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Communities of Practice and the NGO Sector in China

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Abstract: Communities of practice (CoP) represent an important resource for the creation and sharing of sector-specific knowledge. Drawing upon detailed interviews with NGOs, this article explores the development of CoP in China. In particular, the study tests whether CoPs have emerged as an important mechanism for knowledge sharing, developing social capital, and coping with organizational change. This is particularly significant for the relatively new NGO sector in China, who operates in a changing authoritarian institutional environment.

Keywords: Communities of practice, knowledge sharing, social capital, NGO, China

Introduction

Communities of Practice (CoP) with their strong social coherence are valuable elements for creating and sharing institutional-specific knowledge. Similarly, knowledge is a social construct embedded in a specific context and can be characterized as an “ongoing social accomplishment, constituted and reconstituted in everyday practice” (Orlikowski 2002: 252). A community’s primary purpose and aims inform the type of activities and technologies that support it. Such communities are important because they provide a model for people to share knowledge, learn and collaborate. Communities of practice represent a unit of shared practice, and the “willingness to converse and share knowledge needs to be built on a platform of trust” (Sharkie 2005: 38). This is reinforced by McDermott and O’Dell (2001), Kaser and Miles (2002) and Probst and Borzillo (2008) who see human networks amongst the key vehicles for knowledge sharing.

In the past two decades, Chinese non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have increased rapidly, particularly those focused on social service delivery. This is partially due to the changing institutional environment and the retreat of the state in delivering welfare provisions (see Hasmath and Hsu 2014, 2015; Hsu and Hasmath 2014). Given the infancy of both the welfare sector and NGOs as delivery agents in China, this scenario serves as an excellent case to analyze and test salient assumptions looking at the behaviour of communities of practice within an authoritarian institutional environment. Understanding Chinese NGOs from the prism of CoP can illustrate the extent in which the NGO community can capitalize on their knowledge base, and translate this into shared practices. This, in turn, can indicate whether a strong authoritarian institutional environment matters in communities trying to establish best practices. Drawing upon interviews and observations with Chinese NGOS in a variety of social service delivery areas, this article will test three propositions:

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Proposition 1
Communities of practice will emerge as an important mechanism for knowledge sharing, notwithstanding the strong authoritarian institutional environment of China.

Proposition 2
Communities of practice will foster the development of social capital among Chinese NGOs by increasing their willingness to share knowledge.

Proposition 3
Communities of practice have an impact on how employees in Chinese NGOs cope with organizational change and the rapidly changing institutional environment.

The article will proceed as follows: The first section will set out the communities of framework by discussing the importance of social learning, knowledge sharing and social capital. The second section will provide a brief background into the Chinese NGO sector. We will discuss the methodology and sample in the third section, and in the fourth section we will present our findings for each of the three propositions. The fifth section will present a discussion of the results, followed by a concluding outlook on Chinese NGOs as CoPs.

Framework

Communities of Practice

Communities of practice are organizational units that exist beyond the formal structure of an organization. It is important to note that they do not equal teams or assigned working groups and show different dynamics (Kerno 2008). Communities of practice are based on a common practice and achieve coherence by combining three elements (Wenger 1998): (1) mutual engagement, (2) a joint enterprise, and (3) a shared repertoire. Mutuality emerges from interactions that occur by being engaged in the same action. The members of a community of practice have developed a common sense for what the community is about and what its position is within a wider organizational context. The shared “repertoire of a community of practice includes routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence, and which have become part of its practice” (Wenger 1998: 83). “A community’s focus could be on a professional discipline – like reservoir engineering or biology – a skill – like machine repair – or a topic – like a technology, an industry, or a segment of a production process” (McDermott 2000: 20). Within a community, knowledge can be easily communicated because of the shared perspective (Brown and Duguid 2001) and knowing can be seen as a matter of displaying competencies. It should be noted that the “mere possession of potentially valuable knowledge somewhere within an organization does not necessarily mean that other parts of the organization benefit from that knowledge” (Szulanski 2000: 10). Therefore, knowledge sharing can be interpreted as a highly desirable organizational behaviour with a potential impact on an organization’s survival and growth.

