Sprouting from Fissures: Pluralizing the Conceptions of Chinese Citizenship

by

Rain Tianyu Xie
Class of 2014

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors from the College of Social Studies

Middletown, Connecticut
April, 2014
Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT iii
DRAMATIS PERSONÆ iv
NOTE TO THE READER v

Introduction: Citizenship in China 1

ROLES OF INTELLECTUALS 8
THE MANIFESTATION OF CIVIL ORIENTATION 13
RESEARCH APPROACH 20

1. Citizens and the Rule of Law 31
   a. CHINESE CITIZENS: PEOPLE, COMRADES OR MORE? 32
   b. CIVIL LAW, ARTFUL CITIZENS 46
   c. “FLUID” REGULATORY SYSTEM 52
   d. CONCLUSION 60

2. Sprouts of “Active Citizenship” 63
   a. THE POST-SOCIALIST SOIL: PRE-EARTHQUAKE 2008 65
   b. FROM RUINS—DISPERSING THE SEEDS OF CIVIL ENGAGEMENTS 71
   c. SPROUTS IN DANGER: TENSION AND CONFUSION 80
   d. CONCLUSION 86

3. Half-Metamorphosis: Institutionalization of Grassroots Civil Engagements 88
   a. BE LEGAL?! 89
   b. SPHERES OF DISCOURSES: THE STAGED, THE UNSTAGED 103
   c. RATIONALES OF THE NON-LEGALIZED 111
   d. CONCLUSION 116

4. Exclusion From Within: Organizational Collaboration and Extension 119
   a. STRATEGIC COLLABORATION: 4.20 LUSHAN DEBUT 120
   b. RURAL LIVELIHOOD: “NOW FOLLOW US” 128
   c. CORRUPTION MAKES IT WORSE 134
   d. RISKS OF BUREAUCRATIZATION 142
   e. CONCLUSION 146

Conclusion 149
Postscript 158
Bibliography 159
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In the process of producing this thesis, I inevitably incurred more debts than I could account for here:

I am ever so grateful to my tutors, classmates and friends at College of Social Studies for all the enlightenment and mentorship. The Davenport Committee generously funded my field research in the summer of 2013, which is essential for my study. Also I want to thank Center for the Humanities at Wesleyan University for the utopian intellectual atmosphere and intriguing conversations on political audiences.

My thesis advisor, Prof. Mary Alice Haddad has been enormously supportive and patient. Without her constant encouragements I could never weave the tapestry of the Chinese citizenship. I would also thank Prof. Donald Moon and Prof. Stephen Angle for their insightful advices and comments that tightened my arguments. My heartfelt thanks to Prof. Cecilia Miller, and Prof. Vera Schwarcz for the constant inspiration and incredible support throughout my college life; Prof. John Bonin, Prof. Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock and Prof. Gilbert Skillman for their insights and expert opinions. I would also thank my laoxiang, Prof. Patrick Dowdey, for reminding my spiritual roots in the “Chengdu pastoral.”

Field research in Bejing and Chengdu would not be possible without the help of Doctor Shawn Shieh, Prof. Kang Xiaoguang, and friends I met at Renmin University of China. Grassroots NGO workers, volunteers, local officials and villagers, whom I assigned pseudo names in this thesis for identity protection, please accept my deepest gratitude for your knowledge, help and trust. I sincerely hope for a quick recovery of earthquake-affected regions, and pray that all villagers in the area will overcome the trauma as soon as possible.

Thank all my amazing friends at Wesleyan: Alexa, my thesis mentor who reads my work carefully; Winston, for proofreading, and the ginseng soup; Charlie, for constantly checking my sanity; Leo and Lin, for the chocolate lava cake and the Thai iced tea that slowed the time; Ben, Julian and Mari, for being a willing audience of me blabbering on self-reflection and authoritarian regimes; Brendan, Chris, Angela, Lynn and Martin for always de-stressing me; and many, many smiles, concerts, exhibitions that smoothed out my writing paths.

Here, I dedicate my thesis to my parents, and the grassroots NGO professionals of China.

我最亲爱的家人，我对你们的关爱万分感激，尤其感谢爸爸妈妈的多年养育之恩。千里迢迢聚少离多，今年又因作此论文少有通话，实在愧疚！

仅将此文献予二老，和中国“草根”公益人。
DRAMATIS PERSONÆ*

BEIJING

**Professor Wang** Established scholar in a prominent university

CHENGDU, SICHUAN

**Chen Yong** Founder of Chengdu Disaster Preparation Volunteer Center
**Guo Ming** Leader of Wind and Light Disability Support Group
**Hu Zixiang** Founder of Sichuan Youming Social Development Center
**Li Xia** Founder of Warm Heart Home Community Center
**Tao Jun** Founder of Rural-Urban Collaboration Center
**Xi Chen** Chief editor of a Bilingual NGO Journal
**Zhang Li** Founder of Chengdu Xiyou Community Center

RENJIA VILLAGE, LUSHAN COUNTY, SICHUAN

**Liu Qi** Project leader of Warm Heart Home Community Center
**Wang Ming** Experienced professional of Warm Heart Home Community Center
**Wu Nan** Villager
**Yan Si** Villager, volunteer of Warm Heart Home Community Center
**Zhao Ke** Experienced professional of Warm Heart Home Community Center

*These are all pseudo names and organizations that I assign to my major interlocutors whose conversations I will cite in this thesis. Other interlocutors and their organizations will remain anonymous.
NOTE TO THE READER

Aside from personal names, place names, and words that are commonly used in English, all non-English words appear in italics. All Chinese words are rendered in *hanyu pinyin*. I include the Chinese characters at occasions only because I think certain meanings could be lost in translations. I assign pseudo names to all my interlocutors and institutions that they represent to protect their identities. Also I have followed the Chinese convention for names, with the family name first and the given name the second.
Introduction: Citizenship in China

“When the Grand course was pursued, a public and common spirit ruled all under the sky; they chose men of talents, virtue, and ability; their words were sincere, and what they cultivated was harmony. Thus men did not love their parents only, nor treat as children only their own sons. A competent provision was secured for the aged till their death, employment for the able-bodied, and the means of growing up to the young. They showed kindness and compassion to widows, orphans, childless men, and those who were disabled by disease, so that they were all sufficiently maintained.”¹

“大道之行也，天下为公。选贤与能，讲信修睦。故人不独亲其亲，不独子其子。使老有所终，壮有所用，幼有所长，矜寡孤独残废者，皆有所养。”
- Confucius, The Book of Rites

“Believe me, friend Hellishnoise: the great events—they are not our loudest but our stillest hours. Not around the inventors of new noises, but around the inventors of new values does the world revolves; it revolves inaudibly.”²
- Friedrich Nietzsche

China and its citizens are in the midst of profound social transformation. The continuous deepening of marketization reform that aims for “a well-to-do (xiaokang) society,” has broken many formerly forbidden rules of the previous centrally planned regime.³ The open-door policy has situated the Chinese citizens in the float of globalization—as China has become the largest foreign trader and the second largest economy behind the United States, new social and political norms have also

penetrated deeply into various aspects of civic life. Contrary to the many accounts of an authoritarian regime, China is in fact extremely diverse. As the ideological fervor that prescribed rigid rules for ordinary citizens withers away, social groups arise and begin to articulate and pursue their common interests. A civil society is emerging in China in which citizens feel relatively free to voice their dissatisfaction with party and government leaders. Situated in the emerging civil society, the Chinese citizenship is defined a multivalent conception, consisting of membership in a community, and the quality of the relationship between state and individual citizen.

At the end of 2012, there were more than 490,000 Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) recognized by the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA), including Non-governmental organizations (NGO) registered as Social Organizations (shetuan), NGOs registered as Civil Non-Enterprise Units (minban feiqiye), NGOs registered as foundations (jijinhui) and “Affiliated” (guakao) NGOs. Meanwhile, about 1 million CSOs have been operating without legal identity or having registered as corporations to obtain official recognition. Since the 1990s the dynamics of social organizations has changed significantly. In contrast, CSOs before Deng’s era were more similar to vehicles that political elites used to control various aspects of social life and mobilize the great masses to achieve revolutionary goals that they set out. Yet since Deng’s Reform this top-down model in society control began to dissolve. CSOs have

---

4 See He Baogang, *The Democratic Implications of Civil Society in China* (New York: St Martin’s, 1997); Yu Keping, *The Emerging Civil Society and Its Significance to Governance in Reform China* (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2002); Liu, Dittmer eds., *China’s Deep Reform: Domestic Politics in Transition*.


6 Karla Simon, “Meaningful Changes in the Legal Environment for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs): Their Relationship to Larger Trends in China’s ‘New’ Governance”, Paper Presented at Forum on NGO Governance and Management in China (Edmonton, Canada), August 16 2013.
emerged from the shadow of tight state control to work more in collaboration with rather in subordination to the Chinese state apparatus. These organizations have started to create programs advocating citizen participation, promoting diverse interests, providing alternatives for professional and social services and practicing democratic procedures.  

Although the uniformity of Chinese citizenship enforced by the previous ideologically rigid communist regime has disintegrated into a more diverse set of understandings of state-individual relationship, the Chinese conception of citizenship still differs fundamentally from the traditional Western definition. In the Western political tradition, citizenship is usually understood as a legal, political, and moral status rooted in individual membership in a political entity in which he or she could influence its sociopolitical, economic outcomes. In Paulo Henrique’s work the conception of citizenship is distinguished from usual categorization of basic human rights to food, shelter and safety. A stateless, non-citizen could enjoy her human rights but not the rights of citizen. Sherry Arnstein considers citizen control—the right to obtain full managerial power over the state as the highest degree of citizen participation, while passive manipulation and therapy by power-holders the lowest. T. H. Marshall divides citizenship into three elements, civil, political and social, which correspond to rights such s freedom of speech, thought and faith, the right to participate in the exercise of political power, and the right to those resources and

---

7 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
opportunities that are necessary to full membership in society.\textsuperscript{11} Although these three elements of citizenship are distinct and develop at different times, it is at the point where they become universal that citizenship grows into a national institution.\textsuperscript{12} Citizenship is fundamentally an essential condition for democracy.

In the emerging Chinese civil society, the idea that political activism is essential to citizenship must be unlearned, as the boundaries between human rights and citizen rights are blurred. I attempt to avoid the conflation of citizenship with democracy. But I do not deny that non-democracies can also be composed by citizens. The Chinese citizenship is fluid conception, consisting of \textit{membership} in a community, which can be a city or a nation-state, and the relationship and \textit{quality of the relationship} between individual Chinese citizen and the larger state apparatus.\textsuperscript{13}

This thesis analyzes the constant reshaping of the conception of citizenship (\textit{gongmin yishi}) in associational forms and through civic engagements in public life.

The fluid nature of the contemporary Chinese associational life can be seen in the ambiguous boundaries of civil society. Civil associations that were once officially recognized as national “transmission belts” from the state to society are now composed of citizens who artfully interact with and effectively influence local governance and policy making, drawing on various forms of social capital.\textsuperscript{14} This

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, 18  \\
\end{flushleft}
artfulness further blurs the limits of legally permissible civic activities. In this thesis, one of my goals is to document and explain the ways that these interactive strategies are employed by Chinese citizens in associational life, creating both new ideals of citizenship as well as diverse organizational practices that are restructuring the relationships between state apparatus and Chinese citizens. Evidently some Chinese citizens are taking initiatives to address uncovered social needs, but their artfulness infers that in a legal and political framework, their civic engagements contain many legacy of China’s socialist past. The pluralist dynamics of Chinese citizenship in the context of civil society have caught the attention of both Western and Chinese scholars. While many of the existing studies on Chinese citizenship remain historical and theoretical, this thesis, incorporating a field study inspired by the particularity of Chinese intellectual elites, attempts to refine the theoretical understanding of the Chinese citizenship.

There are two main existing approaches that can be put forward to explain the changing characters of Chinese citizenship. However, on closer inspection, each might fall short in articulating the diverse and diverging dynamics in civic associational life. The first argument relies on the transmitting effects of elites—both intellectual elites and political elites. This discussion demonstrates certain explanatory power in possibilities of political, ideological “non-compliances” in public discourses under certain political climate. However, Chinese intellectuals or politic elites, often obsessed with an air of noblesse oblige, are not always the group to initiate actual engagements, but rather are in response to events that have occurred
independent of their intellectual pursuits. In addition, the elitist status of intellectual activists often resists the deeper transmission of egalitarian ideal of citizenship.

The second type of explanation is based on grassroots rightful resistance of the underprivileged. This argument articulates that the Chinese citizenship is less granted than achieved. Hence, becoming a citizen involves crucial psychological re-orientation, including changes in one’s awareness of politics, sense of efficacy and legality. But this analysis fails to explain negotiations, compromises taken in organizational forms, which substantially enlarge the scope of citizenship. Although these two arguments fail to clarify the influences of civic associational life on the contemporary conception for citizenship, they illuminate the everlasting tension between allowing space of individual autonomy and focusing on meeting basic needs of living from different stances in the post-communist China.

This thesis argues that such intrinsic tension, rather than the particularity of China’s political climates, explains the complex patterns of civil engagements in negotiating, compromising and balancing between political goals and society interests. The Chinese citizenship that sprouts from continuous contestation of resources, networks and policies, undoubtedly takes different configurations than citizenship conception in Western civilizations. While many organization leaders demonstrate certain policy entrepreneurship and substantial active citizenship, the

---

struggle with institutional recognition, the transmitted elitist legacy of *noblesse oblige* create internal constraints upon the deepening of citizenship conception. This study grounded in a recent field research in Beijing, Chengdu and Lushan in the summer 2013, examines how individual actors situated at the juncture of state and society convey, transmit their conceptions of citizenship in a variety of civic organizational forms. I attempt to test existing theories on citizenship, fragmentation in the contemporary state-society relationship in an empirical study, which examines various stages of establishment, institutionalization, solidification and extension of civic services. I find that Chinese citizenship has already involved elements of democratic citizenship, but the “metamorphose” towards a full-fledged democratic citizenship is not yet complete. In following chapters, I trace the emergence of new values, new social settings that remake, contest and blur the Chinese conception of citizenship.

In this section, I will briefly review the role of intellectuals in negotiations between state-society relationships. I begin my investigation with Chinese intellectuals because historically they have been at the forefront of social changes in Chinese society and have always shared and articulated their compatriots’ commitment to better governance. Through various forms of public discourse intellectuals have enlightened the yet-to-be-awakened populace and encouraged people to articulate their voices.\(^{17}\) Recent manifestation of civil orientation is unalienable from intellectuals’ endeavor of probing the will of the populace. Chinese intellectuals are also dispersed among a variety of agencies in society, occupying

positions in government bureaus, universities, civic organization and businesses. I will also examine how intellectuals facilitate groupings and assemblies of shared thoughts and how the ideal of citizenship is formulated in intellectual circle.

Enlightened by the particularity of Chinese intellectuals, I chose field research as a fundamental methodology of this study to complement the theoretic understanding of Chinese citizenship. I will explain the structure of my field research and also outline the remaining chapters at the end of this chapter.

**ROLES OF INTELLECTUALS**

Public remonstration or petition of Chinese intellectuals has been an accepted political practice throughout Chinese history. In Confucian times court intellectuals had a tradition of sending memorials to bureaucratic officials and the emperor on matters of principles and consciousness and draw attention to flaws in the leadership’s policies.18 Besides directly drafting memos, in times of trouble intellectuals and students also took temporary associational form outside the political centers and without official approval to call special attention from the emperor and to collectively propose ways to improve or revise rules of governance. As John Schrecker writes, beginning in the waning days of the Han Dynasty, qingyi – “pure discussion” or “critical elite opinion” was presented through groups of intellectuals in court.19 While these remonstrators, literati or members of the elite, intended to speak

---

on behalf of the people (wei min shang shu), they usually presented plausible arguments to show that their concerns also served the state’s interests.  

At the turn of the twentieth century, scholar-gentry reformers sought to reform China’s traditional political system and for the first time introduced the ideal of gongmin (public persons) to China. Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao launched the 1898 Hundred Days of Reform include the notion of individual participation in political life. The scholars of the May Fourth generation in the 1920s further used the term shimin (city persons) to define citizens in an urban setting. In the early twentieth century the term zhishi fenzi, which refers to members of a politicized intelligentsia, or knowledgeable elements of a larger, class-conscious body politic, underscoring intellectuals’ active engagements in alliance with the masses (dazhong) to refine political governance. The Chinese intellectuals are not simply disinterested scholars, but also “fellow travelers among the ranks of the revolutionary masses (geming qunzhong).  

In the Maoist era, individuals could send letters to Mao and party officials to make leaders aware of problems, as well as to urge them to live up to the highest ideals. Although no official sanctions were imposed on these actions, these individuals tended to develop a persuasive rhetoric to present their efforts to refine the economic, political life within the system. However, memories of “sweeping away all monsters and demons” during the Cultural Revolution, when intellectuals  

20 Goldman, From Comrade to Citizen, 79.  
21 Ibid, 11.  
22 Ibid, 9.
were prosecuted, with dissenting opinions were still fresh in the minds of many.\textsuperscript{23} While the suffering that characterized China’s socialist past reminded individuals that the silencing of dissent for the sake of national stability could severely distort state-individual relationship, it also alarmed Chinese citizens of being aware of the boundaries, strategies when expressing political ideals.

In the post-Mao era, the Confucian consultative relationship between the state apparatus and scholars was revived.\textsuperscript{24} After the implementation of Deng Xiaoping’s Open and Reform policies since 1978, intellectuals started to experiment in a variety of ways with which they could voice their concerns of the post-reform state. Deng’s new market-oriented policies invited chronic and severe problems, including “corruption, injustice, urban unemployment, rural unrest, unfairness in economy, a growing gap between rich and poor, problems in economic reform and the plundering of state capital.”\textsuperscript{25} Five groups of intellectuals known as the Neo-Maoists, Neo-Nationalists, Neo-Conservatives, the New Left and the Liberals could not only publicly express political opinions, but also were considered as key resources in policy-making.\textsuperscript{26} These diverse intellectual groups were included within the party establishment and consulted by it. Merle Goldman notes that these intellectuals in academic journals intellectuals could freely debate the changing state-society

\textsuperscript{24} Goldman, \textit{From Comrade to Citizen}, 12.
\textsuperscript{26} Goldman, \textit{From Comrade to Citizen}, 95.
relationship, so long as scholars avoided attacking the party line directly. In regards to public presentation of political ideals, scholars like Ding Yijiang witnessed that the dominance of socialist rhetoric in the Maoist era faded away.

Also noteworthy in the post-Mao era was the open criticism against the traditional relationship between intellectuals and the state, in which intellectuals “never wavered in loyalty to the emperor.” Former professor at Beijing Normal University and the later Nobel Peace Price Laureate Liu Xiaobo openly berated his fellow intellectuals for their subservience to the political leadership and castigated them for not having “broken free from the classic mold unchanged for thousands of years.” He insightfully criticized that these intellectuals had failed to oppose the despotism of the autocratic system “because… [they have] traditionally been given power and have been bureaucratized,” and when they are listened to and are given political position and fame, their “opposition soon becomes obedience for the purpose of achieving their own vested interests.” The increasing diversity and non-conformist rhetoric gradually lit individual consciousness as independent citizens in public discourse. While petitions and formations of associations in the post-Mao era resonated with past practices, they were qualitatively and quantitatively different. Unlike in Confucian times, petitioners and remonstrators in the post-Mao era were not just members of the elite intellectuals—they were scholars and students with few

---

27 Ibid.
31 Liu Xiaobo, “Contemporary Chinese Intellectuals and Politics, Part VI,” *Cheng Ming* (Hong Kong), No.156 (September 1990), 56-80.
privileges no more than factory workers. In contrast with individual petitioners in the Maoist era (1949-1976), some started to articulate political opinions as groups constituted of both established scholars as well as ordinary citizens. Due to the relaxed policies and legal requirements, social organizations (SOs, shetuan) proliferated outside of the state bureaucratic system.\textsuperscript{32}

What was equally remarkable was that a bottom-up, grassroots struggle to resolve social injustice emerged along with the liberation in political ideals in intellectual discourses. The proliferation of diverse ideological political opinions along with accumulated discontent in socioeconomic problems led to events such as the Democracy Wall movement and the Tiananmen Incident on June 4, 1989, where the organized masses confronted and challenged official rules in a quite conspicuous manner. Collective mobilization imposed a direct influence on state apparatus. Regardless of the radicalism and bloody crackdown, some individuals became able to demand for practical civil and political rights and emphasized on the privilege and inalienability of these rights. A window of political pluralism and collective political participation challenged the stability and legitimacy of the regime. Both the Chinese intellectuals and common citizens started to realize that they were no longer merely a part of a collective, but were all individual citizens who were capable of changing the society and their relationship with the state, regardless of their educational backgrounds, as long as they could articulate political ideas and formulate assemblies to effectively present them.\textsuperscript{33} As individuals began to discuss what the state could do

\textsuperscript{32} Qiusha Ma, \textit{Non-governmental Organizations in Contemporary China}, (London: Routledge, 2004), 62.

for them and engage in activities of what they could do for themselves, their senses of ideological autonomy and political efficacy began to grow.

THE MANIFESTATION OF CIVIL ORIENTATION

As China’s modernization proceeded towards the late twentieth century, the nature of social engagement evolved. When Godwin C. Chu and Yanan Ju were studying civil orientation in metropolitan area of Shanghai in 1993, a poll in their field research revealed that 35.5% of Chinese respondents disagreed with the idea that “we should trust and obey the government (because it is always working for our good),” while 94.2% of the respondents believed that “the fate of the country is everyone’s responsibility.”34 A significant portion of the population could seek individual viability of political bargaining outside of legitimate government rules and the majority of the respondents already possessed the sense of civil responsibility. The poll also presented a general dissatisfaction with “the working style of officials” (71% disapproval), as well as a clearly manifested fear of “making too many proposals in front of officials because they may not ‘like democracy.’”35 Although citizens could clearly no longer fully comply with the existing governance, a democratic method of governance was not yet established.

Three aspects of civil engagements could be enlightening in fostering a sense of agency and political efficacy among Chinese citizens: the nature of engagements

---


35 Ibid.
that constitute civil activities, the conception of citizenship and the role of civil engagements in transforming citizenship. The presentation of these aspects of civil consciousness can be detected in both private and public spheres, which involve individual private affinity to certain civil ideals and informal civil groups and public engagements in recognized associational life. The difference between the private and public is closely associated to the conception and artful interpretation of laws and regulations.

Chan and Nesbitt-Larking, Chamberlain and Madsen emphasize the critical nature of citizenship in civil society. They notice that what distinguishes a civil society from an authoritarian or totalitarian one is not merely the existence of a separate or formally free domain of private association, but the existence of a voluntary political community, “a regime of choice and deliberation and incumbents of that regime who are open to scrutiny, criticism and replacement.”

Two major questions concerning attitudinal aspect and associational aspect of civil society are frequently debated among Western and Chinese intellectuals.

Chan and Nesbitt-Larking argue that whether or not citizens can exhibit any critical discrimination among objects of political orientation is critical in understanding political potentials of civil society. Min Qi, inspired by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba’s study on civic culture in the late 1950s, collaborated with a group of young Chinese intellectuals conducted a survey of public opinion

---

among 5,000 respondents in 1986 and 1987. Although some scholars question the representativeness of the survey sample and its methodological flaws, the study indicated that many Chinese people were dissatisfied with many of their officials and were hoping to see reforms in the conduct and structure the government. As the empirical studies show, the youngest cohort—those under the age of 25, in the survey of participants adopted an increasingly “civil” profile.”

This civil profile of challenging authorities and possessing discriminating political objects was presented in slogans like “We love our country, but we hate our government” in the student demonstrations of 1989. According to studies of political cultures by scholars like Ronald Inglehart, an increasing cynicism about the regime’s ideology, and value systems has developed and manifested in online public discourses and private ideals since the 1980s. While loyalty to China as a political entity remains, the Chinese people begin to detach such loyalty from political authorities, regardless the authorities’ efforts to limit criticism and dissent.

Many intellectuals also question if the existing forms of social organizations are capable of manifesting citizens’ diversifying civil orientations. They have tried to analyze the growing vitality in associational life, which changes the structure of previous state-society relationship. Most Western Sinologists and Chinese scholars reject the ideal of completely taking the Western notion of “civil society”—an

38 Ibid.
independent public space between the state and private arena where civic power
against state coercion can be freely exercised.\textsuperscript{40} Most scholars agree that the public
life in China is indeed a complex, multi-layered organism that “the purpose of
associations with civil orientations was not to directly confront the government but
rather to harmonize the relations between society and the government, providing
autonomy to assist the government.”\textsuperscript{41} Peter Ho writes that, “many NGOs have
established by strong personalities who are extremely well-connected to Party and
state institutions… One might therefore conclude that, although the Chinese NGOs
are ‘non-governmental,’ they are, particularly the well-established ones, also part of
an elite hierarchy.”\textsuperscript{42} A sense of state-society corporatism in associational life, in
which the state acts to preempt the emergence of autonomous groups and the role of
the CCP remains crucial.

The concept of state corporatism was pioneered by Phillippe Schmitter.
though the original concept is situated in the “rapid, highly visible demise of nascent
pluralism that occurs when the state is a late, dependent capitalist country.”\textsuperscript{43} In the

\textsuperscript{40} See Qiushan Ma, “Defining Chinese Nongovernmental Organizations,” in \textit{Voluntas: International
Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations}, vol. 13, No.2 (June 2002), accessed online:
http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1016051604920, 115-118.
\textsuperscript{41} See Min Ma, \textit{Guan Shang Zhijian: Shehui Jubian Zhong de Jidai Shenshang [Between Government
and Merchants: Modern Gentry-Merchants During Social Transition]}, (Tianjin: Tianjin People’s
\textsuperscript{42} Quoted in Ru Jiang, Leonard Ortolano, “Corporatist Control of Environmental Non-governmental
Organizations,” in Peter Ho, “Embedded Activism and Political Change in a Semi-Authoritarian
Context” in \textit{China’s Embedded Activism}, eds. Peter Ho, Louis Edmonds (New York: Routledge, 2008),
65.
\textsuperscript{43} Schmitter defined corporatism as “a system of interest representation in which the constituent units
are organized into a limited number of singular, compulsory, noncompetitive, hierarchically ordered
and functionally differentiated categories, recognized or licensed (if not created) by the state and
granted a deliberate representational monopoly within their respective categories in exchange for
observing certain controls on their selection of leaders and articulation of demands and supports,” in
Phillippe Schmitter “Still the Century of Corporatism?” in \textit{The Review of Politics}, accessed online:
1990s, Margaret Pearson, Anita Chan and Jonathan Unger recognized the corporatist nature of associational life particularly in private business practices. Yet the degree of associational autonomy varies in various types of corporatist models. In the state corporatist model, argued by Chan and Unger, associations are not entirely free from state domination and sometimes behave like extensions of the state.\textsuperscript{44} White et al. in the book \textit{In Search of Civil Society: Market Reform and Social Change in Contemporary China}, scholars argue that local corporatism at community level indeed enjoy some degree of freedom. White views a decline in government control and an increase in diversity and effective expression of social interests. White et al. write, “One can argue strongly that there is a strong and growing intermediate sphere of social association in China which embodies in different ways and to different degrees, the basic characteristics of a ‘civil society’ – those of voluntary participation and self-regulation, autonomy and separation from the state.”\textsuperscript{45} Here they agree with the sociological aspect of civil society, rather than its political counterpart, as they propose “by using a sociological definition of civil society, one can identify…the organizational features of a civil society…voluntary participation and self-regulation in their activities, and autonomy and separation in their relationship with the state.”\textsuperscript{46} Although state corporatism could sponsor social organizations to extend state power, societal corporatism indicates that space of civil power exists at least to a limited degree.


