

Positive-Sum Reciprocal Engagement between China's Grassroots NGOs and the Local State

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by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores state-society relations in China by focusing on the interactions between grassroots NGOs and local government departments. It presents the notion of positive-sum reciprocal engagement as one form of relationship that can emerge between the state and social organizations. Such engagement can be characterized as a dynamic and interactive process implying proximity, communication, joint action, mutual influence, mutual benefit and mutual empowerment, resulting in added value for society.

Drawing on fieldwork carried out in six rural or semi-rural Chinese localities, including interviews and questionnaires with local government departments and indigenous grassroots NGOs, this study seeks to identify the conditions under which positive-sum reciprocal engagement is likely to emerge. It finds that the presence of reformist officials, the strengthening of NGO capacity in framing issues to open social spaces and to engage in effective action while communicating the results of such action are particularly important to establishment of reciprocal engagement. Significant structural or contextual factors include positive associational experience and openness in the locality.

This study also explores the extent to which grassroots NGOs are able to affect the formulation and implementation of policy at the local level, and finds policy influence to be one of the significant outcomes of positive-sum reciprocal engagement. One mechanism through which policy influence occurs is in the context of a mass-line model of communication, in which NGOs participate in discourses on social issues and act as channels for the conveyance of policy information and suggestions. Grassroots NGOs are also able to model innovations and contribute to policy formulation and reform in carrying out concrete programs, which is made possible by an environment characterized by policy flexibility and amenable to experimental points.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Methodology

1.1 Introduction

Most studies of China's development focus either solely on the state or on markets, neglecting the important space between them. Studies of the local state are especially scarce, though some analyses do achieve the important purpose of shedding light on the relationship between the local state and society, especially with regard to economic activity. Studies of the non-market, non-state sector, have, however, been largely inconclusive about the nature of social organizations in China and their relationship with the state.

While China's burgeoning non-government, non-profit sector has been hailed in some quarters as a harbinger of democratization and rights promotion, and dismissed in others as a weak force controlled by government, civil society organizations are too diverse to be characterized by theories of either civil society or corporatism. Scholarly efforts to define and describe this sector through a single model have led to lively debates, precisely because conclusions depend on both underlying ideological and normative assumptions as well as the cross section of organizations selected for study.

Even globally, 'much of the literature on local NGOs, for instance, is concerned with those groups that are involved with challenging the state and local elites. This bias ignores the diversity of the NGO field.'¹ Given this diversity, observers looking for evidence of corporatist control in China find it in studies of 'government-organized NGOs' or semi-official organizations. Those looking for signs of an 'independent civil society' rising up against the

¹ W. F. Fisher, "Doing Good? The Politics and Antipolitics of NGO Practices," *Annual Review of Anthropology* (1997), 439-464.

state find it in groups founded by urban elites,² dissidents or intellectuals educated abroad. While the debate about which theory more accurately reflects the Chinese case has been inconclusive, what both frameworks share is a preoccupation with the degree of autonomy and independence enjoyed by Chinese social organizations. This approach fails to adequately capture the nuances of the state-social organization relationship, but more importantly, it does not tell us much about the implications of this dynamic relationship for state-society relations and the Chinese regime in general. It is too tempting to simplify the relationship and see it as unidirectional. Chinese grassroots organizations are not mute victims of an all-powerful repressive regulatory regime. Neither are they fully autonomous representatives of the grassroots challenging the state.

The problem is compounded by researchers' access. Within this varied sector, little is known about China's small grassroots non-governmental organizations, many of which are unregistered, operate in rural areas, and do not benefit from preexisting ties to government or market forces. Because of the lack of official data on these organizations, and because they are less accessible than larger, better known organizations in urban centers, there is a paucity of empirical work on these grassroots NGOs, even though they constitute the bulk of the third sector, both in terms of numbers and distribution, and, according to some scholars, represent 'the most meaningful indicator of civil society.'³ Thus, there may be a selection bias in existing research on social organizations in China, the conclusions of which do not take the experiences of this significant sector into account.

In an attempt to transcend the confines of a debate centered on autonomy and to observe the variations in state-social organization relations within China, as well as to bring to

² By urban elites I mean intellectual, social and political elites that live in urban centers, are financially well off and well-educated, as contrasted to the vast majority of Chinese population.

³ Q. Ma, "The Governance of NGOs in China since 1978: How Much Autonomy?" *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2002), 305.

light one particularly interesting form that this relationship can take, this study draws on the literature on the mutual empowerment of state and society, and determinants of embeddedness and synergy between government actors and citizens to construct and refine the notion of positive-sum reciprocal engagement. It then seeks to uncover the primary determinants of reciprocal engagement between grassroots NGOs and local government agencies, and discover the effects of such engagement on government policy and practice.

A number of conditions posited to give rise to reciprocal engagement in the relevant literature and based on initial field experience were defined as potential factors or independent variables. These factors are divided into three categories: those related to characteristics of the local state, those arising from characteristics of the NGOs, and those that are features of the social and political context. The study takes a case-oriented comparative approach in identifying which factors or conditions significantly contribute to positive-sum reciprocal engagement between grassroots NGOs and local government agencies. Second, this research gathers evidence about the extent of influence that grassroots NGOs, particularly when they are participants in positive-sum reciprocal engagement, can exert on the formulation and implementation of local policy.

After having provided an introduction and background to this study, this chapter presents key research questions, the structure of the thesis and a summary of findings, as well as the contributions made by this study. It then discusses the research methodology and approach used, as well as data collection and analytical methods.

1.1.1 Key Research Questions

Are there cases in which relationships between local government agencies and grassroots NGOs are characterized by positive-sum reciprocal engagement? What conditions

give rise to such engagement? These questions are explored at two interrelated levels of analysis: the organizational characteristics of the state and non-state agencies in question, and the social and political context in which they operate. Potentially significant factors or conditions related to characteristics of grassroots NGOs include the strength of the organization's institutional capacity, as manifested by an encompassing, broad mission, coherence and formality, development of human resources, ability to mobilize funds, to utilize media, to frame issues, and the localized or official background of the founder or director. It is also observed in the effectiveness of the organization's programs. State centered factors include the strength of local public institutions, levels of cohesiveness, competence and engagement, public accountability and the presence or absence of 'reformists' in local government. Factors related to the social and political context include the degree and quality of prior associational experience, such as the number of official, international and grassroots social organizations and the length of time they have been operating in the locality, and whether this experience has been positive, neutral or negative. Other contextual factors, such as income, poverty, and the ethnic make-up of the local population also contribute to such characteristics as openness or sensitivity.

Another set of related questions has to do with policy. In China, social development policies often take the form of broad guidelines sent down by the central government, granting a certain degree of discretion to local governments in how they are applied. Even when specific directives are delivered, they are not necessarily applied uniformly. What, then, is the effect—if any—of the existence of positive-sum reciprocal engagement between grassroots NGOs and local government agencies on the way that policy is implemented? Can instances be observed in which grassroots development organizations have been able to influence local government policy or the discourse on development issues, either through dialogue or through

the examples of their programs and their results as experiments? Related to this, what are the broader implications of the functions that such organizations play in policy formulation and implementation for the regime as whole?

1.1.2 Thesis Structure and Summary of Findings

Following this introductory chapter, *Chapter 2* evaluates the strengths and limitations of the existing theoretical frameworks and literature on NGOs in China, particularly theories of civil society and corporatism. The discussion includes an examination of the underlying assumptions of these frameworks, particularly those related to autonomy, cooptation, power and the political. It then outlines the theoretical approach taken in this study by considering emerging literature focusing on mutual empowerment of state and society, including the concepts of synergy, embedded autonomy and entwinement, as potentially useful for seeing the dynamics of local state-NGO interactions.

Chapter 3 begins by illustrating, refining and analyzing the concept of positive-sum reciprocal engagement as one particular type of relationship that can emerge between grassroots NGOs and local government agencies. The notion of positive-sum reciprocal engagement is defined as a dynamic and interactive process in which parties are proximate, engage in communication and dialogue, jointly undertake action, and influence and benefit each other, resulting in added value for society. It then discusses the specific ways in which such engagement is mutually empowering for grassroots NGOs and local government departments.

The three subsequent chapters of this dissertation seek to explain the sources of variation in the emergence of positive-sum reciprocal engagement across a number of Chinese localities. They look at the preconditions and antecedents that facilitate the emergence of such

engagement, roughly dividing these conditions into three broad categories, each of which is taken up in a separate chapter: conditions related to characteristics of the state and the strength of public institutions, those related to characteristics of grassroots NGOs, and those having to do with the social and political context of each locality. The analysis draws on 119 semi-structured, formal and informal interviews; questionnaires, fieldwork observations carried out between 2009 and 2012; a review of NGO materials, relevant bureaucratic documents; government websites, newspapers, national statistical yearbooks and attendance at numerous government and NGO conferences.

Chapter 4 seeks to determine the extent to which characteristics of public institutions in a given locality are responsible for the presence, or absence, of positive-sum reciprocal engagement between grassroots NGOs and local government departments. Among the conditions related to public institutions, the existence of ‘reformists’ in public agencies proved to significantly facilitate the occurrence of positive-sum reciprocal engagement.

Chapter 5 explores the extent to which characteristics of the social organizations in question—grassroots NGOs—are responsible for the creation of reciprocal relationships. This study finds that of the factors posited to contribute to the emergence of reciprocal engagement, those having to do with the characteristics of grassroots NGOs were of greatest significance. These characteristics fall into two broad categories: the inherent characteristics of the organization and its members, and institutional capabilities that are developed over time. Among these, the ability of grassroots NGOs to frame issues in such a way as to open political spaces had the greatest impact on positive-sum reciprocal engagement.

Chapter 6 discusses the relevance of factors associated with the social and political context of each locality in contributing to the emergence of reciprocal engagement. Such factors include the existence and positivity (or negativity) of previous associational experience

in the locality, income and inequality levels, the proportion and diversity of the ethnic minority population, and so on. This study finds that previous positive associational experience proved to be of the greatest importance in facilitating the emergence of future reciprocal engagement between grassroots NGOs and local government agencies. While economic and demographic conditions such as income and ethnic structure, as well as the quality of prior associational experience, did not directly impact reciprocal outcomes, they did contribute to whether a locality was characterized by sensitivity or openness. Openness was found to facilitate the emergence of positive-sum reciprocal engagement between grassroots NGOs and local government departments.

The second set of research questions is taken up in *Chapter 7*, in which the context of policy formulation and implementation in China is described, and the extent to which the grassroots development organizations studied participate in this process is evaluated. Certain forms of policy influence are found to be one of the significant outcomes of positive-sum reciprocal engagement. Grassroots NGOs involved in such relationships are able to influence discourses on social issues and channel policy information and suggestions in the context of a mass-line model of communication between state and society. Policy flexibility and the official use of experimental points also allow them to contribute to policy formulation and reform through the innovations they model as they implement programs.

The final chapter, *Chapter 8*, is dedicated to a synthesis of the interplay of factors contributing to positive-sum reciprocal engagement into an integrated analytical framework. Such engagement most directly emerges from the institutional capabilities that grassroots NGOs are able to develop—in particular the ability to frame issues—as well as the effectiveness of the programs they implement. The presence of reformists that are willing to provide initial support or benign neglect of NGO actions in local government departments is

another enabling factor. Positive-sum reciprocal engagement is further facilitated by such contextual features as prior associational experience and openness. In addition to a summary of the notion of positive-sum reciprocal engagement and its implications for policy influence, the chapter also presents some limitations of the study, including an extensive discussion of the intersection of conflicts and tensions with reciprocal engagement. It then discusses implications of this work on future research and practice, as well as for understandings of political change and the maintenance of authoritarian resilience.

1.1.3 Research Rationale

The questions taken up by this study are timely in making sense of the great changes taking place in both the Chinese state and society. The Chinese nonprofit, nongovernmental sector is an extremely rapid-growing and fast-changing sector, particularly with respect to the subset of grassroots development organizations such as those treated in this study. The legal framework governing this field is also shifting, but has not yet taken definite shape in the face of much political uncertainty.⁴ Many of the dynamics and approaches that apply to the challenges citizens and officials face in dealing with this issue also apply to the many other areas of state-society engagement and interpenetration. Thus, the findings uncovered in this study may be illuminating in their applications to similar issues in China and abroad.

The contributions made by this study will be of use to both theorists and practitioners. Existing theory about the kinds of relationships that can exist between social organizations and the state, though they have made immense contributions in illuminating certain dimensions of

⁴ A number of new experimental initiatives having to do with the registration and management of social organizations are currently underway and draft regulations are awaiting approval from the State Council that will formalize such experiments. However, there is no definitive consensus as to what these regulations will mandate and when they will be approved. See *Policy Brief No.1 (January 2012): The Fate of the Charity Law and Other National-level Legislation*, <http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.cn/?p=687> accessed August 1, 2012.

such engagement, have neglected others and have proved unsatisfactory in explaining the ways in which these relationships actually work, especially in the Chinese context. One of the aims of this research is to contribute to theory about, and to discover the conditions under which one desirable relationship—positive-sum reciprocal engagement—can emerge. It is my hope that the theoretical framework presented here will be able to transcend the sometimes narrow bounds of a debate located on the civil society-corporatism continuum to uncover more nuanced perceptions of the state-social organization relationship. It can also provide alternative assumptions and normative standards based on efficacy in operation, the ability to elicit participation and to influence policy, rather than on institutional autonomy, to which social organizations can be held to account.

Practitioners working in the private non-government sector in developing countries around the world may also benefit from such a study. My own experiences working with dozens of non-governmental organizations in China and in other countries have highlighted the pressing nature of the kinds of issues dealt with in this study. Growing numbers of practitioners working in the ‘third sector’ are constantly grappling with questions about how their relationship to the state can and should be structured. How does a private, non-governmental organization establish the kinds of collaborative relationships with government that will allow it to expand its scope of influence, and avoid compromising its core values and tenets? Can such an organization ever have a voice in social policy? If so, what is the most effective way, given the social context, to make this voice heard? Many groups struggling with such questions experience a growing frustration with attempts to evaluate their work according to an external dichotomous model that is preoccupied with autonomy and democratization, while the main protagonists of these systems disagree with the fundamental assumptions of such models or their relevance to what they are actually trying to accomplish.

For state actors, too, the question of what role the private, non-governmental sector should play in society has by no means been resolved. Especially in China, where this growing sector is relatively new, and has no clear place in either the pre-reform or reform-era ideology, policy, and governance frameworks, the state is intently interested in this question. How should this growing phenomenon be dealt with? Should such organizations be feared? Nurtured? Regulated? Exploited? Most importantly, since the number of such organizations seems to be increasing, and they look as though they are here to stay, what kinds of functions can they perform in the tasks of social development and the of fashioning of a Chinese modernity?

Ultimately, my personal hope is that research of this nature will contribute to a deeper understanding of and an increased scope for the development of grassroots NGOs in China. My intention is not to romanticize these organizations or to fall into the trap of assuming that they invariably and faithfully represent the interests of the populations they serve. But they can serve as useful intermediaries between the state and rural populations, having a sense of what is possible and how it can be accomplished gradually.

1.2 Methodology

This section discusses the broad epistemological approach and methodological grounding for this study, then gives a more detailed account of data collection, sample selection, data sources and data analysis, including the specific constructs, techniques and methods used.

1.2.1 Approach

As with much case-oriented research, the goals of this study are both historically interpretive and causally analytic. According to Ragin, ‘interpretive work attempts to account

for significant historical outcomes or sets of comparable outcomes or processes by piecing evidence together in a manner sensitive to historical chronology and offering limited historical generalizations which are sensitive to context,' while causal-analytic work is undertaken to 'produce limited generalizations concerning the causes of theoretically defined categories of empirical phenomena (such as the emergence of class-based political parties) common to a set of cases.'⁵

In its broad approach, this study aims to contribute to the development of new theory through detailed, involved empirical research and analysis on the ground. Case-oriented methods can 'stimulate the development of new substantive theories' through application of the simple method of agreement.⁶ Such theory is also likely to be 'testable with constructs that can be readily measured and hypotheses that can be proven false.' Finally, resultant theory based on case research is likely to be empirically valid. 'The likelihood of valid theory is high because the theory-building process is so intimately tied with evidence that it is very likely that the resultant theory will be consistent with empirical observation. In well-executed theory-building research, investigators answer to the data from the beginning of the research. This closeness can lead to an intimate sense of things—"how they feel, smell, seem." This intimate interaction with actual evidence often produces theory which closely mirrors reality.'⁷ Particularly with reference to the notion of positive-sum reciprocal engagement, this study uses empirical observations to form concepts deliberately to avoid adopting ready-made concepts existing in the literature. *Chapter 2* shows the necessity of molding new concepts to fit the empirical data because of the limitations of existing theoretical frameworks.

⁵ C. C. Ragin, *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies* Univ of California Pr, 1989), 35.

⁶ Ibid, 45.

⁷ K. M. Eisenhardt, "Building Theories from Case Study Research," *Academy of Management Review* (1989), 532-550.

It has been noted that variable-oriented strategies focus on patterns emerging from correlations between structural features, they tend to provide explanations that emphasize features of social structure, and while case-oriented studies can be more sensitive to human agency and historical process, they tend to 'see outcomes in terms of specific actions at specific historical junctures,'⁸ and thus be limited in terms of generalizability. In the design of this study, therefore, there has been a special effort to both conceptualize and observe structural/contextual features as well as more constructible features relating to the 'agency' of government and NGO actors.

This study uses subnational units of analysis so that certain structural features can be held constant, contributing to the assumption of causal homogeneity.⁹ This occurs at the level of the province, as well as at the level of the research locality. This approach can facilitate understanding of national political dynamics.¹⁰

Methodologically, subnational comparisons can facilitate the construction of controlled comparisons, strengthen 'the capacity of comparativists to code cases accurately and thus make valid causal inferences' and 'provide a firm foundation for building theories that explain spatially uneven processes of political and economic transformation.' Of course, this strategy also involves 'a trade-off between the ability to gain control' over historical, ecological and cultural conditions, and 'the ability to generalize.'¹¹

⁸ C. C. Ragin, *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies* Univ of California Pr, (1989), 70.

⁹ Ibid, 72.

¹⁰ R. Snyder, "Scaling Down: The Subnational Comparative Method," *Studies in Comparative International Development (SCID)* 36, no. 1 (2001), 100.

¹¹ Ibid, 103

1.2.2 Data Collection

The Localities

Fieldwork was conducted in six localities in three provinces: Hebei Province, Yunnan Province and Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. These were selected from among ten provinces in which I had prior experience and contacts with local grassroots NGOs and government agencies because they represent sufficient variation with respect to contextual factors such as ethnic makeup, income and associational experience, as well as variation in initial observations of positive-sum reciprocal engagement.

Figure 1-1: Map of Localities



Two smaller research localities were selected within each province. Localities were again selected based on my existing contacts and access, as well as the degree of variation they exhibited with respect to the factors mentioned above. In each province, I focused on one locality that included an urban center, such as a provincial capital or major city, and one

locality that included a large county somewhat apart from an urban center.¹² To protect the interviewees in this study, I have decided not to include the names of the selected localities, and, in direct quotations from interviewees, have attempted to exclude any unique identifying features. To provide context for the reader, however, a basic profile of each locality is included below:

Locality N1 is a major city with a long history, a population of about 2 million and a GDP per capita of about 50,000 RMB. The economy mostly based on industry and construction, though there is also a growing tertiary sector. The multi-ethnic populace is dominated by the Hui minority, who make up about a quarter of the population. An important transportation hub, the city offers many opportunities for higher education. As with many northern industrial cities it suffers from poor air quality and has experienced significant environmental degradation in recent years.

Locality N2 is a predominantly agricultural county with a population of under 500,000, half of which are of the Hui minority. It suffers from deforestation, droughts and inhospitable weather conditions. It is only accessible by long-distance bus and the nearest city is about 60km away. The per capita income is under 4000 RMB.

Locality H1 is a young industrial city with a predominantly Han population of between 5 and 10 million and a per capita income of about 30,000 RMB. It is a central hub of transportation routes, has a strong PLA presence and a number of universities and colleges. Air quality and increasing environmental deterioration are continuing challenges.

Locality H2 is a principally Han with a population of under 5 million. There is a university and several high schools in the city. With a GDP per capita of about 20,000 RMB, it

¹² Though of course, almost all Chinese counties are administratively and hierarchically grouped 'under' a municipality. This was not the case for one of the localities in this study, which was administratively categorized as a 'county level city.'

is one of the slower growing cities in the province and still has a strong agricultural sector as well as developed secondary and tertiary industries. The main county of focus has a population of about 300,000 and is predominantly agricultural.

Locality Y1 is a major city in the province with a rich history, a multi-ethnic population of over one million and a GDP per capita below 20,000 RMB. Though there are primarily agricultural rural pockets, the economy is otherwise evenly distributed between an industrial secondary and tourism-heavy tertiary sector. It is accessible in terms of transportation routes and has a few colleges that provide higher education opportunities and several high schools.

Locality Y2 is an ethnic autonomous prefecture with a population of about one million, over half of which are different ethnic minorities. It is a border region with a strong agricultural sector dominated by a few cash crops but also a developed tourist industry. Major challenges facing the locality include high incidences of drug use and HIV/AIDS. There is a basic teachers college in the locality as well as several high schools. GDP per capita is below 20,000 RMB. The main county of focus has a population of about 300,000.

Between three and five visits were made to each locality over the course of three years. Preliminary field visits allowed me to confirm the suitability of the locality as a research site, identify potential interviewees and establish relationships with officials and NGO members, and make some initial observations. The bulk of interviews took place during the second and third visits, while subsequent visits were useful for following up on events that were unfolding during the course of the study. Repeated visits facilitated the building of long-term relationships, establishing a network of contacts and securing trust and credibility as a researcher.

Sample Selection

There exists a dizzying array of social organizations in China. Prior studies have focused on everything from business associations, advocacy organizations, homeowner associations, religious groups, social welfare organizations, and non-profit service-providing agencies to ‘associations for wedding and funeral affairs, old people associations, Christian churches, ancestral, Buddhist, and other local temples, organizations offering technical support to farmers, mutual aid groups, consumer protection associations, dispute mediation associations, village security patrol groups, and others.’¹³As this study was primarily focused on the emergence of positive-sum reciprocal engagement between local government agencies and social organizations that possessed certain characteristics, only organizations that fit the criteria of being grassroots or popular organizations engaged in development or social welfare work in the fields of environment or education were selected:

“Grassroots” or “Popular” Organizations

This study makes a distinction between ‘organizations’ and what can be considered individual initiatives or projects. However, the criteria for what is to be considered an ‘organization’ was necessarily flexible, as some organizations maybe constituted by just one or two members, especially in the initial stages of operation. In general, entities that considered themselves to be organizations, possessed some degree of formality in their operations, a stated mission or charter, and the intention to increase the number of human resources and range of activities over time were categorized as organizations.

To observe how positive-sum reciprocal engagement emerges, it is important to examine those agencies that do not initially benefit from pre-existing ties to the Chinese government, foreign governments or large, well-known international agencies. Chinese social

¹³ V. Pesqué-Cela et al., "Challenging, Complementing Or Assuming ‘the Mandate of Heaven’? Political Distrust and the Rise of Self-Governing Social Organizations in Rural China," *Journal of Comparative Economics* (2008), 3.

organizations are commonly grouped into three categories: government NGOs (GONGOS), foreign NGOs and grassroots NGOs. One Ministry of Civil Affairs official described the special nature of grassroots agencies' interaction with the state in this way:

In working with different kinds of NGOs of course we have to have different approaches and mindsets. Government NGOs are like our own children. We take care of them. Foreign NGOs are like the neighbors' children. We have to take care of them too. But grassroots NGOs are like wild children. They don't belong to anybody and it is not clear how they should be dealt with.¹⁴

Because it is these 'wild children' who form the growing bulk of China's non-profit sector, this study focuses primarily on 'grassroots' NGOs as opposed to organizations initiated by government, often called 'officially organized NGOs' or 'top-down NGOs,' which are studied only in the context of their interaction with grassroots NGOS.

