Encounters between Chinese NGOs and the State: Distance, Roles and Voice*

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Researchers in the field of Chinese studies often assume that the ability of Chinese NGOs to operate freely increases with their distance from the government, and they classify NGOs accordingly. However, this study suggests that in China distance from the state is not a fixed characteristic of an organization nor is increased distance always an advantage. Even unregistered NGOs adopt various strategies that bring them close to the state. Furthermore, contrary to common expectations, independence does not guarantee that an NGO will adopt democratic decision-making structures or increase its contacts with ordinary citizens at the grassroots level.

KEYWORDS: China; civil society; non-governmental organizations (NGO); social space; state-society relations.

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*This research was written at Chang Jung University during the author’s Taiwan Fellowship period. The fieldwork was done during the research periods at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing and at Fudan University, and financed by the Academy of Finland and the Kone Foundation, respectively.

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Past research on Chinese non-governmental organizations (NGO) has typically focused on their degree of autonomy from the state. Some researchers have understood state-society relationships in China in simplistic terms of a power struggle between the state and NGOs, with NGOs attempting to appropriate social space and the state attempting to control NGOs. Those viewing Chinese civil society from this perspective readily interpret the activities of NGOs as evidence that they are actively pursuing autonomy from the state. Some even maintain that if NGOs adopt tasks which the state has not directly delegated to them or serve the interests of their constituents, they are showing signs of autonomy from the state.1 These scholars seem to assume that the Chinese state never views independent social activity as beneficial for itself, despite numerous statements by Chinese officials to the contrary, including acknowledgments that NGOs can “help find solutions to social problems,” “help the government draft laws, regulations and policies and ensure the feasibility and correctness of laws,” facilitate “expanding dialogue with the international community,” and “assist the poor and alleviate hardship.”2 All of these government-approved functions require independent initiative on the part of NGOs.

In China studies, one commonly encounters a typology that categorizes NGOs according to their degree of autonomy,3 as if state control were the only factor in all relations between NGOs and the Chinese state. In such typologies, the only dimension to measure is distance. Distance

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is equated with freedom and independence. The more distant a NGO is from the state, the better. This dichotomous approach sees the state and NGOs as engaged in a zero-sum struggle over social space and expects that the state will regard any development outside of its control as a threat. Milwertz notes that often this struggle is expressed in violent imagery and cites, as one example, an expression about the need for “a shield against potential state penetration and predation.”

According to Lu, scholars focusing on the single variable of autonomy have even equated government support with control. Due to the obvious benefits of cooperation with the state, more sophisticated versions of this typology introduce a second variable: how beneficial, from the point of view of NGOs, relations with the state are. Among those taking such an approach is Foster, who sees the state as providing associations with both opportunities and constraints, and often these opportunities are such that associations opt for incorporation rather than confrontation. In this view, the state not only limits but also facilitates the activities of NGOs. Hence, maximizing autonomy is not the only way for NGOs to advance their aims. Compromising autonomy and seeking connections with the state is another rational strategy. Researchers have found that Chinese NGOs are “embedded” and that they deliberately blur the demarcation between themselves and the state in order to change state policies from within. This approach recognizes the possibility of many

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4Cecilia Milwertz, “Constructing Gender and Development NGOs to Address Developmental Challenges” (paper presented at the conference of the Nordic Association for Chinese Studies in Reykjavik, June 3-5, 2009). Citation from Zhang Xin and Richard Baum, “Civil Society and the Anatomy of a Rural NGO,” China Journal, no. 52 (July 2004): 103.
5Lu Yiyi, Non-governmental Organizations in China (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), chap. 3.
positive-sum games. Researchers have found many examples of mutually beneficial collaboration between NGOs and the government.\textsuperscript{10} Nevertheless, these researchers continue to investigate autonomy.

Despite the heavy emphasis on autonomy in the research on NGOs in China, autonomy is not necessarily very central to what NGOs do. Chinese NGOs are established not to expand social space but to do something. They exist to promote the rights of the marginalized, to prevent environmental degradation, or to alleviate poverty. To reach their goals, NGOs may choose to place close and cooperative relations with the government above autonomy, although autonomy is not irrelevant for them.\textsuperscript{11} Because Chinese NGOs have multiple objectives, they commonly pursue influence and organizational sustainability even at the cost of autonomy.\textsuperscript{12}

Actually, Chinese NGOs themselves perceive their autonomy as adequate and see time and money as the real constraints on their activities.\textsuperscript{13} The difficulties mentioned by NGOs interviewed for this study center on insecure funding, difficulties in recruiting skilled personnel, and the uncertain status of unregistered NGOs. The last point underlines the fact that a lack of state regulation can sometimes be inconvenient to NGOs. It leaves them vulnerable to repression as they do not know what they are not permitted to do.\textsuperscript{14} NGOs would prefer a predictable framework of


\textsuperscript{14}Association 1. Environmental NGO, Beijing.
state regulation to an absence of regulation. Contrary to the assumption that the state exercises heavy control over civic activities in China, in some cases, it is state neglect rather than excessive control that hampers the operation of NGOs. For example, an absence of adequate standards set by the state to guide the provision of social services has impeded non-profit service production. Because it fails to inspect and punish illegal activities by NGOs, it is not easy to gain the public’s trust. Furthermore, as Chinese researchers have often pointed out, the Chinese state controls the wrong things, making it difficult to obtain legal status but easy for those who have this status to bend the rules and misuse their funds. In this context, Lu finds that close relations with a state agency can provide NGOs with more, rather than less, autonomy of operation.

