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Isomorphic Pressures, Epistemic Communities and State-NGO Collaboration in China

Reza Hasmath, *University of Oxford*

Jennifer YJ Hsu, *University of Alberta*

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Reza Hasmath[†] and Jennifer Y.J. Hsu[‡]

Abstract

This article suggests that the lack of meaningful collaboration between the state and NGOs in China is not solely a result of the state seeking to restrict the development of the sector, or the fear of a potential opposing actor to the state; instead, interviews with NGOs in Beijing and Shanghai suggest that a lack of meaningful engagement between the state and NGOs can be partially attributed to isomorphic pressures within state–NGO relations, and insufficient epistemic awareness of NGO activities on the part of the state. In fact, the evidence suggests that once epistemic awareness is achieved by the state, it will have a stronger desire to interact with NGOs – with the caveat that the state will seek to utilize the material power of NGOs, rather than their symbolic, interpretive or geographical capital.

Keywords: state; NGO; collaboration; state–society relations; isomorphism; epistemic community; China

The number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in China has increased dramatically in the past two decades.¹ NGOs now operate in a wide spectrum of fields ranging from education, poverty alleviation, community development, the

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† University of Oxford. Email: rhasmath@gmail.com (corresponding author).

‡ University of Alberta. Email: jenniferhsu@cantab.net.

1 See Xu 2008 for an economic explanation behind the rise of NGOs in China, which considers the following variables: (1) their ability to satisfy needs for public goods; (2) their ability to pursue collective interests; (3) their ability to enhance positive externality while lowering negative externality; and, (4) the level of trustworthiness. Liu 2008 and Yu and Zhou 2012 suggest instead that NGOs have proliferated owing to the wider “political space” afforded to them by the state. Hsu and Hasmath (2013, 2014) reinforce this idea by arguing that the Chinese state has moved away from a strategy of overt coercion (what the authors term “overt sanctioning”) to manage social organizations, to one of tacit sanctioning whereby the state creates and mediates the “space” in which the NGOs can operate. Jennifer Hsu (2012a, 2012b) further suggests this is operationalized in various forms depending on the layer of the state, central or local, with which the NGOs interact.

environment, and health, and offer a variety of services and support for marginalized groups in Chinese society. In effect, NGOs in China have the capacity to be alternative social service providers, and have generally proven to be effective at this task when they are provided with the space to operate.²

Against this backdrop, the local state³ has experienced a strain on its finances which has reduced its ability to deliver social services to its constituents. The restructuring of state-owned enterprises (SOEs), a shedding of social welfare responsibilities, and fiscal decentralization have all increased the burden on cash-strapped local state authorities in terms of social welfare provision.⁴

This study seeks to answer the meta-question: why are there only low levels of voluntary collaboration between the local state and NGOs in China? It seems that greater collaboration would be advantageous for both parties. It would simultaneously relieve the local state of some of its burden by addressing a number of social concerns and would allow NGOs, which have the resources and capacity, to engage with the relevant social problems and issues.⁵ However, the on-the-ground reality suggests that this form of collaboration between the local state and NGOs in China has been rather minimal.

The academic literature is divided into two camps when trying to provide an explanation for this paradox. The first explanation for the low level of collaboration between the local state and NGOs is attributed to the domination and the strength of the central state, which effectively seeks to control the NGO sector through restrictive regulations rather than partner with it. Whether overtly or not, the majority of the literature has contributed to this argument by suggesting a “strong” central state that continuously seeks to manage and control the NGO sector.⁶ The second explanation points to organizational differences between the two sectors.⁷ The major premise here is that the organizational forms and goals of both sectors are divergent and that this dissuades the building of mutual trust or the potential for a credible catalyst to incentivize one or both parties to cooperate towards a common goal.

While we do not question the validity of either camps, neither one fully answers why local state authorities continue to resist and/or remain indifferent to the advances of Chinese NGOs, despite the opportunities that are present in collaborative efforts. While the central state is an active force in the development of the NGO sector, as illustrated in the various rules and regulations that have been

2 See Fu 2012; Kaufman 2012; Teets 2012; Deng and Shieh 2011; Hsu, Jennifer 2009.

3 The term “local state” encompasses the following levels in the context of Beijing and Shanghai: municipal, district, street neighbourhood (*jiedao*) and resident committees (*juweihui*).

4 See Saich 2008.

5 Both parties perceive themselves as key stakeholders to societal problems. See Gazley and Brudney 2007; Guo and Acar 2005.

