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Rethinking Global Civil Society in an Era of a Rising China*

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Abstract: The concept of global civil society arose out of a language, culture and definition influenced by mainstream Western political philosophy and discourse, and the behaviour of Western NGOs who proliferated in the 20th century. The recent rise of Chinese social organizations internationally, who were born, developed and prospered in an authoritarian institutional environment with varying political values and norms that their Western counterparts, suggests a re-examination of our conception of global civil society. This article looks at the international activities of Chinese social organizations, and dissects how their behaviour challenges our understanding of the concept of global civil society.

Keywords: global civil society, China, NGOs, GONGOs, development

Introduction

There is an uncritical acceptance of the concept of global civil society. Scholarly discussions on global civil society presuppose that it encompasses characteristics of civic activity and associationism that is non-governmental in nature; possessing a certain brand of rights and norms; and, acting as a catalyst to check the other two sectors of society, namely, state institutions and the market (see Anderson and Rieff, 2005; Reimann, 2006; Scholte, 1999).

This understanding of global civil society is linked with the rise of a post-Cold War movement towards global governance with accompanying global rules and institutions (see Muetzelfeldt and Smith, 2002). Some have argued that the contemporary rise of global civil society is a product of a neo-liberal paradigm shift, due to rapid globalization that privileges market mechanisms. This, in turn, has created global governance gaps and provides space for civil society actors to assume roles that were once the exclusive domain of nation-states (see Bierman and Pattberg, 2008; Kaldor, 2003).

The rise of Chinese social organizations domestically in the past three decades, and the hyper-internationalization of their activities have urged us to re-examine the knowledge claims for this conceptual version of global civil society. Seemingly, Chinese social organizations, born, developed, and prospered, in an authoritarian institutional environment have varying characteristics than their Western counterparts. Foremost, they are not raised to act as a mechanism to check state activities and the market. To wit, this will be contra to the hidden rules for success for social organizations in the institutional context of China (see Tam and Hasmath, 2015). Chinese social organizations may even take the form of government-organized, non-governmental organizations (GONGOs), whereby they have an intimate and close relationship with the state in their activities (see Hasmath et al., 2016; Hsu et al., 2016). Finally, Chinese social organizations do not necessarily exhibit or share a similar brand of rights and norms that

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prevailing Western organizations possess. They are a reflection of China’s institutional understanding of rights and norms, and akin to their international counterparts, exhibit this understanding in their domestic and overseas programming and activities.

This article looks at how Chinese social organizations’ actions and behaviour internationally are changing our understanding of the concept of global civil society. In the first section, we discuss current conceptions of global civil society, and how it predominantly arose out of a language, culture and definition of civil society that was largely influenced by mainstream Western political philosophy and discourse. We also point to the folly of ascribing global civil society as simply civil society in an international context, which will be instructive in understanding Chinese social organizations’ role in global civil society. We then examine the rise of social organizations in China and their internationalization efforts. In this effort, we present five Chinese social organizations who are extending their activities in Africa. We thereafter analyze how their activities are influencing our conception of global civil society, and discuss the broader implications of our findings.

Framework

Global Civil Society is not Civil Society in an International Context

Mainstream Western political thought often characterizes civil society as the space between the state and family. Scholars looking at historical European epistemology suggest that civil society can acts as a negation to domestic state institutions. They point out civil society emerged in Enlightenment Europe where it was defined through its opposition of the ‘state of nature’ in modern contract theory; a realm where citizens’ interests could manifest (see McIlwaine, 1998). Philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Thomas Paine and Georg Hegel played a prominent role in developing this project of civil society.

Civil society was “rediscovered” and given contemporary relevance by intellectuals in Communist Eastern Europe in the 1980s who were engaged in anti-totalitarian struggle. Non-governmental organizations and civic associations attempted to foster a certain brand of democratic rights and responsibilities to engineer institutional changes in these jurisdictions (see Carothers and Barndt, 2000). This was also aptly seen in removing Marcos from the Philippines to bringing the end of the Derg era in Ethiopia. In short, civil society in this tradition is viewed as a mechanism to aggregate, represent, and articulate political and social interests (see Brysk, 2000); and in the process, bring forth transformative institutional and regime changes. As Rieff (1999, p. 12) elegantly puts it, ‘where civil society is absent, repressive, tyrannical, even genocidal forces are supposed to have a freer hand; where it is present, it is supposed to constitute a firebreak against war, exploitation and want.’

