

# China & Indonesia

## From Sumatra to Yunnan: How Cross-Border Exchanges Are Strengthening Women to Lead for Forest Justice

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Participants learn how forest concessions have affected Indigenous communities, particularly women, in North Sumatra, Indonesia. **EPN**

When women from China and Indonesia first met in Sumatra nearly 20 years ago, they discovered their struggles to protect forests were deeply interconnected. What began as an exchange of stories and strategies has grown into a powerful women-led network, uniting grassroots leaders across borders to confront destructive industries, influence investors, and build solidarity for forest justice.

In 2006, Zhang Huiying, then a program officer at Wuhu Ecology Center in Eastern China, traveled to Sumatra, Indonesia, on a fact-finding mission to investigate the social and environmental impacts of a pulpwood plantation. “The devastation I saw was shocking,” she later reflected. “But the determination of local women to protect their forests showed me our struggles were connected. We needed to act together.”

That mission, organized by the Environmental Paper Network (EPN) and made possible through the leadership of Indonesian partners, marked the first meeting between grassroots women leaders from China and Indonesia. It was the start of an enduring collaboration in which women from the two countries have shared strategies, supported each other’s campaigns, and confronted some of the world’s most powerful pulp and paper companies.

### The Roots of Connection

The 2006 Sumatra trip was motivated by urgent threats. Chinese investments and rising domestic demand for paper were

driving rapid pulp expansion in Indonesia, destroying vast areas of rainforest. Much of this was led by manufacturing companies Asia Pulp and Paper (APP) and Asia Pacific Resources International Limited (APRIL), which have strong ties to China.

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On the ground, Chinese delegates, including Zhang and fellow activist Ding Jie, met Indigenous women whose livelihoods depended on forest resources like incense trees. They learned that corporations’ conversion of diverse forests to monoculture eucalyptus plantations for pulpwood had depleted biodiversity, reduced water availability, and forced women to travel

further and further to collect clean water.

These personal encounters helped shift the focus of the Chinese activists’ own work. “It was no longer an abstract supply-chain issue,” said Ding Jie, now a prominent environmentalist and director of the Wuhu Qingye Community Development Center in Anhui province. “It was about real women, real families, and our responsibility to each other.”

### Building a Women-Led Network

Following the Sumatra exchange, EPN began supporting structured opportunities for women campaigners from China and Indonesia to learn from one another. In 2014, Chinese activists returned to Sumatra, while Indonesian women leaders traveled to China for a symposium and learning trip. These exchanges deepened understanding of how Chinese investment and consumption were harming Indonesian forests, and gave Indonesian partners insight into how Chinese NGOs could help raise awareness at home.

Each visit paired community observations with strategy sessions. Women documented illegal logging, pesticide damage on incense trees, and land grabs affecting ethnic minority communities. They also discussed tactics—from media advocacy to investor engagement—to hold companies accountable.

Ding Jie applied these lessons to her own work. She now [leads sustainable development projects in rural communities in South China](#), tackling climate change with practical, locally driven solutions. Reflecting on her journey, she said, “Leadership means having a forward-looking vision, guiding diverse teams toward growth, and embracing inclusivity to advance public welfare and ecological development.”

## Linking Struggles Across Regions

The shared challenges Zhang and Ding observed ran deep. In China’s Yunnan Province, for example, pulpwood plantations, hydroelectric projects, and mining had displaced Indigenous Miao, Zhuang, Wa, Yi, and Dai communities, eroded biodiversity, and destroyed watersheds. Women there faced similar dynamics to those seen in Indonesia: powerful companies, inadequate environmental impact assessments, and disregard for community rights.

The exchanges helped participants recognize patterns in corporate behavior and identify opportunities for joint advocacy. In one instance, Chinese activists who had met incense tree harvesters in Sumatra shared their stories in outreach to Chinese financiers, highlighting the gendered impacts of pulp plantations.

## Strategy and Solidarity in Yunnan

In 2017, EPN hosted a strategy-building gathering in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, bringing together 40 activists from 14 countries. Indonesian and Chinese women leaders shared updates on their campaigns and forged alliances with participants across East Asia, laying the groundwork for ongoing collaboration, knowledge exchange, and coordinated action on regional forest and environmental issues.