Communities of practice are thus the authority that defines competence. While the shared practice outlined above is the central element of CoP, they also form important social units. They can be seen as largely a mental construct with enough flexibility to incorporate a number of
different individuals without forcing them give up their individuality. “Indeed, the gloss of commonality which it [the community] paints over its diverse components give each of them [individual members] an additional referent for their identities” (Cohen 1985: 109).

The sense of identity evolves parallel to the feeling of membership and belonging towards a certain community of practice. This identity does not only foster knowledge sharing by focusing attention towards the group for problem solving. The strong social coherence also fulfils the needs for affiliation when the organization fails to do so, and provide continuity in times of adversity (see Breu and Hemingway 2002).

**Role of Knowledge Sharing**

It is not a new idea that smaller organizational units correspond with a greater opportunity for social interaction, a higher likelihood for a sense of obligation to other members to form, and a greater extent of participation. All those benefits are enhanced for communities of practice since membership is voluntary. The strong social coherence enables creating and sharing organization-specific knowledge (Wenger and Snyder 2000; Breu and Hemingway 2002). This ability can be interpreted as a community’s absorptive capacity for the acquisition or assimilation of new knowledge and its exploitation (Cohen and Levinthal 1990). The exact patterns of absorptive capacity highly depend on the context and the pre-existing stock of knowledge. Since they vary between organizations, the results are unique and extremely valuable for the organization. In addition, boundary spanners link different communities of practice with each other and facilitate the emergence of even larger informal social networks (see Ardichvili 2008). Boundary spanning refers to the act of extending across borders to build relationships to address complex problems. Boundary spanners – individuals who reach across boundaries – are therefore essential for avoiding the “fragmentation of the organization into silos of specialized knowledge and activity” (Casciaro and Lobo 2005: 92). Both aspects contribute to organizational success. Members sense an obligation to contribute to their community as they perceive themselves as insiders. A study by Stamper and Masterson (2002) support this notion by highlighting the link between the perception of insider status and the existence of social networks.

Brown and Duguid (2001: 202) call communities of practice “privileged sites for a tight, effective loop of insight, problem identification, learning, and knowledge production.” Practices evolve and are driven forward by learning. Within communities of practice, trust creates a safe environment making its members feel comfortable to share challenges and explore new ideas in addition to exchanging mere facts (Lesser and Storck 2001). Adopting a social stance towards knowledge as highlighted before, ensures a conceptual match between communities of practice and knowledge. Each organization provides a unique environment for processes of social learning and knowledge sharing within communities of practice.

At core, the interaction with other peers in other organizations, formally or informally, forges a communities of practice that one can resort to when looking for specific knowledge. This idea conforms to Granovetter’s (1973, 1983) widely cited notion of the strength of weak ties, whereby weak ties connect groups with each other. Put differently, weak ties are more valuable for knowledge sharing as the knowledge tends to be less redundant than it is within a group liked through strong ties. Weak ties are believed to represent the basis for a community of practice. The reasoning is based on the “tendency … of stronger ties to involve larger time commitments” (Granovetter 1973: 1362). It can thus be assumed that individuals spend more time around direct co-workers, which implies interactions with co-workers that outweigh the contacts within a
community of practice time-wise. However, it has to be noted that Granovetter (1973) declares the ties within organizations as weak by definition. Therefore, the statement made here that relationships are weaker within communities of practice than they are with immediate colleagues can only be seen in relative terms. Some research has looked at weak ties in more detail and found that the type of knowledge to be shared determines whether weak or strong ties are more beneficial (see Hansen 1999). However, this holds only true for a cognitive notion of knowledge. Since this study follows a social perspective arguing that there is no dichotomy of knowledge, the strength of weak ties is not questioned.

