BRIEFING PAPER

The Growth of Civil Society in China
Key challenges for NGOs

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- NGOs have grown rapidly in China since the beginning of reforms two and a half decades ago.

- However, many problems need to be addressed before Chinese NGOs can become more effective civil society actors.

- Key problems include certain components of current government policies on NGOs, limited government capacity for controlling NGO corruption, NGO dependence on the government, motivational problems with NGO staff, and some features of China's political culture that are not conducive to civil society activism.

Introduction

Since the late 1980s, the concept of civil society has gained great international prominence. It routinely features in public debates, academic writings, media reports, and policy analyses and recommendations on almost any issue of current concern. Civil society organizations, notably NGOs, have also enjoyed a spectacular growth over this period, receiving increased support from multilateral institutions, governments, the corporate sector and the general public.

China watchers have always shown great interest in the development of civil society in the country, largely because of its widely perceived potential for bringing about democratic political change. But they have also attached importance to civil society, especially NGOs, on account of the other vital functions they are supposed to be able to perform, such as providing social services, promoting community development, protecting vulnerable social groups and generating debate on public policies. Much hope has been pinned on their role in helping to meet the enormous challenges which China currently faces in addressing a large number of social problems and improving its governance.

Is such hope well placed? Can Chinese NGOs live up to expectations? This paper is the first in a series that will survey civil society in China, assessing its performance, examining the key issues it faces, and analysing its future development trends.

Defining NGOs in China

The official Chinese term for NGOs is 'popular organization'. This comprises two sub-categories: 'social organization' and 'private non-enterprise unit' (PNEU). Both types of organizations are non-profit-making, but social organizations are membership-based whereas PNEUs are not.

Chinese researchers and practitioners often divide Chinese NGOs into 'officially organized NGOs' and 'popular NGOs'. The former are initiated by the government and receive government subsidies. Their staff are often on the government's payroll, and their leadership positions are often held by government officials. By contrast, popular NGOs are initiated by individual citizens and receive no government subsidies. Their staff are not government employees, and they do not have officials occupying their top management positions.[1] Officially organized NGOs are also frequently called 'top-down NGOs', while popular NGOs are referred to as 'bottom-up NGOs'.

Although the official Chinese term is 'popular organization', 'NGO' and two other terms – 'non-profit organization' and 'third sector organization' – are also frequently used in China. Technically, these terms have different nuances, but they are often used inter-changeably.

The growth of NGOs since the reforms

The emergence of an NGO sector in China has been a direct consequence of the changes to both the Chinese state and society since the beginning of the reforms in 1978. Reforms have not only led to a relaxation of state control over the economy and society, but have also seen the state actively creating and sponsoring NGOs in order to transfer to them certain functions which it used to perform itself under the command system. In the economic sphere, the government has sought to reduce its direct management role by establishing intermediary organizations, such as trade associations and chambers of commerce, to perform sectoral coordination and regulation functions. In the social welfare sphere, the government wants to foster an NGO sector to which it can offload some of the burden of service provision (see, e.g., Wong 1998). In the social development sphere, the government hopes that NGOs can mobilize societal resources to supplement its own spending (see, e.g., Howell 1997).

Meanwhile, societal actors have been quick to exploit the greater social space and the non-state-controlled resources now available to them to pursue their independent interests and agendas. NGOs provide an important channel for such pursuits. With the impetus to the formation of NGOs coming from both the state and society, the number of NGOs has increased rapidly in the reform era. Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) statistics show that before 1978 there had been only about 100 national social organizations

in China. By the end of 2003 their number had reached 1,736. Meanwhile, the number of local-level social organizations grew from 6,000 to 142,121. The number of PNEUs, which did not exist before the reforms, reached 124,491.[2] Moreover, the social organizations that existed before the reforms were fully controlled by the state and mainly served the state's objectives, whereas many NGOs that have emerged since the reforms enjoy considerable autonomy and work to promote societal interests. A good example of such NGOs are those that are 'organized around marginalized interests' (Howell 2004), such as self-help groups formed by people living with HIV/AIDS, or organizations championing labour rights.

Despite the rapid growth of NGOs, many factors have prevented them from effectively performing public-benefit functions. These factors range from government policies on NGOs to the characteristics of political participation in China. Some key factors are discussed below.