The roots of the concept of global civil society are harder to distinguish. There is very little historical precedence to describe the idea of a global civil society, and thus, scholars often look to the historical foundations of civil society to articulate the normative and prescriptive norms of global civil society – a red herring to say the least.

Typical of the majority of literature publish these days on the topic, is an implicit understanding that the actors of global civil society are those individuals and groups within the international society – such as international non-government organizations (INGOs) or trans-national networks of associations (TNAs) – that are mandated independently from nation-states (see Cooley and Ron, 2002; Smith and Wiest, 2005; Tarrow, 2001). Global civil society seeks to
fill a vacuum left by nation-states’ inactivity or lack of attention. The underlying residual effect of their activities is to strengthen the international and domestic public sphere, often at the expense of the nation-state.

Herein, global civil society takes on the characteristics found in the mainstream Western version of civil society. It involves civic associationism on a global scale, non-governmental organizations, and it seeks to afford change in negation or check of the international system of states and its various institutions.

If the mode of civil society involves negating domestic governmental institutions, global civil society lacks an international equivalent. There exists no international body, the United Nations system of institutions withstanding – which is not a trans-national government entity, but rather an inter-(domestic) governmental entity – that global civil society can negate. A trans-national government is one where the ‘common good’ exceeds the sum of individual state interests. In contrast, an inter-governmental institution, such as the United Nations, reflects the overlapping interests of member states. The point here is quite poignant. If and only if, we assume that international civic associationism seek to fill a void, to negate an international system of nation-states’ activities, then we are looking in the wrong place. The international system of nation-states does not have a universal trans-national government institution that has a mandate to afford total political and social change in the global context. You cannot negate something that does not exist. If and only if, we are conceiving global civil society as a negation to inter-governmentalism, then this is not really global civil society in action, but rather domestic civil society working to inspire change within a mode of inter-governmentalism. Thus, we must assume that the ‘global’ in global civil society does not exist. Either way, we must fashion the concept of global civil society away from the language, culture and definitions of civil society.

The Makings of a Global Civil Society

It is not surprising the literature on global civil society is relatively clear on one thing: the term is ‘fuzzy’ (Aneheir et al., 2001) and ‘is neither self-evident nor unprejudiced’ (Keane, 2001, p. 23). We can, however, acknowledge the possibilities of a global civil society: it is an assemblage of actors and organizations (Keane, 2003), but it is also a process (Kaldor, 2003). Nonetheless, for our purpose here, we seek to understand how Chinese social organizations through their efforts abroad contribute to global civil society. To do this, we draw upon Keane’s (2003) conception of global civil society as it provides an opportunity to assess how social organizations from an authoritarian system are contributing, altering or shying away from an idealized standard, in which Keane (2001) argues is a complex biosphere. A good starting point for a definition and composition of global civil society is to view it,

…as a dynamic non-governmental system of interconnected socio-economic institutions that straddle the whole earth, and that have a complex effect that are felt in its four corners. Global civil society is neither a static object nor a fait accompli. It is an unfinished project that consists of sometimes thick, sometimes thinly stretched networks, pyramids and hub-and-spoke clusters of socio-economic institutions and actors who organize themselves across borders, with the deliberate aim of drawing the world together in new ways. These non-governmental institutions and actors organize themselves across borders with the deliberate aim of drawing the world together in new ways. These non-governmental institutions and actors tend to pluralize power and to problematize violence; consequently, their peaceful or
“civil” effects are felt everywhere, here and there, far and wide, to and from local areas, through wider regions, to the planetary level itself. (Keane, 2003, p. 8)

With this vast expanse of thick and thin networks that comprises global civil society, there will inevitably be tensions due to the variety of actors that inhabit the space. We should therefore not mistake the terrain of global civil society to be devoid of power relations or hierarchy. Keane (2001, p. 23) further elaborates:

This complex biosphere looks and feels expansive and polyarchic, full of horizontal push and pull, vertical conflict, and compromise, precisely because it comprises a bewildering variety of interacting habitats and species: organizations, civic and business initiatives, coalitions, social movements, linguistic communities, and cultural identities.

Given this grand ideal, Keane seeks to qualify these assertions by giving global civil society five main qualities.

