Social Welfare for Marginal Ethnic Groups: Chinese NGOs in Southwest China

Shu-Min Huang
Institute of Anthropology
National Tsing Hua University

This paper discusses the origin and operations of a dozen indigenous Chinese NGOs working to promote social welfare of the marginalized ethnic groups in southwest China's hilly regions bordering Yunnan, Guizhou and Sichuan provinces. Even though they have different specific goals—including poverty reduction, post-disaster reconstruction, community development, environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and so on—these NGOs exhibit several shared characteristics. They were all initiated by community elites with broad based information networks and connections. Most of them also received initial inputs in the forms of funding, operation space, technical training, and advisory supervision from international NGOs. Findings in this study confirm the argument that in spite of the unique governance systems in China, Chinese NGOs in the Mainland are more akin to global NGOs owing to their shared charitable and altruistic concerns. Data from this report is based on the author's fieldwork in that region over the past decade (circa 2008-2017).

PROLOGUE

Will the retrenchment of the Party-State control in China give rise to a genuine civil society? How will grassroots democracy gain its foothold in this post–socialist society? As the state-society balance tips toward the latter, will we see the revival or formation of non-government organizations (NGOs) to fill in the void for humanitarian assistance to meet long- or short-term needs? Are these newly formed NGOs duplications of their pre-modern predecessors or imitations of modern Western counterparts? What roles have NGOs played in facilitating China's post-socialist democratic transition? How will China's transformation conform to (or diverge from) civil society building process based on Euro-American experiences? This paper addresses these issues and sorts out some of the controversies raised by researchers in recent years

Recent research in China indicates the mushrooming of NGOs in China, and the increasingly significant social roles they play in dealing with practical problems since 1980s. External researchers, in the meantime, have raised questions about the compatibility between what they observed and theories related to civil society building. Some questioned whether these newly developed NGOs in China might be called as such due to their official involvements. Others argued that Habermas' civil society theory is too narrowly confined to European experiences, and must be expanded in order to accommodate to non-European societies such as China. These conceptual problems need to be resolved before we gain any insight about China's current development.

This paper argues that the current incremental reform in China has entailed a gradualist political liberalization process. Party-State rhetoric aside, the expanding civil liberty has given rise to a new sense of citizenship. With the burgeoning middle class in the mainland, and their incorporation into the Communist Party, we can anticipate further growth of civil society building in China. Furthermore, with China's continuous expansion in global affairs, it will have to abide by the accepted international rules regarding basic human rights and civil society practices. In a nutshell, the communist government will have to accept, even though reluctantly, the rise of NGOs as a supplement of the governing arms of modern civil society.

NGOs, Social Welfare and the Building of Civil Society in Post-Socialist China

China in the post-1978 reform decades has gone through a steady and broad-based societal transformation, appropriately called "the Second Revolution" by Harry Harding, as opposed to the 1949 revolution, which primarily liberated the allegedly oppressed rural peasantry and urban industrial proletarians (Harding, 1987). Under the current reform agenda, the abolishment of the three-tiered rural communal organizations in 1980s and the disengagement of the Party-State bureaucracy from urban industrial and commercial enterprises in 1990s, have gradually nudged the society towards the establishment (or re-establishment) of a more "rational bureaucracy" (in the Weberian sense of the term) and an open and competitive market economy (Huang, 1994, 1998). The retrenchment of the Party-State control over people's day-to-day lives, and the ensuing increases in personal liberty, have galvanized Chinese citizens' vitality and creativity to produce sustained economic growth in recent decades (Bian, 2000; Howell, 1998).

As this neoclassical, laissez-faire socio-economic policy has gradually taken hold in China, the Party-State, with its curtailed power and resources, has encountered increasing difficulties to meet short- and long-term humanitarian needs at the grassroots level, especially after natural calamities or human made disasters. The comprehensive social safety net established during the Maoist collective era, appropriately called "Communist Neo-Traditionalism" (Walder, 1986), that was built with the 'iron-bowl' job security under a command economy, had been discarded, along with its protective garment (Chow, 2000; Whiting, 1991; See also Wong and Flynn, 2001). Under these conditions, Chinese authorities are increasingly paying attention to the formation and operation of civilian self-help organizations, popularly called as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the West, as a measure to assist the government in shouldering these new demands (Bian, 2000; Estes, 1998; Howell, 1994, 1995, 1998; Whiting, 1991).

Will the retrenchment of the Party-State control provide the power vacuum that enables the citizens' grassroots mobilization and hence the building of a genuine civil society? How will grassroots democracy gain its foothold in this post-socialist society? When conditions compel citizens to take direct actions to defend their personal rights, will they appeal to traditional (pre-modern) type of NGOs, or will they imitate their counterparts in the West? Will the formation of these self-helped NGOs facilitate attaining democratization in post-socialist China? To what extent has China's civil society building process conform to (or diverge from) that of other societies? These questions have attracted tremendous scholarly attention not only because they point to China's possible future development directions, but, they also raise issues regarding the theories related to civil society building and post-socialist social transformation (Estes, 1998; Whiting, 1991; Weller, 1998).