Government policies

Wary of the potential threat to its authority and rule posed by organizations such as the *Falun Gong*,[3] the government has adopted a policy of forestalling the formation of NGOs which might challenge it politically, weaken its control over society or constrict its autonomy in formulating economic and social policies. For example, a set of internal guidelines followed by civil affairs departments in considering applications to establish NGOs stipulates that no NGO set up by 'specific social groups', such as migrant labourers, laid-off workers, or ex-servicemen, should be allowed to exist.[4] Apparently the government fears that these often disgruntled social groups would cause it big trouble once they are able to organize themselves. In a collection of Ministry of Civil Affairs documents, several reports by provincial governments highlighted their achievements in thwarting attempts by members of these social groups to form their own organizations. For example, a report from Shanghai mentioned that some rural migrants employed at a Shanghai factory had formed a union which sent a letter of petition to higher authorities demanding reduced working hours and increased pay and threatened further actions if their demands were ignored. The report said that the local government successfully persuaded the union to disband (POMB 2000).

Not only does the government proscribe NGOs that are liable to make difficult demands on it or challenge its policies, it also wants to prevent *any* NGO from growing too big and powerful by developing an extended organizational network. This is demonstrated by two clauses in the current government regulations for NGO management and registration. The first clause prohibits NGOs from establishing regional branches. The second one bars any individual from serving as the legal representative of more than one NGO. The first clause means that national NGOs cannot set up any branch outside Beijing, while provincial and county-level NGOs must confine their organizations to the

provincial capital city or the county seat. NGOs carrying out the same activities can exist simultaneously at all the different administrative levels, but they must remain separate organizations.

The clause concerning NGOs' legal representatives also has the effect of restricting the organizational expansion of NGOs. 'Legal representative' is the role usually assumed by the leader of an NGO. After successfully setting up and running a popular NGO that provides innovative social services, many founders have tried to establish similar organizations in other cities, in order to make the services available to more people and to spread their ideas. However, because of the 'no regional branch' rule, any extension of the original organization in other locations must be registered as independent NGOs, which means founders cannot be the legal representatives, i.e. the leaders, of both the original and the new organizations. In other words, the services they set up in different places cannot be run as a unified operation under a single leadership, which makes the scaling-up of the services more difficult.

The government's regulation of the NGO sector has also been guided by a professed desire to improve efficiency and eliminate unproductive competition between NGOs. While these appear to be sensible objectives, the means whereby the government tries to achieve them – one of the most heavily criticized clauses in the current NGO regulations – has often amounted to further cramping of NGOs' space. This clause states that the government will not allow any new NGO to be established if in the same administrative area there is already an NGO doing similar work. This stipulation has meant not only that many popular NGOs have been denied approval for establishment, but also that some existing ones have been forced either to disband or to be incorporated into officially organized NGOs. For example, since the Disabled Persons' Federation (DPF), a semi-official organization, already has local chapters in every city, popular NGOs formed by disabled people have not been allowed to register, even though many disabled people and their relatives are dissatisfied with the DPF and feel that it has done a poor job in representing their interests. In one city, a popular membership NGO for disabled people had existed alongside a similar NGO that was affiliated with the DPF for over 10 years, but after the central government ordered an overhaul of the NGO sector in 1998, the local civil affairs department refused to renew the popular NGO's registration and forced it to merge with the organization affiliated with the DPF. As a result, the popular NGO's ability to promote the interests of its members was constrained.

Government capacity for NGO administration

The government's tight regulation of NGOs is just one side of the story. Its desire to keep effective control over NGOs has not been matched by its capacity to enforce its policies. Researchers have observed that in this particular arena the familiar problem of the central government in Beijing experiencing increasing difficulty in securing compliance with its policies from local governments has once again manifested itself. As Saich (2000: 140) wrote: '[L]ocal governments will approve social organizations or other non-state bodies that contribute to the local economy and well-being. This is irrespective of formal regulatory requirements.' In fact, to pose the problem in terms of the Centre versus the localities simplifies the situation. The central government is not dealing with recalcitrant local governments as single entities on this issue. Rather, the challenge it faces is how to discipline myriad individual government agencies from the national all the way down to the lowest administrative level, which often put their narrow departmental interests before the overall strategic interest of the state. As a Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) official said in an interview, many government units simply use the cover of NGOs to create agency slush funds and to make money through charging illegal fees or extorting donations from enterprises. Apparently, these agencies have every incentive to circumvent central government policies in order to protect their NGOs.