The autonomy approach tends to disregard the plurality of situations and activities in which NGOs are involved. Some scholars recognize this plurality and find that there are actors other than the state which influence the work of NGOs. Within the Chinese social space, NGOs interact not only with the state, but also with the media, foreign donors, and foreign NGOs working with similar issues. This study examines a variety of relations between advocacy NGOs and the state. It begins with an investigation of the various roles that advocacy NGOs assume in their interactions with the state. Later, it probes into the issue of autonomy: what it

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15 Association 2. Rural development NGO, Guizhou.
17 Chinese legal scholar Jin Jinping, interviewed on December 5, 2007.
18 Li Yongzhong and Zhang Shouxian, “Woguo shehui zhuaxing shiqi minjian zuzhi de fazhan xianhuang yi duice” (The situation and countermeasures of the development of popular organizations during the transformation in our country), Nanhua daxue xuebao, shehui kexue ban (Journal of University of South China, social science edition) (Hengyang) 8, no. 3 (2007): 4-6.
19 Lu, Non-governmental Organizations, chap. 3.
means and what it does not.

The research is based on the interviews of fifty-four persons working in thirty-seven NGOs or NGO centers, about half of which have official registration as NGOs. Due to demanding regulations and variation between registration practices among local governments, not all NGOs in China have registered as NGOs and some are not registered at all. In the interview, they were asked to introduce their campaigns. Many of them provided access to their campaign materials and events, enabling verification of findings through participatory observation. Thirty of the interviewees were women and twenty-four were men. Due to the fact that many advocacy NGOs are concentrated in Beijing, this sample was Beijing-centered but also included fifteen NGOs from eight different provinces outside the capital. All these NGOs have political or social aims and they engage in advocacy for these aims, although some of them also provide services or distribute aid. All, including the GONGOs (government-organized NGOs), have independence to set their own goals. Some of the GONGOs actively engage in advocacy with the government, albeit working with less politicized issues such as poverty and health. These interviews show that the relationships between NGOs and the state are strategic in nature and vary considerably from one situation to another.

Roles Adopted to Gain Political Influence

The mapping of the variety of the roles that NGOs adopt in their interactions with the state begins with the examination of the strategies NGOs use to influence policymaking. Most NGOs inform the state by sending reports and policy recommendations to the state agencies. Some use regular channels the Chinese government has established for citizen influence. One NGO, for example, sends its proposals to the government through the Bureaus for Letters and Visits (信访局) and through the people’s representatives. When asked if the NGO selectively approaches those people’s representatives who are known supporters of the human
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rights agenda, the NGO said there was no need to be concerned about the personal preferences of the people’s representatives because these representatives have a duty to forward the information they receive from the people.21 Other NGOs, however, prepare and publish policy statements together with people’s representatives sharing their concerns.22 The initiative to provide information does not always come from NGOs, as the government sometimes solicits information and technical know-how from NGOs or individual NGO activists.

NGOs may penetrate the state through personal networks that extend to people working within government agencies. According to one NGO center, the most successful NGOs in China use contacts and networks typical of Chinese culture to involve government representatives and gain their support.23 Usually these networks are based on shared concerns and visions. For example, public schools invited a non-registered environmental NGO to give classes because it was cooperating with certain municipal education authorities that wanted to improve environmental education.24 NGOs with the most efficient networks employ an influential person, such as an ex-minister or a legal expert, who is an insider in policy-making circles.25 Although these networks enable cooperation, several NGOs have distinguished this type of cooperation from institutionalized channels. As long as cooperation depends on individuals within the government, the government agency’s commitment may lapse when the state employee retires or finds a new job.26

NGOs provide initiatives for the state to act upon. They put forward new issues, approaches, and practices. To galvanize the state to take action, they attach moral incentives to their demands or threaten the state with unwanted consequences if the problem is left unsolved. For ex-

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21 Association 3. Human rights NGO, Beijing.
22 Association 4. Gender NGO, Beijing.
23 Association 5. NGO training center, Shanghai.
26 Associations 1 and 4.
ample, one NGO convinced a province that it would face a labor shortage unless it raised its wage levels.\(^{27}\)

NGOs provide examples for the state to emulate. By their concrete work, NGOs want to demonstrate solutions to problems for the state to adopt and disseminate.\(^{28}\) For example, one NGO established a kindergarten to introduce alternative educational methods.\(^{29}\) Often NGOs actively teach the state. They provide training for bureaucrats, policemen and judges, trade unionists, and journalists.\(^{30}\)

NGOs may pressure the state through a third party. They commonly make an issue public by releasing it to the media. Some combine their media campaign with calls and letters to the government. These can be open letters signed by NGOs and specialists or letters sent by individual citizens to the government.\(^{31}\) NGOs are responsible for creating the publicity that prompts citizens to act but do not necessarily initiate the letter-writing campaigns, as it is a long-standing practice in China for readers to send feedback to the government about controversial issues made public by the media. To facilitate public response, one NGO even assists the marginalized to voice their demands by providing them with computers for writing petitions and explaining the justification for their demonstrations to the government.\(^{32}\) NGOs may also pressure local governments through other official agencies such as higher levels of government or courts.\(^{33}\)

NGOs mobilize the state. They investigate cases of mismanagement or pollution and expose these cases for the state to take action.\(^{34}\) For example, one NGO inspects markets and restaurants for illegal trade in wild