The meeting also planted seeds for local organizing. A women-led Dai cultural preservation society emerged from the gathering, working to protect the local language, traditional practices, and the community’s deep connection with nature. “So much of our culture and traditions have been intertwined with rainforests, peafowl, and elephants,” said Yu Yinghan, who worked as a Dai

North Sumatra’s “incense tree” (*Styrax benzoin*) produces a resin with traditional and modern uses. Beyond its economic value to local communities, it also holds cultural and spiritual significance. **EPN**





Indonesian and Chinese women leaders meet with community members in North Sumatra to discuss protecting customary forests and upholding Indigenous rights. **EPN**

language news anchor and later founded her own NGO after being inspired by environmental activists she met at the gathering. “I came to understand that defending our culture also means defending our forests.”

## Learning in the Field

In 2019, three Chinese women NGO leaders—Mao Jing of Snow Alliance in Qinghai, Liu Rongrong of Wuhu Ecology Center, and Hanna Ye of CDP China—traveled to Sumatra to visit the Nagasaribu Onan Harbangan Indigenous community, which has been affected by the operations of the company Toba Pulp Lestari. Local organizations [Lembaga Pemberdayaan Ekonomi Dan Sosial Masyarakat \(LPSEM\) Riau](#) and [Kelompok Studi dan Pengembangan Prakarsa Masyarakat](#)

([KSPPM](#)), hosted the delegation, guided by [Indonesian conservation leader Woro Supartinah](#). She showed how eucalyptus plantations had disrupted traditional incense production and increased household labor burdens on women. The visit allowed women leaders to exchange experiences, witness the impacts of pulp expansion on communities, and strengthen cross-border solidarity in environmental advocacy.

The trip was a two-way exchange: Chinese participants saw firsthand the harm done to communities and local resistance efforts, while Indonesian hosts gained new insights into how their struggles could be communicated to investors and decision-makers in China.

Reflecting on her visit, Hanna Ye said: “As villagers shared how Toba Pulp Lestari affected their lives, from leaves that no longer signaled harvest, to seasonal rains as short as half an hour causing landslides. We saw the stark contrast between these realities and the environmental terms the developed world loves: COP, REDD, net zero, traceability, certification schemes. The gap between policy and reality was laid bare. These communities and the forests they protect are the true foundation of any environmental progress.”

## New Challenges, Evolving Responses

In recent years, threats to Indonesia’s tropical forests have expanded beyond pulp plantations to include nickel mining

and pulp mill proposals from companies like Djarum Group, with supply-chain links to APP and APRIL, often with Chinese financing.

In 2023, Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI) China, an all-women team, and Rainforest Foundation Norway organized a study tour to Oslo for Chinese investors. The trip exposed participants to Nordic environmental, social, and governance (ESG) practices to apply these standards to Chinese overseas investments, including in Indonesia. This initiative reflects the evolution of EPN's exchanges: starting with grassroots community visits, growing into cross-border collaboration that engages policymakers and investors, and consistently placing women leaders at the heart of environmental advocacy.

## Looking Back, Moving Forward

The women-led exchanges between China and Indonesia have demonstrated the power of grassroots diplomacy. They have bridged cultural and political differences, elevated local struggles to international platforms, and nurtured leadership that is strategic and deeply rooted in community realities.

Reflecting on the impact, Mao Jing of Snow Alliance said, "These cross-border exchanges help enrich our understanding of deforestation issues that we did not hear much about in the past. We can do a lot in China to help protect Indonesia's rainforests. We now feel these forests are much closer to us."

From the first meeting in Sumatra to strategy sessions in Yunnan and investor dialogues in Oslo, these exchanges have been grounded in trust, respect, and shared purpose. They have also faced barriers: funding constraints, political sensitivities, and the challenges of ensuring women's voices are heard in often male-dominated spaces.

Yet, as Zhang Huiying reflected, "Every time we connect, we plant seeds of change, rooted in hope and growing into solutions. The roots are spreading—across forests, across countries, across generations. We hope to continue building this shared strength as we meet, learn, and rise together." ■

Indonesian environmentalist Woro Supartinah leads Chinese women campaigners and EPN to investigate rainforest destruction in Riau, Indonesia. **EPN**

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**Zhang Huiying, former program officer at Wuhu Ecology Center**