The first quality is that global civil society is more than just an extra-governmental space – it is the qualities that it possesses as an institution. While it is a non-governmental space, Keane warns us against the idea of rejecting the market as force in global civil society. He suggests capitalism is a driving force for how the actors and organizations of global civil society operate and behave (Keane, 2003, p. 80).

The second quality is that it possesses a set of norms as established by interlinked social processes. Its structure is highly complexed and its growth is a result of structured social actions which are intricate and are overlapping.

Through this social process come the establishment of norms and this leads us to the third of Keane’s feature of global civil society: civility. Civility refers to the abhorrence of violence and acceptance of strangers.

The fourth quality of global civil society is that it is pluralistic. Yet, pluralism can lead to conflict, and therefore it is not a ‘global community’, rather it is heterogeneous and exhibits a push against unity (Keane, 2003, p. 15).

The fifth quality is that global civil society is socially produced and is global, where Keane (2003, p. 18) likens it to vast dynamic biosphere.

We will use Keane’s five main features of global civil society to analyze how Chinese social organizations recent activities abroad have added to, modified or confirmed his conception. We acknowledge the inherent problem with our task. Critics may argue that the selection of Keane’s ideal type will lead to failure as precisely we start with an ideal type of global civil society. To this we respond empirical observations need to be informed by theory and vice versa, and while we whole-heartedly agree there is still a general fuzziness to the concept, we believe Keane has set out five clear attributes of global civil society for us to undertake such a task. In the next section we present the landscape in which Chinese social organizations emerged and expanded overseas.

The Domestic Behaviour of Chinese Social Organizations

The number of Chinese social organizations has risen rapidly in the past three decades. Only 4,446 organizations were registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs in 1988 (Xu and Zhao, 2010, p. 9), but by 2013, there were 546,000 registered organizations (Ministry of Civil
Affairs, 2013), with an estimated 3 million more unregistered. Due to the administrative difficulties in registration, many organizations avoided this hurdle by registering as a for-profit entity, or simply did not register at all.

Recent regulations, namely the Charity and Overseas NGO laws, have created a less free civil society and severely reduced the influence of foreign actors on the domestic affairs of China. From another perspective, if the laws are enforced as designed it will provide a more accountable and predictable home-grown civil society for the state. Both laws follow the global wave of new regulations, from Russia to Ethiopia, governing social organizations’ behaviour. Article 109 of the Charity Law is particularly worrisome when NGOs are considered in the realms of national security, whereby their activities can be curbed if the state deems they are “endangering national security or the public interest”. Presumably, this aspect of the law can be used by state authorities to justify investigating or closing the operations of social organizations who are perceived by the state to threaten the legitimacy of their activities.

This is an affront to the mainstream Western conception of civil society which insists one of the main roles of the sector is to act as a check and balance to the state. While this function has been largely subdued in contemporary China – whereby the majority of social organizations currently operating in China are social and welfare oriented non-state providers, and not overt activists – the hope, notably among Western observers, has been a move towards this antagonistic model.

Reducing foreign actors influence on the domestic affairs of China is also a main goal of the laws. NGOs can, and have been used by foreign states, as a means to promote their objectives, values and norms – even to the extent of toppling regimes in the contemporary era as discussed previously. Chinese leaders are acutely aware of this potential, and thus, the Overseas NGO Law strictly stipulate that in order for a foreign NGO to legally operate, it must establish a permanent representative office registered in China that has been approved by a government affiliated sponsor. The law further stipulates that foreign NGOs cannot conduct fundraising activities or accept donations in China. Moreover, foreign staff must not exceed 50 percent of the total number of an NGO staff and foreign staff cannot concurrently work for another NGO. Suffice to say, the new regulations stifle the proliferation of foreign NGOs in China and potentially foster more space for larger domestic NGOs to operate.

Despite the charges of a less free civil society, the new laws allow for greater accountability and predictability in domestic NGOs activities. Foremost, is the notion that social organizations can form a professional association (Article 24 of the Charity Law). This is a welcome turn of events, that allow social organizations to come together in an institutional framework, forging networks that share best/worst practices and norms – thereby hyper-professionalizing the industry (see Hasmath and Hsu, 2014, 2016; Hsu and Hasmath, 2017). This is a shorthand way of suggesting that there will be greater predictability in the activities of social organizations by virtue of hyper professionalizing.