On the one hand, individual government units often fail to discipline the NGOs under their sponsorship; on the other hand, Civil Affairs, the agency charged with policing NGO activities, is seriously constrained in its ability to perform this duty. In 2001, the MCA's Popular Organization Management Bureau (POMB) had only 25 staff, who in addition to developing and coordinating NGO-related policies, drafting strategic plans for the sector, and providing guidance and advice to local civil affair departments, were also responsible for registering and conducting annual reviews of all national and cross-regional NGOs as well as foreign NGOs that operate in China. As one Chinese researcher commented in an interview, the POMB staff did not even have time to read the annual reports of all the NGOs under their supervision, let alone effectively monitor and review their activities. The situation at provincial and lower levels was similar or even worse. Many provincial civil affairs bureaux had just five or six staff working on NGO administration, who must exercise oversight over thousands of NGOs, including at least several hundred provincial-level NGOs under their direct supervision. Below the provincial level, many civil affairs bureaux had such limited human resources that they could not dedicate a single full-time staff member to NGO-related work. Therefore, as many civil affairs officials openly admitted, and indeed complained, they were woefully ill-equipped for the NGO management duty which the state had laid on them.

Given its limited capacity, the government appears to have given priority to monitoring and controlling NGOs which it suspects on political and ideological grounds, while worrying less about NGOs that are guilty only of economic misdeeds. The combined effect of the state's NGO policy and its limited policy enforcement capacity is that certain types of NGOs, particularly those that are likely to perform the political functions often ascribed to civil society

organizations, such as challenging state policies, championing the rights of disadvantaged social groups, and promoting pluralism and diversity, have limited space to pursue their activities. Meanwhile, many NGOs that engage in economic corruption and malfeasance – in other words conduct that constitutes the antithesis of civil society virtues – have been able to continue their operations unhindered.

NGO dependence on the government

Both officially organized and popular NGOs depend on the government for various vital support and resources. For example, thanks partly to the government's attempt to restrict their size, most NGOs lack the organizational capacity to implement even medium-scale projects. They therefore need to collaborate with the government and rely on its administrative network to implement their projects. NGOs are vulnerable to obstructive and predatory behaviour by individual government agencies or officials, which can jeopardize their work. In such situations, they must seek support from other government agencies and officials and rely on their protection to solve their problems. Because of the government's lack of transparency, NGOs rely on good connections to the government to obtain information on its policies and practices which directly affect their work. In short, even if NGOs do not receive any funding from the government, they are still dependent on it for their ability to operate.

This dependence on the government has limited NGOs' usefulness as champions of interests and values that are different from those of the government. Consider the example of an NGO active in the field of women's rights. It has collaborated with local radio and television stations to make programmes that educate women about their legal rights. The programmes proved to be extremely effective in raising the awareness of these issues not just among women but also in the local population at large. Despite the tremendous impact of the media, however, the NGO failed to fully harness its power in the service of its cause, because it was afraid of offending the government. The television programmes it produced featured typical cases in which women's rights had been trampled. The NGO was very circumspect in choosing the topics for these programmes. It covered stories such as extra-marital affairs resulting in husbands abandoning their wives and children, but avoided others which would show the local authorities in a bad light. For example, a policeman and his colleagues beat up a woman after she had a fight with his girlfriend. The woman sought justice but the local police force ignored her complaints. Although it tried to help the woman through its government connections, the NGO decided not to expose the case in the media, as it would antagonize the police department whose goodwill the NGO needed.

NGOs' dependence on the government not only constrains their actions but also affects their attitude towards the vulnerable and disadvantaged people who are supposed to be their *raison d'être*. Many NGOs consider their relationship with government agencies and officials as the most important of all their relationships. In contrast, their clients, who tend to be the most powerless among NGOs' contacts and who depend on them for services, are often treated as the least important people. NGOs themselves are not unaware of the contradictions involved in such a ranking of their relationships, but they argue that this is unavoidable, and think that they have got their priorities right. As one NGO manager said:

> If you are very close to the government and your work is praised by the government, it is beneficial. But it can also have a down side. You become distant from ordinary people. Ordinary people will think that you are the same as the government. Those people who distrust the government will not support you any more. They will think that you are wallowing in the mire with the government. But if you don't curry favour with the government you cannot get things done. *In the end, the support of the government is far more important than the support of the common people.* Besides, people have different views. There are also those who will support you because you enjoy an excellent relationship with the government.

Their dependence on the government has also been responsible for the poor record of many officially organized NGOs' poor record in fulfilling useful functions on its behalf. Officially organized NGOs are often created to assist with the administrative tasks of government agencies and to facilitate the implementation of government policies. Some government-initiated foundations, for example, are set up to raise money from non-governmental sources to fund government-identified programmes. However, the performance of these NGOs has been very uneven. A considerable number of officially-initiated foundations have failed to raise any funds.[5] In the government's own assessment, one-third of national-level social organizations had been 'useful', one-third had been 'of limited use', and one-third had been 'completely useless or even worse', i.e., they actually created problems for the government rather than playing any useful role.[6]

Why have so many officially organized NGOs been ineffective tools for the government? As part of its reform programme, the national leadership has encouraged government agencies to transfer some of their functions to NGOs, but many agencies at the local level are reluctant to do so, as it would reduce their power and resources. Therefore, although they have set up new NGOs in response to the call from higher levels, they have not handed over any real responsibility to them (see, e.g., Foster 2002). This is one of the main factors accounting for the limited impact of these NGOs.