To some extent the problem seems to lay with the traditional Chinese social fabric that emphasizes interpersonal networks that often circumvent the supposedly impersonal and impartial rule of laws or market mechanisms, euphemistically called "social capital" by some (Chow, 2000; Keane, 2001; Redding, 1998; Smart, 1998). We may wonder whether it will require the development of a new citizenship concept along with its new ethical commitments before ordinary Chinese consider taking part in such impersonal NGOs for common public goals.

The other half of the problem, however, seems to have been derived from questions of Habermas's conceptualization of civil society building—a process largely based on European experiences where the church had played active social roles independent of the state-society dichotomy. Such tripartite social division was not significant in Chinese history and society (Whiting, 1991). Furthermore, the state-society

relationships in Chinese cultural context may not be seen as oppositions, but rather as one embedded in the other: the state is an indispensable part of the society and is expected to provide protection, guidance and order to it (Chow, 2000; Hann and Dunn, 1996; Keane, 2001; Win, 1998).

To understand the complexity of these issues, I begin with a discussion of the changing history and social significance of NGOs in the West. This will be followed by an analysis of the history of indigenous NGOs in pre-modern China, and their current development under the reform and open policy. The next section points out some practical and conceptual controversies revolving around contemporary China's NGO growth. Some of these problems derived from pragmatic difficulties of promoting grassroots democracy in a nominally socialist society; others came from conceptual difficulties when transposing a European-based theory to China. The next section analyses a dozen NGOs I interviewed in Southwest China's hilly regions of Yunnan, Sichuan, and Guizhou from 2009 to 2015. Even though having different specific goals—including poverty reduction, post-disaster management, community development, environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and so on—these NGOs exhibit several shared characteristics. They were all initiated by community elites with broad based information networks and connections. Most of them also received initial inputs in the forms of funding, operation space, technical training, and advisory supervision from international NGOs. Findings of this study confirm the argument that in spite of the unique governance systems in China, Chinese NGOs in the Mainland are more akin to global NGOs owing to their shared charitable and altruistic concerns. It is precisely because of this type of international connections that the government has taken a jaundiced view about the growth and development of these grassroots organizations as foreign agents.

The Development of NGOs in the West

In Western social history, the development of NGOs is virtually synonymous with the development of civil society and democracy: the establishment of social groups or organizations by individual citizens based on shared needs and concerns outside the official nation-state domains. These voluntary, non-profit organizations serve a broad array of societal needs. In the United States, for instance, "Some 5% of the...Gross National Product is derived from this non-profit sector!" (Fox, 1987). More specifically, "Most organizations existing before World War II were rooted in the Christian tradition and structure, and were largely an outgrowth of missionary activities," such as the Salvation Army, Catholic Relief Services, and World Church Council (Fox, 1987). It is only after World War II that we find increasingly large number of secular (non-church related) NGOs formed that provide relief assistance in developing countries, although religious NGOs still play a dominant role in such efforts.

In 1960s and 1970s, many western NGOs also began to devise development assistance in developing countries in order to eradicate the root causes of poverty and the shameful vestige of colonialism. By virtue of their grassroots nature, such groupings or organizations often provided timely assistance to needy citizens with more 'efficiency and efficacy' (Frantz 1987) than the state apparatus, thus strengthening people's sense of autonomy and independence, and the building of civil society (Drabek, 1987). Such successes have increasingly attracted financial sponsorship and contributions from the private sectors as well as governments in recent decades.

The rapid global expansion of NGOs in terms of the number and size can be seen in a recent tally that "The NGO universe includes well over 15,000 recognizable NGOs that operate in three or more countries and draw their finances from sources in more than one country" (Gordenker & Weiss, 1996). Another comprehensive survey of the non-profit sector in 22 countries in North American, South American, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East indicates that it represents a $1.1 trillion industry and employs close to 19 million full-time equivalent paid workers (Salamon, et al, 1999).

In Western history, the rise of such voluntary, citizens groups is considered as an indispensable part of the rise of democracy and civil society - the weakening of the autocratic, monarchical state. Furthermore, Jurgen Habermas's (1989) insightful discussion of the rise of the 'public sphere' in European history as an indicator of the rise of civil society has generated increased interest in the study of grassroots organizations beyond the official state machinery (e.g., Rankin, 1993; Wakeman, 1993). It can

be regarded as a democratic forum in which citizens not only congregate to pursue common goals but also voice opinions to influence official policy-making.

