An Institutional Approach to Chinese NGOs: State Alliance versus State Avoidance Resource Strategies*

Carolyn L. Hsu† and Yuzhou Jiang‡

Abstract

This article uses an institutional approach to examine Chinese NGOs as an emerging organizational field. In mature organizational fields, the organizations are powerfully constrained to follow the institutional practices of that field. However, in an emerging organizational field, the institutionalized constraints are not yet established, so actors can try out a wide range of practices. Some of these practices will become the new "rules of the game" of the organizational field when it is established. The content of these rules will shape the relationship between NGOs and the Chinese party-state for future generations. We find that a Chinese NGO's resource strategy is shaped by two interacting factors. First, NGOs operate in an evolving ecology of opportunity. Second, the social entrepreneurs who lead Chinese NGOs perceive that ecology of opportunity through the lens of their personal experiences, beliefs and expertise. As a result, the initial strategies of the organizations in our sample were strongly influenced by the institutional experience of their founders. Former state bureaucrats built NGOs around alliances with party-state agencies. In contrast, NGO founders that had no party-state experience usually avoided the state and sought areas away from government control/attention, such as the internet or private business.

Keywords: People's Republic of China; non-governmental organizations; institutions and organizations; organizational field; resource strategies; civil society

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are a new organizational form in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Although very few indigenous NGOs existed in China in the 1980s, by 2013 there were over 500,000 social organizations

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† Colgate University. Email: chsu@colgate.edu (corresponding author).
‡ Colgate University.

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officially registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs.[1] Researchers estimate that there are between 2 million and 8 million additional unregistered organizations, depending on the definition of "NGO."[2] The most popular areas for NGO work have been the environment, education/children, the disabled, women's issues, and community development.[3]

The majority of scholarly research on Chinese NGOs has been state-centred. Initially, most researchers asked whether Chinese NGOs would help to create a robust civil society to counter the authoritarian Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and lead China to democracy.[4] (The answers to that question have not been encouraging to seekers of civil society.) In the past decade, scholars using a state corporatist approach have demonstrated that Chinese NGOs have complex, fluid and multidirectional relationships with state actors and agencies.[5] Both the civil society and the state corporatist research reveal that Chinese NGOs (and NGO-like organizations) are increasing in number, popularity and social impact.[6] Because both perspectives focus on the state as the starting point for their investigations of Chinese NGOs, they neglect the other factors and mechanisms that shape the structure of Chinese NGOs and their strategies.

Given the limits of civil society and state corporatism models, we offer an alternative angle – an institutional approach.[7] We examine NGOs as organizations in the process of creating a new organizational field. An organizational field consists of all the firms that produce similar services or products, along with their suppliers, consumers and regulators.[8] Once an organizational field is mature, the organizations in that field are constrained to follow the institutional practices of that field.[9] However, in an emerging organizational field, the institutionalized constraints are not yet established, so actors can try out a wide range of practices and organizational structures. Some of these practices will eventually become the "rules of the game" of the organizational field when it is established. In the case of this particular organizational field, the content of these rules will shape the relationship between NGOs and the Chinese party-state for future generations.

The case of Chinese NGOs also offers an opportunity for social scientists to add to our understanding of institutions and organizations. Most studies about

1 Spires, Lin and Chan 2014. In China, the term "NGO" (*fei zhengfu zuzhi*) does not have a particularly clear or consistent definition. It is used interchangeably with "social organization" (*shehui zuzhi*), "public benefit organization" (*gongyi zuzhi*), "charitable organization" (*cishan zuzhi*), and "popular organization" (*minjian zuzhi*).

2 Depending on the method of calculation, these numbers may or may not include mass organizations and GONGOs (government-organized NGOs), student clubs, community-based organizations, virtual organizations which exist only online, or neighbourhood and village committees. See Shieh et al. 2013, xii; Simon 2013a, xxxiv.

3 Shieh et al. 2013, xvi.

4 Ma 2002; Spires 2007; Wu 2002; Zhang, Ning 2006; Zhang, Xin, and Baum 2004.

5 Hsu, Jennifer Y.J., and Hasmath 2013; Teets 2013; Shieh 2009; Kang and Han 2008; Spires 2011.

6 Hildebrandt 2013; Hsu, Carolyn L. 2010; Lu 2009.

7 For other research on NGOs that take a more institutional approach, see Yang 2005; Hildebrandt 2013.

8 DiMaggio and Powell 1991, 64–65.

9 Ibid., 65.

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the rise of organizational fields are historical, conducted decades after the fact.[10] With Chinese NGOs, we can explore the mechanisms that shape an emerging organizational field as it takes form. We also have the opportunity to examine the rise of an organizational field in an authoritarian context.

In this article, we use an institutionalist approach to analyse a set of 14 NGOs based in Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu. We find that a Chinese NGO's resource strategy is shaped by two interacting factors. First, NGOs operate in an evolving ecology of opportunity, negotiating constraints and possibilities. Second, the social entrepreneurs who lead Chinese NGOs perceive that ecology of opportunity through the lens of their personal experiences, beliefs and expertise. As a result, the initial strategies of the organizations in our dataset were strongly influenced by the institutional experience of their founders. Those founders with previous experience of working in the Chinese party-state bureaucracy usually built organizations around alliances with party-state agencies. These resource strategies allowed organizations to influence government policy but also made them vulnerable to state interference. In contrast, NGO founders that had no party-state experience usually avoided the state and sought arenas away from government control/attention, disguising their organizations as businesses or building virtual NGOs on the internet. Organizations using these strategies had more autonomy, but risked marginalization and reduced impact.

These paths were not set in stone, and organizations changed over time as the ecology of opportunity evolved and as leaders gained new experiences and skills. However, organizational trajectories tended to be path-dependent, since patterns of action were self-reinforcing. As organization members engaged in a particular strategy, they increased their expertise and social capital in that area, making that strategy even more appealing in the future. Moreover, as certain Chinese NGOs became more successful and well known, they turned into role models for newer organizations, and their resource strategies became worth copying.

