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Searching for a Chinese Civil Society Model

TARU SALMENKARI

Abstract This study hypothesizes that the Chinese state uses NGOs as objects of consultation for improving its policymaking in the same way it consults mass organizations, democratic parties, and official professional associations to obtain specialist information. This model of consultation is based on the mass-line model and on its application within democratic centralist administrative hierarchies. The investigation shows that, apart from their main social or environmental tasks, Chinese NGOs indeed inform the state, many of them with policy formulation in mind. It also shows that the Chinese state uses democratic centralist vocabulary to describe the tasks that it assumes NGOs should undertake. However, apart from the mass-line type of consultation, both NGOs and the state have other conceptions about the proper roles for NGOs. The state now promotes the idea of civil society as an independent service provider, while NGOs seek an even larger sphere of social autonomy and self-organization.

Keywords civil society, nongovernmental organizations, democratic centralism, political consultation, third sector

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Western research started to pay attention to civil society in contemporary China around 1989, after massive demonstrations had brought down former communist governments in Eastern Europe while China violently suppressed its own demonstrators. Certain scholars interpreted independent student and worker organizations of 1989 as signs of an emerging civil society in China. However, others have criticized this understanding of civil society as something oppositional to the state. Theorists have pointed out that civil society can only be meaningfully conceptualized in relation to the state. The state, according to them, plays a role in regulating inequalities and uncivil impulses in civil society. Consequently, Western research began to examine empirically Chinese forms of associational life and to evaluate civil society largely in terms of organizational autonomy from the state. Autonomy was found to be compromised, although certain meaningful associational space was still available in postreform China.
Western civil society models thus inadequately depict actual society in China. By the same token, some scholars have recently observed that the Western civil society model inaccurately describes the historical and sociological reality of civil societies even in Western countries.\(^4\) The boundary between state and society is relative in modern Western states as well.\(^5\) Thus, to deepen our knowledge of civil societies, it becomes necessary to explore actual forms of civil society in different countries. As Bhikhu Parekh puts it, “Rather than universalize the Western history and model of civil society and expect all others to conform to it, we need to take different views of it and appreciate its diverse forms. It is odd, even self-contradictory, to take a monistic view of the very area of life that is supposed to be the home of plurality.”\(^6\)

The difference between Western civil society models and the Chinese reality is well recognized by Chinese NGOs themselves. Although they willingly draw funding and inspiration from the Western experience,\(^7\) or even use the government’s admiration of foreign innovations to promote their own goals,\(^8\) some do not welcome Western NGO training because of attempts to mold Chinese NGOs into conformity with Western ideals.\(^9\) One NGO activist even stated that if official and foreign NGOs completely dominated the Chinese NGO field, civil society organizations would become alienated from the needs of the Chinese people.\(^10\) Other NGO activists reject many customary Western ideas of civil society. For example, one interviewee stated that she has never understood conflictual civil society models. After all, the person one is dealing with could be one’s future neighbor or colleague.\(^11\)

Thus, there is an obvious need to scrutinize the kind of civil society model in China. On behalf of NGOs themselves, it appears that path dependency explains their choices.\(^12\) NGOs assume tasks they know or tasks that their leaders are interested in. Media professionals have established a journalist network to distribute environmental information, doctors have become interested in AIDS work, people with disabled family members work in an NGO assisting the disabled. NGOs make their concrete social work a priority. Organizational form itself is not important, but develops according to what is possible. If an NGO has no opportunity to register itself, it works as an unofficial network or registers as a company. Most NGOs are sensitive to state reactions and voluntarily give up activities of which the state disapproves.\(^13\) NGOs need to react to contingencies in their political environment and develop their structure and activities accordingly. As Tony Saich observes, in China each NGO negotiates its own niche and space for its activities.\(^14\)
For this study, people working in various capacities in 14 NGOs were interviewed. Five of these organizations are working on environmental issues, three on migrant labor issues, two on foreign relations, one with the disabled, one on AIDS-related issues, and two are charities. Six of them are officially registered as NGOs, while others have registered as enterprises or deal with their official correspondence under the name of a university department or an officially recognized association.

**A possible Chinese model**

If NGOs react mainly to their political environment to find space for their own activities, the peculiar Chinese civil society model—if one united model exists—must originate in the state itself. My hypothesis is that the official communist ideology could provide this model and that one possible source for an indigenous Chinese civil society model could be the mass line. The mass line provides a model of political communication between the Communist Party and its constituencies. According to this model, ordinary people articulate their needs and demands while the Party systematizes this information into practicable policies and long-term developmental plans. During and after their implementation, the populace is expected to provide feedback on social needs and misgivings related to official policies. Mao Zedong describes the mass-line model well in his famous quote in 1943:

> In all the practical work of our Party, all correct leadership is necessarily “from the masses, to the masses”. This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in such action. Then once again concentrate ideas from the masses and once again go to the masses so that the ideas are persevered in and carried through. And so on, over and over again in an endless spiral, with the ideas becoming more correct, more vital and richer each time.\(^16\)

The original formulation introduces the mass line as direct communication between the Communist Party and the masses at the grassroots, but the Party has applied the same type of input, output, and feedback process in its other contacts with society.\(^17\) Many of these contacts are mediated either through the levels of administrative hierarchy or through separate
organizations such as mass organizations, democratic parties, and professional associations. Then the question is no longer one of scattered and unsystematic ideas, but of specialized information about various areas, social strata, fields of economy, or even of professional expertise. Hierarchical mass-line type of consultation through a democratic centralist process is meant to provide truthful and many-sided information for policymaking.\textsuperscript{18} Chih-yu Shih makes an observation that describes mass-line type of consultation outside people’s congresses as well when he writes:

The mass line approach institutionalized in the system of the People’s Congress may help localize, individualize, and departmentalize a potential political problem before it develops.... If, however, an issue seems to have genuine cross-regional relevance, the Party at the centre is in a position to deal with it at an early stage before the localities themselves realize that their concern has a nationwide audience.\textsuperscript{19}

Although this model has been used to describe the communist leadership style in China,\textsuperscript{20} few have noted that this model makes assumptions about the structure of society. This model encourages social organization directed vertically towards the state, rather than horizontally across society. This vertical orientation would de-emphasize social autonomy from the state and encourage corporatist or co-optive types of social organization. The model assumes permeating boundaries between social organizations and the state, especially when it comes to individual contacts between state officials and ordinary citizens, since these are contacts the mass line explicitly promotes.\textsuperscript{21}

The mass-line model integrates the state or a ruling party with society, but leaves much autonomy to the state. Therefore, this model allows the populace to influence the government not through pressure, but rather through providing the state with information. Therefore, this model seems to concentrate on the \textit{deliberative} functions of civil society rather than on its associative functions. In other words, perhaps the concept \textit{public sphere} fits the Chinese civil society model better than the term civil society which implies independent association. Consequently, Jude Howell finds that the Chinese NGOs can create a critical, public sphere around certain issues although they do not engage in collective action.\textsuperscript{22}

I thus hypothesize that even autonomous associations have social space in China as long as they play by the rules evident in the mass-line model. Instead of horizontal social alliances, this model assumes that associations are directed towards the state, for which they are expected to serve as sources of information. The mass-line model assigns a task to social organizations to
relay two kinds of information to the state: information about the needs and realities of various social groups and sectors or expert information about technical and developmental issues. However, the Party has assigned the articulation and feedback function of different social interests to organizations, co-opted or founded by the Party, that represent women, workers, youth, businesses, professionals, and religious groups. Since the reform policy was launched in the late 1970s, the Party has established semisocial organizations to represent the newly emerged social groups or to mediate interest conflicts within a sector. Therefore, the Party may expect truly societal NGOs to provide an expert voice only. In other words, their role, as seen by the state, is deliberative and directed towards the solution of problems in official arenas or towards the provision of information for official use. Their relation to the government is cooperative rather than pressuring.

Another study that uses the mass-line concept to explain NGO development in China employs this concept to describe the traditional socialist order and contrasts this with later civil society developments; my research, however, emphasizes continuity. Ronald Keith, Zhiqiu Lin, and Huang Lie, paying no attention to the pattern of social communication inherent in the mass-line model, interpret the mass line to emphasize comprehensive social control. Along with self-directedness and community-based activities, they find in an NGO’s own parlance both the idea of comprehensiveness and that the NGO serves as a channel for the circular flow of information between the Party and a social group, both pointing in a corporatist direction. Although interviewees in this study expressed no desire to limit the plurality of civil society organization, the mass-line ideology was evident when one respondent explicitly emphasized the need to create a channel linking the government and the disabled.

The superiority of the mass-line model is its applicability to traditional state-organized interest articulation and to the newly emerged NGO field alike. This model sees acts of the Chinese state as consistent, even when its tolerance towards various forms of social organization changes. Formerly, scholars have resorted to double standards to explain the diversity of Chinese social organization. Some scholars have found the simultaneous existence of both state-organized corporatism and socially organized civil society in China. Others have identified the simultaneous development of state-led and conventional civil societies. However, if one pays attention to the role of social organizations and the nature of their linkage to the state, rather than the degree of autonomy from the state, such a duality can be avoided. If
the form of information channels between the state and society is the central issue, a strong continuity prevails in the organization of social space despite the emergence of NGOs. Pluralization and organizational autonomy can serve the state aim of receiving more nuanced inputs from society, especially in times when social groups and interests are proliferating. The mass-line ideal has probably made NGOs less controversial to the Communist Party than they would be if the Party assesses autonomous organizations according to the control of social space.28

The democratic centralist type of organization resembles corporatism in the sense that the state has often delegated interest representation to the organizations it authorizes, as is the case with traditional mass organizations. In the corporatism model the state delegates to social organizations, such as labor unions and employer unions, the task of mediating certain social conflicts, while in the democratic centralist organization model this mediation is mainly done in the state. Social organizations provide input of needs and demands of the sector it represents to the state, but it is the state that finally decides which demands and needs to take into account and how to prioritize diverse interests. In this model, civil society is but one possible form of social organization through which the state seeks to obtain social input and expert information.

The NGO reality

The NGOs in this study have adapted to the civil society model outlined in the preceding. They send specialist reports to the local or central government on subjects such as the AIDS situation, environmental risks, work-related health hazards, and lapses in either local government’s or enterprises’ adherence to the official norms. They use the media both to invite government attention to the problems and to arouse public awareness. They invite officials to conferences they organize, and many are invited by the government to forums discussing questions specific to their field. Some train state officials or members of official mass organizations.29 Many of them provide services for the government. NGOs take part in government activities, especially at the local level, and offer expertise for policymaking. Even an unregistered NGO can offer environmental education in schools at the local government’s invitation, or be consulted by the local government on an issue needing NGO expertise.