**Role of Social Capital**

While there is limited research looking at the relationship between social capital and communities of practice, the two concepts clearly overlap given they are inherently based on social relationships and weak ties. Literature on social capital suggests that members of a network “must anticipate that interaction, exchange, and combination will prove worthwhile, even if they remain uncertain of what will be produced or how” (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998: 249). This implies a rather unspecific content of ties arising from individual circumstances. The value of a community of practice is less vague for its members as it circulates predominantly around the shared practice. Members “participate because the community provides value” (McDermott 2000: 21). Since social capital is predominantly characterized as an outcome rather than a process, communities of practice cannot be equivalent to social capital. Neither are they likely to be its sole source. Communities of practice might simply be facilitating the development of social capital.

The identification of the structural, relational, and cognitive dimension by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) and Lesser and Prusak (1999) proves helpful in determining the relationship of the two concepts. The structural dimension describes “the overall pattern of connections between actors” (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998: 244). Communities of practice provide these distinct patterns of connections based on a shared practice. Becoming a member of a specific community of practice automatically links the new member to the others members of the network and vice versa (see Roberts 2006; Kerno 2008; Borzillio et al. 2011). Therefore, communities of practice could enhance the structural dimension of social capital.

The relational dimension refers to the personal relationships that members of the network have established with each other. Trust represents the core of this dimension. An arduous relationship between the parties involved indeed represents an essential barrier to disseminating best practices within organizations (Szulanski 1996). Communities of practice could almost act as a monitoring agency for maintaining trust. Members oversee each other’s interactions and any act of untrustworthiness would be known fast within the community of practice, thus potentially advancing the relational dimension of social capital.

Finally, the cognitive dimension comprises “those resources providing shared representations, interpretations, and systems of meaning among parties” (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998: 244). Communities of practice foster shared beliefs and norms, enabled by the shared language developed within the community. Social capital, in turn, “stems in part from the availability of a common belief system that allows participants to communicate their ideas and make sense of common experiences” (Adler and Kwon 2000: 12). That is why communities supposedly encourage the cognitive dimension of social capital. Consequently, it appears to be a valid assumption that communities of practice indeed foster the development social capital.
Another aspect allows for a comparison with communities of practice as well: the notion of bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital “refers to relations between family members, close friends and neighbors” (Chou 2006: 892). It reinforces exclusive identities and homogeneous groups. Bridging social capital denotes “more distant associates and colleagues who may have different demographic characteristics” (Chou 2006: 892). It is essential for developing collective trust. As discussed earlier, boundary spanners link different communities of practice with each other. Boundary spanners seem to be predestined to develop bridging social capital that the entire organization can benefit from. Communities of practice mainly facilitate the evolution of bonding social capital due to the strong coherence within the group (see Grugulis and Stoyanova 2011).

Thus far we have looked at communities of practice from a social capital perspective. Reversing the direction can yield additional insights. Duguid (2005) adopted this tactic in his critical paper on communities of practice. He points out that “CoP analysis accepts the importance of social capital networks to understanding why people will and will not share” (Duguid 2005: 115). The willingness to share knowledge is based on the trust that is an essential element for both communities of practice and social capital. However, the difference between the two concepts comprises the ability to share knowledge. Both aspects – willingness and ability – have to be present in the sender and the receiver for knowledge to be shared successfully. Communities of practice theory suggests that “people have to engage in similar or shared practices to be able to share knowledge about those practices” (Duguid 2005: 115). This implies that social capital analysis includes a much greater variety of social groups because it is not limited to groups with a shared practice. Social capital theorists view the challenge of communication and knowledge sharing within social networks as mainly an issue of trust. Therefore, they regard it as less complex than community of practice researchers who claim that trust in itself does not suffice if it is not paired with shared practice, where learning is a stated goal or not. To understand the development of communities of practice and its utility in analyzing the Chinese NGO sector, the next section provides a brief overview.