NGOs' rising power and structural network across nation-state boundaries in the post-Cold War era have prompted many scholars to ponder over the new roles they may play under the current abysmal conditions of the "crisis of state" (Salamon, *et al,* 1999). The strengthening of grassroots civil society organizations directly challenges state bureaucracies, and certainly implies the weakening of traditional nation-states in international politics (Ong, 1999; Sassen, 1996). The critical relief assistance by NGOs in areas devastated by ethnic conflicts or civil wars prompted many international developers to urge the NGOs serving the new roles as mediators or intermediaries in 'conflict management' (Aall, 1996; Fox, 1987). Furthermore, the weakening of the traditional nation-state by transnational NGOs implies the emergence and formation of a 'global civil society' (Hirst & Thompson, 1999), which is ushering into a new 'global governance' (Weiss & Gordenker, 1996) or "global associational revolution" era (Salamon, et al, 1999).

NGOs in Chinese Cultural Context

Researchers of Chinese history generally agree that with a weak and small imperial bureaucracy, pre-modern Chinese society enjoyed high levels of local autonomy (Hsiao, 1960). To meet societal needs, local elite engaged in "sponsorship or establishment of institutions for welfare, education, religious purposes, social betterment, or defense (*tang, yuan,* temples, schools, militia, etc)" (Rankin, 1993). For instance, poor peasants in Southeast China's coastal provinces of Guangdong and Fujian provinces turned to kinship organizations, called 'patrilineal lineages' with corporate trust funds, for financial assistance in funerals, famine relief, and even education advancement for the gifted and talented (Friedman, 1958, 1966; see also Lam and Perry, 2000). Merchants and craftsmen formed guilds and regional associations to assist each other as they traveled to distant cities—the predecessor of the Chambers of Commerce in modern time (Chen, 2001; Golas, 1977; Ho, 1966; Rowe, 1993). Even though some scholars questioned whether such locally oriented activities really fit Western concepts of 'civil society' (Wakeman, 1993), they are nevertheless genuine indigenous non-governmental organizations.

The three decades following the establishment of the People Republic of China in 1949 had seen rapid expansion of the Party-State power and controlling apparatus through collectivization. Since almost all social welfare needs were fulfilled by the hierarchically structured collectives or work units, virtually all traditional NGOs disappeared from official existence and actual operation, except for few satellite organizations controlled by the Party-State as an extension of its arms to mobilize the masses, such as All China Federation of Women, Chinese Association of Science and Technology, Chinese Writers' Association, and All China Federation of Trade Unions (Whiting, 1991). It was not until the early 1980s when collectivization was formally abandoned that we find the return of selected NGOs, such as the China Children and Teenagers' Fund, established in 1981, that provides social support, educational assistance and health services to poor children and their families (Estes, 1998; Howell, 1995a; Whiting, 1991).

With the liberalization policy deepened throughout the decade of 1980s, there was witnessed the explosive proliferation of NGOs in the form of professional associations (Howell, 1995a; Chow, 2000), philanthropic organizations and foundations (Estes, 1998; Whiting, 1991), as well as special interest organizations (Howell, 1995b). It is estimated that "by October 1993 there were reportedly over 181,000 such organizations registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs (Howell, 1995a). Following the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008, the number of civilian organizations exploded to 431,000, including 238,700 mass organizations (*shehui tuanti,* definition below), 190,400 civilian organizations (*minban feiqiye danwei*), and 1,843 foundations (*Outlook Weekly,* September 12, 2010).

Researchers generally follow the nomenclature systems used by the Chinese government to breakdown these newly formed NGOs into three broad categories: mass organizations (*shehui tuanti* 社会团体), semi-official organizations (*banguan bamin tuanti* 半官半民团体) and popular organizations

(*minjian tuanti* 民间团体) (Howell, 1995b; Whiting, 1991). A brief discussion of these different categories is needed to understand the complexity of the issues.

Mass organizations include all satellite organizations established early by the Party-State as outreach arms to mobilize the masses, such as the Women's Federation, the Chinese Writers' Associations, All-China Federation of Trade Unions, as well as foundations and professional associations established in 1980s. These organizations were primarily funded by the Party-State, and their officials were transferred from state bureaucracies. Most of these organizations have government assigned office space and some even have regular publications to promote their works. While Party-State insisted that these organizations are not part of the state bureaucracy, and some of these organizations have been trying hard in recent years to project the images that underscore their autonomy, external researchers have been debating whether they should be considered as real NGOs (Howell, 1995a; Whiting, 1991).