The terminology used to refer to such organizations varies widely. The term 'grassroots' (*caogen*) is an imported one, often used interchangeably with a more indigenous one, *jiceng*. In Chinese, such organizations are also often referred to generally as 'social organizations' (*shehui zuzhi*), 'people's organizations' (*minjian zuzhi*) or 'bottom-up NGOs' (*zixia ershang de NGO*). Interestingly, the English acronym NGO has been increasingly adopted into the internal Chinese lexicon among the Chinese social science scholarly community and the Chinese NGO community itself. Other, more indigenous terms referring to nonprofit, nongovernmental organizations include 'public welfare organization' (*gongyi zuzhi*) or nonprofit organization (*feiyingli zuzhi*). Such agencies also refer to themselves according to their geographic or issue area of focus, for example, as an environmental protection organization (*huanbao zuzhi*), a poverty alleviation organization (*fupin zuzhi*), a women's organization (*funv zuzhi*), or by using such qualifiers as 'rural' (*nongcun*) or 'development' (*fazhan*). They also use

¹⁴ Interview BJ06, Government, official. Beijing, 2007.

terminology that directly refers to the organization's registration status, such as 'association' (*xiehui*), 'private, non-enterprise unit' (*minban feiqiye danwei*) or 'social enterprise' (*shehui qiye*).

Ultimately, the distinctions between such terms are significant insofar as they reflect differing facets of organizational identity. They can be telling of how these organizations conceive of themselves as well as the image they wish to project. Scholars, too, often consciously select terms based on aspects they wish to be highlighted. As such, I have avoided in this thesis the use of terminology, such as 'civil society organization,' that would too strongly identify these organizations with a particular theoretical framework. I have also chosen not to use terms that may be less familiar to readers outside of China, such as 'people's organization' or 'social organization.' Thus, the term 'grassroots NGO' is used in this study simply because it most immediately brings to mind for English speakers the kind of organization discussed here. Because of its connotations, the closest direct translation of this term, *caogen* NGO, was not used throughout fieldwork. Instead, other, more common terminology was used as the occasion demanded.

Grassroots NGOs are generally small operations, with small budgets, few full-time staff and a heavy reliance on volunteers or unpaid staff. The majority of grassroots NGOs included in this study had fewer than five core staff members (including paid and unpaid staff), while only a couple had over ten core staff. Geographically, grassroots organizations are considered to be local and indigenous, in that they originated, operate, and/or have offices located at the local (village, county, township or municipal) level. As Table 1-1 shows, almost half of the selected organizations operate primarily in rural areas, and half in both urban and rural areas, with only a few that operate primarily in urban areas, while over half locate their offices in rural areas, such as villages or townships. Two thirds of the selected organizations are also founded and run by individuals from the villages or cities in which they operate, while

the rest are founded and run by individuals from elsewhere in the province. In these respects, the sample included in this study varies significantly from Chinese 'grassroots' NGOs included in other studies, many of which are based in and operate in major cities, or, if they do not, are founded and run by elites,¹⁵ or individuals from major cities. One of the few studies that deal with a similar subset of organizations, an important case study of Sanchuan Development Association (SDA), a rural grassroots NGO, describes these organizations as follows:

The emergence of *minjian* NGOs in China is of relatively recent origin, commencing only in the 1990s. ... Like SDA, a growing number of these associations have established ties with foreign funding agencies. Because they are of such recent origin, and because they are generally found in less well-traveled parts of the country, these new organizations have not yet received much attention in the scholarly literature, despite the growing importance of such locally-initiated anti-poverty work.¹⁶

While the large number of such organizations and the lack of scholarship about them and their interactions with the state are sufficient reasons for selecting grassroots NGOs as the focus of study, their significance lies beyond such justifications. As one scholar noted:

Though the elite-led NGOs are important in inspiring and spearheading NGO development, "truly grassroots" or community-based NGOs like Organization F necessarily have to account for the bulk of the NGO sector going forward. These NGOs are the ones that emerge from within a community, allowing them to more intimately monitor the needs of the constituents they represent, and more flexibly adjust to local situations. They are typically social services-oriented and relatively non-political. Given that these NGOs may reach a large percentage of the population in their small localities, their potential to instill a spirit of self-government and participation through voluntary association is huge.¹⁷

¹⁵ See, for example, S. Y. Tang and X. Zhan, "Civic Environmental NGOs, Civil Society, and Democratisation in China," *The Journal of Development Studies* 44, no. 3 (2008), 426, in which the authors note that 'almost all the NGO officials we have interviewed can be considered a social and political elite—some are college professors; some started environmental work while they were students on university campuses. In addition, most of the leaders of non-Beijing NGOs have strong political connection with the local party-state system.'

¹⁶ X. Zhang and R. Baum, "Civil Society and the Anatomy of a Rural NGO," *The China Journal* (2004), 97-107.

¹⁷ J. S. Ashley and P. Y. He, "Opening One Eye and Closing the Other: The Legal and Regulatory Environment for Grassroots NGOs in China Today," *Boston University International Law Journal* 26 (2008), 29-96. However, the claim that such organizations are typically non-political is questioned in this study, see *Chapter 2* for a discussion of this.

Typologies that refer to the registration status of the agency, such as ‘social organizations’ versus ‘private non-enterprise units’ were largely ignored in the selection process. This is because the majority of these agencies have not been able to formally register at all. Unregistered grassroots organizations form a large part of the non-government, non-profit sector. One scholar puts a ‘conservative estimate’ of the number of unregistered NGOs in China between 2.5 and 2.7 million. Of this number, around 150,000 are NGOs registered as businesses; another 400,000 are urban community organizations (*shequ neide minjian zuzhi*). But the majority, up to 1.7 million, are grassroots NGOs in rural areas.¹⁸ What is more, because of the lack of official data, there has been very little formal research done on unregistered rural grassroots organizations.

Organizations that embark on the long and arduous process of registration often end up registering as business entities or associations, and the legal form they take is more often determined by the local situation and the extent to which they have been able to engage with local government. As one scholar familiar with Chinese grassroots NGOs put it, ‘organizational form itself is not important, but develops according to what is possible.’¹⁹ Thus, the mission and programs implemented by an agency were of greater importance in the selection process than the specific legal registration status of an organization. As Table 1-1 shows, about half of the organizations in the research sample were registered as NGOs with nonprofit status;²⁰ two had failed to register as NGOs and had chosen to register as businesses, while almost half of the organizations in the sample had no legal registration status at all.

¹⁸ M. Wang, "The Development and Present Situation of NGOs in China," *Social Sciences in China - English Edition* 28, no. 2 (2007), 96.

¹⁹ T. Salmenkari, "Searching for a Chinese Civil Society Model," *China Information* 22, no. 3 (2008), 397.

²⁰ My nonprofit status I mean registered either as ‘private non-enterprise units’ (*minban feiqiye danwei*), or as associations (*xiehui*).

For such organizations, 'the requirements and restrictions offered under legal registration either do not appeal or are deemed unmanageable by the organization and a detriment to its goals.'²¹ However, it should be noted that while many grassroots NGOs had chosen not to register at this time, almost all planned and wanted to do so. Also, just because an organization is unregistered does not mean, as some scholars assume, that it is an 'underground NGO' that 'avoids all state intervention.'²² As later analysis will show, it is quite possible and even common for unregistered NGOs to engage quite closely with the state.

Development or Social Welfare Organizations

Essential to the selection process was a thorough examination of the kinds of activities and programs carried out by each NGO, as well as the explicit and implicit functions they espouse. Organizations that could not only be considered nongovernmental and nonprofit, but also that focused on development and social welfare were included in the study, though different organizations define their purpose in different terms, such as the provision of social services, social welfare, charity, poverty alleviation, and so on. In other words, these organizations define their mission in terms of and work for the public interest, rather than the interests of their members. Development or social welfare organizations were chosen for two important reasons.

First, as opposed to advocacy groups or membership-based associations, such as businesses or homeowner associations and religious groups, development organizations engage in concrete action in the form of social programs. This means that, unlike other types of social organizations, in order to carry out such programs over the long term, to raise funds, and to

²¹ CM Cooper, "This is Our Way In: The Civil Society of Environmental NGOs in South-West China," *Government and Opposition* 41, no. 1 (2006), 123.

²² Ibid.

register, they will almost invariably have to deal with the question of interaction with local government agencies. Also, in studying grassroots NGOs, research did not have to rely solely on the stated mission and purpose of the organization; it was also possible to observe concrete actions undertaken by each organization and compare such action with a stated mission.

The second characteristic of such organizations is that they, at least potentially, share broad common interests with the state. Insofar as local government agencies and the central government alike are increasingly preoccupied with the promotion of 'social harmony' and 'scientific development,' particularly in their efforts to maintain social stability, they will find the general objectives, if not always the methods, of development organizations generally aligned with these aims. Focusing on such organizations, rather than those that define themselves in terms of opposition to the state, allows for observation of varying degrees of positive-sum reciprocal engagement with local government departments.

Although it could be argued that such organizations cannot tell us much about the nature of the relationship between state and society because they are essentially serving state interests in an apolitical fashion, and some scholars may have chosen to focus on agencies that overtly challenge the state or at least engage in politically sensitive action, I hope to show that many social welfare organizations, though seemingly apolitical, do engage in much politically sensitive action. From influencing educational curriculum in state schools to implementing programs aimed at empowering peasants, to promoting democratic community processes, grassroots development NGOs are able to engage in some of the most politically sensitive areas of activity with the assent, and sometimes the active encouragement, of the state. The question is, under what conditions are they able to do so?

Organizations Implementing Environmental or Education Programs

In order to simplify the issue-specific factors that could affect the emergence of reciprocal engagement relationships between grassroots organizations and local governments, the issue areas addressed by the organizations selected are limited to the environment and education. Including too many issue areas into the analysis would have raised other complex community issues that could have confused the picture. These two areas were broad enough to increase opportunities for variation and encompass a range of different kinds of programs and agencies and to allow for study of interactions with issue-specific government agencies such as Education Bureaus or the Women's Federation.

These two issue areas also have the potential to be framed, construed and dealt with by NGOs and government departments in very different ways. On the one hand, they may both be seen as mundane, apolitical, day-to-day issues that fall within the official rhetoric and plans. On the other hand, they can both be very sensitive areas. Environmental issues can generate heated public debates and be a locus for mass mobilization against industry and the local state. Education is also a sensitive area that has been historically kept very close to home because of the potential for huge influence on the minds of younger generations.

While the grassroots NGOs included in the sample were roughly evenly divided between the two issue areas, it is important to note that many of these organizations did not characterize themselves as strictly 'educational' or 'environmental' organizations. Some of them carried out activities and programs that extended into other fields, such as minority, gender, or health issues, volunteering, poverty alleviation, and so on. Ultimately, many of these issues are interlinked and organizations concerned with promoting rural development often do so in an integrated fashion.

Within each locality, I attempted to identify all of the grassroots NGOs that fit the above criteria. NGO listings and internet sources yielded several such NGOs in each locality.

In a few localities, my prior contacts with NGOs and government officials allowed me to identify other NGOs without an online presence or public profile. Often, one NGO led me to other, similar organizations and snowball sampling followed the initial identification of NGOs. It is likely that the subset of NGOs with an online presence or included in NGO listings from which these NGOs were selected is characterized by a bias towards organizations that already benefit from some legitimacy and recognition in the eyes of the state. Also, by relying on snowball sampling, it is possible that the organizations included in this study have a similar bias in their approaches and beliefs about the nature of interactions with the state. As such, my sample is not representative of the universe of Chinese grassroots NGOs, much less of Chinese social organizations in general.

Some of the grassroots NGOs identified through contacts or the Internet turned out to have ceased operations or disappeared. However, I was still able to learn about these groups through interviews. While this study may not have identified every single ‘living’ or ‘dead’ grassroots NGO that fits the above criteria in each locality, I can be relatively confident that I approached saturation of specific, pre-selected localities. Table 1-1 summarizes basic characteristics of grassroots NGOs included in the sample by locality:

Table 1-1: Basic NGO Statistics

	Locality	Y1	Y2	N1	N2	H1	H2	Total
Total	Total number of organizations	5	3	4	3	3	4	22
Issue Area	Environment	3	1	2	2	2	3	13

	Education	2	2	2	1	1	1	9
Registration Status	Registered as NGO	4	1	3	1	0	2	11
	Registered as Other	0	0	0	0	2	0	2
	Unregistered	1	2	1	2	1	2	9
Years in Operation	Average number of years	7.5	5.8	4	2.2	6.3	4.6	5.1
Founder Origin	Local (village or city)	2	3	1	2	2	4	14
	Local (province/married to local)	3	0	2	1	1	0	7
	Other province	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Size	Under 5 Core Staff	3	2	2	3	1	4	15
	5-10 Core Staff	1	1	1	0	2	0	5
	Over 10 Core Staff	1	0	1	0	0	0	2
Geographic Scope	Urban	0	0	1	0	0	2	3
	Rural	3	1	1	3	1	1	10
	Urban and Rural	2	2	2	0	2	1	9
Offices Located	Urban	2	2	3	0	3	2	12
	Rural	3	1	1	3	0	2	10

Selection of Government Agencies

To investigate instances of positive-sum reciprocal engagement, field research in each locality included not only grassroots NGOs, but also government departments that had engaged with such NGOs or would potentially do so. Government agencies are considered to be those that are funded by the state, whose employees are on the state payroll, and are part of the bureaucratic apparatus. This apparatus includes both Party-government agencies (*dangzheng jiguan*) and public institutions (*shiyi danwei*), as well as social organizations (*shehui tuanti*) and state-owned enterprises (*guoying qiye*). Of primary interest with respect to their interaction with grassroots NGOs are Party-government agencies, which have the power to carry out and enforce laws and regulations, and public institutions, which are responsible for providing public services to society in such areas as education, science and technology, culture, health,

and so on.²³ By 'local,' I mean government agencies that oversee the village, township, county, district or municipal levels. Specifically, those government agencies that are responsible for overseeing the grassroots NGOs included in the sample will be targeted. For example, a grassroots NGO at the municipal level working in the field of education will correspond to at least two government agencies responsible for overseeing it: the municipal Civil Affairs Bureau, with whom it is eventually required to register, and the municipal Education Bureau, which is responsible for supervising its work. In some cases, government agencies at higher administrative levels may be involved. For instance, a grassroots NGO working in the field of education may have to seek approval from the provincial Education Bureau in order to implement a particular program. Also, other government agencies responsible for the target population in question, or in charge of security or Party affairs, for example, may also be involved. In the above example, the Communist Youth League whose mandate involves the education of youth, or the local Public Security Bureau or local Communist Party cells may also be involved.

Of course, many grassroots NGOs find ways to register or gain legitimacy from interaction with other government entities, and many choose not to register at all. Finally, some government entities at the provincial or central level, while not engaged directly with the grassroots NGOs included in this sample, were nonetheless interviewed because of the regulatory role they play at the national level and because of the broad-based policy insight they could provide into NGO policy as well as other policy areas. As such, the sample of

²³ See S. Shieh, "Beyond Corporatism and Civil Society: Three Modes of State-NGO Interaction in China," in *State and Society Responses to Social Welfare Needs in China: Serving the People*, eds. J. Schwartz and S. Shieh, Routledge, (2009), 23. and World Bank, *China: Deepening Public Service Unit Reform to Improve Service Delivery*, Report no. 32341-CH4, Washington, DC: World Bank, (2005).

government entities selected for research was quite broad. Table 1-2 lists some of the government entities with which interviews were conducted and questionnaires administered at various administrative levels.

Table 1-2: Official and Semi-Official Entities Interviewed by Administrative Level

Central (informational)	Ministry of Civil Affairs Ministry of Education Public Security Bureau Poverty Alleviation Office of the State Council Development Research Center of the State Council Central Party School
Provincial	Civil Affairs Bureau Environmental Protection Bureau Education Bureau Women's Federation Poverty Alleviation
Municipal	Civil Affairs Bureau Environmental Protection Bureau Women's Federation Health and Sanitation Bureau Communist Youth League
District/County	County Government Civil Affairs Bureau Education Bureau Party School
Township	Women's Federation
Village	Village heads Party secretaries Women's representatives

Within each locality, I identified government agencies at different administrative levels that had already engaged with the grassroots NGOs included in my sample, or, based on issue area, had the potential to do so. Because of my prior experience in many of the selected localities, I was already familiar with some of the officials associated with these entities, but most I approached without prior relationships. Generally, my approach was to find out the address of the government department in which I was interested, make a visit without prior notice, and ask for either the director of the department or the director of the section in which I was interested. If it was possible to see the official in question at that time, I then introduced myself, the study, and my academic credentials, proceeding with the interview once I had orally discussed ethical issues and if I was granted permission to do so. If I was unable to see the official in question at the time of my visit, I made several visits until I was able to do so. Sometimes, the interview request was refused, but about three quarters of such attempts were successful, though the length and depth of interviews varied. This approach differs somewhat from the approach taken by many foreign scholars conducting fieldwork in China, which tends to go through more official channels. For example, many foreign scholars secure formal affiliation as a visiting scholar with a Chinese university, then seek formal approval for research down the administrative hierarchy, from the relevant central, provincial, municipal, county, township and village authorities.

One of my reasons for taking this approach was due to the sensitivity of this topic. I feared that seeking approval for interviews from higher level authorities would not only lessen my chances of securing interviews, since it is often more difficult to refuse someone in person, but the fact that their superiors would be aware that the interview was taking place would also limit how forthcoming interviewees could be. Instead, by making unannounced visits and talking my way into interviews, I felt I was able to obtain more straightforward and less

‘prepared’ answers to my questions. Also, by approaching interviews in this, more informal, way, I was more easily able to follow up on unsatisfactory interviews by arranging to meet with officials outside the office setting for meals or tea. On several occasions, such repeated interactions allowed for trust and relationships to be strengthened such that subsequent interviews yielded much less guarded information and deeper insights.²⁴

The condition of government offices I observed during these unannounced visits and official responses to my requests were sometimes as informative as the interviews themselves. Some seemingly backwater localities proved to have surprisingly well-organized and professional bureaucracies in which one could actually see people working in their offices, even during the afternoon, while in others it was almost impossible to find anyone to talk to since government staff tended not to return to their offices at all after their lunch breaks. Officials I encountered in some departments politely refused to talk to me, and hedged by telling me I needed provincial approval before talking to them, while others went out of their way to find the right person for me to talk to and made themselves available during as well as after office hours.

Finally, the time I spent sitting in officials’ offices or waiting rooms waiting to speak to someone also provided excellent opportunities to observe the way daily work was conducted, listen in on impromptu meetings between officials and with visitors to the department. For example, while sitting in one county Women’s Federation office, I listened in on discussions between the Chairwoman and her assistant and multiple phone calls with other government

²⁴ Some of my findings may be criticized in so far as I have given equal weighting to positive and negative or critical reports from government sources. While there is, of course, a distinction between authentic responses and superficial echoing of the party line in the interview process, I have tried not to fall prey to the tendency that some China scholars commonly display, in which government respondents are seen as authentic when they are critical, and circumscribed when they convey contentment with official practice.

departments as they busily tried to arrange an upcoming event, seeing firsthand what was confirmed in other interviews—that the Women’s Federation does not have much administrative authority and thus a weaker bargaining position with respect to other government departments, but also that it has a unique mandate and ability to draw on and coordinate between multiple government agencies to fulfill its mission. While waiting in a municipal Civil Affairs office, I observed several NGO representatives coming in to submit registration paperwork or complete annual audits, and the way officials interacted familiarly with them, patiently guided them through the paperwork and discussed their work.

Written Sources

The analysis draws on public written materials related to the administration and operation of the grassroots NGOs in the research sample, such as promotional materials, mission statements, program materials and curriculum, as well as audiovisual materials found on websites and videos. It also draws on some internal materials to which I had access, such as internal reports, memos, email communications and meeting notes.

Written materials related to the operations and policy of relevant government departments in each research locality were also reviewed. These include policy documents, departmental statistics and reports, and government websites.

Quantitative data on factors related to the social and political context of selected localities, such as data on the number of registered social organizations, ethnic makeup and income, was sought in annual statistical yearbooks.

The above data sources were supplemented with newspaper and journal articles, websites and blogs, as well as television reports that provided insight into the workings of local grassroots NGOs, local government departments, and the social and political context of selected localities, as well as the national backdrop against which this study is set.

Interviews

Semi-structured, formal and informal interviews were conducted with members of grassroots NGOs and government agencies in each locality. A total of 122 interviews were conducted, including 51 interviews with members of grassroots NGOs, 55 interviews with government officials, and 16 interviews with NGO scholars or specialists. The full list of informants is included in Appendix A.

A different interview protocol was prepared for government and NGO interviewees. Initial questions focused on the mission, work and history of the NGO or government department, a second set of questions explored social and political conditions in the locality, while a third asked explicitly about the nature of engagement with NGOs or government agencies. Interviews were conducted in Chinese, without the assistance of a translator. In the majority of formal interviews, I asked for and secured permission to record the interview, but in some cases, particularly interviews with government officials, I chose not to record interviews. In all interviews, however, I took extensive notes on my laptop.

Whenever possible, the founder and director of each NGO was interviewed. When this was not possible (for five of the twenty-two NGOs in the sample), the staff member responsible for government relations was interviewed. In many cases, several members of each NGO were interviewed, and I was able to speak with many interviewees multiple times, in different social settings. For about one third of the organizations in the sample, because I already had extensive experience working with them and a strong relationship of trust existed between us, one or two interviews were sufficient to yield the kind of data required. For some of the other NGOs in the sample, particularly when the initial formal interview was followed up by an informal meeting or meal, second or third interviews allowed for topics to be explored more candidly and frankly.

The same dynamics of trust and familiarity affected government interviewees. Those with whom I had previously established working relationships proved more forthcoming in initial interviews, while for new contacts, it took time to build relationships and explore issues. My previous work had already given me opportunities for interaction with local officials and some familiarity with official language. However, the interview process itself also enabled me to become more attuned to the underlying meanings of often high-context communication and nuanced official language. My learning to use such terminology smoothed the communication process, put official interviewees more at ease and predisposed them to talk more deeply because they sensed they were talking to someone who could understand them and their environment.

Questionnaires

As the goals of this study included refining the concept of positive-sum reciprocal engagement and identifying the determinants that contribute to its emergence, it was necessary to have some way of measuring and comparing levels of positive-sum reciprocal engagement across relationships, organizations and localities. This was achieved through the use of questionnaires in which participants answered a number of yes or no questions about their organization's relationship with each grassroots NGO or government department. Detailed questions sought to uncover different dimensions of reciprocal engagement, including proximity, communication, co-action, mutual influence and mutual benefit or empowerment. Points were allocated for each question, and totaled to yield a 'score' for the level of positive-sum reciprocal engagement inherent in each relationship. Since one grassroots NGO or government department was often party to multiple such relationships, relationship scores could also be totaled to provide an indication of the level of positive-sum reciprocal engagement that characterized each organization.

The scores below were calculated as follows: Each government agency-NGO relationship was evaluated by government and NGO participants according to the questionnaire forms included in the appendices. One point was given for each question, and each relationship was given a total score. The scores for all relationships pertaining to one NGO were tallied up, and a further ten points were given if the organization had been able to register with non-profit status. This resulted in a range of scores between 9 and 95, which were then converted to a scale between one and ten (i.e 0.9 and 8.3). I also independently reviewed the interview data for each organization and awarded a subjective score between one and ten based on my assessment of the organizations level of reciprocal engagement with government entities. These two scores were then compared. If the difference was more than one, I averaged the two scores. If not, the original questionnaire-based score was kept.