**Chinese NGO Sector**

With 546,000 officially registered NGOs with the Ministry of Civil Affairs (2013) – the unit responsible for NGO registration – and an estimated 3 million more unregistered, Chinese NGOs present a hotbed for the development of CoPs. Notwithstanding, the political context in which Chinese NGOs emerge from is pertinent to our discussion on CoP (see Hsu et al. 2016a) – in particular state control of the NGO sector through regulations (see Tam and Hasmath 2015). While there have been pilot projects experimenting with regulatory reforms, much of this experimentation is still at the city or provincial level (see International Center for Not-for-Profit Law 2015). The difficulty in officially registering has led many NGOs to avoid registration all together or register as a commercial entity, but continue to operate as an NGO.

The 12th Five Year Plan (FYP) (2011-2015) articulated goals to expand the range of outsourced services. Social services outsourcing refers to the provision of public funds by the government to a non-profit organization or business to deliver public goods and services. The 12th FYP sets out a number of tenets for the participation of social stakeholders, including NGOs, involved in service delivery under the leadership of the Party-state. These principles include abiding by a multi-stakeholder governance mechanism with regards to welfare provision, strengthening the capacity and autonomy of local communities to provide services, emphasize...
the development of social organizations amongst others (see Hasmath and Hsu 2015). With NGOs encouraged to participate more actively in social service delivery, CoPs are thus important mechanisms in transmitting knowledge, practices and information as they navigate this new area of work.

Methodology and Sample

A total of 102 NGOs were interviewed and surveyed (face-to-face) across four cities (Shanghai, Nanjing, Chongqing and Kunming) in China from mid-2013 to early-2014. The interviews probed into the organizational behaviour of NGOs in terms of ecology, engagement with other organizational actors, and the delivery of services. NGOs were selected based on a snowballing technique. Although snowballing techniques may lead to selection and/or gatekeeper bias, we believe this is the most effective way to obtain information on the above topics, particularly when many NGOs seek a low profile given the political context (see Atkinson and Flint 2001).

Of the 102 NGOs interviewed and surveyed, 19 were from Shanghai, 27 from Nanjing, 16 from Chongqing and 40 from Kunming. The average organizational age of the NGOs across the four cities is 10.3 in Shanghai, 8.4 in Nanjing, 6.1 in Chongqing and 12.6 in Kunming. NGOs in our sample engage in a variety different issue areas, with the following being most common: health, welfare, education and environment. Also, there was some variability in each city sampled. In Shanghai, among 19 NGOs, 5 engaged in welfare, and 6 in education. In Nanjing 13 out of 27 were in welfare. In Chongqing, NGOs engaged primarily in the areas of education, environment and community development. In Kunming, 5 NGOs out of 40 engaged in the health sector.

Findings

Immediate Challenges to Communities of Practice and Knowledge Sharing

The number of employees in any given organization is an important element to consider when building up a community of practice. As Table 1 suggests, the number of full-time employees average 12.7 per NGO among the total sample, with 5.6 the least number of employees in Chongqing and 19.9 the most in Kunming. The number of part-time staff averaged 3.3 across the four cities, with 2.0 the lowest average in Nanjing and 4.6 the highest in Chongqing and Shanghai. Suffice to say, with few permanent, full-time staff in our NGO sample, the possibility of fostering a long-lasting CoP is difficult, and more acutely the case when factoring the staff’s years of work experience prior to joining the NGO – the average years of prior work experience was 3.3. Moreover, the responses from participants indicate that the majority had no prior NGO work experience before joining the NGOs (see Table 2). This can suggest that the quality of any CoP that emerges from Chinese NGOs will be minimal, and quite possibly ineffectual given the small workforce and crucially the lack of relevant work experience. In addition, due to the relatively low wages in the NGO sector in China, there is generally a higher turnover relative to government and private enterprise sectors. Respondents in our sample reiterated time and again that low remuneration played a major determining factor in a lack of staff retention. One respondent working with people with disabilities aptly captures the sentiments expressed by many in relation to staff retention:

Most staff members leave because the wages are low, and also because of family reasons. Many people that work in support of disabled people are from other cities/area outside of Nanjing and often go home when their families desire them to go home. (Interview July 2013).