Semi-official organizations include professional associations established in various regions or cities with formal encouragement, or direct involvement, or initial funding from the Party-State. These voluntary associations do have other revenue sources, such as membership dues, and some elected officials along with Party-State appointed representatives. They include organizations such as Association of Individual Laborers, Association for Factory Directors and Company Managers, and so on. The practical necessity of forming these professional organizations certainly reflects the rapid pace of privatizing productive enterprises in China in the reform decades. As remarked by Chow in the following statement, "By 1997, there were 54,418,500 individual laborers, running 28,508,600 family-owned small business units (most of them were food stands, repair shops, and small restaurants)" (Chow, 2000). Similarly, the proliferation of private commercial enterprises such as chemical fertilizer retailers or landscape plants retailers, also entail the establishment of new traders' organizations. To encourage their establishment, the Party-State may provide startup funds as well as office facilities. Retired cadres may be assigned to assist their initial organization drives. Once established, however, these organizations may gradually shed their official connections through raising their own membership fees and relocating to their own office space (Chow, 2000).

The last type of NGOs includes those popular organizations established through private initiatives without Party-State involvements. These include various hobby-oriented organizations, such as those involved folk dances, calligraphy, meditation (e.g., *qigong*) and so on (Howell, 1995a). To gain official approval, these organizations must get registered with local authorities. These organizations would probably be considered as genuine NGOs by Western standard because of their financial and political independence. However, because of their narrowly defined goals and amorphous structures, they tend to be short-lived with limited influences.

Among the above three types of NGOs, the first one has the best formal organization, nationwide network, official connections, and source of funding, but the least autonomy. Researchers will be reluctant to accept them as true NGOs. My preliminary research in southwest China indicates it was these state sponsored organizations that had been actively taken the lead in championing citizens' causes and rights. For instance, it was the Women's League that had been promoting women's awareness against domestic violence, or the Association for Professional Biologists who had been advocating environmental conservation and anti-pollution issues through newspaper editorials and grassroots rallies.

The second type, the semi-official organizations, tends to be closer to the "true" NGOs as we see them in the West, with higher degrees of political and financial autonomy. These organizations, however, due to its localized nature, have less social impact than the first type. The last type, while resembling authentic NGOs in the West, is probably the least significant in grassroots mobilization and civil society building. The issues will be further explored in the next section.

Practical and Conceptual Problems of NGOs in China

To envisage genuinely successful development of NGOs in China, several problems must be addressed. There are two sources of such problems. The first set of problems is more pragmatic and seems to be revolving around the nature of the Chinese Party-State, and its fundamental animosity towards any efforts aimed at promoting grassroots democracy. The second set of problems revolves

around conceptual issues or theories related to civil society building. As the whole notion of civil society was originated from Europe's historical trajectory, its applicability in China might be questioned. I will discuss these two sets of problems separately.

The first set of the pragmatic problems revolves around the intrinsic and seemingly inevitable contradictions between the authoritarian Party-State and the promotion of the civil society. Based on heuristic foresight, we can almost predict the following three controversial issues in China as the NGO movements gain momentums at the expenses of the Party-State. The first is the NGOs' religious affiliations. How can the Party-State reconcile the fact that relief assistance provided by religious organizations have played increasingly important roles in China when the official Marxist doctrine is against religion? This issue could have involved both domestic and external NGOs. The second issue hinges on NGO leadership and organization structure. How can the Party-State reconcile the rise of charismas leaders in newly formed NGOs who can successfully mobilize the masses for particular goals outside of the established Party-State structure? The third one, also closely parallel to the previous one, is NGOs' transnational nature and their entanglement with issues related to state sovereignty. How can the Party-State reconcile the issue of having international organizations providing relief assistance to domestic needy without fearing the curtailment of its monopoly of power?

The most pressing problem for NGOs in China is their religious affiliations. As indicated above, most Western NGOs are rooted in Christian traditions. Even today, church organizations such as World Church Council, CARE and Oxfam are active players in international relief assistance. Similarly, in Taiwan, it is the lay Buddhist organizations, such as Ciji Compassionate Association, who have taken active roles in providing philanthropic assistance in China after major disasters (Chang, 1996; Huang & Weller, 1998; Ting, 1997). Given the Chinese official stance of anti-religiosity, how would the authorities respond when accepting assistance from NGOs with religious affiliations? Will permission be granted when such organizations seek to establish a long-term presence in China in the form of offices, communication networks, and warehouses? The fine line between relief work and proselytism can sometime be extremely thin with the long-term presence of these religious NGOs. A related issue is: how would the government treat indigenous religious NGOs as opposed to foreign ones? Unless this issue is handled properly, perhaps through modification of existing laws that grant full legal status to religious organizations, there will potentially be causes of conflicts.