\(^{27}\) Association 8. Labor rights NGO, Guangdong.
\(^{28}\) Association 9. NGO training center, Beijing.
\(^{29}\) Association 10. Educational NGO, Beijing.
\(^{30}\) E.g., associations 4 and 8.
\(^{32}\) Association 12. Health rights NGO, Beijing.
\(^{34}\) E.g., associations 6 and 7.
animals and calls the police to come and punish the offenders.\textsuperscript{35} Rather than taking the role of independent watchdogs, NGOs engage in what one of them calls “advocacy in accordance with Chinese culture.”\textsuperscript{36} This means that NGOs inform the government about the problems they have identified, in the hope that the government will resolve them. NGO activists say that they need to persuade the state to act because, by themselves, Chinese NGOs lack a social base that is sufficiently powerful to mobilize popular campaigns and because the state does not permit them to mobilize the people by themselves.\textsuperscript{37}

When NGOs act as watchdogs, they mainly scrutinize the activities of social actors for the state rather than the activities of the government itself. For example, they inform municipal governments about polluting factories,\textsuperscript{38} many of them private and even illegal. NGOs present themselves as helping the government to fill in gaps in its capacity to oversee everything. Indirectly, this can be a way to supervise the state, as it targets state negligence. Although NGOs target individual projects rather than local governments, they sometimes succeed in causing the central government to intervene in irregularities resulting from collusion between economic interests and local governments.\textsuperscript{39} However, sometimes NGOs directly supervise the state activities. Some GONGOs providing developmental aid mentioned that they needed to scrutinize whether or not local governments had actually done their part of the project. One openly referred to widespread corruption that compelled them to act as watchdogs over local governments.\textsuperscript{40}

NGOs are well aware of different attitudes towards their work by various state agencies. Horizontal divisions between local governments

\textsuperscript{35}Association 14. Environmental NGO, Shanghai.
\textsuperscript{36}Association 5.
\textsuperscript{37}Associations 1 and 13.
\textsuperscript{38}Association 6.
\textsuperscript{39}Association 11.
are evident; for example, a given NGO may have a tense relationship with one municipal government, but still be welcomed by another municipal government to work within its boundaries. In cases of conflicting interests or priorities, many NGOs seek support from government agencies favorable to their side. Vertical divisions are evident, too. An NGO activist maintains that, while a desire to maximize economic profits may dominate at the local level, the central government wants its laws to be obeyed. Departmentalization permits NGOs to manipulate divisions within the state. Playing upon these divisions can become a technique for gaining influence. As one environmentalist put it, NGOs would be closed if they opposed the government at all administrative levels, but they can take advantage of inconsistencies among state agencies to criticize problems. Thus, NGOs commonly report local problems to higher authorities and hope they will intervene. When NGOs reveal local problems, some see themselves as helping the central government to monitor local governments. Other NGOs, however, complain that their political environment is unpredictable because of the lack of consistent policies from one level of government to another and from one case to the next, with individual governmental representatives at times siding with official agencies and at other times with victims.

Other Roles

NGOs receive help and resources from local and central governments. Many NGOs, including some well-connected unregistered NGOs, hold meetings in state-owned buildings or borrow equipment for their

41 Associations 9 and 17. Association 17. Migrant worker NGO, Beijing.
42 E.g., association 18. Labor rights NGO, Beijing.
43 Association 8.
44 Association 13.
46 Association 12.
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Some NGOs cooperate with local governments to implement projects. Even those that found that it was not easy to cope with the complex mutual obligations involved in cooperation with the state recognized that cooperation helps in cutting costs and reaching to the public. Many, including some unregistered NGOs, even enter the grassroots through official links. Many small NGOs use neighborhood committees and community centers to distribute information about their events. One GONGO even mentioned that a local government interested in local economic development had helped the GONGO to persuade local farmers to join its project.

NGOs mimic the state. Sometimes this is done on purpose, but often it occurs unintentionally because NGOs acquire their norms from the standard cultural repertoire. For example, one migrant NGO organizes its own annual New Year’s gala. The model for this gala is China’s official televised New Year’s gala. The NGO borrows this popular form of entertainment despite the propagandistic content of the official gala. Although the NGO has probably borrowed this form simply because of its popularity, it is aware of the opportunity that its gala offers for the dissemination of its values and uses the gala to showcase migrants’ talents to urbanites. Another NGO launches its projects in the typical Communist Party campaign style and holds hand-shaking ceremonies with local leaders. This indicates the internalization of customary Communist campaign styles,

47E.g., association 11.
48Association 16.
49E.g., association 20. Environmental NGO, Shanghai.
52Association 15.
53Association 17.
54Association 16.
but these rituals also have strategic meaning for fundraising, media visibility, and interactions with local governments.

Some NGOs mimic the state quite consciously to borrow state authority. For example, a service-providing NGO started to hang official certificates and calligraphy, written by high-ranking officials, near the entrance of its office in order to increase its appeal to clients who customarily look for such symbols of state recognition as an assurance of quality.\textsuperscript{55} NGOs use official openings, such as commemorative days, to gain publicity for their issues. In China, both the state and NGOs use national and international commemorative days to remind citizens of the importance of issues like water pollution or the plight of the disabled. For example, the World AIDS Day opens doors to schools for one NGO to give sex education dealing with homosexuality.\textsuperscript{56} NGOs use official slogans to appeal not only to the state, but also to the general public. One adopted the slogan “harmonious society” to persuade its clients to refrain from behaviors that were prompting complaints from neighbors.\textsuperscript{57} Another referred to a government education campaign when it launched its own education program in primary schools.\textsuperscript{58}

Many NGO activists openly advocate sociopolitical change when they champion public participation, community involvement, democratic awareness, and policy initiatives emanating from society. Nevertheless, they do not take a stand against the government, but try to expand boundaries from within. Hence, NGOs adapt to the government’s norms and use politically correct language. To avoid using sensitive language, NGOs demand “adherence to laws” instead of “workers’ rights,” or “participatory management” instead of “democracy.”\textsuperscript{59} Official vocabulary may also be injected into the discourse of NGOs by the people they help, who often like official slogans and continue to revere the central govern-