Questionnaires were administered immediately following each interview. The questionnaires used for government and NGOs are included in Appendix C and D.

Participant Observation

I have been working closely with grassroots NGOs throughout China for the past seven years. From 2005-2008 I worked as a program officer for a nonprofit development organization supporting over thirty Chinese grassroots NGOs through on-site visits, training, funding and the strengthening of institutional capacity.

I continued to be involved in this work throughout the course of the dissertation, and since it has involved frequent contact with grassroots NGOs in their local settings, have been able to develop extensive NGO and government contacts in the field. It has also allowed me to observe aspects of the state-NGO relationship difficult to capture through interviews and questionnaires. For example, I have personally accompanied members of several fledgling grassroots NGOs on dozens of visits to government departments in their efforts to establish

reciprocal relationships, sat with them to wait outside the office for hours, heard them introduce their organizations, experienced doors being closed in our faces, seen open minded officials warm to their story, sat in on meetings in which project terms were negotiated and collaboration reached, and partaken of meals at which trust was built and friendships established. I have also been significantly involved on the operations side of many of these NGOs, attending their training sessions with rural women, observing their classes in rural schools, putting into practice sustainable agricultural techniques in their fields, and assisting them with their finances. I was also able to participate in bi-annual seminars where dozens of Chinese grassroots NGOs gathered together to undergo training, discuss problems, and share experiences.

Clearly, my involvement with many of these organizations and government agencies as a practitioner also created difficulties when I was to wear the hat of a researcher. In many of the interviews, I was not coming to the table as a detached or neutral inquirer; interviewees had often worked with me, had heard my personal opinions and had formed their own perceptions of me. These perceptions doubtless influenced their responses to the questions I posed. These biases directly affected the nine NGOs with which I was quite familiar through my work out of the twenty-two NGOs included in the study. On balance, I believe that this study was enriched far more than it was compromised by my in-depth participant observation.

Confidentiality

All interviewees were told that interviews would be confidential, and that the research results would be shared with them if they wish. The grassroots NGOs included in this study are referred to using codes to protect their confidentiality. Government agencies are identified by name and administrative level, but not locality, also to protect the confidentiality of official

interviewees. The names of the six specific localities in which fieldwork was conducted are also referred to using codes.

1.3 Data Analysis

As described above, in the initial stage of research, the research problem was formulated, the principal concept of positive-sum reciprocal engagement was clarified, and potentially significant factors were specified with reference to the extant literature as well as to my prior experience. The factors hypothesized to be potentially significant at the outset of this study, and the data sources used to assess and measure them, are listed in Appendix E. However, effort was made to ‘avoid thinking about specific relationships between variables and theories as much as possible’ in this initial stage preceding data analysis.²⁵

Central to the process of data analysis was the clarification of key theoretical concepts.²⁶ The key concept that required sharpening was that of positive-sum reciprocal engagement. This and other key concepts are defined in tabular form in Appendix E.²⁷

1.3.1 Operationalization of Key Concepts

The key concept of positive-sum reciprocal engagement encompasses various dimensions or components, which are further described in *Chapter 3*. The concept was

²⁵ K. M. Eisenhardt, "Building Theories from Case Study Research," *Academy of Management Review* (1989), 536.

²⁶ On the importance of concepts, see Sir George Thompson, quoted in R. Rose and WJM Mackenzie, "Comparing Forms of Comparative Analysis," *Political Studies* 39, no. 3 (1991), 446-462.

²⁷ This was done through clarifying the various dimensions of the concept, and by determining the means by which evidence of this construct would be measured and observed in each case. Researchers can ‘use multiple sources of evidence to build construct measures, which define the construct and distinguish it from other constructs,’ however, ‘the construct, its definition, and measurement often emerge from the analysis process itself, rather than being specified a priori.’ See K. M. Eisenhardt, "Building Theories from Case Study Research," *Academy of Management Review* (1989), 542. In addition to statistical analysis techniques, it is possible to use tables summarizing and tabulating the evidence underlying each construct. A table used for this purpose, listing the key concept of positive-sum reciprocal engagement, as well as several other factors and the evidence on which they are based, is included in Appendix E.

operationalized and measured according to these dimensions, which yielded differing measures of positive-sum reciprocal engagement for each NGO-government department relationship. Table 1-3 outlines the information that was sought to determine the extent to which individual grassroots NGOs or local government departments were engaged in a relationship characterized by positive-sum reciprocal engagement:

Table 1-3: Operationalization and Measurement of Positive-Sum Reciprocal Engagement

Proximity and Communication	▪ No communication or interaction between NGO and a particular government department. ▪ Government department knows of existence of social organization ▪ Direct communication between a member of the social organization and member of government agency, ▪ Direct communication between multiple members of each organization ▪ Number of times there has been direct communication, how regular and how sustained communication has been ▪ Formal and informal communication ▪ Mediums of communication: Face-to-face, phone and email communication ▪ Forums of communication: government department or NGO offices, home, or other locations.
Co-Action	▪ NGO member participated in activity organized by this government department ▪ Official participated in activity organized by NGO ▪ Informal cooperation ▪ Formal cooperation ▪ Existence of cooperation agreements or contracts ▪ Collaborative design of projects
Mutual Benefit and Empowerment	▪ Providing assistance to the other party's work ▪ Facilitating project implementation

	▪ Contributing resources ▪ Buying services ▪ Facilitating Registration
Mutual Influence	▪ NGO influenced government department to adopt new or different work methods ▪ NGO affected implementation of this department policy ▪ NGO affected formulation of this department policy

Levels of positive-sum reciprocal engagement were observed and measured from four different perspectives and using different data sources. First, interviews with grassroots NGO members provided one source of data on the nature of organizational relationships with local government agencies. Second, NGO questionnaires provided a more quantitative, measurable indication of levels of reciprocal engagement, which could be compared with interview reports. Third, data related to grassroots NGOs' registration status, programs implemented and formal collaboration projects were available through Internet and written sources, and could be compared with interviews and questionnaires. Finally, the same relationships and activities were discussed with the relevant government interviewees, providing the other party's perspective to verify information.

Organization-level positive-sum reciprocal engagement scores for grassroots NGOs included in the sample are listed in descending order in Table 1-4.

Table 1-4: Levels of Positive-Sum Reciprocal Engagement by Organization

Province	Locality Code	Organization Code	Total PSRE Score
Yunnan	Y2	Y250	9.5
Yunnan	Y1	Y134	8.5
Hebei	H1	H164	8.3
Ningxia	N1	N143	8.0
Ningxia	N2	N238	7.5
Hebei	H2	H261	6.8
Yunnan	Y1	Y131	6.7
Yunnan	Y1	Y132	6.3
Ningxia	N1	N144	6.2
Yunnan	Y1	Y158	5.9
Hebei	H1	H165	5.1
Yunnan	Y1	Y155	4.1
Hebei	H1	H168	4.0
Hebei	H2	H260	3.5
Ningxia	N1	N142	3.0
Hebei	H2	H259	2.7
Ningxia	N1	N141	2.5
Hebei	H2	H263	2.5
Yunnan	Y2	Y252	2.0
Ningxia	N2	N237	2.0
Yunnan	Y2	Y229	1.6
Ningxia	N2	N236	0.9

Factors hypothesized to contribute to positive-sum reciprocal engagement were assessed and measured using a number of data sources. One important data source was transcripts of over 100 interviews with members of grassroots NGOs and local government agencies. Hypothesized factors served as the primary themes or categories according to which interview material was coded, though a few new themes emerged from the interview material itself. No specialist qualitative software was used, and coding was carried out manually. Sections of interviews were grouped by factor, and provided the evidence to strengthen or weaken support for each explanatory factor. Interview content also clarified and forced reconceptualization of the relationship between various factors.

Analysis was then carried out based on the constructed categories or factors to ascertain which were most significant in the emergence of positive-sum reciprocal engagement. The primary unit of analysis in this study is the relationship between a grassroots NGO and a government department. There can be multiple instances of this dyadic interaction for each NGO or government department. Patterns were looked for in these interactions. However, analysis also took place at the level of the organization. Certain variables were held constant at the level of the locality, others at the level of the organization, this made analysis easier and showed where variation came from.

Detailed within-case analysis was carried out for nine of the 22 grassroots NGOs, one to two NGOs within each locality. These nine organizations are ones with which I am most intimately familiar. I have been working with some of them since their establishment, and have been able to observe events unfolding with these organizations for up to seven years, and thus had access to some longitudinal data for these cases.²⁸

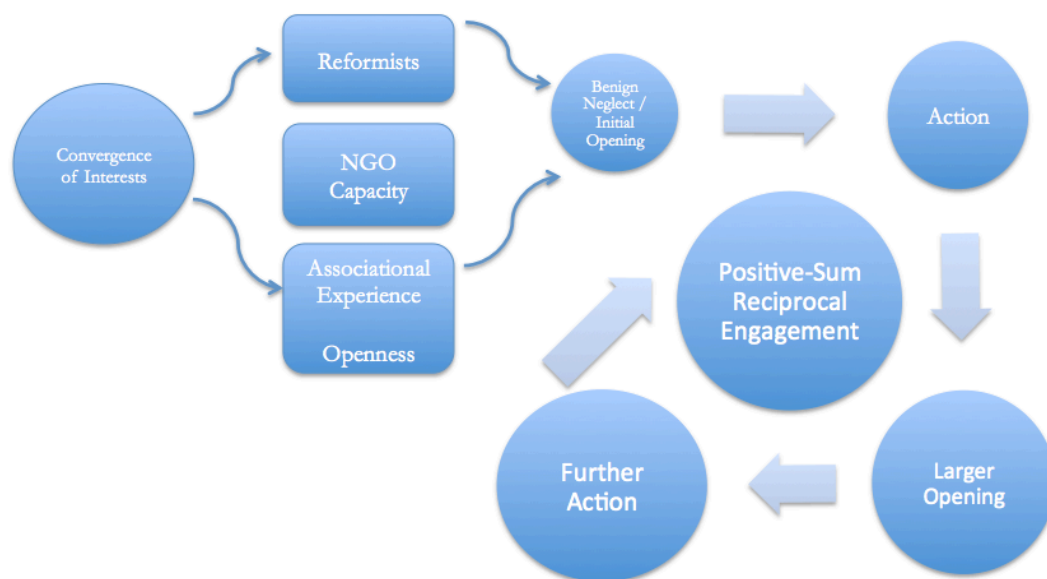
Organizations were divided into groups based on whether they were characterized by low, medium, or high levels of positive-sum reciprocal engagement with local government agencies, and then examined for within-group similarities and intergroup differences. Data on a number of factors potentially significant to the emergence of positive-sum reciprocal engagement that had been previously identified were coded or measured, and then organized using a spreadsheet that facilitated comparison and observation of patterns. A similar process was also carried out by grouping organizations by locality, so that factors related to the social and political context of the locality could be held constant, allowing for observation of other

²⁸ This allowed 'unique patterns of each case to emerge before investigators push to generalize patterns across cases.' It also provided 'a rich familiarity with each case which, in turn, accelerates cross-case comparison.' See *ibid*, 450.

relevant factors. Attempts were thus made to counteract tendencies to misinterpret data by examining data in many divergent ways.

Based on this analysis, four factors contributing significantly to positive-sum reciprocal engagement emerged. Three of these factors, NGO capacity, the existence of reformists, and associational experience, were among those hypothesized to be potentially significant at the outset of this study. A fourth factor, the level of openness or sensitivity that characterized a locality, emerged inductively from NGO and government interviews. Examination of data from interviews and participant observation led to the integration of these four factors into a coherent explanatory framework, which is pictured in Figure 1-2. This model contains the key themes and processes identified during analysis.

Figure 1-2: Model of Key Factors and Processes in the Emergence of PSRE



Finally, each case was examined in light of this emergent framework and the extent to which it fit with the evidence from each case was assessed.²⁹ Data from different sources often yielded similar conclusions, but sometimes gave rise to conflicting interpretations, which in turn stimulated a closer examination of the data and further probing.³⁰

Analysis was carried out as much as possible with a consciousness of my own inherent biases in interpreting raw data as well as coding it.³¹ To the extent possible, I have made these biases explicit as I present the analysis in the following chapters, rather than assuming false objectivity. Also, I have tried not to be too rigid about my hypothesized categories and assumptions, and to let new factors and themes emerge out of the field research process itself.

Throughout this dissertation, significant space is dedicated to giving research subjects voice through direct quotations, in the belief that doing so is essential to understanding them and to developing sound inductive theory. It is important to see the nuances of how NGOs members and government officials themselves describe their effort. Interviews carried out for this study show that they have given a good deal of thought to these issues, and excerpts from those interviews are provided here in the hope of providing a richer description than may be found in similar studies on the subject.

1.4 Conclusion

In sum, this thesis provides a description and an explanation for collaborative patterns

²⁹ A series of cases examined individually can disconfirm hypotheses or increase confidence in emergent relationships in much the same way as experiments. See R. K. Yin, "Case Study Research: Design and Methods," (1984). This step is an important one as 'a close fit is important to building good theory because it takes advantage of the new insights possible from the data and yields an empirically valid theory.' See K. M. Eisenhardt, "Building Theories from Case Study Research," 541.

³⁰ 'When a pattern from one data source is corroborated by the evidence from another, the finding is stronger and better grounded. When evidence conflicts, the researcher can sometimes reconcile the evidence through deeper probing of the meaning of the differences.' See *ibid*.

³¹ 'Inevitably, the findings are shaped by the assumptions and experiences of the evaluators conducting the study and carrying out the data analyses. For the findings to be usable, the evaluator must make decisions about what is more important and less important in the data.' See D. R. Thomas, "A General Inductive Approach for Analyzing Qualitative Evaluation Data," *American Journal of Evaluation* 27, no. 2 (2006), 240.

of state-society relations such as positive-sum reciprocal engagement between grassroots NGOs and local government departments. It highlights the role of NGO agency in the development of institutional capacity, as well as choices of official 'reformists' that open spaces for NGO action. It also finds that prior associational experience and openness in the social and political context facilitate reciprocal engagement. One of the outcomes of such engagement is found to be a certain degree of influence from grassroots NGOs on local government policy and practice.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Issues

Chapter 1 of this dissertation introduced the rationale for and methodological approach taken in this study. This chapter discusses the theoretical underpinnings of the research. It begins by presenting and analyzing some prevalent theoretical approaches taken in the study of China's social organizations and their relationships with the state. Of these, the analytical frameworks of civil society and corporatism will be dealt with in particular detail. Having discussed the prevalent theories, the chapter then attempts to make explicit and problematize some of the assumptions underlying these theoretical approaches. Specifically, the concepts of autonomy, cooptation, power and the political will be examined as they operate within a 'conflict perspective' of the relationship between society and the state. Finally, elements of the theoretical approach adopted by this study will be presented. These elements are drawn from literature concerning the mutual empowerment of state and society, and allow for observation of the dynamic mutual influence occurring between the sphere of the state and social organizations. Insights from this literature are used to construct the notion of positive-sum reciprocal engagement, a central theme of this study, which will be presented and defined in the next chapter.

2.1 Background

As suggested in *Chapter 1*, China's non-governmental, non-profit sector has become a sphere of increasing interest to students of Chinese politics. Existing studies of China's social organizations and other institutional arrangements in this realm have often been characterized by attempts to fit the nature of such organizations into the analytical frameworks of civil society or of corporatism.

2.1.1 The Civil Society Framework

A civil society framework has been applied to China's social organizations by Chinese theorists and practitioners as well as observers abroad. In its conceptual history, as theorists have devised different divisions and configurations of state, society and economy, the term civil society has been varyingly used to refer to a civilized, moral and progressive society,¹ all forms of non-state activity, including the economic sphere,² to a private sphere of the family, associations, social movements and forms of public communication apart from economy and the state,³ as well as to political society, of which public opinion is a key element.⁴

In its contemporary usage, the concept of civil society is generally used to refer both to a nonprofit third sector substituting the welfare state,⁵ and a separate political society checking the powerful state.⁶ Kluver's summary encapsulates the latter conceptualization:

The key purpose of civil society is the provision of alternatives in social, cultural, and economic life to state power. Civil society allows citizens a voice in influencing social and political life outside the domains of the state. According to this understanding, civic discourse is discursive practice that arises from these autonomous organizations and provides input as to social, political, and cultural direction. Civic discourse, emerging from within these autonomous realms, allows broad-based participation from outside the control of the state. Thus, civil society provides an important component for the later establishment of fully democratic mechanisms. The absence of such autonomous institutions raises questions as to the viability of any democratic check on the abuses of authoritarianism. Only structural and economic autonomy can

¹ Z. Fang, "市民社会与资本主义国家的合法性——论哈贝马斯的合法性学说 (Civil Society and the Legitimacy of Capitalist Countries - on Habermas's Legitimacy Theory)," *China Social Science Quarterly* 3 (1993), 34-41.

² See F. Engels, "On the History of the Communist League," in *Selected Works*, eds. K. Marx and F. Engels, Vol. 3 (Moscow: 1973).; K. Marx, "The German Ideology," in *Selected Works*, eds. K. Marx and F. Engels, Vol. 1 (Moscow: 1973).

³ J. L. Cohen and A. Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, The MIT Press, (1994).

⁴ C. Taylor, "Civil Society in the Western Tradition," *The Notion of Tolerance and Human Rights: Essays in Honour of Raymond Klibansky*, Ontario (1991).

⁵ See M. Edwards, D. Hulme and Save the Children Fund, *Beyond the Magic Bullet: NGO Performance and Accountability in the Post-Cold War World* Kumarian Press West Hartford, CT, (1996) and L. M. Salamon and H. K. Anheier, *Defining the Nonprofit Sector: A Cross-National Analysis* Manchester Univ Pr, (1997), 3.

⁶ See T. Brook and B. M. Frolic, *Civil Society in China* ME Sharpe, (1997) and B. He, *The Democratic Implications of Civil Society in China* Macmillan, (1997).

provide the necessary platform from which a truly critical and constructive voice can arise.⁷

As the above excerpt shows, in its application to the Chinese case, theories centered on the concept of civil society are concerned with the rise of social groups and organizations with a relatively high degree of autonomy from the state.⁸ Western scholars, in particular, have primarily been using the ‘civil society’ lens for a specific reason—a preoccupation with the emergence of democracy in China. As Gallagher describes it, the civil society model ‘is an analytical model of social change, founded on the prediction that growth in autonomous social organizations leads to greater societal independence from the state and eventually, perhaps, to democratization.’⁹

The Chinese theoretical discourse on civil society has increasingly had to respond to this usage, and, at times, echo it. Two contrasting streams of the discourse, each with its own actors and preoccupations, have emerged. Domestic theorists ‘have focused on the making of a modern citizenry, consisting of law-abiding and civil members of society. Existence of this entity presupposes the active involvement of the state. The relation between civil society and the state was thus seen as an intimate and harmonious one.’ The other group, exiled intellectuals, have as their primary concern the ‘creation of a private realm that is independent of the state. There has been no mention of law, order and civility. Even illegal societies are included as a constituent of civil society. The term “civil” becomes redundant.’¹⁰ Associated with the Eastern European political movements of the late 1980s, and with Chinese

⁷ R. Kluver, "Elite-Based Discourse in Chinese Civil Society," *Civic Discourse, Civil Society, and Chinese Communities* 5 (1999), 11.

⁸For civil society approaches, see G. White and J. Howell, *In Search of Civil Society: Market Reform and Social Change in Contemporary China* Oxford University Press, USA, (1996); B. M. Frolic, "State-Led Civil Society," *Civil Society in China* (1997), 46-67; B. He, *The Democratic Implications of Civil Society in China* Macmillan, (1997).

⁹ M. E. Gallagher, "China: The Limits of Civil Society in a Late Leninist State," in *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia: Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space*, ed. M. Alagappa, Stanford University Press, 2004), 421.

¹⁰ S. Y. Ma, "The Chinese Discourse on Civil Society," *The China Quarterly* 137, no. 1 (1994), 192.

intellectuals' search for a democratic China, this understanding of civil society was of a 'politicized society arrayed against the state.'¹¹

Because an autonomous civil society is considered to be one of the building blocks of democracy,¹² and scholars of China are often concerned with political reform and democratization, much of the existing research has been confined to the exploration of a few recurring questions: do social organization in China constitute a 'true' civil society? Are they really autonomous? Do they really represent the interests of 'the people'? Can they freely engage in whatever type of social action they desire? Even when they can be answered, such questions are limited in their usefulness. 'In both the neo-Tocquevillean and New Left schools, civil society is evaluated by its relative distance from state actors, with an implicit normative assumption that the ideal nature of civil society is independent and separate from the state. Chinese civil society can only come up short if this is the major focus of comparison.'¹³

2.1.2 The Corporatist Framework

Some question whether civil society, an essentially Western concept, is appropriate for the study of Chinese state-society relations. Unger and Chan feel a civil society approach 'assumes too much independence in associational life in Deng's China.'¹⁴ The primary alternative framework that has been advanced is state corporatism, in which the state maintains communication and retains control over a particular sector of society by recognizing only one sectoral organization.¹⁵ The corporatist framework is also preoccupied with a recurring set of

¹¹ Q. Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations in Contemporary China: Paving the Way to Civil Society?* Routledge, (2006), 20.

¹² J. Howell and J. Pearce, *Civil Society & Development: A Critical Exploration* Lynne Rienner Pub, (2001).

¹³ M. E. Gallagher, "China: The Limits of Civil Society in a Late Leninist State," 421.

¹⁴ Q. Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations in Contemporary China: Paving the Way to Civil Society?*, 139.

¹⁵For corporatist approaches see M. M. Pearson, "The Janus Face of Business Associations in China: Socialist Corporatism in Foreign Enterprises," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 31 (1994), 25-46; J. Unger and A. Chan, "China, Corporatism, and the East Asian Model," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 33, no. 1 (1995), 29-53; G. White and J. Howell, *In Search of Civil Society: Market Reform and Social Change in Contemporary China*

questions: how does the state control social groups and organizations? How do corporatist characteristics such as pre-emption, co-optation, bargaining, institutionalization, and physical repression manifest themselves in state-society relations?

Corporatism has also been challenged as an accurate description of China's situation.¹⁶ 'While corporatism may explain power and interest arrangements, it does not account for the political, economic, or social structures in a given society. It is the civil society approach that enables us to see structural changes in the past two decades.'¹⁷ As Gallagher again emphasizes, 'State corporatism, however, also has profound limitations, because it is largely a descriptive model. Social organizations in China are indeed structured in state-corporatist fashion, but adopting state corporatism as a lens would be a mistake, because it would provide an incomplete view and a static model.' More recent work within the corporatist framework acknowledges that this framework does not encompass the current Chinese reality, but is a useful tool to be applied in understanding the transformation of the Chinese state.¹⁸

While 'pointing out that the Chinese government employs state-corporatist structures to rein in and control society does little to help us understand future political change,'¹⁹ recent scholarship has applied the corporatist lens to Chinese state-society relations in a way that 'sheds light on the process of interaction between state and the relevant social stakeholders.'²⁰

As in this analysis, Hsu and Hasmath find that NGOs seek a closer relationship with the state, and that 'it is the local state that is of the greatest importance to NGOs, as it is the

Oxford University Press, USA, 1996); J. Ru and L. Ortolano, "Corporatist Control of Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations: A State Perspective," in *China's Embedded Activism: Opportunities and Constraints of a Social Movement*, eds. P. Ho and L. Edmunds, (2008).

¹⁶ See G. White and J. Howell, *In Search of Civil Society: Market Reform and Social Change in Contemporary China* Oxford University Press, USA, (1996).

¹⁷ Q. Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations in Contemporary China: Paving the Way to Civil Society?*, 142.