\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
Will the “patron-client” relationship of the observed corporatism tamper the necessary independence of civil associational in China? Ding Yijiang argues in his book *Chinese Democracy After Tiananmen* that the corporatist model is not perfectly sufficient in explaining the increase in social pluralism that prepares for democratization. Theoretically, scholars like Shi Xianmin have visions that increasing social pluralism is not just functional for local citizens to refine regional community, but amount to a “reconstruction of society.”  

The individualization of social interests, as Shi argues, promotes the “consciousness of group interests,” which “in turn would foster democratization.”  

Ding examines corporatism and pluralism in the emergence of civil associations. Scholars like Guo Dingping have already observed a surge in the number of local associations in early 1990s. In 1992, there were already 1,400 nationwide associations, 19,600 provincial-level associations, 160,000 county-level associations and “countless associations below the county level or within large work units,” while a 1990 Beijing Daily article reported that there were 100,000 local associations.

While these early forms of civil associations were under the supervision of state apparatus, they were capable of breeding and manifesting group consciousness, which conveys senses of liberal individualistic values and a pluralist view of society.

---


48 Ibid.

Interestingly in the seemingly corporatist mechanism, “fragments,” meaning the incoherence of responses to perceived social problems at local levels frequently occurred.\(^{50}\)

An alliance emerged between the local political authority and local community “against the encroachment of the central state—an alliance of interest on behalf of local protectionism.”\(^{51}\) Local government also support demonstration of operational independence organized by local business associations. Besides fragments in local corporatism, the scale of unregistered social groups weakens the explanatory power of state corporatism, as social groups existing without legal recognition seem to operate outside of supervision or support of state apparatus.\(^{52}\)

Andrew Mertha observes these fragments in local corporatism as one of many fissures in China’s authoritarian political system today. In his case studies of local activism against hydropower plant projects at Pubugou, Dujianyan and on the Nu River, he witnesses that civil associations including NGOs, the media has demonstrated the capability of collectively bargaining with state apparatus and competing with political authorities in policy-making process. These civil associations, as Mertha notes, originally excluded from decision-making at regional or central political centers are gradually becoming viable actors. This phenomenon resonates with Kenneth Lieberthal and David Lampton’s discoveries of decision-making mechanism in post-Mao era. Mertha elaborates that a critical degree of


\(^{52}\) Simon, “Meaningful Changes in the Legal Environment for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs): Their Relationship to Larger Trends in China’s 'New' Governance.”
fragmentation emerges when the state finds it difficult to maintain political control, as existing political bureaucracies have not adapted sufficiently to “rapid socioeconomic changes, the aggressive lobbying or corporation among interest groups or changing expectation of citizenry.” 53 Civil associations, particularly NGOs have the potential of becoming “policy entrepreneurs,” which as John Kingdom writes, “possess defining characteristics including their willingness of invest their resources…in the form of policies which they approve.” 54 Critical citizenship seems to be upgraded from private political orientation to active entrepreneurship in policy making.

**RESEARCH APPROACH**

Inspired by Kevin O’Brien and Li Lianjiang’s discussion of their approaches towards popular politics studies, I also attempt to examine state, civic organizations into institutionally situated individuals—officials, NGO leaders, professionals and volunteers. 55 These individual actors are central to the transformation of state-society relationship. When examining citizenship, I attempt to extend the study of Chinese theories of citizenship to actual practice in associational life, namely regarding individual citizens’ engagement with law and regulation, the strategic use of persuasive rhetoric and the allocation of social capital. I describe how individual political ideals are articulated and amplified. Considering the practical challenge of conducting nationwide quantitative analysis with now outdated data collected by Min

Qi and Ronald Inglehart two decades ago, I view ethnographic field research as a more convincing methodology. This thesis is based on two months of field research conducted in Beijing and Sichuan Province in the summer of 2013. The interviews that I conducted do not represent a statistical sample, but rather an attempt to investigate how conceptions of citizenship vary by organizational type. Interviews with a variety of intellectuals, activists, government officials, students and ordinary people Chinese enabled me to probe the grey areas of ideology and civic participation.

Knowing that social organizations have proliferated in the past three decades, I selected and identify NGOs that are in effect self-governing, voluntary and non-profit. I used the term NGO broadly to indicate mass organizations and government-organized “NGOs” (GONGOs) with close tie to the state, as well as grassroots NGOs with little or no official ties to the state. Many GONGOs, registered as Social Organizations (shetuan), civil non-enterprise units (minban feiqiye) or foundations (jijinhui) with Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA), were spin-offs of a government agency or public institution. GONGO leaders were often state officials or retired officials, and they received at least initial funding from the state. In light of previously discussed regulatory framework, that in most of the cases NGO registration requires sponsorship from a professional supervising unit, about one million grassroots NGOs have avoided registering with MCA—they register as companies or operate without legal identity.

However, there is no clear divide between GONGOs and grassroots NGOs. Some GONGOs have detached from their government units, while grassroots NGOs though started with no reliance on have become quite dependent on state resources. In
this thesis, I identify with the fluid nature of Chinese NGO’s legal status, operational strategies, and funding resources, but I am inclined to articulate their political potentials at and beyond their locality. Through negotiation, resource bargaining and collaboration within and beneath public sphere, some Chinese NGOs could realize self-empowerment beyond their legal identities and plant political participatory awareness from the bottom. I examine the actual engagements and changes in associational endeavors that are not necessarily confined by the associations’ current official identity—either GONGOs, the political influence of which might be intuitively ruled out, or grassroots associations including unregistered groups. Therefore, this thesis primarily investigates three types of grassroots associations: NGOs officially registered at the MCA, NGOs registered as corporate entities and unregistered NGOs. The categorization of these three types of civil associations is based on both their legal identities and actual operations.

My research was divided between two main sites. In the first part I spent six weeks in two major cities in China, Chengdu and Beijing. Whereas Beijing, located in northern China with over 20 million inhabitants, is the political center of China, governed as a direct-controlled municipality under the national government, Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province in Southwest China with over 15 million inhabitants, is one of the most important economic, cultural center in Western China, and holds a sub-provincial administrative status. A “social entrepreneurship” pilot program (shehui chuangxin shidian xiangmu)—a policy supporting the experiments of civil associations was launched in both Beijing and Chengdu since 2011. Through my thesis adviser, Professor Mary Alice Haddad I met a number of NGO leaders, who
kindly introduced me to their co-workers and local civic “circles” (guanzi). By comparing reactions to central policies between the political power center and sub-provincial region, I hope to see how central policies are interpreted in different levels of municipalities.

Figure 1. Map indicating the sites of my research: Beijing and Sichuan Province. Reproduce from Google map.

In Beijing I focused on research institutions affiliated with prestigious Chinese universities and one of the leading non-governmental publication organizations. Most of my interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese. I used English with four foreigners, who were researchers and scholars from the United States, Canada, South Korea and Italy. Out of twenty people that I conducted extensive interviews with (in average above one hour), one was at or above the age of 60; eleven were between 30 and 60; eight were below the age of 30; twelve are female; eight were male. I interviewed two professors, four researchers, eight university students and six NGO
professionals. The two professors and two researchers already hold PHD degree. The other two researchers and the eight university students were PHD candidates, recent college graduates with bachelor degrees in Social Work and French studies, and graduate students in public policy. On average, the six NGO professionals had worked in the field for more than five years. Fewer than half of the students were candidates for CCP. Educated individuals are overrepresented in my research because my focus in Beijing was on academic and research institutions. In addition to conducting interviews, I also attended seminars on civil society and Neo-Confucianism for graduate students majoring in public policy at Beijing Renmin University and had informal conversations with many of the participants there.

I began my research in Chengdu by visiting analysts at Sichuan Social Science Academy and Chengdu City Museum, all of whom had substantial experience with civil engagements after the Wenchuan Earthquake in 2008, one of the most deadly natural catastrophes in China to date. The three researchers offered me enlightening insights and informative analyses on disaster relief efforts of civil associations. All of the three researchers were party members; two of them are male; three of them have graduate degrees in Economics, Public Policy and Art History. Through Professor Patrick Dowdey of Wesleyan’s Mansfield Freeman East Asian Studies Center, my initial interviewees in Beijing and the three scholars I talked to, I could reach out to 174 local contacts in Chengdu, including GONGOs, Non-profit organizations, NGO registered at Sichuan provincial Ministry of Civil Affairs and Chengdu MCA, NGO registered as corporate and unregistered NGOs. I was able to select six NGOs which I call in this thesis—Sichuan Youming Social Development Research Center, NGO
Growth Letter, Chengdu Xiyou Community Culture Development Center, Warm Heart Home Community Center, Chengdu Disaster Preparation Volunteer Center and Wind and Light Disability Support Group, each representing NGOs registered as Civil Non-Enterprise Units, NGOs registered as business and unregistered NGOs. I conducted extensive interviews with founders of NGOs, experienced professionals and temporary volunteers. I also observed their daily administrative practices and participated in their conference discussions and programs in local communities.

Out of eighteen interlocutors in Chengdu, three were above 55, and retired from their previous career; eight were between 30 and 55; and seven were below the age of 30. Out of the six founders of the targeted NGOs, two were female; two were veterans; three had extensive working experience with state apparatus before committing to civil engagements; and one had recently retired from academic institution. About three NGO leaders were also party members. Their education background varied from graduate degree to associate degree, but considering the age distribution, the sample can be considered well educated. Besides interviews with NGO founders, directors, workers and volunteers, I also observed their daily administrative practices and attended their meetings and discussions. In addition to interacting with local associations and academia, I interviewed party officials at the Sichuan provincial Ministry of Civil Affairs and officials at The Communist Youth League Committee of Chengdu City. I recorded my observations by taking notes and recording under permission of my interlocutors. I presented myself as a student eager to learn more about the practices and inner workings of civil associations. All interviews in Chengdu were conducted in Mandarin or Sichuanese Mandarin.
The second part of my research was based mainly in three villages—Longmen, Qingren and Feixianguan, all governed under Lushan county, Ya’an city in Sichuan Province, where suffered from a 7.0 M earthquake in April 20, 2013. Lushan is about 72 miles from Chengdu along the Longmenshan (Mt. Longmen) Fault. I wanted to examine grassroots NGOs’ actual efforts in quake-stricken areas. Inspired by Rebecca Solnit, that in catastrophes people often manifest extraordinary humanity and collapses of existing social order are often generative of new systems and norms, I wanted to examine whether or not the perception of civil responsibility and rural grassroots democracy (jiceng minzhu) of individual resident, and individual NGO workers changed or not. I also hoped to examine the effectiveness of these grassroots NGOs in comparison to the local governments that provided community services after the earthquake. Additionally, I was curious about the relationship between local rural population and urban NGO professionals and if the two groups hold different conception of citizenship and associational life.

---

Based on networks I built in Chengdu and Beijing, I was able to visit communities in quake-stricken areas that three of my targeted grassroots NGOs in Chengdu planned to help. Over the course of my fieldwork, I engaged in participant observations of daily practices of NGO professionals in local communities. I participated in daily group meeting of grassroots NGOs. I took notes and photographed of NGO professionals’ daily work at camps, kindergartens and local township governments. My fluency in Mandarin and local Sichuanese dialects allowed me to converse with local residents and NGO professionals.

In addition conversing with NGO leaders of the three grassroots NGOs, I interacted with nineteen volunteers and NGO workers. Many of the NGO workers were recent college graduates with bachelor degrees in Social Work; the majority of the population was under 30; and two-thirds of the population was male. The bias towards young, educated, males is understandable, considering that the relatively
hazardous, shabby living condition in less modernized, post-quake rural hinterland might be less appealing for older, female NGO workers and volunteers. I also talked to two members of village committees, hoping to understand their perception of NGOs’ efforts. Besides, I frequently conversed with local residents. Many of these conversations were conducted in a less formal manner. Although only ten villagers were informed interlocutors, during the two weeks of my stay I managed to talk to converse with 30 local residents. Interestingly most of them were female, over the age of 50. This is understandable since most young people tend to leave villages and to work in Lushan County or Ya’an city and the Chinese elder females are usually more approachable. I presented myself as a student volunteer willing to listen and to help.

In my thesis, I have followed the Chinese convention for names, with the family name first and the given name the second. Name usage in China often reflects power relations. Often higher-status people like government officials, NGO leaders and scholars are addressed by their family names and occupational status. In this thesis I tend to simplify these greetings and use their last names. To protect the identities of all my interlocutors, I have assigned pseudonyms for all individuals and organizations. In some cases when merely a name change was insufficient to disguise identity, I utilized composite characters. I used real names for only those people who are directly quoted in published material such as a newspaper report or an academic publication.

Chapter one, while presenting a clear understanding of regulations of civil affairs, elucidates certain theoretical paucity of existing forms of civic organizations. Since no clear patterns or structures of civil society or citizenship have emerged, I do
not attempt to establish any theoretical alternatives. Instead, I examine the “soil of citizenship”—the existing conception of individual members in the political community, and the changing regulatory climates, which could nourish further development of civic organizations. In Chapter one I present that the Chinese government still steers the development of civic organizations and officially defines the ideal political citizens as unitary objectives of the masses. As more civic organizations demand organizational autonomy, the tight state-control loosens. Although it could be enlightening to cast away the presupposed stereotype of state-society antagonism, civil society situated between the state and society remains a site of contestation, in which different ideals and organizational forms struggle to establish themselves.

Understanding the complex patterns and organizational forms of civic engagements, Chapter two zooms in on the emergence of civic organizations in Chengdu after the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake. The surging voluntarism largely motivates individuals to take actions in organizational forms, yet at beginnings many are unaware of citizen duties and state regulations. While some start to take informal patterns of organization and participation, others pursue formal institutionalization of voluntarism. The conception of citizenship, manifested through this nascent voluntarism is rather clear.

In the pursuit of legal organizational identity, civic organization leaders grasp a clearer understanding of citizenship. Chapter three analyzes the impact of institutionalization of group activities on citizenship. Three different forms of organizations are studied: NGOs registered as civil non-enterprise units, NGOs
registered as business and unregistered NGOs. Two identical characteristics are manifested along the institutionalization path: relationship-centered working mechanism and artful, de-politicized rhetoric. While the conception of voluntarism is deepened with some further understanding of equality, rationality, mutual respect and policy entrepreneurship, tendencies of hierarchical bureaucratization and cynicism towards the fragile belief system imply the diverging effects of civic organizations on citizenship. Chapter four investigates extension of civil engagements and collaboration after the 2013 Lushan earthquake and explains how the conception of citizenship is articulated in the process. Chapter four investigates the solidification and extension of civic services of Chengdu local grassroots civic organizations. The conception of citizenship is proliferated among urban NGO professionals, yet when civic services are transferred to rural settings, exclusion towards rural residents is created. The formerly de-politicized, artful rhetoric is muted as public silence towards rural rightful resistances, and egalitarian pursuit is rendered towards a more elitist attitude upon the ideal of “serving the people.”
1. Citizens and the Rule of Law

“…Today three characters poison the Chinese people’s mentality: it is slavish, autocratic, and chaotic. Our thought revolution aims to change slavish mentality into independent thinking, to change autocratic mentality into independent thinking, to change chaotic mentality into logical thinking.”

Luo Jialun, “Reply to Mr. Zhang Puquan”

Resonant with Luo’s mission, this thesis attempts to unveil transformations of the concept of citizenship by studying individual people—the ones who are experimenting, transmitting and fostering new ideas. I am fundamentally concerned with how theories of citizenship are carried out in practice. In the first section, I describe various Chinese theories of citizenship, in relation to the purpose of the state, political participation and agency. I analyze the different conceptualization of political rights from Western civilizations. In the second section, I examine the changes in conception of regulations and the rule of law in relationship to emerging active citizenship. In the third section, I analyze current changing regulations on civil associations and define the boundaries between legal and illegal forms of associational life. Through these three parts, I hope to describe if and how the exercise of citizen rights in civil associational form and the law-abiding ideal diverge or converge.

CHINESE CITIZENS: PEOPLE, COMRADES OR MORE?

In order to grasp the nature of citizenship in civil engagements manifested through associational form, I must dissect two of its components: the definition of citizenship and the roles citizenship and participation play in creating an assembly and political efficacy. Citizenship denotes the legal, political link between individuals and states. More specifically it addresses an individual’s belongingness to a political community. Andrew Nathan points out that the Chinese view of citizenship has generally meant the ability to exercise political rights. Yet, unlike in Western intellectual tradition where rights are viewed as inherent natural rights, the Chinese have considered political rights to be those granted by the state. According to Merle Goldman, “Governments were to grant political rights, not to recognize them.” The nature of such rights by permission contains assertions of political disagreements and, to a certain degree, rightful resistance and connotes compliance. Therefore, I avoid the conflation of citizenship with democracy as appeared in various legal concepts such as citizen rights, freedom of speech and assembly etc. Although citizenship is an important component in the construction of democracy, I argue that in a non-democratic political tradition people can still exhibit their individual beliefs regarding their appropriate roles in their communities and establish their compliance, resistance and collaboration.

58 See Andrew Nathan, Chinese Democracy.
I compare and contrast among three terms, *gongmin* (公民, public people, citizen), *shimin* (市民, city people, urban residents) and *renmin* (人民, man’s people, people) by their uses in official rhetoric to identify different categories of political subjects and associated ideological traditions. By borrowing these Chinese-centered terms, I hope to delve into different types of relationships between the Chinese people and state apparatus and their conceptions of citizen rights, rule of law and legality of regulations.

**GONGMIN**

The term *gongmin* first appeared in the late Qing dynasty (1644-1911), when the Qing government attempted to imbue the population with the idea of citizenship as a link between the individual and the state with the expectation of creating a political order. In reforms such as the 1898 Hundred Days of Reform (*bai ri wei xi*, 百日维新) led by elite gentries Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, the term *gongmin* (public persons) was used to define a citizen, implying popular sovereignty and participation. Kang wrote in 1902, “Since all the people have the right to participate in assemblies and they all have the responsibility to be concerned about their country, they are called citizens (*gongmin*).”

Starting with the May Fourth Movement in 1919, the idea of active citizen participation was promoted. During this time, students, workers and merchants established autonomous groups, encouraging expression of independent opinions and establishing political association. The separation of political rights between politically

---

60 Peter Zarrow, “Citizenship in China and the West,” 19.
61 Ibid., 20.
oriented intellectuals and elite gentries and ordinary people started to become blurry. However, such desire for autonomy and individual political voices was interrupted by the Warlordism in the 1920s, war with Japan and domestic military conflicts between the Kuomintang Party and the Chinese Communist Party.⁶²

The reappearance of the term *gongmin* was associated with China’s move to the market in the late twentieth century and the accompanying decentralization of political power, increasing involvement with the international community and relaxation of control over personal activities. In the post-Mao era, the term *gongmin* appeared in reformed political rhetoric, addressing legal protections and civic obligations, but it also appears in the enlarging “public sphere.” Historians like Mary Backus Rankin have described that the development of the ideal of public (gong) bore some similarities to Jürgen Habermas’ idea of a “public sphere” in Western Europe. She considers that the term *gong* refers to open, public initiatives that were “distinguished both from direct state administration or coercive control and from private spheres, particularly of family or other kin groups but also of individual businesses, apolitical friendship networks, and other activities that do not concern matters of common interest.”⁶³ However, there is little change in the nature of political rights. While China has become more relaxed, the still unlimited party-state can easily suppress undesired political debate or civil associations.

Besides the slowly emerging “public sphere,” the reappearance of *gongmin* is also partly due to China’s growing contact with the outside world. International communities and human rights associations and the Internet have slowly peppered

civic concepts, human rights and political awareness in public space. Some Chinese 
“neo-statist” scholars such as Wang Shaoguang, Hu Angang and Wang Hongchuan in 
their recent articles claim that the concept of gongmin cannot be found in Chinese 
intellectual tradition and exaggerates citizens’ inclination towards self-interest in a 
contractual state. They also argue that such foreign, Western indoctrinated concept 
is unable to justify recent societal development. Despite the lack of analytical power 
and potentiality of party-driven propaganda, these two articles connote dislike and 
caution towards gongmin’s blurry linkage with individual empowerment and political 
disagreement. However, as political development proceeds, the Chinese authority not 
only concerns itself with the destabilizing factors introduced (though lost in the 
translation when learning from development path of Western civilizations), but also 
senses the need to advocate public compliance and participatory ruling in order to 
ensure legitimacy of ruling, especially when suppression is no longer the optimal 
strategy. “It is frustrating that the Western terminologies dominate the entire study of 
the third sphere. The Western linguistic supremacy (xifang huayu baquan, 西方话语 
霸权) imposes a great barrier for us to discover the proper balance between individual 
empowerment and CCP governance,” a professor at a prominent Chinese university 
said in a personal interview with the author.

64 See Wang Shaoguang, “‘Civil Society’: the Unrefined Legend Forged by Neo-Liberalism” 
(gongmin shehui: xin ziyou zhuyi bianzao de zucao shenhua) in People’s Forum Political Discourse 
Bi-weekly (renmin luntan zhengluan shuangzhoukan), in July 2013, accessed online: 
the Greatest Motivation for China’s Dream” in People’s Forum—Academia Vanguard, in July, 2013, 
accessed online: http://www.rmlt.com.cn/2013/0724/91780.shtml; Joseph Fewsmith, China Since 
Such a linguistic barrier implies that there is a large grey area in the current definition of *gongmin* and its association with the recognition of civil society—sometimes translated as *gongmin shehui*. Interestingly, one major difficulty concerning the criteria of civil orientation is associated with the conceptions of political and social equality. Rapid modernization slowly has penetrated a class vision of political rights where only intellectuals, elites and political officials can display dissent in public. Whereas *gongmin* is no longer a legal status reserved only for the privileged, a sense of noblesse oblige arguably still remains. Historically this legacy contributes to the lack of political efficacy of civil engagements. Elizabeth Perry, observing demonstrations in May-June 1989, records that such civil independence, especially among urban intellectuals and students, wedded to a limited result of remonstrance. In their style of presenting petitions, banners and demanding dialogue with the authorities, they tended to search for political patrons, “emphasizing the need for state strengthening and switching quickly from one ‘hero’ to the next.”

Perry Link recorded that the students knelt on the steps of the People’s Hall and begged the Premier, “Will you just come out and see us, just give us your acknowledgement of our trying to be patriotic and trying to help?” The plea for a “hero” who might not promise any effective dialogue exhibits the deficient democratic group consciousness and the inheritance of a Confucian, non-democratic tradition. Moreover, protesters of the Tiananmen Incident in 1989 tended to emphasize a traditional, elitist moralism,

---

contrasting their own selfless martyrdom to the crass banality of the masses. In 1989’s “democracy” movement, students were reportedly “horrified at the suggestion that truly popular elections would have to include peasants, who would certainly outvote educated people like themselves.”

Although some elites recognize the significance of encouraging a more egalitarian civil orientation and express concern for marginalized classes, the unprivileged, marginalized classes may not have a proper arena in which they could represent themselves.

**SHIMIN**

An alternative Chinese translation of civil society that proliferates in academia is *shimin shehui*, which implies the particularity of urban setting in creating civility, political efficacy of citizens. In comparison with *gongmin*, the term *shimin* appeared far earlier in Chinese classical literature. Xun Yue, prominent historian of the late Han dynasty writes, “Mountain folks are simple, city people (*shinmin*) playful, [they are] coexisting (山民朴，市民玩，处也).” Activists of the May Fourth Movement used *shimin* in addition to *gongmin* to define active citizens in an urban setting. Contemporary Chinese scholars He Zengke, Han Shuifa, Chen Hongyi and Li Qiang, taking a Marxian historical materialism stance, adopt the translation of civil society as *shimin shehui* (*市民社会*, city people society) instead of *gongmin shehui*.

---


公民社会，public people society) to situate the historical context of civil society within the European processes of urbanization and marketization.\(^{71}\)

In addition, using shimin in public discourses and published articles allows scholars to strategically discard “the Western linguistic supremacy” and weakens the state-society dichotomy inferred by the “publicness” of gong.\(^{72}\) Radical leftist Li Beifang openly asserts the “publicness” as a destructive derivative of “things of bourgeoisie class.” Qiang Shigong argues that the core value of Chinese civil society—“positive collaboration (liangxing hudong)” does not contain necessary public disagreements that Western public sphere usually incorporates. Both Deng Zhenglai and Deng Jiabin insist on the neutrality and balance between state and society. When the state-society dichotomy is magnified, Deng Zhenglai and Ding Yijiang explain that the society might fall into a vicious cycle where “relaxation leads to chaos; chaos leads to over-unanimity; over-unanimity leads to rigidity (yifang jiuluan, yiluan jiutong, yitong jiust).”\(^{73}\) Instead of peppering his arguments with politicized rhetoric, Chen Hongyi, quoting Thomas A. Metzger proposes to reorient the focus of the study on the conception of civility in order to unlearn the overly rational, calculative mentality of contemporary market economy and to establish


\(^{73}\) Ding Yijiang, Chinese Democracy After Tiananmen, (New York: Columbia University, 2002), 95.
mutual trust and shared civil responsibility within a community. Deng Zhenglai and Jing Yue further elaborate that the conception of civility in the Chinese context should “have market economy as foundation, contractual relationship as axis, mutual respect and protection of basic social membership rights as prerequisites.”