\textsuperscript{55} Association 10.
\textsuperscript{56} Association 22. Gender rights NGO, Beijing.
\textsuperscript{57} Association 10.
\textsuperscript{58} Association 23. Educational NGO, Hebei.
\textsuperscript{59} Associations 8 and 13.
ment even as they voice strong criticism of their immediate leaders.\textsuperscript{60}

NGOs often emphasize that their aims are the same as those of the state—for instance, the reduction of poverty—and that they have no reason or desire to come into conflict with the state.\textsuperscript{61} They see themselves helping the government to identify social problems or environmental misconduct.\textsuperscript{62} Sometimes NGOs blur boundaries strategically to legitimize their work. NGOs working with sensitive issues are often especially eager to find ways to hint that their activities should not be seen as oppositional. For example, a labor rights NGO emphasized that it only opposes government policies rather than the government itself and that its work benefits China because it promotes productivity.\textsuperscript{63} One NGO described itself as politically neutral, but cleverly defined this to mean that it did not support any political party.\textsuperscript{64}

Some NGOs benefit from a misconception on the part of the government offices that the NGOs are state units. Sometimes NGOs use the status of the official agency registered as its supervisory unit. It is especially common for non-registered NGOs to affiliate themselves with some official agency, such as a GONGO or a university department, in order to cope with bureaucracy and to have access to bank accounts.\textsuperscript{65} Some NGOs introduce their issues to the policy-making process through their partners in state agencies.\textsuperscript{66} At other times, the blurring of identity is unintentional. A student environmental organization from a provincial capital has cooperated successfully with a city government that originally received the student representatives because it had mistakenly believed that they were a delegation sent by the provincial government. Now the student NGO and the city government conduct programs together to keep

\textsuperscript{60}Association 24. Labor rights NGO, Guangdong.
\textsuperscript{61}Association 25. Migrant issue NGO, Beijing.
\textsuperscript{62}Associations 6 and 7.
\textsuperscript{63}Association 8.
\textsuperscript{64}Anonymized.
\textsuperscript{65}E.g. associations 4 and 26. Association 26. Environmental NGO, Sichuan.
\textsuperscript{66}E.g., association 4.
tourism sites clean and reduce pollution in a local industrial park.\textsuperscript{67}

Some NGOs assist government or even adopt official roles. Even unregistered NGOs carry out tasks that the government asks them to do.\textsuperscript{68} One aid organization assessed that its cooperation with government is easy because the NGO helps local governments to do their work better.\textsuperscript{69} The state even allocates money to NGOs for official purposes, for example, educating the children of revolutionary martyrs.\textsuperscript{70} Other NGOs have adopted work that they feel the government should do, but does not.\textsuperscript{71} This accords with the official discourse, often repeated by the NGOs themselves, that NGOs can fill gaps in state-provided services and deliver specific services to small groups with distinct needs. In this way, they are expected to help reduce social conflicts and promote progress.\textsuperscript{72}

Some NGOs that participate in international forums even speak for the government at such events. They consider it their task to make international agencies aware of conditions and needs in China. However, it would be a mistake to think that these GONGOs are mouthpieces of the Chinese government, as the very same GONGOs have persuaded the Chinese government to conform to the international standards in controversial developmental and health issues, such as AIDS prevention.\textsuperscript{73} One NGO even mentioned that the reports about the Chinese situation that these NGOs prepare for the international arenas could be used to supervise the Chinese government.\textsuperscript{74}

NGOs can increase the legitimacy of the state by alleviating problems. Due to the novelty of NGOs in China, many aid recipients tend to

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\textsuperscript{67} Association 27.  Environmental student NGO, Sichuan.
\textsuperscript{68} E.g., association 26.
\textsuperscript{69} Association 23.
\textsuperscript{70} Association 16.
\textsuperscript{72} Associations 5 and 9.
\textsuperscript{73} Associations 7 and 15.
\textsuperscript{74} Association 4.
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thank the government for NGO projects. Paradoxically, NGOs nevertheless need to convince the state of their usefulness. Even GONGOs mention that they need to gain the government’s trust, because government offices are unaccustomed to having non-state actors engage in social projects. To improve their position, NGOs try to prove they can do things that the government cannot do. For example, one NGO was initially opposed by an official agency for doing work that belongs to the government, but after this NGO gained recognition for its effort and sincerity, official opportunities started to open up. Even when the state is favorably disposed to an NGO project, it is unaccustomed to working with non-governmental partners. This can create practical problems. For example, one environmental project failed because the local government assigned visiting schedules that were impractical for volunteers with primary commitments to their studies. The complex relationship that Chinese NGOs have with the state is exemplified by one NGO’s complaint that, in China, the government unnecessarily interferes (guan), but does not provide positive engagement (canyu).

In the official Chinese discourse, NGOs are understood to serve as “bridges” between the government and society. Many NGOs that represent marginal social groups do indeed perceive themselves as helping to link the government to its constituencies. One NGO, for example, has arranged seminars where representatives of the government can meet with migrant workers. Another helps the disabled to produce media programs that serve both to change attitudes in society and to “link the disabled to
The interviews reveal that the absence of governmental regulation over the associational field sometimes creates problems for NGOs. Some NGOs complain that although NGO work is not illegal in China, it is not protected by law. Consequently, NGOs operate in an atmosphere of uncertainty. Although NGOs feel they can develop as long as they do not break the law, oppose the government, or grow too big, they lack security about the permitted scope of their activities. Even GONGOs are not free of this anxiety. Because interactions between the government and NGOs are not regulated by laws but develop through practice, even GONGOs do not know what activities are off-limits and must restrict their activities to what is undisputably permissible. However, other NGOs take advantage of vague regulations to expand the realm of permissible activities. One labor rights NGO argued that, because it obeys laws and works for the poor, its activities could not be regarded as inappropriate.