Data and Methods

This research draws upon participant observation and interviews conducted from 2004 through 2009 at 14 NGOs (see Appendix). All the NGOs were headquartered in Beijing, Shanghai or Chengdu, although many served beneficiaries as far away as Gansu, Yunnan and Inner Mongolia. Organizations were obtained through snowball/purposive sampling. We sought organizations founded by middle-class urbanites, since they have a higher profile and potentially more public influence than those started by rural citizens.[11] We chose organizations that focused on social problems in the most popular areas of NGO work in China: the environment, children/education, and disability access. We removed

10 See, e.g., Dobbin 1994; Clemens 1997.
11 Spires 2011.

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organizations that were branches of foreign NGOs, or that failed during the course of our research time.

For each of the 14 organizations in the dataset, we interviewed members about the founder's personal history, the history of the organization, its sources of resources, projects, challenges and future plans. We interviewed multiple members and beneficiaries in many of the NGOs to gain a wider perspective. Interview data were analysed using NVivo software, a qualitative data analysis tool, for patterns in the following areas: resource strategies, founders' institutional backgrounds, views of the state, and perceptions of funding sources, including private donors and international foundations.

Because our goal was to examine NGO organizational strategies in detail over time, our methods focused on a relatively small number of cases. Prioritizing depth over breadth makes a virtue of necessity. Even now, the largest available datasets contain only a fraction of China's millions of NGOs – several hundred organizations at most.[12] Those of us who study Chinese NGOs are like the blind men with the elephant, pooling our resources together to assemble a better understanding of the whole. Therefore, this article is intended to be a study of the variables, mechanisms and strategies that apply to first generation, middle-class, urban social welfare Chinese NGOs in the particular regions of Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu.[13] It also provides a theoretical approach that can be used to explore other sectors of Chinese NGOs.

The Limits of the Civil Society and State Corporatism Models

As the number of Chinese NGOs increased around the turn of the century, they began to draw the attention of scholars. Initially, many researchers wondered if these organizations portended the rise of civil society in the PRC. Although "civil society" is a term rooted in Western political theory, it has become a popular concept among both Chinese intellectuals and China scholars since 1989, owing to the fall of the Soviet bloc.[14] For civil society scholars, the key research questions about Chinese NGOs have focused on autonomy and democracy: are Chinese NGOs sufficiently autonomous from the state to create a strong civil society in the PRC? Will this civil society be sufficiently robust to constrain the Chinese state and to foster democracy?[15] The resulting research reveals that Chinese NGOs experienced a wide variation in their relationships with the party-state. For those seeking signs of civil society in China, the prospects seem dim. Few Chinese NGOs are truly autonomous and oppositional to the state.[16] They are more likely to be autonomous if they are small, far from political centres, and

12 Shieh et al. 2013, x; Spires, Lin and Chan 2014.
13 There are indications of regional variations in Chinese NGOs. See Hasmath and Hsu 2014.
14 Brook and Frolic 1997; Ma 2002; Kang and Han 2008; Wang 2011; Zheng and Fewsmith 2008; Pils 2012.
15 Hsu, Carolyn L. 2010; Lu 2009; Ma 2006; Howell 2004; Wang 2011.
16 Shieh 2013.

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have a narrow spectrum of activity.[17] Conversely, the NGOs that have larger societal impacts are usually the ones with the closest ties to the state.[18]

If Chinese NGOs are not a harbinger of Western-style civil society, perhaps these organizations are a manifestation of state-led corporatism, one symptom of a shift from direct state domination to state control through surrogates.[19] However, while studies using the state corporatist approach have exposed a great deal about the complicated ties between state organizations and Chinese NGOs, their findings undermine any simplistic view of Chinese NGOs as state surrogates. First, NGOs do not have relationships with "the state" because there is no such thing as "the state" in China. Instead, the party-state is polymorphous, with fissures between the central and local governments, and competing agendas between different localities, departments and individual officials. Chinese NGOs build ties with particular state actors, and those particular relationships affect the organizations' relations with other state actors.[20]

Second, even when Chinese NGOs have close and entangling relationships with party-state agencies, the state organ does not necessarily control the NGO. Instead, the relationships are fluid and multidirectional.[21] An NGO with a close relationship with a powerful state actor could have substantial leverage over state agencies lower down in the hierarchy.[22] In some cases, NGOs are instrumental in writing state policies.[23] As a result, many China scholars who began with a state corporatism framework have found it necessary to adapt the framework to account for this complexity. These revised versions include Kang and Han's "graduated controls,"[24] Shieh's "regulation" versus "negotiation" versus "societalization,"[25] Spires' "contingent symbiosis,"[26] and Teet's "consultative authoritarianism."[27]

Both the civil society and state corporatism approaches have provided a helpful starting point for studying Chinese NGOs, but they have reached the limits of their usefulness. They reveal that Chinese NGOs rarely are oppositional organizations with the goal of democratic reform or revolution; neither are they simply puppets of a corporatist state. However, as we shall see, although the relationship between the Chinese NGOs and the state is very important, it is only one factor among a number of variables shaping Chinese NGOs in the 21st century.

17 Ma 2002; Simon 2013a; Saich 2000; Wakeman, Jr. 1993; Zhang, Xin, and Baum 2004; Spires 2007.
18 Hsia and White 2002; Lu 2009.
19 Unger and Chan 1995.
20 Howell 2006; Hsu, Jennifer Y.J., and Hasmath 2013; Wu and Chan 2012.
21 Hsu, Jennifer Y.J., and Hasmath 2013; Hsu 2010; Hildebrandt 2013.
22 Hsu, Carolyn L. 2013.
23 Teets 2013.
24 Kang and Han 2008.
25 Shieh 2013; Shieh 2009.
26 Spires 2011.
27 Teets 2013.