While the term shimin allows scholars to explore China’s emerging civil society without necessarily confronting the governance of state apparatus, the emphasis on the urban environment creates intrinsic exclusion of the Chinese population. Deng and Jing argue that the “entrepreneur class,” which includes rural entrepreneurs and township workers, and intelligentsia should be central to shimin shehui, but state officials and “self-sustaining peasants whose livelihood depends entirely on land” should be excluded. This exclusion of the rural population mirrors the severe economic and social inequality between urban and rural China. Liu Qi reports that between 2000 and 2010, the number of villages in China dropped drastically from 3.6 million to 2.7 million, accompanied by millions of migrate workers who were forced into taking low-paid jobs and deprived of shimin rights of urban residents. While migrate workers, according to Liu only hold “incomplete citizen rights,” the left-behind rural residents in their home villages wrestle with both poverty and unrecognized citizen rights. Li Lianjiang captures the demand of citizen rights and the struggle with “rights talk” in Hebei, where villagers create graffiti

---

74 Chen Hongyi, “Implications of Civil Society Theories.”
76 Ibid.
78 FOOTNOTE
saying that: “Return us our citizenship rights. We are not rural labor power, even less are we slaves.”  

This discrimination even deepens into individual perception towards the rural population. A survey reported in Wu Chengjun’s article on urban cultural discrimination shows that 25.32% of shimin perceive migrate workers as “filthy”; 18.91% consider them as “lacking of proper manners;” and 22% are believed to be “uneducated.” These stereotypes and slight further marginalize migrate workers as an underprivileged, “uncivil” group and solidify social biases upon rural residents that “Citizen (shimin) rights are not out of the conversation—finish the work and leave!”

Although Wu encourages the rich urban residents to redistribute their wealth to the needy, rural citizens, such socially stratified biases still remain, which severely undermine the ideal of civility and threaten the ideally collaborative state-society relationship.

RENMIN

Unlike gongmin or shimin, the origin of the term renmin, literally translated to mean people’s people, is long rooted in the Chinese Communist tradition. The term renmin therefore does not impose an ideological threat to the reign of the CCP. Some of Mao’s most well known slogans state that, “The people (renmin), and people alone, are the motive force in the making of world history” and “serve the people (renmin).”

In the Maoist era, renmin, those that comprised the subaltern group ready

---

79 O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, Rightful Resistance in Rural China, 117.
for the Maoist revolution, were allowed to speak for themselves and be masters of the
country (renmin dangjia zuozhu). Individuals began to refer to each other as tongzhi,
comrades, which literally translated to “companion in aspiration.” Since the Maoist
era, the term renmin has been used to idealize compliance of wills, strong unanimity
and unitary objectives of the masses. Mao emphasized that renmin consists of
different working classes and the major component of renmin is the working masses.
Zhou Enlai clarified in his 1953 speech explaining the Common Program that renmin
included only the working class, peasant class, petty bourgeois class, national
bourgeois class and some patriotic democratic elements who had consciously
separated themselves from the old reactionary classes.

Among these groups, Mao specifically depicted the peasantry as revolutionary
in nature and wrote that, “The peasants are clear-sighted. Who is bad and who is not,
who is the worst and who is not quite so vicious, who deserves severe punishment
and who deserves to be let off lightly—the peasant keep clear accounts and very
seldom has the punishment exceeded the crime.”82 Unlike the underprivileged group
in contemporary China, peasants as part of renmin could deserve the fruit of
revolution and enjoy the rights of the people, while the non-renmin, namely the
landlord, anti-revolutionary class need to be transformed following the confiscation
and reallocation of their property to become renmin.

The difference between renmin and non-renmin was further articulated in
Mao’s theory of contradictions. In his speech entitled “On the Correct Handling of
Contradictions Among the People” in 1957 he claimed that all of the contradictions in

Chinese society could be categorized either as hostile contradictions between the people and their enemies or as non-hostile differences amongst the people. Scholars like Yu Xingzhong argue that this creation of people’s enemies virtually invalidated the concepts of citizen and citizenship, even if these concepts were written into the constitution and national law. Moreover, the classification of the citizens into “the renmin” and “the enemies” yet the simultaneous use of the terms “renmin” and “gongmin” to refer to those who confused the idea of citizenship and prevented the development of citizenship consciousness in China.\(^3\)

Regardless of Mao’s violation of citizenship and the linguistic confusion in official rhetoric, the Cultural Revolution and the great famine in the 1960s created a generation aware of the danger of unquestionable subordination. After Deng Xiaoping’s ascent to power, the development of state-led capitalism and the growing desire to enrich the people also triggered a movement, albeit subtle, towards active participation. The Tiananmen Square Incident, the Democracy Wall movement and more recently widespread political debates among the Chinese “netizens” suggest that the Pandora’s box of active citizenship has already been opened.

Aware of the unleashed political rights of whom?, the Chinese government attempts to divert focus from political participation to issues of livelihood (minsheng wenti, 民生问题). Recent official rhetoric can be found in President Xi Jinping in his ’s public speech at the First Meeting of the twelfth National People’s Congress in March 2013, in which he emphasizes that “China’s dream is in roots renmin’s dream,

and must closely rely on renmin to realize, and must promote renmin’s wellbeing. (中国梦归根到底是人民的梦，必须紧紧依靠人民来实现，必须不断为人民造福).” Pro-party neo-statists like Wang Shaoguang and Hu Angang, who glorify President Xi Jinping’s political slogan of the “China’s Dream,” argue that, when addressing social development, the term civil society (gongmin shehui or shimin shehui) should be replaced by the more superior term people’s society (renmin shehui). It is highly questionable if party elite intelligentsias can still impose their vision of the nation’s future and attempt to reinforce a class vision rooted in community obligation on whom?

This change in public rhetoric from the agential role of Communist revolution (dazhong luxian) to Confucian traditional humanism reflects the CCP’s efforts to strengthen its popular roots and to redefine China’s development strategy. In this re-visitation of state legitimacy in traditional political philosophy, the agential role of renmin, which underscores the revolutionary potential of the mass line (dazhong) and unanimity of interests, seems to be weakened. Instead, the CCP uses the ideal “minben,” an ancient Confucian justification of state legitimacy—“minben,” meaning “regarding the people as the foundations of the state,” to reorient its governing principle towards “people’s interests.” The significant of min is revealed in works of Mencius, where he considers the primary source of state legitimacy comes from governors’ ability to fulfill people’s needs. Mencius writes:

---

“Here is the way to win the empire: win the people (min) and you win the empire. Here is the way to win the people (min): win their hearts and you win the people (min). Here is the way to win their hearts: give them and share with them what they like, and do not do to them what they do not like. The people (min) turn to a human ruler as water flows downward and beasts take to wilderness.”

(“得天下有道：得其民,斯得天下矣。得其民有道：得其心，斯得民矣；得其心有道；所欲与之聚之，所恶勿施，尔也。民之归仁，犹水之就下、兽之走圹也。”）

Guo Baogang writes that “min ben” has two main implications: “First, people’s interests are of utmost importance. Second, rulers must follow the will of the people; show respect for people’s needs; let people be the principal decision makers of their own life.” In this context, min is no longer a uniform political subject with absolute unanimity, but a group with a variety of needs that are waiting to be fulfilled. Mencius thoughts’ modern policy interpretation becomes a utilitarian justification of state governance, suggesting that people will be happy and supportive only if their needs are satisfied. The CCP government has devoted to expand healthcare coverage, stabilize employment and improve public services, to “benefit people (li min), nurture people (yang min), and improve people’s livelihood (hou minsheng).”

However, this utilitarian justification of state legitimacy has been threatened. Increasing bottom-up protests, particularly after the millennia, have suggested that the Chinese people, once seen as inevitably reliable, are becoming far less so. The number of tax riots, protests against resettlement due to the construction of hydroelectric dams, demonstration against corrupted authorities rises and threatens

---

87 Guo Baogang, China’s Quest for Political Legitimacy, 9.
88 Ibid.
the stability of the society. It is estimated that in 2003, three million people were involved in 58,000 protests, a 15 percent increase from 2002. In 2004, the number rose to 72,000 and rose again to 87,000 in 2005.\textsuperscript{89} Mass media has recorded that, not only did the scale of protest expand, but protests also became more frequent and violent. Among the protesters, the ratio of peasants—one important component of renmin has increased. Besides peasants, the working class, the most promising class in orthodox Marxism, also demands promises such as basic livelihood that the state had vowed for a long time ago.\textsuperscript{90} After decades of modernization, some renmin, peasants in this context, are excluded from what the state had promised. Since the livelihood of min, rather than liberty, serves as the foundations for political morality in the reign of CCP, when the party elites can no longer keep up the promise that creates the unity of renmin, the Chinese people no longer adhere to the political ideology.\textsuperscript{91}

When comparing the three terms gongmin, shimin and renmin, it is clear that the Chinese term for “citizen” still connotes collective membership in the polity instead of a claim to individual alienable political rights against the state. At the same time, there is a growing political and social consciousness among the Chinese population at large. When the Chinese gongmin and shimin are in need of certain

political autonomy to amplify their voices and interests, the state apparatus and pro-
Party intelligentsia are quite sensitive to the potential antagonism that threatens CCP
governance. However, the CCP government adopts a utilitarian moral justification to
reorient the tension of the existing state-society relationship to future promises of
materialistic needs. This reorientation towards livelihood attempts to dilute the desire
for the gongmin’s political autonomy, yet this top-down attempt to resolve state-
society antagonism cannot ensure equality. The exclusivity of shimin reflects an
embedded unequal treatment towards rural residents, while the elitist legacy of
gongmin reveals the difficulty of the underprivileged to articulate their social needs
and to amplify their political voices.

CIVIL LAW, ARTFUL CITIZENS

Scholars have long been engaged in the discussion regarding the relationship
between the law and individual citizens in society. Shi Tianjian conducted a survey
on the role of bureaucrats in Beijing in 1989, which revealed that 39.9% of the
respondents believed that “bureaucrats should ignore government policy when
necessary.”92 It is important to note that a significant population has considered that
law and regulation are negotiable. The question is whether the Chinese citizens are
able to balance between their duties as law-abiding individuals and the freedom they
desire. Before looking into recent regulation changes on civil associations, here I
attempt to wrestle with two concepts: the Chinese conception of the rule of law and
the legacy of the “right to rebel.”

92 Shi Tianjian, Political Participation in Beijing, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997),
26.
After the Tiananmen Incident, Chinese legal scholars attempted to develop some theoretical justifications for the rule of law in China’s post-socialist environment. Most of this theory is anchored in the “social origin of law,” an ideal pioneered by Guo Daohui, a famous legal scholar and the chief editor of China Legal Science (Zhongguo Faxue) since 1979, suggesting that legal rights originated with the “spontaneity of social rights,” which were transformed into public legal rights through the law-making function of the state. The state-made law (falv), according to Guo, is essentially different from the common will of society (fa). By applying a Rousseauian approach to a socialist political context, Guo emphasizes that the state-made law (falv) has to be a clear articulation of common will and argues that the rule of law is found in socialism, which places both society and law above the state. Statism, as Guo contrasts signifies the government mandate of law and state domination of the society. He concluded that China’s socialist root requires “giving power back to society,” which indicates a diminishing statism. Another scholar active in the post-Tiananmen discussion, Ma Changshan, distinguishes the “form of law” from the “essence of law.” The orthodox interpretation of law originating in the will of the ruling class is incorrect because it only addresses the form of law and justifies state domination over the society. Ma also proposes that civil law, based on property rights and a contractual state-society relationship, should be the law of civil society.

In response to the dramatic changes that followed Deng’s opening-up policy and the

---

94 Ibid.
development of a market economy, many scholars articulate their opposition against the ideal of law as solely embodying one social class. Instead, law results from “coordination, compromise and common understanding among different social interests.”\(^96\)

The academic inquiry of the rule of law in the late 1980s and early 1990 resonates with the adoption of the Administrative Procedure Law (APL) in October 1990. The law was drafted “for the purposes of safeguarding correct and timely trial of administrative cases, protecting the lawful rights and interests of citizens, legal persons and other organizations and ensuring and supervising the exercise of administrative power by administrative organs according to law.”\(^97\) It was designed to create official avenues for legal recourse of public activism and protests, and was valued as “a milestone of democratic and legal construction.”\(^98\) While the APL can encourage government officials to be more attentive to their duties and increase their awareness of state law, it also creates some possibility for the empowerment of the common people and subverts the idea that laws exist only to punish them. However, litigation was costly to maintain, and individual relationships that citizens enjoyed with their local cadres made it difficult to file official administrative lawsuits against township governments. A survey conducted by Kevin O’Brien and Li Lianjiang in Fujian, Jiangsu and Jiangxi provinces between 1999 and 2001 suggested that only 9% of the respondents considered filing local government and present public complaints

\(^{96}\) Ding Yijiang, *Chinese Democracy After Tiananmen*, 38-41.
on court.⁹⁹ Based on these results, O’Brien and Li explain that the local government tends to use unofficial methods to resolve tensions and sometimes individuals can be detained, coerced, bribed to drop a lawsuit even after a case has been filed. Regardless of the actual application of APL, it has an established form indicating that citizens can appeal to the law, rather than being merely subjects to it.

Evidently certain activism as a conception of citizenship has been nurtured. Hence to realize what people consider is rightful, citizens might step out of the boundary of law and regulation, particularly when government’s formalized channel of expressing social, political discontent is impeded. Legally ambiguous methods are usually utilized to justify activism against local officials. In fact the weaknesses and loopholes in contemporary legal framework actually inspire citizens to develop strategic interpretation of legal codes without being outwardly disruptive. For instance, the Anyuan protesters presented a petition against the Pingxiang Mining Company using the unthreatening rhetoric: “We are seeking wage and welfare, not power (quan) or politics. We are asking for permission to stage a demonstration. We may not receive it, but the right to request it is stipulated in national constitution.”¹⁰⁰ The Chinese citizens like many of their counterparts around the world often master the language of the state to maximize their chances for a favorable outcome and minimize the likelihood of repression from potentially hostile officials.

However, the accountability and rationality of citizens when using rights and law might be challenged by historical legacies—“the right to rebel.” In imperial China, the artful resistance is always framed in rhetoric that requires the removal of

⁹⁹ O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, Rightful Resistance in Rural China, 6-7.
particular corrupted officials and, albeit only very occasionally, dynasties, while at
the same time retaining and reinforcing certain basic principles of the Confucian
order. If the Imperial Court were flexible enough to adjust certain ways of governing
according to people’s appeal, order can be maintained. Mao, well educated in the
moves and countermoves in rightful resistance in Ancient China, also states: “To
rebel is justified (zaofan youli),” spurring the poor peasants to embrace “socialism” as
the final answer to poverty and oppression.\footnote{Perry, “Chinese Conceptions of ‘Rights’ from Mencius to Mao—and Now,” 43.} While peasant poverty might be
utilized as the motor for “historical transformation,” irrational, radical approaches
such as confiscating grains, destroying traditional public properties in the Mao era
brought atrocious chaos in the society.

Although “the right to rebel” appears to be an outdated political slogan, it is
worth revisiting these ideas because they contain telling clues about how regulations
and laws are conceptualized in contemporary China. Even though a sense of active
citizenship is introduced in the authoritarian regime, it is not accurate to equate
strategic expressions of civil and political rights with seeds of democratic revolution
from below. The pervasive moral economy protests framed in the rhetoric of “rights”
have their limitations, because if the government is flexible enough to soothe the
syndrome on the surface, protesters might be immediately pacified and cease further
inquiries into bureaucratic misbehaviors. The promise of livelihood in the
contemporary conception of Chinese citizenship can create certain inconsistency and
inefficiency in exercising civil rights. Ching Kwan Lee, when investigating worker
protests in China, has encountered claims like “Workers’ thinking is not that
For underprivileged workers, usually from rural areas, frequent paychecks and bonuses are more valued than legal rights; therefore, protests are usually the last recourse. Moreover, the state itself has been actively encouraging a conceptual linkage between livelihood and rights. For instance, the 2006 abolition of the agricultural tax, followed by the promulgation of a new property rights law, reveals the state’s stress that “rights” are always a state-conferred privilege rather than a natural, inalienable prerogative.

Nevertheless, the current stage of modernization promises a shaky livelihood that cannot deter citizens from inquiring political decisions. Associational life has nurtured a greater communicative citizenship, through which citizens cultivate an alternative sense of cooperation. By forming, joining and engaging in civil associations, citizens engage in discussions that aim to redefine and reinterpret the laws and regulations by which they are governed. They engage in discussions that cultivate mutual respect for others as potential allies and resources. Frequent dialogue enables mutual understanding, which might help some citizens to unlearn the elitist legacy of particularism and develop a more egalitarian civil space. Artful interpretation of laws and regulations and strategic operation in associational forms might help citizens to understand ways to achieve social cohesion and make the government to believe that diversity can not only generate opponents, but also breed social stability. Before distinguishing the boundaries of acceptable forms of civil associations, I will briefly present current changes in regulation.

“FLUID” REGULATORY SYSTEM

The regulatory apparatus of the Chinese civil society after 1989 can be divided into two distinct periods: from 1989 to 2008 and from 2008 to the present. Interestingly, the very first regulatory initiatives in fact predated 1989. In 1988, the Social Organization Management Bureau (shehui zuzhi guanli ju) was created within the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) to supervise social organizations’ (SOs) activities. In the following year, regulations on the registration and administration of SOs were established. Later in 1998 these regulations were revised after a special meeting of the Politburo Standing Committee, adding provisions to strengthen management in civic associations.\(^{104}\) The revised regulations include the Regulations for Registration and Management of Social Organizations (shehui tuanti guanli tiaoli) and Provisional Regulations for Registration and Management of Civil, Non-enterprise units (CNEUs) (minban feiqiye danwei dengji guanli zanxing tiaoli).\(^{105}\) Many aspects of these regulations were consistent with reformed state corporate structures. For instance, the revised regulations stated that establishment of SOs can be denied if “in the same administrative area, there is already a social organization active in the same or similar area of work.”\(^{106}\) In other words, the impending monopoly of the social services and civic engagements provided by the new SOs was anticipated and demanded. Another similarity could be found in the revised regulations is that there was a similar “level-by-level” management system that required national SOs to register with the national Ministry of Civil Affairs and local

---


\(^{105}\) Article 11, Article 13 of the Civil, Non-enterprise Units Regulation.

\(^{106}\) Ibid.
SOs register with the Civil Affairs local bureaus. Besides, SOs were only allowed to operate in the administrative area in which they registered. In line with some state corporatist regulatory framework, the revised regulations of 1998 and CNEUs, along with the 2004 Foundation Regulations, required any civic associations that were candidate for registration at MCA to be sponsored by a professional supervising unit (yewu zhuguan danwei) in the same practice field and within the same administrative area. Such professional supervising units usually constitute state bureaucratic apparatus, namely government agencies (dangzheng jiguan), public institutions (shiye danwei), mass organizations (qunzhong tuanti) and state-owned enterprises (guoyou qiye).

Among the four types of state apparatus, mass organizations such as the National Women’s Federation and the Communist Youth League and other public institutions have formulated an extensive network of semi-Party-state organizations and serve as transmission belts linking the state and society, providing public services to society in areas of education, culture, science and technology and so on. These two types of groups have been designed to encourage popular participation within party-sanctioned borders ever since the Maoist era.

The registration requirements in this first regulatory system created the “dual supervision” of the Civic Affairs bureaucracy and professional supervising units. The rationale of this design was to remove certain supervising obligations of the Civic Affairs bureaus and to enable the supervising units to guide and control registered civic associations. Besides this dual supervision system, other state and party agencies, including the Public Security, State Security Bureau and the Tax and
Foreign Exchange Offices, were involved in monitoring civic associations. Local authorities could always employ the Provisional Measures on Banning Illegal NGOs issued in 2000 to shut down associations that “are not registered, without authorization, carry out activities in the name of [an NGO].”¹⁰⁷ During this period, however, the state’s regulation of civil society became more comprehensive and the system began to demonstrate better controlling power, rather than promoting healthy and sustainable development. Ambiguity and arbitrary interpretation of regulations and policies hindered a coordinative relationship between state apparatus and civil society.

Besides regulatory complexity, the 2004 State Council approved new Regulations for the Registration and Management of Foundation, explicitly restricting public fundraising. In the early drafts, the regulations distinguished between foundations that were “oriented towards public fundraising” and those that were not allowed to engage in public fundraising.¹⁰⁸ The public fundraising foundation category evidently covered existing, government-established foundations such as the Youth Development Foundation, Children and Teenagers Fund, Poverty Alleviation Foundation and so on, even though some could barely sustain their operations. In order to set up a new fundraising foundation, the regulations required an initial endowment of 8 million RMB to register at national level and 4 million RMB to register at a lower administrative level. In any year of its operation, the foundation is required to spend 70% of the fund it raised and no more than 10% of its expenditure.

is for staff and overhead costs.\textsuperscript{109} For non-fundraising foundations, an endowment of at least a 2 million RMB was required to register and operate at regional administrative areas.\textsuperscript{110} Each year the foundation must spend on public welfare projects at least 8\% of its total assets from the previous year.\textsuperscript{111}

In terms of foundation governance, the final draft of the regulation still required all foundations, including representative offices of overseas foundations, to partner with a government agency as professional supervising unit, which should be responsible for conducting an annual review of the foundation’s operations. Additionally, in both fundraising and non-fundraising foundations, a board of directors comprising five to twenty-five members must meet at least twice per year and hold responsibility for decision-making. No more than a third of board members could be close family relatives in foundations endowed by individuals. The Chair and Deputy Chair of the board should not be taken by currently employed state body officers. Annual reports were required to be audited by a certified accountant and must be released publicly. While the new regulation attempted to facilitate transparency and efficient management of foundations and prevent tax evasion, it did not necessarily encourage local NGO growth, as ordinary Chinese citizens are unlikely to be able to collect four to eight million RMB initial endowment.\textsuperscript{112}

International foundations, however still faced an ambiguous regulatory framework. The 2004 Regulation remained ambiguous towards international foundations and philanthropic organizations. The only clear Article of the regulations,
Article 25 states that “representative bodies of overseas foundations may not engage in fundraising or accept donations within China.”\textsuperscript{113} However, well-known international organizations like UNICEF, which operates as an UN agency, attempted to obtain a special dispensation to continue its fundraising activities in China. Some small international NGOs used to claim that they held special permissions to raise funds locally, yet under the new Regulation such permissions seemed to have expired. That is to say, the 2004 Regulation might have motivated international organizations to be localized—instead of establishing representative offices they would rather establish their mainland chapters to obtain Chinese legal identities.\textsuperscript{114}

The initial regulatory framework had become more comprehensive and systematic, yet the strict administrative requirement pushed many civic associations to operate without legal identities. Meanwhile, an efficient regulatory framework towards foreign NGOs and foundations was still lacking. After the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake, scandals in charitable sectors caught public attention. In the second period starting from 2008 the Chinese government responded to certain deficiencies in the existing apparatus and sought for more effective “new governance.”

The reforms began with a pilot program in Shenzhen in July 2009, when the MCA announced a Cooperative Agreement on Advancing Integrated Reforms in Civil Affairs within Shenzhen Special Economic Zone. One of the reforms included the permission of certain categories of social organizations to register directly with the Shenzhen Civil Affairs Bureau without any affiliation with professional supervising units. The new Agreement also allows Shenzhen’s local bureau to take

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
over regulatory jurisdiction over both domestic and foreign foundations in Shenzhen, which would expand government contracting with civic associations to provide better social services. New tax incentives will also be offered to encourage charitable endowment. Following Shenzhen’s testing water, a few provinces and province-level municipalities have started similar reforms with MCA’s approval. In Guangdong, Shanghai, Beijing, Chengdu, Yunnan, relatively autonomous local legislative experiments were taken regarding regulations and management of different categories of social organizations. The head of Guangdong Civil Affairs Bureau announced that the province would assist a few types of social organizations, namely social services and charitable organizations to register and volunteer to be the professional supervising agency.

At the Fifth Plenary Session of the seventeenth Central Committee in 2010, “strengthening and innovating social management” became the new focus. The general principals of civic affairs management are party leadership, government responsibility, social coordination and public participation.”

Previous President Hu Jintao gave speech at the Provincial and Ministerial Level Social Management Innovation Seminar at the Central Communist Party Academy reaffirming Center’s approval of management innovation. More local regulations and efforts to better supervise and guide operations of civic associations have sprouted across China. Recent updates of the “new governance” was discussed within China’s Twelfth Five-Year Plan for 2011-2015, where under Part VIII and Part IX, active development of

---

social welfare and philanthropy and social management were taken into consideration. Chapter 37 promised that the government would play a coordination role among people’s organizations, grassroots autonomous organizations, various social organizations and social enterprises, to promote “standardization, professionalization, socialization and legalization of social movements.” Yet a clear, practical design from the center is still waiting to be carried out.

With these regulatory modifications in mind, it is evident that the CCP understands that civil associations can be used as a tool for social change. More recently Party scholars have debated when the state should extend its branches into the third realm and change the associational landscape. Wu Hui and Zhao Xucheng at the Central Party School argue that civil associations represent a “double-edged sword” effect, which might improve governance over the long term, but more presently threaten the Party’s leadership at the grassroots by replacing social space previously occupied by party organizations and therefore underestimate Party’s capacity and prestige.116 Yin Deci realizes that social pluralism as a byproduct of market economy has already destroyed the Party’s “absolute control” (juedui kongzhi quan) over society and has threatened the Party’s core methods of social mobilization, political indoctrination (zhengzhi guanshu) and policy-making.117 Yet Yin also states that the Party leadership should not be imposed on civil associations,

as “it will constrict the space within which civic organizations can develop. Social capital won’t be utilized effectively, and the dynamics of the Party’s governing methods will likewise be lost.”\(^\text{118}\) Yet some scholars believe that the state has to advocate selective “absorption” (\textit{xi na}) of NGOs. Absorption, according to Wu Xinye, a professor of public administration at East China University of Political Science defines “absorption” as the society allows the Party “to shape social policy by legitimating the interests, scopes and mode of political participation of NGOs, supporting their provision of public services and ensuring that they continue to meet genuine social needs.”\(^\text{119}\) For instance, the city Shanghai started to engineer a “radial influence project” (\textit{fusheli gongcheng}) by “fusing” government officials with grassroots teams.\(^\text{120}\) The state’s “comprehensive coverage” of society will allow the CCP to transcend conflicts of interest and jurisdictional disputes.\(^\text{121}\) The crux of these discussions lies in the question if the CCP can continue exercising its leadership while removing its administrative control over civil associations.