The fundraising aspect of the Charity Law requires a social organization to be separated into two classes: (1) fundraising through public channels; and (2) non-public fundraising, viz. accepting private gifts and donations. This dual class system allows social organizations that previously had public fundraising status to keep their privileged status, while other organizations need to wait for a two-year period. This setup effectively maintains a two-tiered system, in which social organizations with public fundraising status (e.g. GONGOs or NGOs with strong government connections) are advantaged, while other organizations have to prove their credentials.
In terms of transparency, the Charity Law (notably Chapter Seven) will require a level of reporting that would make it difficult for smaller organizations (the majority of domestic NGOs) that lack staff, resources and expertise to conduct this level of reporting (see Hasmath and Hsu, 2008). While this is a common situation in other jurisdictions, what makes the Chinese situation interesting, is that this – coupled with the fundraising aspect – will encourage larger domestic social organizations to survive, and crowd out smaller ones. This is not necessarily a terrible turn of events in the short term, as it incentivizes consolidation of already scarce resources to larger NGOs, who can use their economies of scale to execute their domestic mandate. Looking ahead, this may be a boom for larger domestic Chinese social organizations who have aspirations to go abroad.

In short, China’s Charity and Overseas NGO Laws while creating a less free civil society, allows the Chinese corporatist state (see Hsu and Hasmath, 2014), to reduce foreign actors’ influence, and provide greater accountability and predictability of a home-grown civil society that is regionally pluralistic in its activities and strategies (see Hsu et al., 2017). Over time, this predictability provides space for the state to further trust domestic civil society actors, while simultaneously, allows the Party a greater strangle-hold of power in China.

The Internationalization of Chinese Social Organizations

Rapid economic growth, in the past three and a half decades, has transformed China’s position as a recipient of international aid to a donor nation. China’s overseas development assistance has mirrored its state-run commercial investments and trade activities. Thus, the majority of China’s overseas development assistance is directed at nations, notably in Africa and Southeast Asia, where it has a substantial stake in accessing natural resources and low cost human capital. This assistance is largely in the form of concessional or low-interest loans, and government-financed or government-subsidized infrastructure projects.

Viewed from a different lens, China’s development assistance has provided political support to regimes that are otherwise ignored or condemned by Western nations. It thus has the potential to strengthen existing authoritarian regimes, and forestall or even reverse democratization.

Nevertheless, state actors are not the only ones involved in China’s internationalization. Chinese social organizations, too, have begun to go abroad, setting up in Africa and Southeast Asia. They are funded in part by Chinese state-owned enterprises and the Chinese state (in the form of GONGOs) further muddying the difficult distinction between state and non-state actors in China's overseas presence.

While there are no official statistics about the number of Chinese social organizations in Africa and Southeast Asia, an extremely conservative estimate exceeds 100, though perhaps as few as 10-15 have permanent operations and local offices. Chinese social organizations tend to operate in jurisdictions in Africa and Southeast Asia where China has commercial and investment interests, which allows them to tap into the infrastructure already established by Chinese state-owned and private companies. In addition, it ensures lower transaction costs, and provides a tacit consent from the Chinese government – which is helpful in managing domestic, personal and institutional relationships – to operate in these overseas jurisdictions.

The activities of Chinese social organizations are generally social and welfare oriented, covering a multitude of sectors ranging from healthcare, education and the environment. Poverty alleviation programs, agricultural technology and transfer of expertise exchanges have been developed by social organizations such as China NGO Network for International Exchanges,
Chinese Youth Development Foundation, and the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation, under the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). Human resources training programs between Chinese and African social organizations are now a common feature, and the China Red Cross and the Chinese Medical Association have teamed up with African social organizations to conduct training courses for locals, and send trained personnel from China to Africa for hands-on support. Environmental protection is another new area of engagement. Some Chinese social organizations have launched long-term cooperation with their African counterparts, especially in the areas of disease prevention, AIDS treatment and maternal care.

