Growing up and ‘going out’: The development and internationalization of Chinese NGOs

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The puzzle: NGOs have emerged in China, but authoritarianism persists

- How do NGOs emerge in closed political systems, like China’s? What specific steps do they take to survive?
- What effect has the emergence of Chinese NGOs had on the political status quo?
- How will the nature of NGO development affect the future of activism in China? And NGO-state relations elsewhere?
What makes the book unique?

- Focused on PROCESS, not (presumed) RESULT
- A larger-N comparative study of different types of NGOs: environment, HIV/AIDS, gay & lesbian
- ‘Disaggregates’ the state, beyond Beijing
  - Attentive to state, but focused on society
- ‘De-romanticizes’ activism: examines leaders as economic actors; ‘a career, not just a cause’
Case selection: reason to expect different response across issue areas

D.V.: State Response

Key I.V.: Goals & Policy Correlation

Environment

HIV/AIDS

Gay & Lesbian

Negative

Positive

High

Low
Multi-method, cross-regional data collection and analyses

- Data collection: Field research in China ’07-’08

- *Exploratory*: In-depth, semi-structured interviews with NGO leaders (~80)

- *Confirmatory*: Web-based, nationwide survey (~100)

- Analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively
What do NGOs have to work with?
The analytical framework

- Political Opportunities: small ‘policy windows’, not ‘big opportunities’
- Economic Opportunities: financial resources, often tied to political opportunities
- Personal Opportunities: strong, but fickle and fleeting relationships
Opportunities emerge by accident and design

• Economic development has side effects; state knows problems need to be solved

• Decentralization and the retreating state (*small state, big society* / 小政府，大社会)

• State management through legal registration (*see The China Quarterly 2011*)
Received wisdom: expect different relations across issue areas

- **Goals & Policy Correlation**
  - **Environment**
  - **HIV/AIDS**
  - **Gay & Lesbian**

- **State Response**
  - **Negative**
  - **Positive**
  - **High**
  - **Low**
NGO-state relations were mostly as expected in Beijing...
But these patterns in Beijing were rarely duplicated elsewhere

- Local interests differ from and matter *more* than central interests
  - Decentralization plays important role
  - Incentive structures for cadre promotion complicate political space for NGOs
    - Interests in *economic development* can increase or decrease opportunities
Henan: reputational concerns close space, especially for HIV/AIDS work

Goals & Policy Correlation

High

Low

HIV/AIDS

Gay & Lesbian

Environment

State Response

Positive

Negative
Yunnan: economic interests changed opportunities for issue areas

- State Response: Negative - Positive
- Goals & Policy Correlation: Low - High

- Environment
- Gay & Lesbian
- HIV/AIDS

Correlation Graph:
All (Chinese NGO) politics are local

- NGOs' choices are highly constrained by local government interests; close relations with the center don’t guarantee viability.
- Issues and regions that were once ‘heaven’ for NGOs might quickly turn into ‘hell’.
- As government interests change, NGOs must adapt to stay in their good graces.
Agency matters: NGOs can adapt to enjoy more opportunities

- Adjust group activities to match (local) government interests, rhetorically and substantively
- Increase transparency, actively and passively
- Give government credit for NGO success
- Avoid networking with other organizations; keep a distance from ‘troublemakers’
Theoretical and empirical implications

• Relationship between NGOs and authoritarian governments is not zero-sum
  • ‘Co-dependent’ state–society relations
• NGOs can, surprisingly, strengthen authoritarianism
• By de-romanticizing NGOs and leaders their strategic and economic behavior is revealed
Understanding NGO development helps explain other emerging patterns

- Working carefully within confines of the system, NGOs can make policy change (at the margins)
- Funders might not be able to achieve dual goals of tackling social problems and build civil society
- Explains the appeal of alternative models of funding for NGOs—social entrepreneurship
- Success in China could mean this model of state-society relations is exportable
Exporting China’s model of state-society relations?

- The society-side of the ‘go out’ policy
- What happens when NGOs who are doing the ‘teaching’ have themselves emerged within an entirely different political context?
- You know your own environment best; do you do as you were taught?
- What effect could this have on the development of NGO-state relations elsewhere?
Hypothesizing the effect of Chinese NGOs on local NGOs

- $H_0$ No effect

- $H_1$ Effect, but unintended and weak (no state links?); pro-authoritarian

- $H_2$ Effect, but intended and strong (state links?); pro-authoritarian

- $H_3$ Effect, but not as state intended; pro-democracy, ‘transnational activism’?

- $H_4$ Chinese NGOs re-socialized by others, re-learn from Western NGOs operating in same context?

- $H_5$ Chinese NGOs and Western NGOs conflict, a ‘soft power war’?

- $H_6$ Effect of Chinese NGOs and Western NGOs not too different; co-dependent state-society relations universal?
Testing the hypotheses

• Funding sources likely matter; ‘independent’ v. state-supported?

• British Academy-funded research to commence Spring/Summer 2014
  • Interview Chinese NGOs operating in Malawi, Zambia, and Tanzania; and their African counterparts

• Other comparative research examining Chinese NGOs operating in Southeast Asia
Thank you!

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