In addition, many officially organized NGOs are staffed by serving or retired government employees whose incomes and job security are not tied to the fortune of the NGOs. Some of these NGO staff have

displayed considerable entrepreneurial flair and raised money themselves to undertake projects, but there are also others who will only carry out activities if they receive project funding from the government. When there is no money, they do nothing. After a field trip to a western province, a Beijing-based NGO researcher found that many staff of officially organized NGOs he interviewed there were unperturbed about the fact that they were sitting idly in their offices all day long. The general secretary of one such NGO said that they were 'on strike', because the local government was in financial crisis and had no money to give his organization. NGOs like this have continued to exist because they do not need to earn their living. By creating the dependency of such organizations, the government has only itself to blame for their ineffectiveness.

Motives of NGO practitioners

As mentioned above, many officially organized NGOs at local levels are simply tools for local government agencies to create agency slush funds. NGOs allow these agencies to set up bank accounts where they can put their off-the-book income. Obviously such NGOs cannot be expected to make a genuine contribution to the public interest. Some popular NGOs have also been set up by people whose real motive is profit. Loopholes in the government's NGO management system have made it possible for profit-oriented organizations to register as NGOs, especially at the local level. Many fee-charging social service organizations, such as private nursing homes and childcare institutions, fall into this category.

Even if their motive is not profit, many NGO practitioners still have self-serving purposes. According to one outspoken women's NGO activist, a university lecturer, there were four reasons why she took part in NGO activities: they provided her with data for her teaching and research; they allowed her to make useful new friends, thereby expanding her social network; they brought some extra income; and they gave her opportunities to go on foreign trips. This woman considered her case to be typical. She had worked for several well-known women's NGOs in China and knew many inside stories. She was very cynical about the motives of most leaders of women's NGOs, believing they had similar goals to hers but that in addition they were after fame.

As this woman pointed out, it was not that these NGO leaders did not believe in what they were doing. They did care about the causes they had chosen for themselves and had worked energetically to promote them. However, they were not exactly value-driven. Their NGO activism did not necessarily spring from deeply held beliefs or ideals. It was motivated as much by personal gain as by anything else. This interest in personal gain was reflected in the way these leaders managed their organizations. There was often a total lack of transparency and democratic decision-making. The leaders wanted to control everything and were reluctant to share opportunities and acclamation with their staff. Consequently they all had difficulty

retaining talented people. Furthermore, this woman argued, because the leaders' actions were not founded on a passion for such ideals as equality, democracy and the empowerment of women, they could hardly inspire others with these ideals. In fact, they often showed little regard for these principles in their treatment of the NGOs' beneficiaries. As to the NGOs' ordinary staff, they had not experienced much equality, democracy or empowerment themselves because of their leaders' autocratic style, so how far were they able to go in embodying these values in their own interactions with the NGOs' clients?

This woman's opinion was shared by many other NGO workers. They often complained that their leaders treated the NGOs as their private property. As one proof of this, many cited the fact that their leaders were extremely reluctant to set up boards of directors to supervise their actions. Some staff felt that they were working for the fame of their leaders rather than a public cause. Many said their leaders did not allow them to represent the organizations in external meetings for fear that they would start to make a name for themselves, and many were disgruntled at the monopolization of opportunities by their leaders. One person said she was only able to go on a study tour to a foreign country because the donor agency that funded the tour specifically invited her, as it was directly related to the work she was doing. This greatly annoyed her manager, who tried unsuccessfully to find excuses to prevent her from going on the trip. Not surprisingly, many staff also complained that their leaders would tolerate no disagreement, let alone criticism.

Despite the complaints of their staff, to conclude that many NGO leaders started out with some specific targets of selfish gains, such as fame, professional opportunities or material rewards, is probably doing them an injustice, for at the beginning many of them simply did not know exactly what they would achieve with the projects they were embarking on. On the other hand, many founders of popular NGOs did admit that self-fulfilment was their main motivation. Many of them were not satisfied with the jobs they were doing and were looking for ways to put their talent to better use.

