middle East): [www.goldmanprize.org/about/](http://www.goldmanprize.org/about/), last accessed 15 August 2020.
- 2 Four major public campaigns broke out in the 1960s against the construction of the Narita Airport and demanded compensation for the victims of the Itai-Itai cadmium poisoning, Minamata and Niigata mercury disease, and Yokkaichi asthma incidents.
- 3 [www.hyi.org.cn/go/](http://www.hyi.org.cn/go/), last accessed 1 September 2019.
- 4 <https://gt.foreignpolicy.com/2016/profile/wang-yongchen?df8f7f5682>, last accessed 9 September 2020.
- 5 Interview at the office of ACBK in Astana, 8 July 2016.
- 6 Office visit and interview in Almaty, 7 July 2016.
- 7 Dragons – Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong; Tigers – Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand.

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