Table 1: Staffing and Experience of NGOs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th># Permanent Staff</th>
<th># Part-time Staff</th>
<th># Volunteers</th>
<th>Avg. Years of Work Experience Prior to Joining NGO</th>
<th>Avg. Age of Staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>31.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanjing</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>443.4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>32.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chongqing</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>3008.8</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>30.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kunming</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>36.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Avg.</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>867.8</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>32.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Constructing a community of practice where knowledge sharing is the focal point of the community is immediately problematic in the context of China. Staffing challenges including staff retention and size of the NGO are problems for establishing a coherent and sustainable community of practice. However, as many of the NGOs indicated the importance of volunteers to satisfying staffing needs, the large cohort of volunteers may serve as a burgeoning CoP. The average number of volunteers varies quite dramatically in our sample size – as seen in Table 1 – in part due to the size of the organization and whether it is a grassroots NGO or a government-organized NGO (GONGO). In Chongqing, the average number of volunteers is ~3,009 – although we need to bear in mind that six of the organizations are volunteer placement organizations. Nanjing had the next highest average number of volunteers of ~443, with many of the organizations working with groups such as the elderly and people with disabilities, and also many acting as volunteer placement organization. Shanghai had an average of ~12 volunteers per NGO, and ~7 for Kunming. Given these vast differences, CoP will vary city-to-city, as well as sector-to-sector. Where there are high numbers of volunteers, we can assume that the transmission of knowledge and subsequent, best/worst practices are occurring. As NGOs discuss recruitment strategies, many have noted that the hiring of paid staff members come mainly from the existing pool of volunteers. For example, the founder of Light of Hope, a Chongqing-based NGO working with migrants with more than 500 volunteers, noted that one of the main recruitment strategies include recruiting university students, particularly those in social work, first as volunteers with an eye to developing them as future staff from the pool of volunteers (Interview May 2013). Non-Profit Incubator, operating in Nanjing’s Yuhuatai District, shared a similar strategy of recruitment. According to the representative: “NPI tries to train the people it needs, moving recruits from volunteers to interns to full-time positions” (Interview June 2013). Thus, volunteers can potentially play an important element in facilitating the development of a communities of practice in the Chinese context. In cities like Chongqing and Nanjing where NGOs rely heavily on volunteers to fulfil project delivery goals, CoP will emerge informally given that the learning configuration will not be structured, notably when there are several hundreds of volunteers to manage.
Communities of Practice and Social Capital

Trust, familiarity and mutual understanding are prerequisites to successfully transfer tacit and/or overt knowledge. Yet, all of these are also affected by power relations among participants in CoPs. The reliance on volunteers, particularly in Chongqing and Nanjing indicates that CoP in the case of these two cities will be informal. Moreover, the gap between knowledge and actual practice will be pronounced. The director of Chongqing Youth Education Volunteer Association, a large youth-based NGO with more than 3,000 volunteers noted that of the 11 permanent staff, four or five of the employees had previous experience in working with the NGO as volunteers (Interview May 2013). In such a situation, the stress of managing a large cohort of volunteers with so few staff demonstrates the challenges in formally structuring a CoP. Nonetheless, the bonds established prior to becoming a permanent staff member is the first step in creating social capital that can expedite shared learning and practices. Similar to what Nistor and Fischer (2012) found in the context of academia, in CoPs, knowledge is expressed and applied only through participation.