The pattern of political influencing in these cases fits two basic characteristics of the mass-line model. When it comes to contacts with the
government, NGOs apply deliberative means to persuade the government to act. Deliberative power is wielded not by pressuring the government, but rather by introducing and framing issues so that new views and conceptualizations would change the thinking both inside and outside the government. Most NGOs interviewed have two-directional communication with the government, but when it comes to decision making, the state appears autonomous. Several interviewees noted that although the government tackles problems their NGO has reported, they do not really know how the government deals with the information they provide.

Activities of all but one NGO in my sample fit well with the mass-line model. The only exception was the China Women’s Development Foundation which collects money and provides services for poor women. Evidently, the reason for its ability to ignore the mass-line types of vertical information flows to the government is that it leaves to its founder organization, the Women’s Federation, the tasks of relaying information to the government and participating in official negotiations concerning the social group it represents. Therefore, an NGO registered under the Women’s Federation can pursue other, more specific aims. All the other NGOs interviewed, including another organization engaging in poverty reduction and service provision, mentioned acts of lobbying and informing the state. Some even emphasized politically relevant research as their rationale. However, most of the NGOs in my sample did not consider information provision to the state to be their main task, but their priority was concrete social or environmental work. Some even emphasized their role in creating new ways of organizing society much more than their cooperation with the state. Although NGOs, research organizations included, have an ethos of problem solving, their inclination for reporting their proposals to the state demonstrates that they recognize the need for state action to resolve social and environmental problems.

Horizontal relations between NGOs do not diverge from the mass-line model either. Society-wide organization was absent, partly because the Chinese state effectively suppresses this type of organization, but in the interviews conducted the NGO leaders did not seem to miss such an opportunity either. Although no specific questions were asked about horizontal cooperation, three types became evident from the interviews. One arena for horizontal communication is state-organized. NGO activists meet in official conferences to which they are invited as NGO representatives, regardless of their organization’s unofficial status. This situation is analogous to the Chinese government’s practice of gathering together many different
organizations, such as bureaucracies, Party branches, people’s congresses, and mass organizations for deliberations about a policy. In addition, NGOs themselves arrange opportunities to meet their colleagues, for example, by organizing salons, conferences, or common activities. Likewise, foreign NGOs hold NGO forums where the Chinese activists meet.

The third type of interaction was NGO-initiated, but hierarchical. When a wider geographic reach or more resources are needed, Chinese NGOs naturally seem to adopt an umbrella type of organization in which one NGO located in Beijing or a provincial capital brings together numerous local organizations and provides coordination or even redirects funding to them. This is a typical model in official Chinese organizations which tend to form a vertical chain of different level governments, Party branches, or mass organizations. This type of organization suits the mass-line model well, which expects higher levels of an organization to systematize information collected at the levels below it. Similarly, the NGOs seek not to extend their organizations, but to find a socially emerged organization on a higher level to facilitate its horizontal communication with other NGOs and even to maximize its resources. Some of these umbrella organizations, for example, apply for money from abroad and then channel it to local NGOs and student organizations. In this way, smaller organizations can enjoy the many benefits of larger organizations without having to expand their size. This system enables the umbrella organization to remain relatively small so that a few people, often on a voluntary basis, are able to run it. The logic of such an organizational model serves voluntary organizations well, although I assume that it originates in customary Chinese organizational forms.

To summarize, Chinese NGOs accord with many of the basic tenets of the mass-line model: they provide information for the government; they recognize the need to influence state policies to attain their aims; and hierarchical relationships with the state, and even with other NGOs, are at least as central to their work as horizontal relationships with other civil society actors. Horizontal networks are used for information sharing, while collective action across organizational boundaries is absent. In contacts with the state, NGOs use deliberative power, not collective action. Although association is important to many NGOs themselves, it is questionable whether it is for the state. For example, when the local government consulted an unregistered environmental NGO about its plan to start organic farming in the area, the local government hardly saw it as differing from consulting an individual, such as a professor or technician, with the relevant expertise. One interviewee even
noted that the government sees NGOs as individuals influencing the government, not as a legally protected form of organization mandated to represent a group.\(^{39}\)

**The official model and the NGO self-image**

However, during the interviews I became aware that this hypothesized official model does not accord with the NGO self-image and is not always adopted willingly. In the interviews, respondents made statements indicating that the NGOs’ own organizational ideal diverges considerably from the official Chinese model. Interviewees said, for example, that their NGO should learn from the organizational principles of the United Nations or the European Union, or that the NGO’s e-mail list can function as an independent news agency or a human rights group.\(^{40}\) Often NGOs contrasted the governmental top-down way of doing things with the bottom-up approach of the NGOs. Many of these NGOs hope their work will promote the development of a more vibrant civil society, or foster the people’s own abilities to deal with the authorities.\(^{41}\)

Although NGOs mostly adjust to fit a certain officially promoted pattern, there is no single path leading up to it. Some NGOs harbor ambitions of building social power, but they adapt to their sociopolitical environment and do what is possible at the time. Others became NGOs out of expediency, without having much understanding of this organizational model.\(^{42}\) For example, the All-China Women’s Federation’s strongwoman Chen Muhua started the China Women’s Development Foundation in order to find a less bureaucratic way of doing things.\(^{43}\) The strong influence the state concedes to NGOs without a clear NGO identity was evident in an interview in which an NGO leader predicted that her NGO would form a channel linking the government and the disabled and teach the disabled to use the law to protect themselves.\(^{44}\) These are actually tasks that the official Chinese discourse expects civil society to take. The interviewee was obviously in a process of learning and derived much of her information about NGOs from the official discourse. One NGO in my sample even had to accommodate its activities to conform to the official model out of pressure. Originally this NGO relayed its reports directly to the government through nonpublic channels of the press and in this way was already engaging in a mass-line type of communication with the government.\(^{45}\) When the NGO grew, it found that the police, being unaccustomed to NGOs, were investigating its activities. To secure its position, it had to expand
its deliberative role and turn to the press to distribute information about its aims and activities.\textsuperscript{46} Evidently, the state has a lot of power to guide the kind of forms NGOs actually take, and it encourages their deliberative functions but discourages some other type of activities.