6 See, e.g., Wu and Chan 2012; Heurlin 2010; Simon 2009; Ru and Ortolano 2008; Kang and Han 2008; Ma 2002; Dickson 2000.

7 See, e.g., Fulda, Li and Song 2012; Friossart 2006 and 2010.

issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA), it is at the local state level that the majority of meaningful interactions occur between the state and NGOs.⁸ Given that NGOs are relatively new to the social landscape in China, it is prudent to test whether the Chinese NGO sector has matured sufficiently to become part of an epistemic community, whereby their knowledge or expertise can be used as reference points by the local state. Furthermore, if the argument is that NGOs are organizationally distinct from the local state, it will be worthwhile to examine whether NGOs will eventually succumb to isomorphic pressures – that is, pressures that overtly or tacitly force NGOs to adopt similar structures and behaviour – such as coercive pressures brought about by the regulatory environment; mimetic pressures that arise from uncertainty in the social space to operate effectively; and normative pressures that would eventually arise from a convergence of attitudes, norms and approaches through the professionalization of Chinese NGOs. Embedded in this background, this study seeks to understand local state–NGO interactions through an analysis of the strategies and methods that are utilized to establish collaboration between both parties. It probes into the interactive role that various isomorphic pressures and epistemic awareness play in determining whether or not NGOs collaborate, or to what extent they collaborate, with the local state, and vice versa. This study seeks to move beyond strategies of engagement between the local state and NGOs. Notably in the final two sections, we focus on the role of epistemic awareness of NGOs by local authorities and how NGOs are developing to become a community of experts – which is a potential requisite for further engagement with the local state.⁹

Methodology and Sample

The study focuses on the cases of Beijing and Shanghai by drawing upon fieldwork conducted there between late 2011 and mid-2012. The underlying speculation is that Beijing, as the capital, may present unique challenges to local officials in their collaboration (or lack thereof) with NGOs. The municipal government of Shanghai, on the other hand, has cultivated networks with selected NGOs. In addition, Shanghai's municipal government has become a stronger voice in Shanghai's development policy in comparison to Beijing, where the top-down model of governance continues to prevail thereby leaving little room for local innovation or experimentation.¹⁰ The more innovative form of policymaking within Shanghai's government ranks is reflected at the community level where local NGOs are given greater leeway to experiment and encourage citizen participation in community projects.

8 See Hsu, Jennifer, and Hasmath 2014; Teets 2013. Our fieldwork further reinforces this notion: the majority of the NGOs we interviewed indicated that their interactions with the state, if any, are largely at the local level.

9 We thank the anonymous reviewer for highlighting this element of our study.

10 Thornton 2013.

Using a random purposeful sampling technique, 28 NGOs were interviewed – 15 in Beijing and 13 in Shanghai. The overall sample represents a good cross section of NGOs’ material power (e.g. their size, budget and ability to acquire more resources), symbolic power (e.g. their ability to have legitimacy in their statements), interpretive power (e.g. their ability to bring expertise to the forum and interpret “social facts”), and geographical power (e.g. whether they are local, regional or national-based). The NGOs interviewed have annual budgets ranging between US\$1,590 and US\$6.35 million, with the average NGO interviewed having a budget of US\$78,283 per annum. Most NGOs interviewed have secured their financial resources with the aid of a mix of domestic and international funding support. One NGO, Peace for Humanity, remains entirely self-funded by its founder. The NGOs in the sample have an arithmetic mean of 8.5 years of operation in China, with a range between 2 to 19 years. Nearly half of these NGOs are registered with an accompanying government sponsoring agency, and the rest are registered as businesses.¹¹ The majority of the NGOs interviewed are engaged in service delivery work to marginalized populations – from migrant workers to children and the elderly – and community development. There are three NGOs in our sample that assisted the development of smaller and newer NGOs by providing training and workshops. In sum, the primary sectors of operation for our sample include (number of NGOs in parentheses): education (18), health (8), migrants (8), environment (8), gender (7), welfare (6), media (2), culture (1), connecting charities (1), fundraising (1) and training (1).¹² While the interviews do not offer a national sample, they do provide a depiction of the increasing involvement of the local state in the work of NGOs in two of China’s most important cities.

Neo-Institutional Theory and Isomorphic Pressures

The degree of isomorphic pressure on NGOs is contingent upon the environment in which they operate.¹³ According to neo-institutional theorists, organizations that occupy a shared sector will eventually begin to copy one another as a result of coercive, mimetic and normative pressures. A key element of institutional theory is the belief “that organizations sharing the same environment will employ similar practices and thus, become isomorphic with each other.”¹⁴ In the classic formulation of isomorphic pressures, DiMaggio and Powell posit that: “(1) coercive isomorphism stems from political influence and the problem of legitimacy; (2) mimetic isomorphism [results] from standard responses to uncertainty; and (3) normative isomorphism is associated with professionalization.”¹⁵

11 Notwithstanding their registration as businesses, they are functionally NGOs. See Deng 2010.

12 It is important to note that the majority of NGOs in the sample reported multiple primary areas of operation.

13 Watkins, Swidler and Hannan 2012; Lewis and Opoku-Mensah 2006.

14 Kostova and Roth 2002, 215.

15 DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 150. They note that the various isomorphic types are not always empirically distinct.

Isomorphism in the context of NGOs thus refers to the different factors that mould the development of organizations to a similar shape, structure or form.