Self-censorship and boundary expansion are not the only ways NGOs negotiate the state controls they face. The state seldom starts with repression but seeks less confrontational forms of control. Two NGOs from different parts of the country recounted that the state initially approached them through a colleague or a friend who warned them not to continue working with a controversial case. One dropped the case in question. Although the state thus limited the NGO’s freedom to choose its cases, this interference did not prevent the NGO from pursuing its mission, since in China the problems deserving attention are many. The NGO started to work on another case equally relevant to its objectives, this time successfully resolving the problem. Another NGO reduced the state’s motivation for control by making its objectives public. Its strategy was to reduce control by letting the state better understand what the NGO

84 Association 29.
85 Association 1.
86 Anonymized at the request of the association.
87 Association 8.
was doing and why. These NGOs responded to the hints the state sent them, but some other NGOs have continued their activities without any adjustment and have met with more repression by the state.

Control is not the only way the state guides associational activities. The state may assign tasks to NGOs, with the result that NGOs may find themselves engaged in activities initiated not by themselves but by the state. This does not necessarily mean that the NGO’s own mission is compromised. For example, a city government sought technological advice from an unregistered environmental NGO for its plans to promote organic farming. The NGO was happy to help, as it was already promoting green living, including eating organic food. Although the government kept the small NGO busy seeking information for the government, the NGO felt it was promoting its own cause. This cooperation contributed to the city government’s goal of increasing farmers’ income, but it simultaneously served the environmental objectives of the NGO.

Roles and Distance

The preceding list of roles that NGOs play in relation to the state does not exhaust all possibilities. For example, other scholars have identified evasion of state control as one NGO strategy. Evasion is indeed a common strategy for expanding social space in China, but interviewees in this study usually painted another kind of picture, in which NGOs expand their social space by informing the state. Even many unregistered NGOs in China send reports and proposals to the government because the government loosens its vigilance and even rewards them with cooperation when it knows what they are doing.

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88 Associations 8 and 13.
89 Association 26.
Although the list in the previous section may be incomplete, it demonstrates that the various roles played by NGOs in their interactions with the Chinese state do not fall neatly on the continuum of distance between the two. Certain roles do involve distance: penetration, cooperation, assisting, adopting official tasks, and evasion. However, NGOs adopt these roles regardless of their status and official registration. Even many unregistered NGOs penetrate the state and receive support from individual administrators who share their concerns and beliefs.\textsuperscript{92} There are some other roles which distance might facilitate, such as supervising and pressuring the government. However, in this study, the NGOs monitoring how local governments use resources are organizations which themselves have meaningful resources to distribute. In the sample, they are all GONGOs. Finally, there are many roles that do not involve distance: informing, convincing, providing examples, mimicking, manipulating divisions, and increasing state legitimacy.

Investigation of the multiple roles that NGOs adopt reveals that distance to the state is not an inherent quality of an organization. It is not determined by how an NGO is founded, registered, or funded. A single NGO can play roles which bring it close to the government and roles which create distance. Since independent NGOs are working in the same state-centered reality as GONGOs, they can choose to penetrate the state or mimic the state in the same way that registered NGOs do. If there is a difference, it is in the degree of state support, as not all the contacts and resources available to GONGOs are accessible to all NGOs. However, one needs to be careful with generalizations since some unregistered NGOs are extremely well-connected and since the registered status obviously is not very important for the state. When the state seeks expertise, it readily approaches even unregistered NGOs.

An NGO’s disposition toward the state is not a fixed organizational quality; rather, it is situational and contextualized. The same organization chooses to play various roles depending on its activities and aims. The

\textsuperscript{92}E.g., Associations 1 and 4.
degree of autonomy it seeks depends on what it is doing. In a way, this choice of the roles and the degree of autonomy is strategic, although one should not underestimate the degree to which some of these choices are natural and unreflected for people who are acculturated to the Chinese political system. In addition, factors beyond the control of the NGOs themselves play a part in these choices. What an NGO can expect from the state and from a particular state agency is not irrelevant in these choices.

Moreover, distance does not seem to correlate with associational autonomy if autonomy is defined as the ability to fulfill the aims the NGO has set for itself. Cooperation with the government, at times to the degree that some tasks of the NGO and the government overlap, can be a way to have these aims implemented in a much more efficient way than would be possible for the NGO alone. NGOs work for policy change because they are well aware of the government’s capacity to implement laws and policies nationally, something NGOs themselves cannot do.

The equating of autonomy and distance has obscured the fact that analytically autonomy in associational activities can mean more than one thing. Apart from meaning out of the reach of the state, autonomy can refer to the self-determination of activities or self-management of programs without assistance from the state. Chinese NGOs are generally able to decide their goals and, as the preceding examples demonstrate, even repression often does not compromise their overall mission, although it may compromise self-management in individual cases. In Chinese NGOs, a do-it-yourself attitude is quite common. Some of the NGOs interviewed for this study have opened spaces for migrant workers to gather or collected books for school children in impoverished areas without government assistance. In China, NGOs actively look for social solutions, but are ready to turn to the state when they want political solutions. The readiness to seek social solutions may derive from the Chinese tradition of communal management of local affairs and the values of communist voluntarism,

\[93\]Interviews with Chinese civil society scholars Yang Tuan, Fan Lizhu and Yuan Ruijun, on November 13, December 21, 2007 and December 28, 2007, respectively.
but simultaneously the prevalence of social solutions is due to the weakness of the state as a welfare provider. Until very recently, the Chinese state simply did not provide the kind of programs which have led many Japanese advocacy NGOs to channel state welfare distributions to solve social problems.94