The second problem that needs to be addressed is NGO leadership and organization, especially indigenous ones. NGOs are often formed by individuals who share similar concerns and interests, and who are willing to work together in order to achieve common goals. These individual initiatives often provide fertile ground for the rise of charismatic leaders. By virtue of their personal persuasions, appeals, and convictions, these grass-root leaders successfully attract followers, command devotion and commitment, and mobilize volunteers and valuable resources to accomplish common goals. These goal-specific organizations often exhibit high levels of discipline and efficiency among the members and volunteers. Will the existence of such well-structured organizations be interpreted as frontal challenges to state authorities? Will NGOs' organizational efficiency and successful membership recruitment be considered as surreptitious effort to undermine official Party-State power? What kind of communication should the NGOs and state apparatus establish that would neither undercut state authorities nor jeopardize NGOs' autonomy and independence?

Thirdly, we should consider the transnational nature of many global NGOs and their roles in China. Various international NGOs have been actively involved in promoting specific goals, such as Carter Center's and International Republic Institute's involvements in China's grassroots democracy through village elections (Shelley, 2000), and Ford Foundation's poverty alleviation programs in southwest China that advocate greater local control of national forest (Saich, 2000). Given China's sensitivity towards international interventions in her domestic affairs (Howell, 1995a), it is difficult to know initially where and how to draw the line between providing international assistance in grassroots development or disaster relief on the one hand, and interfering in domestic affairs on the other hand. Some kind of mutually agreeable protocols and guidelines should be worked out between major international NGOs and Chinese authorities in order to avoid potential confusion and conflict. We believe that only through open and frank

discussions can all sides reach a workable forum in which joint efforts can be made to foster the development of democratic institutions in China through the growth of NGOs.

The second set of the problems are conceptual ones in nature and derived from the theoretical implications of civil society building as defined by Habermas. Are these predominantly government sponsored NGOs in mainland China the true instruments of civil liberty? How should we consider them in light of democratic mobilization? And, lastly, whether the civil society building process in the West, along with its democratization process, can be predicted by this model and be duplicated in China? I will elaborate these issues below.

Most researchers who conducted empirical researches in China argued against dismissing these government sponsored NGOs as less than genuine. Howell argued that "The term civil society fails to capture the diversity of organizations that have emerged in China since reform" (Howell, 1995b). In the same vein, Whiting pointed out that "Chinese NGOs may be characterized as existing in a transitional stage between complete dependence on the government and some degree of autonomy from it" (Whiting, 1991; Howell, 1995b). Furthermore, Howell suggested that "Foreign NGOs should not necessarily deplore the prospect of working closely with the Party/State or with some semi-official social organizations" (Howell, 1995a), because of the all permeating power of the Party-State. In light of these ambiguous conditions under which the NGOs developed in China, Estes coined the term GONGOs (i.e., government organized non-government organizations) for China (Estes, 1998).

If the NGOs in China's reform era are not identical to NGOs in the West, then the next logical question we may ask is: Can these organizations be regarded as facilitating agencies to accomplish civil society building predicted by Habermas' theory? In other words, Can we expect the successful duplication of the civil society building process in China even with less than ideal NGOs? Again, researchers who have conducted empirical researches in China tended to be critical of Habermas' theory. Howell succinctly identified what he called "The Poverty of Civil Society" problems:

> In applying the concept of civil society to China, we should also be aware of its particular history in Western political thought, its normative content and its multiplicity of meanings and usages....Civil society has been seen as a crucial ingredient for democratic life. This historical and ideological baggage again creates its own set of specific problems for the analyst studying China (Howell, 1995b).

Similar reservation was also expressed by Chow, who argued, "One unique characteristic that needs to be specifically addressed is that the dichotomy of 'civil society' and 'the state,' which is often used to analyze modern capitalist societies, cannot be simply transplanted to the study of China. In other words, there was no *a priori* state/society divide in China before the reform began" (Chow, 2000).

It seems their viewpoints can be summarized into the following three arguments: 1. The state-society division in European history is different from that of pre-modern China, as seen in the absence of the church outside of the state-society dichotomy; 2. 'Citizens' expectation of their personal rights as well as the roles of the state played in protecting such rights is quite different between China and the West; 3. Habermas' general theory of civil society building, while useful in European cultural-historical contexts, may not be applicable to understand China's current societal transformation. All these three arguments will undoubtedly be debated among researchers in the years to come. But, with increasingly more empirical research opportunities being possible, we might be able to put them to test in future.

NGOs in China's Neighbors: Hong Kong and Taiwan

While researchers have disagreements regarding the civil society building roles played by China's NGOs, we may look at similar development in China's neighbors, especially Hong Kong and Taiwan. After all, all three societies share similar cultural heritage and have gone through rapid societal transformation in recent decades. Needless to say, the most salient features we can say about Hong Kong and Taiwan are their rapid economic growth: Hong Kong in 1960s and Taiwan in 1970s. Improved living standards have seen the rise of the middle class in the both societies having formed the driving force behind their democratic movements and the building of civil societies (Hsiao and So, 1999; Lam and Perry, 2000; Win, 1998).