Put differently, coercive pressures can be displayed by examining the impact of state regulation on the behaviour of an NGO. For example, regulations in China forbid NGOs from conducting public fundraising. This ultimately forces NGOs to rely largely on private and institutional donations, which often come with certain stipulations that alter NGOs' behaviour.¹⁶

Mimetic isomorphism has a tendency to occur in an uncertain environment, where organizations will begin to copy successful models as a way of coping with changeable conditions.¹⁷ By copying, NGOs are able to establish legitimacy quickly without having to build a repertoire of practices which can be time-consuming and not necessarily lead to any tangible outcomes. This is particularly pronounced in the case of China where the environment for NGOs can oscillate depending on state behaviour.¹⁸ NGOs' acquiescence is also a likely strategy that can lead to an economic gain,¹⁹ as well as legitimacy.²⁰

Finally, normative isomorphism emerges when similar attitudes and approaches lead to homogeneity – often the result of hiring practices that stress like-educational achievements, or inter-hiring between existing organizations. Normative pressures are often brought about by the desire to professionalize.²¹

The strength in utilizing neo-institutional theory to understand NGO behaviour lies in the fact that it is able to explain why organizations adopt certain practices – mundane or complex – in environments where they have little influence to reject said practices.²² Chinese NGOs generally operate in a relatively singular institutional environment, whereby competing logics do not cause contestation, and thus, much variation in institutional designs.²³ Organizational change with regards to NGOs in China is particularly dependent on the political environment and the power of institutional actors in their support or opposition to change. We argue that the political environment and power exerted by the state can have different effects on the NGO sector: they can lead to coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphic pressures. We believe that the puzzle is not only the nature of the state per se (strong/weak) but also the institutional environment that is created by

16 Deng and Shieh 2011.

17 DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1991.

18 Wen and Chen 2012; Hsu, Jennifer 2012a, 71; Hsu, Carolyn 2011; Qi 2011.

19 Oliver 1991.

20 Deephouse 1996.

21 As Mawdsley et al. 2002 suggests, professionalization can often occur as a by-product of receiving conditional grants from donors, as part and parcel of establishing accountability.

22 DiMaggio 1988.

23 Nonetheless, neo-institutional theories of organizational change are not without their critics. Issues such as organizational self-interest and agency are not accounted for in the literature. That is, there is a tendency to treat organizations as passively adopting norms and practices with little reflection or resistance (Tolbert and Zucker 1996; Corvalessi and Smith 1988). Furthermore, the concept of isomorphism may preclude neo-institutional theory from explaining practice variation (see Thornton and Ocasio 2008). For instance, theorists have asserted that heterogeneity in institutional environments may cause competing logics to exist simultaneously in one institutional environment (see Pache and Santos 2010; Dacin, Goodstein and Scott 2002).

the power of the state in which NGOs must navigate. Thus, we seek to build upon organizational theory as it applies to NGOs to comprehend the present and future development of the Chinese NGO sector.

The Institutional Environment and Collaborative Measures

Notwithstanding the increasing size and diversity of the NGO sector in Beijing and Shanghai, coercive pressures are prevalent owing to the existing regulatory environment that manages NGOs. Officially, all NGOs are required to be registered with the MCA, in addition to having a willing department or leading unit to sponsor them.²⁴ Given that there are minimal incentives for government departments or units to take on the extra administrative work that is required to sponsor an NGO, and the strong disincentive of being liable in the event an NGO becomes troublesome, it is not surprising that government sponsorship is difficult to secure.²⁵ This is such the case that many NGOs are prevented from completing registration at this step. In the situation where an NGO has complied with the dual registration process, all NGO decisions are technically required to be approved by the sponsoring agency. Furthermore, NGOs must provide annual financial reports to the MCA. This effectively means that the autonomy of the organization is eroded and, in the long term, will incentivize the NGO sector to forge practices in a homogenized fashion to ensure a high degree of predictability for the state.

Many organizations avoid this lengthy bureaucratic process by registering as a for-profit commercial or business entity with the Bureau of Industry and Commerce. Since the 2004 Regulations on the Administration of Foundations, organizations can also be formed through private initiatives and still undertake tasks that were once considered public. Such for-profit organizations cannot officially establish regional or branch offices, which in effect reduces the chances for an organization to scale up their services and establish geographic power.²⁶ Moreover, only one type of each organization may be established in any given region. Despite this situation, such organizations essentially operate and present themselves as NGOs.²⁷ This suggests that coercive pressures prevail irrespective of whether organizations are officially registered as an NGO, commercial/business entity or foundation. That is to say, the state's management system will direct some NGOs to channel their efforts "into areas the state finds most acceptable" in any case.²⁸ The regulatory environment for NGOs in China contributes to maintaining social stability by keeping out those organizations that the government perceives as a threat, and minimizing the size and strength of the

24 The MCA is given the authority to issue warnings, orders, and cancel or change an organization's status.

25 See Hildebrandt's (2011) discussion about the conflicting political and economic incentives for registration for both NGOs and government alike.