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Chinese NGOs as a New Organizational Field

How do we study Chinese NGOs to see what they are, not what they are not? Why do Chinese NGOs engage in certain strategies of action rather than others? In other words, what kind of organizations are Chinese NGOs, and what kind of organizational field is emerging for NGOs in the PRC?

Institutional theories examine the ways that organizations emerge, compete for survival and growth, and die while embedded in a structural and cultural system of the organizational field.[28] Many of the key theories of institutionalism were developed from empirical research on non-profit organizations in the West, including community colleges,[29] art museums,[30] political interest groups,[31] and voluntary social service organizations.[32] In a mature organizational field, established procedures are taken for granted, so that radical innovations become difficult to imagine, much less implement.[33] Newer and more unusual organizations have a higher rate of failure, thus organizations tend to be inherently conservative in terms of their structure and practices.[34] Once they are established, organizational fields tend to evolve gradually, rather than change dramatically, unless they are confronted by significant changes in their external environment.[35] In a case like Chinese NGOs, where the organizational field is not set, we have the rare opportunity to examine why certain practices become institutionalized as the established procedures of an organizational field, while other practices do not.[36]

What mechanisms determine which patterns of practices will become established as institutions in the new organizational field? NGOs are organizations, and as organizations their primary task will always be to secure the resources necessary for survival.[37] These include not only material resources and labour but also access (to potential clients) and legitimacy (in the eyes of potential supporters). To do this, organizational actors must negotiate a constantly shifting *ecology of opportunity*, in which structures of power constrain the areas of potential action.[38] However, social actors do not perceive the ecology of opportunity objectively, but instead through a lens of their own cultural expectations, personal experiences and expertise,[39] shaped by their own evolving habitus.[40]

28 Powell and DiMaggio 1991.
29 Brint and Karabel 1991.
30 DiMaggio 1991.
31 Clemens 1997
32 Singh, Tucker and Meinhard 1991.
33 Jepperson 1991; Zucker 1977.
34 DiMaggio and Powell 1991.
35 Haveman 1992.
36 Hsu, Carolyn L. 2007; Dobbin 1994; Clemens 1997; Brint and Karabel 1991.
37 Pfeffer and Salancik 1978; Galaskiewicz and Bielefeld 1998; Hannan 1988.
38 Brint and Karabel 1991.
39 DiMaggio 1991; Clemens 1997.
40 Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992.

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The shifting ecology of opportunity

In terms of the ecology of opportunity, Chinese NGOs faced particular structural and cultural challenges in terms of securing resources at the beginning of the 21st century. According to institutional research, the newer and more innovative an organization is, the greater the challenge it faces in establishing legitimacy and securing the flow of resources.[41] Many Chinese, including our interviewees, believed that NGOs were a new phenomenon in China and that charitable organizations were not an established convention in "traditional Chinese culture."[42] This assumption was reinforced by Chinese media coverage, which treated NGOs as a recent foreign import.[43] In reality, late imperial China had a rich tradition of private philanthropy.[44] However, the collective memories of those practices were effectively erased by 30 years of Maoist socialism, which saw providing social welfare services as the prerogative of the party-state. Private charities were replaced by government-controlled welfare organizations, or GONGOs, like the China Welfare League or Red Cross Society of China.[45]

The market reforms shifted the burden of social welfare from the central government to local government, local communities and individual households, and it also made it possible for independent associations to emerge.[46] Then, following the 1989 Tiananmen protests, the Chinese party-state clamped down on citizen organizations, placing them under the authority of the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA). By the early 1990s, almost no Chinese social welfare NGOs existed outside of GONGOs.[47]

In the first decade of the 21st century, the number of Chinese NGOs rose sharply. However, neither the Chinese legal nor social welfare system took into account NGOs. The 1998 and 2004 regulations for social organizations seemed designed to hinder rather than facilitate NGO work.[48] All Chinese NGOs were required to register with MOCA, a process which was difficult and confusing. To register, an NGO had to have a "supervisory agency": a government institution or GONGO.[49] Supposedly "non-profit public welfare institutions" could be certified to fundraise domestically, but only a few state-connected organizations were granted permission.[50] Although all NGO funds were to be regularly audited, there was no system to carry this out.[51] The majority of NGO-like organizations in China never officially registered,

41 Haveman 1992.
42 Simon 2013a, xxviii–xxix.
43 China News Analysis 1998.
44 Brook 1997; Simon 2013a; Smith 2009; Smith 1987; Rankin 1993.
45 For more on the state takeover of private philanthropy, see Dillon 2007.
46 Tsang 2001; Adams and Hannum 2005; Davis 1989.
47 Howell 1996, 205–07.
48 Simon 2013a; Zhu 2011.
49 Ma 2006, Ch. 2; Simon 2013a, Ch.8.
50 Simon 2013a, 255–57.
51 Simon 2013a, 204.

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and compliance with other regulations was similarly uneven.[52] As a result, most Chinese NGOs operated in a legal grey area.

Lack of public recognition and legitimacy has also affected Chinese NGOs. Most Chinese citizens and businesses were still not familiar with the practice of charitable giving to private organizations.[53] Even in 2008, the NGO beneficiaries we interviewed had never heard of a "non-governmental organization." They assumed that they were being served by the state or the Party.[54] The only NGOs in our sample that had successfully raised money domestically had powerful ties to state agencies which could compel donations from their underlings.[55] Many of our interviewees found it difficult to negotiate the world of foreign funding.[56] Others complained that foreign donors did not understand China and had inappropriate constraints and expectations.[57] Moreover, working in the domestic NGO sector was not seen as a respected career path and so it was challenging to hire and keep staff members (all the NGOs in our sample suffered from a high staff turnover).