¹⁸ J.Hsu, R. Hasmath, "The Changing Faces of State Corporatism," in *The Chinese Corporatist State: Adaptation, survival and resistance*, eds J.Hsu, R. Hasmath (London: Routledge, 2013), 3.

¹⁹ M. E. Gallagher, "China: The Limits of Civil Society in a Late Leninist State," 421.

²⁰ J.Hsu, R. Hasmath, "The Changing Faces of State Corporatism," 6.

local authorities who determine the practical boundaries of what is acceptable or not for NGOs.’ While the notions of tacit and overt sanctioning are useful in highlighting the power the local state continues to wield over such organizations, and it is indeed the case that ‘local governments are determining and reinforcing the parameters of NGOs work,’²¹ more work is needed on how NGOs work outside these parameters and succeed in shifting them. The focus of these studies’ analyses on organizations in Beijing and Shanghai, which are in some ways much more heavily regulated and subject to state scrutiny, and in others benefit from a more liberal environment than the grassroots NGOs in this study can obscure such data.

Also, the corporatist framework is characterized by an underlying wariness of the interpenetration of the state and NGOs. In this view, when an NGO is found to be ‘voluntarily entrusting part of its work to the local state, it is allowing the district authorities to penetrate its space, which runs the risk of leading to greater government control and coordination. The outcome of such actions entails the possibility of the local state further infringing on the space for NGOs and creating greater barriers for the participation of NGOs in the future.’²² Instead, corporatist analyses are being enriched and supplemented by a recognition that ‘while the state may derive its legitimacy through the cooptation and support of social organizations, it may also inversely provide social organizations with the legitimacy they require to operate and represent relevant groups.’²³ Hsu and Hasmath agree with Foster that ‘the state’s ‘control impulse is mixed with strategies aimed at promoting social and developmental agendas as well as more parochial organizational and individual goals.’²⁴ Thiers also points out that ‘rational organizations will seek both the freedom of non-state autonomy

²¹ J. Hsu, R. Hasmath, “The rise and impact of the local state on the NGO sector,” in *The Chinese Corporatist State: Adaptation, survival and resistance*, eds J. Hsu, R. Hasmath (London: Routledge, 2013), 132.

²² Ibid, 131.

²³ Ibid, 138.

²⁴ K. W. Foster, "Associations in the Embrace of an Authoritarian State: State Domination of Society?" *Studies in Comparative International Development (SCID)* 35, no. 4 (2001), 94.

and the safety and power of state authority, moving back and forth along this continuum as constraints and opportunities arise.²⁵ Thus, a growing number of those drawing on the corporatist analytical framework suggest that there are interactions outside this framework that also deserve scholarly attention. While it is true that social organizations in China are very much dependent on the support and involvement of the state in order to function, and thus, to some extent, give credence to the predictions of a corporatist model, it is also true that there has been a decline in government control of associational life as well as a flourishing diversity of social organizations within the past few decades. Like much else in China, both the nature of social organizations in China and the regulatory frameworks governing them are in a state of rapid change, but despite a number of predictions that the situation is moving toward one or another 'ideal type' posited by the theories of civil society and state corporatism, it has become clear that the phenomena of social organizations in China cannot be neatly fit into one of the existing analytical frameworks.²⁶

In an attempt to make them more applicable to the Chinese case, various scholars have attempted to reformulate or redefine the concept of civil society, or focus on specific interpretations or strands of the concept,²⁷ such as 'semi-civil society,' 'state-led civil society,' 'government-led civil society'²⁸ or the 'public sphere'²⁹ as well as varieties of corporatism, such

²⁵ P. Thiers, "Stretching away from the state: NGO emergence and dual identity in a Chinese government institution," in *China in an Era of Transition: Understanding Contemporary State and Society Actors*, eds J. Hsu, R. Hasmath (Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 159.

²⁶ M. E. Gallagher, "China: The Limits of Civil Society in a Late Leninist State," 421.

²⁷ See H. B. Chamberlain, "On the Search for Civil Society in China," *Modern China* 19, no. 2 (1993), 199; T. Brook and B. M. Frolic, *Civil Society in China* (ME Sharpe, (1997)); R. Madsen, "The Public Sphere, Civil Society and Moral Community: A Research Agenda for Contemporary China Studies," *Modern China* 19, no. 2 (1993), 183; P. C. C. Huang, "'Public Sphere/Civil Society' in China?: The Third Realm between State and Society," *Modern China* 19, no. 2 (1993), 216.

²⁸ Yu Keping quoted in Y. Yao, "Chronicle of Political Reform Foretold," *China Daily* October 23, 2009.

²⁹ Baogang He's (1997) 'semi-civil society,' or Michael Frolic's (1997) 'state-led civil society.'

as ‘socialist corporatism’ or ‘agency corporatism.’³⁰ However, there seem to be diminishing returns on trying to stretch concepts beyond a certain point, such that the utility of the concepts themselves is lost.

Other scholars have supplemented the interest mediation and integration of corporatism with the notion of symbiosis, suggesting that the hierarchical nature of state society relations in China does not preclude ‘room for negotiation between state and society.’³¹ However, these scholars also point out that while ‘corporatism is often an indispensable device for interpreting state-society relations in China, but alone it is insufficient in capturing the full extent of the social and political transitions.’³²

Thus, while elements of both civil society and corporatism can be observed in the Chinese case, other, new forms of state-society engagement are also emerging. A body of work has developed that draws on the insights of these two frameworks and supplements them with new theorizing to observe emerging these emerging forms of state-society interaction. Before discussing this body of work and how this study builds on and supplements it, however, this chapter will explore the theoretical foundations and assumptions of civil society and corporatist frameworks, and, more broadly, state-society relations in authoritarian regimes, as a necessary step in making explicit alternate assumptions underlying this study.

³⁰ Pearson’s (1997) ‘socialist corporatism,’ in M. M. Pearson, *China's New Business Elite: The Political Consequences of Economic Reform* University of California Press, (1997) or Ru and Ortolano’s (2008) ‘agency corporatism.’

³¹ See J. Hsu, R. Hasmath, “The Chinese corporatist state: Lessons learned for other jurisdictions,” in *The Chinese Corporatist State: Adaptation, survival and resistance*, eds J.Hsu, R. Hasmath (London: Routledge, 2013), 141 and P. Ho, “Self-imposed Censorship and De-politicized Politics in China: Green Activism or a Color Revolution?” in *China's Embedded Activism: Opportunities and Constraints of a Social Movement*, eds P. Ho and R. Edmonds London: Routledge (2008), 22.

³² J. Hsu, R. Hasmath, “The Chinese corporatist state: Lessons learned for other jurisdictions,” 141.

2.1.3 Elements of an Underlying 'Conflict Perspective'

At the heart of both prevailing analytical frameworks discussed above are assumptions about the nature of government, of the people, of power, and most importantly, of the relationship between the state and society. The corporatist framework 'highlights the mechanisms which the state can use to limit and control the political impact of NGOs,'³³ while the civil society model 'implicitly assumes an oppositional and conflictual relation with the state, neglecting the cooperative dimensions.'³⁴ As many Chinese scholars have argued, such systems of thought are characterized primarily by a Western dichotomous conception that opposes various elements with each other—it is the balanced tension between these opposing elements that makes for a healthy relationship between the state and society.³⁵ Flyvbjerg's advocacy of a Foucauldian versus Habermasian perspective of state-society relations and civil society encapsulates this justification:

Generally, conflicts have been viewed as dangerous, corrosive and potentially destructive of social order and therefore in need of being contained and resolved. This view seems to cover Habermas's outlook on conflict....There is mounting evidence, however, that social conflicts produce themselves the valuable ties that hold modern democratic societies together and provide them with the strength and cohesion they need; that social conflicts are the true pillars of democratic society....In a Foucauldian interpretation, suppressing conflict is suppressing freedom, because the privilege to engage in conflict is part of freedom....With the plurality that a contemporary concept for civil society must contain, conflict becomes an inevitable part of this concept. Thus civil society does not mean 'civilized' in the sense of well-mannered behavior. In strong civil societies, distrust and criticism of authoritative action are omnipresent as is resulting political conflict. Moral outrage is continuous, because actual authorities inevitably violate whatever ideal norms civil society has for justice. A strong civil society guarantees the existence of conflict. A strong understanding of civil society, and of democracy, must therefore be based on thought that places conflict and power at its centre, as Foucault does and Habermas does not.³⁶

³³ S. H. Whiting, "The Politics of NGO Development in China," *Voluntas* 2, no. 2 (1991), 20.

³⁴ J. Howell, "Striking a New Balance: New Social Organisations in Post-Mao China," *Capital & Class* 18, no. 3 (1994), 89.

³⁵ Q. Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations in Contemporary China: Paving the Way to Civil Society?*

³⁶ B. Flyvbjerg, "Habermas and Foucault: Thinkers for Civil Society?" *British Journal of Sociology* (1998), 229.

At the core of arguments such as the one above are certain implicit definitions of such basic concepts as freedom, justice and power. This 'conflict perspective,' as Foster calls it, 'occupies an influential place in the study of comparative politics and comparative development.' Since it so often, whether implicitly or explicitly, forms the foundation of analyses of social organizations in China, it is worth quoting Foster's succinct description of the perspective at length:

The conflict perspective is founded on the claimed necessity of analytically distinguishing between state and society, and it focuses on how interaction between the two sides shape political and social outcomes. When the state is not democratic, the state-society relationship is virtually assumed to be characterized by chronic conflict, resolvable only through a removal of the authoritarian regime. Furthermore, a distinct separation between state and society is insisted on not only analytically but also as part of a claim that clear separation is what enables society to retain or gain power vis-à-vis the state. Common conceptualizations and uses of the idea of civil society make this claim explicit.

This perspective views association-state relationships in authoritarian contexts as inherently conflictual. Associations are seen as the paradigmatic representatives of societal interests. As such, they present a constant threat to the state because they provide the organizational basis with which people can resist state efforts at domination. To avoid domination, associations seek autonomy. As political actors, they are important as vehicles through which "society" can bring about political transformation. The authoritarian state, on the other hand, is conceptualized as a system of domination, driven in its behavior most fundamentally by the need to maintain an unpopular hegemony over a generally unwilling society. State actions, then, are interpreted as part of this effort to exert domination. Critically opposed to associational autonomy, the non-democratic state endeavors to control and manage the associational sphere, wishing to maintain political control and use these organizations for its own purposes. A common strategy used by states to accomplish this is to attempt to bring the associational sphere within the embrace of the state apparatus, whether by crafting authoritarian corporatist structures of control, co-opting existing associations, or creating new associations such as government-sponsored NGOs.³⁷

³⁷ K. W. Foster, "Associations in the Embrace of an Authoritarian State: State Domination of Society?", 86-87.

Rather than taking such assumptions, and the theories on which they are based, for granted, this study examines the special nature of a significant segment of the non-market, non-state sector in China, drawing on insights from theories based on alternative assumptions.

This approach has its parallels in the study of the development of China's private sector. When China's economic reforms began in the late 1970s, few scholars would have predicted the outcome. The nature of the reforms and the ways in which the economy developed in the transition from central-planning to capitalist markets was unique. While economists and international agencies advocated 'shock therapy' and asserted that privatization and a rapid shift to markets were 'the only sure path for the transition away from central planning in Eastern Europe,'³⁸ China's unfolding experience simply did not fit into this model. The unprecedented success of the reforms, however, drew a great deal of attention from the scholarly community, and gave rise to a body of literature that examined in detail every aspect of these reforms—their gradual and experimental nature, the extensive government intervention in and domination of key product markets, and the absence of privatization of existing public firms.³⁹ Such incisive analyses were possible only because they were able to transcend a narrow conception of the Chinese economy as being in 'transition' along a continuum from one ideal type posited by economic models to another. Even today, though largely capitalist, China's economy is still characterized by a high level of government regulation and intervention, and the experience of other East Asian economies coincides with newer theories that stress the economic benefits arising from an 'embeddedness' of states and

³⁸ A. G. Walder, "Local Governments as Industrial Firms," *American Journal of Sociology* 101, no. 2 (1995), 263.

³⁹ See *ibid*; D. Guthrie, *Dragon in a Three-Piece Suit: The Emergence of Capitalism in China* Princeton University Press, (1999); B. Naughton, *Growing Out of the Plan: Chinese Economic Reform, 1978-1993* Cambridge University Press, (1995).

markets.⁴⁰ The 'China model' is now being emulated, appropriately or not, by other countries that see it as an alternative to the formula of reform for transition economies and developing countries promoted by the international institutions.⁴¹

This is not to suggest that the way the Chinese state has dealt with social organizations or the development of such organizations in China has been somehow successful or worthy of emulation by other societies. Neither do I intend to ignore the valuable insights and knowledge that have been generated by studies exploring China's social organizations from civil society or corporatist perspectives. Rather, I am suggesting that when existing observations do not seem to fit neatly into existing models at one or another end of a given spectrum, further should also draw on other frameworks and assumptions if it is to contribute to an understanding of the nature of state-society relations in this realm, since 'the analytic conventions and preconceived notions that undergird the conflict perspective obscure interesting and important aspects of association-state relations under conditions of authoritarianism.'⁴²As an initial step, a few of these key basic concepts and assumptions, including those of autonomy, cooptation, power and the political, are explored below.

2.1.4 Autonomy and Cooptation

Autonomy can refer to 'an organization's freedom to formulate and pursue a self-determined agenda without undue external pressures.... It is the autonomous nature of civil society, many believe, that enables it to countercheck abusive and corrupt state, diffuse social

⁴⁰ See M. Granovetter, "Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness," *American Journal of Sociology* 91, no. 3 (1985), 481; A. H. Amsden, *Asia's Next Giant: South Korea and Late Industrialization* Oxford University Press, USA, (1989); P. Evans, *Embedded Autonomy: States & Industrial Transformation* Princeton University Press Princeton, NJ, USA, (1995); R. Wade, "Governing the Market: Economic Theory and Taiwan's Industrial Policies," (1990).

⁴¹ Y. Song and S. Huang, "A Study of the China Model and its Sustainability," *China & World Economy* (2005).

⁴² K. W. Foster, "Associations in the Embrace of an Authoritarian State: State Domination of Society?" 86.

and economic power, pluralize the political arena, and promote accountable and participatory governance, thus contributing toward the creation and maintenance of democracy.⁴³ In the conception of 'civil society as a counterweight to the state,' the concern is with 'the capacity of civil society to resist state repression,' and thus, 'civil associations must be "autonomous".'⁴⁴

Within the conflict perspective:

Association-state relations under conditions of authoritarianism are generally characterized in terms of one or the other of two dimensions that are often thought of as being covariant: an "autonomous vs. controlled" dimension and a power dimension. When associations enjoy autonomy, they form the basis for a civil society that can provide a counterweight to the state. On the other hand, when associations lose autonomy and are tied into the state apparatus, they are seen as co-opted, a sign of continuing domination of society by the state.⁴⁵

The argument for autonomy 'is aired not just in the scholarly literature, but in political debates over the character and trajectory of civil society in Latin America and Eastern Europe.' Although 'a range of political forces across the political spectrum think that civil society has been constrained by the state and needs to be liberated,'⁴⁶ autonomy is of particular concern in authoritarian contexts:

In contexts of democratic transition, in particular, where established political parties have been repressed, weakened, or used as tools by the authoritarian state, autonomy from traditional politics seems to be a prerequisite for oppositional advocacy. In such contexts, civil society is treated as an autonomous sphere of social power within which citizens can pressure authoritarians for change, protect themselves from tyranny, and democratize from below.⁴⁷

The scholarly literature on Chinese NGOs also draws heavily on the parallel notion of cooptation. State-created groups or previously existing organizations are coopted by being

⁴³ S. Wang, "Money and Autonomy: Patterns of Civil Society Finance and their Implications," *Studies in Comparative International Development (SCID)* 40, no. 4 (2006), 4.

⁴⁴ M. W. Foley and B. Edwards, "The Paradox of Civil Society," *Journal of Democracy* 7 (1996), 4.

⁴⁵ K. W. Foster, "Associations in the Embrace of an Authoritarian State: State Domination of Society?" 87.

⁴⁶ B. Beckman, "The Liberation of Civil Society: Neo-liberal Ideology and Political Theory," *Review of African Political Economy* 20, no. 58 (1993), 232.

⁴⁷ M. W. Foley and B. Edwards, "The Paradox of Civil Society," 4.

‘drawn into the state system and (to an extent) politically demobilized.’⁴⁸ According to Selznick, cooptation is ‘a process of absorbing new elements into the leadership or policy-determining structure of an organization as a means of averting threats to its stability or existence.’⁴⁹ While cooptation ‘can be less than total’ and ‘may not necessarily be into the leadership or policy-determining part of the state,’⁵⁰ central to accounts of cooptation are the presence of threat and power imbalances:

Thus, cooptation becomes possible when a challenging group or social movement opposes the practices, initiatives or policies of more powerful social organizations or political institutions. But that is less than half of the equation. The more salient issue has to do with the responses to such a challenge and the resulting outcome, that is, with some mix of institutionalization, social control, cooptation, and policy changes.⁵¹

Arguments against a focus on autonomy and cooptation include practical, conceptual and ideological objections. Practically, it can bias good research. As a result of the focus on the ‘autonomous vs. controlled’ dimension of state-social organization relationships, diverse forms of such relationships are obscured. For example, being bounded by this narrow continuum has meant that cooptation is often observed when ‘a more apt concept would be collaboration...to serve public purposes,’⁵² and difficulties arise in distinguishing the two. Also, ‘in the literatures on authoritarian regimes, civil society, and democratization, associations that are closely linked with and penetrated by an authoritarian state often take on significance chiefly as symbols of successful state domination of society’ which ‘tends to result in associations that are closely linked with (or incorporated into, or co-opted by) an authoritarian state being either dismissed

⁴⁸ K. W. Foster, "Associations in the Embrace of an Authoritarian State: State Domination of Society?" 88.

⁴⁹ P. Selznick, "Foundations of the Theory of Organization," *American Sociological Review* 13, no. 1 (1948), 13.

⁵⁰ K. W. Foster, "Associations in the Embrace of an Authoritarian State: State Domination of Society?" 104.

⁵¹ P. G. Coy and T. Hedeon, "A Stage Model of Social Movement co-optation: Community Mediation in the United States," *The Sociological Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2005), 406.

⁵² M. Sorin, "The Boundary between Public and Private Policy-Making: A Reply to Mark V. Nadel," *The Journal of Politics* 38, no. 1 (1976), 162.

as unworthy of attention or treated as mere extensions of the dominating regime.⁵³ Similarly, a focus on autonomy has made explanations of the Chinese state's varying tolerance towards different forms of social organization problematic:

Formerly, scholars have resorted to double standards to explain the diversity of Chinese social organization. Some scholars have found the simultaneous existence of both state-organized corporatism and socially organized civil society in China. Others have identified the simultaneous development of state-led and conventional civil societies. However, if one pays attention to the role of social organizations and the nature of their linkage to the state, rather than the degree of autonomy from the state, such a duality can be avoided.... Pluralization and organizational autonomy can serve the state aim of receiving more nuanced inputs from society, especially in times when social groups and interests are proliferating. The mass-line ideal has probably made NGOs less controversial to the Communist Party than they would be if the Party assesses autonomous organizations according to the control of social space.⁵⁴

Other practical considerations have to do with the implications of autonomy for democracy. While the general consensus among scholars from De Tocqueville to Putnam has been that civic association has a positive effect on the construction of democratic values and practice,⁵⁵ other scholars of civil society posit that 'Putnam's evidence, if not his argument, suggests that political autonomy is less important than the fact of association itself.'⁵⁶ Others go even further, claiming that an autonomous civil society can be harmful to the project of democracy if it is dominated by 'single-issue groups that are preoccupied with the pursuit of parochial self-interests' rather than the few groups that 'may work at high-minded aims.'⁵⁷ Under these conditions, self-interested groups 'could choke the workings of representative institutions and systematically distort policy outcomes in favor of the rich and well-connected

⁵³ K. W. Foster, "Associations in the Embrace of an Authoritarian State: State Domination of Society?" 87.

⁵⁴ T. Salmenkari, *Democracy, Participation, and Deliberation in China* (Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 2006) 401.

⁵⁵ A. De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* Wiley Online Library, (2000); R. D. Putnam, R. Leonardi and R. Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* Princeton Univ Pr, (1994).

⁵⁶ M. W. Foley and B. Edwards, "The Paradox of Civil Society," 4.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 5.

or, more simply, the better organized.⁵⁸ Thus, an autonomous and powerful civil society can be a double-edged sword:

If civil society is a beachhead secure enough to be of use in thwarting tyrannical regimes, what prevents it from being used to undermine democratic governments? To the extent that civil associations are strong, they challenge governing institutions to meet particular needs, aspirations, and conceptions of the common good. Established interests may lock up social resources and block society's ability to meet the demands of the dispossessed (as in the southern United States up to the advent of the civil rights movement in the 1960s); social blocs may form, each with its own panoply of associations, to battle one another for control of the state (as in contemporary Lebanon or the "plural states" of Western Europe before the political settlements of the nineteenth century); political forces may forge powerful ties with community organizations and civil associations, polarizing society and at times threatening the "order" that incumbents so cherish (as in post-World War II Italy and contemporary El Salvador). To understand the role of civil society in the modern world, we must discern how and under what circumstances a society's organized components contribute to political strength or political failure.⁵⁹

The findings of this research showed that at least the social organizations examined in this study were not compromised in their autonomy by proximity to the state. In other words, the autonomy, integrity and efficacy of these organizations is not a factor of proximity to the state, and further, such proximity can enhance the ability of such organizations to resist forces that threaten their autonomy. However, the relationship between autonomy and collaboration is a complex one, and tensions can arise between organizational and collaborative interests:

A defining dimension of collaboration that captures both the potential dynamism and the frustration that is implicit in collaborative endeavors is the reality that partners share a dual identity: They maintain their own distinct identities and organizational authority separate from (though simultaneously with) the collaborative identity. This reality creates an intrinsic tension between self-interest—achieving individual organizational missions and maintaining an identity that is distinct from the collaborative—and a collective interest—achieving collaboration goals and maintaining accountability to collaborative partners and their stakeholders.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ T. Carothers, "Civil Society," *Foreign Policy*, no. 117 (1999), 23.

⁵⁹ M. W. Foley and B. Edwards, "The Paradox of Civil Society," 5.

⁶⁰ A. M. Thomson and J. L. Perry, "Collaboration Processes: Inside the Black Box," *Public Administration Review* 66 (2006), 26.

For organizational theorists, collaboration between organizations can, but does not always imply, a lack of autonomy. It is possible for stakeholders to:

...retain their independent decision making powers even when they agree to abide by shared rules within the collaborative alliance. In some cases, stakeholders have complete autonomy, even with regard to the collaboration. In other cases (e.g. in federations or when stakeholders act to reach an agreement), participants may agree to relinquish some autonomy to the collaborative alliance. If the participants relinquish all autonomy, a different organizational form is created—a merger, perhaps, but not a collaboration.⁶¹

It can be argued, however, that collaboration between such disparate actors as authoritarian states and grassroots NGOs is characterized by a vast ‘power imbalance’ and is more likely to result in the voluntary or involuntary relinquishing of autonomy, particularly on the side of the NGO. While I do not interpret the results of this study in such a light, other observers may see in some of the cases described in this study signs of grassroots NGOs’ loss of autonomy. Even if this interpretation is correct, however, from an organizational perspective, a loss of autonomy can, under certain conditions, better enable an organization to achieve its goals. Of course, this does not hold for organizations espousing goals that preclude cooperation with an authoritarian state. For example, as with many Latin American NGOs that emerged in the context of opposition to authoritarian regimes, ‘NGOs organized around the conviction that fundamental political change is necessary to achieve development obviously will be in chronic confrontation with the state.’⁶² Outside of this subset of organizations:

Associations do not invariably seek autonomy from the state. Viewing associations as fundamentally “civic” in nature, embodying a societal interest in freedom from state domination, obscures the more basic fact that associations are organizations created to accomplish particular goals. Adopting an organizational perspective facilitates an understanding of why some associations seek to forge close linkages with a part of an

⁶¹ D. Getz and T. B. Jamal, "The environment-community Symbiosis: A Case for Collaborative Tourism Planning," *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 2, no. 3 (1994), 152-173.