Chinese NGOs are generally aware that the state restricts their activities and often mention that they might do things differently if it were possible. However, when they referred to what could be understood as the autonomy agenda in the interviews, they usually did not speak about organizational autonomy, but about capacitating ordinary people in communities or in marginalized groups to act on their own. Sometimes this meant acting without state assistance, but other times it meant communicating their needs to the government. Thus, the relevant autonomy conception is not anti-state, but self-determination and ability to do it yourself. Moreover, the centrality of autonomy in the work of NGOs is a controversial issue. Even within a single NGO, there are different views about the right balance between the search for independent activity in society and the NGOs’ primary goals. Some prioritize the issue their NGO is working for and criticize others for focusing on movement building at the cost of practical work.95

Autonomous, Popular, and Democratic?

Scholars tie autonomy to a bundle of other issues which, as will be shown, are independent of autonomy. Among the characteristics that are expected to accompany autonomy are a bottom-up working style, a grassroots approach, attention to popular voice, and democracy. Thus,

95Anonymized.
more autonomous NGOs are often referred to as “grassroots”\textsuperscript{96} NGOs, “popular”\textsuperscript{97} NGOs, “people’s”\textsuperscript{98} NGOs, or even as “unofficial, ‘bottom-up’ grassroots NGOs” (草根組織).\textsuperscript{99} These appellations are intended to contrast with “top-down,” “centralized,” “governmental,” and even “undemocratic.” This terminology implies that NGOs having closer links to the government belong at the less democratic end of the continuum, or even dichotomy. This is by no means self-evident. “Non-state” is a different category than “close to people” or “democratically run.”

In fact, independence does not automatically bring with it increased citizen participation.\textsuperscript{100} Some unregistered NGOs are very good at involving the marginalized in their activities and even help them speak for themselves in public or state arenas.\textsuperscript{101} Others succeed in organizing non-members, such as students and journalists, to join their activities. One NGO had its own man in a poor rural area to assess needs through personal information-gathering and networking, thus reaching the needy left outside of state welfare distributions.\textsuperscript{102} However, some GONGOs likewise engage in dialogue with the local people, although the dialogues mentioned by interviewees were more about the implementation of developmental projects decided elsewhere and even involved an effort to persuade farmers to invest now in new technologies which in the long run will bring them profit.\textsuperscript{103} Although this dialogue addressed farmer’s concerns, there was an evident top-down element in the process. However,

\textsuperscript{98}Zhang and Baum, “Anatomy of a Rural NGO,” 99.
\textsuperscript{101}E.g., associations 17 and 29.
\textsuperscript{102}Association 30. Aid NGO, Beijing.
\textsuperscript{103}Association 15.
many other GONGOs efficiently encourage civic participation and community action.\textsuperscript{104}

One should be careful not to assume, as some have, that “NGOs are a vehicle for democratization in China by virtue of the fact that they are closely connected to the grassroots.”\textsuperscript{105} Research literature from many developing countries shows that often NGOs passing the criteria for autonomy set by Western researchers and donors are poorly integrated with society.\textsuperscript{106} They focus on issues that interest the urban, educated elites who run these NGOs rather than on local needs.\textsuperscript{107} As many NGOs are more accountable to international donors than to the local populace,\textsuperscript{108} they can become tools to advance unpopular policies.\textsuperscript{109} Sometimes NGOs are even inimical to grassroots organizing.\textsuperscript{110} According to Chatterjee, where civil society organizations are exclusive domains of an imported elite culture, they end up providing pedagogy rather than increasing opportunities for free association among ordinary citizens.\textsuperscript{111}


As many Chinese NGOs are run by urban intellectuals and funded by foreign donors, China is not devoid of similar examples. In an interview, Professor Kang Xiaoguang mentioned an international project which allocated funds to an urban Chinese NGO. Unaccustomed to modest living in poor villages, this NGO spent most of the funding on transportation and hotel rooms. Consequently, the time it spent in the villages was too short to gain an understanding of the local situation, a problem that was further exacerbated by the fact that villagers used a dialect unfamiliar to the NGO personnel. The project eventually failed. This example shows that NGOs are not automatically more attuned to social needs than the state is. Some unregistered NGOs have a desire to integrate into the rural communities they help but, because their members are employed in urban areas, they can visit these communities only a few days a year. By contrast, some staff members of GONGOs have years of experience in volunteering in remote rural areas, although others, accustomed to urban lifestyles, are appalled with living conditions among the aid recipients in the rural periphery.

Many Chinese NGOs involve themselves in official community-building programs or public school curricula to reach people at the grassroots. Some NGOs maintain their relations with the needy at the grassroots level through the extensive networks of official mass organizations, such as the Youth League or the Women’s Federation. One GONGO uses the government to locate the needy areas. The state, which collects systematic information from the whole population and from all areas of the country, naturally has more extensive knowledge of the over-

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112 Interviewed on December 14, 2007.
113 Association 11.
114 Association 15.
115 Association 16.
117 Association 4. Also see Carolyn Hsu, “‘Rehabilitating Charity’ in China,” Journal of Civil Society 4, no. 2 (September 2008): 81-96.
118 Association 16.
all situation than any NGO could have.