26 Hasmath and Hsu 2008.

27 See Deng 2010.

28 Heurlin 2010, 233.

NGO sector, which in turn, may limit NGOs' collaborative efforts with the local state.

Suffice to say, efforts to launch collaborative projects between the local state and NGOs in Beijing and Shanghai are limited. Although collaboration offers both parties – the state and NGO – an opportunity to pool material, symbolic, interpretive and geographical resources, the local state rarely engages in voluntary collaborative efforts except when it is familiar with and knowledgeable about a specific, individual NGO project. For instance, Beijing NGOs such as Beijing Cultural Heritage Protection Center, Facilitators, Tongyu, and Shining Stone Community Action have been established at least since the early 2000s (1993 for Beijing Cultural Heritage). Their continued existence and operation in Beijing suggests that their longevity has made some impact in garnering opportunities to work with local authorities. All four NGOs have managed to maintain their collaborative projects with Beijing's local authorities, rather than operate in an on-again, off-again manner which often characterizes the local state–NGO experience. The case in Shanghai is also similar in that it is the older NGOs (Lequn and Grassroots Community) that have managed to carry out projects with the involvement of local authorities.

For the aforementioned NGOs, one main method of maintaining contact and collaboration with local municipal authorities is to mobilize their material power and market their services to the city. After nearly ten years of working with migrant communities in Beijing, Facilitators and Tongyu have managed to secure municipal commitment to purchase services since 2010. While these two NGOs have collaborated with local authorities in the past on specific projects (for example, Facilitators worked with the Centre for Disease Control in 2003 during SARS), it is support from local authorities for their ad hoc programmes and the ability to build up an organizational and work history that has enabled such NGOs to continue their collaboration with the local government to the present day. Similarly, Lequn, which focuses on providing services to youth and migrant communities, has found success in maintaining its collaboration with municipal authorities through contract-based work.

Whether or not the above strategy translates to projecting a higher level of mimetic pressure is another narrative. The evidence suggests that while the four NGOs have copied a successful model to market their services, they have done so without awareness of each other's tactics. Granted, the modelled organization may be unaware of their mimetic activity in this respect, or the models of "success" may be diffused unintentionally through employee transfer/turnover or via trade associations.²⁹ However, this is not a possibility that can be entertained given that, to reiterate, (1) they have no direct awareness of each other's work and have self-reported little or no awareness of other NGOs' activities; (2) they are working in completely different sectors of operation, and as such, have little

29 DiMaggio and Powell 1983.

chance of unintentional contact that may lead to copying; and (3) they rarely experience employee transfers from other NGOs. Uncertainties in the institutional environment and their relationships with local government have led the NGOs to develop an independently derived, pragmatic approach to marketing their material power to local authorities. Interestingly, this tactic becomes difficult to execute given that local governments often have not gained sufficient knowledge or epistemic awareness of the potential capacity of the NGOs, as the next section suggests. Seemingly, such findings may appear to challenge a neo-institutional framework. Our findings from Beijing and Shanghai suggest that while NGOs still operate within a particular institutional environment – which may be corporatist in nature³⁰ – they have yet to be creative and innovative to the extent that they can mitigate the impacts of their environment.

Even when epistemic awareness has been achieved by local government, some NGOs have experienced “competition” from authorities when delivering social welfare services. A representative for a Shanghai-based NGO explained that it is not unusual for the government to “steal” the ideas and programmes of small successful NGOs.³¹ For example, Shan Tao, a successful NGO that sells goods over the internet for charities, has faced competition from Shan Pin, a government-organized NGO (GONGO). Shan Pin has benefited from government backing and contacts, and as a result, has managed to secure the financial support of large corporations such as KPMG. Shan Tao’s representative believes that the poaching of such ideas may be detrimental to smaller NGOs unable to compete against the bigger NGOs and GONGOs with greater material and geographic powers. The interview with Shan Tao’s representative confirms a degree of wariness towards government officials:

When they [the government] do not come up with creative solutions or think of solutions on their own, but instead “borrow” the ideas of other NGOs to implement their programmes, this not only fails to increase the growth of creativity in our society, it more importantly reduces the willingness of social organizations to come up with new and creative solutions, and constrains the integration of resources in society and grassroots organizations. This is what makes it frightening.³²

According to the representative for Shan Tao, interactions with government officials can be hazardous not only for individual NGOs but also for the sector as a whole. Fear of having ideas poached reduces the incentives to be innovative and ultimately diminishes the NGOs’ potential interpretive power. From a different lens, although the borrowing of successful practices or ideas may be a positive example of organizational or policy-based learning, what is challenging for the NGOs in this study is the possibility of being squeezed out by larger and better-funded government-backed NGOs. This competition can strangle any future innovations on the part of smaller, grassroots NGOs.