Moreover, I heard many critical comments about the dominant pattern in my interviews. Several NGOs expressed concern about the narrow field permitted for NGO activities. Since there are no specific laws or rules concerning many aspects of NGO activities, NGOs do not know what is off-limits.\textsuperscript{47} Unregistered NGOs in particular, while not illegal, still do not enjoy legal protection, and must try to avoid activities which the government might consider questionable.\textsuperscript{48} However, permitted activities are not often enough to bring results. According to NGO activists, current activities, such as environmental education and salons organized by NGOs, are unable to stop enterprises from polluting.\textsuperscript{49} Since the government response to social problems is often symbolic, sometimes outside pressure is needed to force it to really do something.\textsuperscript{50} NGO activities consist mostly of community cooperation without political content, but real civil society development would require the official acknowledgement of people’s right to demand that the government be responsible to the people, even if it means addressing politically sensitive issues.\textsuperscript{51} Moreover, the official policy keeps independent NGOs small and makes it difficult to establish organizations connecting different areas or levels of administration. Some NGO leaders complain that the NGO scene is fragmented, rendering the voice of NGOs feeble and their acts ineffective. Moreover, although problems are multifaceted, the NGOs communicate and cooperate mainly with other organizations in their own field.\textsuperscript{52}

Consistent with the official model, NGOs usually note that their relationship with the government is friendly, but then qualify this statement and emphasize that they can still be critical or that they still prioritize their own objectives. Still, many NGO leaders are critical of their relationship with the government. Several activists argued that the government is not interested in establishing true cooperation with NGOs, but only invites NGOs as experts, or as audiences, to meetings at the government’s choosing. NGOs themselves have very little influence on whether the government chooses to be responsive.\textsuperscript{53} These comments reflect the NGOs’ desire for a more equal relationship with the government, in which NGOs would not only have a role in deliberations about the policy, but also in the decision-making process itself.\textsuperscript{54} In other words, these critics seem to assume that the ideal NGO role resembles the presence of Western social organizations in advisory bodies or in
corporatist negotiations rather than their use of communicative power to conceptualize and frame social problems in novel ways, which is their role according to the tenets of deliberative democracy.55

Because the press provides NGOs with the opportunity to distribute information to both administrators and the public, this channel fits the mass-line model well. As the example cited earlier shows, authorities even seem to expect NGOs to use the press. Thus, it is not surprising that earlier research has found that one official institution with which NGOs have developed cooperative relations is the media.56 Some NGOs manage to use media publicity to initiate real policy change or governmental interventions in local projects.57 One NGO even succeeded in framing the labor issue it was researching so that the provincial government felt an urgent need to legislate new minimum wage standards.58

Some NGOs were content with existing NGO relations with the media,59 but others were not. Many NGO leaders expressed dismay over the ways the media report NGO activities. The media interest in issues is superficial and short-lived, and they tend to concentrate on negative events.60 NGO activists complained that NGOs’ voices seldom appear in the most widely circulated newspapers which mainly promote commercial values rather than NGO-supported environmental awareness.61 Moreover, some opined that concentration on media work is not a sign of a healthy and mature civil society but of the weakness of the NGOs’ social base. Currently, Chinese NGOs have few resources to negotiate on an equal footing with the government or enterprises or to influence them directly. Therefore, NGOs must turn to the media and rely on the government’s support to reach its aims.62 Besides, the orientation to media publicity influences the ways NGOs work. Two environmentalists concluded that because of NGOs’ current reliance on the media, they tend to concentrate on publicity and education. Although the NGOs’ focus on education brings results, it simultaneously causes the neglect of many other possible activities.63 At worst, some people engage in environmental work only to attract media attention with no intention to commit long-term.64 Likewise, not all are happy with meetings, the other central mass-line channel for communication between the NGOs and the government. One NGO leader resented the concentration on meetings instead of on work that brings concrete results.65

To summarize, although NGOs adapt to the mass-line model because of the sociopolitical environment in China, it is not their own civil society ideal. NGOs also criticize this model. This criticism does not target the mass line-type of consultation but the narrowness of the permissible field for NGOs,
especially for those without an officially recognized status. Although NGOs recognize that the mass-line type of methods are effective, some of them would adopt a more comprehensive range of methods if the political environment permitted their use. Some even find that concentration on information work that the mass-line model promotes actually hinders NGO development in other fields.

**NGO relations with their constituencies**

NGOs’ relations with their constituencies will be examined next to see whether the mass-line model explains this relationship at all. In this respect, evidence given by the NGOs interviewed is unfortunately based on a very small sample, since many of these are environmental, and thus lack any true constituency. Some others work with foreign policy issues, which encourages them to concentrate on relations with foreign NGOs and international organizations rather than on contacts with the Chinese people.66 Moreover, due to the Beijing-centered sample, some of these organizations are umbrella organizations for other NGOs working at the grass-roots level. Although I have no way of knowing whether NGO relationships with their constituencies as described here are representative, I can demonstrate some strategies actually in use in China.