Lam and Perry lamented that due to Hong Kong's great success in market economy and *laissez faire* government, even under the British colonial era before 1997, people seldom noticed the vibrant "third sector," i.e., the citizens' self-motivating, goal oriented movements in the form of social services, political pressure groups and philanthropic activities that supplement government programs. For instance, one of Hong Kong philanthropic organizations, called Community Chest, has coordinated activities of 125 member organizations, and, "In 1996, donations to the Community Chest were more than HK$177 million" (or US$22.7 million) (Lam and Perry, 2000). Another interesting point about Hong Kong is the large number of NGOs organized on the basis of pre-modern Chinese indigenous organizations, such as lineages (called 'clans' by Lam and Perry) or regional organizations accounting for 15 percent of all registered non-profit organizations. Even more impressive is Oxfam International-Hong Kong. It established its first assistance office in Kunming, Yunnan, in 1992, and has committed over RMB$450,000,000 to various humanitarian assistance projects in China by 2007 (Oxfam International Hong Kong 2007). As will be seen in the next section, Oxfam International-Hong Kong has played a centrally critical role for China's current NGO development.

Similarly, in Taiwan in 1980s, the rise of the middle class and large business conglomerates began to exert pressure on the authoritarian Nationalist government to launch political reforms that minimized some of its abusive state power. The retrenchment of the state control witnessed the rapid growth of grassroots citizens' organizations based on various persuasions: consumers' rights movements, environmental protection movements, anti-nuclear movements, and women's rights movements. All these movements have been confrontational towards the authoritarian Nationalist government, further accelerating the demands for reform and democratization. Based on this, Hsiao and So coined the term "contentious civil society" to describe this process (Hsiao and So, 1999). Regardless of what labels do we use, Taiwan has been considered a successful transitional case to the development of a full-fledged civil society with democratic governance.

NGOs in Southwest China

From 2010 to 2012, I carried out fieldwork in southwest China's hilly Yun-Gui Plateau, which includes the entire province of Yunnan, Guizhou, and southern Sichuan (See Map 1 below). To understand the organization and operation of the NGOs in this region, I used the following research steps. The first one is to collect information about local NGOs through government registration and local news reports. This is followed by online visits of their official webpages to compile initial information about the nature and practices of each specific organization. Before I personally visited the organization, my assistant managed an appointment to verify the availability of the organization's responsible person for my interviews. In total, I visited 66 NGOs in two years with a wide stretches of organization formats and practices. In the following, I used information from 12 such NGOs for my analyses about the nature and specific characteristics of these NGOs.

Map 1: Map of China and the Yungui Plateau

Spatially, these 12 NGOs have the following geographic distributions: four each from Yunnan and Guizhou, three from Sichuan, and the last one crosses Yunnan and Guizhou. In terms of time established, we have the following distribution:

TABLE 1
TIME OF NGOS' ESTABLISHMENT

Time of Establishment	Before 1995	1996-2000	2001-2005	2006-2010
Number	1	1	5	5

Clearly the rise of NGOs in China is a post-2001 phenomenon when China's economic development reached a certain threshold level and the rise of the urban middle class as a non-refutable social fact. Urban elites played a crucial role in China's post-socialist transformation. In terms of the age of the 12 NGO founders, it also clearly showed its concentration among the younger and better educated generations:

TABLE 2
AGE OF NGO FOUNDERS AT TIME OF ESTABLISHMENT

Age of NGO founder	Below 29	30-39	40-49	Above 50
Number	1	6	3	2

The elitist's nature of China's newly risen NGOs can be seen in their founders' education levels. All 12 founders of the studied NGOs had attained college education degrees. Two even had post-graduate training and served as college professors. The other professionals included two livestock specialists, two government office workers, two middle school teachers, an architect, a news reporter, a retired government official, and a fresh college graduate.

When examining the origin of these 12 NGOs, we can divide them based on the organizer's initial inspiration: self-motivated individually (9), government initiated (2), and a branched-off from international organizations (1). It is interesting to note that the two government initiated NGOs, or GONGOs, are the least active among the 12 and with the most complaints, even though they have stable and generous funding supports from various levels of the government (i.e., provincial and prefectural government both).

When looking at the financial resources of these 12 organizations, there is a clear cleavage between two broad categories. Both the GONGO (2) and the spinoff international organization (1) indicated no budgetary concerns. All three have sufficient structural backing from established institutions: the government and the church. The opposite is true for the other 9 self-motivated organizations. Raising sufficient funds for operation seemed to be a major concern for all. It was under this context that Oxfam International-Hong Kong (OI-HK, henceforth) played a crucial role in facilitating their birth and growth. All 9 organizations had received assistance from OI-HK in one form or another during various stages of their development. The assistance may take the form of rented office space for an NGO during its incubation period. Or it may take the form of a grant to launch its maiden trial project. Or it may take the form of a workshop for its workers so that they may learn how to recruit volunteers, raise funds, do bookkeeping, apply for external funds, and write annual reports.