30 See, for instance, Jennifer Hsu and Reza Hasmath’s (2014) arguments on the Chinese corporatist state.

31 Given the potential sensitivity of the subject matter, this NGO has requested to be anonymous.

32 Interview with Shan Tao representative, Shanghai, December 2011.

Alongside the threat of competition from the local government, NGOs also have to contend with the possibility of absorption. In its early years, the Beijing Cultural Heritage Protection Center had to stave off government attempts to co-opt and absorb it into existing government structures that work in the area of cultural heritage. It has been approached by local officials to “become part of their government branch, like a GONGO, which we refused.”³³ Beijing Cultural Heritage Protection Center has managed to maintain its independence and, perhaps owing to these previous experiences of being subject to co-optation, the representative emphasized that the NGO does not collaborate (*hezuo* 合作) with local authorities. Instead, it works beside them. Some NGOs have not been so fortunate. A representative of Les+ recounted the experience of the “Free Lunch Programme” created by journalist Deng Fei. Deng was able to attract substantial donations from the public via the internet in order to provide free lunches to needy school children across the nation. Deng’s success attracted the attention of the government and, according to the representative of Les+, Deng’s initiative was “eaten up [sic] by one of the branches of the government and turned into a government programme.”³⁴ Small and potentially successful NGOs are vulnerable to government incorporation.

Nevertheless, not all NGOs are so pessimistic with regards to the government. In rare cases, NGOs can be seen as a vehicle for government authorities to project certain images or messages to both domestic and international audiences. China Dialogue’s representative believes that when the Chinese government needs to be heard and taken seriously by the international media, it taps into the potential symbolic power of the NGOs which can provide a “voice” for the government to get its message across.³⁵ Consequently, local NGOs have lent legitimacy to the government when the situation demands it. The government’s interactions with the international media and NGOs have also proved beneficial for smaller NGOs. For example, Tongyu has been able to source funding from the larger China AIDS Foundation, a GONGO which receives financial support from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria on the condition that it involves local NGOs in its initiatives. According to Tongyu’s representative, the situation would be “very different if they [the GONGO] didn’t need to fill this quota.”³⁶ Here, the involvement of the international community dictates changes to the institutional environment of the NGOs, and the government has little recourse but to respond. It is through the government’s response that we see space opening up for local NGOs to conduct their projects. The institutional environment is evolving, and NGOs can benefit from or be thwarted by government incorporation. In the case of a changing institutional environment, interactions with government do not occur through the actions of NGOs, but as a result

33 Interview with Beijing Cultural Heritage Protection Center representative, Beijing, December 2011.

34 Interview with Les+ representative, Beijing, December 2011.

35 Interview with China Dialogue representative, Beijing, January 2012.

36 Interview with Tongyu representative, Beijing, December 2011.

of external forces and the government proactively identifying the successes achieved by certain NGOs.

It is evident in the cases of Beijing and Shanghai that coercive isomorphism is dominant. However, mimetic isomorphism is also at play in instances where NGOs like Shan Tao have adopted similar organizational functions to establish legitimacy. While those in the NGO sector have accused Shan Pin of stealing ideas from its NGO counterpart, it is interesting to note that even government-backed NGOs require legitimacy beyond state support. In either case, it would appear that coercive and mimetic isomorphism occur almost in tandem with each other in the context of China.

The Epistemic Awareness of NGOs by the Local State

NGOs which have reported difficulties in establishing collaborative opportunities have portrayed local authorities as lacking trust and knowledge of the sector. Beijing's Green Earth Volunteers always invite local officials to their monthly talks. However, the majority of these invitations are declined. The representative for Green Earth Volunteers doubted that the local authorities had any incentive to use the symbolic or interpretive powers of NGOs other than to promote GDP growth, as career promotion in local government is often based on economic growth.³⁷ Focusing on economic development often marginalizes other issues, such as the environment, and prevents local authorities from taking the time to realize the full potential of the NGO sector. Shanghai's Green Oasis, a conservation focused NGO, faces this situation. The Green Oasis representative recalled that: "There is not much collaboration with the local government. The only time was 2010 when the local government gave us some funds for an activity involving the elderly."³⁸ Having a programme aimed at helping the elderly seems incongruent with the general environmental conservation goals of Green Oasis; however, it does suggest that ad hoc programmes that attune to the priorities of the local state, and are pitched as such by the NGO, have a greater chance of securing the collaboration of the local state. Green Oasis' representative further noted that, "local officials know of the existence of the NGO, but their focus is elsewhere where the perceived needs are greater."³⁹

Less than half of our NGO interviewees believed that the knowledge levels of the local authorities in Beijing and Shanghai had improved with regards to the NGO sector, whereas more than half of the interviewees thought that there were low levels of trust and knowledge of NGOs. How can such a seemingly contradictory perspective be explained? Based on the collaborative interaction between NGOs and the local state, we can conclude that knowledge of individual NGOs has improved, but that this knowledge is difficult to extrapolate to the

