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Self-Limiting Organizations and Codependent State–Society Relations

Environmental, HIV/AIDS, and Gay and Lesbian NGOs in China

In the past decade, social organizations have quickly sprouted in China, as one observer notes, like "bamboo shoots after a rainstorm" (Lu 2003: 55). The growth of the country's nongovernmental organization (NGO) sector has puzzled many observers, due in part to expectations that the emergence of civil society groups will – sooner or later – hasten political reform and perhaps even lead to regime change.[1] Yet, despite the emergence and development of these groups, the broader political status quo has not changed: the one-party state remains, further proof of its resiliency. To explain the gap between prior assumptions and the present reality, some China scholars have called for more patience, suggesting that these groups will play the role of change agent in due time. They argue that social organizations have helped reduce the influence of the state on society and still represent an important antecedent to democratization (Ma 2005; Saich 2000; White 1993; Yang 2005). However, others explain the current situation as evidence that Chinese NGOs lack autonomy, serve as simply another arm of the government, and are unable to challenge the authority of the state as similar organizations in other polities do (Alagappa 2004; Unger and Chan 1995; Wu 2004).

Although both positions have merit, the existing state of the conversation about social organizations in China leads us to miss an important dynamic: debates over the effect of NGOs on political change do not adequately capture the complex relationship between the state and society, nor do they account for the complicated political and economic environment within which these groups operate. Chinese social organizations are neither wholly autonomous nor completely bound by state control. They are granted enough space to meet their own, often narrowly defined goals, but not so much autonomy that they

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[1] In this book, I use the term social organization, group, and NGO interchangeably.

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might challenge the government or otherwise undercut state interests. Social organizations work to further their own goals; at the same time, they often work to assist the government in implementing its policies. In this respect, the relationship between the authoritarian state and society might be less zero-sum than previously suggested (e.g., Stepan 1990); it might be best described as codependent.

The literature covering the main debates on NGOs in China, and in other authoritarian polities, undersell the actions of these organizations and treat their very existence as little more than an axiomatic means to another end (e.g., political change). *Social Organizations and the Authoritarian State in China* is different. It is less interested in the potential far-reaching political outcomes of the existence of these groups (reform or regime change). It is neither a descriptive study of the activities of Chinese NGOs nor an analysis of these groups' abilities to meet larger goals, which for the issue areas in this study might include protecting the environment, stopping the spread of HIV/AIDS, or extending more rights to lesbians and gays. Rather, it is a study of survival, a sort of playbook for how social organizations forge their existence, an issue that has only recently begun to be explored by China scholars (Ho and Edmonds 2008: 5).

Questions about the larger and lasting effect of social organizations are both interesting and important. However, this book begins from the belief that answers to such questions must be informed by a more complete understanding of the context within which social organizations have formed in China. To do so, it is necessary to examine how these organizations adapt to complex and dynamic political and economic environments. Recognizing that past studies of social organizations lack theories to explain the adaptive nature of these groups in an authoritarian context, this book explores several key questions: How do Chinese social organizations deal with the state? How do they adapt to narrow opportunity structures? How strong are they, and what is the likelihood that they will survive over the long term? Finally, what do these organizations mean for broader political outcomes in China?

To answer these questions, I compare social organizations in three issue areas, across diverse geographic regions: groups engaged in environmental protection–related activities, those devoted to addressing the growing problem of HIV/AIDS, and organizations that work to improve the lives of gays and lesbians. This multicase study enables me to explain variations in how organizations adapt to the overall opportunity structure in order to emerge and thrive. The central argument of this book is that Chinese NGOs have made a series of strategic adaptations in order to take advantage of the limited opportunities presented to them. But the adaptations each organization makes are also dependent on local conditions, which differ by issue area, administrative region, and even time. Although these adaptations afford groups important benefits necessary for success in the short term, they also carry with them costs that can make longer-term sustainability difficult.