Table 2: Do Existing Permanent Staff Members have Previous Experience Working with NGOs?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Some</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>N/A</th>
<th>Total Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>8 (42.1%)</td>
<td>10 (52.6%)</td>
<td>1 (5.3%)</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanjing</td>
<td>2 (7.4%)</td>
<td>10 (37.0%)</td>
<td>9 (33.3%)</td>
<td>6 (22.2%)</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chongqing</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>8 (50.0%)</td>
<td>8 (50.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kunming</td>
<td>25 (62.5%)</td>
<td>9 (22.5%)</td>
<td>4 (10.0%)</td>
<td>2 (5.0%)</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>27 (26.5%)</td>
<td>35 (34.3%)</td>
<td>31 (30.4%)</td>
<td>9 (8.8%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Yet, when asked: “Do existing permanent staff members have previous experience working with NGOs?” 34.3 percent of the total responded that existing staff have had “some” previous experience and 30.4 percent having no previous experiences at all (see Table 2). For the former response, this will vary widely in terms of years of experience as well as type of experience, for example, working as a volunteer or paid employment in an NGO. Nevertheless, when paired with results on the over-reliance on volunteers in carrying out program goals, these findings suggest that the building of CoP using social capital to facilitate this process may be limited.

If a member’s social capital can facilitate the growth and strengthening of the CoP, then the social capital of the NGO leader and staff members are important factors to consider in the emergence of a CoP. However, in discussing whether Chinese NGOs should be considered as a community of experts, the Director of Chongqing Hemophilia Association, a health NGO, noted that most NGO workers lack professional training and knowledge (Interview June 2013).
Furthermore, when we consider the range of NGO leaders out there – for example, in the Chongqing Hemophilia Association’s case the majority of staff are patients afflicted or have relatives living with illness – then it is difficult to consider these people as “qualified as experts” (Ibid). In examples such as this, those directly affected by the issue that the NGO seeks to remedy may not necessarily be considered as having high social (or epistemic) capital (see Hsu and Hasmath 2016). Yet, if we consider the flip side, these individuals will have established strong networks with other patients and thus have the potential to mobilize supporters for advocacy.

Admittedly, the large presence of volunteers in Chinese NGOs, on its own, may be counter-intuitive to establishing and fostering a CoP. However, when observing the recruitment strategies for volunteers in the sample cities, we were open to rethinking this notion. Time and again we noticed that the recruitment of new volunteers was often predicated on the suggestions of existing volunteers. Further, for many of the NGOs in our sample, exemplified by Home Sweet Home, a Shanghai NGO working in community development, new staff members were recruited from the existing pool of volunteers (Interview May 2013) – suggesting at minimum, the seeds of a CoP. In another example, officials at Ha Lei House, a Nanjing NGO working with children, articulated employees who eventually become staff follows a similar process: “Right now recruitment is through the professional school; first students become volunteers, and then they become part-time staff, and then some people will become full-time staff” (Interview June 2013). Consequently, we can anticipate that CoP can and do emerge from volunteers, whether formal or informal.

Social capital thus plays a key role for individual volunteers in their step towards paid employment in the sector. Social capital is explicitly used as a recruitment method by some of NGO leaders, for instance most prominently by Walking into Life and Learn, a Shanghai-based NGO. This small NGO working in the area of education with disadvantaged children has leveraged the founder’s network for various organizational needs from recruiting staff to financing the organization (Interview July 2013). Another Shanghai NGO working with disadvantaged children, Morning Tears, has capitalized on the founder’s previous position in the local government to help access resources needed for their work with children (Interview June 2013).

While networks of volunteers can help build the social capital of the NGO, these networks can also be a hindrance. According to a health focused NGO working with cancer patients, Xiao Xia, the founder observed that older volunteers “don’t have the energy and the education level to be able to take on tasks like managing websites. University volunteers don’t stay long enough, and they don’t know the work and the clients very well” (Interview June 2013). Thus, the different capacities of the volunteers may work against the NGO in building CoP because neither group of volunteers, older members and university aged volunteers appear to be capitalizing on their shared experience to facilitate the work of the NGO.