Although most Chinese social organizations do not have permanent offices established in Africa, and have a tendency to work in an ad-hoc manner, conducting projects created for a particular purpose, there are a number of social organizations that have established sustained work in Africa. For instance, the Red Cross Society of China (中国红十字会总会), Project Hope for Africa developed by the World Eminence Chinese Business Association (WECBA) in cooperation with the China Youth Development Foundation (CYDF中国青少年发展基金会) of the Chinese Communist Youth League, International Development Department of the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation (CFPA中国扶贫基金会), the Chinese-African People's Friendship Association (中国非洲人民友好协会秘书处), Amity Foundation (爱德基金会), Chinese Medical Association (CDMA中华医学会-首页), Ark of Love (爱之方舟), China HIV/AIDS Information Network (CHAIN, 全国艾滋病信息资源网络), Beijing Volunteers Federation (北京市志愿者联合会), Volunteers Working Committee of the China Association of Social Workers (中国社会工作协会志愿者工作委员会), Green River’s (绿色江河), China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, or China International Center for Economic and Technical Exchanges (中国国际经济技术交流中心). Apart from these social organizations, several national and regional commerce chambers like the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, as well as academic institutions such as the Chinese Society of Asian and African Studies are conducting projects in Africa.

While Chinese social organizations in Africa receive strong Chinese government support, state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private businesses are also extending financial support. In fact, Chinese companies are now the biggest financiers of social projects in Africa, providing an alternative financial channel for the internationalization efforts of Chinese social organizations. Chinese businesses in Africa often contract Chinese social organizations to logistically undertake projects under the guise of their corporate social responsibility (CSR). For example, Hainan Airlines has been helping cure cataract patients in Africa since 2010, one year after the Shenzhen-based airliner opened its Beijing-Dubai-Luanda route. The program, China-Africa Brightness Action, is sponsored by Hainan Airlines and Anhui Foreign Economic Construction Group with help from doctors at the Beijing-based, Tongren Hospital. The project, originally started in China's Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, has treated more than 2,000 patients in Africa. Huawei Technologies and ZTE Corporation, two high-tech giants in China, have also undertaken various CSR projects in partnership with Chinese social organizations in Africa. Taking a cue from the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in 2000, many Chinese companies are spreading their wings in Africa and are fast becoming vital partners for Chinese social organizations in the region. There are now more than 3,000 Chinese enterprises in more than 10 African nations and countless small private businesses, which, will be an important source of support for Chinese social organizations.

Compared to social organizations from Western nations, it seems easier for Chinese social organizations to fit their skills into African society, as poverty alleviation was a much more recent event in China than in the West. However, civil society in China is young, and for this reason Chinese social organizations are less experienced, short of international talent, and knowledge about running projects in Africa (see Hsu et al., 2016). Western social organizations have been in Africa much longer, have an extensive network, a better knowledge of the local society, and thus find it easier to get involved in the local community. Moreover, due to the differences in language, culture, political systems, and concepts, Chinese social organizations often find it difficult to get involved in Africa. Therefore, the biggest obstacle in entering Africa may be the limits of their own capacity. Although Chinese social organizations have been expanding rapidly in the last few years, organizations with a truly international presence like Western ones have yet to appear.

One of the comparative advantages Chinese social organizations have in Africa is that they have a tendency not to overtly interfere with African governments’ internal affairs, unlike some of their Western counterparts. For example, in April 2014 Western NGOs in Kampala were vocal in criticizing the Ugandan government’s draft of a law criminalizing homosexuality. Uganda’s Minister of Internal Affairs warned these NGOs that they had no right to interfere with domestic matters. Such incidences create tension and wariness on the part of African authorities towards Western social organizations, and the arrival of the Chinese promises a hope for a different approach.

Where governments are fragile, particularly in post-conflict environments, an independent civil society can be viewed as fostering political opposition and a threat to the viability of incumbent regimes. In reaction, a wave of new laws have been enacted amongst Africa nations to maintain tight government oversight and control over the activities and structure of civil society organizations, e.g. Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda, Zambia, Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe. Interestingly, Chinese social organizations’ activities seemingly proliferate in these nations, for example the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation operates in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Zambia and Sudan, the Red Cross Society of China in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, or the Chinese-African People's Friendship Association in Ethiopia, Mali and Uganda.

In this context, we further highlight the specific case of five social organizations who have internationalized their activities in Africa below.

The Chinese-African People's Friendship Association

The Chinese-African People’s Friendship Association (中国非洲人民友好协会秘书处) is a national people’s organization of the People’s Republic of China. Founded in April 1960 on the initiative of 17 national people’s organizations including the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, All-China Federation of Trade Unions, All-China Youth Federation and All-China Women’s Federation, the Chinese-African People’s Friendship Association is a GONGO.