The mass-line model of civil society suggests that associations maintain a similar kind of relationship with their constituencies as they do with the state. As the state centralizes information it receives through its ministries, social organizations, and the media, one could assume that NGOs gather and process data coming from below. In other words, NGOs are fitted to the hierarchical chain of organizations gathering and processing information, as the democratic centralist model that mirrors the mass line in organizational contexts assumes.67 Moreover, the democratic centralist model tends to appoint one specific constituency to each organization. Traditional intermediary organizations represent groups such as women, labor, professionals, or religious communities. Instead of listening to a variety of voices from the same group, the Chinese government continues to assume that it can consult a single organization that comprehensively represents the voice of a particular group or all available knowledge of a certain issue. Consequently, laws permit the registration of only one NGO for each issue within one geographic unit.68 Some NGOs work with a group that already has an officially recognized intermediary organization to represent it. One of these NGOs initially faced
some obstruction from this mass organization which did not welcome others on its turf before the NGO managed to convince the mass organization of its sincerity and commitment. Some other Chinese NGOs have adopted the function of social representation for groups having no officially recognized organ of representation. They publish the opinions and demands of a certain constituency such as migrant workers or villagers to be relocated due to dam construction. These organizations relay a certain constituency voice to the government, but many others have no specific social group to speak for.

Along with communication from associations to the state, the mass-line model assigns the task of educating the constituencies to intermediary organizations, be they grass-roots government, official mass organizations, or NGOs. Presumably, NGOs are considered valuable because of their role in distributing information not only to the state, but also to the public. The content of this education can be either state-initiated or expertise information. Official mass organizations relay both types of information to their constituencies, but the state may expect NGOs to educate the public only on issues according to their own specialization. The target group of information can be either a specific social constituency or the public in general. Traditional mass organizations inform both. For example, the All-China Women’s Federation provides education to women on various issues relevant to their lives, but it also informs the public about gender equality and problems women are facing.

All NGOs in the study engage in educational activities. They distribute information about their special field to raise public awareness of environment-saving technologies, labor laws, or the need to protect local wildlife. Some NGOs educate the public because they want to change discriminatory attitudes towards groups such as migrant laborers or the disabled. Along with personal counseling and lectures, NGOs engage in intermediated communication with the public. They invite the press to report their activities and seminars, distribute information to the media, write articles, and produce reference materials to engage journalists’ own interest in the issue. Apart from using the media, many NGOs publish books to disseminate their own message and to generate some income. All NGOs target the public, but some also provide specific information for a constituency, such as migrant laborers or AIDS victims.

Although the education offered by NGOs focuses mostly on their own special field, some NGOs educate the public or their reference group about state policies and laws. Yet, they disseminate legal and other official information for reasons other than those of the state itself. Their concern is rights protection,
not the channeling of state-initiated information. For example, one NGO has assisted AIDS victims in drafting petitions to the government and has donated second-hand computers to them to enable them to communicate directly with the central government.\(^{71}\) Other NGOs provide legal help and information for migrant workers to address abuse by their employers.\(^{72}\) Here NGOs find support from the official emphasis on legality.

To use the vocabulary of systems theory, the basic idea in the democratic centralist information flow is that inputs and outputs are channeled through the same organization. Although the NGOs seem to fulfill the mass-line type of consultative status in the official design well, their activities do not completely match the democratic centralist type of hierarchical pattern. NGOs act as intermediaries to transmit the voice of a certain group of people to the state, but they are not instruments for the state to reach certain constituencies. Obviously, the state assigns societal NGOs the role of providing expertise. Besides, many issues of NGO expertise, such as environmental protection or foreign policy, have no constituency at all. Still, this conclusion must be made cautiously with regard to the future. One of the NGOs in my sample has been invited to establish a branch in a city “other than Beijing,” where it now works.\(^{73}\) Although the city authorities clearly want this NGO to provide services and legal advice for migrant workers, their invitation may also mean that the city desires that this NGO transmit the migrant workers’ voice to the city decision makers in order to improve policy-making capacities. If this is the case, the city authorities probably expect the NGO to help the city government distribute official information to the previously unrepresented migrant workers, just as the mass organizations do among the social strata for which they have a monopoly of representation.

Another possible explanation for the incomplete democratic centralist pattern could be that the state considers the democratic centralist performance of the NGOs satisfactory as long as their message to the state and the public is coherent. In other words, as long as an NGO distributes the same type of information in its education to the public and in its reports to the government, it would sufficiently fulfill its democratic centralist tasks of transmitting information to levels both below and above. This could mean that the state interprets attempts by some NGOs to increase popular awareness of rights and of legal recourse as inconsistent with their messages to the state. The state has tolerated the advocacy of migrant workers’ rights but has been on its guard against AIDS advocacy, perhaps because some leaders still see AIDS as a taboo issue,\(^{74}\) or perhaps because leaders do not regard AIDS
victims as a social group requiring representation of its own, or perhaps because the state views the inconsistency between the health reports the NGO delivered to the state and the rights education for the public as a sign of hidden motives. The need for a consistent voice could also explain the centrality of the media as an officially approved arena for the voice of NGOs. Since the media, according to the model of mass-line journalism, facilitate NGO communication with the state and society alike, perhaps the state thus interprets the NGOs’ use of the media as a sign of a consistent message.