⁶² K. W. Foster, "Associations in the Embrace of an Authoritarian State: State Domination of Society?" 85.

authoritarian state, sacrificing autonomy and their purely private or societal character.⁶³

As Foley and Edwards suggest above, political strength is not always compromised by a lack of autonomy. While ‘in the context of non-democratic regimes, a lack of associational autonomy from the state is thought to indicate a situation in which the state benefits and society loses,’ even some degree of cooptation can be in the interests of an organization:

An association may decide that achieving organizational goals and even just maintaining itself as an organization can be best accomplished through cooperation with the state, even if this involves sacrificing some degree of autonomy. In their study of grassroots rural associations, Esman and Uphoff argue that “most successful local associations enjoy the support or at least the acquiescence of government and are linked to services or resources that originate in the state”. Indeed, Naomi Chazan notes that in African single-party states in the decades following independence, “certain associations preferred to enter into collaborative arrangements with national agencies,” rather than seek autonomy, in order to pursue their interests.⁶⁴

While autonomy and cooptation are pressing issues for most scholars of Chinese civil society, it is worth taking into account the extent to which they matter for Chinese scholars and NGO practitioners themselves. These concepts seldom appear in the Chinese literature on nonprofit organizations. Among the twenty-six grassroots organizations included in this study, only six cited a possible decrease in autonomy or independence as a potential concern or disadvantage of working with government. One NGO founder mentioned that government ‘may limit our organization’s scope for doing things, and ways (*tujing*) and methods. So sometimes this cooperation may weaken the NGO’s ability to do what it wants to do.’⁶⁵ Those organizations that did note a loss of autonomy generally felt confident in their ability to navigate the tensions between collaboration and independence:

I think there wouldn’t be any disadvantages to us [in cooperating with government]. At the beginning, when government cooperates with us, maybe they will bring up certain requests. If we register, for example, their conceptual framework might

⁶³ Ibid, 103.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 95.

⁶⁵ Interview Y132, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

constrain us for a while (*yueshu women yixia*), but our goal is the same, so our framework also has common points. So it depends how we understand and use their principles.⁶⁶

The director of an NGO with close ties to local government gave the following example of how such tensions are navigated in practice:

Our working approach is sometimes inconsistent with the government's. This is why your method of expression has to allow them understand you. Sometimes they say, "Why are you making it so complicated, why don't you just do it simply like this?" Then you have to say, "Actually, we have to do it this way because of the funders' requirements." But then they might think you only care about funders and not about the ideas of the government. So you have to manage this tension and solve these issues. Sometimes they may have an issue that they want you to come in and work on, but actually they have the resources to do it themselves. Then I tell them my NGO may not be able to get the [financial] support for this because the government already has the resources. So you have to face their pressures, because to do anything, I have to actually do an investigation to make sure that it is really something that is missing in the policy, but if it is something that the government can do well themselves, if they have the resources to do it...I can't do it. So how to express this is a challenge.⁶⁷

In contrast to the underlying concerns about autonomy in the literature on Chinese NGOs, practitioners' few concerns about independence did not make reference to steering away from politically sensitive areas. For example, in response to a question about the potential disadvantages of working with government, the founder of a young organization said:

Because the current level of cooperation we have is not very deep, I can't imagine what the disadvantages would be. It could be that they would arrange, or direct, or command the organization to do things that are not in line with our organization's conceptual framework or mission, or things we are not willing to do. For example, our point of departure is voluntary participation, respecting the peasant masses, but some government policies are not in line with this principle. This would create some problems, because our organization's approach is from the grassroots up, while the government's approach is top-down. In between you have a point that needs to be connected, but how to find this point requires a lot of support and help.⁶⁸

The above respondent's fear has more to do with being influenced in its work style and methods, rather than political censorship. Interestingly, similar concerns are voiced by NGOs,

⁶⁶ Interview N237, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

⁶⁷ Interview Y250, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, July 2010.

⁶⁸ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

not only in China but in all political contexts, especially in reference to their funding agencies, implying that NGO autonomy may be a conceptual idealization that does not exist in quite the way it may sometimes be imagined.

Many organizations, in China and abroad, struggle to reconcile their own guiding principles and approaches with the requirements of funding organizations. Whether it is possible to maintain autonomy as NGOs struggle to meet donor demands to ensure survival is a question that has garnered increasing attention:

Although autonomy is often assumed to be the trademark of civil society, few political scientists have taken the trouble to explore how much civil society organizations are operationally autonomous from external forces. An organization's source of revenue is no small matter in this equation. Most people would doubt whether civil society organizations could maintain their autonomy if they rely mainly on government handouts. By the same token, if those organizations depend primarily on income from commercial activities, people would wonder about the possible consequences of blurred line between them and for-profit business organizations.⁶⁹

The significant effect that the pursuit of funding has on NGO autonomy calls into question the assumption that autonomy is a natural 'status quo' enjoyed by NGOs except when it is compromised by intimate bonds with authoritarian governments.

One final objection to the 'autonomous vs. controlled' lens is ideological. For some scholars, the question of civil society organizations' autonomy is an ideological issue, in which 'competing class projects confront each other, each concerned with the promotion and defense of different civil societies, populated by different NGOs, social movements and encapsulating different civil rights. Each project seeks to ensure the long-term social basis for alternative configurations of state power.'⁷⁰ Regardless of the ideological approach, the state's involvement is key:

The state plays a central role in both the construction and the liberation of civil society. The functioning of civil society, also in its autonomy from the state, depends

⁶⁹ S. Wang, "Money and Autonomy: Patterns of Civil Society Finance and their Implications," 4.

⁷⁰ B. Beckman, "The Liberation of Civil Society: Neo-liberal Ideology and Political Theory," 30.

on state intervention, including the enforcement of the rules which constitute and regulate property, markets and other rights....By pretending to be civil society's best friend and by assigning the state the role of the enemy of civil society, the neo-liberal project conceals its own massive use of state power, transnational and local, for the purpose for constructing a civil society according to its own image. In so doing, it is busy suppressing and disorganising much of the civil society as it actually exists, with its aspirations and modes of organisation centred on influencing the use of state power. While pretending to act on behalf of all civil society - NGOs, social movements, grassroots - by a definitional trick, groups which are not supportive of its own project are defined out of civil society. They are 'vested interests', benefiting in one way or the other from state and therefore not truly civil society in the way the polarity has been falsely constructed. The hypocrisy of this ideological construct, however, is that the beneficiaries of neoliberal state intervention are as profoundly dependent on state promotion and protection, including the state enforcement of their own type of property rights.⁷¹

There seems to be an increasing resistance to what is perceived as a Western model of civil society among Chinese NGOs and those in other countries. One study of Chinese NGOs finds that:

The difference between Western civil society models and the Chinese reality is well recognized by Chinese NGOs themselves. Although they willingly draw funding and inspiration from the Western experience, or even use the government's admiration of foreign innovations to promote their own goals, some do not welcome Western NGO training because of attempts to mold Chinese NGOs into conformity with Western ideals. One NGO activist even stated that if official and foreign NGOs completely dominated the Chinese NGO field, civil society organizations would become alienated from the needs of the Chinese people. Other NGO activists reject many customary Western ideas of civil society. For example, one interviewee stated that she has never understood conflictual civil society models. After all, the person one is dealing with could be one's future neighbor or colleague.⁷²

The ideal of autonomy, then, involves practical, conceptual and ideological assumptions that should not be taken for granted. As one scholar puts it: 'Rather than universalize the Western history and model of civil society and expect all others to conform to it, we need to take different views of it and appreciate its diverse forms. It is odd, even self-contradictory, to take a monistic view of the very area of life that is supposed to be the home

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² T. Salmenkari, *Democracy, Participation, and Deliberation in China*, 398.

of plurality.⁷³ This study attempts to observe some of these diverse forms by being open to alternative assumptions, particularly those held and expressed by participants in the study themselves.

2.1.5 Power and the Political

A common perception among observers of China's nonprofit sector is that these organizations have to be apolitical in order to succeed and to survive. Depending on one's definition of the 'political,' there is some truth to this claim. But the political can refer to partisan political activity as well as, more broadly, to discourse and action intended to bring about constructive social change. One can draw a distinction, as some countries' charity laws do, between political purposes and political activities.⁷⁴ There is a whole range of approaches that exist between mobilizing protesters to call for regime change and purely charitable activities. Have we understood these organizations rightly if we say that they only succeed if they deal with nonpolitical issues? What kind of political field is being created through their work and through the linkages they are able to establish between the state and social groups?

While Chinese NGOs are seen to be apolitical because they lack the freedom to explicitly challenge the state, there are those who refer to the 'antipolitics' of NGOs operating in more open political contexts by which power relationships are obscured and whereby local conditions are treated as problems the solutions to which are technical rather than structural or

⁷³ B. Parekh, "Putting Civil Society in its Place," in *Exploring Civil Society*, eds. M. Glasius, D. Lewis and H. Seckinelgin (London: Routledge, 2004), 15-25.

⁷⁴ "Charity Commission: The Promotion of Human Rights," <http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk/Publications/rr12.aspx>, (accessed December 3, 2011).

political.⁷⁵ NGOs are often idealized as ‘disinterested apolitical participants,’ organizations through which ‘people help others for reasons other than profit or politics.’⁷⁶

On the other hand, politics is also defined as ‘power-structured relationships maintained by techniques of control’⁷⁷ in which ‘politics is not confined to institutions but pervades every aspect of life’.⁷⁸ For the purposes of this study, a definition that extends the realm of the political to all spheres of activity may be too broad. With reference to grassroots NGOs in China, it may be more useful to think of politics as ‘decisional action oriented towards, or judged according to, some normative ideal pertaining to the entire community.’⁷⁹ Of course, politics is also concerned with ‘the power dimensions of activities people engage in as they pursue their own – individual or shared – conceptions of the good.’⁸⁰ The concept of power is central to definitions concerned with the organization of political power in ways that serve the common good.⁸¹

Power, too, can be conceptualized in different ways. There can be much to be learned from allied disciplines and their literatures in approaching questions of power and the political. While power has often been associated with domination in Western social and political theory, Giddens also recognizes that ‘power is not necessarily linked with conflict...and power is not inherently oppressive.’⁸² Follet long ago took issue with a coercive, and thus limited and problematic, understanding of power relations, arguing instead for a ‘conception of power-

⁷⁵ J. Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development," Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press, 1990).

⁷⁶ W. F. Fisher, "Doing Good? the Politics and Antipolitics of NGO Practices," *Annual Review of Anthropology* (1997), 439-464.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ J. Gerring and J. Yesnowitz, "A Normative Turn in Political Science?" *Polity* 38, no. 1 (2006), 133.

⁸⁰ I. Shapiro, "Problems, Methods, and Theories in the Study of Politics, Or what's Wrong with Political Science and what to do about it," *Political Theory* 30, no. 4 (2002), 240.

⁸¹ R. Bauböck, "Normative Political Theory and Empirical Research," *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences* (2008), 40-60.

⁸² A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* Univ of California Press, 1984), 257.

with, a jointly developed power, a co-active, not a coercive power' that could serve as an alternative normative basis for social and political relations.⁸³

Power can also be understood as the manifestation of a society's capacity for collective action, or 'the human ability...to act in concert,'⁸⁴ a central concern for a great number of NGOs. And with reference to collaborative relationships: 'there is power in cooperation among equals, and even when power is unequally distributed it can still be expressed in forms that are not oppressive—as in the empowering relationship that can exist between a nurturing parent and child.'⁸⁵

While scholars acknowledge a distinction between contrasting expressions of 'power to' and 'power over,'⁸⁶ analyses that focus on 'power to' tend to be dismissed as largely irrelevant to social analysis, particularly to political analyses. Justification for this dismissal is sought in scholarly tradition, and in the concern that analyses focusing on 'power to' can obscure what they see as the 'central interest of studying power'—its conflictual aspects.⁸⁷ The fear is that a focus on 'power to' relations 'shifts the theorists' gaze away from the set of phenomena that a theory of social power must comprehend, namely the illegitimate inequalities that exist in modern societies.'⁸⁸ However, in a culture characterized by normative adversarialism—and a discipline that privileges conflict in analysis—this approach is ironically guilty of omission in the reverse as it conceals empirical examples of 'power to' from view by 'defining them as

⁸³ M. P. Follett, "Power," in *Dynamic Administration*, eds. H. C. Metcalf and L. F. Urwick (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942), 101.

⁸⁴ H. Arendt, *Macht Und Gewalt* (Munich: Piper, 1970), 143

⁸⁵ M. Karlberg, "The Power of Discourse and the Discourse of Power: Pursuing Peace through Discourse Intervention," *International Journal of Peace Studies* 10, no. 1 (2005), 1-25.

⁸⁶ T.E. Wartenberg, *The Forms of Power: From Domination to Transformation*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 27.

⁸⁷ S. Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, (London MacMillan, 1974), 30.

⁸⁸ T.E. Wartenberg, *The Forms of Power: From Domination to Transformation*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 5.

irrelevant to social inquiry and observation.⁸⁹ It also causes us to ‘make assumptions about human nature, and prescribe models of social organization, that we otherwise might not.’ If ‘power over’ exposes inequalities, ‘power to’ analyses can show how the capacity of populations is harnessed to gradually overcome them. How much more important to bring these dimensions to light when analysis is being carried out in a cultural context and social structure and worldview that emphasizes and values reciprocal and mutualistic relations over adversarial ones, while remaining cautious about potential for the rhetoric of harmony to be used to justify oppression.

Notions of power and influence are closely intertwined. While power has also been defined as ‘the capacity to restructure actual situations’, influence can be seen as ‘the capacity to control and modify the perceptions of others.’⁹⁰ The language interviewees used to talk about their relationships to authority drew heavily on these concepts:

My feeling now is that when compared to them our strength is always weaker than theirs. This may be because of the background and context of China, that the government is very strong, and we are the grassroots, just one person or a few people doing things, and we are not very strong. But I think this strength is the effort we make and the results we have, and the ideals we have and how it can attract them.⁹¹

While they do engage in ‘the political,’ which can range from calling for regime change to organizing villagers to petition the government for running water to be brought to their village, Chinese NGOs must also be able to deal with the question of what is the realm of the political that is too sensitive. Overall, ‘there appears to be growing space for individuals and social groups to express their views (or to demonstrate them through practical actions)’ and by extension ‘exert influence on policy and public opinion, there seem to be ‘few clear lines to

⁸⁹ M.R. Karlberg, *Beyond the culture of contest: From adversarialism to mutualism in an age of interdependence*, (George Ronald, 2004) 26.

⁹⁰ I. C. MacMillan, *Strategy Formulation: Political Concepts* (West Publishing, 1980).

⁹¹ Interview H259, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August, 2010.

mark out that space or show what is and what is not permissible.⁹² When introducing their organizations to government or outsiders, these groups are often quick to reassure listeners of the ‘non-political’ nature of their work. One common refrain is to claim that one’s organization is ‘non-political, non-religious and non-ethnic,’ (*fei zhengzhi, fei zongjiao, fei minzu*) to preempt wary officials’ three primary concerns. The director of a longstanding development NGO skilled at negotiating political space shared:

In the worst case, the government would prevent you from working here, or spread negative information. Because theoretically they [government and NGOs] are all thinking of the wellbeing of people, but it can also become negative if you take it the wrong way, it can be political. But we do not do things in a political way. For example the issue of self-governance of the villagers (*cunmin zizhi de wenti*), elections and things, we don’t get involved because it is political.⁹³

Chinese NGOs, then, are characterized by a wide range of approaches to political change and conceptions of power. While studies of Chinese NGOs have been concerned with those organizations that overtly challenge the state or engage in politically sensitive action, this study shows that seemingly apolitical organizations can also engage in political action, even when the political undertones of their action may not be apparent to them or to local officials. It is also possible, then, to have a set of ‘development organizations that see profound social and political change as an essential component of development but define this change in terms that do not force them into a role of political activism directed to the conquest of political and economic power.’⁹⁴

To detect this dimension of NGO activities and its implications requires that research focus on what these organizations actually *do*, and not just what they *say*. Indeed, one must look beyond what they do, to the implications of what they do over time. As subsequent

⁹² R. Wexler, Y. Xu and N. Young, *NGO Advocacy in China: A Special Report from China Development Brief* (China Development Brief, 2006).

⁹³ Interview Y250, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, July 2010.

⁹⁴ F. Arbab, *Non-Governmental Development Organizations: Report of a Learning Project* (Cali, Colombia: CELATER, 1988).

chapters will show, certain tactics used by these organizations can legitimize or neutralize sensitivity and fears, and build confidence with both local government and with their target populations. These actions accumulate to change the nature of what is politically sensitive and what is not in society overall and contributes to our understanding of how political change is taking place in China.

2.2 Theoretical Approach

As discussed above, the civil society and corporatist frameworks emphasize different aspects of the state-society relationship because they are preoccupied with particular outcomes. As long as these preoccupations are made explicit and limitations in explanatory power are recognized, this is not a problem. This research also has certain preoccupations, which highlight different aspects of the state society relationship. The basic focus will be to what extent and how social organizations do what they set out to do, or fulfill their mission and objectives. I look primarily at the nature of the relationships between grassroots development organizations and local governments, because my interest lies in the process of social development and the implementation of social welfare policies, especially in rural and semi-rural areas. This is a sphere of activity in which both the state and social organizations participate, albeit in different ways.

With this emphasis, concerns about the autonomy or control exercised over social organizations become less relevant to the achievement of intended outcomes and analysis can transcend the linear continuum imposed by a constant focus on autonomy. What is important here is a different set of criteria—whether and how these grassroots agencies can mobilize resources, implement social programs, and perhaps even influence the implementation and formulation of policy at the micro-level. This approach will allow me to analyze the way such

agencies actually function, and the nature of their interactions with local governments. As was mentioned above, such an approach is comparable to the approaches adopted in studies of firms in China. Rather than simply measuring up Chinese firms to a predefined model of what private sector firms should look like, illuminating studies of state-owned or private firms in China examine how they carry out their mission and conduct business effectively, often in concert with local government or as hybrid entities through different periods and social and political contexts, and end up influencing this context.⁹⁵

2.2.1 Mutual Empowerment of State and Society

Fresh research in the growing field of state-NGO relations is beginning to focus on the symbiotic nature of the sometimes ambiguous relationships that characterize the state and society. Though bound by a number of constraints, social organizations in China engage in a complex process of negotiation with the state and create their own social spaces in a number of creative ways, sometimes with the implicit or explicit approval of local authorities who see the need for their services. What is more, research needs to look not only at the influence of the state on society—of government on social organizations—but also at the influence of social organizations or NGOs on the state. As Gallagher argues:

One of the key arguments presented here is that state-civil society interaction is important because it is changing the nature of the Chinese state. This transformative effect of civil society is, however, a result of the close interdependence and mutual penetration of the state and social groups....“it is more important to study the process of interaction and how it defines, bounds or transforms the two sides,” rather than measuring the degree of societal autonomy from the state.”⁹⁶

⁹⁵ For a few studies that take this approach, see A. G. Walder, "Local Governments as Industrial Firms"; D. Guthrie, *Dragon in a Three-Piece Suit: The Emergence of Capitalism in China*; D. Guthrie, "Understanding China's Transition to Capitalism: The Contributions of Victor Nee and Andrew Walder," *Sociological Forum* 15 no. 4 (2000), 727-749.

⁹⁶ M. E. Gallagher, "China: The Limits of Civil Society in a Late Leninist State," 419.

Efforts to theorize the relationship between the state and the non-profit sector in China can be enriched by an approach that uncovers instances of mutual empowerment between state and society. Such a focus allows us to observe the dynamics of the system, both the ways in which the state regulates and influences societal elements, as well as the ways in which societal organizations exert their influence on the state and shape the social environment. Scholarship has already begun to highlight the 'need to develop a perspective that emphasizes the interpenetration and mutual shaping of state and society.'⁹⁷

One scholarly attempt to incorporate mutual empowerment in the study of the relationship between the state and social organizations is that of synergy. This analytical framework has, to date, not yet been applied to the Chinese context, but possesses several characteristics that make it one useful lens through which to observe how local government agencies and grassroots development organizations in China interact in pursuing social development. The idea of synergy emerged out of the literature on social capital, and can help us to look specifically at the way in which the processes of corporatism and civil society can coexist at one of the interstices of state and society.

The literature on social capital has important contributions to make in understanding the nature of these interactions. While social capital is sometimes defined as 'trust and norms of reciprocity, fairness and cooperation,' these can be more accurately analyzed as byproducts of civic engagement.⁹⁸ But does civic engagement mean a lessening of the power of the state? Or can a strong state and a rich associational life coexist?

Woolcock posits 'that strategic combinations of different types of social capital are required to sustain economic life provides a firm rebuttal of arguments that state-society

⁹⁷ G. Yang and C. Calhoun, "Media, Civil Society, and the Rise of a Green Public Sphere in China," *China Information* 21, no. 2 (2007), 230.

⁹⁸ M. Woolcock, "Social Capital and Economic Development: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis and Policy Framework," *Theory and Society* 27, no. 2 (1998), 151-208.

relations are inherently a zero-sum game. Whether states perform well or poorly is an empirical issue, and which of these outcomes prevails turns on the coherence, credibility, and capacity of the state, the nature and extent of its engagement with civil society, and, importantly, the organizational features of civil society itself.⁹⁹

Proponents of social capital further argue that 'the state can actively nurture a stable, progressive, and predictable environment in which it is possible for a vibrant civil society to emerge and flourish.'¹⁰⁰ Not only is such a relationship a possibility, Skocpol argues, but a historical reality: 'conservatives may imagine that popular voluntary associations and the welfare state are contradictory opposites, but historically they have operated in close symbiosis.'¹⁰¹ Thus, 'there is no zero-sum opposition between civil society and the state.'¹⁰²

A number of other scholars who have studied social organizations in China, or civil society in other regions, refute the idea that state-society relations are a zero-sum game in which the empowerment of one leads to the weakening of the other.¹⁰³

Though the term 'nongovernmental organization' itself suggests autonomy from government organizations, 'NGOs are often intimately connected with their home governments in relationships that are both ambivalent and dynamic, sometimes cooperative, sometimes contentious, sometimes both simultaneously.'¹⁰⁴ Thus, 'contrary to what

⁹⁹ Ibid, 186.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 157.

¹⁰¹ T. Skocpol, "Unravelling from Above," *The American Prospect* 25 (1996), 20.

¹⁰² R. W. Hefner, "Civil Society: Cultural Possibility of a Modern Ideal," *Society* 35, no. 3 (1998), 21.

¹⁰³ See T. Brook and B. M. Frolic, "The Ambiguous Challenge of Civil Society"; J. S. Migdal, "The State in Society: An Approach to Struggles for Domination," in *State Power and Social Forces: Domination and Transformation in the Third World*, eds. J. S. Migdal, A. Kohli and V. Shue (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 7–36; X. Wang, "Mutual Empowerment of State and Society: Its Nature, Conditions, Mechanisms, and Limits," *Comparative Politics* 31, no. 2 (1999), 231–249; L. L. Tsai, "Solidary Groups, Informal Accountability, and Local Public Goods Provision in Rural China," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 02 (2007), 355–372.