However, as witnessed before in government-organized NGOs (GONGOs), officials in GONGOs are pressured to pursue the interests of their supervising state apparatus instead speaking for the needs of citizens. The “public welfarism (\textit{gongyixing})” as Kang Xiaoguang states, is greatly reduced due to the potential

\(^{118}\) Ibid.  
\(^{120}\) Ibid.  
\(^{121}\) Ibid.
conflicts in interests. Some grassroots NGOs have shown “little interest in Party-building, and worry that the Party is seeking to influence their original organizational arrangements.” They take forms of unregistered civil groups or corporate firms to keep their voluntarism and democratic governance intact. Interestingly, as Deng Guosheng at Tsinghua University explains, the state intentionally tolerates some civil associations operating without the appropriate legal status. As long as civil organizations do not harm state security and social stability, the Chinese government’s attitude is “no recognition, no banning, no intervention.” At its core, legal status is not as essential as pragmatic, material benefits that these NGOs bring to local citizens. Local Party officials sometimes facilitate the development of unregistered NGOs and outsource government responsibilities for civil associations. Frequent dialogues between local Party representatives and local NGO professionals might be able to unlearn the simplistic perception of unilateral opposition between the effort of state and the autonomy of civil organizations.

CONCLUSION

The subtlety and complexity of Chinese citizenship, the fluidity of conception of legality can be perceived as fertile ground that allow new values, new norms to emerge. Bentley astutely observes this sense of entrepreneurship that,

---

“In China, you do things not because there is a legal channel to do them; you occupy the space before the government claims it, and the legal mechanisms all happen after the fact… Use the space you have – don’t wait for policies and laws because you have to create new ways of doing things.”

The Chinese people now can embody a variety of values of renmin, shimin and gongmin, including both the socialist concern in compliance with state interests and also the democratic citizen pursuits of autonomy. These elements inspire the Chinese to experiment. Both local officials and citizens can take different forms of associational life, establishing new forms of network at locality and allocating resources more effectively. This partially cooperative relationship might strengthen the state’s flexibility to associational life and increase its responsiveness to citizens’ real needs. If such cooperative channels can remain open, the emerging active citizenship expressed in resistance can be transformed into cooperative political entrepreneurship.

Recognizing the fluid nature of Chinese NGOs’ legal status, I categorize grassroots NGOs that I study in following chapters into three types: NGOs registered as civil non-enterprise units, NGOs registered as business and unregistered NGOs. Chapter two till Chapter four are case studies, exploring these three types of grassroots NGOs in Chengdu and Beijing based on their establishment, institutionalization and solidification of civic services. In this organizational evolvement, the conception of Chinese citizenship is articulated, transmitted and diverged to potentially conflicting ideals. Fragments of gongmin, shimin and renmin characteristics intertwine through civic engagements. While perception of law,

---

legality of regulation and political efficacy are constantly crystallized and transmitted, the fluid nature of the Chinese emerging civil society also contains embedded self-conflicting developments.
2.

Sprouts of “Active Citizenship”

“Bamboo shoots after the rain—step, step up!”
- Chinese Idiom

This chapter depicts the diffused nature of the Chinese active citizenship at a nascent stage among grassroots NGO leaders. I adopt the metaphor “sprouts” (mengya), a word frequently used in literatures of capitalism emergence in China, to describe the beginnings of grassroots civil engagements. Like the budding bamboo shoots after a spring rain, grassroots NGOs slowly emerged. The shoots were not plentiful and roots fragile, often buffeted by the cold winds of “dual management.” However, “sowers”—members of local communities or congeries of elites, directly or indirectly associated with the Chinese Communist Party, attempted to find associational alternatives by taking different registration identities other than non-enterprise NGOs.

Embodied with the political participatory ideal of gongmin and imputed Party ideology of renmin, NGO leaders at this stage did not have an overall political program or even a clear understanding of civil engagements. In fact, like many of their literati predecessors such as court intellectuals in Confucian times, intelligentsia (zhishi fenzi) in early Republican era and active protestors at the Tiananmen Incidents, they believed that those who governed, belonged to the educated, the professionalized, not the actual “masses” (dazhong). Therefore, concepts of an egalitarian working method, a legally protected voice for the underprivileged and a

---

pluralism of views and interests were not clearly formulated. The strength of civil association was not even in people’s imagination. Yet the embedded activism and the fragmentation of the post-socialist regime nurtured the urge to realize individual political efficacy and to seek alternatives—taking organizational identities as corporate or informal groups. Without an articulated idea of social, political citizenship, people learned by taking actions. In particular, during the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake, when established social, political orders were demolished, members at localities started to formulate actions beyond their normal occupations to help earthquake victims in need. New roots of civil engagements sprang from ground fissures.

In this chapter I investigate the post 2008 conditions for civil engagements, together with the emerging citizen participation in 2008 and its consequences. The analysis is grounded in my summer researches with leaders of six NGOs, four of which were registered as non-enterprises associations later on, two additional organizations registered or partly registered as corporate and one unregistered NGO, which has been operating since 2008. Regardless of their registered or unregistered organizational forms, at beginnings many leaders were perplexed: overwhelmed by the rapid social changes following the Open and Reform, many Chinese citizens, standing at the crossroads of socio-political transformation, were unable to articulate what they were actually after.
THE POST-SOCIALIST SOIL: PRE-EARTHQUAKE 2008

At the turn of the 21st century, the further dismantling of the socialist system, and the deepening marketization of economic relations offered up plenty of causes for discontents. Noteworthy in between the interstitial spaces between state and society was the mushrooming of demonstrations. Journalists Edward Cody, Joseph Kahn and recorded the enlarging scope of protests in 2005. Hence, “maintaining stability” (wei wen 维稳) had been one of the core concerns of the CCP regime since the paroxysm of radical social movement on June 4 1989. Regardless of the efforts from the political center in the two decades since 1989, discontents, protests against state policies, state practices and state officials persisted. Work stoppages, sit-ins, tax refusals, complaint petitions, public demonstrations, riots, suicides, and even complicated repertoire of licit or illicit public shaming to push officials into actions, had all been reported in newspapers and online. Many Chinese were questioning the legitimacy of the CCP regime. Vivienne Shue reports that the police, the secret police, the military and the civil officials have all watchfully worked together to contain “waves” of all such incidents to ensure that they remain local in scope, by “defusing crises when necessary with some measured concessions, and decapitating in embryos as many groups or units as they deemed might develop into the


organization skeletons for large-scale collective actions.” Although Shue’s presupposed state-society dichotomy tends to overemphasize the antagonism between average citizens and state apparatus, questions regarding legitimacy of the CCP governance are frequently addressed among grassroots NGO professionals in Chengdu.

However, what Shue overlooked was that fragmentation of the state governance created spaces for individuals to refine the community by themselves. Xi Chen, the editor of a journal that publishes bilingual reports and researches on civil society in China, still remembered the days of confusion, doubts and challenges, “It took time and courage to explore such autonomy.” He responded upon my question on strategies that can ensure NGOs’ organizational independence. “The government in some sense already lost its legitimacy (hefaxing). Everyone knows. Every laid-off worker knows. But so what?" "The question of legitimacy, frankly speaking, is impractical and outdated. My concern is about the kinds of actions people can take to solve social problems by us,” He said, “Antagonism simply worsened the situation. Most of the time, it occurred when some silly netizens became radical and spread rumors. People always shunned away from what they say online.”

Hu Zixiang, a senior citizen, retired scholar at Sichuan Social Science Academy, responded my question about legitimacy very practically: “Did you read too many things on democracy without digesting properly? Or did you spend too much time on some online forum—those forum where ‘creative rhetoric,’ like

130 Xi Chen, in a personal interview with the author in Chengdu. June 17, 2013.
131 Ibid.
shitizens, antizens were created? Legitimacy—I don’t talk about them. I do what I can. Even before 2008, when I didn’t know what I was allowed to do, I observed and I cared.”132 He used a local idiom “konglechui” (空了吹), meaning talking in a futile way in Sichuan dialect, to comment on my inquiry of CCP legitimacy.

In response to the same question, Chen Yong, the head of Chengdu Disaster Preparation Volunteer Center burst out laughing, “Clearly legitimacy crises were not the causes for me to initiate my organization. That question was relevant, but not directly. Yet ironically enough, I was actually one of the victims in these ‘crises,’ – I was marginalized in some internal political conflicts when I served as an official in Panzhihua.133 My job became meaningless. My coworkers deserted me. I had to make my way out from the bureau, casting off the ‘iron bowl.’ At first, I didn’t know what to do. I tried to do business but failed. So I started this social entrepreneurship. I had no idea if this one would last.” Unlike in Shue’s studies, in which she observed activists, demonstrators expressed their desires for an end to bureaucratic corruptions, nepotistic incompetence and other flagrant abuses of power and lasting longings for “the ideals of simple, honest, popularly responsive government,”134 these NGO leaders in Chengdu were far less infuriated by CCP legitimacy crises or bureaucratic fragmentations. Rather, they wanted to engage in practical, useful activities that operated beyond the criticism of current governance, even though at first they were not clear what they were actually after.

This seeming “self-empowerment” was by no means an assertive presentation of rights consciousness in Western democratic tradition. O’Brien and Li, Robert Weatherly, Marina Svensson articulate that the ideal of *rights* in China, different from contemporary American discourse that tends toward an absolute, individualistic and ontological sense, is more of a relative, social and phenomenological concept—“rights are what socially defined persons have by being what they are defined to be.”

Hu, a senior citizen and a semi-retired scholar who was a sent-down youth and experienced the Cultural Revolution, frequently criticized the loaded utilizations of “rights” in online discourses, stating that “Those netizens had no idea of what real miseries and sufferings were.” Chen, the unappreciated state official, had a self-mocking humor: “Rights? Haha! I’ve eaten the imperial grains (*chihuangliang*, 吃皇粮) for so many years. But I even didn’t have any rights or privileges.” Xi, a fluent English speaker, well learned in Western theories of civil society, did not think that citizen rights in Western liberalist sense could be easily translated and accepted by Chinese citizens. But he agreed that external influence of political liberalism in particular after the fall of Soviet Communism was substantial. Like many Chinese citizens, NGO leaders embodied characteristics of both *gongmin* and *renmin*: they were and possibly always are part of the collective *membership* in the polity even as they pursue actions that are beyond the current status quo. While they amplified their concern of participatory interactions with the state, shadows of their socialist past could be traced in their tacit, unspoken concerns towards social, political instability, and citizen rights. They tended to take a detour in amplifying their social concerns

It was also important to notice that these grassroots activists, unlike rural rightful resisters, the “non-citizens” in O’Brien and Li’s studies, were not subalterns—many of the NGO leaders were already “awarded” with certain social, economic status, and therefore possibly possessed social resources beyond refashioning official rights’ discourses, creating rights graffiti in rural courtyards or writing wall posters. Instead of instrumentalizing loopholes in the Chinese legal rhetoric and initiating “rights talks,” these well-connected individuals were more able to mobilize social capital. However, their utilization of personal influenced networks was not the same as Shue’s observation of the patron-client systems in the 1990s, in which NGO leaders would necessarily feel “indebted” to state apparatus and therefore become obligated to return favors. “I am looking into the entrepreneurship part,” Chen claimed and even joked in a commanding manner: “Maybe I will be able to order some silly bureaucrats (rang tamen ting wo de).” “I prefer the grassroots. I like people and things closer to the soils,” Hu, the senior citizen and retired scholar said. Although networks of personal relations and possibly persisting reciprocal obligations would keep serving as substitutive vehicles other than established institutions, the patron-client nature in state-society interactions was likely to accommodate each other’s purposes.

Nevertheless, at the nascent stage of development that existed in 2008, no one could identify the new purposes of civil engagements; even the motivations of the

136 Kevin O’Brien, Li Lianjiang Rightful Resistance in Rural China, Figure 4 “We’re citizens. Return us our citizenship rights. We’re not rural labor power, even less are we slaves,” and Figure 5 “Former village cadres must confess their corruption.” (Photo by Li Lijiang, Heibei, 1995), (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 117, 118.
137 Vivienne Shue “State Power and Social Organization in China.” 71.
139 Hu, in a personal interview with the author in Chengdu.
very activists that were working to build new forms of civil engagement seemed to be far less concrete. Scholar studies of civil society, legality and democracy in the 1980s did not even reach on perception of citizenship, legality and political participation of these well-educated, potentially the emerging Chinese middle-class citizens. Common assumptions of voluntarism and rights-consciousness also appeared to be vague at the beginnings. Upon my question of motivations, Xi, the editor of the NGO development journal, explained his reasons for joining his organization, NGO Growth Letter as: “I need to find a job. They were hiring. I finished my school in the early 1990s. The state no longer distributed working positions for college graduates. I need to figure out by me myself.” Both Chen and Hu “bumped into” (pengqiao yujian) concepts of NGOs when they managed to find alternatives of their professional lives. Chen, disappointed by his failed attempts in businesses after leaving the bureau, pursued what he called as “the most idealistic endeavor” and started his career in civil engagements. Hu, the retired scholar, constrained by his age and education could no longer get promoted within the Academy. Instead, Hu sought to transmit his “afterheat” (yure) after retirement. None of them was particularly well off. Other local NGO leaders claimed that they had not even heard of the name of NGO or civil associations before 2008. In Hu’s words, quoting Deng Xiaoping’s speech on economic reform, civil engagements in Chengdu in 2008 were another incidences after the Open and Reform where the Chinese citizens managed to “cross the river by groping for stepping stones (mozhe shitou guohe, 摸着石头过河).”

140 The Chinese idiom “cross the river by grouping for stepping stones” is widely used to described Deng Xiaoping’s Open and Reform policies in the 1980s.
Regarding the rights-consciousness assumption, Will Kymlicka and Wayne Norman write in their categorization of citizens that the most basic right is to have rights. For many grassroots NGO leaders, they had already been granted with rights of livelihood and social mobilization and therefore did not perceive the necessity of confronting state representatives to improve their economic, social situations. Considering the educational degrees, former careers and personal social experiences, many of the NGO leaders were likely have been state-patronized, and therefore they could be exceptionally familiar with the resource distribution within the state apparatus. However, they did not agree with the passivity of being recipients of privileged resources; they had their own social purposes, even if those purposes were initially vague and amorphous.

FROM RUINS—DISPERsing THE SEEDS OF CIVIL ENGAGEMENTS

Rather unexpectedly, a traumatic earthquake produced a catalyst effect on civil engagements in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province with 14 million inhabitants. At 2:28 pm in the afternoon on May 12, 2008, about a minute of seismic tremble tore up towns adjacent to the Chengdu Basin, toppling buildings, cracking and shifting mountains, twisting roads, breaking water mains and pipelines. It was a severe disaster, centered only 50 miles northwestern to the city and the damage it created was vast. It was the deadliest earthquake since the establishment of People’s Republic of China: official reports stated that 69,200 were confirmed dead, 374,176

---

injured, with 18,222 listed as missing. The earthquake also left about 4.8 million people homeless, and evidence of damage could still be seen across northwestern Sichuan five years later. The People’s Liberation Army under Beijing’s command sent 13,000 soldiers to rescue the injured, delivering food, clothing, and medical services. In addition, an “army” of 200,000 volunteers from all over China came to the earthquake-stricken areas trying to help in every possible way. Afterward the initial outpouring of support came frequent seismic aftershocks and numerous political scandals revealing local corruption, illegal construction of school buildings, and embezzlements of philanthropic funds.

Since the Zhou dynasty, earthquakes in China have been often perceived as signs that the rulers had lost the “mandate of heaven” (tianming)—a principle suggesting that earthly rulers are part of the cosmic order, endorsed by the harmony they presumably provide or protect. Natural disasters had frequently been harbingers of dynastic changes. In the twenty-first century it was less likely that natural calamity would directly cast bad omen upon the state governance. But the Party has been extremely cautious of its reputation. In 1991 in a government-sponsored White Paper on human rights, the public rhetoric stated as: “it is the urgent task of the Chinese government to maintain national stability… [and] secure a well-off livelihood for the people throughout the country so that their right to subsistence


will no longer be threatened.”145 Facing this unprecedented natural disaster, this government promise of ensuring livelihood was challenged. At the local level, symbols of political authority in towns torn by the Wenchuan earthquake were reduced to wreckage—municipal buildings were destroyed along with temples, slums, factories, peasant huts and news station.

Rather than going with the flow of disorder, citizens of Chengdu responded differently. Zhang Li, later founded of Chengdu Xiyou Community Center, whom her coworkers later described as a “woman on fire,” quickly picked up her landline and called her contacts at the Chengdu Red Cross Blood Center, a blood donation organization under the operation of China Red Cross, while the ground was still shaking. After studying accounting in college, Zhang used to work at the Communist Youth League, where she interacted with the Chengdu Red Cross Blood Center when organizing a blood donation day. Zhang recalled, “My first intuition was that the injured people might need blood and hospitals will run out of supply. So I called my friends at the Red Cross and asked them if I could help.”146 After living out of her car for a week, Zhang drove to Babao Street to visit a blood donation station that her friend at the Blood Center operated. “I was completely an amateur but I used my accounting skills a bit, recording blood types and doing some administrative work. I became a social worker.”147

The city Chengdu was not severely damaged, whereas towns not far away were flattened, homes destroyed, families shattered, and industries reduced to

---

146 Zhang Li, in a personal interview with the author, 8 June 2013.
147 Ibid.
smoldering ashes. “In the city center, a chaotic, anxious yet strangely cheerful atmosphere prevailed.” Zhang recalled.148 “After a moment of panic, most people were calm and cheerful. In some well-established neighborhoods, residents deliver deserts and tea to each other and old people play Mahjong together. Overworked young people like my husband and me could take a break. In mid-May, I started to think if such will of Heaven (tianyi) delivered some message that our community could have been like this, where people actually care about each other.”149 Like many NGO leaders from Chengdu, Zhang started to explore if one could reestablish some social bonds that she thought were finally “awakened” by the earthquake. “I felt the strongest calling ever of doing something for people around me,” Zhang said. Many NGOs born after the earthquake acknowledged the unaccepted power of natural disaster beyond causing death, wounds and destruction of city structures that for a broader range of population, the earthquake toppled old orders and opened a window for new possibilities. After the moment of devastation, the old orders were no longer functioning and people started to improvise and innovate new ways of rescues and communities. After a temporary service with the Red Cross, Zhang resigned from her job and committed to her new passion—community development in both disaster, poverty-stricken regions and in urban neighborhoods. Her ideal was rooted in being—of situating, living and working in a better community.

Like Zhang, Li Xia, a veteran who left for absence from her military service in Tibet in the year 2008 also started her journey of civil engagements shortly after the earthquake. Her first act, like many other Chengdu citizens was donation. “I was

148 Ibid.
149 Ibid.
bored during my vacation. Also I was retired from the army. It was in the year 2008 when I became addicted to civil activities,” Li said enthusiastically.\textsuperscript{150} The word “addiction” appeared frequently in my conversation with Li. Her deepest joy seemed to come from the confirmation from people she helped that kept her working to refine communities scarred by disasters and poverty. “The disaster taught me the fragility of life and the power of empathy,” Li said.\textsuperscript{151} At the moment of chaos, desperation and deprivation, mutual assistance could turn the worst human conditions into hope and abundance. “I cried when I saw how much those volunteers in my group did for earthquake victims. I couldn’t give up helping the children, and I couldn’t leave.”\textsuperscript{152} Shortly after the earthquake, Li and her friend set up a psychological advice office in a local middle school in Pengzhou, 12 miles northwest of Chengdu, a county devastated in the earthquake. Inspired by her military experience with left-behind Tibetan children, she wanted to be the one that school children could talk to. “Local government was busy with more urgent rescues and post-quake reconstruction. They didn’t have much time for the children,” she observed.\textsuperscript{153} Similar to Zhang, rather than simply following the post-earthquake conventions of hiding, escaping and resting, Li initiated activities in which members of immediate community could join and benefit.

Anger, discontent and fear evaporated. In an unfamiliar way, enthusiasm and enjoyment took over. A sense of immersion in the moment, a long-awaited, spontaneous solidarity with others and an emotion graver than happiness but deeply

\textsuperscript{150} Li Xia, in a personal interview with the author, 15 June, 2013.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid.
positive possessed some NGO leaders. Chen, the founder of Chengdu Disaster Preparation Volunteer Center, the “unappreciated” official in Panzhihua at the time, perceived the earthquake as a final opportunity that he could prove himself as “a useful citizen.” Before 2008, Chen was “reallocated” in a local political torrent in the Panzhihua Volunteer Center under the governance of Panzhihua Communist Youth League Committee at a prefecture level. “I couldn’t do anything before the disaster. My work was purely bureaucratic and administrative. My passion in work was eroded. I simply sat in my office, reading newspaper and drinking tea everyday.”

“But I became madly engaged in volunteer work after the earthquake. I wanted to do so much. I had never worked that hard. I worked from mornings till midnights and wasn’t even tired! I thought I could finally unleash my repressed enthusiasm to contribute something to the society. My wife said I was crazy as a dog,” Chen mocked himself. 154 Tao Gang, a young professional in his mid-twenties, who joined Chen’s team in 2008 and later initiated the Rural-Urban Collaboration Center, left his marketing and sales position in a promising IT firm in Shenzhen and had stayed with villagers after the earthquake. “Before 2008, I was just like many other materialistic young people. I wanted promotion, big apartments, nice cars and so on. Only after coming to Sichuan I realized that there was happiness beyond the measurement of money that was worth seeking after,” Tao said, “Director Chen’s ‘craziness’ was contagious. I followed him to villages. I picked up the Sichuanese Mandarin on my

---

154 Chen, in a personal interview with the author in Chengdu, 2 August, 2013.
way. I loved working with people in villages, in rural settings. I was no longer
exploited.”

Undoubtedly, the earthquake provided an extraordinary window of
possibilities, and what manifested from wreckage and ashes could matter elsewhere,
in both ordinary times and in other extraordinary moments. Hu, the senior citizen and
semi-retired scholar, who later became the director of a small research NGO affiliated
with the Sichuan Social Science Academy—Sichuan Youming Social Development
Center, pursued to prolong the positive emotions and closely knit social ties that
emerged from the earthquake. “I was worried that citizens might get carried away
simply by temporary altruistic passion, and after the earthquake such passion could
not last,” Hu said, “I wanted to find a way that works in the long run.”

A keen observer of China’s economic, social changes since Deng’s Reform and Open policy,
Hu saw how deeply desired and intensely rewarding the social ties and meaningful
philanthropic work were during the disaster relief moments. “I’ve seen the changing
mentality from a commune oriented value before the Cultural Revolution to the
individualistic, emotional detachment in the marketization mechanism. Now many
people lost their hope for a better community, but others recognize it in extraordinary
moments like this. Indeed we are members of the society; the country is our home,”
Hu said.

Three days after the earthquake, Hu established his first disaster relief group,
512 Relief as a temporary, autonomous platform for disaster relief that Hu’s social
ties could extend to a wider range of population. Besides directly participating in

---

155 Tao Gang, the director of Rural-Urban Collaboration Center, in a personal interview with the
author, 26 June 2013.
156 Hu, in a personal interviewed by the author in Chengdu.
disaster relief works, Hu also tried to engineer the development of local civil society. He didn’t want the emerging voluntarism to be transient and subject of government or Party manipulation. “We each create our realities independently. Each individual possesses equal rights to shape the world that we all are situated in,” Hu said philosophically, remaining tacit and somewhat indirect to explain his concern towards state manipulation. He further summarized that his egalitarian concern was fundamentally at individual level where each citizen responds to civil engagement, not merely as duty but also as a value of being, a positive civil orientation. “It’s a difficult pursuit. But you see, I’m retired. I experienced a lot, the Cultural Revolution to the Tiananmen Square Movement. I was also a sent-down youth. Now I deserve to ‘follow my heart’s without overstepping the boundaries of what was right,’” quoting Confucius, Hu described his motivation.157

At the local level, the Wenchuan earthquake, though terrible and grievous, triggered the awareness of community membership, and in particular for citizens like Zhang, Li, Hu, it illuminated their wishes of a better society. They perceived the rare moment when strangers could become collaborators, and they improvised new roles for themselves. They didn’t linger over trauma; they didn’t blame chaos, conflicts, scandals; they didn’t perceive their altruistic endeavors as unsustainable and evanescent—rather, they strove to institutionalize their resourcefulness and kept their commitments to civil engagements in post-earthquake era.

Such rise of collective membership as opposed to self-awareness of citizen rights in Chengdu was not within the intellectual domain of contractual state-society

157 Ibid. The original quote of Confucius is: “congxin suoyu, bu yuju (从心所欲，不逾矩).”
relationship; nor was it even slightly peppered with Western democratic indoctrinations, and nevertheless it was also not rooted in communist ideological propaganda. It was an amorphous, genuine hope for a better society, relatively disconnected from instrumentalist, ideological renderings. At the nascent stage of membership awareness, the sense of elitism, the legacy of noblesse oblige that labeled the Chinese *gongmin*, and the politically idealized solidarity that categorized the Chinese *renmin*, were discarded. At the same time, the core value of the two terms—the recognition of the self as social being within an established community—was not just recognized, it became a guiding principle for action.

Although the principle that directed people’s action was not fully amplified in public sphere, participants were incredibly willing to contribute resources for disaster relief works. Jia Xijin and Zhao Yusi, Yang Guobin, Shawn Shieh and Deng Guosheng reported that only two weeks after the earthquake, public donations exceed 30 billion RMB, roughly the same as the entire public donations of the year 2007.¹⁵⁸ By the end of the year, charitable donations totaled 107 billion RMB (15.7 billion USD), tripling the total amount given in 2007.¹⁵⁹ The unprecedented participation of social organizations changed the previous top-down state monopoly of crisis management. Both Robert Putman and Yang Guobin explain that it is the accumulation and surplus of social capital, which Putman and Yang define as trust,


norms of reciprocity and networks of small-scale citizen activism that create such unprecedented scope of citizen participation.\textsuperscript{160}

While social capital has been credited with enabling public generosity, the concept has also come under criticism. Robert Pekkanen, Alphaslan Orzedem and Tim Jacoby who investigated in NGOs that emerged after earthquakes in Japan, argue that disasters have a limited impact on long-term state-society relation. In Japan the post-earthquake NGO engagements and volunteerism were not well sustained. Jonathan Schwartz, Shawn Shieh and Jessica Teets argue that crises in fact play a role in expanding space for civil society.\textsuperscript{161} Xinhua news published an article “‘Behind the Warrant:’ How Will Chengdu NGOs Keep Up Their Good Endeavors Till the End,” revealing the potential “free-riding” and corruptive behaviors during disaster relief activities.\textsuperscript{162} It became increasingly susceptible if the good intention of grassroots NGO leaders would persist and the authenticity of the good will would remain.

