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THE MAKING OF IDENTITIES AND DISCOURSES: URBAN GRASSROOTS ENVIRONMENTALISM IN CHINA

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Environmental movements have long taken root in China through works of environmental scientists and professional NGOs in relatively rural regions since the country's reform period in the early 1980s. The recent phenomenon of urban grassroots environmentalism, however, commands people's attention to the interaction between environmentalism understood here as specific sets of cultural thoughts on the environment and the Chinese urban public's daily life experiences in cities. This study offers a historically situated ethnographic exploration of a specific organization, Friends of Nature, a national environmental NGO based in Chinese cities, and its members' cultural, social, and psychological experiences as urban grassroots environmentalists. Founded in 1994 in Beijing, Friends of Nature (FON) is the first environmental NGO in China and wields fundamental influence over the urban public's understandings of environmentalism. Its membership system with over 16 thousand members who are everyday urban residents working in heterogeneous industries and organize local environmental events on weekends differentiate itself from other professional environmental organizations. Through participant observation, interviews, and essays and poems by members collected during my fieldwork at the Guangzhou and Shenzhen groups of FON in July 2017, I examine how the group of urban grassroots environmentalists under study have shaped a cultural discourse on the environment through their experiences as immigrants from the countryside to cities, and in turn, have undergone self-transformation in their identities as environmentalists and recent settlers in cities. This study also suggests the non-politically threatening nature of urban grassroots environmentalism in China which intentionally and unintentionally prioritizes the less political personal pursuits of the urban public while forgoing potential outright confrontations against governmental and business entities.