Given the political environment in China, this book understands and appreciates the impact that the state has on society; actual state policies are an important factor to bring into the analysis. However, as the perspective here is that of social organizations, I devote considerable attention to social actors' perceptions and understanding of the state and its policies. Furthermore, because social organizations interact with the state at various levels, this study does not conceive of the state as a unitary actor: as implementation of state policies varies across areas and levels of government, I capture perceptions on various levels. Two related hypotheses, formulated from preliminary research on environmental groups in China, guided my investigation. First, groups are allowed to emerge and exist to the extent that they adapt to state policy. In other words, groups are given most latitude when they are engaged in work that conforms to the expressed needs and interests of the state. Second, to pursue their respective interests, social organizations display self-limiting behavior, focusing on narrow goals; they are reform-minded but avoid actions that might be seen as threatening to the state.

The research for this book was designed to explain the relationship of social organizations and the state; the dependent variable of primary interest is measured by an NGO's interpretation of state reaction, inferring success or failure to adapt based on the reaction. I observed group behavior by examining several different variables: motivations, strategies, goals, and other organizational features. Given the hypotheses guiding this research, the key independent variable, however, is how well the groups' work fits into the state's goals. I expected variation within cases – that is, within the same issue area – and across them, depending on the degree to which the groups adapt to perceived state goals and policies. For example, the Chinese government has been vocal about its desire to resolve the country's environmental problems. We might, therefore, expect environmental groups to be given relatively more autonomy to do their work. HIV/AIDS groups (along with lesbian and gay organizations), at first glance, face a less hospitable political environment. Although the central government has begun to address the growing health problem of HIV/AIDS, some officials at some local and provincial levels have been less willing to implement policy changes and allow social organizations to tackle the issue. Such variation may not exist simply across issue areas. Even within the issue areas under examination, not all groups are given the same autonomy or latitude to do their work. In the environmental sector, activists in certain geographic areas still encounter occasional – and sometimes brutal – government repression.

Borrowing insights from social movement literatures, I argue that social organizations are affected most by the opportunity structure. To gain more analytical leverage to explain the strength and long-term viability of social organizations, I disaggregate the opportunity structure into three distinct but complementary parts: *political opportunities*, government policies that directly (or indirectly) open or close space for organizations; *economic opportunities*, funding sources that flow from domestic or international donors, whether

governmental or nongovernmental; and *personal opportunities*, the importance of individual organization leaders in groups' growth and the ties they maintain with individual government officials. This three-part articulation of the opportunity structure represents the context within which Chinese social organizations must operate. By better defining this context, I can also better explain how leaders adapt to these opportunities. Understanding the actions that NGO leaders take to adapt to the opportunity structure is crucial to explain the role they play in governance and, as I ultimately argue, the dismal prospects for their long-term viability, as well as the resilience of the authoritarian regime. I find that, on the whole, groups are not circumscribed directly by the state through repression. Rather, it is the adaptations of the social organization leaders to the opportunity structure that impede their progress and threaten their long-term viability.

Although drawing primary attention to NGOs (and their leaders) is important to fully understand societal agency in state–society relations, I also am mindful to avoid some potential pitfalls associated with doing so. For instance, many studies of NGOs contain a strong normative bias, which often makes analyses of them misleading and inaccurate. Social organization leaders are commonly assumed to be altruistic, high-minded, enlightened, and idealistic. To understand how they navigate political space – and to appreciate the role that political, economic, and personal factors play – I avoid romanticizing NGOs and those who lead them. Leaders of NGOs in China, as elsewhere, are understood here as strategic, opportunity-driven actors. Nongovernmental organizations are made up of *real*, fallible people, who have unique problems and individual, selfish interests.[2] This book attempts neither to sanctify nor demonize NGOs, but to normalize them.