**SPROUTS IN DANGER: TENSION AND CONFUSION**

No disaster is entirely natural. The Chinese term “natural disasters and man-made misfortunes” (tianzai renhuo 天灾人祸) captures the tendency of chaos, demoralization and disorder that potentially exaggerate the calamity. In the context of earthquake, man-made difficulties hindered early organizational formation, which


\textsuperscript{162} Xinhua News, Sichuan Station, “‘Behind the Warrant:’ How Will Chengdu NGOs Keep Their Good Endeavors Till the End,” (‘tongjiling beihou’ Chengdu NGO ruhe shanshi shan zhong), 30 March, 2009, [http://www.sc.xinhuanet.com/content/2009-03/30/content_16101395.htm](http://www.sc.xinhuanet.com/content/2009-03/30/content_16101395.htm)
delayed disaster relief works. Improvised volunteer work, philanthropic donations could be banned, if public discourses, local authorities *perceived* these actions malfunctioning or destabilizing. However, these experiences including confrontations with local authorities shortly after the earthquake enabled NGO leaders to embrace contradictions in both the minds of victims undergoing the disaster and those trying to understand, tackle the disorder from afar.

Two weeks after the earthquake, on May 24, 2008, Chen encountered his first “problem.” The police knocked at the door of Chen and his teammates’ temporary office in Chengdu. The office was provided by the initiator of the first local NGO platform under the guidance of professionals of a British environment NGO, which has been supported by the famous British ethologist Jane Goodall. After the earthquake Chen volunteered to take the coordinator position in this nascent collaboration with other 50 civil organizations, and traveled from Panzhihua to Chengdu.163

Busy with disaster relief works, Chen and his team members did not even think about institutionalizing their group; nor did he have time to formally resign from the Panzhihua Volunteer Association. And with his established official identity affiliated with the Volunteer Association, many of Chen’s acquaintances, colleagues and friends contacted Chen for micro donations. One of them was Zhou, the director of China Guangdong Lions Club, a Chinese branch of the Lion Club International, proved by the State Council and Guangdong provincial Ministry of Civil Affairs as

---

philanthropic social organization (*shetuan*). Zhou representing the Lion Club, hoped to donate three portable restrooms and 100,000 to 150,000 RMB to Mianyang. Zhou, like many philanthropists, unfamiliar with conditions in the field tended to find someone at locality whom they could trust, so that the donation would be actually distributed to people in need. Although China Charity Federation and China Red Cross were the only two designated associations that were permitted to publicly raise funds, many citizens still questioned their efficiency and transparency and sought for alternative channels to financially assist earthquake victims. Such channels of donation often lay in the grey zone between regulatory permission and sanction.

Chen was “sanctioned” for his actions. “I only slept for three hours the night before I got caught. The police came into the office. There were about twenty other volunteers working at that time. Everyone stared at me, confused. The police said to me while flashing their badges: ‘Chen, you were reported. Please come with us.’ It was like in the movie.” Later Chen was informed that an anonymous citizen reported him representing an unregistered organization accepting a substantial amount of donation. Chen was put under investigation and had to return to Panzhihua. Still, at the local police station, he tried to defend himself and his group, carefully organizing the rhetoric: “We were not accepting donations as an organization. We were simply trusted and appointed by people who chose us.”

Zhao thought public investigation was not necessarily bad for reputations of NGOs, “We welcomed investigation. We worked so hard to ensure transparency.

---

164 Chen mentioned this encounter briefly in a personal interview with the author in Chengdu. This incident was also reported in Southern Metropolis Weekly, 30 May, 2008, “Grassroots NGO: ‘Love’ in the Special Time,” accessed online: [http://past.nbweekly.com/Print/Article/5019_0.shtml](http://past.nbweekly.com/Print/Article/5019_0.shtml)
Now finally we caught some attentions.”¹⁶⁵ Yet Chen’s relief works were delayed while the investigation was ongoing. Chen concluded this encounter with the police as a kind of tradeoff he had to make when “departing from the state branches.” He recalled that he could have seized the chance to collaborate with the Communist Youth League, yet he persuaded other volunteers to take the stance as independent NGOs. What he did not anticipate was that the legal fragmentation was utilized to oppose his philanthropic, good intentions.

Besides legal ambiguity, “distorted altruism” also interrupted disaster relief works. Zhang, the founder of Chengdu Xiyou Community Center recalled the days when she went to a village near Wenchuan as a volunteer. “Too much traffic—trucks with red bandages from all kinds of organizations and enterprises were stuck on the highway. Further into the mountains, the roads were partially destroyed. Cars couldn’t even move. They couldn’t even yield to ambulances,” she said.¹⁶⁶ Volunteers, citizens with the enormous passion to help rescuing others started contributing to rather than relieving the crisis. “Some pseudo-volunteers appeared to enter the earthquake stricken areas to help, but in fact they went to exploit local residents. For instance, some college students, who had no idea of disaster reliefs, overwhelmed by some innocent, young passion, formed a team and went down to a village. I met this team when I was conducting my field research. They were just camping there, consuming villagers’ food, occupying settlement tents and just hanging out with each other when the sky is collapsing,” Hu said, “They were even not responsible for their own safety. When the local government announced that

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.
¹⁶⁶ Zhang, in a personal interview with the author in Chengdu.
unprofessional volunteers should stay out from the disaster sites, they were
ridiculously infuriated, posting stupid nationalist claims like ‘foreigners could get in.
Why not us Chinese?’ online.”¹⁶⁷

Li, the founder of Warm Heart Home Community Center also showed her
deep disappointment at the inconsiderate behaviors of naïve volunteers: “Frequently
villagers complained about some volunteers that they didn’t come to help but rather
to poke on their scars. They asked earthquake survivors again and again about their
fleeting stories, losses of families and assets and pains. They filmed sorrows,
anxieties of the villagers so that their blogs would have higher click-through rates.”¹⁶⁸

All such distorted voluntarism complicated the simplistic awakening of community
membership. NGO leaders started to seek for a more rational working mechanism of
civil engagements, in which contradictions could be resolved and real benefits could
be achieved.

The management inexperience among grassroots NGO leaders also
exacerbated the living condition of post-earthquake NGOs. “I was blacklisted once!
Those people online were suspecting for embezzlement! We were on the ‘wanted list’
of corrupted NGO for more than ten days,” Chen was disgruntled. “One of our
volunteers ruined our reputation. And he ran away with the money! We couldn’t find
him.”¹⁶⁹ Reported by Xinhua News, the volunteer, Bo, from Yanting County, Sichuan
started to work as cook and hotel waiter after dropping off from middle school when

¹⁶⁷ Li, in a personal interview with the author in Chengdu.
¹⁶⁸ Ibid.
¹⁶⁹ Chen, in a personal interview with the author in Chengdu. Chen’s scandal was reported in Xinhua
News, Sichuan Station, “‘Behind the Warrant:’ How Will Chengdu NGOs Keep Their Good
Endeavors Till the End,” (‘tongjiling beihou’ Chengdu NGO ruhe shanshi shan zhong), 30 March,
2009, http://www.sc.xinhuanet.com/content/2009-03/30/content_16101395.htm
he was fifteen. After the earthquake he quit his job and started his volunteer work in Hanwang County. Bo was incredibly devoted and in August, Chen and other coworkers decided to incorporate him as a full-time professional with monthly wage of 1200 RMB (190 USD). In Chen’s investigation, Bo was discovered for taking a 1300 RMB (210 USD) donation and 240 bottles of vegetable oil, which were sold to a hotpot restaurant of Bo’s friend. He lied to coworkers that he already distributed the vegetable oil to the disaster victims. Chen explained, “We were not allowed to accept cash donations! But the other volunteer at our Hanwang office left. Bo ‘sneaked in’ (zuan kongzi)! And the donator was really enthusiastic and insisted to give us money.”

It was a common problem. To ensure the efficiency of disaster relief, many NGO leaders tended to be negligent in supervision and to overly trust volunteers. “We have to publicize this scandal. We also need to unlearn individual heroism! There’s no way to disguise it. My coworkers and I discussed this scandal for a few days. Our organization was just about to register. If we revealed the whole case publicly, we were really scared that Bo would ruin our reputation forever,” Chen said. Chen’s coworkers reported Bo’s embezzlement to the Hanwang police station and publicized the appropriation of donations online. Fortunately public discourses, after a few criticisms on the lack of “scientific management,” approved Chen’s courage of unveiling the scandal.

\[^{170}\] Ibid.
CONCLUSION

All these unpleasant encounters reflected the complexity of civil engagements that many NGO leaders were not prepared to face. The transformation from authentic, comparatively naïve ideal of communal membership transcended beyond the simple wish of “helping people in need.” The authenticity and efficiency of altruism, voluntarism through the mobilization of social capital were contested, confronting problems with every day practices. Many grassroots NGOs realized that it took a great effort to shoulder all social responsibilities and construct a system of “trustworthiness—how people anticipate that others will behave in the future” among local residents.171

Regarding individual conception of citizenship, NGO leaders were less involved in the discussion of citizen rights, but were rather more concerned with responsibilities of reallocating social resources and utilizing social capital. Through trial and error during the chaotic post-disaster days, many NGO leaders developed a more concrete and rational understanding of voluntarism in social organizational settings. Although this awakening of voluntarism and the immediate mobilization of social capital were impressive at local level, the recently sprouted NGOs still faced challenges of weak organizational capacity, institutional fragmentation, lack of legitimacy and unfamiliarity with regulations.172 The following chapter analyzes how the awareness of voluntarism was transformed and transmitted through legalization and socialization process. Two identical characteristics that sparkled at this nascent

---

172 Teets, “Post Earthquake Relief and Reconstruction Efforts: The Emergence of Civil Society in China?”
stage were corroborated in the transformation of citizenship conception—relationship-centered working mechanism and rhetoric artfulness in communication strategies.
3.

**Half-Metamorphosis: Institutionalization of Grassroots Civil Engagements**

“In the end, the campaign’s limited successes arose from using ‘law as a club and ‘bargaining in the shadow of the law.’”

- Kevin O’Brien, Li Liangjian

In the immediate aftermath of the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake, citizens of Chengdu frantically joined together to address the desperate needs of their communities. As the previous chapter analyzes, the awakening of voluntarism at the locality impresses the disaster stricken communities. This chapter discusses the evolution of Chengdu grassroots NGOs from ad-hoc groups of volunteers to established organizations. Two characteristics, the wide utilization of personal social ties, and the mastery of public rhetoric strategies, highlighted the relationship-centered, ideologically ambiguous development of civil society in Chengdu. The first “stepping stone” that many grassroots NGO leaders tried to reach was legal recognition. Although some unregistered NGOs have continued to operate without any legal identity, many chose to be recognized publicly as legal organizations. Usually NGO leaders could choose to register as civil non-enterprise units or as businesses.

The first section of this chapter analyzes the different paths that NGO leaders took towards legal recognition. The second section focuses on the rhetorical strategy

---

during such utilization of personal relationship and its diverging effects on the development of civil organizations. While artful rhetoric facilitated NGO registration and funding application, the norms that such rhetorical strategy generates new norms—“the informal laws that govern exchanges and daily life” could place grassroots civic organizations under the risks of bureaucratization, which produced a double-edged impact on grassroots NGOs. While bureaucratization could improve operational efficiency, it could undermine the trustworthiness of grassroots organizations. Aware of the potential betrayal of the authenticity of citizen voluntarism, some NGO leaders chose to continue operating without a formal legal structure. The third section discusses the rationales behind these unregistered NGOs, as an “antithesis” that addresses concerns of NGO institutionalization. In this process of legalization, citizen voluntarism became gradually formalized into three distinct organizational forms: NGOs registered as non-enterprise, NGOs registered as corporations and unregistered NGOs. Departing from the previous diffused conception of citizenship, the idea of citizenship during this period went through a metamorphosis towards more rationalized yet more diverse concepts.

BE LEGAL?!

“This government in some sense already lost its legitimacy. But NGOs—We, have to be legal,” Xi, the editor, was the only one among all the interlocutors who openly claimed the loss of state legitimacy.\(^{174}\) For Xi, legal recognition meant the institutionalization of belief, which indicates the official recognition of organizational

\(^{174}\) Xi, in a personal interview with the author in Chengdu. June 17, 2013.
efficiency.\textsuperscript{175} Xi’s ideal resonated with Zhao Dingxin’s discussion of the state’s gradual loss of performance legitimacy, that when the state failed to fulfill concrete promises of livelihood—\textit{minsheng}, its legitimacy could be in crises.\textsuperscript{176} According to Xi, such performance legitimacy could be yielded to civil organizations to ensure social stability. By “outsourcing of legitimacy” in forms of government purchasing, NGOs could ideally broaden the scope of civic services.\textsuperscript{177}

In fact, for most local grassroots NGO leaders the desire for legal recognition was primarily for pragmatic reasons rather than anything having to do with state legitimacy. Their sense of pragmatism was reflected in NGO leaders’ utilization of personal ties and strategic rhetoric. One common characteristic of this strategic rhetoric is the use of depoliticized language particularly in public discourses. This habit did not directly affect or distort their civic purposes, but rather facilitated the completion of civic projects. Meanwhile, many NGO leaders demonstrated sufficient and persistent political efficacy in private, although they seldom amplify their political voices in public.

Shortly after the Wenchua Earthquake, many passionate NGO entrepreneurs shunned away from further commitment not due to the particular hardship they experienced, but rather because of the restrictive regulations and the unexpected limits of funding and human resources. As the communitarian solidarity and the altruism provoked by the natural catastrophe started to fade, Zhang and Li witnessed a substantial withdraw of volunteers from other parts of China. “I wanted to recruit

\textsuperscript{175} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{177} Xi, in a personal interview with the author. June 17, 2013.
new volunteers with some professional skills online, particularly students who major in education and psychology, but how long will they commit to our program?" Li talked about her first psychological counseling project in Pengzhou, “We had no legal identity and couldn’t raise funds publicly. Because we were grassroots NGO beginners ‘newbies’ (cainiao), we couldn’t get any sponsorship from established foundations.” The basic livelihood of NGO volunteers was challenged by the lack of financial support. “Volunteers worked with children in the day and also became good company for the elderly in the evening. The young people were to leave heavy boxes, clean away wreckages in the school building and decorate rooms. In summer 2009, a year after the earthquake, My volunteers after intense physical labors in the day, could only rest in camping tents without fans or air conditioning in the sizzling August. That was inhumane!” Li reminisced about the bitterness and hardship she faced, “Most volunteers could only stay for three weeks at most. There were no materialistic rewards for those young people even though they really did a lot,” Li realized that without a legal recognition her dream of reconstructing a better society would easily evaporate. She also realized that regulations that were designed to ensure an orderly society actually acted against citizens’ good will.

In fact, many NGO entrepreneurs had tasted the bitterness of such irony—their pursuit of the Grand Course (dadao) in the Confucian teaching to refine the community was largely confined by “redundant paperwork and petty, outdated...
Initially most NGO entrepreneurs attempted to bypass policy restrictions and avoided discussing policy in public, because in post-quake Sichuan where many towns were in ruins, policy talks on NGO registration seemed to be inefficient. Local Ministry of Civil Affairs was unlikely to process any open discussion on policy changes. Besides, relaxation in registration laws might only prescribe some freedom of assembly in theory, not in practice. As evidenced in lots of Party rhetoric of citizen rights and deliberative democracy, political rhetoric seldom demonstrated real commitment that could be accountable for citizens.

The inefficiency of policy negotiation directed NGO entrepreneurs like Zhang and Li to seek alternatives. Zhang’s rationality of shunning away from direct confrontation of local governments was out of a deep belief in pragmatism, “I didn’t want to bother bargaining with the local governments. They were busy with reconstruction, and practically who wanted to talk about changing policies in urgent moments? Moreover, local governments don’t have the power to render policies in favor of us. They have their own limitations,” Zhang analyzed. Her deep belief in pragmatism directed towards a different, relationship-centered strategy in raising funds. She started to use personal channels to collect money by publicizing her project among her friends, colleagues, including some of whom had leadership positions in the Chengdu Communist Youth League. Similarly, Li started to post her philanthropic plan on blog, explaining her commitment to children in Pengzhou. Afterwards she initiated micro donations on Tencent QQ, among her friends, whom

---

181 Zhang Li, (director of Chengdu Xiyou Community Development Center), in a personal interview with the author, 21 June 2013
182 See O’Brien, Li, Rightful Resistance in Rural China.
183 Zhang, in a personal interview with the author.
184 Li, in a personal interview with the author, 20 June, 2013.
included veterans, bureau officials and businessmen. She recorded every donation and publicized each part of expenditure online to ensure transparency. These unofficial micro-donations “watered” Li’s sprouting project.

Supporting Julian Greenwood Bentley’s observation that, “In China, you do things not because there is a legal channel to do them; you occupy the space before the government claims it, and the legal mechanisms all happen after,” Zhang and Li found their ways to sustain their projects. And indeed, the “legal mechanism” did follow after.

Zhang and Li’s creative solutions were artful. The first comprehensive construction of a “new governance” of civil associations selected Chengdu one out of the five pilot cities. Although a professional supervising unit was still required, the registration process became more accessible as local Civil Affair Bureaus welcomed certain types of civil associations particularly those specialized in social services and charitable organizations. Besides the easing of legislative hurdle, from 2009 to 2010, Zhang and Li’s organizations received professional assistance from Shanghai Non-profit Incubator (NPI), a non-profit, non-governmental organization registered in Pudong New District of Shanghai in 2006. Li reported, “Officials contacted us when they saw what we did—our blogs, Weibo and also projects at sites.” Both Zhang and Li received monetary support and professional guidance from NPI. “NPI’s indoctrination, which stresses government support and permission is really insightful. I am also very grateful that NPI provided us free office space and facilities and registration consulting services. However, I have different interpretations in values of

185Julia Greenwood Bentley, “Survival Strategies for Civil Society Organizations in China.”.
my civil engagements, and I don’t feel compelled to comply to everything [under NPI’s guidance],” Zhang said proudly.\(^\text{186}\)

For Hu, the path towards legitimacy was slightly different. Shortly after the earthquake, Hu shared his social ties established at the Sichuan Social Science Academy to assist other civil associations, institute researchers and news media to “cooperate and participate in post-quake reconstruction.” “I realized the necessity of some kind of division of labor,” he said, “young, capable people like Li and Zhang are passionate and charismatic leaders and can really interact with earthquake victims and be part of the local community. I’m not that type. I’m retired from the frontline. I’m old and can’t handle intense fieldwork. But I can provide backstage help!”\(^\text{187}\) Hu contacted his previous colleagues at Sichuan Social Science Academy. His wife, an established scholar in sociology reached out to her contacts, students and coworkers at Sichuan University. Shortly after state-led first-response, Hu started his first capacity building project, Path of Sichuan in September 2010. He and his wife contributed an old apartment near the courtyard of the Academy. On the fifth floor of a desolate socialist building, Hu, his wife and their former students converted the dining room into a temporary office—setting up land phone, desktop computer and the Internet connection. The spacious living room was adopted as meeting room. Hu picked up an old long table and big chairs that were discarded when the Academy refurbished its meeting room.

Meanwhile, Hu’s team was quick in establishing a website, a Sina blog and a Tencent QQ group, publicizing the organization and updating information of

\(^{186}\) Zhang, in a personal interview with the author in Chengdu, 8 June 2013.\(^{187}\) Ibid.
government policy and philanthropic endeavors. Hu also received notice from a variety of newspapers. “It was embarrassing at first. Although I know many people in Chengdu, it is difficult to have people trust you. I tried to prove it,” Hu recalled his financial difficulty at the first phase of the Path of Sichuan project, when his unregistered team relied heavily on funds raised through his personal ties. He still managed to host four salons on civil society, organizational methodology, environmental protection and gender studies in “his living room.”

“188 The first salon only attracted 35 participants and the scale doubled at the end of 2010. And luckily the financial hardship only lasted for a year,” Hu said, “Since 2011 we started to receive some attention from Hong Kong Oxfam International. They appreciated our local efforts. At that time if international NGO wanted to become local, I should be the person that they would talk to. We received generous support from Oxfam.”

189 Hu did not specify the amount of donation that Oxfam provided, but the donation allowed Hu to extend the Path of Sichuan project for another year.190 The more stable financial source also allowed Hu’s team to register at the Ministry of Civil Affairs. The attention from international NGO allowed Hu to register his organization at a higher municipal level than other local grassroots NGOs.

Hu’s personal association with the Sichuan Social Science Academy through his previous career and his good reputation among the Sichuan academia facilitated the legal recognition process. The affiliated supervising unit of Sichuan Youming is Sichuan Social Sciences Association, a mass association directly governed by the

188 Hu, in a personal interview by the author in Chengdu, 26 June, 2013. The sponsorship of the above mentioned foundations could be fine in the following link: http://www.512ngo.org.cn/shangm_thread_about/key_ABOUTUS.html
189 Ibid.
190 Ibid.
provincial government, which bridged endeavors of social science scholars with the state governance. Hu’s ideal was to institutionalize and professionalize a channel that other grassroots NGOs could consult and trust. In alliance with the established Sichuan Social Sciences Association, he created his unique toolsets—an established web of social ties, information and talents to better perceive policy changes and value changes.

One outstanding characteristic of the relationship-centered working mechanism was careful framing of the group’s mission and organizational strategy. Local NGO leaders fully understood the means of control of public discourses from regional political center. Recognized the boundaries of government tolerance, these NGO leaders artfully started with informal horizontal linkages and remained patient to establish formal information exchange platforms. The public compliance towards government policy made the state apparatus less likely to directly outlaw these associations. In particular, civil solidarity emerged after the traumatic earthquake demonstrated positive attitudes within the society, which the state was unlikely to openly repress. Besides the artful public compliance, which secured grassroots NGOs’ existence, NGO leaders utilized personal social ties as a crucial resource to finance and legalize their projects. The relative consistency of informal financial supports at the outset allowed small, grassroots NGOs to become visible to a wider range of civil society participants, like Shanghai NPI and Oxfam. This extension of audiences opened a window to more formal financial support, which accelerated the process towards organizational legitimacy.
In contrast to the theoretical discussion in Chapter One, the relationship-centered civil engagements observed in the field does not conform to the theoretical concept of *gong*, the publicness, since the ways of legally registering at MCA and realizing civic projects incorporate utilization of private social connections. In Habermasian, or Mary Backus Rankin’s conceptualization of civil society, *gong*, the civil public, implies clear distinction between state control and the private sphere. However, practically in order to realize legitimating institutionalization of civic associations, both government permitted legal identity and private personal ties were so instrumental and closely knit that they call into question the fundamental concept of civil society, which divides public sphere from the state and the market.\(^{191}\)

Meanwhile, the strategic use of social ties as means to realize civic assemblies as alternative institutions to exercise group power imposes direct challenges on the idealized ideological solidarity and presupposed political compliance of the masses. Civic activism found ways to gain legitimacy by establishing solid connections in the society, not by rejecting those connections.

Also noteworthy are the constraints of these relationships based on reciprocity. Although personal ties could smooth the paths towards legitimacy, organizational identities as non-enterprises still face strict state supervision, which threatens NGOs organizational autonomy. In many occasions the authority of supervision units still persisted to impose influences and weaken the autonomy of grassroots civic organizations. Considering the wide use of personal relationships and

---

\(^{191}\)Ranki “Some Observations on a Chinese Public Sphere.”
social ties in the initial funding and organization of these groups, the publicly desired transparency of non-enterprises NGOs could be less pragmatic and desirable.

Compared to the registration requirements of NGOs, registration requirements of enterprises were far less restrictive. Xi’s journal NGO Growth Letter was initially formed as a consulting company established in Beijing, 2003. Since the administrative organization was registered as enterprise, it was not under the surveillance or protection of any supervising unit. The tradeoff, besides necessary protection against state intervention, was heavy tax burdens. Without tax exemption, NGO Growth Letter shouldered greater burdens to support its professionals and administrative costs. For NGOs that heavily relied on supports from both domestic and international foundations, it was not easy to publicly request tax coverage for operational purposes as part of donation application. “For a while we struggled to gain financial support for administrative coverage. Initially we could only get 8 percent. That was not enough. But you know how businesses functioned in China back in old days. Numbers could be manipulated,” the accountant of Xi’s organization indirectly hinted that the unspoken rules of corporate operations allowed for underreporting incomes and minimizing administrative costs as part of the survival techniques deployed to stay financially afloat.¹⁹² Although tax avoidance was supposed to be outlawed, a variety of business studies indicated that tax avoidance was a pervasive surviving strategy facing the increasing market competition among enterprises.¹⁹³ NGOs registered as business also went with the flows but possessing

¹⁹² Accountant, in a personal interview with the author in Beijing, 2 August, 2013.
different purposes—rather than grasping a competitive niche in the market, NGOs strived to survive while operating with relative independence. To certain extend, Xi and the accountant’s experiences again reflected citizens’ perception of legality—that effectiveness is the primary evaluation measurement and legal status secondary. Therefore, the form of civil organization was not as crucial in the public’s evaluation of the group as its actual contribution and engagements.

However, such registration form as business did not protect NGO Growth Letter from state intervention. In July 2007, the publication was banned under the accusation of conducting “unauthorized surveys,” a violation against the 1983 statistical law, and the English-language edition was considered “an illegal publication.” The chief editor at that time, a British national, even faced risks of deportation. In some Western journalist reports, this editor wrote, “these actions have been precipitated by zealous security officers, and that more senior figures in the government and Communist Party will realize that actions of this kind are not in China’s best interest.”

Journalists interpreted this sudden antagonism against foreign press in 2007 as an action to lift restrictions and censorship prior to China’s 2008 Beijing Olympics. The editor further explained, “Any foreign person asking any Chinese person information is conducting unauthorized surveys. They are looking for a small, technical means to close us down.” The legal ambiguity could also be instrumental for the state to impose coercion to any activities that it perceived as potentially hostile. The state apparatus was likely to exert “hard” influence to intimidate civic

---

195 Ibid.
organizations while leaving “soft” impacts on organizational forms. The traditional governance philosophy of “simultaneously exerting soft and hard policy” (ruanying jieshi) was frequently adapted, attempting to steer the development of Chinese civil society.