While there is nothing wrong in seeking self-realization through NGO work, the fact that the original motivation of some NGO leaders is self-realization rather than passion for the specific issues addressed by their NGOs does tend to present problems for the organizations later on. It is true that wanting a fulfilling career and a sense of personal achievement is not the same as wanting specific selfish gains, such as fame or professional opportunities. However, in practice one can easily associate the latter with the former. It seems that, once their work has brought them rewards such as fame and professional opportunities, some NGO leaders do attach great importance to them and are unable to convince those around them that they care about the NGOs' missions more than about these personal gains. At the same time, their success is dependent on their being portrayed as high-minded individuals who put self-interest aside to pursue public causes. This discrepancy

between the public image and the actual behaviour of NGO leaders as observed by their colleagues appears to be an important reason why there is often a great deal of cynicism among NGO staff about the motives of their leaders and the purposes of their organizations.

The prevalent cynicism among NGO staff has contributed to an internal culture in many NGOs which is characterized by a lack of trust and openness between leaders and other members, a lack of institutional loyalty, much backbiting and incessant power struggles. While many NGO staff complain about the self-serving behaviour of their leaders, many of them also inadvertently reveal that they themselves do not always put the interest of their organizations above their own. For example, many have no scruples about badmouthing their leaders to donors and clients, which often serves to undermine the latter's confidence not just in the leaders but in the organization as a whole. It is not uncommon for staff members to make contact with donors and other key supporters behind their leaders' backs to promote their own schemes. Quite a few of them admit that they plan to start their own NGOs or projects and to this end are secretly exploiting the resources of the organizations where they are currently working.

Just as NGO staff are often full of complaints about their leaders, so NGO leaders also have plenty to say about the cynical tactics of their staff. One leader said that two senior staff in her organization never disagreed with any of her decisions at staff meetings. However, if they did not like these decisions they would afterwards go to the NGO's patron in the government to make mischief, so that he would pressure her to change her decisions. Another leader said that her deputy had tried to oust her through backstage manoeuvres rather than an open challenge. The deputy supplied clients with details of various behind-the-scenes activities in the NGO, which served to foment their dissatisfaction with her leadership. Eventually some of the clients joined forces to demand that she hand over the helm to the deputy. Many NGO leaders feel that their staff often have personal agendas and do not share information with them.

In short, while it would be unrealistic to expect all NGO workers to be good Samaritans who are without any selfish concerns, motivational issues appear to have contributed to a very unhealthy internal culture that has plagued many Chinese NGOs. Such a culture has not only undermined their public-service performance but also threatens their organizational sustainability, as is attested by the internecine wars that have crippled many NGOs.

Political culture

Various studies of China's political culture have identified a number of features that are not conducive to collective action and civil society activism. These include elitism, fatalism, and lack of cooperative spirit and group solidarity (see, e.g., Liu 1996; Jennings 1997; Ogden 2002). These features cannot be attributed to a single cause. Rather, history, customs and tradition, and past and present political institutions have all played a part in producing these features.

Both qualitative and quantitative studies of political culture have intrinsic limitations, therefore simply using the conclusions of such studies to explain the weakness of Chinese NGOs would not constitute rigorous analysis. Furthermore, the existence of cultural traits that are not conducive to civil society activism does not mean that such activism cannot develop in China. In analysing the problems frequently encountered by Chinese NGOs, insights from studies of Chinese political culture and political behaviour are clearly useful, although they should be applied with caution. The cultural attributes and behavioural patterns identified by these studies do seem to have some effect on NGO performance. Many Chinese NGOs in different sectors and different geographic locations seem to face a number of similar obstacles, and the relevance of cultural factors therefore needs to be considered.

Among many popular membership-based NGOs there appears to be widespread pessimism (or realism) about what they can achieve through their actions. This pessimism is apparently responsible for many people's lack of interest in engaging in advocacy activities to challenge the status quo, especially current government policies and practices. Many people stress that NGOs should not set unrealistic goals for themselves and should be sympathetic to the government's position. For example, the leader of an association of parents of disabled children remarked:

> When so many able-bodied people have been laid off, how can we realistically expect the government to give subsidies to families with disabled people, or find jobs for disabled people? My brother lives in New Zealand. I have heard from him that in New Zealand the government takes care of everything for disabled children. There are special provisions for them so they receive more benefits than normal children. If we want China to do the same, I am not even sure if it can be achieved 50 years from now, so I don't blame the government. There is no point in pressuring it to do what it is incapable of doing.

Another parent who serves on the governing board of two popular disability NGOs said:

> I have said on many occasions that the economy of our country has not developed to a stage when we can expect the government alone to pay for the care of our disabled children, so let individuals, families, and society all contribute to it. I always say to other parents that we should face the reality and should not shout abuse in public whenever we are dissatisfied with things. Government officials also have their difficulties. We shouldn't go to government offices to make trouble whenever things don't go our way.