The mass-line model expects a hierarchical relationship between different nodes in the information flow from the grass roots to the government. It sees intermediaries as possessing more complete information than the grass roots, but less complete than the central authorities. Indeed, when NGOs represent their constituencies, the relationship is by no means equal. This is not surprising, because NGOs are set up by people with more education than the groups they represent, not by the marginalized groups themselves. One NGO leader specifically emphasized that they are an organization working on migrant labor issues, not an organization of migrant workers. The issues are generally selected by the NGO leaders according to their interests, not by the constituency. As one NGO leader put it, their organization makes its own decisions, although it sometimes chooses to listen to what communities have to say about the issue.

This situation has led Howell to note that recent developments in China have engendered the formation of a more open, but not necessarily more inclusive, public sphere in which intellectual and technical elites claim to speak on behalf of the marginalized groups. However, I am less pessimistic, since many of the NGOs in my sample make great efforts to help society hear the marginalized groups’ own voice. One organization teaches the disabled to create their own media programs; another aims to facilitate the expression of a marginalized group’s own perceptions of how to resolve social problems. Others consciously involve local people in their projects or train members of marginalized groups to become NGO workers. Some NGOs provide the means for the marginalized groups to communicate directly with the experts or with the government. Although the distribution of power is rarely excessively distorted, especially since the groups themselves benefit from organizational abilities, networks, information, and articulateness of the NGO leaders, an asymmetry of power nevertheless exists. It becomes obvious, for example, when a migrant worker had to consult notes to be able to articulate the ethos of his organization in its New Year Gala.
Those NGOs that provide an umbrella for other NGOs are conscious of the asymmetries of power between themselves and the lower-level actors. They observe that conflicts occasionally arise in combining the umbrella NGO’s vision and experience with the local NGO’s knowledge of local situations. Lower-level organizations often have little choice but to adopt guidance from the umbrella organization because it is the only available source for learning about NGO activities. Some practices which the umbrella organization has encouraged other organizations to adopt, however, have proven problematic even in its own organization.

To summarize, Chinese NGOs fulfill the mass-line type of role of communicating information to the government quite well, but their communication with an assigned constituency does not follow the mass-line model. Some NGOs do not have a constituency, and when they do, they relay constituency needs to the government but often do not provide the state with a channel to reach the constituency. However, all NGOs inform the public and some even provide information to a specific constituency. Evidently, NGOs have a deliberative social function, although this function mainly takes the form of disseminating expert information to the public rather than transmitting the state’s voice to a certain constituency.

**Conclusions**

This article has demonstrated that Chinese NGOs work in a social and political environment characterized by deliberative roles for social actors. Deliberation is targeted partly to the state and partly to the public. As Guobin Yang puts it, the Chinese NGOs’ use of public debates and media campaigns has a discursive outcome, since they introduce new discourses into the public sphere. Hierarchical forms of communication are central, often even dominant. A tendency towards hierarchical modes of organization seems to prevail, even when NGOs engage in communication with other societal actors. This model fits well with the traditional communist mass-line model. Likewise, information flows channeled through NGOs are in many ways similar to those that the Party expects of traditional mass organizations.

However, this article cannot prove that the mass-line ideology actually produces such an organizational pattern. Another kind of approach is needed to prove that the Party has consciously shaped the organizational sphere in China in the direction of forms compatible with the mass line. This would require a
thorough reading of the official NGO-related statements and documents. For this study, only a limited number of official speeches and recent articles about NGOs in the official press were randomly surveyed. Even a random reading shows the use of mass-line vocabulary in articles and official statements. For example, officials and the press see that NGOs “serve as a bridge for mutual communication that will link government and society” and expect NGOs to consult their constituencies and voice their interests, to participate in drafting policies and laws, and to disseminate expertise information. Moreover, NGOs themselves may derive from the mass-line model. Keith, Lin, and Lie find that the formal organizational chart of an unregistered NGO can refer to the principle of democratic centralism, even when it seeks a degree of autonomy atypical of traditional state-organized organizations.

Nevertheless, the same statements reveal another kind of official interest in the NGO formation: the idea that a “small government,” leaving to society the provision of many services, should replace the old all-embracing “big government.” Still, although some semiofficial NGOs interviewed engage in social service provision, no autonomous NGO in the sample redirects social resources to social services in any substantial quantity. These NGOs have insufficient financial capacities and personnel to provide welfare services, especially since Chinese firms are unaccustomed to donating to charity. Interestingly, semiofficial NGOs have no such problems, but receive huge donations from individual Chinese entrepreneurs, perhaps precisely because their semiofficial status makes their achievements and donators widely public and because their official aura encourages donators to trust these organizations. State policy may also explain why truly societal NGOs seldom provide social services. Only officially registered NGOs can open bank accounts in their own name, but they must register under the supervision of an official administrative organ or officially recognized organization. In this way, NGOs easily develop a semiofficial status, even if they originally had none. NGOs registered as enterprises can open bank accounts, but their income is taxed. Thus, neither unregistered NGOs nor NGOs with enterprise status can handle donations efficiently. The Chinese third sector seems to be occupied mainly by semigovernmental organizations and foreign or expatriate-led charities. This could mean that the social space for truly autonomous NGOs working on social or political problems emerges purely from the mass-line model, although due to the lack of comprehensive material, I can only rely on my own impressions here. Finally, no registered NGO in China can totally escape the consultative model derived from the
mass-line theory. Even associations concentrating on leisure time activities, as well as religious organizations, have to comply with the rules of registering only one association working in the same field within one geographic area, even though the government hardly expects leisure-related associations to relay any information relevant to policymaking.