Other domestic grassroots NGOs registered as enterprises like Tao’s Rural-Urban Collaboration Center in Chengdu were arguably far less politicized than Xi’s NGO Growth Letter. Tao, after volunteering in many disaster relief works during the Wenchuan Earthquake introduced “philanthropic trading” to the local civil engagements circle. He and his team initiated philanthropic tourism, environmentally friendly hostels and non-profit organic farms to accelerate economic recoveries of disaster stricken villages. “I grew up in a peasant family in Jiangxin Province. I understood the hardship that peasants would face after a severe disaster. I wanted to help them,” Tao explained. His organization, different from other NGOs of the “Wenchuan Generation,” was specialized in economic innovations to reduce the income gaps between rural and urban households.¹⁹⁶ “Our service targeted at rural households. But I’m also part of the Chengdu grassroots NGO circle. We share resources and help each other to get funds. Non-profits also need funds.” His connection with the “Wenchuan generation” NGOs such as Li, Zhang, Hu and Chen helped his team to gain supports from NPI, the same non-profit, non-governmental organization from Shanghai that helped Li and Zhang’s establishments. His group received financial support of 80,000 RMB (USD 12,500) from YouChange China Social Entrepreneur Foundation in 2010 and another 170,000 RMB (USD 27,000)

¹⁹⁶ Tao Gang (the director of Rural-Urban Collaboration Center), in a personal interview with the author, 26 June 2013.
from China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation, Wenchuan Disaster Relief Program.\textsuperscript{197} “Li and Zhang really helped me out. They even lent me their own money to cover my employees’ wages,” Tao recalled, “Our relationship within the Chengdu circle is really tight.” Yet Tao took a different path. He felt unsettled and unsatisfied after NPI’s assistance. “I thought if I started an NGO, all the work would be really repetitive. Repetition is not effective,” Tao explained his reason of being different from his Wenchuan peers. “Social entrepreneurship is really a new area. We just successfully registered in 2012. There are many opportunities. In particular, we got to teach participants of these philanthropic tours to be responsible for their behaviors—collecting trash, not wasting food and so on. They were not just tourists; they need to be trained to respect the environment and fruits of labor of local residents.”\textsuperscript{198}

At the local level, the utilization of personal relationship should not be simplified as NGO leaders’ cunning abuse of nepotism; it rather reveals the foundation of Chinese citizenship that is ingrained in the ideal of membership and interpersonal relationships. Thomas B. Gold explains that relationship-centered social ties are based on the traditional concept of \textit{bao}, reciprocity, where one does favors for others as “social investments,” expecting something in return, which takes beyond a materialistic measure, often intertwined with empathy and feelings.\textsuperscript{199} Zhao Tingyang, a philosophy professor at Chinese Academy of Social Science notes the need to study relationships (\textit{guanxi}) when seeking for effective governance. He writes that,

\textsuperscript{197} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid.  
“The political makes sense only when it deals with ‘relations’ rather than ‘individuals,’ and the political is meant to speak for coexistence rather than single existence. In a very Chinese way, politics aims at a good society of peaceful ‘order,’ which is the first condition for any possible happiness of each and all, and at keeping a society from the ‘disorder,’ that destroys all possibilities of individual happiness. This political conception could find a strong argument in Chinese ontology, the ontology of relations, instead of the Western ontology of things.”

The utilization of interpersonal relations such as acquaintanceship, friendship, comradeship or family kinship to obtain legal identity implies the fluidity of Chinese citizens’ conception of laws. Evidenced in these case studies, the relationship-centered approach aims at reestablishing good relations of traumatized communities after the earthquake.

In contrast, the conception of legality detached from interpersonal empathy, is less of a vital prerequisite of community membership or citizen voluntarism. In contrast, Chinese legal scholars in the post-Tiananmen era in early 1990s attempted to reestablish the equation of state-made law with common will of the society, wishing for the “giving power back to the society.”

The grassroots NGO leaders however, attempt to take a detour, taking an indirect path that is secured with personal social connections, to ensure a smooth, trial-free legalization procedure. The contractual state-society relationship, which Ma Changshan idealizes as the foundation of civil law, is largely weakened by the relationship-centered approach in civil engagements,

---

200 Zhao Tingyang, "Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept 'All under-Heaven'," Social Identities, vol.12, no. 1 (2006), accessed online: http://beanhu.wordpress.com/2009/01/01/tianx/
in which laws and regulations, state apparatus become disaggregated into partially institutionalized individuals with similar interests, or friends, comrades, families, acquaintances whom sympathize with the ideals of NGO leaders.\textsuperscript{202}

In Kenneth Lieberthal and Michael Oksenberg’s fragmented authoritarian framework, “policies are not necessarily either coherent or integrated responses to perceived problems or part of a logical strategy for a leader to advance power and principle… A package or bundle of policies is best disaggregated into its individual policies.”\textsuperscript{203} Similarly, compliance to a collection of regulation on civil engagements can be divided into strategic agreement to a segment of regulation, favored by personal connected bureau officials. On the bright side, the fluidity nature of law at least formulates space to test the limits of state governance, to examine alternative ways to cooperate with the government.

**SPHERES OF DISCOURSES: THE STAGED, THE UNSTAGED**

However, the fluidity in the conception of legal identity also indicates the unrealizable assurance of legal rights. NGO leaders still need to prepare for all kinds of eventualities that nascent grassroots NGOs must face. After successfully registering at Chengdu Bureau of Civil Affairs, Zhang and Li still faced difficulties in sustaining their operations. “The sense of achievement passed away quickly. I was no longer a volunteer or social worker, but an organizer of my NGO. I need to be responsible of every project that I got sponsored for,” Li said. “I was a veteran, you


see. I was only familiar with following or giving direct commands. I didn’t know how
to talk to government officials using some bureaucratic jargons (daguanqiang 打官腔)
and I didn’t know how to write a business proposal for my project. I had to learn
everything fast. Otherwise all the efforts would be in vain.”  

Contrasting with Li’s arduous efforts to grasp the bureaucratic tones and professional
rhetoric, Zhang was an expert in tactful communication.

“You have to make sure that different groups in the society understand what
you are talking about,” Zhang said, “so that people can fully understand you and
support you.”  

Observing her interactions in local residential community, she never
talked about her “concepts of individual empowerment or grassroots democracy”
when working with residents in a community; nor did she mention any potentially
antagonistic concepts such as freedom of speech and assembly to local governments.

“Let’s do something together”—the only phrase that Zhang repeated when working in
her programs.  

In her opinion, residents have witnessed too many unrealized
promises that confidence in bureaucratic rhetoric is long lost. Actual, tangible help
has been far more welcoming than flamboyant display of philanthropic concerns. If
words are silver, silence with practice is gold. However, when communicating with
local officials and foundations, Zhang became particularly eloquent, advertising her
community building projects with phrases such as “ensuring communal stability from
within (neibu baozheng wending)” and “de-stressing pressures of social governance

204 Li, in a personal interview with the author in Chengdu, 20 June, 2013.
205 Zhang, in a personal interview with the author in Chengdu, 8 June, 2013.
206 Ibid.
She could have adopted and paraphrased phrases in some official political rhetoric on Great Harmony (datong), but it was intriguing that she could transform phrases with certain socialist tradition into her own concern of autonomous civic practices to address social needs.

While she assimilated some Party rhetoric, towards certain progressive foundations, Zhang emphasized some of the democratic elements of her civic organization that, “We were purely grassroots, and we are distributing power to people.” Her words sounded plainly forthright yet not necessarily untrue. One of her working methods in urban communities was to organize open meetings to create a window for open discussions. Different from the urban movement in Shanghai Green Garden New Village recorded by Peter Ho and Zhu Jiangang, where residents successfully petitioned to limit the construction of new real estate building where the key to the achievement was to de-politicize their actions, Zhang did not disguise the political potential of her engagements. She encouraged over 100 residents to gather in a conference room to vote on a construction of a green land. Residents were asked to write their opinions on a piece of paper and put it in a basket. Volunteers of Zhang’s Xiyou Community Culture Development Center categorized residents’ thoughts and publicized the results. “At first, some people thought this meeting was deceiving and they left furiously, especially when they saw the results differed from their wishes.” Zhang and her workers were patient. They visited residents with opposing opinions and explained their good reasons of initiating such meeting.

---

207 Ibid.
208 Ibid.
209 Ibid.
“The green land is shared among every individual resident in our community,” she often said.

In some urban communities, Zhang’s persistence paid off. “When residents realized the actual benefits of collectively contributing to their community, they slowly accepted the rituals of meeting, open discussion and voting,” Zhang summarized. “Previously what could residents do when their green land was inappropriately used? Reporting (gao) and protesting (nao, literally translated as making noises)? These options were far less effective. In fact, they never worked. How could district government care about every trivial complaints in residential life?” Such civil discourse was conducted at a community level. However, such rhetoric rarely appeared in Zhang’s public presentation of her engagements. Her online reports only recorded the harmonizing influences rather than her ambition of “empowering the people.” Zhang’s understanding of “public silence” was insightful. Memories of repressing dissenting opinions in Maoist era were still embedded in people’s mind, that they would not easily take the risk of expressing discontents publicly.

The de-politicized public presentation and the deliberative democratic working tendency in urban communities, though seemingly self-contradictory, signaled the artfulness of NGO leaders and embeddness of citizen activism. Zhang argued that it was precisely the active participation in decision making at a community level that could ensure social stability. “The vertical relationship between the state and the society cannot ensure stability. Beijing has repeated emphasized the

---

210 Ibid.
'maintenance of stability.' Stability cannot be achieved through top-down maintenance,” Zhang argued, “by empowering the people I wanted to create organic stability.”

Zhang did not perceive deliberative democracy to be a theoretical term loaded with Western influences, but rather a set of practices that create horizontal connections among members of a community for mutual recognition and collective decision-making. “I am not an expert in political science or any academic studies. I just thought self-empowerment could make our society a better place. I don’t make any ambitious claims. I do what I can.”

In contrast with Zhang’s down-to-earth pragmatism, Hu appeared to be more opinionated towards democracy. He shook his head when I brought up “deliberative democracy” and the term “empowering the people.” He deliberately asked me, “What do you want to say when using the term ‘democracy?’ Use your own word to describe it please. I agree with individual empowerment, but democracy—it’s such an easy trademark to sell your goods!” His scorn was insightful. The CCP Party rhetoric in fact frequently utilized the term democracy when it pursued top-down policy design,

“We need to politically safeguard the people's rights... Instead, to achieve this we need to perfect the democratic system, reinforce the legal system, and improve the democratic supervision mechanism. Only by perfecting the regulatory mechanism under which power is exercised according to law, by practicing democratic election, democratic decision-making... will we ensure that people will enjoy all democratic rights according to law, that corrupt phenomena will be eliminated.”

---

211 Ibid.
212 Ibid.
213 Hu, in a personal interviewed by the author, 26 June, 2013
Democracy could be seen as a false promise that the official rhetoric had been circulating for over two decades. Hu’s rhetorical indifference towards democracy, civil society and other “imported vocabularies” reflected his perceptiveness towards political connotations in public discourses.

While in public discourses many NGO leaders chose to be politically neutral, in semi-public spheres or in private they could be strongly opinionated. Chen, the founder of Chengdu Disaster Preparation Center declared in a personal conversation that, “I always abuse (maren) those officials. They didn’t understand a thing. The government is to be educated!” He claimed, half-jokingly. “The foundations were the same! Too many redundant procedures! Both the government and the foundation! For instance, Narada Foundation took more than two weeks to approve a project proposal. But facing some extremely urgent disaster reliefs, people in the quake-stricken areas cannot wait for two weeks! People could die while waiting! So I became furious towards these policies. It didn’t make sense that simple paperwork like had to take such a long time. But later they changed their policies. For emergency the application process will take less than three days. I guess some actually listened to my ‘abusive words,’ as I actually yelled in their office.” He said in a proud way. “My NGO specializes in disaster reliefs and disaster preventions. These tasks deal with individual lives. In times of emergency, people don’t really care about rhetorical courtesies. I guess I’m less diplomatic than other NGO leaders you met.”

Although I did not exclude Chen’s tendency of bluffing and exaggeration in our conversation,

---

his activism extended beyond his privately contentious rhetoric. Not only did he “abuse” officials, but also actively published his criticisms of social incidents online. Chen started online discussions early after 2005. He found that many people shifted the attention from civil society to social work, which he perceived as a public compliance and reduction to the notion of “being good people and doing good things” (zuo haoren haoshi). He insisted that civil engagements were more than volunteering, but also seeking for outlets of individual voices. His active rhetoric in online discussion and in private could be his own channels of expressing discontents.

The tactfulness of working rhetoric among NGO professionals implied the sophistication of civil engagements. Many were equipped with the theoretical toolsets of political pluralism, citizen empowerment and participatory governance. However, instead of transmitting these ideals in public discourses, NGO leaders were more willing to translate their understanding of active citizenship into practices. They claimed their strategy as “doing instead of naming (zhi zuo bushuo).” Yet rhetoric artfulness did not simply serve as a masquerade mask of their political efficacy. Instead the proliferation of rhetoric strategies revealed the self-conflicting nature of grassroots NGO leaders’ conception of citizenship. On the one side, the familiarity with official rhetoric that complies with the state bureaucratic norms facilitated grassroots NGOs to realize their civic services. On the other side, however, the incongruity of strategic rhetoric between public compliance and pro state apparatus attitudes and the non-public resistance could greatly weaken the reliability and trustworthiness of grassroots civic organizations.
In particular, the use of strategic rhetoric could carry intrinsic risks of inconsistency between promises to different interest groups and actual fulfillments. Yan Huo describes his encounters with international foundations in China and points out the bureaucratic working style, selling off the philanthropic concepts to one audience and presenting their financial affluence to the other. NGO professional consumed by catering various interests of local governments and foundations, become less interested in actual provision of civic services. Nevertheless, the belief system of civil organization leaders is established through actual practice instead of artful rhetoric. When the focus of civic organizational work shifts from actual commitment of civic projects to rhetoric games, Yan Huo argues, NGOs are in fact self-alienated from their actual values. The discontinuity between projected ideals and realization of projects might trigger performance legitimacy crisis. Similar to Zhao Dingxin’s critique on the fragility of Chinese state legitimacy, when grassroots NGOs fail to fulfill concrete promises that NGO professionals claim towards local governments, foundations and the citizens, the trustworthiness of grassroots NGOs declines. In Wang Pei’s analysis on grassroots NGOs’ participation in social assistance, such fragility of belief system together with the alienation tendency due to the fluidity in organizational identities should be the major concerns of civil engagements.

217 Zhao, “The Mandate of Heaven and Performance Legitimation in Historical and Contemporary China.”
RATIONALES OF THE NON-LEGALIZED

While many NGO leaders managed to gain legal recognition for their organizations, a large proportion of Chinese NGOs continue to operate as unregistered organizations. Timothy Hildebrandt explained that NGOs that specialize in environmental protection, HIV/AIDS prevention, and gay and lesbian rights, regarding the political, social sensitivity of these engagements usually choose to stay unregistered to save troubles from direct confrontations with local governments and polices.219 Although registered civil organizations enjoy some autonomy and more fundraising opportunities, they must abide by strict criteria. Unregistered organizations, by saving the effort of registration, lose the open fundraising or donation opportunities, and arguably are under even stricter state restrictions, albeit in a different, informal way.220 For instance, Guo Ming’s Wind Light Disability Support Group consisting of the same group of volunteers in the 2008 earthquake kept operating without a legal status into 2013. His area of work—supporting the disabled, seemed far less politically controversial. Guo, an established architect possessed well-established network with local media, Sichuan Disabled Persons’ Federation and the Foundation of China Disabled Persons’ Federation. With an advantageous background he, unlike NGO leaders of similar status like Li, Zhang and Chen chose to stay legally “hidden.”

Similar to many registered NGO leaders, Guo did not consider legal identity a priority of his philanthropic endeavors. He also perceived his group as completely

220 Ibid.
legal, “I don’t want to register simply for the sake of legal identity. Individual philanthropy is not violating any regulation. My group is simply an aggregation of individual philanthropy.” He perceived individual philanthropy as independent activities unassociated with regulations and policies of Ministry of Civil Affairs, or established foundations. “I want to awaken the civic mindedness (gongyixin) of Chinese citizens,” Guo described his purposes. In Guo’s opinion, such civil awareness should not be fettered with any bureaucratic procedures in legal registration or funding applications. From his engagements in the civil circle in Chengdu, he was highly aware of the erosive effects along the legal registration procedures that “many NGOs became non-NGO when they gained the legal identities.” For Hu, professionalization of civil engagements faced an intrinsic danger of bureaucratization and assimilation to state bureaus. “Many NGOs shared the same working mechanisms as GONGOs. For instance, Sichuan Disabled Persons’ Federation, though entitled as GONGO, is in fact an administrative bureau. Those so-called professionals in the Federation were not helping the disabled, but simply fulfilling their banal, bureaucratic duties. The Foundation of the Disabled Persons’ Federation is also extremely bureaucratized.”

Although Guo admitted that bureaucratized working system might enhance effectiveness in management, he perceived such hierarchical working mechanism as a betrayal of his egalitarian, philanthropic philosophy, “If hierarchical working mechanisms pervaded among NGOs and some NGO professionals thought that they were always better than others, they were not doing philanthropy; they were

---

221 Guo Ming (the leader of Wind and Light Disability Support Group), in a personal interview with the author, 22 August, 2013.
dispersing resources as if to beggars, so that these people could selfishly gain a sense of self-fulfillment.” Unlike other NGO leaders, Guo’s rationale of remaining unregistered was not strongly associated with state policy environment for NGOs, but rather the impact of individual behaviors in registered group settings.

Regarding financial instability and fluctuations of human resources that many other NGO leaders encountered, Guo’s unregistered NGO seemed to possess certain “ultra-endurance.” On the financial instability, Guo claimed that he and his teammates committed at least 5% of their annual income to philanthropic endeavors. If his teammates encountered some financial difficulty, he would contribute more. Although the collected money might be smaller than the resources gained by organizations able to gain donations from a wider variety or funders, Guo’s team had been financially self-sustainable. On the note of human resources, every current team member had stayed committed and maintained a horizontal working relationship in every project. “We were close friends, and we share many things in common. Otherwise it’s impossible that our group could last this long without external funding and policy supports,” Guo explained. “But even without external financial supports, we would never exploit local residents when we were conducting our project. We would pay for all our accommodations and take trash away from villages.”

Although Guo also utilized personal ties, NGO networking platforms to realize his philanthropic projects, he still found it challenging to find the right recipients. Guo’s close relationship with Chengdu People’s Radio was established and enhanced during disaster relief works after the Wenchuan Earthquake. One of the

---

222 Ibid.
223 Ibid.
channels, presented by a visually challenged host became a crucial platform for Guo’s group to locate households in need. From 2008 to 2010, Guo’s team introduced “rural tourism”—active participation in rural lifestyle in vacations to disabled families in Caopo Village in Wenchuan. Instead of enjoying custom services, tourists were actively engaging in organic farming, traditional knitting. Guo confessed that the project only lasted for a month, as most participants were his teammates’ friends. As rural economy gradually recovered from the earthquake, Guo shifted his attention to refine the living conditions of the disabled in urban communities.

Interestingly, regardless of Guo’s deep concern with organizational autonomy, he did not refuse organizational collaboration with state bureaus. Instead of official cooperation, Guo treated the collaboration as an extension of his personal network, aiming to retain the authenticity of his philanthropic endeavors. He explained, “None of us is full-time volunteer. We all have our own jobs. We need to maximize operational effectiveness. But within our team we maintain as horizontal as possible.” Organizational collaborations were crucial to the existence of unregistered groups that the cooperating partners acted as shields against antagonistic state intervention while opening opportunities of philanthropic project. Collaboration with the Chengdu People’s Radio and Sichuan Disabled Persons’ Federation allowed Guo’s team to launch public debates and media campaigns about the rights and livelihood of disabled citizens, thus injecting certain new dynamics into the public sphere.

However, comparing to other registered NGO leaders’ open acknowledgement of artful rhetoric, Guo’s skepticism reflected his commitment to

\[224\] Ibid.
autonomous philanthropic endeavors. Similar to his critical attitude towards the potential of NGO bureaucratization, he noted the distortive effects of communication strategies, “rhetoric could just be a cover, but it could also change the core values. If the core value of NGOs always floats with rhetoric, how do people actually trust them?” He was aware that the emerging civil society could be a field to test political limits, and thus to survive in the restrictive policy environment, NGO leaders always have to find the right supporting audiences. But he still prioritized his group’s philanthropic ideal above legal identity or the scope of civil engagements.

Guo’s efforts were subtle, aiming at extending civil awareness to a wider range of population by constructing alliances with other fields, rather than engaging in various forms of contention. This resolution on authentic, non-confrontational working mechanism, while mirroring potential risks of registered NGOs, unveils his persistent pursuit of egalitarian voluntarism. The avoidance of legal recognition reflects the unreliability and doubts concerning legal status. Guo admitted that legal form and egalitarian voluntarism were not necessarily exclusive, yet he argued that if a legal organizational form were taken, formal organizational interactions with state bureaus and foundations—essentially stakeholders with different interests could distract NGO professionals to adhere to the initial philanthropic principles. In particular, Guo found that egalitarian working principle could not be fully respected in legal registration procedures or formal organizational cooperation, because both state bureaus and arguably foundations functioned in adherence to hierarchical orders, and therefore would anticipate, or indirectly require NGOs to operate in same

---

225 Ibid.
bureaucratic fashion. These hierarchical orders, although effective and professional in practices, did not treat both recipients of philanthropic funds and donors as equals. Although some NGO professionals attempted to use artful rhetoric to balance between hierarchical orders of state bureaus and egalitarian ideal of civic projects, Guo still considered such artfulness potentially deceitful.

CONCLUSION

This chapter presents the maturation of the conception of civic engagements and the pluralization of organizational forms. Through legal institutionalization the conception of civil citizenship evolved from a nascent, amorphous awareness of community membership during spontaneous cooperation after Wenchuan Earthquake, to a clearer set of ideals that took on diverse organizational forms. These new ideals involved, in practice, towards a more formalized voluntarism and an artful entrepreneurship of social, political relations. Meanwhile, while voluntarism became institutionalized, NGO professionals started to formulate different organizational strategies. In particular, less conventional civic group identities as corporate and non-legalized organization were adopted to protect organizational autonomy, and the “authenticity of voluntarism.”

Different from the display of public-spiritedness, charitable giving and collective voluntarism after the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, the post-2008 civic organizations further pursued to institutionalize personal ties and social capital.226 “Trust and capacity weakness”—the major obstacles of grassroots civic organizations

---

in Jessica Teets’ observations in 2008, did not inhibit organizational development. 
NGO professionals have been exposed to a variety of organizational identities.\textsuperscript{227} Rational analyses of tradeoffs between legal identities and organizational autonomy allowed NGO professionals to test the boundaries of regulations and limits of individual social ties. Institutionalized networks indeed facilitated the emergence of grassroots organizations.

While former studies partly explain the maturation of civic organizations, existing field researchers provided very few answer to the pluralization of organizational forms. Shawn Shieh and Deng Guosheng related this organizational evolvement to Robert Putman’s argument on accumulation of social capital that the rapid emergence of relationship-centered civil engagements suggests that China’s NGO community possessed a substantial stock of social capital.\textsuperscript{228} Yang Hubin, similarly, claimed that the evolvement of local civil society was a “logical outcome of more than 10 years of small-scale but persistent grassroots citizen activism since the mid-1990s.”\textsuperscript{229} Considering the rise of collective relief efforts, Jessica Teets argues that the participation in relief efforts strengthened the local civil society by increasing co-operation between civil society groups, society and local government. She concludes that civil society in China “acts like many democracies, by identifying social needs, developing projects to address these unmet needs, and mobilizing

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{227} Teets, “Post-Earthquake Relief and Reconstruction Efforts: The Emergence of Civil Society in China?”
\textsuperscript{228} Shieh, Deng, “An Emerging Civil Society: the Impact of the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake on Grassroots Associations in China.”
\textsuperscript{229} Ibid. The ideal of “social capital” is from Putman, Leonardi, Nanetti, \textit{Making Democracy Work: Civic Tradition in Modern Italy}, 167, 175.
\end{footnotes}
\end{footnotesize}
Recognition from scholars is encouraging, but it is important to understand the growing pluralization trend in establishing, organizing grassroots NGOs. In particular, scholars and NGO professionals should not overlook the self-conflicting impacts that the different organizational strategies create on principles of civic activities, the conceptions of civil society and citizenship.

This chapter exhibits a maturation of both the conception of civil society and the pluralization of organizational forms of grassroots NGOs. The ideal of egalitarianism, commitment to social services and peaceful collaboration with the state are articulated and transmitted in organizational forms. Meanwhile these organizational forms (NGOs registered as civil non-enterprises, NGO registered as business, and unregistered NGOs) that embodied the changing conception of civil society in fact exhibit self-conflicting impacts on organizational principles. Resonating with T.H Marshall’s theory that citizenship is a “way of life growing within,” the spread of citizenship conception depends on changes in individuals’ hearts and minds, which lead to changes in behaviors. The next chapter further analyzes such changes in perceptions and behaviors when local grassroots NGOs extend the civic services to rural areas. While through organizational collaboration personal social ties are transformed into collective resources, further exclusion of citizenship towards rural citizens is formulated within local civil society.

---

230 Teets, “Post-Earthquake Relief and Reconstruction Efforts: The Emergence of Civil Society in China?,” 346
231 Marshall, Citizenship and Social Class, 75.
4.

Exclusion From Within: Organizational Collaboration and Extension

“We, are empowering the people.”
- Zhang Li, Director of Chengdu Xiyou Community Culture Development Center

“Citizenship…excludes at the same time that it includes; it draws boundaries and ranks the populace. Citizens are in a privileged position vis-à-vis other community members because they possess rights that noncitizens and incomplete citizens lack.”
- Kevin J. O’Brien

The formal institutionalization of civic organizations established sites that enabled NGO leaders to practice certain political skills, organize, and participate civil engagements. For these NGO professionals, the conception of citizenship strongly resonates with O’Brien and Li’s observation that the Chinese citizenship “is less accorded than made, less granted than won.” The underlying theoretical question is that if exclusion of citizenship could be created from within — the bottom-up civic engagements. By examining the extension of civic services in disaster relief works after the 2013 Lushan earthquake, this chapter attempts to find the ways in which such exclusion of citizenship has been formulated within the sphere of civil society. Arguably, while the unregistered NGOs retained the formerly promised all-volunteer, small-scale, community-based civic activities, those that adopted bureaucratic forms

232 Zhang Li, (director of Chengdu Xiyou Community Development Center), in a personal interview with the author in Chengdu, 21 June 2013.
(as either registered non-enterprise civic entities or registered business) adopted a “new” sense of citizenship that was reminiscent of the older elitist ideals shared among Chinese intellectuals. Civic services provided by grassroots NGOs of the Wenchuan generation saw a shift from chaotic yet relatively egalitarian — “we are all in this together” sense of voluntarism, to a new, more professionalized and rationalized vision of civic activism — an elitist ideal of “leaving it to us.”