Even if they are not completely pessimistic about their ability to make a difference, most people want quick

solutions to their problems and are unwilling to devote time and energy to any activity that does not promise immediate returns or concrete benefits to themselves. Most revealing is the remark of a participant at a national conference of parents of mentally disabled children. The remark was made in response to another participant's suggestion that they contact representatives to the People's Congress to ask them to introduce new legislation concerning social service provision for disabled children:

> It is too slow a remedy to be of any help. Even if we can make the People's Congress adopt new legislation to provide social services for disabled children, it may take five years for it to happen, but we cannot wait that long. By then our children will have grown up. So let us focus on practical issues instead.

At the same conference several parents from different cities all mentioned that the preoccupation with their individual short-term needs had prevented many parents from taking part in collective actions to pursue long-term goals. In one city, some parents of autistic children set up an association which effectively lobbied government special education schools to accept their children, who used to be denied access. However, once the problem of their own children's schooling had been solved, some initial members of the association, including its two founders, pulled out of the organization, which continued to focus on the issue of educational access for autistic children because many new parents who still faced this problem had joined the association.

In another city, a parents' association was set up with the encouragement of a local NGO leader who consciously tried to promote civil society activities. Its objective was to organize parents to influence government policies on welfare provision for disabled people, but it was unable to mobilize active participation from many parents. As the president of the association said:

> The Chinese people are very practical. They only make investments when they are assured of returns. If there is going to be a 50% gain, people will give you 50% support, otherwise they give you nothing. Because they did not see any material benefits, parents were not keen on the association. The two vice presidents and I made ourselves very busy but achieved nothing.

Fear of incurring the displeasure of authorities, common among members and potential members of popular NGOs, presents a further impediment to the development and effective functioning of these bodies. At the above-mentioned conference of parents of mentally disabled children, some parents, when encouraged to organize themselves, were afraid that the authorities would accuse them of participating in illegal activities. For example, at a group discussion, after hearing parents complaining that they received little support from either the government or society, a

teacher suggested that families living close to each other could form small groups and meet regularly to exchange information and engage in mutual aid. Even such an innocuous scheme scared some parents, who feared they would be found guilty of setting up illegal organizations.

In a public speech in 2002, Meng Weina, an NGO activist for nearly 20 years, argued that the development of civil society in China might have been hindered more by the people than by the government. Over the years she and colleagues in her organization had used various means to push the government to provide more welfare for disabled people. Although the government was often annoyed by their sharp criticism, it had by and large responded favourably to these legitimate demands. On the other hand, her open criticism of the government and bold challenge to existing policies and practices had frightened many members of her own organization as well as other NGOs, who had tried to distance themselves from her and accused her of being overly political. As a result, Meng Weina felt that she had faced more pressure from 'the people' than from the government.

Meng Weina's charges were at least partially borne out by comments from those who had worked with her. In dealing with the government, Meng Weina had not shrunk from confrontational strategies. For example, she once led some parents of disabled children on a demonstration outside the municipal People's Congress to demand that the government provide financial assistance to disabled children in non-governmental schools. Some people who had taken part in the demonstration later argued that Meng Weina was wrong to involve them in such activities. One parent said: 'In retrospect I think she had no consideration for our safety. China has its specific situation. What if the government arrested us? She should have thought about protecting us. If she organized the demonstration now I would not have taken part in it.' A former colleague of Meng Weina's said: 'She is too emotional and tactless. We should take strong measures only after courteous ones fail. We should try to get what we want from the government through friendly negotiations rather than confrontational strategies.'

Such views were disputed by a disabled woman who set up a club for disabled youth with the help of Meng Weina. As this woman remarked: 'Many people criticize her for using radical measures, but if she had not taken radical measures the government would not have paid attention to her.' Her experience of trying to make the government approve the club had convinced this woman that they would not have succeeded if they had not followed Meng Weina's advice and put some pressure on the government:

> If we did not fight for our rights we would never have succeeded, because they told us we did not need to organize our own club. They said they would organize things for us through the disabled persons' federation. If we had listened to them, we wouldn't have the club today. After Meng Weina staged the demonstration the government

immediately sent over 10 officials to her school to discuss their demand and they agreed to give the school 100,000 yuan every year. If Meng Weina had not taken that action, how could they receive the money?

Despite similar expressions of support for Meng Weina's 'radical actions', most people were afraid of taking part in such actions. Some even maintained, in the face of evidence to the contrary, that Meng Weina's actions had had no positive effect on government policies and practices. Others agreed with Meng Weina's argument that her efforts had forced the government to improve its care for disabled people, but nevertheless thought that her strategies were likely to cause 'misunderstanding with the government' and were therefore not suited to 'the political environment of China.'