An ecology of opportunity is not static but dynamic, and it can shift dramatically.[58] One significant difference between the circumstances faced by Chinese NGOs founded before 2000 versus those started afterwards was the rise of Web 2.0. Internet-based social networking offered Chinese social entrepreneurs a way to access volunteers and gain publicity at a much lower cost than previously available. The cultural perception of Chinese NGOs also shifted over time. NGOs were active in relief work following the 2008 Wenchuan 汶川 earthquake, and this raised their public profile. Volunteering at NGOs became trendy for middle-class educated youth even before the earthquake but really took off following the disaster.[59] (Nevertheless, even after the earthquake, these volunteers expected their NGO activity to be a temporary jaunt before getting a "real" job.[60]) In 2013, legal policies were revised with clearer and friendlier regulations for NGOs.[61] Meanwhile, the party-state explored new ways of partnering with private organizations.[62]

52 Shieh et al. 2013, xii; Hildebrandt 2011.
53 Hsu, Carolyn L. 2008.
54 We literally heard this from dozens of interviewees, including underage student beneficiaries who remained anonymous. Examples include: interviews with CYDF parent beneficiary, Zhang Qiaoping, Xundian, Yunnan, 18 March 2008; CYDF teacher beneficiaries, He Jingmei and Li Chunqiu, Xundian, Yunnan, 19 March 2008; Golden Key student beneficiary, Yang Ming, Beijing, 29 February 2008.
55 Lu 2009 63.
56 Interviews with Heilongjiang Youth Development Foundation founder, Gu Wei, Harbin, 12 June 2008; Golden Key founder, Peter Xu, Beijing, 23 February 2008.
57 Interviews with GEI founder, Jin Jiaman, Beijing, 29 April 2008; CAI founder, Judy Shen, Beijing, 25 March 2008; Hua Dan founder, Caroline Watson, Beijing, 30 May 2008. See also Spires 2012, 127.
58 Singh, Tucker and Meinhard 1991.
59 Interviews with CYDF founder, Xu Yongguang, Beijing, 4 January 2004; Peter Xu; Jin Jiaman; Caroline Watson.
60 Interviews with Golden Key volunteers, Li Na and Wang Muzi, Beijing, 6 March 2008; CYDF volunteers, Zhang Shaoyu and Zhu Youhui, Xundian, Yunnan, 18 March 2008; CYDF volunteer, Na Li, Dunhuang, 7 May 2008; CYDF volunteers, Jiang Quan and Liu Tianliang, Lanxi, Heilongjiang, 10 June 2008; VJoin founder, Wang Yimeng, Shanghai, 27 July 2009.
61 Simon 2013b.
62 Thornton 2013; Shieh 2013.

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The evolving habitus of Chinese social entrepreneurs

According to institutional theories, organizations do not react to the ecology of opportunity in a perfectly rational and objective way. In a mature organizational field, actors in new organizations mimic the practices of successful predecessors, whether they are the best choice or not.[63] For the first generation of Chinese NGO leaders, this was not an option because there were no successful NGOs before them to copy. Instead, they devised strategies of action according to their own interpretation of the ecology of opportunity – an interpretation shaped by their own habitus (experiences, beliefs, tastes and habits).[64]

Under these circumstances, people tend to choose strategies of action which utilize their own areas of expertise, and they avoid practices which feel unfamiliar, even if those practices may be objectively better than the alternative.[65] For instance, if an NGO is run by a 22-year-old who spends his free time hanging out on Facebook, RenRen, and Baidu, it would be natural for him to utilize internet-based social networking to achieve his organizational goals. For a 50-year-old, however, Web 2.0 would be more likely to evoke feelings of discomfort and incompetence, so that person would be less likely to take advantage of the new opportunities that it offers. Previous studies have discovered that organizational actors tend to replicate their own institutional experiences when they move to new firms and even to new fields.[66] People become socialized in the practices of their workplaces, and they carry skills, experiences and expectations from their former organizations with them. Organizations that ask their people to move too far outside their repertoires of competence have a higher rate of failure.[67] As a result, new organizations will tend to adopt the institutional practices with which their members are familiar, regardless of efficiency.[68]

In our own research, we found that an organization's resource strategy tended to be highly influenced by the organizational background of its founder – at least for the first generation of Chinese NGOs. If NGO founders had had substantial experience in the party-state bureaucracy, their organizations usually utilized resource strategies that focused on partnerships with party-state agencies. If NGO founders did not have this type of background, their organizations' strategies often focused on avoiding state attention, for example by locating the NGO in cyberspace.

However, it is important to keep in mind that a person's habitus is not set in stone, but constantly evolves as a result of new life experiences.[69] Starting an NGO at the turn of the century was in and of itself an unusual activity to undertake in the People's Republic of China. Running such an organization forced a person to develop new skills, networks and areas of proficiency. Fifty-year-olds

63 DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Jepperson 1991.
64 Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 133.
65 Swidler 1986; Hsu, Carolyn L. 2006.
66 DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Clemens 1997, Ch. 2; Haveman 1992.
67 Haveman 1992.
68 Hsu, Carolyn L. 2006.
69 Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 133.

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can learn how to negotiate Web 2.0, and the more time they invest in it, the more eager they will be to utilize social networking in the future. As organizational fields mature, successful models become available. Organizational fields can also develop institutions of professionalization that socialize actors to adapt certain strategies of action.[70] In the last decade, some NGO leaders and employees have gained new skills and knowledge through training programmes run by foreign foundations and NGOs.[71]

The Organizational Field of Chinese NGOs: State Alliance versus State Avoidance

Institutional theories offer a fruitful way to examine Chinese NGOs. Conversely, the rise of Chinese NGOs provides an excellent opportunity to enhance our understanding of organizations and institutions. Although there have been important studies examining the emergence of new organizational fields, most are conducted long after the fact using historical data.[72] In the post-communist era, Chinese society has undergone such drastic transformations that a plethora of new organizational forms have emerged in the last couple of decades.[73] These situations allow scholars to explore the variables shaping the rise of an organizational field as it emerges, without the prejudices of hindsight.