The main tasks of the Chinese-African People's Friendship Association include: (1) establishing and developing cooperation with organizations and local communities in Africa; (2) promoting non-governmental cooperation in the economy, trade, society, education, science and technology between China and Africa; (3) conducting China-Africa non-governmental cultural exchanges; (4) facilitating exchanges and cooperation between Chinese and African local governments, and promoting the establishment of sister-city relations between Chinese cities and
provinces and their counterparts in Africa; (5) carrying out public interest activities promoting China-Africa friendship; and, (6) working in all fields related to the cooperation between Chinese and African people.

It is interesting to note the route that the Chinese-African People’s Friendship Association takes to go abroad and establish its activities in Africa. Contrary to received wisdom, the projects do not start from China, or the Chinese government, but they predominantly start from Chinese companies operating in Africa. If a Chinese company, most likely an SOE, wants to implement a civil society project in Africa, it will first turn to the Chinese-African People’s Friendship Association for assistance. The Chinese-African People's Friendship Association will then contact a relevant Chinese GONGO to assist in implementing the project. While it is possible they will contact an independent Chinese NGO, for the most part, a GONGO is targeted for two reasons: a GONGO will normally have better state contacts and a more stable source of funding.

The Chinese-African People’s Friendship Association does not have a permanent office in Africa, yet. However, it partners with local African friendship associations, e.g. Ghana-China Friendship Association, Association of Local Government Authorities of Kenya, or South Africa-China People’s Friendship Association. Currently it cooperates with over 20 local African NGO partners.

**Beijing NGO Association for International Exchanges**

Another GONGO, the Beijing NGO Association for International Exchanges (北京市民间组织国际交流协会) operates under the Beijing People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries. The Beijing NGO Association for International Exchanges was established in 2007 as a non-profit social organization, and was co-founded by local Chinese NGOs in various fields. There are 69 group members at present.

The purpose of Beijing NGO Association for International Exchanges is to promote exchanges and cooperation between Chinese NGOs in Beijing and international NGOs. The main functions of the Association include attending UN conferences and other international conferences, receiving delegations, holding international events, applying for international organization memberships, opening up new channels of people to people exchanges, developing promotion and research, and organizing training and lectures.

Since its establishment, Beijing NGO Association for International Exchanges has sent delegations to 76 nations. During their visits aboard, the delegates attended international conferences to promote the international image of NGOs in Beijing, including the UN ECOSCO high-level meeting, the annual meeting of UNDPI, the UN Climate Change Conference, the Global Summit of Women, the World Future Energy Summit, the World Social Forum, the World Family Summits, the World Rural Forum, the Asia-Europe People’s Forum and the China-Africa People's Forum. Meanwhile, the Association has received more than 100 delegations from different international organizations over 120 nations including UN officials, leading ministerial officials of foreign countries and heads of international organizations. Beijing NGO Association for International Exchanges has also organized a wide array of international conferences and activities, such as the 3rd United Nations NGO Pacific-Asia Region Symposium, the Public Health Forum, the 4th United Nations NGO Pacific-Asia Region Symposium, the 7th Asia-Europe People’s Forum, the Global Summit of Women, and the Beijing International Forum on People to People Friendship. Through these events Beijing NGO Association for International Exchanges has gradually set up a platform to facilitate international
exchanges of local Chinese NGOs, ensuring a stable development of people to people exchanges in Beijing. In March 2010, Beijing NGO Association for International Exchanges became a group member of the China NGO Network for International Exchanges and the affiliation has allowed it to provide a broader international exchange platform for Chinese NGOs in Beijing.

The Beijing NGO Association for International Exchanges GONGO’s route to go abroad is different from that of the Chinese-African People's Friendship Association. The projects in Africa do not start from Chinese companies operating in Africa, but from African-based NGOs themselves. African NGOs, which want to implement a project, turn to the Beijing NGO Association for International Exchanges for assistance. At that stage, Beijing NGO Association for International Exchanges attempt to secure resources, including funding and staff. If it is unable to gather enough resources and implement the project on its own, it contacts other Chinese NGOs to do it on their behalf.

The Beijing NGO Association for International Exchanges aims to cooperate with the largest and most influential local African NGOs, through which it can have access to other smaller local partners.

**China NGO Network for International Exchanges**

China NGO Network for International Exchanges (中国民间组织国际交流促进会) was founded in October 2005. The association has 45 member organizations (of which 25 have the consultative status with the United Nations) and 26 individual council memberships.