To Meng Weina, her NGO colleagues' and clients' fear of offending the government had been a major constraint on her ability to engage in civil society activism. To respect their wishes, she had had to channel her energy into service delivery rather than advocacy work. Faced with similar problems, some other activists who shared Meng Weina's dauntless spirit had decided to abandon group-based actions altogether in favour of individual actions. Some anti-AIDS campaigners, for example, felt that as individuals they were less fearful of criticizing the government and exposing its mistakes, and therefore they could carry out more effective advocacy than organizations. The conclusion they drew from this was that they did not need any organization to support them. While this may be the case, it demonstrates once again how many disincentives for collective action exist at present.

Scholars have pointed out that whereas the institutional arrangements in many societies make it difficult for ordinary citizens to influence policies at the implementation stage, thereby forcing them to pursue their interests by targeting the agenda-setting or policy formulation stages of the policy process, the institutional design in China is such that the reverse is true. In China, policies are usually not formulated in a precise form, and lower-echelon bureaucrats often enjoy considerable discretionary power in interpreting and implementing policies according to local situations. Such an institutional design induces people to focus on influencing the decisions of individual officials rather than the policy-making process itself in order to obtain the desired benefits from the government. This in turn encourages them to take individualized actions such as developing patron–client ties with officials or using *guanxi* (personal connections), which is often more cost-effective than investing in group-based political activities (Shi 1997).

Many examples bear out the above analysis of the characteristics of political participation in China. A story related by a member of a parents' association serves to illustrate this point. This parent and a fellow member of the association paid a visit to the municipal government's Charity Fund which had provided financial aid to various people in need. However, it had

not provided funding for families with disabled children, as it did not have such a funding category. These two parents argued that many families with disabled children also experienced financial difficulties, so the Charity Fund should create a new category for such families. The Charity Fund official who received them said that this was not possible. However, he offered to help the two parents with their individual needs. One can see from this example how tempting it is for ordinary people in China to approach officials with their individual problems rather than trying to obtain benefits for a whole group of people.

NGOs are often undermined by internal strife, which tends to break out whenever the opinions or interests of their members are not in total alignment. Not a single NGO interviewed for this project has been free from such strife. Two NGOs in the HIV/AIDS field saw their members disagreeing with each other as to the priority issues their organizations should be addressing. In each case, rather than trying to resolve their differences, members simply pursued their own interests with little regard for the unity of their organization and the coherence of its goal. One NGO organized a national conference of people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) in order to bring such people in different parts of the country together for joint action. However, PLWHA who had no higher education felt snubbed and rejected by those who did. Efforts by an internationally funded HIV/AIDS prevention programme to encourage people at high risk of contracting HIV, such as homosexual men and commercial sex workers (CSWs), to form their own organizations also encountered much difficulty, as homosexual men tended to form many small circles based on similar educational background and socio-economic status, and did not wish to be associated with those outside their circles, while CSWs often saw other CSWs as competitors rather than allies.

In another case, a British couple founded a resource centre for parents of mentally disabled children. The centre's 100 or so members included parents of autistic children as well as parents of children with other types of mental disability, e.g., Downs Syndrome and cerebral palsy. Although the centre was intended to bring families in similar situations together to join forces in improving public perceptions and attitudes toward disabled children, members of the centre formed informal subgroups which quarrelled with each other over the use of the centre's resources. The preoccupation with immediate needs as opposed to long-term goals drew parents of children with the same type of disability together. For example, parents of autistic children organized activities specifically targeting autism using the centre's resources. Other parents were disgruntled, because they felt those families benefited more from the public resources of the centre than they did. The parents of autistic children remained unrepentant, saying that the centre's resources were for everybody, so if other parents did not know how to make good use of them it was their problem. Meanwhile they also started to organize activities among themselves outside the

centre to avoid squabbles with other parents, which further weakened the sense of solidarity among members of the centre.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed some major problems that have negatively affected the ability of Chinese NGOs to perform the benevolent functions which are generally expected of such organizations. This suggests that the effectiveness of NGOs either as service providers or as advocates for the interest of their constituencies cannot be automatically assumed but must be empirically proved.

Most of the problems faced by Chinese NGOs have no quick or easy solutions. Many of them stem from the institutional and structural arrangements that currently exist in China, such as the way state–society relations are structured. At the moment organizational capacity-building for Chinese NGOs is high on the agenda of many donor agencies. Partly as a result of donor interest, many organizations and individuals have been busy organizing training programmes for these NGOs. However, as this paper has sought to demonstrate, the problems afflicting Chinese NGOs cannot simply be removed by, say, teaching them some modern management techniques, or the importance of working together with other NGOs. The situation is far more complicated. To help Chinese NGOs to better fulfil their potential, interested parties need to look beyond the NGOs themselves and to direct more efforts at improving the general environment for the development of these organizations.