37 Interview with Green Earth Volunteers representative, Beijing, December 2011.

38 Interview with Green Oasis representative, Shanghai, November 2011.

39 Ibid.

wider sector. Given that it is difficult and politically unwise for NGOs to form alliances, there are few opportunities for them to amass geographical power.⁴⁰ Thus, smaller and newer NGOs will find it more challenging to gain the attention and support of local officials.⁴¹ The well-established NGOs with relatively longer organizational histories will likely have a near monopoly on potential collaborative partnerships with the local state. Where there is collaboration between the smaller and newer NGOs, it tends to be on an ad hoc level and rarely lasts beyond a single project. The interviewees indicated that such circumstances usually occur in individual cases identified as “needy” by the local authorities. Thus, the knowledge level of the NGO sector is also dependent on the local authorities’ awareness of certain social issues and the degree of importance that is assigned to these issues.

The interviews suggest that greater state collaboration and epistemic awareness of NGOs by the local state will be achieved through the professionalization of NGOs – a signifier of normative isomorphic change. Professionalization in the context of this study essentially refers to having established a respected organizational identity alongside a continuation and expansion of service provisions to relevant constituents. Seemingly, normative pressures to homogenize come from the similar attitudes and approaches gained through the process of professionalization. The representative for China Youth Climate Action Network noted that local authorities are more willing to collaborate with those NGOs that have developed a professional capacity and gained the approval of the wider community.⁴² A number of NGOs further clarified the meaning of “professional capacity” as the capacity to provide services (*fuwu* 服务). A representative from Shanghai’s New Citizen Life Center echoed this sentiment, and reported that opportunities to work with the local authorities will occur “[w]hen the NGO is seen to contribute a service to the population.”⁴³

This may prove problematic for nearly half of the NGOs sampled, as they lacked the geographical power and financial resources (material power) to sustain momentum on the projects that they were engaged with. With 13 of the 28 NGOs interviewed operating on a budget of less than US\$20,000 per annum, establishing trust and professionalization through service provision would be extremely difficult. The China Association for NGO Cooperation’s representative reiterated this challenge: “Many of the local NGOs are very small and don’t have a lot of capacity, or are not very professional.”⁴⁴

It is interesting to observe that many NGO representatives equated service provision and the added value of the NGO as a determinant factor to potential collaborations with the local state: “on the local level, the government needs to

40 Hsu, Jennifer 2012a.

41 Carolyn Hsu (2010; 2009) argues that NGOs are much more likely to form alliances with state actors for reasons related to securing resources and legitimacy.

42 Interview with China Youth Climate Action Network representative, Beijing, January 2012.

43 Interview with New Citizen Life Center representative, Shanghai, December 2011.

44 Interview with China Association for NGO Cooperation representative, Beijing, January 2012.

see the added-value of an NGO.”⁴⁵ This evaluation was echoed by Beijing’s Facilitators: “What is very important is that an NGO has to be very professional and valuable [to society] so that the government can see its effect.”⁴⁶ The representative for Shining Stone added further weight to the notion of NGOs needing to create “value” in order to be considered by the local authorities: “NGOs need to have the capacity to solve problems, the capacity to provide services. Otherwise the government would not trust your NGO to do work.”⁴⁷

It would appear that those NGOs that have evolved from small localized organizations to city-wide service providers have done so through a process of sustained organizational momentum and perseverance despite an uncertain and fluctuating political environment.⁴⁸ A representative of Facilitators attributed his organization’s growth to the notion that, “the Beijing authorities have been paying increasing attention to the NGO sector.”⁴⁹ The Beijing Cultural Heritage Protection Center detailed their commitment to their organization and programmes in the context of obtaining NGO registration: “For 5 years, every day, to meet every requirement we did everything the government wanted us to do. Even in the spring of 2003, through Beijing’s SARs outbreak, we continued to work for the centre, which impressed local authorities. Finally, we satisfied all of their demands and received our NGO licence.”⁵⁰ Such persistence engendered not only trust between the NGO and the local authorities, but also a greater degree of knowledge and epistemic awareness of the NGO in question.

In this vein, to build greater trust and knowledge, Lequn has implemented specific programmes as needed by the Shanghai authorities.⁵¹ Lequn believes that the NGO sector in Shanghai is trusted by the authorities: “Local authorities (at least in Shanghai) have quite a good relationship with the NGO sector. There is quite an acceptable level of mutual understanding and collaboration.”⁵² Following the local authorities’ direction and meeting the objectives of the local state has worked well for Lequn and has generated a positive outlook on the part of the NGO’s representative. The representative of New Citizen Life Center in Shanghai also suggested that good relations between NGOs and Shanghai authorities exist, since organizations are able to reach out to different sectors in society and fulfil their needs – something that is often problematic for the authorities to achieve.⁵³ Thus, for Lequn and New Citizen Life Center, two organizations that target migrant youth and women groups, being amenable to the local authorities’ requests and proactive with the constituents concerned are the strategies that have been adopted to raise the knowledge level of the local authorities.