The rise of Chinese NGOs is also significant for institutional researchers because it permits us to examine the emergence of an organizational field in an authoritarian context. The classic theories of institutional research are largely based on cases in North America and Europe, where the state plays a much smaller role than in the PRC. In turn-of-the-century China, the party-state loomed large in almost every aspect of an NGO's ecology of opportunity. The central government wrote the laws and policies that regulated NGO activity, yet it was not subject to the same kinds of checks and balances that a democratic administration must negotiate. The state also had significant gatekeeping powers over the resources that NGOs need. For example, state actors could give or withhold the permission that an NGO needed to fundraise domestically.[74] State-favoured organizations could have "voluntary" donations funnelled to them.[75] Even grants from foreign foundations were often channelled through state agencies, which decided which NGOs received these monies.[76] The state also controlled access to potential beneficiaries of NGO work to a much higher degree than in Western societies. The Chinese state could (and still can) meddle in NGO affairs and undermine their work much more easily than its counterparts in North America or Europe.

70 DiMaggio 1991; DiMaggio and Powell 1991.
71 Spires 2012.
72 Clemens 1997; Dobbin 1994.
73 Hsu, Carolyn L. 2006.
74 Simon 2013b.
75 See examples of "administrative fundraising" in Lu 2009.
76 This was especially true for environmental work. See Economy 2010, 199.

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Given that the party-state played such an outsized role in the ecology of opportunity, the first issue that Chinese NGOs needed to resolve when designing their resource strategies was their orientation to the state. In our research, we found two different orientations. Some NGOs viewed the state as the best source of resources for their organization. Consequently, they chose to develop alliances with state actors in order to access those state resources. Other NGOs perceived that state involvement would lead to risky entanglements and obstacles. These organizations developed resource strategies that avoided state attention as much as possible.

According to our dataset, the organizational experience of the NGO founder was one of the key variables determining which orientation the organization would choose from the outset. If NGO founders had substantial experience of the party-state bureaucracy, they would usually set up their organization to extract resources from the state by establishing alliances with state actors. If NGO founders did not have this type of background, their organizations' strategies often focused on evading state attention, for example by locating the NGO in cyberspace. Both sets of strategies could be successful but they had different implications for state–NGO relations.

Strategies of state alliance

Half of the organizations in our dataset relied upon resource strategies that focused on alliances with state actors. Six out of seven of these organizations were founded by former party-state bureaucrats: Chengdu Urban River Association (CURA), China Youth Development Foundation (CYDF), Global Environmental Institute (GEI), Global Village Beijing, Golden Key, and LiangShuMing Village Construction Center (see Appendix). At the time of the interviews, these organizations ranged in age from four years (LiangShuMing Village) to 23 years (Golden Key). They varied widely in their missions, staff numbers and the wealth of their budgets. Yet, all were founded by people who had spent years working in the party-state prior to setting up their NGOs. These founders were highly competent in negotiating government bureaucracy, forging links with state agencies and extracting state resources. From their perspective, the most reasonable way for their organizations to accomplish their missions was to use the party-state as the key source for resources. A number of these founders explained to us that, "China is a society with a strong government."[77] Their point was not that the Chinese government ought to be feared, but that it was the centre of resources and power, a site for one-stop shopping for everything an NGO needed.

Although all of these organizations received some level of private/foreign funding, their central resource strategy was to partner with the state. This strategy was to create an effective model of how to solve the social problem and then to

77 Interviews, Xu Yongguang, Peter Xu, and Jin Jiaman.

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persuade a state agency to adopt it and implement it on a large scale. Their goal was not to solve social problems directly, but to motivate the Chinese state to use state resources to serve their constituents. Jin Jiaman 金嘉满 of GEI explained:

> I feel that what a Chinese NGO can do is come up with a new concept or a new idea, and you want to apply that locally. … You do it on a small scale. When you have enough experience and get the model to work well, you can then inform the government, and provide the government with something to copy and paste. So eventually, when the government is copying your model and promoting it on a large scale, it will have a huge effect.[78]

Jiang Chao 姜超 at Global Village Beijing agreed: "Some sample programmes can be shown to the government. If they are proven to be successful and appropriate, they will be copied."[79]

State alliance resource strategies gave these NGOs the potential to create a large impact relative to the size of the organization. For example, Peter Xu 徐白仑 of Golden Key, who is himself blind, wanted to serve blind and visually-impaired children. In the 1980s, the vast majority of visual impairment in China was caused by diseases of poverty, so those who were stricken usually lived in rural areas served by poorly equipped schools. Since these schools were not equipped to deal with disabled children and because the families had no money to send their children to schools for the blind, these young people remained uneducated and illiterate. However, when Peter founded Golden Key, his vision was not to build schools for the blind; instead, the organization attacked the obstacles that prevented state schools from serving disabled children. It developed teacher-training modules so that even poorly educated rural teachers could serve these children. It designed and produced inexpensive lamps, magnifying glasses, braille writers and other tools that facilitated learning. Peter and his wife travelled to China's poorest provinces and counties and lobbied local officials to adopt Golden Key materials for their schools. Every time they succeeded, the visually-impaired children of an entire region would benefit. Although Golden Key never had more than four paid employees, it transformed the poor rural schools of Xinjiang, Gansu and Inner Mongolia from sites of exclusion into service providers for visually-disabled children.

Why were state actors willing to work with Golden Key? What Peter Xu and the other former state bureaucrats understood was that the party-state was not monolithic, but a collection of organizations that faced their own challenges in securing resources for survival. In an era of government downsizing, local state offices were under pressure to demonstrate their effectiveness. Party-state bureaucrats needed to demonstrate a list of accomplishments in order to earn promotions.[80] NGOs like Golden Key could help them accomplish their goals and serve the needy at the same time.