Furthermore, this book is more about the frequent *routine* relationships between state and society and less interested in the rare instances of repression. In this, the research deviates from many other studies of Chinese social organizations. Previous attention to NGOs in China, vignette-driven popular media accounts in particular, have paid closest attention to the most extreme cases, in which activists face the kind of brutal repression that one might expect in the Chinese authoritarian polity. In offering a more systematic, multicase, larger N study, this book intends to correct inaccurate understandings of how the entirety of civil society operates in China, a misunderstanding that comes from focusing only on repressed groups. This book is, in essence, a profile in success. It analyzes organizations that, by virtue of their specific issue areas, have the potential to provide benefit to the state and have been able to effectively adapt to the opportunity structure and avoid many forms of negative state response.

Nonetheless, this book still captures a sense of real political struggle, though not a struggle in the sense that social actors are pitted against the state and

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[2] The romanticization of NGOs is pervasive throughout academic and policymaking communities such that some scholars have faced push-back from attempts to use social movement and NGO theoretical frameworks to explain groups not as broadly social-minded, such as Al Qaeda.

vice-versa. Instead, it sheds light on how social actors struggle to make sense of the state and the adaptations necessary to deal with government and the opportunity structures it has created. It shows how these structures often change and, thus, that strategic limitation itself is in flux. Understanding the complexity of this state–society interaction puts me in a better place to speculate about the future of social organizations and, ultimately, of civil society in China.

Through my investigation, I conclude that whereas increasing in number and widening in focus, Chinese social organizations are not well institutionalized. These organizations and the people who lead them are motivated and impacted by economic factors, as well as by political ones. Despite the lack of wide-ranging repression, I cannot offer a sanguine outlook for NGOs in particular or civil society in general. The very nature of the opportunity structures can provide the space to allow for initial emergence and short-term success, but the adaptations necessary for leaders to take advantage of these opportunities create weak organizations ill-suited to continue over the long term. Even though the state has not purposely created the structure in order to constrain groups through coercive means, the result might well be just as effective. I also find evidence of a chilling effect among NGO leaders: even if we could objectively fault the government for failures of some social organizations, the leaders of NGOs in China do not always see it that way. Rather, they tend to blame other civil society group leaders (and sometimes international NGOs) as the primary reason for their plight. Furthermore, because these organizations have usually forged a "harmonious" existence by acting in the service of the state, their emergence does not herald the birth of a strong, independent civil society that could challenge the authoritarian regime. In fact, the better they do their work, the more likely they are to eliminate problems that, if unresolved, could undermine the regime. In this way, the emergence of Chinese social organizations has the more likely (and surprising) effect of helping the authoritarian state persist.

The remainder of this introduction discusses the literatures from which this book draws and contributes. After exploring the dominant theoretical paradigm in which most studies of NGOs are conducted – civil society literatures – it engages the corporatist literature and then social movement literatures. In the end, I suggest a more unified theoretical approach to explain social organizations and the state in China. Next, I propose a new conceptual framework of state–society interaction in authoritarian polities through which I define the kinds of groups studied in this book and toward which I intend to generalize; I also introduce the primary analytical framework through which I examine these organizations. Finally, the introduction offers an overview of case selection and research design and previews the book's chapters.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

Current understandings of NGOs in China have been strongly shaped by studies of environmental organizations, one of the three issue areas featured in this

book (Cooper 2006; Ewoh and Rollins 2011; Hildebrandt and Turner 2009; Ho 2001; Mertha 2008; Ru and Ortolano 2009; Schwartz 2004; Tang and Zhan 2008; Teets 2009; Xie 2009; Yang 2005). The dominance of these "green groups" in the literature on NGOs in China is not surprising, given that these organizations are the oldest, thought to be the most successful, and are usually the most accessible to researchers.[3] As with the work on environmental NGOs in other parts of the world (Dalton 1994; Princen and Finger 1994; Wapner 1995), most of these studies have been focused on whether these organizations will be able to affect political change.[4] The question of primary interest for most studies of NGOs in China has driven (or, alternatively, been driven by) the choice of theoretical frame.