45 Ibid.

46 Interview with Facilitator representative, Beijing, December 2011.

47 Interview with Shining Stone representative, Beijing, December 2011.

48 Stern and O’Brien 2011.

49 Interview with Facilitator representative.

50 Interview with Beijing Cultural Heritage Protection Center representative.

51 Interview with Lequan representative, Shanghai, November 2011.

52 Ibid.

53 Interview with New Citizen Life Center representative.

Direct contact and communication with individual officials is another tactic used by some NGOs such as Beijing's Shining Stone to foster epistemic awareness of the NGO's capacity and initiate collaboration with local authorities. While no promise of collaboration is guaranteed via this strategy, the NGO can nevertheless establish a direct line to the relevant government departments: "We would look for *guanyuan* 官员 (local officials) with whom we were familiar and approach them with the social problems we wanted to work on, particularly social problems that the government also wanted to solve."⁵⁴

These various strategies for increasing local authorities' knowledge of the NGO sector and for building trust have indeed improved the potential for collaborative relationships between the local state and NGO. A number of NGOs have further suggested that trust is no longer a major barrier to collaboration; rather, they say, it is "*jiaodu* 角度," or perspective, that plays a stronger role. As Facilitators noted, it not that local authorities do not trust NGOs, it is just that they have a different perspective of the situation. For Shining Stone, variations in *jiaodu* refer to the degree of familiarity that local authorities have with NGOs. If local authorities increase their knowledge of NGOs' perspectives and vice versa, and NGOs are able to increase their epistemic capacity, greater collaboration between both parties will occur.

The Growing Epistemic Capacity of NGOs

In the classic formulation espoused by Haas, NGOs are generally seen as epistemic communities – that is, they constitute a network of professionals with "recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain, and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area."⁵⁵ Further, NGOs share a set of normative and principled beliefs; notions of validity; and a common policy enterprise. That NGOs have become part of an epistemic community would suggest that the experience and knowledge they have developed have become important to policymakers and to the general public in addressing a range of issues.⁵⁶

There was no consensus among the interviewees about whether NGOs in China can currently be conceived of as a community of experts whose symbolic and interpretive powers can be meaningfully utilized, and whether it is the role of NGOs to produce new knowledge or not. For some NGO representatives, such as the one from Shanghai's Green Oasis, the development of knowledge – whether it comes in the form of innovative projects or delivery methods of certain programmes – was thought to detract from the goal(s) of the organization.

54 Interview with Shining Stone representative.

55 Haas 1992, 3.

56 An anonymous reviewer suggested that it may be more appropriate in the case of China to use the term of "a community of civil society practitioners" given that NGOs are often composed of citizen activists. We believe that NGOs in China are beginning to professionalize. As such, they should be viewed as more than citizen activists or a "community of civil society practitioners."

According to other NGOs, such as the Beijing Cultural Heritage Protection Center, the NGO sector is not yet a community of experts as the NGOs themselves lack the requisite transparency. Tongyu’s representative was even more adamant that NGOs are not experts in their fields, claiming that, “NGOs are about mass awareness. China doesn’t have an established NGO scene,” even though she believed that the contribution of NGOs across the sector could in time lead the sector forward.⁵⁷ While the diversity of the NGO sector is readily apparent, and the individuals who work for NGOs represent a wide spectrum of professions, the Green Earth Volunteers’ representative opined that NGOs “do not represent, as a whole, a group of scientific experts.”⁵⁸

In the view of the China Association for NGO Cooperation, a certain segment of NGOs can be considered as having expertise and inherent interpretive and symbolic powers that derive as a function of this expertise. For example, the Climate Change Action Network in China, which constitutes a consortium of environmentally focused NGOs, fall under this category. However, in the majority of instances, and particularly if NGOs are considered individually, their experience is “very low.”⁵⁹ Notwithstanding, China Dialogue’s representative believed that NGOs embody a level of interpretive power that is not found within government ranks, since the former are potentially staffed by experts in the field, and are increasingly important sources of information when “big social problems breakout.” Whether NGOs in China should be responsible for the production of new knowledge or not, NGOs do have a vital role to play in the dissemination of information to the public. Green Earth Volunteers’ representative presented an interesting insight: “Producing knowledge is not necessarily something that a NGO does, because that’s not something *we* do, but *reframing* knowledge is something that NGOs can do and have definitely done in China. And I think they have been relatively successful in this.”⁶⁰ Perhaps Chinese NGOs cannot fully achieve a mature epistemic community because of coercive pressures. However, if we accept the representative of Green Earth Volunteers’ perspective, NGOs may be more effective as agents of change not by pushing knowledge boundaries, but by using their interpretive powers in a relatively covert manner to recast existing issues in a new light and/or shedding light on the under-emphasized spectrum of political, economic and social issues.