78 Interview, Jin Jiaman.
79 Interview with Global Village Beijing programme director, Jiang Chao, Beijing, 29 May 2009.
80 Hsu, Carolyn L. 2013.

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In our dataset, we found several different types of organizations that used state alliance strategies. Golden Key was a small, private charity that marketed products to provincial and local governments. CYDF was a GONGO founded by the Chinese Youth League. Its founder, Xu Yongguang 徐永光, managed to make CYDF largely autonomous at the administrative level while utilizing Youth League manpower and expertise to implement CYDF programmes.[81] Environmental NGOs, like GEI, engaged in a third strategy. The Chinese government extracted a substantial amount of funding for environmental protection from foreign foundations and then outsourced much of the actual work of environmental protection to NGOs, both foreign and domestic. Well-connected Chinese environmental NGOs, like GEI, positioned themselves to be at the receiving end of those international funds.[82]

The limitations of state alliance strategies

As people who had grown up under the ideology of state welfare, these NGO founders genuinely believed that only the state had the power to solve social problems in a country as large and complicated as China. They were convinced that it was impossible for an NGO to scale up direct impact past a certain point, so their strategy was to work through the state rather than expand the size of their own organization and privatize the social problem. Yet, their picture of the state was not rose-tinted, but utilitarian. These former bureaucrats/NGO founders took pleasure in complaining about the party-state, its corruption and incompetency – and in noting how they took advantage of its weaknesses to benefit their organizations. They noted that the ponderous and conservative nature of the state bureaucracy made it difficult for state actors to find creative solutions, even when their careers depended on it. GEI's Jin Jiaman explained: "there are various regulations and there are position ranks and levels, and all of these will control what you want to do. So actually, if you have some ideas and you want to implement them, it is almost impossible."[83] In return for state support, NGOs could run the risks that state organizations could not take in order to test potential solutions to social problems.

However, there was a cost to the strategy of state alliance. In order to foster state partnerships, all of these former bureaucrats operated by the same set of unspoken rules. They avoided politicized topics and never publicly criticized state officials in power. They pushed for social transformation, but not for democratization or political change. Organizations that failed to comply with these conditions would risk having their support cut, being denied access to their clients and even being prematurely shut down. Our interviewees at state alliance NGOs did not complain much about these constraints. We did not get the impression that they felt inhibited – many of them were willing to offer scathing criticisms

81 Ibid.
82 Economy 2010, 199.
83 Interview, Jin Jiaman.

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of the government on our recording devices. Instead, these former bureaucrats who had lived their entire lives within these boundaries took these limitations for granted and were at ease with them.

The resource strategy of state alliance succeeded best when NGO goals coincided with those of the state agencies.[84] Although these NGOs could expand the purview of state concern, they could not publicly advocate for social changes that would reduce the power of the party-state. Indeed, their resources strategies increased state power rather than reduced it – their mission was to push the state to address more social problems, pass more regulations and provide more benefits. The members of these organizations did want to transform the Chinese party-state, specifically to make it more responsive to its citizens' needs, more effective and less incompetent and corrupt. But, strategically, they advocated transformations that were so gradual that they would not register as political reforms, much less revolution.

Strategies of state avoidance

In this section, we analyse five organizations from our dataset that engaged in resource strategies designed to avoid the Chinese government: 1 KG, Aibai, Children's Art Initiative (CAI), Hua Dan, and VJoin (see Appendix). At the time of the interviews, the oldest NGO was Aibai (ten years in operation), and the youngest was VJoin, which had just opened. In all five cases, the organization's founder had no previous work experience in the party-state bureaucracy. In contrast to the NGO founders in the previous section, who were usually middle-aged when they began their organizations, all of these NGOs were started by people in their twenties or late teens. The founders of 1 KG, AiBai and VJoin worked in the private sector or were still students when they set up their organizations. Judy Shen of CAI is Chinese-American, while Caroline Watson of Hua Dan is a British citizen.

In contrast to the former state bureaucrats described in the last section, these NGO founders viewed the Chinese state as a powerful, corrupt entity that sought to control and neutralize NGOs. Zhao Ke 赵柯 at Aibai described the dangers of forming a relationship with the state: "Chinese NGOs would flatter their leaders [of a state foundation] and lose their independence … Once I give you the money, you cannot violate my rules." He insisted that NGOs who worked with the state became infected with corruption: "Once you have good relationship with the government, officials will give you my project. But you will never discuss the purpose of the NGO. You will end up doing it just because it is the way to make a lot of money working with your friends."[85]

Because these NGO founders had never worked in the party-state bureaucracy, they lacked the skills and competencies for exploiting state actors that came so

84 Hildebrandt 2013.
85 Interview with Aibai programme director, Zhao Ke, Beijing, 17 May 2009.

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easily to former party-state bureaucrats. While the former bureaucrats understood that "the state" was comprised of a myriad of individuals and organizations with competing agendas, these younger NGO actors talked about it as a monolithic entity that was powerful, uncontrollable and untrustworthy. Unlike the former bureaucrats, they could not see how the state's resources could be accessed and manipulated to their advantage.

Although these organizations worked in different sectors (ranging from AIDs awareness to rural education), their initial resource strategies shared one commonality: they were designed to avoid state attention. They sought resources and arenas of operation that they perceived to be outside of state control, or at least unlikely to attract state attention. One way to hide from state attention was to disguise the organization as a private business and to register it as such.[86] This was Caroline Watson's plan for Hua Dan, an organization that offered confidence-building drama workshops for migrant schoolchildren. As a business, Hua Dan could also provide team-building workshops for companies for a fee, which supplied the funding for the charitable work and avoided MOCA regulations.