As an NGO network engaging in promoting international exchanges and cooperation, the China NGO Association aims to widely promote Chinese NGOs abroad, and encourage Chinese NGOs to have more exchanges and cooperation with their counterparts globally. The route it takes to work abroad is similar to the Beijing NGO Association for International Exchanges.

The areas of work and expertise include networking and linking up African NGOs with Chinese NGOs from various social fields such as social development, science and education, culture and art, medical and health care, environmental protection, democracy and human rights, policy advocacy and law, business and commerce, public welfare and charity, poverty alleviation and disability assistance, as well as women and youth affairs. The organization’s projects in Africa are mainly funded by its member organizations.

**China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation**

China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation (中国扶贫基金会) was founded in March 1989 and commenced work in Africa in 2009. The aim of the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation is to support communities and individuals living in poverty, improve productivity, healthcare and living standards.

The China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation has launched a comprehensive assistance scheme with a budget of RMB 60 million (~USD 8.81 million) to improve the mortality rates in pregnancy and childbirth in Sudan, which are largely due to insufficient medical facilities and trained staff. The social organization’s project in Sudan aims to build 13 hospitals, and in the long term, provide other medical facilities, staff training, volunteer coordinating and hospital operating.

With Sudan as a starting point, the project aims to establish a model of maternal and child health care system across Africa, notably in Ethiopia, Chad, and Kenya. Funded by private and...
corporate donors, the organization also plans to establish offices in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Zambia and Sudan with the attendant aim to provide direct assistance to vulnerable groups, mainly children and women.

**China Youth Development Foundation**

China Youth Development Foundation (中国青少年发展基金会) was founded in October 1989, and commenced work in Africa in 2010. The China Youth Development Foundation aims to help young people build capacity and to improve the environment for their growth by providing aid services, giving a voice to the interests of young people and by carrying out social advocacy. In 2011 the China-Africa Hope Project was launched in Kenya, Burundi and Rwanda to build 1000 primary schools.

Project Hope is the flagship program of the China Youth Development Foundation. Through Project Hope, the social organization seeks to improve educational facilities and improve teaching quality in poorer regions. The organization’s projects in Africa are funded mainly by Chinese companies, including Tianjiu Scholar-Merchants Group, Insight Holdings Group, Mingda Yihang Group, Fametal Mining, Winnerway, Timeshine, Qunli Coal and Cyber Real Estate.

**Discussion and Analysis**

The internationalization efforts and activities of Chinese social organizations beg us to rethink our understanding of global civil society. Returning to Keane’s five qualities of global civil society, we see that the wide-ranging behaviour of Chinese social organizations abroad does challenge this conception.

Foremost, the non-governmental space that Keane professes is directly challenged by virtue of Chinese GONGOs entering the global civil society space. In Keane’s defense however, he did recognize that market can play a role in global civil society, and thus, he did not subscribe to a hard view that global civil society is strictly separate from state or enterprise activities. The increasing activities of Chinese GONGOs internationally suggest an expansion of global ‘civic associationism’ which may influence international affairs. This exploitation is perhaps most noted in Chinese GONGOs participation in the United Nations’ meetings where they have received observer or consultative status. Such acts manipulate the system where the space ought to be greatly reserved for civil society groups that are relatively independent of the state. It is often the case that when a Chinese GONGO is invited to give evidence, advice or testimony to international organizations, there is a potential hypocrisy that the Chinese GONGO is actually representing the national government’s view through the prism of its organization. Or take the example of some of the Chinese GONGOs highlighted in this article, operating in a host jurisdiction under the auspices of a civil society actor, and conducting development work with local beneficiaries: in this scenario, is state sovereignty infringed given the close links between the Chinese GONGO and the Chinese government? A Chinese GONGO which is operationally similar to the government does pose a closer degree of non-separation which can be exploited by the Chinese government to its global strategic advantage.

Furthermore, the supposed universal set of norms in the formation of global civil society, albeit rooted in mainstream Western political thought, is turned on its head. The growing presence of Chinese social organizations globally has some important implications. Western
NGOs have traditionally been viewed as “agents of export” in terms of best practices and norms. They are seen as builders of capacity in host nations, alternative social service providers, and advocates of liberal democracy. In seeking to fulfill these functions, Western NGOs have worked to train and socialize local NGOs in host jurisdictions. They have taught a “Western model” of state-society relations, whereby NGOs act as a watchdog and sometimes antagonist to the government. This presents NGOs as countervailing forces vis-à-vis the state, and sees their proliferation as a basis for future democratization. NGOs possess a range of resources and power — ranging from material to moral — and have been put forward as agents of socio-political change by the NGOs themselves, by multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and IMF, and by national governments through their development agencies.