Meanwhile, the already proliferated use of personal network was transformed into collective resources shared among local grassroots NGOs. The collective utilization of personal, social ties further unpacked the perception of a unified state into actors and officials situated within the radius of collective NGO networks. The already blurry boundaries between bureaucratic officials and NGO professionals, and between prescribed regulations and policy entrepreneurship, became more ambiguous. However, this “boundary spanning” effect widely that was observed in embedded activism in China, also built new borders that excluded the majority of rural citizens. In this extension of NGO engagements into rural China, the state legitimacy based on promises of rural livelihood was outsourced to local grassroots NGOs. When NGOs were entitled to “grant” and “empower” rural citizens, they became the institutions that drew boundaries and ranks of the populace. The inclusion of rural citizens through civic activities remained piecemeal and incomplete.

**STRATEGIC COLLABORATION: 4.20 LUSHAN DEBUT**

Strategic local NGO collaboration was again, awakened by an earthquake. The Lushan Earthquake in April 20, 2013 of 7.0 on the Richter scale struck the
Chengdu Plateau. The epicenter was located in Lushan County, Ya’an, about 72 miles from Chengdu along the Longmenshan Fault, but the force of the quake was felt as far away as Beijing. Although at a much smaller scale than the one elicited by the 2008 earthquake, the social response was equally remarkable. Rather than the individualized zealous enthusiasm in 2008, individual volunteers took actions in more established forms, channeling their energy into organizations that were not just ad hoc collections of committed individuals but rather groups with coherent organizations.

Local organizations immediately formed an alliance to avoid the chaos that had occurred in 2008. The rationale of forming such alliance was to strengthen disaster relief efforts of civil organizations and to maximize the efficiency in allocating social resources. Except for Chen’s Chengdu Disaster Preparation Center, none of other grassroots NGOs were specialized in disaster relief. Experiences after the Wenchuan earthquake also indicated that sharing resources in emergency could improve working efficiency particularly for unprofessional organizations. Chen explained that, “Although the state takes care of the majority of the emergent disaster relief works, government should never expel citizens’ devotion to help.”

For Chen, NGOs formulated an outlet for citizens’ voluntarism. Zhang, the founder of Chengdu Xiyou Community Center explained that there were two factors that acted as catalysts of the alliance formation: 1) the establishment of the “Chengdu civil group” on WeChat (a mobile text and voice messaging communication device on mobile phones, similar to Whatsapp) at the beginning of 2013, and 2) a

---

coincidental cooperation program between Zhang’s Xiyou Community Culture Development Center and a local philanthropic foundation which was originally designed to raise money for the poor.\textsuperscript{236} Zhang said that “these two coincidences”—the utilization of new media and frequent small-scale intra-organizational collaboration allowed them to form a quick alliance right after the earthquake.\textsuperscript{237} The five NGOs that this thesis studies—Sichuan Youming Social Development Research Center, Chengdu Xiyou Community Culture Development Center and Warm Heart Home Community Center, Chengdu Disaster Preparation Center and Rural-Urban Collaboration Center were all founders of the Alliance. The Chengdu Communist Youth League was also incorporated in the founding team. Besides the ten organizational founding organizations, about 50 additional NGOs participated in the Alliance.

The group’s solidarity was particularly noteworthy. All individual participants presented themselves to the public as members of “420 Alliance” instead identifying with their home NGOs. The group solidarity implied a new type of group voluntarism, in which participants were not only willing to volunteer to help but also to adapt to form a collective group to channel their altruistic endeavors. The collaboration of 2008 was much less organized. Hu, the founder of Sichuan Youming Social Development Research Center, emphasized that openness and mutual-respect were the two core values that enhanced the group solidarity: “Any NGO possessing

\textsuperscript{236} The collaboration was reported by Fu Tao, the editor of China Development Brief, emailed to the author on June 30, 2013. The revised edition “Observation of 420” was later published in the Summer 2013 Edition of China Development Brief. Accessed online: http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.org.cn/upload/userfiles/files/2013summer.pdf.
\textsuperscript{237} Ibid.
similar objective could join us, and no one or organization could dictate the allocation of resources of other associations. Every member must respect the others.”

Besides group solidarity, the communication platform was also quickly upgraded within a few days after the disaster. Through blogs of established foundations online and an extended WeChat group on mobile communication, members could update and share information of most urgent needs and accurate situations in disaster stricken areas. The 420 Alliance also held daily meetings with local press to share and identify authentic information, which would be helpful for the execution of relief plan. The identification of correct information was a crucial part of the Alliance’s objective. Li, the founder of Warm Heart Home Community Center noticed the information asymmetry of government announcements. For instance, she recalls that, “Some local governmental officials claimed that they had already received plentiful goods and medical supplies, but our field workers reported that all the donated goods were simply piled up in storage.” The Alliance saw one of its most important role to be the task of identifying where resources and needs were actually located to facilitate efficient delivery of aid. Additionally, while updates about the disaster swarmed online, many captured only fragments of the reality. Li and her volunteers strove to categorize reliable information sources both in new media and from fieldwork reports and make it available to the public and, especially, to the organizational members of the 420 Alliance.

Besides information accuracy, the strong social ties among the members of the 420 Alliance also smoothed NGOs’ endeavors, particularly when facing policy

---

238 Hu, in a personal interview with the author in Chengdu, 26 June 2013.
239 Li, in a personal interview with the author in Renjia Village, Lushan County, 22 August 2013.
constraints on civic associations’ participation in disaster relief. In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, the 420 Alliance was able to deliver 18 trucks of relief goods. However, as the government-led relief teams were also on the way to the earthquake stricken areas, highways from Chengdu to Lushan were jammed with heavy traffic. In more remote regions, collapsed roads along the Longmenshan Mountain were crowded with military trucks, cars and buses with NGO logos from all over China. A few days after the earthquake, the State Department announced that, “unpermitted organizations and groups were forbidden to enter disaster stricken areas. Volunteers and NGOs already in the disaster stricken regions should withdraw from the sites even though they already contacted local disaster relief centers.”

Sichuan Provincial government attempted to collect all relief goods from NGOs and other citizens and formed a unified redistribution mechanism. Due to this policy restriction, many relief goods were detained.

Using their social connections, the Alliance was incorporated as part of the state apparatus delivering aid. Zhang, with her past working experience with Sichuan Provincial Communist Youth League Committee (CYL), immediately incorporated CYL in the Alliance. The CYL officials supported the 420 Alliance with government permitted road passes. Chen said wittily, making reference to the imperial “Mandate of Heaven”, “With the pass, we were ‘fighting the disaster under the Mandate (fengzhi jiuzai, 奉旨救灾).’” This informal collaboration with CYL was an

---

241 Chen, in a personal interview with the author in Lushan County, August 21, 2013. The phrase “fighting the disaster under the Mandate” was also reflected in Fu Tao’s Report in China Development
effective work-around for the regulations set by the State Department, and “alleviated the pressure of local governments.”

Chen explained that within the first 72 golden hours of post-disaster rescue, local governments were engaged in searching for the injured and calculating casualties. Many mayors of villages could not spare any time to coordinate relief goods distribution. Yet public discontent about undistributed goods was alarming. For instance, on April 23, residents of Lingguan Village of Baoxing County protested in front of local police station, due to the failed promise to distribute goods and services. The authority of local government, which relied heavily on concrete promises of livelihood, appeared to be quite fragile in emergencies. To ensure necessary material support, local governments after seeing the road passes issued by Provincial CYL, permitted the entrance of the Alliance into disaster stricken areas. By loosening their interpretation of the regulation, local governments in quake stricken regions could at least pacify the potentially infuriated masses.

By dealing with the regulation as one issued by institutionalized individual officials with shared interests in disaster reliefs, rather than something issued by an impersonal, central state bureaucracy, NGO professionals were able to rationalize their altruistic endeavors. The local officials would inform participants of the Alliance of the actual needs of goods and services, and the Alliance would publicize the information through the established communication platform.

---


Immediately after the earthquake, the Alliance set up their working site at Xiaojiaohe Neighborhood Mutual Assistant Center in southern Chengdu to process public donations. Yet shortly after the earthquake too many goods flooded the working site. In Zhang’s words, urban residents were “on fire” (*tai huo le*): “they wanted to give out everything that they thought earthquake victims might need: bed sheets, pillows, jackets, instant noodles and so on.” *Many of them were in fact not as helpful as the donors thought, and the hoarding of goods became a huge problem for us. We could neither distribute them effectively, nor return to the donors,”* She said. Hence underscoring rationality in donation became a crucial task for the Alliance. In the office a blackboard recorded detailed information of relief goods deliveries, including exact time of delivery, local respondents and progress of community integration. “It could be discouraging for urban citizens at the first place. But later they had no difficulty understanding our motivations. This society values efficiency,” Hu concluded.

On the national level, Xu Yongguang, the founder of Narada Foundation, a prominent private foundation that acts as a supplier of funds and promotes the development of public welfare projects noticed the shift of philanthropic endeavors from state-led social organizations to “actual” bottom-up philanthropic groups. Xu notes that after the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake, the China Red Cross and its associated branches received 13.8 million RMB donations, 21.1% of all social donations. In contrast, other civil foundations that operated independently from the state only received 1.375 million RMB, only 1.81% of all donations. After the 2013

---

243 Zhang, in a personal interview with the author in Chengdu, 21 June 2013.
244 Ibid.
245 Hu, in a personal interview with the author.
Lushan Earthquake, philanthropic foundations received a greater portion of the donations from the society, exceeding the amount of donations received by the China Red Cross and China Philanthropy Federation.\textsuperscript{246} The collaborative disaster reliefs of grassroots NGOs and foundations gained popularity with their transparency and efficiency.\textsuperscript{247} Xu claimed that the Lushan collaborative disaster relief was a turning point in society where philanthropic practices were finally “returned” to the society.\textsuperscript{248}

At the local level, grassroots NGO leaders experimented with the strategic alliance as a new, semi-institutionalized mode of allocating social resources, transforming personal social connections into collective resources. In this process utilization of new media allowed local civil society to launch campaigns, news about accurate needs from earthquake stricken areas. Meanwhile, the pervasive relationship-centered working mechanism in the NGO institutionalization stage was reinforced in this NGO alliance that NGO leaders were capable of accessing the state through their relationships with individuals inside the state. They were able to negotiate special, institutionalized privileges based on the shared purpose of disaster relief, which facilitated civic engagement beyond the boundary of state regulations. This dynamic resonated with the pragmatic, non-confrontational ideal that many grassroots NGO possessed.

\textsuperscript{246} “Xu Yongguang: Disaster Relief Works during Lushan Earthquake is the Turning Point of Philanthropy Returning to the Society” (xu yongguang: lushan dizhen jiuyuan shi cishan huigui minjian de zhuanzhedian), China Development Gateway, \url{http://cn.chinagate.cn/society/2013-05/27/content_28944510.htm}.
\textsuperscript{247} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{248} Ibid.
While the extension of civic services demonstrated the ways that conceptions of citizenship have been formed on the ground through practices, admittedly these channels were limited to those members of the urban population who were already committed to relief works. In tents, shelters, and offices borrowed from local cadres or donated by foundations, urban NGOs scattered seeds of “civil society,” yet they also confined the bloom of rural active citizenship, as they were artfully silent towards local resistance of villagers. They had to be silent, because they were closely collaborating with local cadres, and were busy with taking actions of relief works, of community reconstruction. They didn’t have the resources to amplify their voices.

**RURAL LIVELIHOOD: “NOW FOLLOW US”**

Following the collaborative disaster relief actions in April 2013, grassroots NGOs engagement extended to rural areas, providing community services for the left-behind elderly citizens and children, and also initiating economic recovery projects. During an Alliance meeting in June, Hu put forward his opinion that the main advantage of NGOs was not on-site disaster reliefs, but rather post-disaster community development. Consistent with his proposal of “rationalized civil engagements,” Hu advocated for NGO leaders in the Alliance to reorient the focus of their work from direct disaster reliefs to community reconstruction projects. “The casualty of the Lushan Earthquake is not as daunting as the Wenchuan earthquake, but most of residential houses were destroyed. Although the Center had commissioned local governments to set up resettlement sites, the previous rural
community had collapsed. That was the part that our NGOs could have helped restore,” he explained.  

During my field research in rural areas around Lushan County, colorful tents established by NGOs dotted the areas adjacent to the debris. Although banners of the 420 Alliance were widespread in quake stricken areas, most NGO tents stressed their own organizational identity and their collaborating foundations. NGOs re-established their individual organizational identities because the 420 Alliance was not yet a registered institution and therefore could not publicly receive grants from foundations. To apply for grants and to acknowledge individual supporting foundations, individual organizational identity must be taken. Still, the communication platform of the Alliance persisted.

In August 2013 I visited Li’s Warm Heart Home Community team in Renjia village, Qingren town under the municipal governance of Lushan County. The village is located in the southern end of the beautiful Dayan valley. With 724 households and 3210 residents, Renjia village is the most populated village around Lushan area. 9 villagers were killed in the earthquake, and 22 severely injured. All buildings, reconstructed after the 2008 earthquake, were destroyed again during the 2013 earthquake. Local livelihoods were threatened. Five NGO professionals had come to Renjia after the earthquake in April 2013, and were still working when I visited in August. Most of them were recent college graduates from Sichuan, Hebei and Guangdong Province. Only the team director, Liu, a Social Work major from Gansu Province, was experienced in disaster relief works from his time with the recovery

249 Hu, in a personal interview with the author in Chengdu, 26 June 2013.  
from the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake. The other two male NGO volunteers, Zhao and Wang from Hebei and Guangdong were already employed in other professions but decided to leave their jobs to help people in need when the 2013 earthquake struck. They were not trained social workers but had gained sufficient experiences since April. One young female professional, Zhu, from Mianyang, Sichuan, recently joined the team also studied Social Work in school and recently became an official NGO worker with Chengdu Warm Heart Home Community.

Besides these committed NGO workers, four local volunteers closely assisted the team. Yan, who grew up in Renjia village and had just graduated from a nursing school in Chengdu, went back to her hometown immediately with Chengdu Warm Heart Home Community after the earthquake. She greeted me in the courtyard in front of her house—a three-floor, concrete house, yet more precisely—a house skeleton with only a few finished walls, a complete roof and no window frames. She pointed to her house, “My unfinished new house, its frame just constructed before the earthquake, was one of the only buildings that was evaluated as a safe shelter. My mom and I wanted to let the NGO workers stay in the house. We were thankful for their help. Their efforts were better than the government plans.”

Yan’s mother, Wu, an energetic woman in her early forties who always had a smiley face, said, “We wanted to be ‘advanced household. (xianjin jiating).’ They came to our village from the cities. We wanted to collaborate.” Wu really enjoyed the company of the young people: “They are really polite, educated and sweet, and they work really hard. Young folks from big cities are really outstanding.”

---

251 Yan, in a personal interview with the author in Renjia Village, Lushan County, 20 August, 2013.
252 Wu, in a personal interview with the author in Renjia Village, Lushan County, 20 August, 2013.
Li’s project was designed to reconstruct the local community, which encompassed reestablishing local community and assisting economic recovery. In summer 2013, she planned to stay with villagers till the full post-earthquake reconstruction plan had been launched. Receiving funds from the One Foundation, Shanghai Soong Ching Ling Foundation and China Youth Development Foundation, Li’s team set up a temporary kindergarten and library next to the resettlement site. She also initiated an outdoor cinema and outdoor dancing events in the evenings. People whose homes were in shambles had someplace to gather and enjoy themselves with their neighbors in the evenings. Her team was also responsible for distributing goods donated by other enterprises and organizations. The working days were long. NGO professionals biked to the resettlement site at 7:30am in the morning and prepared for events of the day. The two local volunteers and the recently joined fresh graduate from Mianyang began to clean the classroom and waited for children to come. They measured the body temperature of each child to prevent the spread of illnesses, before holding classes from 8am till 11am. After class, parents or grandparents came to pick up their children for lunch. In the afternoon, some of the children stayed in the library to read, play, or watch TV.

---

The three male volunteers were in charge of connecting with foundations, media and local government, distributing donated goods, and creating an effective bond with local residents. Their morning work usually ended by 11a.m., because the sizzling mid-summer temperature in the valley made outdoor work almost impossible by noon. After 4p.m. in the afternoon, they would prepare for the evening events and sometimes leave Renjia village to a neighboring village and open an outdoor cinema. The cinema usually ended by 9p.m. When they came back from the cinema, all team members gathered for a meeting at 10:30p.m.on the third floor of Yan’s house. Usually Zhao and Wang were in charge of recording every individual’s accomplishment of the day. Liu, the team leader would announce the plan for the next day and motivate everyone to keep the morale high. Li visited the team at least once per week from Chengdu and usually stayed with the team for two days. Zhao, who decided to delay his employment in a corporation in Chengdu, said “The working hours are long, but I like it. It’s easy to get money and fame in the city, but sincere gratitude and appreciation are really hard to obtain.”

For both NGO workers and local residents, life was not pleasant. Zhao told me that previous volunteers found it too hard to endure the rural roughness: the rooms had no windows or doors; the military cots were not comfortable; hot showers were rare; toilets were outdoors, smelly, and dirty with no automatic flush valves; the food was simple. For many NGO field projects that I visited, the landscape was invariably the same: ashes, dirt, and rubble. They were all hot, dirty, and uncomfortable. It was immediately understandable that for young people growing up in urban China,

254 Zhao, in a personal interview with the author in Renjia Village, 21 August, 2013.
accustomed to dining at various restaurants and sleeping between clean sheets, such a change in the post-earthquake landscape of rural China would be very hard indeed. Yet at the resettlement site, living conditions were even worse. 40 households had been moved from military tents to wood-frame huts. No tap water was available, and electricity was not reliable. Although the majority of the residents attempted to stay with extended families in safe regions outside of the earthquake-stricken areas, the “left-behind” elderly and children were situated in less desirable conditions. Daily livelihood was challenging, as basic infrastructure had been destroyed and, even worse, the self-sustaining agricultural production had been interrupted.

The disruption of livelihood, minsheng, the most frequently used political rhetoric rooted in traditional Confucian teaching of justifying the ruler’s governance, was closely associated with the challenge of local governance. Recall that the Chinese government often directed the focus of political participation to issues of livelihood (ningsheng wenti). The fragility of such focus was that once problems of livelihood emerged, the legitimacy of governance might be threatened. In Renjia village, the question of effective reconstruction was frequently discussed at the local level. A growing sense of distrust towards the local government prevailed in the village. Yan often made cynical comments, once saying, “After the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008, I simply don’t believe in the government. We read in the news that each household in the region would receive 3000RMB (480 USD) compensation, but in fact my family only received 1000RMB (160 USD). Villagers saw the announcement in the newspaper and realized that they only got one third of the promised amount. They

---

255 Information was collected by the author at the settlement site in Renjia Village in August, 2013.
were infuriated. They demonstrated (nao) in front of the Village Committee but in vain. But of course, no media would report such minor issue.”256 All villagers were waiting for a clear guidance of post-earthquake reconstruction in the hope that the state would provide generous assistance to build their houses. Three months after the earthquake, no official policy was announced. Many chose to disregard the policy and started to renovate their houses, yet many were still waiting.

**CORRUPTION MAKES IT WORSE**

Corruption rumors were even more discouraging. Yan’s mother, Tao, seldom showed her frustration, but a worried frown appeared on her face when she read news about the reconstruction plans. Wu said that, “The original cost of reconstruction would be 200,000RMB (32,000 USD) for every household, yet the actual compensation of only 30,000RMB (48,000 USD) for each household of more than six residents could not meet the budget of reconstruction.”257 Yan responded to her mother, “That source of information was not reliable. We’d better just wait.” They agreed that they could not rely on the government. “Self-empowerment (ziwo fuquan)” in other local residents’ words, meaning independent discoveries of livelihood and financial recoveries from the disaster, became a common theme in talks before the outdoor cinema in the evenings. When people were gathered together, information of recovering the rural economy including developing rural tourism, organic farming was shared among villagers. When the top-down policy design

---

256 Yan, in a personal interview with the author in Renjia Village, 23 August, 2013.
257 Wu, in a personal interview with the author in Renjia Village, 23 August, 2013
became less promising, local residents united again and cultivated “the power of the masses” to restore their livelihood.

The economic “self-salvation” was largely led by NGO professionals. Zhao and Wang reached out to philanthropic projects of large food manufacturers as well as Non-profit organization, and professional associations in Chengdu, attempting to establish a micro platform between established urban enterprises and rural households. After the outdoor cinema one night, Wang announced that a team of agricultural experts would visit Lushan and host a seminar on increasing productivity of grains. He also recorded the number of participants of the seminar and wrote the announcement on the blackboard in front of the resettlement site. “I know nothing about growing grains, but this expert team contacted us a week ago. I’m willing to set a meeting time and place and encourage the local villagers to learn more. Many villagers, especially those living at the resettlement site are far from their farmlands. The disaster already caused substantial loss in their assets. I will do what I can to minimize the future loss,” Wang said.

Cases of promoting income-generating events were widely observed in Lushan area. Zhang and her team from Chengdu Xiyou Community Culture Development Center in Feixian village, Feixianguan County, a County of 11,500 residents in southern Lushan, were devoted to promoting economic recovery. Although in July 2013, Zhang’s team members were still waiting for a concrete reconstruction plan, Zheng, the team leader had a clear plan to increase incomes of local residents. “Lushan is a town of 2,000 years history. Many traditional root

258 The data is from the Lushan County official website: http://www.scxxy.cn/template/6/601/Detail.aspx?wid=787&cid=3186&ID=7608
sculptures are really exquisite. We were trying to do some marketing of these sculpture workshops. And at the same time, for peasants who suffered from substantial loss, we are promoting economic forest projects, in which farmers would plant orange trees rather than grow grains. Such projects would be in accordance to the state ‘Grain for Green’ project in the region. In particular after the earthquake the mountains were torn loose. Increasing the forestry coverage will be helpful for the recovery of the eco-system of the region.”\textsuperscript{259} Perceiving the growing need of organic food among urban citizens from Chengdu, Zhang attempted to organize organic food and vegetable markets, establishing a good collaboration between urban food retailers and local peasants. Part of her project also included volunteer tours from Chengdu to Feixian village, aiming to increase civil participation and narrowing the urban-rural income gap.

“Lead, Assist, Share, Enrich and Rejoice,” Tao, the social entrepreneur and the founder of Rural-Urban Collaboration Center summarized his team’s responsibility in economic recovery projects at Lianglu village.\textsuperscript{260} From August 2013, Tao and his team reached out to the youth in the village and initiated economic recovery workshops. Besides collaboration with the local roots sculpture workshops and development of organic farm, Tao’s team also introduced the basic principles of business management in the rural-urban collaboration, including production, marketing, networking, cost-benefit analysis and community responsibility. Understanding that some rural residents might be less educated, Tao’s team worked

\textsuperscript{259} Zheng, in a personal interview with the author in Feixianguan County, 24 August, 2013.
\textsuperscript{260} Tao, in a personal interview with the author in Chengdu, 26 June, 2013. The phrase “Lead, Assist, Share, Enrich and Rejoice” (dai, bang, gong, fu, le) also appeared in the article:
to teach cost and benefit calculations through case studies. Aside from business operational principles, Tao also introduced rural residents with e-commerce, encouraging them to open online shops of organic vegetables, extending the sale platform from traditional food market to online channels.\textsuperscript{261} Interestingly, all workshops were conducted in the local Village Committee office, and were opened by the Village Chief with welcome speeches often peppered with bureaucratic rhetoric. Not all village residents could participate in these workshops. Tao’s team only selected twenty young, capable residents to participate in the workshop.

Cases in Feixianguan County and Lianglu village indicated that a new dimension of the relation between livelihood and political rights appeared as NGOs became another, and arguably more effective resource channel to ensure economic wellbeing of these rural villages. As stated in Chapter One, the state had been actively promoting a conceptual connection between government-guaranteed livelihood and political rights, cultivating a sense in which “rights” were essentially state-conferred. Villagers like Yan and Tao could receive direct guidance and assistance from NGO professionals; protesters who were disillusioned by the “missing” compensation could find additional ways to support their households. Intentionally or unintentionally, the obligation that the Chinese government made to guarantee “livelihood” of individual citizen, was being outsourced.

However, this outsourcing did not necessarily mean that the legitimacy of governance was diluted. In fact, to the extent that the new NGO-led projects succeeded, the government’s legitimacy was enhanced by their success. NGO

\textsuperscript{261} Tao, in a personal interview with the author in Chengdu, 26 June, 2013.
projects still relied on the support of local government, and Zheng, the team leader at Feixian village from Li’s Chengdu Xiyou Community Culture Development Center, recognized that without the assistance of local government, their work could not proceed. “The Feixian local government, in particular the Village Committee was incredibly collaborative. They let us use two offices from the Village Committee building and their conference room for free. They also provided lots of detailed information about the most updated information of villagers,” Zheng spoke gratefully.

Arguably local government collaboration still heavily depended on the strength of social ties and NGO leaders’ relationship. Zheng’s team’s success was due to the well-connected relationship Li established both in Chengdu and Lushan. Recall that Li previously served as an official at the Chengdu Communist Youth League Committee, which established extensive branches at all County levels within Sichuan Province. When Li’s team arrived in Lushan, she received greetings and support from officials in the Communist Youth League Committee at the County level. Huang, the Chief of Feixian Village Committee, admitted, “Director Li was from the provincial capital (shengcheng). The Communist Youth League informed us to be supportive. Also her team has contributed a lot to our residents. Surely I ‘obey the orders (tingzihui).’”

He frequently presented their admiration of Li and her team members, addressing them as “capable citizens from the city” and their project as “gladly approved by the superior.”