Independence from the state can be an obstacle to strengthening ties to the populace. Chinese NGO scholar Jin Jinping\textsuperscript{119} believes that ordinary Chinese citizens lack trust in NGOs because the state does little to control mismanagement of funds by NGOs. This mistrust makes it difficult to fundraise from society.\textsuperscript{120} Here, independence from state control may conflict with financial independence and social support, although a closer relationship with the state has not solved similar irregularities within GONGOs. The Chinese, who mistrust NGOs in general,\textsuperscript{121} do not differentiate them according to their distance from the state. A gender rights activist\textsuperscript{122} argues that the main victims of the scandal that hit the Red Cross Society in 2011 were not GONGOs but numerous small organizations which had to close after their funding dried up. There is little that many advocacy NGOs can do to convince the public. Some openly admit that they are not known to the public.\textsuperscript{123}

Another issue that is distinct from autonomy is democratic management of the NGO. Many Chinese NGOs have strong leaders. NGOs are highly dependent on the charisma, skills, and social contacts of their leaders.\textsuperscript{124} Some have non-democratic, non-transparent leadership styles that alienate the staff.\textsuperscript{125} Among the NGOs interviewed, the least leader-centered organizations were GONGOs, which have resources that allow

\textsuperscript{119}Interviewed on December 5, 2007.
\textsuperscript{120}Jessica C. Teets, “Post-Earthquake Relief and Reconstruction Efforts: The Emergence of Civil Society in China?” \textit{China Quarterly}, no. 198 (June 2009): 330-47.
\textsuperscript{121}Christopher Heurlin, “(Dis)Trusting NGOs in China” (paper presented at the Forum on NGO Governance and Management in China Program, University of Alberta, August 16, 2013); Benjamin Tipton, “Follow the Money: Philanthropy in China” (master’s thesis, University of British Columbia, 2012).
\textsuperscript{122}No organizational affiliation.
\textsuperscript{123}Associations 1 and 32. Association 32. Health rights NGO, Beijing.
\textsuperscript{125}Lu, \textit{Non-governmental organizations}. 
them to hire capable personnel, and their large size causes them to rely more on organizational routinization than on personal commands. This does not mean that GONGOs never have charismatic leaders; some do. It does suggest, however, that it may be difficult for unregistered organizations to escape dependency on individual leaders as many have to rely on voluntarism to run the organization. Voluntarism does not prevent democratic decision-making but, to make people devote their free time without pay, voluntarism rewards people by making them feel they are doing things that are meaningful to them. Not only does this limit the number of people ready to take responsibility for routine operations, but it also means that leaders want to feel the organization serves their aims. Therefore, if unregistered NGOs grow beyond a few relatively equal friends, they may be committed to a democratic process but may still, to the dismay of members, centralize power in the leaders, on whose networks they rely for their resources.126 Most unregistered NGOs have few opportunities to build an impersonal organization as they cannot open bank accounts. Although many have other means to receive money from foreign donors, donors usually do not fund an organization’s operational costs as such.

Finally, one must critically analyze the relationship, often assumed to be mutually supportive, between democracy and social space.127 Although generally speaking this may be true, democratization probably would not keep the Chinese state from interfering in society. Blurred state-society boundaries and strong states are typical of democratic East Asian countries as well.128 It would be unrealistic to expect that the problems Chinese NGOs meet with the registration system would simply go

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126 Association 1.
away with democratization. After all, Japanese NGOs have had similar difficulties with the registration system, and even after democratization, some Taiwanese NGOs still find that the registration system is obstructing the expansion of their social reach. Obviously, something regional, either a culturally acquired or a mutually learned approach to legislation, explains these difficulties, quite apart from democracy.

Although democracy usually opens more social space for NGOs, it does not necessarily facilitate NGOs’ efforts to reach their political aims. An international NGO introducing its campaign, already successful in China, to Taiwan, remarked that China is a good environment for NGO campaigns because, when the authoritarian Chinese state becomes aware of a problem, it takes effective action. It thus anticipated that campaigning would be more challenging in Taiwan. In this context, Chinese NGOs’ contribution to expanding social space is evident, but we may ask, now that some NGOs have established fruitful cooperation with the present regime, where would those NGOs stand in a democratization process leading to political pluralism? In the past, business associations have sided with the state against the democracy movement.

**Big Society, but Small State?**

Although NGOs participating in this study often criticized the Chinese state for regulating the wrong things and making their work difficult,
many of them also hold that the state should regulate more things than it currently does. They want the state to intervene in domestic violence, illegal logging, and many other social and environmental problems much more actively than it does now. Thus, NGOs with political goals are more, rather than less, likely to work with the government.

The interviews implicitly reveal that NGOs turn to the government because they take it as a legitimate actor in many fields. NGOs recognize that the state has the monopoly of legislation and policy implementation. None of the NGOs interviewed for this study questioned that there should be public schools or government programs for social and economic development. They do not hold anti-state disposition, but distinguish between what the state does and what society should do. Moreover, the NGOs interviewed for this study have internalized the idea of a strong developmental state actively engaging in society and people’s lives. Most NGOs even approved state assistance for associational development and activities, sometimes hoping for more assistance than is currently available. Others wanted to be involved in shaping the policy agenda, rather than reducing the scope of state activity.