In short, the role of social capital in building CoP in Chinese NGOs may be limited at this stage in the development of Chinese NGOs. Nonetheless, the interviews suggest that the centrality of volunteers to the work of Chinese NGOs, and by explication the use of volunteer networks, it is possible that an informal CoPs will emerge. Moreover, such networks have advanced the social capital of individual volunteers, which leads to future employment in a NGO. Social capital of individual NGO founders is also used to further organizational goals, and not necessarily to build CoP. Accordingly, social capital is a flexible mechanism in the case of Chinese NGOs, useful for both individual and organizational gain. However, when it comes to
CoP, our sample data does not seem to suggest a direct linkage between the two.

Communities of Practice and Expertise

Our sample data suggest that CoPs are not mechanisms that are currently implemented across the NGO sector. However, the extensive use of volunteers signifies the import of such networks in the future building of CoPs. Notwithstanding, the respondents in our sample indicate that Chinese NGOs lack the professionalism and expertise to be considered an epistemic community, where NGOs are part of a community of experts that act as a coherent group in which they seek to inform and impact policy and policymakers. Just over half of those surveyed (51 percent) believed Chinese NGOs are not part of an epistemic community. Chongqing is the only city where the overwhelming majority of respondents stated that NGOs cannot be considered as an epistemic community (68.8 percent), whereas the responses were split more evenly in Kunming (Yes: 45.0 percent; No: 42.5 percent). Qualitative responses qualified some of the sentiments. Two themes emerge from the responses. First, domestic NGOs have not obtained sufficient expertise in which they can be considered a community of experts. And second, the lack of professionalization inhibits some this development (see Hasmath and Hsu 2007; Hsu and Hasmath 2016 for further insight). It is interesting to note that there is an association with international NGOs as community of experts: “Some International NGOs in Shanghai are very professional and can be considered as a community of experts. But not for local NGOs” (Shanghai Sunrise, Interview June 2013). Similarly, Morning Tear, another Shanghai-based NGO, noted the same: “Unlike International NGO, most of Chinese NGO are not professional and doesn’t have many experts involved” (Shanghai, June 2013). Without this idea of community or established expertise, it is difficult to envisage a formal structure facilitating the establishment of a CoP.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study suggests that CoPs are yet to emerge as significant tools for knowledge sharing amongst and within NGOs. Reflecting on each of the three propositions as presented above, we see that CoPs are not formalized institutions as noted in the literature, rather in the case of Chinese NGOs they are nebulous networks.

Our first proposition where we hypothesized communities of practice will emerge as an important mechanism for knowledge sharing, notwithstanding the authoritarian, institutional environment of China stands true to the extent that we detect informal networks emerging from the volunteers. We note that there are immediate organizational challenges for the majority of the NGOs surveyed, where lack of permanent staff, high staff turnover and years of experience in the NGO sector present direct challenges to the establishment of CoPs. Indeed, given the environment in which Chinese NGOs operate in, disjunctive structural changes can serve as a catalyst for the development of CoPs when stakeholders are pressured to adapt to or accommodate change, or else be made redundant. In the context of the authoritarian environment with a strict regulatory environment, we believe that CoPs will emerge whether formally or informally as an adaptive mechanism, particularly in an era where the Party-state is advocating for greater involvement of NGOs in the delivery of social services domestically and internationally (see Hsu et al. 2016b). Thus, practice-learning in professional settings is both endogenously (with respect to best practices disseminated and shared as embedded evolution of
practices) and exogenously sourced (in response to new technologies or challenges like shifts in demand-side expectations or budgetary constraints). Consequently, in seeking to adapt to such changes and paired with the desire to secure government contracts as a way to ensure funding for the NGO (see Hasmath et al. 2016), CoPs are likely to appear as a way of institutionalizing the trials and errors of adaptation. While this remains in the realm of conjecture at this stage, we suggest that this is the most plausible direction given the informal networks that have arisen from the large volunteer base among the NGOs surveyed.