¹⁰⁴ N. Chazan, "Africa's Democratic Challenge," *World Policy Journal* 9, no. 2 (1992), 279–307; G. Clarke, "Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Politics in the Developing World," *Political Studies* 46, no. 1 (1998), 36–52; S. N. Ndegwa, *The Two Faces of Civil Society: NGOs and Politics in Africa* Kumarian

conventional wisdom suggests, in many cases close linkages (including even interpenetration) between associations and authoritarian states are looked upon favorably by societal participants in such arrangements.¹⁰⁵

Shieh also attempts to transcend the civil society-corporatism debate by presenting a more 'dynamic, interactive and multidimensional framework of state-NGO relations' that focuses on the modes of interaction employed by China's NGOs. He argues that three of these modes are particularly salient: regulation, negotiation and societalization.

Regulation refers to formal state initiatives and mechanisms designed to control and manage social organizations involved in the provision of social services. Negotiation refers to consensual, and generally more informal, interactions between state and social actors in the provision of services. These interactions may be over areas of conflict or cooperation and may be initiated by either the state or social actor, but involve the active, voluntary participation of both sides. Finally, societalization refers to a mode whereby NGOs provide social services through initiatives in which the state is not a partner. The state may recognize and tolerate these initiatives, but is not directly involved in this mode. In contrast to the other two modes, societalization signifies greater distance from the state. It also signifies greater ownership and moral autonomy on the part of NGOs over their initiatives, though not necessarily institutional autonomy.¹⁰⁶

Shieh makes an important distinction between different kinds of autonomy, a distinction which is often overlooked in the literature. Institutional autonomy, he argues, is 'less a function of distance from the state, and more a function of having the resources and influence to resist state interference. For Chinese NGOs, resources and influence often come about not because they are removed from the state, but because they enjoy close ties with the state.'¹⁰⁷

Press, Inc., 1996) in P. C. Gilbert, "NGOs and Human Rights Promotion, Socialisation, Framing, and the Case of West Papua" (M.A. in Political Science, University of Canterbury).

¹⁰⁵ K. W. Foster, "Associations in the Embrace of an Authoritarian State: State Domination of Society?" 85.

¹⁰⁶ S. Shieh, "Beyond Corporatism and Civil Society: Three Modes of State-NGO Interaction in China," in *State and Society Responses to Social Welfare Needs in China: Serving the People*, eds. J. Shwartz and S. Shieh (Routledge, 2009), 23.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 23.

Similarly, O'Brien's observation that co-opted groups gain visibility and legitimacy by becoming embedded in the system can also be applied to the relationship of social organizations with the state. He notes that 'in an organization seeking to become embedded, the agents of change seek proximity to existing centers of power (i.e. entwinement) rather than distance.... They realize that independence at this point means irrelevance and that future development demands sensitivity to existing power relations.'¹⁰⁸

This study draws on insights from both the corporatism and civil society approaches, as well as the literature on synergy, or those 'ties that connect citizens and public officials across the public-private divide.'¹⁰⁹ Those who argue for the importance of synergy¹¹⁰ claim that in those instances where synergy has been observed, civic engagement works to strengthen state institutions, and effective state institutions create an environment in which civic engagement flourishes.¹¹¹ Local organizations and institutions, as more formalized and structured forms of civic engagement, can be strengthened by state regulation and 'can give rise to collective action increasing the power of the state.'¹¹²

Synergy can be based on two distinct conceptualizations of state-society relations: complementarity and embeddedness. While complementarity captures the mutually supportive relations between public and private actors and implies a clear division of labor, synergy based on embeddedness is characterized by intimate connections between citizens and public officials. A more radical view of synergy, embeddedness 'questions the assumption of distinct

¹⁰⁸ K. J. O'Brien, "Chinese People's Congresses and Legislative Embeddedness: Understanding Early Organizational Development," *Comparative Political Studies* 27, no. 1 (1994), 80.

¹⁰⁹ P. Evans, "Government Action, Social Capital and Development: Reviewing the Evidence on Synergy," *World Development* 24, no. 6 (1996), 1120.

¹¹⁰ See R. D. Putnam, "The Prosperous Community," *The American Prospect* 4, no. 13 (1993), 35-42; J. B. Nugent, "Between State, Markets and Households: A Neoinstitutional Analysis of Local Organizations and Institutions," *World Development* 21 (1993), 623-623.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² M. Woolcock, "Social Capital and Economic Development: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis and Policy Framework," 157.

public and private spheres, and sees trust and productive informal networks not only as a property of civil society but as spanning the public-private divide.¹¹³ While Evans' initial notion of 'embedded autonomy' was originally applied to the relationship between industry and the state, he posits that expanding the scope of state-society links to include a broader range of groups and classes will 'result in a more politically robust and adaptive version of embedded autonomy.'¹¹⁴

Ostrom's work on the highly effective 'coproduction' of goods and services by the cooperative efforts of public and private actors,¹¹⁵ and Tandler's work on the 'blurred public and private divide'¹¹⁶ emphasize the potential benefits of networks that span the divide between state and civil society. According to Evans, this kind of characterization of synergy based on embeddedness:

...flies in the face of both a market-based logic of development and traditional theories of public administration. Neoliberal and statist views of the world can be reconciled to synergy as complementarity, perhaps even to the possibility of occasional positive influences flowing across the public-private divide, but the idea of ongoing public-private intimacy offends everyone's sense of propriety. Public administration purists see it as threatening the insulation necessary for clearheaded decisions that are in the public interest. Market advocates see it as hopelessly muddying the logic of individual incentives and rational resource allocation.¹¹⁷

However, Evans' analysis of synergetic relations shows that, in general, these tend to be based on a combination of both complementarity and embeddedness.

One of the arguments raised against embedded relationships between the state and firms, which could also be applied to the relationship between the state and social

¹¹³ P. Evans, "Introduction: Development Strategies Across the Public-Private Divide," 1036.

¹¹⁴ P. Evans, "Government Action, Social Capital and Development: Reviewing the Evidence on Synergy," 1127.

¹¹⁵ E. Ostrom, "Crossing the Great Divide: Coproduction, Synergy, and Development," *World Development* 24, no. 6 (1996), 1073-1087.

¹¹⁶ Judith Tandler, "'Social Capital and the Public Sector: The Blurred Boundaries between Private and Public" Paper Presented to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences Conference of the Economic Development Working Group, Social Capital and Public Affairs Project" (Cambridge, MA, May, 1995).

¹¹⁷ P. Evans, "Introduction: Development Strategies Across the Public-Private Divide," 1036.

organizations is that such relationships can too easily cross the fine line from embedded autonomy to corruption and clientelism. Maintaining a deep divide between public and private sectors, it is thought, can help to control corruption and other forms of opportunistic behavior.

If the remedy to corruption is seen as the creation of a strict bureaucratic structure to separate the servants of the public from the public, it is likely that behind the closed doors of a centralized system corrupt practices can flourish without much fear of exposure. The efforts to control corruption by creating a gulf between polity and society may encourage other forms of opportunistic behavior to proliferate along with corruption. When public officials and the citizens they are supposed to serve work together in diverse sets of open, nested arenas, productivity can be higher and all forms of opportunistic behavior are more likely to be exposed, but never totally eliminated.¹¹⁸

The desirability of synergetic relationships between state and citizens also comes from the possibilities for higher productivity and effectiveness of both state action and private efforts. Ostrom suggests:

That coproduction of many goods and services normally considered to be public goods by government agencies and citizens organized into polycentric systems is crucial for achieving higher levels of welfare in developing countries, particularly for those who are poor. Prior efforts directed at improving the training and capacity of public officials have frequently had disappointing results. Efforts directed at increasing citizen 'participation' in petitioning others to provide goods for them have also proved disappointing. Efforts directed at increasing the potential complementarities between official and citizen production or problem-solving activities may require more time at the initial stage of a process, but promise a much higher, long-term return.¹¹⁹

2.3 Conclusion

The theoretical approach taken here seeks to move beyond the civil society and corporatist frameworks and build on emerging work that allows for the mutual empowerment of state and society in studying state-social organization relationships. Holding the possibility

¹¹⁸ E. Ostrom, "Crossing the Great Divide: Coproduction, Synergy, and Development," 1083.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

of mutual empowerment of state and society as a governing assumption and drawing on the many theoretical advances in this field discussed above, this study develops the related notion of positive-sum reciprocal engagement to describe one form of relationship between grassroots NGOs and local government agencies.

By looking at instances in which positive-sum reciprocal engagement emerges or fails to emerge, this study aims to advance theorizing about such relationships and contribute to the literature on mutual empowerment between state and society. It also incorporates insights from the literature on Chinese politics to examine the ways in which the political context shapes potential for reciprocal engagement and its variation across regions. It hopes to make an original theoretical contribution by explaining how tensions coexist with and are navigated within mutualistic state-society relationships rather than purely adversarial ones. While highlighting the diversity of state-society arrangements and putting forward explanations for this diversity, it also attempts to provide theoretical explanations for the state penetration of society as well as the observed influence of society over a powerful authoritarian state. Uncovering reciprocal engagement between local government agencies and grassroots development organizations can also contribute to a more nuanced understanding of state-society relations in general and examine the role that such relationships play in China's broader political context.

Chapter 3: Positive-Sum Reciprocal Engagement

3.1 Introduction

This chapter begins by illustrating, refining and analyzing the concept of positive-sum reciprocal engagement as one particular type of relationship that can emerge between grassroots NGOs and local government agencies. It then discusses the specific ways in which relationships between grassroots NGOs and the local state are mutually empowering. *Chapter 1* has already defined the subset of grassroots NGOs and local government agencies as the actors in these relationships, dealing with the *who* of reciprocal engagement. The previous chapter has discussed theoretical foundations reciprocal relationships. The next three chapters look at the preconditions and antecedents that facilitate the emergence of positive-sum reciprocal engagement, and *how* such engagement is established and sustained over time. *Chapter 7* focuses on the implications of reciprocal engagement, its outcomes for various actors, and for the environment.

It should be pointed out that positive-sum reciprocal engagement represents only one kind of relationship that can emerge between two particular types of actors, and is not applicable or generalizable across Chinese civil society. For example, it would be meaningless to talk about reciprocal engagement between dissident groups and the state, because the discussion here is confined to organizations that are working for change from ‘within the system.’ Likewise, the concept of positive-sum reciprocal engagement would also be inapplicable to government-organized NGOs or semi-official organizations, because the concept implies a certain level of distinction between state entities and social organizations, as well as action that is initiated or conceived within the frameworks of the social organizations.

It is even possible that it would have less applicability at higher administrative levels, in looking at relationships between the state and large, national NGOs, or between grassroots NGOs and central government agencies.

Despite the concept's limited applicability to relationships between local government agencies and a particular type of grassroots NGO, the concept has relevance to our understanding of civil society and, more broadly, state-society relations. Measured by the number of civil servants, local government agencies make up over 90% of China's government apparatus,¹ while grassroots NGOs represent the majority and the bulk of Chinese social organizations.² Trends also indicate that the proliferation of grassroots NGOs will accelerate. Finally, as pointed out elsewhere in this dissertation, the study of one particular relationship formed between state and society can also provide new insights into general patterns of state-society interaction.

3.2 Comparable Concepts

The theoretical frameworks and approaches challenged by this work and those within which this work is located have been outlined in the previous chapter reviewing the literature on Chinese NGOs and the mutual empowerment of state and society. This section attempts, more narrowly, to refine the concept of positive-sum reciprocal engagement, and, although exact definitions are not always possible or desirable, to deconstruct the concept and present some of its various components and dimensions.

¹ According to Vice Director Hou Jianliang of the Ministry of Human Resources (*renshi bu*), as of 2003, the total number of civil servants in China was 6.4 million, of which 0.5 million were employees of the central government. See HB. Liu, Analysis and Reform of China's Central and Local Government System and Structure (*woguo zhongyang yu defang zhengzhi jigou de fenxi yu gaijin*), *Reform Internal Reference* (*Gaige Neican*), 2006 (6). <http://www.iolaw.org.cn/showArticle.asp?id=2050> accessed December 28, 2011.

² See M. Wang, "The Development and Present Situation of NGOs in China," *Social Sciences in China - English Edition* 28, no. 2 (2007), 96.

While comparable concepts appear across a number of literatures, this section will show that positive-sum reciprocal engagement differs from these existing concepts in important ways and refers to a distinct form of state-society relationship. At a general level, the construct of positive-sum reciprocal engagement is most closely related to concepts found in the literatures on the mutual empowerment of state and society³ and engagement between the public and the private.⁴ These literatures, as well as literatures on collaboration and cross-sector collaboration that deal directly with inter-organizational relationships, including relationships between government and nonprofits, put forward such concepts as cooperation,⁵ collaboration,⁶ partnership,⁷ embeddedness,⁸ complementarity,⁹ coproduction,¹⁰ synergy,¹¹

³ J. S. Migdal, A. Kohli, and V. Shue, *State Power and Social Forces: Domination and Transformation in the Third World*, Cambridge University Press, 1994) M. Woolcock, "Social capital and economic development: Toward a theoretical synthesis and policy framework," *Theory and Society* 27, no. 2 (1998): 151-208.

⁴ P. Evans, "Introduction: Development strategies across the public-private divide," *World Development* 24, no. 6 (1996); P. Evans, "Government action, social capital and development: Reviewing the evidence on synergy," *World Development* 24, no. 6 (1996), 1119-1132; Judith Tendler, *Good government in the tropics*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 221.

⁵ The literatures corresponding to these concepts are discussed in the chapter on theoretical issues. For a few examples of each concept, see: A. Najam, "The Four C's of Third Sector-Government Relations: Co-operation, Confrontation, Complementarity and Co-optation," *Non-Profit Management and Leadership* 10, no. 4 (2000); 375-396.

⁶ See *ibid.*; D. J. Wood and B. Gray, "Toward a comprehensive theory of collaboration," *The Journal of applied behavioral science* 27, no. 2 (1991), 139; N. C. Roberts and R. T. Bradley, "Stakeholder collaboration and innovation: A study of public policy initiation at the state level," *The Journal of applied behavioral science* 27, no. 2 (1991), 209; S. S. Dawes and O. Eglene, "New models of collaboration for delivering government services: A dynamic model drawn from multi-national research," (2004), 1-11.

⁷ J. W. Grubbs, "Can agencies work together? Collaboration in public and nonprofit organizations," *Public administration review* 60, no. 3 (2000), 275-280; S. S. Dawes and O. Eglene, "New Models of Collaboration for Delivering Government Services: A Dynamic Model Drawn from Multi-National Research" *Proceedings of the 2004 Annual National Conference on Digital Government Research* (Digital Government Society of North America, 2004).

⁸ Evans, "Introduction: Development strategies across the public-private divide"; P. Evans, *Embedded Autonomy: States & Industrial Transformation*, (Princeton University Press Princeton, NJ, USA, 1995).

⁹ A. M. Thomson and J. L. Perry, "Collaboration processes: Inside the black box," *Public administration review* 66 (2006), 20-32; Najam, "The Four C's of Third Sector-Government Relations: Co-operation," 375-396; Evans, "Introduction: Development strategies across the public-private divide."

¹⁰ W. F. Lam, "Institutional design of public agencies and coproduction: A study of irrigation associations in Taiwan," *World Development* 24, no. 6 (1996), 1039-1054; E. Ostrom, "Crossing the great divide: Coproduction, synergy, and development," *World Development* 24, no. 6 (1996), 1073-1087.

¹¹ Evans, "Introduction: Development strategies across the public-private divide"; Ostrom, "Crossing the great divide: Coproduction, synergy, and development"; J. Fox, "How does civil society thicken?"

entwinement,¹² empowerment,¹³ public participation,¹⁴ and empowered participatory governance.¹⁵

3.3 Positive-Sum Reciprocal Engagement

As discussed in *Chapter 1*, the approach adopted in this research has not been to take an existing, well-defined concept from the literature, and apply it to the context of government-NGOs relations in China, including or excluding cases based on a pre-existing categorization or definition. Instead, research began with an observation of relationships and phenomena that were not fully captured by any of these existing concepts.

Research and fieldwork commenced with the observation of this phenomenon, viewed initially through the lens of a few comparable concepts and frameworks in the literature. It was by looking for and learning about these distinctive relationships, through the process of research itself, that the concept of positive-sum reciprocal engagement has subsequently been more fully refined and conceptualized.

3.3.1 Illustrations

Research began with the assumption that listening carefully to the voices of interviewees, observing concrete examples and illustrations of reciprocal engagement between grassroots NGOs and local government departments is necessary in order to further probe the concept, delimit and refine it. Some of these illustrations, taken from interviews with members

The political construction of social capital in rural Mexico," *World Development* 24, no. 6 (1996): 1089-1103; M. Burawoy, "The state and economic involution: Russia through a China lens," *World Development* 24, no. 6 (1996): 1105-1117; Evans, "Government action, social capital and development: Reviewing the evidence on synergy," 1119-1132.

¹² K. J. O'Brien, "Chinese People's Congresses and Legislative Embeddedness: Understanding Early Organizational Development," *Comparative Political Studies* 27, no. 1 (1994), 80.

¹³ IAP2 spectrum www.iap2.org, accessed January 15, 2011.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ A. Fung, E. O. Wright, and R. Abers, *Deepening democracy: Institutional innovations in empowered participatory governance*, (Verso Books, 2003).

of grassroots NGOs and local government departments engaged in such relationships, are presented below.

One of the grassroots environmental NGOs included in this study describes the nature of this relationship with the relevant offices and officials of the local state as follows:

It should be a mutually trusting, mutually encouraging, mutually supporting and mutually monitoring (*jiandu*) relationship. By mutually trusting, I mean the government should welcome the NGO to do things, and should support its work. The NGO is like a good person helping other people, because the government's functioning inevitably leaves blank certain untouched spaces (*sijiao*), so NGOs assist government to do many things. Mutual trust is...because as a registered NGO, with respect to my own organization, the government trusts me. And our organization also has trust in the government's function (*zhineng*). At the same time as having this mutual trust, we also understand each other. For example, I can do some publicity work or other work, and I don't have to go and let the government know (*dasheng zhaohu*), or if I go and do other things I don't have to let them know, because I have their tacit consent (*moxu*).

As for mutual monitoring, this includes financial monitoring, financial auditing and investigating, and [monitoring] funding sources. This is also of assistance to the nongovernmental organization. And the opposite is also true, the NGO's influence on the government is also positive. Because the government's monitoring of the NGO can allow the NGO to use its money suitably, to use its funding in the places where it should be used. The NGO's actions can equally affect the actions of the government, because the NGO can do a lot and the government... can realize the deficiencies in their functioning, this will strengthen their work, and fill in the gaps in their work (*tianbu kongbai*). Mutual support refers to the government's support of the NGO's programs with human, financial, and other resources. NGOs can also support the work of the government.¹⁶

An educational grassroots NGO described its organization with local government as follows:

The local government approves of our work. When they think of our organization, they see that it is meticulous and helps their work, and the common people like it. On the one hand we get this support, but also our work is very independent, they won't come and meddle in our affairs. Because first of all their money is not involved. So is like the salt and soy sauce in the food. The government is the salt, and they think sometimes having some soy sauce is good too. I think it is a coexisting and interdependent (*gongcun huxiang yicun*) relationship, because a lot of our work requires their support, and if we participate we can help their work be done better.... Because the resources are in the government's hands. So I think the best relationship, because

¹⁶ Interview N238, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

they could give some resources to the social organizations, it is an equal and cooperative relationship.

For example, now I want to do an early education project. So we have someone...who is high in government, I go to them and tell them we want to do this early education program. While there are many private schools, public schools are lacking, and we wish to go and help the teachers so that children [in this area] can receive better education, so they will go and coordinate with the Education Bureau. They will see which schools need the most support, we listen to their suggestions and get the teachers to participate in the training. When you do the initial investigation, they have to see you are doing a very detailed survey. So I will first talk to the Education Bureau officials. Then I will talk to the teachers, observe the situation in the community and what the needs are, and how the common people see the issue. When you have all this information they see that you have done preparation and what you are telling them is based on solid evidence, that you are seeking truth from facts (*shishi qinshi*). You have to tell them you have done this preliminary investigation. We can directly go [to the potential project site] and do the investigation, everyone knows us, we are all classmates, so we have the foundation. But then when you want to actually do the program, it's not just an individual action, it is organizational one, so you have to go through the relevant government offices....If we do it well we can give the government some suggestions and models about how, within a small scope, this can be promoted.¹⁷

The grassroots NGO mentioned above is engaged in a reciprocal relationship with a local government department. An official from this department described their relationship as 'very close' and characterized by extensive cooperation. Referring to the NGO by the common term 'social organization,' the official gave the following account of the relationship:

For example, with respect to [this department's] projects, we hand over a portion of our work to the social organization to complete. Among social organizations, everyone knows not to duplicate or waste resources. So we hope that the work will be orderly and that resources won't be duplicated. If you are doing this work and working with this population, the other one is doing the other, so that different groups are working with different populations. We will suggest certain tasks according to the work they are doing, and provide them with resources accordingly. So in this way, the cooperation is very positive.

Management is very important. We have tried to ensure that as these social organizations, are established, carry out their work, and develop, there should not be a lot of overlap in their work. The work I do, I do well. Between them there will also be some dialogue and cooperation. But, here, as a government organization, the scope of our responsibility also includes some work that can be carried out by these organizations. So they survive according to quality. In doing this work they do it well,

¹⁷ Interview Y250, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, July 2010.

and it is of great assistance to our work. So we have a very complete cycle (*huan*), each government office and social organization is doing a different part of it, so runs very smoothly. It contributes to the scientific quality, systematization and improvement of the work. So we do not feel that social organizations cause any inconvenience to us or negatively affect us.

With respect to the role of these organizations in society, this same official shared the following thoughts:

If the criterion is resources, social organizations do not have a lot to offer. With respect to their function in society, there is a position I agree with, that social organizations are a supplement to government departments. They cannot replace, or represent, the government. If they think they can do this, it is an incorrect understanding. And we hope they are also a social resource. Because a policy and guiding principle (*fangzhen*) of our department's work calls for "the participation of the of whole society" (*quan shehui canyu*), and social organizations are a social force. I myself have worked in NGOs before, so I understand their work well.

...whether it's government offices or NGOs, [we all] have to improve our abilities. Because only when you have good working methods and skills can you ensure the quality and survival of your organization. But if you can't do this you won't secure the approval or recognition (*renke*) of government or of the people. Aside from ability, as a supplement to government organizations, you must have intimate contact with government organizations to enable your organization to gain their understanding and support, and work according to their guidance. If you operate without having secured the approval or recognition of the government, you can't do anything. When problems come up in your work, you must dialogue and communicate with each other without delay. Because NGOs should know that they participate in order for things to become better, but if I participate and make this work more chaotic (*luan*), whether from the point of view of government or NGOs, this is not what we hope for.

[In this kind of relationship] I think certain working information should be shared, as long as it is public information that is not classified as internal to the government. Even though, as an NGO, you are not managed by government, but your work should be shared and given as feedback (*fankui*) to the government so that they can do their work. Otherwise how will you gain their support? Also there is the sharing of resources. So NGO resources can come in, and government resources can be shared with NGOs.¹⁸

The reference to NGO resources above is one of several that came up in interviews. These resources can include financial and human resources, expertise, technical support, and so on. Each of these resources can empower partner government organizations in ways that

¹⁸ Interview Y251, Government, staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

will be further explored below. Another educational NGO discussed the mutual influence inherent in this type of relationship:

This cooperation can fill in some of the areas they [government] have left blank. It can result from common ground between the two parties (*gongtong dian*), and be a win-win relationship. We do some things that the government is not paying a lot of attention to, but that we think are very important. And when the government sees what we are doing and how important it is, even if we leave, the government will continue to do this work... But as an organization, our power is very limited, so to be able to do it well, the government's involvement is very important. If they support and participate, and observe what we are doing and the good results, they will accept it. It will also fulfill an advocacy function. Because our ability is limited, and the number of people we can reach is limited, and we can't replace the government, we can only supplement a little bit.¹⁹

It is useful to observe how this type of relationship is represented in the Chinese discourse. An influential Chinese NGO scholar and practitioner identified three types of relationships between social organizations and government. The first is the adversarial (*duikang xing*) relationship. With adversarial relationships, 'the advantage is you can get media attention. But in China, actually, if you take this approach you will seldom succeed.'