In studying social organizations, political scientists frequently rely on insights from civil society literatures, which usually assume that social actors have a contentious or counterbalancing relationship with the state (Cohen and Arato 1992; Gellner 1984) and that the societal activity it explains will lead to political change (e.g., Bermeo and Nord 2000; Keane 1998; Putnam 1993). The most dominant literatures maintain that social organizations are a challenge to authoritarianism by increasing political participation (especially among marginalized populations) (Silliman and Nobel 1998) and keeping state power in check (Clarke 1998), and are thus a fundamental source of democratization (Diamond 1994). Most civil society scholars see social organizations – and NGOs in particular – from a decidedly liberal perspective, maintaining that democracy requires this autonomous civil society to balance a strong state and represent the myriad interests within society. But although civil society literatures of today are well suited to explaining change, they are less adept at describing stability. This might explain why studies of social movements in strong and *persistent* authoritarian regimes (like China's) are scarce.

Although research on social organizations in China is also centered on the concept of civil society, there is widespread recognition that civil society may be different in this political context. China's civil society is described as highly regulated (Baum and Shevchenko 1999), limited by "Asian characteristics" (Madsen 1993), and usually less confrontational than in other contexts (Liu 1996; Ogden 2002). Many note that the state must be taken into consideration when using the concept of civil society (Chamberlain 1993; Nevitt 1996;

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[3] Because HIV/AIDS groups are considerably newer than environmental NGOs, far fewer studies have focused on this issue area. Still, notable exceptions include Kaufman (2009) and Wu (2011). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) activism has been virtually ignored by political scientists; there are apparently no studies yet published on NGOs in this sector.

[4] It is important to note that much of this early work on environmental NGOs in China was primarily descriptive in nature. To the extent that research has been more analytical, most has focused only on environmental NGOs, sometimes featuring case studies of individual groups; systematic, large-scale studies of multiple issue areas have not been completed. Thus, the generalizations about Chinese NGOs that do exist have been drawn from understandings of organizations in this one issue area rather than several.

Zhou 1993); for some it is a mix of purposeful state sponsorship and grassroots activities (Morton 2005). But Saich (2000) warns that too much attention on the state ignores the mechanisms through which groups work around it. Despite broadened definitions, many of these scholars still conclude that civil society will eventually lead to political transition (Cooper 2006). And, although civil society might not bring democracy to China, civil liberties are sure to increase because of the very existence of these social organizations (Morton 2005).

Work in other political contexts problematized the link between civil society and political change. The way social organizations affect change differs across context and time; the development of a civil society does not always lead to democratization or some other marked political change. Civil society groups are not always "civil" (Payne 2000), nor are they always independent enough from the political regime to be a force for political change (Ottaway and Carothers 2000). Nongovernmental organizations can legitimize the status quo and not always challenge it (Mercer 2002). Groups that attempt to exist in an authoritarian regime moderate their activities lest they be repressed (Gershman and Allen 2006; Ottaway and Carothers 2000). In Vietnam, for example, the growth of social organizations has not resulted in a mobilization of broad-based civil society, largely because these groups continue to be urban and elite-based, with strong connections to the state (Gray 1999). To account for this variation, Foley and Edwards (1996) offer a modified conceptualization of civil society. They suggest that certain types of groups can actually stabilize and sustain nondemocratic regimes; they call this Civil Society I and juxtapose it with Civil Society II, which operates more in opposition and less in concert with the state.

Recent studies on China point to similar fundamental problems with traditional assumptions of civil society and political change. An increase in the number of interest groups could weaken the state, but it does not necessarily benefit society as a whole (Ogden 2002). Alternatively, single-issue NGOs might marginalize the political intervention of social organizations (Beja 2006) and meet the specific needs of the state, such that it can maintain its monopoly of power (Ding 2001). These perspectives are consistent with Marxist theories that suggest states permeate civil society in order to consolidate power, thus making the two indistinguishable (Gramsci 1971: 238). Discontent with the civil society literatures has led some scholars to simply abandon it altogether. Zhou argues that the common strategy of "identifying discrete elements of civil society and then simply adding them up" does not adequately capture the existence or nature of civil society (Zhou 1999: 7).