Endnotes

[1] The distinction between officially organized and popular NGOs is not always clear-cut. For example, some popular NGOs have staff who are able to work for them while retaining their status as government employees.

[2] Tables 1 and 2 give a breakdown of the number of NGOs by region. It should be noted that the MCA statistics only include registered NGOs. Current government regulations require NGOs to register with the government in order to exist lawfully, but many unregistered organizations are still able to operate owing to the government's limited capacity for controlling unregistered organizations. There are also NGOs that register as businesses, since the registration requirements for businesses are easier to meet. Therefore, the real number of NGOs is bound to be higher than the MCA statistics show.

[3] *Falun Gong* is a sect related to *qigong* (traditional breathing and meditation exercises) that took the government by surprise when 10,000 of its followers surrounded the headquarters of the state apparatus in central Beijing for 13 hours on 25 April 1999 to protest against media criticism of its practice. The government subsequently launched a nationwide crackdown on *Falun Gong* and eventually banned it as 'an evil cult.' The *Falun Gong* incident reminded the government that it had not maintained effective control over the activities of NGOs, and it therefore subsequently tried to tighten their registration and supervision.

[4] These guidelines have been mentioned in several speeches by high-level Civil Affairs officials.

[5] According to a POMB official in a lecture at Tsinghua University in April 2000.

[6] Lecture by a POMB official at Tsinghua University in January 2000.

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TABLE 1: NUMBER OF SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS BY END 2003

	Provincial-level organizations	Prefectural-level organizations	County-level organizations	**Total Number of Organisations**
Central government	0	0	0	**1,736**
Beijing	1,244	0	1,204	**2,448**
Tianjin	795	0	953	**1,748**
Shanghai	1,035	0	1,739	**2,774**
Chongqing	689	0	2112	**2,801**
Hebei	609	2,105	2,843	**5,557**
Shanxi	673	1,274	1,459	**3,406**
Inner Mongolia	434	950	992	**2,376**
Liaoning	543	3,118	2,134	**5,795**
Jilin	505	1,478	1,740	**3,723**
Heilongjiang	626	1,594	979	**3,234**
Jiangsu	843	3,928	6,472	**11,243**
Zhejiang	830	3,393	6,326	**10,549**
Anhui	655	1,972	2,017	**4,644**
Fujian	753	2,025	3,434	**6,212**
Jiangxi	592	1,457	2,248	**4,297**
Shandong	1,080	3,612	4,403	**9,095**
Henan	818	2,743	2,338	**5,899**
Hubei	734	2,363	3,363	**6,460**
Hunan	698	2,535	3,040	**6,273**
Guangdong	860	3,774	3,426	**8,060**
Guangxi	537	1,490	2,364	**4,391**
Hainan	531	104	254	**889**
Sichuan	880	3,076	6,579	**10,535**
Guizhou	553	672	1,116	**2,341**
Yunnan	634	1,248	2,374	**4,256**
Tibet	157	109	0	**266**
Shaanxi	645	1,232	1,680	**3,557**
Gansu	671	1,000	1,502	**3,173**
Qinghai	376	277	319	**972**
Ningxia	420	120	308	**848**
Xinjiang	575	1,082	906	**2,563**
Total	**21,030**	**48,731**	**70,624**	**142,121**

Source: Ministry of Civil Affairs

TABLE 2: NUMBER OF PRIVATE NON-ENTERPRISE UNITS BY END 2003

	Total number of organizations
Central government	14
Beijing	1,682
Tianjin	1,472
Shanghai	3,592
Chongqing	1,218
Hebei	5,307
Shanxi	1,854
Inner Mongolia	1,791
Liaoning	4,766
Jilin	2,589
Heilongjiang	3,541
Jiangsu	5,852
Zhejiang	9,279
Anhui	1,899
Fujian	1,084
Jiangxi	3,109
Shandong	33,384
Henan	5,166
Hubei	4,158
Hunan	2,865
Guangdong	8,020
Guangxi	2,728
Hainan	505
Sichuan	9,822
Guizhou	912
Yunnan	1,175
Tibet	4
Shaanxi	3,058
Gansu	1,754
Qinghai	339
Ningxia	250
Xinjiang	1,302
Total	**124,491**

Source: Ministry of Civil Affairs

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The China Project aims to promote understanding of China's economic, political and social development, and its impact upon the rest of the world. Research focuses on the challenges of economic reform; governance and civil society; the social consequences of economic reform; regional development and China's engagement with the world. Further details can be found at http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/index.php?id=272.