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Civil Society Dilemmas in Dealing with China

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In the past few years, China has grown in significance in the work of many organisations and institutions in Europe. This also goes for European civil society organisations (CSOs), which – in contrast to the EU's definition – is understood by us as a power beyond economics and politics.

The American secret service predicted in their 2015 Global Trends Report that the NPO sector will grow enormously in influence in the coming years. According to this report its role will fundamentally change – while it is currently described as a “service provider” for information and expertise (70% in the areas of health, education and social services, the rest in “advocacy for certain interest groups”), its future role will be stronger in “designing and implementing policies.”

With this rosy vision in mind, I will demonstrate in the following 10 statements (in an admittedly somewhat blunt manner) some observations on the difficult relationship of European civil society organisations in dealing with China.

Statement 1: There is no unified European Civil Society and no unified perception of China

European civil society organisations have differing perceptions of China. Those which deal already with China mainly work in the following sectors:

1. Human rights (Amnesty International, Reporters without Borders, Tibet sympathisers etc.)

2. Labour (Trade Unions or organisations which concentrate on labour rights issues i.e. Clean Clothes, etc.)
3. Environment
4. Education (Organisations which organize informational and educational exchanges on various levels about and with China, exchange programmes with schools and universities, political exchange programmes).

Additionally, there are institutions, organisations and activities of which some function under the label of “civil society” or have at least intersected with civil society organisations:

1. The European Economic and Social Commission consider itself a “bridge for organised civil society.”² Together with the Chinese Economic and Social Council, the Commission organised regular meetings under the title “EU–China Roundtable” whose original name was the “China-EU Civil Society Roundtable” but was changed for unknown reasons.³
2. China-Europe Forum (www.china-europa-forum.net) – a forum for dialogue which focuses on various societal groups including civil society
3. Academica Sincia Europaea (ASE) (www.ceibs.edu/ase/ASE.htm) – an intellectual interface between China and Europe.

Every one of these various organisations has their own particular founding history, has particular connections to the state or to political institutions and thus could be each in their own way politically or financially bound. Naturally, these circumstances could be the cause for the varying as-

¹ This text was written in collaboration with Dr. Klaus Fritsche. Nora Sausmikat and Klaus Fritsche are members of staff of the German Asia Foundation (www.asienstiftung.de) and co-responsible for the project “EU-China Civil Society Forum”. This text is based on the talk given on the workshop of the Forum at the 20th of January 2009 in Frankfurt. A deeper academic analysis of this topic will follow very soon in a forthcoming study of the forum.

²http://bookshop.eu.int/eubookshop/download.action?fileName=QE7807276DEC_002.pdf&eubphfUid=572418&catalogNr=QE-78-07-276-BG-C

³http://eesc.europa.eu/sections/rex/asia/china/index_en.asp?id=6140rexen

assessments of China; and thus different objectives to their work.

Statement 2: Different types of organisations apply different strategies

The different history and different status of the organisation determines also the different strategies applied for their work. Let's say, for example, we are talking about civil society organisations in Europe:

- that have arisen due to social protest against the state (i.e. left-wing Anti-war, Solidarity and Environmental movements). Many such organisations are then unwilling to make compromises in a cooperative strategy with organisations founded by the state or supported by authoritarian regimes.
- that are severe critics of the Chinese Regime such as the advocates of the Anti-war movement or organisations established by sympathisers of Tibet. For them, official and informal cooperation is also not an option.
- that are mainly interested in environmental issues. They intentionally avoid getting involved in polarising discussions, and also see Europe as having responsibilities (these groups also include organisations which combine an environmentalist and labour rights advocacy approach like i.e. Clean Cloth Campaign). For this reason, they also support a change in European policies towards China.
- who were formed from leftist ideology. They politically support similar minded groups within China and keep the public informed about working conditions and labour rights, promote fair trade and accordingly demand changes in European policy and European companies.
- that were founded by political institutions. They build upon bilateral cooperative structures which set the political framework for the cooperation. The unanimously approved general declaration made at the EU-China Summits over the necessity to incorporate civil society members in the consultation process for the new EU-China partnership and cooperation agreement (PCA) all come short in these kinds of initiatives.

Research institutions, academic think tanks and political foundations again apply a more pragmatically or non-political strategy to be able to work in and with Chinese institutions. These

structural differences directly lead to statement three:

Statement 3: Different CSOs produce different focuses and images of China

The type of organisation defines their self-determined tasks and goals. An identifying feature for the majority of such organisations is that they each work with a thematic focus. The classification of the respective focuses poses a danger towards the general perception of the development of China in that some parts of the development may be neglected.

This strong strategic focus and its inherited attitude towards China conclusively determine if a rather *confrontational* or *cooperative* stance should be taken. While dealing with the mobilisation of the European public, naturally other issues would be prioritised than in initiatives which deal with the exchange and networking with Chinese organisations. To produce differentiated information on the inconsistencies in the Chinese modernisation process is not a widespread aim among Western advocacy networks.