As this discussion suggests, civil society literatures remain diverse. Multiple civil society perspectives exist, each having emerged from unique historical and political contexts: the dominant literature today, one that is interested primarily in the democratizing effect of civil society, has been shaped by the role of civil society organizations in democratizing movements throughout

Latin America and Eastern Europe.[5] Still, civil society literatures, and the popularity of them in explaining NGOs, cast a long shadow; conventional wisdom on social organizations has been driven by some of the same key questions, even with modifications made to the framework. Perhaps most problematic for this book, civil society literatures make assumptions about what society wants and what its goals are: actors seek to simultaneously engage in their activities, exist indefinitely, and, in the long term, serve as a force for political reform and change. However, these goals are rarely complementary in China.

It is not that civil society literatures are completely ill-suited to the study of state–society relations. Rather, they are interested in a different research question, namely: how does society affect political change? In this respect, civil society literature has done us a great service by making us account for the role of society. I, too, focus my research on society, but my question is different. Whereas most civil society literatures are interested in the prospect of change in the future, I seek to explain the status quo.

To understand social organizations in an authoritarian context, corporatism literature provides a better theoretical starting point in that it offers a descriptive model of the state–society interaction, paying particular attention to the state's role in creating and managing the relationship. Schmitter (1974: 93–4) calls corporatism "a system of interest representation" wherein organizations are given "representational monopoly within their respective categories in exchange for observing certain controls on their selection of leaders and articulation of demands and supports." Corporatist insights have been increasingly adopted to explain the negotiated, highly structured relationship between the state and society in China. Unger and Chan (1995, 2008) argue that, under Chinese corporatism, the state grants some autonomy to social organizations with the understanding that they will moderate their demands and activities in accordance with government wishes. Gallagher (2004: 421) more recently employed the concept in explaining how the state controls groups through "mutual penetration, converging interests, and co-optation" rather than repression of coercive methods. For polities like China, the establishment of such corporatist arrangements should not be entirely surprising: Leninist parties often adopt more inclusive practices in relation to society as they move from revolutionary to developmental goals (Jowitt 1992).

Although popular, there are serious limitations to the corporatist paradigm in the China context. Gallagher (2004: 422) argues that the idea of corporatism is too static and does not account well for change. Because corporatism is state-centered, with a keen eye on "top-down control" (Unger and Chan 1995: 31), it undersells the actions of individuals and organizations, as well as downplays the likelihood and importance of variation among them. In addition, most corporatist literature fails to properly disaggregate the state enough to show

[5] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this important point.

how state–society arrangements in China are not homogenous, but vary across specific issue areas and geographic regions.[6] It tends to ignore the divisions that are common within any corporate entity, which can lead to competition for scarce resources (Oi 1992); this occurs both among individual leaders for economic resources and also government officials themselves. In one of the earliest efforts to use the term in explaining state–society relations in China, Oi (1992) was correct to disaggregate the state and accommodate for variation. Another significant deficiency is the literature's inattention to the society side of the arrangement and an overall neglect of agency (however constraining the overall structure may be for social organizations). Although corporatism is well suited to explain the constraints of the political opportunity structure, it fails to show how society adapts to the opportunities offered by this corporatist relationship.

Social movement literatures may provide better leverage to analyze the interaction of the state and social organizations. Like corporatism, social movement literatures help us capture the environment within which the movements must operate, while also downplaying any assumed outcome, as is common in the civil society paradigm. However, unlike the more state-centric corporatist paradigm, social movement literatures place greater emphasis on how the motivations and actions of social actors help ensure success for organizations.

Although organizations in the issue areas featured in this book are commonly explored within the "new social movement" framework,[7] I draw primarily on the rational school of political process literatures. This strand grew out of U.S.-based mobilizations in the 1960s and a subsequent acknowledgment that both societal and state actors are rational, reasonably trying to pursue their goals. Rational approaches also remind us that the presence of social problems does

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[6] Although I make explicit efforts to disaggregate the state in this book to account for important regional and issue area variation, I am also mindful of the warning that Perry (1994) offers in regards to studies of state–society relations in China, that too much disaggregation can run the risk of losing sight of larger patterns throughout the country.