One of the most effective ways to avoid institutions controlled by the state was to move out of the physical realm altogether and into the virtual world of cyberspace. The Chinese party-state does police the internet, of course, but the world of web-based social networks is too fragmented and too personal for easy surveillance. All of the Chinese NGOs we studied had websites, but these five organizations utilized Web 2.0 networking through Facebook, RenRen, Baidu, and other similar sites to a much greater degree than the organizations founded by former state bureaucrats. If the former bureaucrats had spent decades learning the ins and outs of the Chinese party-state, these younger NGO leaders had spent their lives on the web, gaining skills and competencies in using and exploiting the internet. They were fluent in the language of blogs and social networking websites. For 1KG, Aibai, and VJoin, the internet was not just another media outlet: these organizations existed primarily in cyberspace, not in a physical set of offices. One of the benefits of this approach was that they could claim that they were not formal organizations but rather informal social networks – and therefore did not come under the purview of state regulations for organizations.

The internet allowed these NGOs to scale up their impact without having to raise large funds or hire a lot of people. If former bureaucrats essentially outsourced the work of their NGOs to party-state actors and agencies, these NGO leaders outsourced their organizations' work by breaking it down into tiny components and parcelling it out among large populations of volunteers/clients accessed through internet-based social networking technologies. For example, 1KG began as a website where hikers could pledge to bring one kilogram of school supplies in their backpacks to needy rural communities near

86 Hildebrandt 2011.

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their hiking routes. By exploiting the characteristics of the internet, 1KG's founder, An Zhu 安猪, was able to access enormous manpower at almost no cost. Five years after its inception, 1KG still had only five paid staff members, but was able to boast thousands of volunteers.

The founders of VJoin[87] used another aspect of their web experience. VJoin started as a riff on the Common Application, a web-based application that allows students to apply to colleges online. Wang Chen 王琛, Wang Yimeng 王一萌, and Xu Anting 徐岸汀 decided to adapt the model for NGOs. VJoin's mission was to increase access to NGOs by encouraging volunteerism and providing a valuable service for NGOs seeking labour and skills. The founders explained:

> Everyone will have a space for comment and discussion. It will feel like a blog. We will have a log entry and relevant information link. After each entry, students can put up their pictures and videos for better description. Good articles will be highlighted, and gift donations are available. We will invite NGOs to post their volunteer recruitment notifications on the bulletin. You can be a "fan" of great charity initiatives. We might design an open-source website and invite talented people to add interesting applications here.[88]

Their vision was impressive enough to earn them a grant from Google.

The limitations of state avoidance strategies

By not forming any state alliances, these NGOs avoided some of the potential compromises and entanglements that state alliance NGOs had to negotiate. However, state avoidance strategies also had their downsides. Because the party-state controlled so many aspects of Chinese society, there was little room left in which these NGOs could manoeuvre. For example, Hua Dan's Caroline Watson and CAI's Judy Shen wanted to serve schoolchildren but wished to avoid having to deal with the state, even though almost all primary and middle schools in China are run by the state. Both Watson and Shen declared that they would never consider working with the Ministry of Education.[89] Instead, they focused their efforts on the miniscule fraction of schools that were outside of government control: the semi-legal migrant schools that had no official standing in the state educational system.[90] These two organizations ended up confined to the margins, both geographically and socially.

State avoidance resource strategies also prevented NGOs from engaging directly in political advocacy. This was not because they were afraid to offend political patrons, but because they did not wish to draw any attention from the state sector. Their motivations may have been quite different from those of state alliance NGOs, but their tactics produced similar results: they had to skirt around controversial topics and refrain from both criticizing the government or officials and

87 VJoin is now iJoin.
88 Interview, Wang Yimeng.
89 Interviews, Judy Shen and Caroline Watson.
90 These schools, which generally lacked legal status, were founded by private entrepreneurs to serve the children of migrant workers. In August 2008, the Ministry of Education announced that migrants would be eligible to attend public schools, thereby removing the need for migrant schools.

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advocating for democratization. In fact, state alliance NGOs were in a better position to engage in political advocacy than those organizations which prioritized autonomy to the point of shunning any connection with the government. The members of state alliance NGOs worked directly with state actors and had the opportunity to influence them to act differently.[91] However, by the standards of democratic nations, both types of resource strategies constrained all the NGOs in terms of any direct political action.

The Future of Chinese NGOs and their Resource Strategies

Data from the early years of Chinese NGOs permits us to watch the process of an organizational field emerging and maturing, and the rise of certain resource strategies: NGOs fostering symbiotic relationships with party-state agencies, NGOs that also operate as for-profit businesses, and NGOs accessing a diffused labour force through internet-based social networking. As resource strategies attract adherents, the most popular will eventually become institutionalized as the rules of the game of the organizational field. When that happens, Chinese NGOs will experience constraints not just from the party-state, but also from the structural environment and cultural expectations. Although the organizational field will continue to evolve, dramatic innovations will be difficult to imagine, much less implement.

In our dataset, we find that the institutional experiences of an NGO's founder had a significant impact on whether the organization's initial strategy would be oriented towards treating the state as a resource to be exploited or a danger to be avoided. This does not mean that institutional experience will be the key variable for future strategies. For the first generation of Chinese NGOs, there was no choice but to follow models outside of the field, so it made sense to fall back on the institutional background of the founder when designing strategies. As the organizational field of Chinese NGOs has matured, successful organizations have become a source of practices to mimic.

Examples of adoption could already be seen in the organizations in our sample. JUCCCE (Joint US–China Collaboration on Clean Energy) was founded in 2007 by Peggy Liu, a Chinese-American woman. Despite the fact that Liu had no work experience in the party-state bureaucracy, the organization carried out a state alliance strategy similar to CURA or GEI. Conversely, Aisi Chuangxin 爱思创新 (2007) and Huizeren 惠泽人 (2003) were both founded by former party-state bureaucrats but depended more heavily on internet-based social networking rather than on partnerships with government agencies for resources.