Since all of the 12 NGOs are multitasked, we can tabulate their involvements based on the specific tasks they are engaged in.

TABLE 3
TASKS AND DISTRIBUTION OF 12 NGOS

Work Category	Content of Activities	Number
Poverty Reduction	Community development projects; Small-scale loans; Improved animal breading; Promotion of indigenous handicrafts for tourists; Road building to facilitate trades.	7
Information Exchange	Internet information platforms for NGO projects and funding application; Availability of volunteers; Post-disaster material needs.	4
Training	Short-term workshops for school teachers from poverty regions, future volunteers, and NGO workers.	3
Disaster Management	Post-disaster reconstruction; Mudslide prevention; Distribution of aid goods; Warehousing goods.	3
Cultural Preservation	Recording oral history, songs and dances, and handicraft production; Survey of temples.	3
Environmental Protection	Preserving biodiversity; Reforestation; Preventing soil erosion; Maintaining local indigenous species.	3
Life Improvement	Promoting civilized 'urban' lifestyle; Proper social decorum for poor children; Enhancing people's devotion to socialism and social conscientiousness.	2
Fund Raising	Set up fundraising booths in shopping centers; Email fundraising; Recruitment of fixed monthly donors.	2
Education	Funding AIDs orphans' education; Build libraries in poverty regions; On the job training for school teachers; Distribute sports packages for students in poor areas.	2
Health & Hygiene	Build latrines and drinking water tanks; Awareness of AIDs and other contagious diseases; Funding for cold-chain operations.	2

It is apparent from the above list that these NGOs have filled in major social welfare chasms that the government has been unable to handle. It falls on the shoulders of the newly risen urban middle class who, after having gained the material comfort of life, begin to search for the meaning of life through concerns over pan human sufferings and humanitarian needs. The best example in our sample is an NGO called "A Ray of Sunshine" in this region. It was organized by an architect, Mr. Fan, who made a fortune through urban landscape designs and housing constructions in recent years before he even reached 35th year of his age. Through a happenstance encounter he found out about a poverty-stricken region in the hilly Miao minority area where elementary school students often have no shoes to wear or no money to pay school fees. He decided to do charity work. He organized his colleagues in the architecture firm in 2010 to form this organization. Through work connections and the use of websites, they collected surplus goods from various local manufacturers and warehouses. In the hilly regions, the organization identified school teachers as contact persons to collect information on special requests from students. On weekends, they used their own all-wheel drive vehicles to transport the goods to school teachers for distribution. To minimize expenses, all the volunteers paid for their own meals and fuel costs when delivering goods. Mr. Fan was very proud of his work and said, "When the provincial Red Cross found out about our work the following year, it proposed to incorporate our NGO into the Red Cross system. Even though this move would have given us some legitimacy with the government and provided us with some logistic support, such as an accountant for our bookkeeping and capital liquidation, we decided not to accept it. This is so because we cherish our independence and we dislike the kind of overhead charges Red Cross put on every transaction." This NGO has been blossomed into a very vibrant social group with over 300 young volunteers participating in its various programs in 2017. Newly established projects such as repairing dilapidated classrooms and establishing scholarships for good students have been added to its recent activities.

Not all NGOs or their founders are successful. At a time of rapid social change, there are young people who are looking in vain for new aspiration and opportunities for self-elevation. In 2010 I met a new college graduate, Mr. He, who just started an NGO. Having witnessed the abysmal chaos after the Wenchuan earthquake, he decided to take a new path in disaster management. He wanted to set up warehouses with large capacity to provide emergency supplies, such as tents, clothing, instant foods, bottle water, electricity generators, first aid kits, etc., for future disaster relief. To collect the necessary funding, he and a co-worker went to shopping malls on weekends to collect donations. To conserve meager funding, they paid themselves only RMB$1,500 per month. They lived in cramped rooms for the low rents, and purchased cheap foods in late evening from the markets for their meals. Life was hard, but Mr. He was full of enthusiasm and energy. He proudly said to me, "With our capacity, the next time when major disaster strikes, we will be better prepared." In 2011 when I visited this organization again, I was told that it had been folded and Mr. He had abandoned his goal. He was converted to Christianity, joined a missionary group, and went to Africa for his own spiritual salvation.