In order to clarify this point, here are two examples⁴:

In the Consumer Campaigns, one can see that China is always treated as a scapegoat. This goes to show that exploitation is not only a Chinese bad habit, but one that is inherent in the global capitalist market structures and appears in many Southern countries which produce for the North. Indeed, China's image suffers greatly due to this issue. Nowadays, China is mainly perceived as a country that produces goods under unfair and exploitative conditions. Other than that, criticising China also must mean criticising the supply industries for European companies producing in China.

Secondly, many Human Rights organisations criticize China more than other countries (such as Saudi Arabia) and produce a very one-sided picture of China. A great part of the European news coverage is also very selective.

On the other hand - as mentioned above - it's in the nature of an advocacy group to focus on one thematic topic, polarize and mobilise the public.

⁴ These examples were taken from the two workshop papers of Sven Hansen and Klaus Heidele, Workshop European "NGO, China and the European Union's policy on China", Frankfurt 29.4.2008. See: http://eu-china.net/web/cms/front_content.php?idcat=4&idart=432

Statement 4: European CSOs are badly coordinated

The above mentioned diverging views of the groups may be responsible for the small number of activities organised at the European level apart from the already established organisations active within Europe. Very similar to the feature of the 24 official sectoral dialogues of the European Commission (and their additional dialogues on Human Rights and Migration), coordination and communication among European CSOs is also very weak.

The same goes for programmes in the individual EU-member states. For example, while there have been broad networks which monitor the negotiations of free trade agreements between the EU and various Asian countries, what has up to now been almost completely missing are similar networks monitoring the negotiations for the EU-China partnership and cooperation agreement (PCA). One reason for this may be the lack of active partner organisations in China; many of them exist in the ASEAN countries or India. Another reason could be a lack of transparency of the negotiation process inside the European commission.

Statement 5: European CSOs have limited interest in China

The growing societal interest in China contrasts the small number of European NGOs whose work concerns China. What results is that, aside from funding organisations and the big multinational organized NGOs such as WWF, only a few have regular contact to organisations from mainland China. Most often, everything goes through Hong Kong.

One reason for this undoubtedly lies in the fact that international working organisations traditionally concentrate more on Latin America and Africa. Thus, China's growing engagement in these regions has given greater meaning to the China issue.

Even in the area of environmental conservation, one can see that only organisations dealing with climate issues which are involved in the China's developments. Other environmental organisations have little interest. This is mostly due to the fact that it is unknown how to develop contacts and cooperation in China.

Statement 6: Chinese CSOs are very different from European CSOs in many respects

In order to cooperate with Chinese CSOs, it is necessary to know their particular characteristics. Lately, there are hundreds of thousands of state organised GONGOs and great numbers of organisations that concern themselves with local matters. The number of organisations that are active in "advocacy work" and also have interests on global issues is still relatively small. In the area of environmental conservation, there are nowadays initiatives which network at local and international levels, like the Youth Climate Action Network or the CAN-Network (Climate Action Network).

Chinese CSOs are restricted in their work; for one thing, they need a state partner to register them as a CSO.⁵ They must clearly state their goals and intentions and are monitored even after their registration. When they want to lobby, they seek contact with protective and highly influential governmental circles.

Chinese CSOs have different campaign styles from the West: they inform the public, train and advise. Confrontational campaigns where the faults of companies are unmasked (*sha ming*) are taboo. Criticisms in connection with constructive recommendations are permitted. Media and information campaigns are considered the most successful strategies in enforcing interests. At workshops, representatives from the government are invited depending on the subject matter.

The majority of CSOs are active in the area of environmental conservation. Parallel to these are legal protection movements, consumer initiatives, labour initiatives, social charitable institutions, and Women's Rights initiatives. The sustainability of these CSOs often is endangered by financial problems.

Cooperating with Western CSOs also often creates difficulties. The Chinese government are of the opinion that Western CSOs are contributing to the negative image of China amongst their home population concerning subjects of Human Rights or China's ecological footprint. In short: Chinese CSOs are constantly being confronted with the fact that their Western partners follow their political agenda of a system change and are unable to accurately judge the circumstances in their coun-

⁵ Please see Miriam Schröder, Melanie Müller, Chinese Paths to Climate Protection, in: D+C, No. 1, 2009, pp. 30-32.

try; placing the Chinese CSOs under enormous pressure.⁶ Western partners are often not interested in small pilot projects, but rather want to see quick and big results. With such expectations, they overwhelm their Chinese partners.⁷

Statement 7: Finding the middle ground between social advocacy and assigned governmental responsibilities

Lately, civil society organisations (Global Witness, Human Rights Watch, Reporters-without-borders, Amnesty international, Greenpeace, WEED) have reached the status of being able to deliver independent, critical and reliable background information and policy proposals of great significance. In so doing, this serves not only as a mobilisation of the public, but this serves also indirectly as an advisory for European policies for China. Thereby, this could contradict with the main purpose of critically monitor existing policies.