In proposition two, we postulated that CoPs will foster the development of social capital among Chinese NGOs by increasing their willingness to share knowledge. The NGO representatives indicated that the network of volunteers is useful for individual volunteers in establishing and improving one’s social capital. In particular, as NGOs seek to hire permanent staff, representatives indicated that drawing on from the existing pool of volunteers is standard practice. As Green Stone, a Nanjing-based environmental NGO noted, the age of the volunteers is directly equated with not only the volunteer’s social capital, but that of the organization: “the major problem is that members are fairly young, so they lack experience and they lack social capital; they don’t know as many people and don’t have much resource. Also, Green Stone, in truth, is still an immature organization, there was a major shift of goal in 2006, and there were no activities in a few years, so the organization really lacks experience” (Interview July 2013). Social capital, and organizational maturity and experience are thus inextricably linked in the eyes of this NGO representative. In this context, social capital is therefore an important mechanism to facilitate the growth of an organization, starting from the social capital of individual members, whether volunteer or staff. In turn, social capital will foster of CoPs, rather than CoPs fostering social capital. Of course, further social capital will be gained once the CoP is established, but in the context of this study, the social capital of individual NGO members is a prerequisite for the growth of CoP. Although one shortcoming of the study is the lack of refined data on volunteer characteristics over a time-series, our assumption is that as individuals move through the ranks of the NGO, an informal community of practice will transpire as knowledge and best practices become embedded within the organization and becomes greater institutionalized as the organization matures.

Our final proposition put forth that communities of practice have an impact on how employees in Chinese NGOs cope with organizational change and the rapidly changing institutional environment. The ideal CoP which assumes workplaces are coherent communities is no longer a realistic assumption in modern labour markets, an authoritarian market economy such as China inclusive, where decentralized management and informal employment (among other new network forms) are common. Sectors which are prone to outsourcing, sporadic or freelance work are less effective at supporting CoPs than stable work groups or vertically-integrated bureaucracies. Given that this is the case, as indicated in the literature, where Chinese NGOs are still very much in their infancy, we see that the foundations of establishing a formal CoPs are indeed shaky, particularly with high staff turnover, as well as large floating volunteer base. The challenges that beset Chinese NGOs, not just organizationally, but also factors external to the organization like politics and policies, will affect any CoPs. Thus, we believe that the emergence of CoPs across the Chinese NGO sector will be sporadic and informal. Moreover, when the majority of the NGOs in our sample do not see themselves as part of a community of experts, it therefore presents a huge challenge for the possibility of a structured and institutionalized CoP. Put differently, knowledge sharing will be more active when CoP members feel safe in agreement about the sector’s need for knowledge sharing.
Considering each of our three propositions in line with our sample data, we believe that structured and formalized CoPs will not materialize in the Chinese NGO sector, rather informal learning networks will serve the learning needs of staff and volunteers. As we have seen, volunteers play a big part in the delivery of services for NGOs in our sample, and as such, informal learning networks have already played a part in transitioning volunteers to paid work.
Notes

1 Alternatively, one can potential posit that communities of practice evolved “naturally”, and thus, CoPs are a result of social capital. We find little evidence in the context of NGOs in China to support this position, but are mindful this may not be a universal observation what factoring other jurisdictions’ experiences.

2 This is not a reality restricted to China’s NGO sector. According to the 2011 UK Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development’s *Resourcing and Talent Planning Annual Report*, the median turnover rate in 2010 for the voluntary, community and not-for-profit sector was 13.1 percent, compared to 8.5 percent in the public services (CIPD 2010: 30). A study commissioned by People in Aid (2007:24) suggested that high staff turnover rates across the NGO sector in Honduras, India, Kenya and Pakistan were due to eight common factors: low salary, job insecurity, increase employment opportunities, personal safety and security, a lack of respect and appreciation, under-employment, a lack of development opportunities, and a poor working culture.
References