Notes


6 Bhikhu Parekh, “Putting Civil Society in Its Place,” in *Exploring Civil Society*, 20–1.

7 Organizations in my sample have translated foreign materials, experimented with Western organizational models, or learned new forms of activities. For a case involving a foreigner’s advice leading to the establishment of an NGO, see Xin Zhang and Richard Baum, “Civil Society and the Anatomy of a Rural NGO,” *The China Journal*, no. 52 (2004): 100.

8 Interviewee 1, a founder of an NGO working with the disabled, Beijing. The interview took place on 25 May 2004.

9 Interviewee 2, a founder of an environmental NGO, Beijing. Interviewed on 22 December 2006. See also Jonathan Schwartz, “Environmental NGOs in China,” *Pacific Affairs* 77, no.1 (Spring 2004): 47. This means that the foreign donors’ priorities really guide NGO activities in China, as Jude Howell (“Seizing Spaces, Challenging Marginalization and Claiming Voice” in *Exploring Civil Society*, 127) has anticipated.
Some Chinese NGO leaders make this same claim themselves. Interviewee 3 (a leader of an environmental NGO, Beijing, interviewed on 21 May 2004 and 26 December 2005) noted that financing from the government or foreign funds often guide what kind of efforts NGOs decide to take on. Interviewee 4 (a leader of an NGO working with migrants, Beijing, interviewed on 29 December 2005) noted that foreign donors finance projects that correspond to their perceptions and needs.

Interviewee 4.

Interviewee 5, a leader of an environmental NGO, Beijing, interviewed on 21 May 2004 and 19 December 2005; interviewee 6, a representative of an NGO working on migrant issues, Beijing, interviewed on 6 September 2006.

A good example of path dependency is the case of Li Xiaojiang, a founder of an early feminist NGO in China. See Li Xiaojiang, “Creating a Public Sphere,” Asian Journal of Women’s Studies, no. 2 (1996): 70–112. Likewise, many of the NGOs interviewed evolved along the path of their leaders, developing an interest in a certain issue and later ending up, sometimes quite without interest in any particular form of social organization, founding an NGO while looking for an organizational form suitable for such activities.


10 Interviewee 4.

11 Interviewee 5.

12 A good example of path dependency is the case of Li Xiaojiang, a founder of an early feminist NGO in China. See Li Xiaojiang, “Creating a Public Sphere,” Asian Journal of Women’s Studies, no. 2 (1996): 70–112. Likewise, many of the NGOs interviewed evolved along the path of their leaders, developing an interest in a certain issue and later ending up, sometimes quite without interest in any particular form of social organization, founding an NGO while looking for an organizational form suitable for such activities.

13 Interviewee 7.

14 Although this model is of Chinese origin, it might be applicable to other countries too. The liberal model of social autonomy has provided insight into Chinese society regardless of its foreign origin. Similarly, a study of the mass-line type of information flows in Western civil societies could contribute to our understanding of civil societies in general. As with all models, the mass-line model examines only a limited number of processes. In actual practice, NGOs do much more than engage in horizontal interactions and maintain their autonomy from the state, as the liberal model expects. Likewise, actual NGOs even in China engage in activities not related to their communications with the state and the public.

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17 Chinese sources often use the term “mass line” to refer to information gathering from mass organizations or lower-level administrators in meetings.


19 Chih-yu Shih, Collective Democracy (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1999), 168.


21 These permeating boundaries are actively used by those NGOs that have connections with the state; see, e.g., Milwertz, Beijing Women Organizing, 135–8.


25 Interviewee 1.


28 Some scholars assume that corporatism aims at social control, and interpret pluralization, ineffective social penetration, or autonomous initiatives from below as failures in maintaining control, and thus corporatist social structures. Jude Howell, “New Directions in Civil Society,” 158, 162–3; Jonathan Unger “‘Bridges’: Private Business, the Chinese Government and the Rise of New Associations,” The China Quarterly, no. 147 (1996): 818. However, social control is not an evident aim in the Chinese vocabulary. The mass-line agenda speaks of democratic centralist hierarchies in terms of two-way communication between the state and society.

29 About training officials, inviting them to NGO-organized events, and printing training materials for them, see Keith et al., “The Making of a Chinese NGO,” 47; and Milwertz, Beijing Women Organizing, 78–82, 138.


31 In his article “Greening without Conflict?,” Development and Change 32, no. 5 (2001): 893–921, Peter Ho argues that Chinese NGOs derive no strategic benefit from confronting the central state, because the Chinese state itself is becoming more concerned with environmental issues. In this situation, NGOs can attain their aims by using the available social space to encourage the government to pay attention to environmental problems. As interviewee 8 (a staff member of an NGO working on foreign policy issues, Beijing, interviewed on 23 May 2006) stated, Chinese NGOs proceed in small steps towards their goals and are ready to compromise on each step, but the result is a more rule-based society which more extremist forms of action cannot bring about. This suggests that the Chinese government may be capable of directing the speed of the liberalization of social space as long as it is receptive to some extent, and in this way may convince the NGOs that it pays off to follow official rules.

32 Interviewee 9 (a leader of an environmental NGO, Nanjing, interviewed on 15 May 2004 and 2 January 2006); interviewee 10 (a founder of an NGO working on the AIDS issue, Beijing, interviewed on 20 May 2004 and 20 December 2005); and interviewee 11 (a founder of an NGO working on labor issues, Shenzhen, interviewed on 18 March 2005).