However, in the Chinese case, the NGOs doing the advocacy work and programming have emerged from an authoritarian institutional environment, in which they have adapted to tight state supervision and limitations. As mentioned, many Chinese NGOs find it difficult to register as an NGO with the Ministry of Civil Affairs due to burdensome requirements. The domestic environment for Chinese NGOs can potentially serve as a guide for understanding Chinese NGOs’ activities abroad (although we are quick to caution that the domestic civil society in China does not necessarily equate to our constitution of the global civil society). Projected out further, presumably, Chinese NGOs have the strong potential to offer valuable best/worst practices and lessons to help their local host nation counterparts to operate more effectively under similarly illiberal states. In turn, Chinese NGOs may face criticism from those who hope to use humanitarian and development aid to promote political change, and fear that Chinese NGOs will strengthen authoritarian tendencies or reduce the presumed liberal-democratic influence of Western NGOs and governments.

Civility, Keane’s third quality, is thus compromised, whereby Chinese social organizations and Western ones are in effect competing for the attention of their host jurisdiction. We found evidence of this in our study looking at Chinese NGOs activities in Ethiopia, whereby local NGOs and governments would effectively have both Chinese and Western NGOs compete for their attention (see Hsu et al., 2016). Where local civil society representatives have preference over Western or Chinese assistance, this may place the two at opposing ends of the spectrum with the potential of endangering civility.

Suffice to say, the hyper-internationalization of Chinese social organizations has fostered an equally hyper-pluralized global civil society. Keane was correct to suggest that this can lead to conflict given there are competing visions of the ‘good’ civic life. We are yet to see this conflict play out in a vivid manner (Hsu, 2017), notably since Chinese social organizations abroad generally engage in one-off, project-based interventions in their host jurisdictions. Such one-off projects are easy to control, lead to a loss of institutional knowledge, and often the solutions in host nations are short-term and temporary. Indeed, the emergence of Chinese NGOs on the global scene is contributing to the pluralization of global civil society.

Yet, as we have discussed above, the proliferation of Chinese GONGOs does not appear to fit with Keane’s fifth element, that global civil society is socially produced. Indeed, Chinese GONGOs have emerged from the state and thus, it is difficult to argue such organizations have emerged independently from society.
Conclusion

Problematic to the concept of global civil society is its acceptance by a community of experts from a distinct Western-centric language, culture and definitions of civil society. The nature of Western liberal-democratic nation-states allows for an explicit respect for the division between state and civil society. Henceforth, global civil society can play a relatively greater role in Western liberal-democratic nation-states due to the tradition and acceptance of this fact.

Nonetheless, in many parts of the non-Western world, the role global civil society plays with the nation-state will change in form and context. The overarching need to influence the state by separating and negating from it, as found in Western liberal-democratic nation-states, may not be so important in non-Western contexts. The case of China aptly demonstrates this, whereby the state is the sole bearer of most change, and the idea of empowering or creating a separate civil society sector will be a foreign one.

Put differently, the origins of most social organizations operating internationally, at present, can be traced to Western democratic nations. There is thus a general path-dependency for contemporary attention to view social organizations development efforts as antecedent to support and strengthen democratic institutions and values around the globe. But, what happens when social organizations that have solely developed within an authoritarian political context expand their operations abroad? Chinese social organizations, who were established and socialized in a highly regulated authoritarian environment, have recently begun to expand to other nations with different political environments, institutional norms and local rules of conduct.

What does this mean for China’s contribution to global civil society, and perhaps stepping up to fill the possible U.S. vacated role as a global leader? First, the Overseas NGO Law has the potential to restrict foreign funding to grassroots domestic Chinese NGOs, thus in part constraining the opportunity for non-GONGOs to develop, expand and eventually conduct activities abroad. Second, if Chinese GONGOs are the primary type of organizations undertaking international work, then the presumed intimate ties to the state may limit the credibility of these organizations operating in many international jurisdictions. Third, as to whether the Chinese may fill the potential power vacuum left by the United States of America under President Donald J. Trump, from the perspective of development aid projects, existing literature and initial research suggests neither Chinese NGOs nor GONGOs are seeking to champion global civil society and the related liberal values associated with it.
References


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