CONCLUSION

Based on previous discussion, we can draw a few concluding remarks about growth of NGOs in China and their impact on civil society building. First, the proliferation of NGOs has been astronomical, and the trend will continue along with the current economic growth and the rising middle class. Sustained economic growth in China during the past three decades has contributed to the improved living standard, especially among urban dwellers along the coast. Enhanced education levels over the same period have also contributed to a new sense of citizens' awareness. The rise of the middle class, albeit small in number and percentage for the entire population, signals for a fundamental structural change in Chinese society. Demands for legal rights and protections, such as consumers' rights, environmental conservation, and industrial workers' protection from work-related injuries, will generate more grassroots movements that accelerate the civil society building processes. The announcement of incorporating entrepreneurs into the Communist Party by the then President Jiang Zemin in 2000 clearly signals for the awareness of the top echelon of the Party-State that change is inevitable, and democratization will become China's mainstream development in the years to come.

Second, in considering the relationships between NGOs and civil society building in China, we should include the organizations initiated by the Party-State as genuine NGOs. Both the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese society are going through rapid changes. Owing to the all encompassing and permeating nature of the Communist Party before the reform era, it would be next to impossible to expect the automatic formation of citizens' voluntary associations after 40 years of oppressive rules. Under this condition it would not be unusual to find the best organized and best operated social groups outside of the Party-State bureaucracies established by the Party-State as fronts to appease certain segments of the society. The increased liberty given to citizens from the top has underscored a new dialogical relationship between the Party-State and society. It is under this condition that we will find members of the Party-State initiated NGOs deciding to disassociate themselves from the Party-State apparatus, and transform their organizations into genuine NGOs to serve societal goals.

It is along the same vein that we can conclude that while Habermas' general theory of civil society building seems to be appropriate in explicating the civil society building processes in China; there are also discrepancies that must have been taken into considerations about the unique history and cultural heritage in China. Among the major differences are: first, the lack of a religious institution that sets outside the state-society dichotomy. Without an institutional alternative or mediator between them, the state-society division may become more sharpened and contentious as seen in political riots in Taiwan in 1970s and China in 1980s. The shortened feedback loops between state and society, however, also make their changing balances more direct and observable. In other words, the retrenchment of the state power will entail the dramatic increase of grassroots organizations, even when such organizational formats are newly imported from the outside and not a part of the cultural tradition.

Furthermore, while we know something about the sudden plethora of newly established modern NGOs, either those formally established by the Party-State or those linked to special interest groups in the form of voluntary associations, we know virtually nothing about traditional NGOs and their revival in contemporary China's social landscape. Ethnographic reports have indicated the reestablishment of lineage halls or regional associations (Huang, 1998; Jing, 1996), but these reports are sporadic and incidental. Other traditional self-helped organizations, such as religious cults and credit associations, are probably quietly making a comeback in order to fill in the void created under the current reform. Owing to their sensitive nature, however, there has been little information about them. Obviously, these organizations would not have been registered with Party-State authorities due to their uncertain legal status, thus making their existence virtually under researchers' radars. This will remain so, unfortunately, until democratization is fully established in China and that all citizens' organizations will be protected equally under the rule of laws that we will possibly have a clear count of all NGOs, both modern and indigenous, that operate in building the civil society in China.

The love-hate relationship between the Party-State and the proliferating NGOs is quite evident. The tangible material benefit provided by NGOs has fulfilled needs that the entrenched Party-State

bureaucracy has been unable to meet. Furthermore, many NGOs have introduced efficient management systems that provide useful alternative governing models for local bureaucrats. But the negative implications of these, from the government's perspective, are equally obvious. Any NGO's success in alleviating social suffering is a public indictment of the failed Party-State and its local bureaucracy. Even more troublesome are new ideas that NGOs introduce from the West to the general public. Concepts such as "participatory management," "transparent governance," "grassroots democracy," "open society," "gender equality," "sustainable development," and certain others often appear in NGOs' brochures and instructional programs and have become common parlance among NGO workers.

It is this ambivalence that stymies government efforts to lay out a clear set of policies for the mushrooming NGOs. One way to control them is by the registration practice mentioned above. This immediately puts many international and some local NGOs in legal limbo. Most international NGOs are not formally registered because of the unlikelihood that they would be taken under the wing of any government office, and hence they are forced to operate in a legally gray area.

Will a financially secure Chinese state simply kick out the international NGOs and replace them with government-operated ones? I do not believe this scenario will take place. Under the current development trajectory, the Chinese state is eager to participate in international sociopolitical arenas in more sophisticated and responsible ways. The presence of international NGOs is a clear signal that China is a full-fledged member of the international community and abides by its common rules. In conclusion, the development of NGOs in China mirrors the country's reality and possibilities. It indicates both the international community's expectation of China's participation in global game plans and China's potential roles in a global future given its distinct social development experience. These concerns are both Chinese and global in nature.

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