Final Words

This article has suggested that the local state lacks meaningful knowledge of the NGO sector and that NGOs have not sufficiently matured to become part of an epistemic community. Given that NGOs are relatively new to the social landscape in China, we postulate that the Chinese NGO sector has not developed

57 Interview with Tongyu representative.

58 Interview with Green Earth Volunteers representative.

59 Interview with China Association for NGO Cooperation representative.

60 Interview with Green Earth Volunteers representative.

sufficiently to become part of a mature epistemic community in which their expertise or interpretive powers can be used as reference points by the state. In time, it is plausible that NGOs in China may become part of a mature community of experts where they can more effectively harness not only their material power but also their symbolic, interpretive and geographical powers. There are, however, a few reservations in this regard. We can prognosticate that it is not simply a matter of time before Chinese NGOs mature into an epistemic community; rather, given the strength of the Chinese state and the existence of strong coercive isomorphism pressures, any production of knowledge outside of the state arena may challenge the legitimacy of China's Party-state, thereby becoming intolerable and, ultimately, hindering the development of NGOs.⁶¹

In effect, the existence of such structural forces, rooted in the Party-state system and a regulatory framework that undeniably dominates local state–NGO relationships, strongly suggests that NGOs will have to stay one step ahead of the state. To do so, NGOs need to produce new knowledge⁶² and, more importantly, anticipate surprises or discover the unknown.⁶³ For example, NGOs will have to anticipate the next major social problem, and enact upon it with programmatic endeavours. When executing such a strategy, we posit that NGOs will more likely gain the trust of state authorities through a “best practices”⁶⁴ framework, or by following successful NGO “models”⁶⁵ that will, in the end, lead to greater possibilities of collaboration with the local state. Moreover, a “best practices” framework will entice the NGO sector to professionalize under the auspices of mimetic and normative isomorphic forces.⁶⁶ Of course, the scenario in which the state may attempt to compete and/or absorb such innovative NGOs, akin to the Beijing Cultural Heritage Protection Center example in its early years, may be a reality.

While the institutional environment in which NGOs are operating is slowly changing, thereby allowing greater participation of NGOs to address a number of social issues, the majority of the NGOs interviewed still perceive the state as having limited meaningful knowledge of the sector. Further, even if epistemic awareness were achieved, it is quite plausible that the state would develop a strategy of strategic ignorance⁶⁷ to vary its degree of acknowledgement of an NGO, depending on a pragmatic calculus that is based on the NGO's resources for

61 Hess 2009 suggests that civil society practitioners are often faced with a lack of knowledge when seeking to make epistemic claims. To counter this situation, he proposes that practitioners call on government agencies to devote more resources to particular issues, partner up with the research community, or conduct their own research. In the context of China, this may not be feasible given the lack of epistemic awareness of the NGO sector on the part of government and, furthermore, the regulatory constraints that enhance coercive isomorphic pressures.

62 Binney 2001.

63 Savage 2000.

64 Hsu, Jennifer 2012b.

65 Qi 2011.

66 Murphy 2000.

67 The term “ignorance” should not be seen in a negative light; rather “(i)gnorance should function as a kind of cover term that generally points to the borders and the limits of knowing, including the intentional and the unintentional bracketing out of unknowns” (Gross 2010, 67).

social and welfare considerations – in essence, by factoring whether NGOs can utilize their material power (rather than their symbolic, interpretive and geographical powers) to supplement the local state's social and welfare provisions. The initial underlying reasoning for this theory is based on McGoe's concept of "factual ignorance," which suggests that local government officials can utilize competing facts about NGOs (e.g. beneficial to society versus potential socio-political threats) as capital.⁶⁸ Part of this calculation involves mediating the uncertainty of forging working partnerships with NGOs presently.⁶⁹ The second reasoning is the idea that strategic ignorance can be used as a defensive strategy whereby errors or problems can allude to an interpretation of evidence (e.g. the ambiguous nature of NGOs as they exist outside of administrative structures) and further exonerate local authorities from engaging with NGOs. It will be prudent for future work to examine and measure the extent to which strategic ignorance on the part of the local state is used as a deliberate tactic to allow and disallow collaboration with NGOs.

摘要: 该论文指出, 中国政府与非政府组织 (NGO) 之间合作的缺乏并不能完全归咎于政府对该领域发展的限制, 或是出于对一个潜在的政府反对者的害怕。与北京和上海的 NGO 访谈显示, 政府与 NGO 之间缺乏有意义的合作的部分原因是同构压力, 以及政府对于 NGO 活动认知的缺乏。事实上, 证据显示, 一旦政府获得了对 NGO 工作的认知, 它将会更加愿意与 NGO 建立联系。当然必须说明的是, 政府想要利用的是 NGO 的物质资源, 而非他们的象征性, 阐释性, 或是地理上的资本。

关键词: 政府; NGO; 合作; 国家—社会; 同构; 认知群体

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68 McGoe (2008, 2007). Factual ignorance arises "when the complexity and contradictions inherent in competing scientific facts are employed as a form of political capital" (McGoe 2007, 230).

69 Zack 1999.

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