The legitimacy and centrality of the state becomes evident, for example, in one NGO’s definition of two commonly used terms for civil society in the Chinese language. According to the NGO, gongmin shehui (citizen society) refers to social activity which reveals problems in society for the government in order to make it solve the problems, while shimin shehui (city people’s society) refers to service recipients’ activities to improve social services. The state is central in both areas, either as the policy implementer or as a service provider. Simultaneously, civil society should have an active role. In this picture, civil society generates bottom-up demands reflecting social realities and needs. Nevertheless, NGOs recognize top-down processes as necessary. For example, after the Ya’an earthquake, NGOs saw themselves as superior in providing accurate information about the grassroots needs, but acknowledged the need

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134 Association 14.
for the coordination of aid activities by the state.\textsuperscript{135} In contrast to the idea of small government and big society,\textsuperscript{136} common in Chinese academic discussions, Chinese civil society practitioners interviewed for this study rather seemed to desire a strong state and strong society. In this ideal, civil society is freer to make its own choices and to mobilize society to make demands towards the government, but simultaneously the state provides welfare more comprehensively and implements laws more efficiently. Even an NGO having the reduction of taxes on its agenda simultaneously demands better welfare services. It aims for a transparent tax system using collected taxes for the benefit of the people, rather than a small government.\textsuperscript{137} NGOs do not want to reduce the scope of the state, but many of them insist that the state should change its top-down decision-making style and adopt more bottom-up initiatives from civil society.

\textbf{Conclusions}

This study has shown that organizational charts and registered statuses tell little about the distance Chinese advocacy NGOs maintain with the state or about their reach to society. As this article shows, the presumed advantages of being autonomous are not automatically there and, therefore, it should not presumed that more independent NGOs differ from GONGOs in some predictable ways. Individual organizations in both categories can succeed or fail in promoting popular participation and democratic values, depending on their own values and capacities rather than on their distance from the government. Moreover, this distance is a dynamic, not a fixed, factor. For Chinese advocacy NGOs, autonomy from the state is situational and partly strategic. However, the closeness to the govern-

\begin{flushleft}\textsuperscript{135}Association 36. NGO center, Zhejiang.\end{flushleft}


\begin{flushleft}\textsuperscript{137}Association 37. Think tank, Beijing.\end{flushleft}
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ment is not explained only by the NGOs’ pursuit of influence and state-distributed resources, nor is it dependent on opportunities, such as allies in government agencies sharing the NGO’s priorities. Political culture and social expectations also explain why NGOs adopt certain strategies, practices, and vocabularies. Both civil society practitioners’ and the public’s expectations have been shaped by the decades of Communist Party rule propagating certain norms and practices. Finally, personal traits are not irrelevant in explaining the pursuit of autonomy. For example, one leader attributed the readiness of his NGO to adopt controversial issues and tactics to the fact that he personally “likes challenges.”

By contrast, many other interviewees emphasized their willingness to work with others, including the government.

The closeness to the state is partly attributable to the comparative advantages that states, in China and other countries, have when it comes to scale, opportunities, resources, and norms. This imbalance means that often advocacy NGOs need to work not only with the state, but through the state, especially if they want to ensure a national impact through laws and policies. In China these comparative advantages are a reality even in the fields which are often thought to be the strengths of NGOs, such as the division of power within an organization and the reach to the grassroots. The Chinese state manipulates its comparative advantages vis-à-vis NGOs to slant the situation even further in its favor. More than repressive techniques, NGOs interviewed for this study worry that, in order to be permitted to operate, there is a limit to their social reach, funding, and activities. All of these limitations keep advocacy NGOs small and restrict their social reach, but seldom limit their autonomy to choose issues that are meaningful to them.

138Association 12.
Appendix: Interviewees

Association 1. Environmental NGO, unregistered, Beijing, three interviewees.
Association 2. Rural development NGO, registered, Guizhou.
Association 3. Human rights NGO, registered, Beijing.
Association 4. Gender NGO, unregistered, Beijing, two interviewees.
Association 5. NGO training center, registered, Shanghai, two interviewees.
Association 6. Environmental NGO, unregistered, Jiangsu, three interviewees.
Association 7. Foreign policy NGO, GONGO, Beijing.
Association 8. Labor rights NGO, registered but not as an NGO, Guangdong.
Association 9. NGO training center, registered, Beijing.
Association 10. Educational NGO, registered as a school, Beijing.
Association 11. Environmental NGO, unregistered, Beijing, two interviewees.
Association 12. Health rights NGO, registered but not as an NGO, Beijing.
Association 14. Environmental NGO, unregistered, Shanghai.
Association 15. Aid organization, GONGO, Beijing.
Association 16. Aid organization, GONGO, Beijing.
Association 17. Migrant worker NGO, unregistered, Beijing.
Association 18. Labor rights NGO, registered but not as NGO, Beijing.
Association 19. Environmental NGO, registered, Beijing.
Association 20. Environmental NGO, registered, Shanghai, two interviewees.
Association 21. Community work NGO, registered, Shanghai, two interviewees.
Association 22. Gender rights NGO, unregistered, Beijing.
Association 23. Educational NGO, registered, Hebei.
Association 24. Labor rights NGO, registration in Hong Kong, working in Guangdong.
Association 25. Migrant issue NGO, registered, Beijing.
Association 26. Environmental NGO, unregistered, Sichuan, two interviewees.
Association 27. Environmental student NGO, registered, Sichuan, two interviewees.
Association 28. Aid NGO, registered, Beijing.
Association 29. Health rights NGO, registered but not as an NGO, Beijing, two interviewees.
Association 30. Aid NGO, registered, Beijing, two interviewees.
Association 31. Environmental NGO, registered, Shanghai, two interviewees.
Association 32. Health rights NGO, registered but not as NGO, Beijing.
Association 33. Gender rights NGO, registered, Guangdong.
Association 34. Health rights NGO, registered, Beijing, three interviewees.
Association 35. Environmental NGO, unregistered in China, Beijing, two interviewees.
Association 36. NGO center, registered, Zhejiang.
Association 37. Think tank, registered but not as NGO, Beijing.
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