The second relationship is the public participation cooperation model (*gonggong canyu beizuo moshi*), where a government characterized by limited resources acts as 'referee' and social organizations as the 'athletes.' In this model government uses tax exemption, contracting and other ways to buy the services of NGOs. 'This doesn't mean that all the power is in the hands of the government and NGOs are just implementing. Because even though a lot of these forums and meetings don't include the voices of the people, still there can be mutual supervision (*jiandu*).'

The third model is bilateral cooperation (*shuangfang beizuo moshi*), characterized by communication and dialogue with local government, 'together coming up with a model of how

¹⁹ Interview Y252, NGO, staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

to do things. Through this collaboration we discovered both sides need to have space and common ideals. This is another new collaborative model.’²⁰

3.3.2 Definitions and Dimensions

The term positive-sum reciprocal engagement is used to describe the kind of relationship that is the focus of this research because it captures a few of the different dimensions or facets of this relationship. Without limiting analysis to an exact definition, positive-sum reciprocal engagement between grassroots NGOs and local government agencies seems to imply a dynamic and interactive process characterized by closeness and proximity, communication and engagement, collective or joint action, mutual influence, mutual benefit and mutual empowerment, resulting in added value for society. These different facets or components of positive-sum reciprocal engagement are explored in further detail below.

1. Proximity

One key characteristic of positive-sum reciprocal engagement has to do with the distance between social organizations and the state. Closeness of the association seems to be important, but defining ‘closeness’ is problematic, as it can refer to mutual dependency as well as intimacy. For the purposes of my analysis, grassroots NGOs and local government departments that are engaged in reciprocal relationships are distinct, while also, depending on the depth of engagement, mutually aware, close, and even intimate.

2. Communication

The second component of positive-sum reciprocal engagement is a certain degree of communication and engagement between the state and social organizations:

Social organizations are part of society. The government is the heart. And the CSOs [civil society organizations] are the other organs. There must be communication and

²⁰ Interview BJ09, NGO, network director, analyst. Beijing, September 2009.

veins between these. You have to develop good relations with government so that the blood can flow, the communication can flow.²¹

These relationships involve engagement and communication at both the individual and at the organizational level. This communication can occur through discussion and dialogue, visits, reports and meetings. The content of communication could take place at the level of exchange of ideas and experience, where ‘the government would have some activities that we [the NGO] participate in, and some of the meetings we hold to share and discuss the topic of education, they can also participate in, so that ideas and theories could be shared and information flow between the two.’²² It can also involve collective planning and strategizing about action:

[This cooperative relationship involves] going and visiting them often, and engaging in dialogue with them. Also, we try to identify individuals who are likeminded. With these individuals we can have closer cooperation and dialogue. We can even make some plans together, about what goals we want to achieve within a certain period of time, what they think we should do, what we think we should do, we can communicate with each other and make a plan. In this process, together we think about what kinds of modifications we need to make to this plan, and then after this period, we can look back and reflect on whether we achieved this goal. We can do this kind of analysis together.²³

With respect to content, positive-sum reciprocal engagement also implies the communication of information that flows both ways: the sharing of information about the work of the NGO and the work of the government. NGOs regularly share with collaborating government departments developments in and results of their work, while government officials share with collaborating NGOs information about the government department’s work, changes in policy, and the local situation.

3. Joint Action

Positive-sum reciprocal engagement between grassroots NGOs and local government agencies also involves some form of action outside of what the state or the local government is

²¹ Interview BJ09, NGO, network director, analyst. Beijing, September 2009.

²² Interview H259, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

²³ Interview Y132, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

already doing. Individuals from both spheres may be directly participating in this action, but there are also cases in which only participants from the NGO sphere are participating directly. One interviewee characterized this kind of relationship as 'Equal, dynamic, for example I can participate in their work, they can participate in my work, not be divided into upper and lower levels (*shangxia ji*). Everyone can share together.'²⁴

In this respect, the reciprocal engagement relates to concepts such as cooperation and collaboration, defined as 'an interactive process having a shared transmutational purpose.'²⁵ A transmutational purpose, or shared, goal-directed activity among participants denotes the purposeful, creative and productive aspects of this type of relationship, and differentiates it from dialogue or communication. It also implies a transformative purpose, which would presumably effect changes in the involved parties' approaches and goals.

4. Mutual Influence

The fourth dimension or characteristic of positive-sum reciprocal engagement is mutual influence. In the context of this relationship between the two parties, mutual influence can be seen not only as influencing the other party to act towards one's own vision of the common good,²⁶ but also as collectively defining a vision of the common good. In a reciprocal relationship, grassroots NGOs and government departments both consciously and unconsciously mold and affect each others' actions, preferences, and worldviews. In this sense, it is an organic relationship in which each party acts on the other in a dynamic way:

Because as NGOs, we are at the grassroots, much of our work involves dealing with government; we coordinate and communicate with them so that they know what we are doing, what the benefits are, and what we need in terms of support from them. Another important task, because we are supplementary to government, is to keep

²⁴ Interview Y229, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

²⁵ Roberts and Bradley, "Stakeholder collaboration and innovation: A study of public policy initiation at the state level," 209.

²⁶ Najam, "The Four C's of Third Sector-Government Relations: Co-operation," 375-396.

abreast of the changes in the community and then share with government the results of what is happening, how to guide policy, and where the weaknesses are, so that our resources can be effectively integrated with the government resources.²⁷

Observations of NGOs or other social groups influencing government exist in public perception and in the literature on NGO-government relations;²⁸ they are commonly referred to in a normatively neutral or positive way as advocacy, lobbying, or interest group representation. Observations of government influencing NGOs also exist, but are generally referred to in a normatively negative way, as cooptation or capture. According to the commonly accepted pluralist governance model, the assumption is that ‘the public good is an aggregation of private interests. This approach legitimizes lobbying actions of all kinds, assuming that no single interest will capture the state.’²⁹ Within this framework of social relations, it seems acceptable for influence to be exerted by NGOs on government, but not vice versa. Why this should be so has to do with the imbalance of power between the two, and is clearly tied up with our notions of power. Within the conception of positive-sum reciprocal engagement explored here, however, the influence exerted is mutual, and, along with many of the interviewees in this study, I posit that it can often take place without the loss of real autonomy or authenticity so feared by scholars of civil society.³⁰

5. Mutual Benefit and Empowerment

Reciprocity in relationships implies benefit to both parties. Between grassroots NGOs and local government departments, benefits can be experienced through the complementary exchange of resources or services specific to each sector. However, the concept of positive-

²⁷ Interview Y250, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, July 2010.

²⁸ See, for example, D. Korten, ‘Third generation NGO strategies: A key to people centered development’ *World Development* 15 (1987), 145-159.

²⁹ JM. Brinkerhoff, DW. Brinkerhoff. Government-nonprofit relations in comparative perspective: evolution, themes and new directions. *Public Administration and Development* 22(1): 3-18 (2002).

³⁰ For a more complete discussion of this subject, see *Chapter 2* of this dissertation.

sum reciprocal engagement as outlined here goes beyond a reciprocal ‘you scratch my back, I scratch yours.’ While many instances of reciprocity in social relations can be thought of as zero-sum, in which the benefits exchanged are equivalent and essentially cancel each other out, there are also instances of reciprocity that yield positive value for both sides. The key concept here is mutual empowerment, which effectively goes beyond and is more dynamic than mutual benefit.³¹ Exactly how positive-sum reciprocal engagement empowers grassroots NGOs and local government agencies is discussed in more detail in the remainder of this chapter.

6. Added Value for Society

The collaborative activity inherent in positive-sum reciprocal engagement can lead to shared creation or discovery, and implies ‘the creation of new value by doing something new or different.’³² In this dimension, reciprocal engagement is closely related to the concept of synergy, the ability of a whole to achieve a more favorable result than its strongest part or the sum of its parts. One NGO interviewee advocated for this such engagement in the following terms: ‘We have to take advantage of the government (*liyong zhengfu*). Some people say we have to go against the government. But the government has many [positive] qualities too, it’s the same. So it should be $1+1=3$. But right now its $1+1=1$.’³³

Another interviewee saw this kind of relationship resulting in ‘a virtuous cycle for the local environment,’³⁴ implying that the value added by the interaction can also be directed toward a common objective that transcends the benefit of either party.

³¹ For a more comprehensive discussion of empowerment, see *Chapter 2*.

³² Wood and Gray, "Toward a comprehensive theory of collaboration," 139.

³³ Interview Y134, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, May 2010.

³⁴ Interview H261, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, May 2010.

3.3.3 Differentiation

In achieving conceptual clarity, it is often as important to think about what a concept *is not* as to define what it *is*. As such, I will make an attempt to differentiate the concept of positive-sum reciprocal engagement from other, perhaps related, notions.

First, wherever proximity to the state is observed or discussed in the context of NGOs, particularly in the Chinese context, it is often mistaken for capture, cooptation, or loss of autonomy. This is clearly not what is meant here, and the kind of relationship outlined in this chapter is a complex one that cannot be simply located on either side of a coopted/autonomous dichotomy. In the words of one interviewee:

Our relationship has been one of ‘reliance but not dependence’ (*yikao erbu yilai*). We are an independent organization, government does not interfere (*ganrao*) or lead (*lingdao*) us. But we do actively try to secure the support of the local government, such as the Environmental Protection Bureau, the Forestry Bureau, etc. Because if you leave the local government, you can’t do anything (*niyaoshi likaile dangdi zhengfu ma, ni yeshi zuobuliao*).³⁵

Similarly, the mutual influence dimension of the positive-sum reciprocal engagement concept does not refer to the merging of one entity into another, or even the assimilation of one entity to resemble another. The question of autonomy, independence and assimilation and cooptation is a complex one that is discussed more fully in *Chapter 2*.

Mutual benefit is too often mistaken for mutual dependence, in the sense that one party is necessary for the survival of the other. Biological metaphors related to species survival, such as adaptation or modification, for example, are often applied to NGOs in the Chinese context. This kind of interaction is not what is being referred to here, as these concepts imply that NGOs display a passive acceptance of the political and social environment and modify behavior accordingly. Interviews with participants in reciprocal relationships and observations of interactions within those relationships, on the other hand, show that

³⁵ Interview Y134, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, May 2010.

grassroots NGOs party to positive-sum reciprocal engagement can also actively analyze, question and act on the existing policy environment, social structure or the socioeconomic forces.

Positive-sum reciprocal engagement also goes beyond complementarity, or the idea that grassroots NGOs and local governments play a role of supplementing or ‘filling the blanks’ left by the other. While interactions can begin with this pattern, this research has observed that NGOs can enter and expand spaces initially inhabited by government actors, and can also create new spaces.

The nature of relationships grassroots NGOs form with local government officials as described here should also not be confused with *guanxi*. It would be a mistake to reduce them to the cultivation of personal relationships for personal or even organizational gain. As will be suggested at the end of this chapter, these relationships are not always strategic or instrumental, they also contain a component that refers to a broader motivation. In their co-active component, these relationships are differentiated from the kind of personal or professional relationships that emerge from parties that meet regularly in different fora with no specific problem-solving or action-oriented objectives.

Finally, positive-sum reciprocal engagement should be differentiated from the kind of collaboration found in contracting regimes. Government contracting of NGO services or outsourcing to NGOs, while it can involve some of the dimensions mentioned here, is generally regularized and transactional. It often does not involve the kind of joint action and mutual influence inherent in positive-sum reciprocal engagement. The key issue here is the mutually transformative impact of engagement. In a transactional contracting relationship, some may see in the transfer of a degree of responsibility and resources to NGOs some expansion of societal ‘power,’ but I see in the potential of positive-sum reciprocal engagement

to empower grassroots NGOs as well as local government agencies in the ways described in the remainder of this chapter a more profound and lasting dynamic of social and political change.

The tendency to confuse positive-sum reciprocal engagement with some of the other concepts canvassed above may be rooted in a lack of theoretical clarity about certain foundational issues. Entwined with many of these notions are assumptions about the nature of power, influence, human motivation, equality and the nature of the political and of social transformation. In order to ground this conception of positive-sum reciprocal engagement, I have visited the theoretical basis of some of these issues in *Chapter 2*.

3.4 Motivations: Benefits and Empowerment

There are NGOs in China that choose not to engage with government at all. It is possible for these organizations to rely on alternate strategies such as gaining popular support, seeking media attention or relying on international funding, to operate and expand—at least up to a certain point. But the evidence suggests that the vast majority of social organizations of all kinds seek engagement with the state. The grassroots organizations included in this study are no exception; over 90 percent of survey respondents agreed with the statement that their organization should establish relationships with local government. But what are their motivations for wanting to establish these relationships? Is it simply, as some observers suggest, that without legal and regulatory protections, these organizations are perched on the brink of survival, their precarious existence only sustained by currying favor with officials?³⁶

³⁶See, for example, S. Liang, "Walking the tightrope: Civil society organizations in China," 3 (2003), 11–15; Y. F. Tan, "Grassroots NGOs in an 'out of food' crisis (*caogen* NGO *zhaoyu* 'duanliang' *weiji*)," *Southern Weekend* (*Nanfang Zhoumo*) (2010); V. Yu, "China's NGOs fear the worst," *Asia Times* (2009); K. B. Richburg, "China's crackdown on nonprofit groups prompts new fears among activists," *Washington Post* (2010).

And what do NGOs bring to the table? Given the government's strong bureaucratic and implementation capacity, and the relative lack of such capacity in many NGOs, particularly grassroots organizations like those included in this study, these organizations are limited in their ability to benefit government by alleviating social burdens and contributing resources. Why, then, would government departments engage with them? This research presents some evidence that there is more to the story than the argument circulating in much of Western media and scholarship, and in some Chinese NGO circles, that the Chinese government avoids shutting down NGOs for fear of raising international outcry, but that through 'policy chills' and by cutting off legal means and financial resources, the state is hoping NGOs 'die a slow death.'³⁷ Still other observations of engagement between the sectors put this engagement down to the desire of the state to maintain power by trying to coopt 'dangerous elements.'³⁸

Drawing on interviews and field observations, this study argues that engagement between local government and grassroots NGOs is often sought because it can empower both parties in ways that may not be observed at first glance. In addition to asking government and NGO interviewees whether they wanted to establish relationships with members of the other sector, interviewees were asked why. This section presents various motives independently cited by participants in interviews. It should be noted that the motivations discussed here refer to perceived or expected outcomes of engagement between NGOs and government; not all expected outcomes are realized. Some of the real outcomes of positive-sum reciprocal engagement observed by this research are dealt with in *Chapter 7*.

³⁷ For example, J. Unger and A. Chan, "Corporatism in China: A Developmental State in an East Asian Context," *China after Socialism: In the Footsteps of Eastern Europe or East Asia* (1996); X. Zhang and R. Baum, "Civil Society and the Anatomy of a Rural NGO," *The China Journal* (2004), 97-107.

³⁸ A. Brettell, Environmental non-government organizations in the People's Republic of China: innocents in a co-opted environmental movement? *The Journal of Pacific Asia* 6 (2000), 27-56.

3.4.1 Empowering Local Government Agencies

Why would risk-averse government officials in a strong state engage with grassroots NGOs? Different conclusions would be drawn based on different assumptions about human motivation. For example, it could be argued that local officials stick their necks out to support these groups because of their altruism and desire to contribute to the betterment of their communities and society. At the other extreme, if the assumption is that local officials are calculating agents of a Party struggling to ‘secure its leadership,’ characterized by ‘insecurity, distrust of civil society and fear as to the consequences of an embrace of global values,’³⁹ it is natural to assume that engagement with these groups occurs to the extent that it is useful in staying apprised of their activities, and coopting them to serve state interests. This study attempts to capture a fuller range of possible motivations, by looking in greater detail at the specific ways in which local government agencies can be empowered, as well as inspired or threatened, by engagement with grassroots NGOs.

Reducing the Social Burden

One of the most common explanations given as to why the Chinese state tolerates the existence of civil society is that it can pass some of the burden of service provision on to these NGOs, and take advantage of societal resources to supplement spending.⁴⁰ This explanation has some currency. A few interviewees discussed the ability to offload service provision as a factor in government officials’ decisions to work with NGOs. One provincial Ministry of Civil Affairs representative said: ‘As for [social organizations’] relationship with government, there

³⁹ N. Bequelin, "Crackdown in China," *New York Times* (2011).

⁴⁰ For example, see Y. Lu, "NGOs in China: Development Dynamics and Challenges," *The University of Nottingham, China Policy Institute, Discussion Paper* (2007); J. Howell, "NGO-state relations in post-Mao China," in *NGOs, States and Donors: Too Close for Comfort?* (St. Martin's Press in association with Save the Children, 1997), 202-215.

are many weak populations in society, the government helps them. Of course the government is very happy if you establish an organization and raise funds and take pressure off government. So the government helps them and solves problems for them.”⁴¹

There are, however, some limitations to this motivation. First, while the option of government spending less and doing less while maintaining or increasing social services may be desirable and possible over the long term, the generality of Chinese NGOs, large and small, do not yet possess the administrative or operational capacity to take on the provision of services in a reliable, sustained, consistent and professional manner.⁴² In this respect, the Chinese government’s administrative and operational capacity in the provision of social services still far outstrips that of NGOs. As one NGO practitioner put it ‘You cannot replace the government... If you want to do the thing that the government and everyone else is doing well, you can’t do it.’⁴³

Second, while the argument may hold true for large private foundations with financial resources or organizations with access to significant international funding, grassroots organizations like those included in this study often cannot bring much to the table in terms of funds and mobilization of societal resources. Still, in principle and over the long term, alleviating social burdens could be one motivation for government officials’ engagement with the NGO sector.

Reducing Dependence and Fostering Participation

⁴¹ Interview N174, Government, staff. Ningxia, December 2010.

⁴² See, for example, X. Jia, "Relationship between social organizations and government (*minjian zuzhi yu zhengfu de guanxi*)" *Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe* (2008), 227; H. Huang, "Building professionalization in popular organizations (*lun minjian zuzhi zhuan ye hua jianshe*)," *Social Association Management Research (shehuan guanli yanjiu)* 2 (2010); "Chinese NGOs need easier working environment," *Global Times* (2011).

⁴³ Interview BJ09, NGO, network director, analyst. Beijing, September 2009.

Many NGOs try not only to provide social services or solve social problems, but also to help people develop the capacity to solve their own problems. Thus, in addition to reducing pressure on officials by contributing to the provision of social services, grassroots NGOs can fulfill capacity building functions. One provincial Women's Federation official vented about the department's difficulties in building new homes for poor rural families. He recalled that many of these families had been content with the simple dwellings they had built for themselves, but when local government departments initiated projects to upgrade village houses, the villagers were never satisfied with the materials and construction, leading the government department to have to rebuild the houses multiple times. He then talked about the work of grassroots NGOs as having the potential to break this cycle of increasing dependence on government departments for social services.⁴⁴ When NGOs engage in capacity building work, villagers can begin to collectively consult and take action to resolve local problems themselves, by building bridges, fixing roadways and public village buildings, starting agricultural cooperatives, and implementing simple health and sanitation projects.⁴⁵ A growing recognition of this potential is reflected in the state's recent focus on raising the 'self-development capacity' (*zìwǒ fāzhǎn nénglì*) of poor, rural populations.⁴⁶

Capacity building initiatives often lead to increased public participation. A municipal Environmental Protection Bureau official said of a local NGO whose mandate includes fostering participation:

They are a people's organization, so in future they will develop and grow bigger, and the number of people who participate will increase. The more people participate, the

⁴⁴ Interview G109, Government, staff. Guangdong, February 2010.

⁴⁵ Interview Y229, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010; Interview N238, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

⁴⁶ The State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development, *China Rural Poverty Alleviation and Development Framework 2011-2020* (*zōngguó nongcūn fūpín kāifā gāiyào 2011-2020 nián*) <http://www.cpad.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/FPB/s6446/201112/174466.html> accessed December 9, 2011.

better. Because their work is helpful to the improvement of the environment. More people need to participate in environmental protection⁴⁷

In theory, and according to government rhetoric, increased public participation is desirable as part of a current official trend. One national NGO practitioner and academic gave the following statement in a gathering of NGOs in which he made reference to a recent government slogan:

“The Party leads, government takes responsibility, society cooperates, public participates (*dangwei lingdao, zhengfu fuze, shehui xietong, gongmin canyu*).” The first part is the work of government. The second part is the work of all of us. They already recognize the work and contribution of society...So we have to have confidence. We’re not doing this on our own.⁴⁸

While the ability of grassroots NGOs to foster participation and reduce dependence on government is desirable in theory, it can be a double-edged sword. In practice, an engaged and active populace can be threatening to local officials:

They want us to give them the money so they can do this work themselves, rather than us doing it. Because when we do projects, we do a lot of capacity building for the common people, and the government officials think that if we do this, the villagers will be difficult to manage (*bubao guanli*). So they don’t like this kind of training for villagers.⁴⁹

Access to Financial Resources

For some local government agencies, particularly in resource-poor regions, engaging with NGOs can provide the opportunity to tap into sources of funding from society or international donors. One environmental NGO was, after almost a decade of operation, able to successfully secure a significant amount of funding from local enterprises, grants from local and international foundations, and award money.⁵⁰ It is not uncommon for an NGO partnering with a government department to implement a project to give the relevant state

⁴⁷ Interview H262, Government, Director. Hebei, August 2010.

⁴⁸ Interview BJ09, NGO, network director, analyst. Beijing, September 2009.

⁴⁹ Interview Y155, NGO, Staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

⁵⁰ Interview H261, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

offices a ‘coordination fee.’ Since government departments, particularly those in poorer regions, often face severe fiscal shortages, access to such funding can be a powerful motivator. Among the grassroots organizations included in this study, however, this kind of practice was the exception rather the rule.

Another environmental NGO suggested that gaining access to international funding that includes collaboration between government and NGO as a requirement is a consideration for officials: ‘It [collaboration] benefits them [government]. For them to win projects, there are requirements that they have to work with NGOs, so they come actively and seek us out to cooperate....This is part of their work. They hope there can be more organizations to apply for these funds to help poor areas.’⁵¹

Access to Human Resources

Despite the common image of bloated bureaucracies and idle officials, for many local government departments, particularly those in poorer areas, finding enough money to pay employees and finding enough workers to do what needs to be done is a major challenge.⁵² In these circumstances, the existence of NGO staff members in the locality that can assist their work can be very useful. Several NGO interviewees reported not only having participated in government organized activities, such as anti-drug events, agricultural training courses, cultural events and research projects, but assisting directly in the administration and execution of these activities.

There is also the possibility that NGOs can eventually take on larger areas of responsibility, for instance, the introduction of, training in and follow-up work for a

⁵¹ Interview N143, NGO, director of external affairs. Ningxia, June 2010.