33 Interviewee 12, a representative of a national-level NGO working on international relations and developmental issues. The interview took place on 5 September 2006.

34 Interviewee 13 (a representative of an NGO working on foreign policy issues, Beijing, interviewed on 4 September 2006) even defined himself as a researcher rather than an activist.

36 Salmenkari, *Democracy, Participation, and Deliberation in China*.

37 In the study sample, two umbrella organizations, both funding student environmental projects in different parts of the country and seeking to learn from each other's work, even formed a hierarchical rather than horizontal relationship for mutual communication. One NGO funded another NGO's conference. I met both organizations on 3 January 2006 and observed how they used the opportunity to meet to discuss the problems in supervising projects they are funding. Nevertheless, Chinese legislation forbids NGOs from establishing branches. See Schwartz, "Environmental NGOs in China," 38–9.

38 Interviewee 14, a founder of an environmental NGO, Chengdu. The interview took place on 2 January 2006.

39 Interviewee 3.

40 Interviewees 3, 9, and 10.

41 My interviewees expressed this wish in various ways, some stressing the idea itself, others their concrete methods to facilitate independent petitioning, organizing, or seeking legal resolution.

42 Interviewee 1.


44 Interviewee 1.

45 In China, the media report many sensitive issues and much of the popular feedback to the government through insider (*neibu*) channels.

46 Interviewee 11.

47 Interviewee 8.

48 Interviewee 3.

49 Interviewee 3.

50 Interviewee 10.

51 Interviewee 3.

52 Interviewees 3 and 10.

53 Interviewees 3, 5, and 11.

54 Explicitly, interviewee 3.


57 Interviewees 7, 9, and 16 (a member of an environmental NGO, Beijing). The last-named was interviewed on 22 December 2005.

58 Interviewee 11.

59 Two NGOs in my sample even concentrate on media work. See also Milwertz, *Beijing Women Organizing*, 69.

60 Interviewee 11.

61 Interviewee 17, a leader of the China branch of an international environmental NGO. The interview took place on 11 September 2003.

62 Interviewee 5.

63 Interviewees 3 and 5.

64 Interviewee 18, an activist in an environmental NGO, interviewed on 16 May 2004.
Interviewee 11.

Interviewee 8.

Salmenkari, Democracy, Participation, and Deliberation in China.


Interviewees 4 and 9.

Interviewees 1 and 4.

Interviewee 10.

There are NGOs that also provide legal aid for their constituencies. See, e.g., Ho, “Greening without Conflict,” 908; Howell, “New Directions in Civil Society,” 154–5.

Interviewee 4.

As AIDS activists (interviewee 10) themselves interpret.

The democratic centralist organization model lets the state decide which social groups need representation. See Salmenkari, Democracy, Participation, and Deliberation in China. Jude Howell assumes that the absence of elite connections hinders the organization of groups such as sex workers, see Howell, “Women’s Organizations and Civil Society in China,” 197. This may be true, but another reason for their unorganized status may be that the state has not regarded them as a group whose interests it needs to consult in decision making. Elsewhere, Howell observes that although the state has suppressed workers’ independent political organization, it has permitted organizations for addressing the needs of female migrant workers, Howell, “Seizing Spaces, Challenging Marginalization and Claiming Voice,” 125–6. According to Howell, gender plays a role here because women are traditionally seen to need protection. However, the three NGOs assisting migrant workers in the study sample are not gender specific, indicating that gender is not a central issue legitimizing the organization of migrant workers. A possible explanation why the government tolerates independent migrant worker organizations is because it has no official organization through which it can reach migrant workers, while it increasingly recognizes that they form a group with a specific legitimate interest.

Zhao Yuezhi, Media, Market and Democracy in China (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 24–31. She introduces mass-line journalism as two-directional communication between the leaders and society mediated by the press.

Interviewee 11.

Interviewee 10.

Howell, “New Directions in Civil Society.” 163.

Interviewee 4.

Interviewee 4.

Interviewee 5.

Interviewee 3.

Guobin Yang, “Environmental NGOs and Institutional Dynamics in China,” 65.

See, e.g., Chen Guangyao, deputy director at the Non-Governmental Organizations Administrative Bureau under the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs, “China’s Nongovernmental Organizations.” International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law 3, no. 3 (2001), <http://www.icnl.org/knowledge/ijnl/vol3iss3/art_2.htm>, accessed 9 April 2008. During the Mao era, the idea of bridges, or transmission belts, was no less important, but the social space was dominated by official organizations.

87 Still, I heard NGOs themselves refer to this logic only once. Interviewee 1 saw that the task of the NGOs is to help the government and to cover areas neglected by the government.

88 Some NGOs in my sample donate books to schools in poor areas or to AIDS orphans, for example, but such aid demonstrates the small scale of aid that independent NGOs are able to provide. Unregistered NGOs tend to provide immaterial services, such as counseling and education, but they do not constitute a third sector through which the state could reduce its own burdens as a welfare provider.

89 Interviewee 11.

90 Interviewee 19, a founder of an environmental NGO, Beijing. The interview took place on 19 December 2005.

91 Interviewee 15. Still, he noted that foreign companies have a much stronger tradition of philanthropy.


94 Saich, “Negotiating the State,” 131.

95 Kenji Otsuka, “China: Social Restructuring and the Emergence of NGOs,” in The State and NGOs, ed. Shinichi Shigetomi (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), 239.

References