Unlike in previous observations after the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, local governments were remarkably alert to potentially intrusive outside groups, in many

---

262 Huang, in a personal interview with the author at Feixian Village Committee, 24 August, 2013.
263 Ibid.
cases after the Lushan earthquake, local political authorities developed unprecedented trusts towards NGOs. In Li’s cases, her social and political position was barely questioned, or remotely mentioned in conversations, as the trust from bureaucratic superior could effectively undo the any doubts towards political risks of civic activities. Clearly, Li’s social ties also conveniently granted her a sense of authority and political correctness, regardless of her discursive democratic working mechanism and the unconventional political ideals that she displayed in her work and in our interviews. Similarly, Tao’s project received warm welcome by local cadres. His workshops were directly taking place at the Village Committee’s offices. The Village Chief of Lianglu Village praised Tao’s team that “They really knew how to maximize social resources. We don’t. We are glad that these young people from Chengdu are here to help.”

The state administrative hierarchy was therefore highly malleable in this context. On the one hand, all parties from inside the local government as well as the NGOs needed to use the established state hierarchical channels of power to engage in their activities, and they carried out their work in the symbolic centers of state authority in the Village Committee office. And yet, it was not just government officials participating in these activities.

Conforming to state-authorized channels was not just required by government officials, this strong preference of attention from higher administrative levels was reinforced and encouraged by the rural citizens themselves. Yan’s mother, the middle-aged woman who hosted Zhang’s Warm Heart Home Community Center

---

264 Tao, in a personal interview with the author in Chengdu, 26 June, 2013. The appreciation of
team, always praised the members as “polite, educated, disciplined and ‘advanced youths’ (xianjin qingnian),” making reference to their status as city citizens. When wearing the volunteer team T-shirt in the village, I was immediately greeted, thanked and praised by local residents. This admiration of and gratitude towards NGO workers from the city enhanced collaboration with both the local government officials and the local residents.

The admiration sentiment also created a strong sense of “following,” implying a tendency towards ubiquitous agreement with NGOs decisions, and a weaker notion of “participating.” Residents were recipients of donations, clients of NGO community services, victims of the earthquake, mostly left-behind rural citizens who had little idea about political efficacy. During distributions of donations and participation of civic activities, local residents were expected to follow the rules, schedules, standards that NGO workers designed. “I treated them as equal. But they’ve got to obey. Otherwise nothing will work,” Liu, the team director of Zhang’s Warm Heart Home Community Center said. And in fact, most of the time local residents did follow—they lined up in front of Yan’s house at 7am on a Sunday morning to receive sunstroke prevention pills and kept waiting till noon when they were handed out. They followed NGOs guidance with little questioning. When equal distribution of goods was not perfectly realized, local residents who received less than their neighbors would be infuriated, claiming that they “followed the wrong team (gen cuo le).” Yet their anger went away quickly when NGO workers compensated them with home visits or conversation over cigarettes breaks.

265 Observation in Renjia Village, 23 August, 2013.
Not all NGO participants were as capable as Liu in working with the local residents. Zhu, a recent arrival found herself frustrated with the situation: “Those bumpkins (xiangxiaren) simply don’t listen to my orders. I also couldn’t get along with the local volunteers. They don’t like me.” Her derogative rhetoric showed her frustration at work and also her sense of social superiority as a college graduate from a urban environment who had been “downgraded” to engage in rural philanthropic works. The respect and compliance that she expected as her dues were not happening on all occasions.

A sense of elitism discussed in Chapter One arguably had a stronger presence when the urban NGO workers came to work in rural China. In Renjia village and Feixian village, Liu and other NGO workers frequently made claims to the elderly, saying “leave it to us.” In contrast to Zhang’s community services in Chengdu, their attitudes towards residents at Renjia village were less egalitarian, or “democratic,” as the NGO workers’ strong voluntarism replaced open discussion or effective negotiation. However, unlike student protesters in 1989, who were scared at the suggestion that truly egalitarian political, social engagements would include peasants, most NGO workers did not present direct disdains towards villagers at Renjia in public, though back talks that complained about the lack of good manners among local villagers were observed.

Local demonstration, reflected in interviews with Yan, was more of an outcry of resident discontent and less of a successful bargaining with the local authority. Also noteworthy was that villagers did not come to NGO professionals to articulate

266 Zhu, interviewed by the author in Renjia Village, 23 August, 2013.
and amplify their interests and discontents, partly because NGO professionals refused to be the “patronage” of rightful resistances. Liu explained, “Conflicts of interests are everywhere. We NGO workers are not part of their problems. We try our best to refine the post-earthquake situation. Indeed our capacities are limited.” Some local residents like Yan and her family chose to collaborate with NGOs, whom they thought would be more effective and capable than the local government. “We listen to their orders,” Yan said in a willing, submissive way.

The extension to rural China promoted elitist forms of civic engagement in particular in rural settings, but even these NGO workers embraced more truly egalitarian values than students of 1989. The protesters of 1989 cloaked their traditional, elitist moralism under their banners of “democracy” and equality, while at the same time excluding workers and peasants from their organizations and deliberations, and tended to keep them physically at a distance as well. In contrast, today’s NGO workers are willing to endure hardships in rural environments and work together with local residents to reinvigorate rural communities. Aside from relationship-centered working approach and artful communication strategies, rural engagements targeted issues of livelihood, a traditional idea around which all Chinese could develop their conceptions of citizenship.

RISKS OF BUREAUCRATIZATION

Bureaucratization can sometimes be the evil twin of elitism. Zhou Yu, a professor at Nanjing University of Technology analyzes the potential “alienation” of grassroots NGOs who have formed bureaucratic structures and argued that in
comparison to the “pure philanthropists,” institutionalized grassroots NGOs could unintentionally betray their civil responsibility and “grass-rootedness” when they institutionalize. Zhou argues that theoretically institutionalization might make grassroots NGOs immune from effective public surveillance, and rather than acting as an alternative to the Chinese state, they might take on the very same characteristics of modern Chinese bureaucracy they were trying to avoid, such as overloaded bureaucratic rhetoric, redundant principles, and free-riding phenomena.

“Overemphasizing policy conceptualization and undervaluing realization of civil practices,” according to Zhou were two direct outcomes of bureaucratization, which could erode the core value system of civil society and therefore fail to construct active citizenship values.267

Kang Xiaoguang linked the risks of bureaucratization to the intrinsic elitism in state-society interactions and particularly criticized its associated “moral superiority:”

“We NGO professionals spend most of the time criticizing others — complaining that the government suppresses us and that others refuse to donate money — but we never have sufficient self-reflection. We simply go along with the flow in public discourses, which irrationally praise us as angels, symbolizing transparency and justice. But we never really think about ourselves: Are we doing work effectively? Are we also having the same problems as the bureaucracy that we spend so much time

---

These concerns about bureaucratic entrenchment were gradually manifested in local grassroots NGOs when they extended their civil practices to the rural areas. Hu reported that some NGOs only utilized the funding for professional trainings and completely disregarded real-life practices. And hence rural residents did not actually benefit from the services NGOs promised to provide. Chen summarized his dilemma as follows: “I wanted to be at peace and just engage in my work, but I found myself intertwined with the banal Chinese bureaucratic rituals: I was occupied with fundraising dinner parties (chouzi yingchou) and lots of drinking.”

Indeed bureaucratization and bureaucratic rhetoric could be stylistically convenient for grassroots NGOs to broaden the scope of their civil engagements. Appropriating bureaucratic rhetoric resonating with the rhetorical strategies that NGOs were already using such as affirming local government authority, developing personal connections with higher administrative state bureaus that had smoothed previous civil engagements. Adding bureaucratic rhetoric and behavior fit nicely with these other strategies. Also, very often the pervasive utilization of personal social ties was realized by conforming to certain established bureaucratic rituals—persuasive paperwork, sufficient reports and dinner parties that could enhance the “favor-returning” effects of relationship-centered working style.

---


269 Hu, in a personal interview with the author in Chengdu, 26 July, 2013.

270 Chen, in a personal interview with the author in Chengdu, 21 August, 2013.
Additionally, government officials often evaluated the trustworthiness of grassroots NGOs based on whether their organizational administration “conforms to code of conducts (anguiju yunxing).” For officials that the author interviewed with at Sichuan Provincial Ministry of Civil Affairs and at Chengdu Communist Youth League, “regimentation of grassroots NGO behaviors” was a priority in state-society collaboration. Bureaucratization or compliance with bureaucratic working mechanisms could ease the culture differences between the government officials and the NGO leaders, between the local governments and the grassroots groups.

However, bureaucratization and its associated elitism in grassroots civil practices created new forms of exclusion and therefore hindered the transmission of active citizenship through civil engagements to a wider range of population. In cases of Chengdu grassroots NGOs extending civil services to rural China, the strong sense of “following us” among NGO professionals limited the scope of active citizenship. In goods distribution, community development NGO professionals dropped the egalitarian ideal that had been used in their civil practices in urban settings. Whereas the urban working rhetoric was peppered with democratic ideals, in rural settings more authoritarian commands usually replaced negotiations for higher working efficiency. Kevin O’Brien and Li Lianjiang write that in contemporary China “villagers have certain rights, but theirs is partial, local citizenship. Rural people have few opportunities to participate in the exercise of power outside the village, and their inclusion in the wider polity is not well established.” Yang Guobin anticipates that

---

271 Official at Chendu Communist Youth League, interviewed by the author in Chengdu, 27 August, 2013.
272 Official at Sichuan Provincial Ministry of Civil Affairs, interviewed by the author in Chengdu.
273 Kevin O’Brien, Li Lianjiang, Rightful Resistance in Rural China, 119.
NGOs could actually constitute a new field where more citizens could practice political skills through non-confrontational activism. Ideally NGOs would channel the expression of rural citizens’ grievances and needs into institutionalized requests. In reality, NGOs only acted as an alternative source of refining the state answer of individual livelihood. In collaboration with local governments, grassroots NGOs behave as pacifiers instead of institutions of both accommodation and resistance. At the rural individual level, the majority of villagers remain passive recipients of civil practices; a few participated in civil engagements. No effective negotiation took place between rural recipients and NGO professionals, as many villagers in fact felt “forever indebted to the volunteers.”

CONCLUSION

While strategic collaboration of Chengdu grassroots NGOs emphasized the efficiency of resource mobilization and confirmed the increasingly rationalized voluntarism in local civil engagements, extension of civil practices to rural settings has three major implications for state-society relationship and understanding of citizenship: First, the take-over of the fragmented state legitimacy based on promises of livelihood influences the society to think about the possibilities of social power. Second, the micro-level shifts of rightful resistance from ineffective demonstration to self-realization of community resources may inspire rural citizens to reconsider what they are capable of. These implications if spread and escalated could challenge the

---

274 Observation in Renjia Village, 23 August, 2013.
existing regimes’ durability, as the loss of state legitimacy is transformed into faith in civil collective endeavors. Third, the manifested elitism and escalated bureaucratization draws new boundaries of active citizenship transmission in civil engagements form, since rural residents still have little to say about their political identities. Contrasting with characters that NGOs possessed at the stage of institutionalization, in this extension of civic practices to rural areas, only rationalized voluntarism remained a consistent value. Policy entrepreneurship results in a more cursive path of development: while the spirit of social entrepreneurship remains, most grassroots NGOs shun away from supports of rural rightful resistance. Boundary-spanning effects can only be found in collaborative disaster relief works. Although NGO leaders collaboratively unpacked state apparatus—the Communist Youth League, local governments into institutionalized individuals with common beliefs, unlike before institutionalization when they took actions before the establishment of regulations, this time they stopped testing the limits of rural politics. Instead, a strong elitist legacy in collaboration with local authorities emerged. During the process of “unpacking state apparatus”, many grassroots NGOs go with the bureaucratic flows and have lost their egalitarian promises.

This rather complicated dynamic embodies the exclusivity of Chinese citizenship, where it still refers to a privileged legal status. While a wider range of urban residents and urban NGO participants through civil engagements sympathize with active citizenship, the voice of the rural population is still weak. Although both urban and rural citizens can increasingly identify, interpret and challenge official misbehaviors, and find alternatives to realize their either philanthropic endeavors or
livelihood needs, not all of them can realize their political efficacy. In other words, many citizens have already sensed the great potential of power from the society, but they are still not fully capable of politicize social power, publicly amplifying political voices. This great hesitancy finds its roots along the institutionalization of civil organizations, where NGO professionals deliberately drop clues of possible political activism in public discourses, and later in extension of civil practices, where authenticity of NGO values becomes eroded in possible trend of bureaucratization and deeper government collaboration. Yet this typical “three steps forward, one step back” mechanism still sheds light on political changes, gradually, indirectly, but surely—when broadening active citizenship challenges the top-down discipline in civil society management, when increasing number of residents demand more beyond promises of livelihood, Beijing will step up to re-establish the fragmented state legitimacy based on economic promises and readjust to the changing state-society relationship.
Conclusion

“宁可一思进，莫在一思停。”
“Rather think about advance instead of pause.”
- Chinese Idiom

In writing this thesis, I remember the sniffs followed by sympathetic laughter that my interlocutors always presented when hearing the word “democracy.” Past tragic experiences of the so-called “sowers of Chinese democracy” had demonstrated that elite-led democratization would be unlikely to succeed, since democratization imposed on local communities from on high in Beijing or intelligentsia, is merely a continuation of political elitism under a democratic cloak. For many Chinese, democracy remains either a loaded term that is often misread, exaggerated in Party rhetoric, or even a spell cast on China’s political change by Westerners. When gazing away from the crystal ball that hopes to forecast China’s democratic future, many scholars have already detected various shades of pluralization in political life—in village-township elections, rightful resistances, vibrant online discourses, the dominant paradigm of “zero-tolerance of dissents” is frequently challenged.275

This thesis zooms in on the people and places where these shades of pluralization are being constructed, contested, dismantled, reformed, and renewed. As evidenced in case studies, grassroots NGOs leaders, by articulating uncovered needs in society, strategically interpreting regulations, and collectively utilizing

individual networks, aim at social control, at least in areas where the state perceives no political threats. Towards state apparatus, their actions incorporate both accommodation and resistance, although most resistance against state rulings are cloaked under artful rhetoric, or dissolved in personal networks. NGO workers believe that there are means to advance their interests within existing regulatory limits and persuade public channels to allow rights that have not yet ensured by laws. In essence, this is a renegotiation of China’s social contract.

More precisely, this thesis focuses on individual responses towards fragmented state policies and local governance. Although I adopt rhetoric of fragmented authoritarianism model, I don’t intend to frame civic engagements within the arena of market failure or policymaking, but rather look into actual activities that individual citizens initiate and support. The reason for studying actual bottom-up endeavors when local communities are in emergency has to do with the core of traditional political concern—min, the people. As discussed in Chapter one, in traditional political philosophy, Mencius acknowledges that min should not be treated as a uniform political subject with absolute unanimity. Rather, min, the people have different interests and needs, waiting to be fulfilled by the benevolent ruler. This utilitarian justification of state legitimacy infers that by offering adequate goods and services, minxin—a traditional sense of demo-allegiance can be realized.276

In modern Chinese public rhetoric, however, this utilitarian justification of demo-allegiance of min dissolves into a variety of terms in Chinese language, addressing different categories of political subjects and associated ideological

276 Zhao, “Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept ‘All Under-Heaven’.”
tradition. Three major terms examined in Chapter one — *gongmin* (*公民*, *public people, citizen*), *shimin* (*市民*, *city people, urban residents*) and *renmin* (*人民*, *man’s people, people*), all reveal that the contemporary Chinese are no longer passive recipients of political orders. While the term *renmin* in Maoist era has left shades of collective, proactive attitude with unitary, socialist objectives in the hearts and minds of Chinese citizens, people also demand popular sovereignty and participatory social governance. Through exercises in public demonstrations, rightful resistances, online activism, the Chinese people are re-conceptualizing their membership in the society and the quality of relationships with the state apparatus. Regulations, laws are re-interpreted in strategic ways, and these innovative ways are experimented in both individual and organizational forms.

The phenomena that I study in this thesis share many elements with active citizenship in studies of grassroots rightful resistance. In their work on rural “rights talks,” O’Brien and Li argue that:

“Rightful resistance is a form of popular contention that operates near the boundary of authorized channels, employs the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful to curb the exercise of power, hinges on locating and exploiting divisions within the state, and relies on mobilizing support from the wider public. In particular, rightful resistance entails the innovative use of laws, policies, and other officially promoted values to defy disloyal political and economic elites….”

In my case studies, grassroots NGO leaders in Chengdu are masters of rhetorical strategy. Yet unlike resisting villagers in Hebei, they are not seeking for

---

“rights talks”—they are not proactively demanding citizenship rights that they are deprived off.\textsuperscript{278} In a way, their rhetorical artfulness lies in strategically silencing discontents in public discourses. Unlike villagers who painted graffiti on desolate walls to seek a “return” of citizen rights, they never deploy reactive strategy of vandalism.\textsuperscript{279} Instead their artful use of language attracts people with similar ideals and interests to collectively refine communities that they are situated in. Their audience and supporters include institutionalized individuals in state bureaus, resourceful businessmen, civil society actors in other cities.

Hence, they came to their civil engagement with extensive personal networks and further institutionalized those social networks into collective resources that could be shared among local NGOs. The variety of organizational forms that grassroots NGO leaders take exhibits their innovative interpretations of laws and regulations. However, they also drastically differ from rightful villagers. The main differences are associated with the notion of resistance. In the cases that I document citizens are not targeting merely at local officials whose corruption runs against legal or other norms; they directly address urgent social needs that local officials overlook by taking actions, rather than through contentious discourses. Moreover, they are not fighting for their own rights, but seeking to refine communities that are beyond their areas and fields of interests. They artfully shun away from direct confrontation with local officials, because they need local government to be at their side in order to complete their civic services.

\textsuperscript{278} Ibid, 117.
\textsuperscript{279} Ibid, 129.
In 2008, in the immediate aftermath of the Chengdu earthquake, Chinese found themselves responding by instinct to the tragedy around them. At this moment, the nascent stage of new forms of citizenship, collective voluntarism was the overarching character of citizenship. In the years that followed these amorphous forms of citizenship grew both more defined and more diverse. As different groups attempted to institutionalize and solidify their civic services, some attempted to retain their original egalitarian voluntarism while others pragmatically began to assimilate to bureaucratic characters and norms. Although the authenticity of voluntarism in the local civil society may have been diluted with their more bureaucratic organizational forms, NGO leaders were able to gain certain policy efficacy as they interacted with a variety of registration laws and operational regulations. Moreover, in further organizational collaboration and extension of civic services, professionalized redistribution of social resources have received recognition from both local government and residents.

When the 2013 earthquake hit the same region, a very evolved set of civic organizations responded. NGOs established after 2008, immediately formed alliance, institutionalizing their social networks into collective form. In contrast with relief efforts in 2008, these NGOs’ established identities allowed them to pool funds from a wider a range of population and mobilize social resources with greater efficiency. Although NGO professionals were more efficient with their delivery of services, and they had found ways to reach out to populations in remote rural areas, they, unintentionally, were reforming an elitist form of citizenship. While the efforts that civic organizations were taking to assist local communities were respectful, they
excluded locals from their decision-making and reinforced urban-rural power relations in ways that undermined the egalitarian focus of their earlier voluntary participation. The revival of elitism resonates with the legacy of *noblesse oblige* in previous, so-called democratic protests of the Tiananmen Incident. This elitist restoration in civic movements that infers allegiance towards “groups of higher social rank,” could intrinsically undermine the consistency and trustworthiness of local civil society. Aside from the elitist stance at individual level among some NGO professionals, the extension of civic services in rural settings foreshadows the risk of bureaucratized elitism that creates and solidifies new boundaries of citizenship.

Nevertheless, from 2008 to 2013, not all NGOs are taking this route as legalized, potentially bureaucratized forms to express their social concerns. Many organizations have been operating without legal identity. This more anarchic form precisely addresses citizens’ concerns of bureaucratization, distortions of voluntarism in civil engagements. Instead of seeking for greater funding opportunities or extending scale of civic services, these NGO leaders value organizational autonomy, and authenticity of voluntarism. However, their value of organizational autonomy does not exclude collaborations with state bureau. Through personal networks, they also establish instrumental connections with officials whom would assist their projects. Yet non-legalized identity allows them to avoid hierarchical orders that some NGO leaders perceive as detrimental to individual “civic mindedness” (*gongyixin*), and hence a more horizontal working mechanism of collaboration within organizations and civic services can be realized.
Although NGO leaders adopt a variety of organizational forms with different rationales and preferences, two common factors emerged as playing important roles in facilitating the evolvement of Chinese citizenship: rhetoric artfulness and utilization of personal ties. These two are implicit, pre-existing norms in socialist public life, where political discontent is tabooed and contractual relationship based on open negotiation does not exist. China’s one-party system today does not ban Chinese citizens from developing and expressing alternative viewpoints, and the marketization gradually cultivates the desire of information transparency, but nevertheless these characteristics coloring the interaction between state and society persist.

The state-society relationship in China is defined by its complexity, fluidity and subtlety, and is expressed both in the proliferation of informal information sharing in disaster relief works, and in the “unpacking” of state apparatus into institutionalized individuals whose interests could be in alliance with NGO leaders. While the CCP government attempts to rein civic engagements by shutting down NGOs that are perceived as political destabilizers, the state apparatus finds it hard to interact and control individual discourse and interpersonal relations. Hence civic engagement as a major expression of state-society is not confined to state interests but enjoys certain autonomy of pluralist, decentralized operation.

As the conception of citizenship constantly evolves, new boundaries of exclusion are drawn. The co-existence of registered civic organizations (both as non-governmental organizations and corporations) and unregistered group infers the diverse, changing and contested conception of citizenship. Previous discussed ideals of _gongmin_ (公民, public people, citizen), _shimin_ (市民, city people, urban
residents) and renmin (人民, man’s people, people) are constantly interwoven, clashing, remaking and transmitting new conception of citizenship in organizational forms. The Chinese idiom—“rather think about advance instead of pause” (“宁可一思进, 莫在一思停”), captures this fast, forward-moving motion of citizenship and civil engagements—an emergent result of complex mechanisms of frequent policy improvisation, strategic institutionalization and organizational solidification, where individuals have little time to reflect on what is left behind.

In its close investigation of the dynamic of citizenship formation in China today, this thesis attempts open a window to look at what Nietzsche calls, “the inventors of new values, the self-awakened group that breaks the silence between state and society.” In China, that silence is being broken through action first and words later. The fear of public speech is still haunting. Due to China’s communist past, memories of renmin as reactive masses with strong unanimity are not falling into oblivion. However, the modern Chinese society requires certain autonomy, and Chinese people need free space to articulate, amplify their interests and ideals. Through actions, the Chinese people are gaining political efficacy, while unlearning their reactive citizenship as passive, conforming masses. But this evolution is not yet complete. Restoration of traditional elitism, discrimination is constantly contesting, challenging and remaking of individual citizen’s perception of self.

Understanding how the multiple ideas of citizenship and of civil society are being formed will enable us to see subtle yet dramatic changes in state-society relationship. These changes are not linear, but rather, in Maoist rhetoric, somewhat

---

dialectical (bianzheng). In near future, phenomena studied in this thesis may be curtailed or recognized by state apparatus, but most likely the quality of relationship between individuals and state will keep changing, complying and resisting state policies at the same time. Arguably, instead of the conforming, socialist masses—renmin, the Chinese citizens who have such pluralizing visions of state-society relationship, will be the ones that eventually realize the “Chinese dream (zhongguomeng).”
Postscript

In late August 2013 right before I was leaving Chengdu to catch my flight to Hong Kong en route to New York, I went back to Hu, the semi-retired scholar, the leader of a non-governmental research and capacity-building institution and say my goodbyes. Hu lit a cigarette and asked, “So are you coming back after school?”

Seeing my hesitation, he looked me straight in the eye and says, “Be aware! You might get stupid. People, things are too straightforward in the U.S. You don’t get to use your brain that much.” “I think I am already a bit slow!” I responded honestly. The sunbaked smell of sweet olive flowers spread through the air, ticklish and crispy. “How can you leave the food and flower of this city? These cannot be found elsewhere,” He said half-jokingly.

“Do come back some day. Work with us. Better join us! The society needs you.” He said and shook my hand.

Six months later in writing my thesis in Middletown, Connecticut, I tried to relive my encounters with Hu and many other NGO leaders’ during the two earthquake disaster relief periods, picturing the collapse and reconstruction of orders and landscape. From windows of Olin library, I could only see the sky, Foss Hill and Usdan Student Center all blending in white snow. I reminisced about the sweet olive scent and Hu’s witty words. In some ways by writing this thesis on Chinese citizenship, I became more able to crystallize my own ignorance.

To express my deepest gratitude to Hu and grassroots “civic circle,” I dedicate this thesis to all grassroots NGO professionals, and my parents in Chengdu.
Bibliography


Chen, Hongyi, “shimin shehui lilun de qishi” (Implications of Civil Society Theories), in China Social Science Seasonal (zhongguo shehui kexue jikan) vol. 5, Hong Kong, November 1993. online: http://www.aisixiang.com/data/67216.html


Deng, Zhenglai, Jing, Yue. “gouijan zhongguo de shimin shehu” (Construct Civil Society in China) in *zhongguo shehui kexue jikan* (China Social Academy Seasonal), Vol.1, November 1992.


Ma, Changshan, “Cong shimin shehui lilu chufa dui fa benzhide zai renshi” (Rethink the Essence of Law According to the Theory of Civil Society), in Faxue Yanjiu (Studies in Law) No.1, 1994,


Shi Xianmin, “Zhongguo shehui zhuanxingqi de jiegou fenhua yu shuang eryuan shehui jiegou” [“Structural Differentiation in China’s Transitional Stage and Double Dualist Social Structure”], in *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Jikan (China’s Social Science Quarterly)*, No.5, Autumn 1993.


———. “Meaningful Changes in the Legal Environment for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs): Their Relationship to Larger Trends in China’s ‘New’ Governance”, Paper Presented at Forum on NGO Governance and Management in China (Edmonton, Canada), August 16 2013.


Tian, Baichun, "Why is it that Developing Socialist Democratic Politics is Our Party's Consistent Goal?" in *Quishi (Inquiry),* No.20 Oct 16, 1997.

———. “Tongjiling beihou’ Chengdu NGO ruhe shanshi shan zhong” (“Behind the Warrant:’ How Will Chengdu NGOs Keep Their Good Endeavors Till the End), *Xinhua News, Sichuan Station,* 30 March 2009, [http://www.sc.xinhuanet.com/content/2009-03/30/content_16101395.htm](http://www.sc.xinhuanet.com/content/2009-03/30/content_16101395.htm)


Xun, Yue 荀悦 (148-209), Shenjian: Shishi, Vol.2.


Yu, Keping. The Emerging Civil Society and Its Significance to Governance in Reform China, Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2002.