Therefore, also on the European side, there is the danger that CSOs will be instrumentalised through politics⁸. Consultation processes are often organised in such a way, that adequate participation by NGOs is impossible. In key issues they are not involved. But where it seems to increase reliability, their positions on the issues are selectively quoted.

Other than that, the interaction of European parliaments with non-governmental organisations which deal with the poor and needy shows that they shift their own assigned responsibilities and duties to these organisations. But because of their inadequate financial resources and personnel, they are hardly in the condition to take on such tasks.

⁶ Additionally, the fact that partial funding comes directly from the US government (through the state department Bureau of Democracy, Rights and Labour or National Endowment of Democracy), Chinese NGOs are put under pressure by the Chinese government.

⁷ Moreover, the USA's unashamed assertion that funding by NGOs in China is meant to support, "a regime change" (Nick Young in www.nickyounghwrites.com/?q=taxonomy/term/8).

⁸ This is the case in some EU Papers and the 80-page response by the federal German government to the major survey conducted by the Alliance Party 90/the Green party towards the federal government's policy with China (June 2008). What becomes apparent is that civil society organisations are quoted most often when positive news in par with the policies of the federal government in the area of legal advice is made public (p. 12/Decline in the Use of the Death Penalty in China). However, NGOs are not cited when the information could injure the bilateral relationship, i.e. the chain of cause and effect between the European Supply industry and its injuring effects on the norms of labour. The official statement under such circumstances is: We have had no knowledge of such!

CSOs which are involved in the political consultation process with regards to Chinese politics, both by the Chinese, German and European Commission, must now ask themselves in a critical manner:

- What exactly is our role?
- What can we realistically achieve?
- What should we be aware of?

Even Chinese CSOs are now being marginally involved in European consultation processes. But do they really have an interest in EU-China relations? They have received many diverse co-operational and funding opportunities through the EU, but do they know anything about EU-China relations? Also, we should ask ourselves if we misuse our relations with Chinese NGOs for our own purposes.

Statement 8: Cooperating with GONGOs means supporting the regime?

As indicated before, European CSOs have different goals, differing assessments of China and thus differing working methods. The advocacy of social and ecological justice and human rights (or generally "global justice") is considered the smallest common denominator. There are indeed differences in exceeding goals and critiques like the critique on the predominant global capitalistic development model.

In order to promote change within the European-Chinese relations, it is necessary to set up exchanges and collaboration with Chinese CSOs on various levels. It's here when the problems begin:

- 1) If we want to engage with Chinese NGOs we will be confronted with issues surrounding collaborating with GONGOs or measuring the degree of their participation in certain activities. In some areas, working with certain GONGOs is even inevitable.
- 2) Should the Chinese government misconstrue critique as an attack on their authority, work in China will be made more difficult and even pose a danger for Chinese cooperation partners.
- 3) Finally, a non-confrontational cooperative approach which takes into account the contradictory development in China could, on the other hand, lead to accusations in Europe that this type of cooperation only strengthens the Chinese government and restricts and thereby betrays the self-determined goals of the organisation.

Statement 9: One must dare to walk the tightrope

Obviously, working with Chinese NGOs is not far from walking on a tightrope. The simplest way would be to withdraw. What is more difficult is to be conscious of the dangers of possible problems and confront them. However, collaboration with Chinese CSOs can be of great benefit to both sides.

By intensifying exchange on both sides, European and Chinese individuals are able to get a deeper view into the effects of globalisation on each others life and work situations.

A mutual trade-off of ideas in work methods could specifically help develop issue-specific co-operations across regions.

This does not mean that critique should be withheld. We must always ask which places and which forms of critique are most suitable.

Statement 10: What needs to be done?

Out of these considerations, here are various objectives for European CSOs:

- CSOs should foster the intensification of debates and thus contribute to transmitting an image of China that takes into account the contradictory development within China.

- CSOs should not only “work on”, but with China. The exchange of representatives of CSOs and social movements from China and Europe must be promoted through contact and exchange programmes to develop concrete cooperation with Chinese CSOs.
- It is important to promote discussion regarding European responsibilities towards developments in China with respect to social and ecological standards and human rights.
- Exchange, and where possible, the cooperation between European civil society organisations must be strengthened. This will not only strengthen our voice towards the EU, but will soften it in that we will not be pitted against the Chinese.
- Lobby for the inclusion of topics that are of international relevance (i.e. climate issues) into the European China-Policy. This could be done together with our Chinese colleagues.

Research on transnational advocacy in Central Asia, East Asia, Eastern Europe and Africa also shows very much the same results discussed in this paper.⁹ First and foremost, transnational advocacy networks fulfil the task of spreading information, pave the way for capacity building and therefore work for mutual understanding. Our project endeavours to realize these responsibilities and we hope that with this workshop, we can go one step further.

⁹ Sarah E. Mendelson, John Glenn (Eds.), *The power and limits of NGOs*, New York 2002; Joachim Betz, Wolfgang Hein (Eds.), *Neues Jahrbuch Dritte Welt 2005 - Zivilgesellschaft*, Wiesbaden 2005.

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