[7] These movements are said to transcend traditional class distinctions (Melucci 1980), often dealing with intensely personal and intimate aspects of human life (Larana, Johnston, and Gusfield 1994). Although other social movements in nondemocratic polities are seen as contentious and revolutionary (Goldstone 1998; Rucht 1996; Tarrow 1998), new social movements (NSMs) avoid advocating for the abolition of current political and economic systems and are thus more reformed (Cohen 1985; Melucci 1980). Although demands are fewer, these movements are less willing to compromise them (Calhoun 1993). Environmental movements are the prototypical example of post-material mobilization (Carlisle and Smith 2005); surveys of groups in Western Europe and developing countries suggest that groups in both contexts are post-materialist, concerned with quality-of-life issues above all else (Dalton 1994; Peritore 1999). However, organizations in the NSM paradigm also emerge in areas with decreasing levels of income, where material concerns still reign (Calhoun 1993; Cohen 1985; Drucker 1996; Goodin 1992; Hassler 2006; Pakulski and Crook 1998; Rootes 2004; Talshir 2004). Mobilization is not a response to rising demands, but due to an "urgency to defend existing needs" (Offe 1985: 843). Indeed, environmental degradation can have real material implications, with industrial pollution or inadequate water resources hurting livelihoods and impacting human health.

not automatically produce collective action.[8] One major variant of the rationalist literature – resource mobilization – links social movement emergence and success to the presence of adequate financial and human resources. Resource mobilization has emphasized the variability of economic resources in the emergence. It contends that motivation to action is not enough for mobilization. Groups depend on outside, external resources to emerge and sustain themselves (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Grievances might be secondary to financial resources in describing why groups emerge and thrive (Jenkins and Perrow 1977; Oberschall 1978; Tilly 1978).

Another crucial ingredient in explaining mobilization – and the other major focus of these literatures – is the emergence of a more favorable political context, often conceived of as an expansion of political opportunities (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996). This political process approach traditionally assumes that opportunities arise when state repression declines, political access increases, and the political environment becomes friendlier (McAdam 1998). The approach has been used primarily to explain the situation in newly democratized or open political structures. To this extent, a traditional understanding of political opportunities may not be helpful for explaining social organizations in China, although the general insights are still applicable to even nondemocratic polities.

Because the state plays a key role in the story of Chinese social organizations, a more state-centric opportunity structure is necessary to understand the relationship of state and society. Political opportunities in the China case are best understood not as Goldstone's (1980) "big opportunity," in which an entire state system breaks down, but rather as Kingdon's (1984) "policy window." The state can narrow opportunities as a "control agent" or widen them as a "facilitator" (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1988). Tarrow's (1996) conceptualization of "cross-sectional statism" is particularly germane: concerned with maintaining the status quo and preserving power, states shape opportunities in the interest of their own survival. In China, political opportunities have not arisen as a result of a more inclusive state or in the wake of a failed one. Instead, they have emerged because the state has chosen to become more responsive to certain pressing social problems. As part of its broader effort to withdraw the state from its larger role in society – dubbed "small state, big society" – Beijing has decided that non-state actors are best suited to solve these problems,

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[8] Rationalist literature does, however, tend to assume that movements arise out of conflicts. An important clarification is needed here. Conflicts should not necessarily be equated with groups employing antagonistic postures or tactics. As I explain later, it is important to understand that antagonistic tactics generally are not presumed effective by the social actors in this study. As a result of this orientation, groups like those featured in this book that do not operate in opposition to the state are often excluded from discussions of social movements and civil society. However, I suggest that conflicts can be thought of differently: as the presence of problems that demand action. In these circumstances, social organizations can arise to help the state address pressing social problems.