Your research examines environmental politics in China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan in the near absence of national environmental-advocacy organizations. What inspired this project and what questions are you currently exploring?

My current project emerged partly from my most recent book, Building Democracy in Japan (2007), and partly from my teaching. Building Democracy in Japan is primarily concerned with telling a bottom-up story of Japan’s democratization and explaining the ways that citizens, civic organizations, and local governments, in addition to the national government, democratized their political values, practices, and institutions. Environmental movements of the 1960s and 1970s feature prominently in that story. In teaching about Chinese politics, I was struck by how similar Chinese environmental activism of the 1990s and...
2000s sounded to Japanese activism of a few decades earlier, and how current environmental organizations in both countries tend to pursue a proactive, cooperative relationship with the government rather than an adversarial political strategy. I was intrigued to find out why two developmental states, which have strong governments with close ties to business and very few advocacy organizations, have both ended up with globally cutting-edge environmental policies.

My current project examines environmental politics in four East Asian countries that run the full spectrum of democratic governance: China (not democratic), South Korea and Taiwan (newly democratic), and Japan (mature democracy). I am primarily interested in identifying what kinds of advocacy strategies are working in these countries. I ask how environmental advocates operating in environments hostile to advocacy get individuals, governments, and businesses to change their behavior in environmentally positive ways.

What are some examples of specific characteristics or elements that have been present in policies incorporating both business and environmental considerations?

Many of the most successful environmental policies have created strong incentives for environmental improvement in ways that benefit business. Sometimes this is in the form of government subsidies or tax incentives to promote desired behavior—e.g., the development and use of renewable energy. Often it is in the form of branding or other types of certification, such as an eco-label for energy efficient products. With both of these methods, companies benefit financially when they engage in positive environmental behavior.

One interesting finding is that some of the most powerful policy changes are not those that are directed specifically at environmental outcomes but rather those aimed at increasing transparency. When companies, local governments, and national governments make environmental data public, it becomes much easier for environmental organizations and even private citizens to use such data to pressure companies and governments to be more environmentally responsible. Regulations requiring governmental and corporate transparency may be the single most effective set of policy options for improving environmental outcomes. Rather than a policy that encourages companies to “race to the bottom,” higher transparency regarding environmental information helps create an environment in which local governments and companies “race to the top.” They have positive incentives for continual improvement that go well beyond whatever baseline regulation may be in place. Again, this makes it possible for the goals of financial gain and environmental improvement to work hand and hand rather than against each other.

Perhaps the best example of where this is working is with the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs (IPE), which has made publicly available, government-sourced pollution data in China much more accessible to the public through a searchable map. Soon after IPE was founded in 2006, Walmart approached it to find out how the global retail giant could use IPE’s database to help Walmart meet its internal environmental commitments and green its supply chain in China. Now IPE has dozens of large multinationals that are working together as part of the Green Choice Alliance to create and disseminate green supply-chain management strategies that are helping to improve environmental conditions in China.

Are there any significant differences between the development of environmental policy in Northeast Asia and in the United States and Canada?

In North America, environmental politics have become highly partisan. Environmental groups spend a lot of time and energy lobbying politicians in Washington, D.C., and Ottawa, and rhetoric around environmental issues is often highly confrontational.
In Japan and China, politicians have been less involved in environmental politics. As a result, bureaucrats and local government officials work with academics and advocates to craft environmentally positive solutions to the problems that they face. South Korea and Taiwan looked more like North America in the 1990s and 2000s. South Korea continues to engage in partisan environmental politics, but Taiwan appears to be moving more toward a Chinese/Japanese model where environmental advocates are more likely to be working with rather than against the government.

I must note that since the 2011 disaster in Fukushima, nuclear power politics, as a faction of the environmental movement, are reinvigorated and are becoming more antagonistic and partisan across the region.

How do personal relationships contribute to successful networks in these four countries?

Personal relationships are critical to successful politicking anywhere in the world, and they are particularly important in East Asia. Having some kind of personal connection to a policymaker, whether through family, school, or professional ties, enhances access, increasing the possibility that one might be able to influence that person. From the perspective of the policymaker, having personal connections to a diverse set of individuals enhances the policymaker’s ability to vet ideas and refine policy, improving the ultimate policy outcome both in terms of the actual policy and in terms of its implementation.

Findings from my research suggest that networking is an important and very successful strategy for environmental advocates across the region. Through their networks, environmental advocates were able to dramatically expand their capacity and connect to other individuals and groups with diverse skills, enabling them to undertake larger and more sophisticated projects and expanding the effectiveness of their efforts.

Given that Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are all democracies, how do environmental networks function differently in these three countries from how they function in China?

The biggest difference that I found between the environmental networks in China and those in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan was that the Chinese networks tended to take on a hub-and-spoke type of pattern while those of the other countries were more of a dense web. Funding and capacity was the biggest challenge for all the advocates in the entire region. In China, however, there are a few well-funded, well-resourced organizations, either international NGOs or government-funded nonprofit groups, that provide much of the funding and some of the know-how to a plethora of smaller NGOs.

Thus, there are two basic network patterns in China: a personal network that links individuals of various types and positions together and an organizational network that links a funder with all the groups that it funds. The local groups that were all funded by a single entity would connect and share information, but they were in a disadvantaged position vis-à-vis the funding organization.

In contrast, in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, environmental networks are highly diverse, containing very different types of members—from private individuals to small volunteer-only NGOs to large international NGOs to ministry officials to local governments. All members interact with one another on a largely horizontal, equal basis even though they are very differently resourced. Personal networks operate in much the same way as they do in China.

Interestingly, in all four countries, academics served a very important purpose in environmental networks, helping to link business, civil society, and government together. It was often the case that professors at prestigious universities who worked on specific aspects of the environment were also deeply involved in one or more environmental organization related to their research and regularly served on government panels...
that helped develop policy related to their research area. In this way, academics often served as a kind of network “hub” that enabled information to pass to different communities.

**Are there lessons from these countries that other countries can learn regarding how to best encourage civic participation and communication networks among diverse stakeholders?**

Yes! The largest lesson is perhaps that encouraging transparency in environmental information creates a social, political, and market environment that rewards positive environmental behavior and punishes negative environmental behavior, even in a context where the legal or regulatory environment does not change.

A second important lesson is that data does not motivate people. Experts can see numbers and become alarmed, but ordinary people have difficulty understanding why they should care. If ordinary people don’t care, then corporations and governments have little incentive to change their mode of operation away from the status quo. Finding ways that the environmental data can take on social meaning—whether this is through a film or art installation that captures the public imagination or through a map that highlights towns or corporations with high pollution rates—can make a very big difference in encouraging positive changes to environmental behavior.

A final lesson might be that, in spite of all the doom and gloom stories about the environment, there is a lot of good news. Individuals, organizations, governments, and corporations have become very innovative and have developed numerous solutions to many of our biggest environmental problems. Even in political environments that are hostile to advocacy, significant progress is being made. Learning how to emulate and disseminate success will be one of the most important keys to addressing our growing environmental crisis.