Even established organizations dabbled in adding new resource strategies to their repertoires. Although the initial motivations underlying the resource

91 Zhang, Zhibin, and Guo 2012.

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strategies were mutually exclusive (state alliance versus state avoidance), the resulting strategies themselves were not. So although Golden Key never abandoned its central strategy of working through state partners, it also explored the benefits of opening a private business. As the years passed, the organization helped more and more blind students graduate from school. To make them employable, Golden Key began offering scholarships for training in traditional Chinese acupressure massage. In 2007, it opened up a small acupressure massage parlour and hired some of its graduates. Conversely, 1KG, the website for social-minded backpackers, participated in a 2007 "Non-Profit Incubator" run by the Communist Party and eventually accepted grants from the government.[92]

An institutional approach would allow scholars to examine how the emerging organizational field of Chinese NGOs interacts and overlaps with the evolving organizational field of party-state organizations. Similarly, more research needs to be done on the interaction with the organizational field of international NGOs and foundations. Empirical research has demonstrated that Chinese NGOs in different sectors display very different characteristics, giving scholars the opportunity to explore how practices are becoming institutionalized in different, but interacting, subfields.[93]

摘要: 这篇论文为研究中国的非政府组织 (NGO) 提供了一个组织性的研究方法。组织上的需求促动 NGO 的策略与行为。随着一些 NGO 成功与失败, 某些策略会变得更受欢迎并被社会期待。这些做法会被制度化成为这个新组织领域的游戏规则。这些做法的内容会决定中国 NGO 与政府的关系。 本文通过探究资源策略提供了一例组织性的研究方法。作为组织, NGO为了生存必须保证拥有足够的资源流动。我们发现当制度模板缺失时, 一个 NGO 的资源策略常常取决于其创始人与领导者的机构经历。由前政府官员创立的 NGO 依靠与党政机关的合作伙伴关系。而没有公务工作经验的 NGO 创始人则强调了与政府的独立并寻求不受国家控制的渠道, 例如网络。

关键词: 中华人民共和国; 非政府组织; 组织社会学; 组织领域; 资源策略; 公民社会

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92 Zhang, Ning 2006.
93 Hildebrandt 2013.

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Appendix
Data Sample

This group was culled from a larger sample of 26 organizations by removing branches of foreign NGOs and failed organizations. All of the organizations conducted non-profit work in the People's Republic of China, but three (JUCCCE, AiBai and CAI) were founded, at least in part, by American citizens, and one, Hua Dan, by a British citizen.

1 KG 多背一公斤, 2004
Size: 5 employees, hundreds of volunteers
Mission: hikers bring school materials to needy villages
Founder: An Zhu 安猪, previously worked in private business
Interviewee: public relations manager, WaiWai 歪歪

AiBai 爱白, 1999
Size: 4 employees (2 part-time)
Mission: increase homosexuality awareness in China; AIDs prevention
Founders: Liu Xiaoqiang 刘小强 and Wang Jian 王剑
Interviewee: programme director, Zhao Ke 赵柯

AiSiChuangXin 爱思创新, 2007
Size: 4 employees, 1 intern
Mission: community development and participatory governance
Founder: Bo Shulian 薄树连, former employee of Global Village Beijing
Interviewee: founder

Children's Art Initiative (CAI), 2004
Mission: arts education for migrant children
Founder: Judy Shen, a Chinese-American law school graduate
Interviewee: founder

Chengdu Urban River Association (CURA) 成都城市河流研究协会, 2003
Size: 5 employees
Mission: improve river quality in Chengdu area as a research centre
Founder: Tian Jun 田骏
Interviewee: founder

China Youth Development Foundation (CYDF)/Project Hope 中国青少年发展基金会/希望工程, 1989
Size: 50+ paid staff
Mission: many campaigns (environmental protection, AIDS awareness), but most famous for Project Hope, which aims to provide educational access for poor rural children
Founder: Xu Yongguang 徐永光
Interviewees: founder, current leader, 5 central administrators, 6 provincial staff members, 39 adult beneficiaries (school administrators, teachers, parents), plus 5 groups of children interviewed in groups

Global Environmental Institute (GEI) 全球环境研究所, 2004
Size: 15 paid staff
Mission: provide market-based models for solving environmental problems in order to achieve development that is economically, ecologically and socially sustainable
Founder: Jin Jiaman 金嘉满
Interviewees: founder and 1 employee (Lila Buckley)

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Hua Dan 花旦, 2006
Size: 5 paid staff
Mission: to build migrant students' self-esteem through drama workshops
Founder: Caroline Watson
Interviewees: founder and 3 volunteers

Huizeren 惠泽人, 2003
Size: 10–15 employees
Mission: volunteer capacity building
Founder: Zhai Yan 翟雁
Interviewee: founder

Global Village Beijing 北京地球村, 1996
Size: 15 employees, hundreds of volunteers
Mission: environmental education
Founder: Liao Xiaoyi 廖晓义
Interviewee: programme director, Jiang Chao 姜超

Golden Key 金钥匙, 1986
Size: 3–4 paid staff
Mission: educational access for blind and visually-impaired children
Founder: Peter Xu 徐白仑, formally an architect in a state-run firm
Interviewees: founder, 3 employees, 3 volunteers, 3 beneficiaries

JUCCCE (Joint US–China Collaboration on Clean Energy) 聚思, 2007
Size: 10–20 employees in each office (Shanghai, Beijing, San Francisco)
Mission: clean energy solutions
Founder/leader: Peggy Liu
Interviewee: 1 employee

LiangShuMing Village Construction Center 梁漱溟乡村建设中心, 2006
Size: 10 employees
Mission: dedicated to village construction/productivity and human rights
Founder: Wen Tiejun 温铁军
Interviewee: staff member, Wang Pan 王盼

VJoin 同益, 2009
Size: 15 volunteers
Mission: enhance awareness of NGOs among Chinese youth
Founders: Wang Chen 王琛, Wang Yimen 王一萌 and Xu Anting 徐岸汀
Interviewees: all three founders