⁵² V. Shue and C. Wong, *Paying for Progress in China: Public Finance, Human Welfare and Changing Patterns of Inequality*, Routledge, (2007).

government-promoted green waste-management system in rural areas. As one NGO founder explained of local government collaborators, part of the allure of collaboration with grassroots NGOs comes from this possibility:

Because they are considering the next step, that there are many things they don't have the time or energy to do, and they really hope they can take a part of this work and give it to the NGOs. But they have to consider the question of whether or not NGOs can do it well. If there is total trust they [government] can say "I hand this matter over to you and let you do it with peace of mind." At this time you have already entered a collaborative relationship. But now is still a period of examination. In this process, they have to understand step by step.⁵³

An environmental NGO talked about its work organizing groups of villagers to manage water resources and monitor fishing activity seen by local officials as a way to alleviate fiscal and human resource pressures:

If [the relationship is] positive, there would be many benefits for government. Because...the government has very limited staff and resources, if they don't have people to manage this work, they will have a heavy burden. So if the villagers can manage it for themselves it is very good for government....The local government has very low taxes and few resources so they notice what they gain when we help them solve these problems.⁵⁴

Earning Political Credit

Other scholars have also identified the opportunity to gain political credit (*zhengji*) 'as an incentive to governmental cooperation with NGOs.'⁵⁵ The survival, promotion and political development of officials, particularly at the local level, depends significantly on their superiors' perception of their achievements in office. Earning political credit often involves economic investments or basic infrastructure: 'Big projects [bring *zhengji*]. For example, if they get some programs to come and invest here, it's a big *zhengji*.'⁵⁶ This can

⁵³ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁵⁴ Interview Y155, NGO, Staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

⁵⁵ Spies, "Contingent Symbiosis and Civil Society in an Authoritarian State: Understanding the Survival of China's Grassroots NGOs," *American Journal of Sociology* 117, no. 1 (2011).

⁵⁶ Interview Y155, NGO, Staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

also involve large social projects, such as ‘the universalization of solar power, or animal husbandry promotion.’⁵⁷ It is often measured by a rise in living standards:

Political credit (*zhengji*) is measured by how the economic situation of the place has changed, whether the living standards of the common people have risen after the leader has been in the locality for a few years.⁵⁸

From the perspective of several NGO interviewees, *zhengji* is a powerful motivator for the local officials with whom they come into contact:

The goal of what they [officials] do is *zhengji*. There is also the side of serving society, but its mainly about *zhengji*—for example, some statistics, some activities, how many trainings you’ve held, how much money you’ve raised for poor students.⁵⁹

Allowing and supporting the work of NGOs in a locality can also enable individual officials or specific departments to earn political credit. One reason for this is the contribution NGOs can make to local economic development and a rise in living standards. The founder of an environmental NGO registered as an association explained:

For government, if the community develops economically, they have face (*mianzi*). For example, since our rural honey production project yields such results, it is a political achievement (*zhengji*) for the local government. And the programs, technologies, experts and information we bring in are beneficial for our association and even more for the local government. Resources can be shared and complementary. The government would do or be able to do many of these things, if we didn’t do them. Raising people’s awareness of low-carbon and environmentalism is a way to raise the people’s character or quality (*suzhi*),⁶⁰ this way the government’s *zhengji* can come to be realized.⁶¹

NGOs can contribute to official *zhengji* by implementing development programs aimed at raising incomes, with the financial, technological and know-how inputs this implies. But they can also empower local officials to solve local problems. One environmental NGO worked in

⁵⁷ Interview Y158, NGO, director. Yunnan, July 2010.

⁵⁸ Interview N238, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

⁵⁹ Interview H260, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

⁶⁰ The term *suzhi* comes up frequently in both NGO and government interviews. It is generally used in reference to people, and I have generally chosen to translate it as character or quality. For a fuller discussion of this important term, see A. Kipnis, "Suzhi: A Keyword Approach," *The China Quarterly* 186, no. 1 (2006), 295-313.

⁶¹ Interview Y134, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, May 2010.

a locality where fishing in the local lake had been prohibited, but where local fishermen and farmers were engaged in illegal fishing, putting local officials in the difficult position of monitoring and confiscating fishing tools. The NGO assisted in the establishment of a local association to self-regulate local fishing and manage illegal fishing equipment. As a result, the government leader who oversaw this collaborative initiative ‘got promoted (*tiba*) and became widely known.’⁶²

Besides solving social problems, NGO capacity building work can also assist government efforts to raise consciousness and the peoples’ character or quality (*suzhi*), a goal commonly referred to in the official discourse. But since ‘changing people’s thinking doesn’t happen right away,’ this motivation may be relatively weak in comparison to the way NGOs can contribute to *zhengji* through economic benefit and solving social problems:

With regard to *zhengji*, actually they talk about people’s character or quality (*suzhi*) a lot, but this takes a long time, too long; ‘it takes one hundred years to educate an able man’ (*bainian shuren*). So actually, they are more practically interested in the benefits right in front of their eyes and their short-term interests.⁶³

Finally, cooperating with and managing NGOs, in itself, can bring political credit to local officials. The more ‘cooperations’ a government department has under its belt, and the more entities under its supervision, the better. An NGO founder explained:

Since the government’s resources are limited, and what they can do is limited, we are complementing (*buchong*) the government in what they want to do but are not able to do in the locality. So I think we are a very good complement to government. A cooperative relationship with these kinds of organizations is also helpful to them, sometimes is a kind of credit (*chengji*) to them. If they cooperate with us to do something, and we are under their scope of management (*guanxia fanweinei*), it is a kind of credit.⁶⁴

Another NGO founder stated that *zhengji* accrues when officials can say that they participated in a public environmental campaign or project, or ‘that “we cooperated with

⁶² Interview Y155, NGO, Staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

⁶³ Interview Y134, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁶⁴ Interview Y132, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

people's organizations,” as this ‘increases their *zhenji*. In reporting on their work they can say “we did a lot of activities with the public and with the people’s organizations,” which is good for them when it is reported in the media.’ This is particularly the case when targets such as ‘public participation’ are built into the cadre evaluation system: ‘Government activities have to meet different conditions, for example, one condition is public participation (*gongzhong canyu*), so all these activities fall under that category.’⁶⁵

One unregistered NGO’s ability to mobilize a large number of volunteers was so attractive to the local Youth League that they offered to be the NGO’s sponsoring organization: ‘We have over 1000 volunteers. They [the Youth League] want us to hook (*guakao*) under them, because it would earn them some *zhenji*.’⁶⁶

While the desire for political credit and the multiple ways collaboration with NGOs can contribute to earning *zhenji* usually acts as a positive motivation for local officials, *zhenji* can sometimes mean that NGO activities harm rather than help the image of government agencies:

In the eyes of the public, if the government is perceived as not paying as much attention to these disadvantaged people as we social organizations, it could affect the public perception of them as officials. This year in March, we organized to help a girl in the village, we raised 30,000 RMB for her. When we announced this number, the county head (*xianzhang*) was inspired to, or felt compelled to, also go and start raising funds. He felt he could not fall behind in this, it would affect the public’s perception of him. It is good that they do this. Another issue arises when the contributions made by people’s organizations are greater than those of government. Then, they have to do more. This will affect their *zhenji*. In another instance, when we wanted to do something like this, they blocked us from raising money.⁶⁷

Meeting National Targets

Related to political credit is the role NGOs can play in helping government departments meet national targets and requirements embedded in the cadre evaluation system

⁶⁵ Interview H165, NGO, founder director. Hebei, August 2010.

⁶⁶ Interview H263, NGO, deputy director. Hebei, August 2010.

⁶⁷ Interview H168, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, November 2010.

(*kaobe zhidu*). A municipal Environmental Protection Bureau official in one research locality said of their cooperation with a local environmental NGO: 'Through cooperation with them we can achieve our goals and do our work better.'⁶⁸ County Women's Federation staff in another research locality talked about the detailed targets they had to reach with respect to women's development and children's education.⁶⁹ These targets are initially outlined in a national plan, which is translated into provincial, municipal and county targets. They valued their collaboration with the grassroots NGO based in that county because of the agricultural and animal husbandry training programs it was carrying out with rural women.

An educational NGO in another research locality with a high incidence of HIV/AIDS described how collaboration with NGOs on specific projects can enable local officials to reach national targets:

The national Ministry of Urban Construction wants [local] municipal departments to take care of AIDS prevention in workers, but they are not able to do this. But through us they can actually achieve their evaluation requirements. So they take our work to be part of [this city's] work. And through this they can do well in this area. Initially they can only reach ten people, but then because of us they can reach thirty, so the superiors see a lot of benefit.⁷⁰

Positive Publicity

For local government agencies, collaborating with grassroots NGOs can also mean an opportunity to get some good publicity. One unregistered environmental NGO cooperating with the county Women's Federation was interviewed by a local TV station. The founder said: 'The Women's Federation has also done interviews on me in the past, but not about my program or what I am doing, but presenting me as a fruit of their work.'⁷¹ Another NGO founder was able to operate with government support from the very beginning because he was

⁶⁸ Interview H167, Government, staff. Hebei, November 2010.

⁶⁹ Interview H2103, Government, chairperson. Hebei, March 2010.

⁷⁰ Interview Y250, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, July 2010.

⁷¹ Interview H260, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

active in media circles and ‘they wanted to do things in media. So to do this they needed my cooperation.’⁷²

A municipal Environmental Protection Bureau official confirmed that collaboration with NGOs enables them to publicize their work and expand influence. He said of a local environmental NGO:

They are also doing environmental protection work and want more people to participate. We are very eager to work with them. Even though they are a people’s organization, their activities are effective in advancing our work....they simultaneously fulfill the function of publicizing for us.... I think they have quite a positive effect, we do projects with them to expand influence, so that more and more people pay attention to environmental protection and begin to participate.⁷³

Good publicity is desirable for local officials who are concerned with projecting a good image to higher-ups and the local populace. The idea that engagement with grassroots NGOs can contribute to this positive image is another channel for the empowerment of local government.

Doing Things Government Cannot Do

An often-cited benefit to government of working with NGOs among both government and NGO interviewees was the ability of NGOs to do things that government wants to do but cannot. A municipal Civil Affairs official said of the ‘public benefit organizations (*gongyi zuzhi*)’ in the region: ‘They are doing things that the government is not doing, so we are encouraging the development of this area. So we are supporting this part, this third sector.’⁷⁴ A provincial Women’s Federation official similarly said: ‘They do the work in

⁷² Interview H165, NGO, founder director. Hebei, August 2010.

⁷³ Interview H262, Government, Director. Hebei, August 2010.

⁷⁴ Interview Y156, Government, director. Yunnan, July 2010.

which the government is lacking, they should develop more. They are mutually complementary.’⁷⁵

One of the areas in which it is difficult for local government departments to involve themselves is the solution of specific problems or issues outside their immediate jurisdiction. Many government agencies have very strictly proscribed geographic and issue-areas of responsibility, and to venture beyond the responsibilities and tasks assigned to them or plans made by supervisors could be quite hazardous. Such ‘meddling’ officials run the risk of being seen as ‘getting involved in what does not concern them.’ One environmental NGO related the following experience:

We found a small forest of 600 *mu*, which is under the control of the government, but the government doesn’t do anything about it or care about it, because it is an old growth forest which doesn’t come under the jurisdiction of the Forestry Bureau. The forest was being damaged by the neighboring villages, so we talked about this in the media and kept taking the public there to plant trees and do activities. This suddenly got the attention of the government. So they got funds for it and now the forest has been expanded to 1000 *mu*. Now that so many people visit the forest, the villagers also became a bit afraid, so they slowly and naturally stopped their harmful activities.

In this case, taking action to protect one particular forest outside their jurisdiction would have been difficult and risky for the Forestry officials to do. It could also leave them open to future claims and set troublesome precedents; if action was taken to protect this forest, why not others? Why not all the unclaimed forests in the area? When an NGO, however, takes the initial action and garners public support and resources, the protection of this forest becomes a more legitimate area of activity in which officials can involve themselves. According to this interviewee, NGOs are useful ‘because government can’t go to deal with these small things, they do big things. But these are things we do....’⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Interview H167, Government, staff. Hebei, November 2010.

⁷⁶ Interview H165, NGO, founder director. Hebei, August 2010.

A government official provided an example with similar underlying logic, which he explained to a meeting of NGOs gathered from around the country:

Unfortunate people and disadvantaged people all have different problems. The policies don't reach all of these. As an official in the community I see all these problems. But can I go help them? Can I sign their claim forms? If I do they'll lodge a complaint against me. I can't! But you can. That's where social organizations come in.⁷⁷

As these examples indicate, NGOs can deal with previously overlooked, small, specific issues, and empower local officials to contribute to their resolution.

NGO interviewees also took the view that collaborating with grassroots NGOs benefits local government because it 'helps them solve some of the problems they don't want to deal with.'⁷⁸ Many NGOs have the mandate and resources to reach the exceptions not covered by government programs, such as the very poor, the disabled, and the sick:

We do the things that government is not able to do, as a supplement. For example, the extremely poor, the government cannot help them, but society can help them. The government hopes that all people can benefit from a better life. So government needs people like us to participate, because its power is limited in certain areas, so it needs the masses to participate. So to build a harmonious society we need to help these people.⁷⁹

Acting as substitutes for local government agencies in such endeavors can open space for grassroots NGOs. Comparing the development of NGOs to the development of the CCP, a national NGO practitioner advised the same gathering of NGOs:

You have to find the space in which nobody else is doing anything, and work in that space. How did the Chinese Communist Party develop? By going to the places where there was no one else, the remote areas (*bianqu*). The things that the government wants to do but cannot, that's what you have to do.⁸⁰

Grassroots NGOs can also carry out work that has been neglected by government for lack of attention, know-how or resources. An educational NGO concerned with the protection

⁷⁷ Interview BJ07, Government, staff. Beijing, September 2009.

⁷⁸ Interview Y229, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁷⁹ Interview H168, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, November 2010.

⁸⁰ Interview BJ09, NGO, network director, analyst. Beijing, September 2009.

of ethnic minority culture spent a great deal of energy and resources on collecting and recording traditional folk songs belonging to the local ethnic minority. The director of the organization said:

The government has a lot of resources and departments. But this is not its focus and main area of work. So we do the things that they don't pay attention to, but really need to be done. Because we think the purpose our people's organization is the good of the nation.⁸¹

Enabling Inter-Governmental Cooperation

The same project described above, which aimed to preserve ethnic folksongs and languages being lost and transmit them to younger generations through education, enabled the coordination and cooperation of a number of different government departments:

We think that...if we didn't do [this project], the Ministry of Culture is supposed to do it, but they don't have the time and energy. But our organization has culture specialists, language specialists, and teachers, so we achieve good results and are able to focus. For example, [this] issue, everyone sees that it is a problem and it is a great pity, but what to do about it, how to solve it? It is very difficult for one or two government departments. But for us, we can draw on a lot of different resources and bring different government officials to work on it.⁸²

The complex and multi-disciplinary nature of this project meant that it required cooperation with a number of government departments. For example, the collection and recording of folksongs in surrounding villages by NGO staff, together with local government officials, involved coordination with Women's Federation agents at the grassroots, as well as county, township and village governments. With respect to content, the project involved the support of the Bureau of Culture and the Women's Federation. The Education Bureau was enlisted to help with dissemination of the recorded folksongs to schools and to train teachers to use produced materials. Finally, the question of how to secure the support and give due credit to ethnic minority community members and elders involved dialogue with the

⁸¹ Interview Y158, NGO, director. Yunnan, July 2010.

⁸² Interview Y158, NGO, director. Yunnan, July 2010.

Intellectual Property Bureau. The NGO was able to involve officials of different levels and backgrounds in the project.

Especially in a fragmented bureaucracy, it can be challenging to achieve coordination between different government departments at the local level. It seems to be extremely difficult for horizontal linkages and coordination between government departments to occur without the intervention of a higher authority, even with a pressing and recognized issue such as the loss of ethnic minority culture. The resulting paralysis in this case could have been broken by a top-down mandate from the municipal or provincial government, but this was not forthcoming, perhaps because 'how to relate to the variety of cultural activities which are neither organized from above nor primarily driven by market forces' presents 'the largest cultural-ideological quandary facing the political elite.'⁸³ The involvement of an NGO, bringing in financial resources as well as subject specialists to take the lead can be useful in legitimizing such 'folk culture.' When local officials are aware of a pressing problem that they are unable to address, and that requires the engagement of multiple actors within the bureaucracy, working with a local NGO can present a solution.

Connecting Society and State

Chinese NGO scholars and practitioners have identified the important function these organizations can fulfill as intermediaries between the state and the people. According to one of them, NGOs 'can connect the two sides of government and society.' Their ability to play this role can open social spaces for government-NGO collaboration, and 'this space comes from the recognition of the government. Government wants to hear the voices of society.'⁸⁴

⁸³ S. Thøgersen, "Cultural Life and Cultural Control in Rural China: Where is the Party?" *The China Journal*, no. 44 (2000), 136.

⁸⁴ Interview BJ09, NGO, network director, analyst. Beijing, September 2009.

As intermediaries, NGOs channel information and communication both upwards and downwards:

At present, one can see that government finds certain issues very challenging. So within the scope of existing policies and laws, and the scope of their work, NGOs can be a beneficial complement (*buchong*). For example, their [government's] work involves a kind of communication and dissemination (*xuanchuan*) from top to bottom, level by level. But to get from the higher levels to our villages requires many steps and the coordination of many departments. For something to get to the villagers takes a long time. But we have direct contact with the villagers and the government can quickly learn their real situation and needs from us.⁸⁵

A significant portion of the work of certain government departments involves carrying out 'investigations' (*diaocha*) of local socio-economic conditions, and, to some extent, public opinion. Increased administrative workloads and less engagement with the grassroots can make this difficult, allowing NGOs to step in. Government officials who decide to engage with NGOs working at the grassroots are, at times, aware of the importance of this function and how it can benefit them in their work. An NGO founder explained:

It will promote their work. They are on top and don't come down to the grassroots. We are at the grassroots and know their situation. So we are like an intermediary, a platform for government and common people, so that the Women's Federation can promote (*xuanchuan*) some of their work through this platform, or the aspirations and life situation of the common people can be reflected to the Women's Federation. For example if they want to do an investigation, they can find out about the general situation [of the common people].⁸⁶

Particularly for officials at administrative levels above the township, there does not seem to be much engagement with the grassroots. In the view of many interviewees, this is a gap that can be filled by grassroots NGOs, and can assist and empower officials:

For government, it will help them because they are very busy, and I have time to serve the villagers, and they will have time to do other things. They can't come down to the villages, but I can. I can tell them the reaction of the villagers, and pass on the individual and agricultural information to them. Because I talk directly to the villagers, they aren't with the villagers every day.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁸⁶ Interview H260, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

⁸⁷ Interview Y229, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

While it benefits government, the ability of grassroots NGOs to act as intermediaries between state and society is also beneficial for society:

For society, in addition to government support they [the people] will also get help from social forces to promote their development. And for this kind of organization it is easier to have a closer relationship to the people, often it less top-down, they will listen to the peoples' voices and solve some of their very practical problems, so it has an important effect on society.⁸⁸

Public Legitimacy

As discussed further below, it is rather intuitive that engagement between local government and grassroots NGOs can help NGOs establish legitimacy. But can this engagement contribute to the legitimation of officialdom in the eyes of the public? According to one NGO founder who is also active in semi-official and official groups, government working with people's organizations is 'a practical need for them. They need more members of the public (*gongzhong*) to understand them. This way when we go out we will speak more objectively about different matters.'⁸⁹ By 'speaking objectively,' the interviewee refers to the public not being swayed by negative biases in their perception of government, or having a generally positive perception of government. It seems possible, then, for deeper engagement with NGOs and social groups to strengthen government credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

Decreasing the Risks of Experimentation

⁸⁸ Interview Y132, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁸⁹ Interview H165, NGO, founder director. Hebei, August 2010. This view, though it did not come up often in the course of fieldwork, implies that local government engages with NGOs out of a fear of negative consequences rather than desire for benefit. To the extent that it is true, it would support the argument that views engagement as a form of cooptation.

Elsewhere, I argue that one of the most important ways in which engagement with grassroots NGOs can empower local government departments is in their ability to act as proxies for policy experimentation and innovation:

Social organizations can provide a number of things, we can ease the burden on government. Our greatest advantage is that we first, have the information on the ground and are close to the population, second, we do things on a small scale so we're flexible, we are innovators and can be experimenters.⁹⁰

Other scholars have also suggested that civil society organizations can realize 'system innovation' by influencing government policies, which can 'only be realistically achieved through face-to-face collaboration between civil society practitioners and government officials in specific fields.'⁹¹ Where positive-sum reciprocal engagement exists, the Chinese context, characterized by fragmented decision-making, decentralization and regional variation in policy implementation provides even small, grassroots NGOs with significant opportunities to participate in the formulation and implementation of policy on the issue areas in which they work. This is achieved precisely through successful social programming in an environment amenable to 'experimental points', in which NGOs can act as proxies for government in testing new approaches. By allowing or even encouraging an NGO to implement innovations, local leaders can take credit for success and avoid risks in the event of failure. This argument and the field data supporting it are presented more fully in *Chapter 7* of this dissertation.

3.4.2 Empowering Grassroots NGOs

As discussed above, the vast majority of NGOs operating in China seek some form of engagement with the state. Almost all of the grassroots NGOs in this study wish to establish relationships with local government, and as the interview excerpts quoted in this section show, have a deep and sophisticated awareness of the ways in which engagement with the state can empower them to achieve their goals.

⁹⁰ Interview BJ09, NGO, network director, analyst. Beijing, September 2009.

⁹¹ A. Fulda, Y. Li, and Q. Song, "How to Gain Trust and Promote System Innovation: Strategies of Chinese Civil Society Organisations Collaborating with the Government," *The University of Nottingham, China Policy Institute, Discussion Paper* (2009).

This engagement is not just a survival tactic. While survival is part of the story, I argue that engaging with local government can empower grassroots NGOs in sometimes unexpected and very practical ways that even the legal or regulatory reforms that are so often and emphatically called for by many observers cannot. As one NGO founder put it: ‘Under China’s national conditions (*guoqing*) and laws, if you want long-term development in the locality, and to have better and more sustainable development, then to form a working [relationship with government] is an inevitable step (*biran de yihuan*).’

An experienced and savvy director of a grassroots environmental NGO described the organization’s motivation for cooperating with government in terms that referenced survival and guards against threats of oppression, as well as such practical benefits as access to policy support, financial resources, efficiency, administrative capacity and mobilization ability:

Cooperating with government brings a lot of benefits for us...with an NGO everything is related. The local government plays the primary leading role. If government opposes you, you can’t operate long-term or large-scale. The local government has a lot of resources, policy and money, if they don’t support you, they can oppress you. For NGOs, you can’t survive on this earth. I think all NGOs in China face the same problem. Money is limited, and there is much work we want to do. In this situation, it’s not that we run around looking for money, but everything has its costs. So we use the minimal amount of money to achieve the most, to get the greatest input volume (*touru liang*). If you carry out a training course, they [government] can provide you with the space, they can provide experts to support and direct your program. Or if you go to a project site they can get the local government in the township to support you. They can use their administrative power to gather the local community, they can get workers to support our work. This will be much better than doing it by ourselves.⁹²

Some organizations do not see the support of local government as being necessary to their survival: ‘for us, we don’t have a lot of dependence on government. We can still do our thing regardless of whether we have the support of the government or not.’⁹³ For these organizations, government cooperation is a voluntary strategy. One educational NGO that has

⁹² Interview Y134, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁹³ Interview N142, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

considerable experience working closely with government compared the success of projects they had carried out in conjunction with government collaboration and projects carried out independently: ‘This other project was not carried out in direct cooperation with government, we only secured their approval for it... But if we had had their participation it would have been better.’⁹⁴

In these cases, engaging with the state is less a matter of survival and more a question of using the power of government to their advantage in maximizing resources, impact, and effectiveness:

Over many years the government’s function (*zhibing*) has been very extensive and powerful, while NGOs lack, or have minimal access to, funds, resources, human resources and material resources. So NGOs can give relatively little play to their functions compared to the government’s functional effectiveness. The cooperation between nongovernmental and governmental organizations, of course, can allow you to secure some social trust and recognition (*renke*) when you carry out your programs, government can provide some facilitating conditions (*bianli de tiaojian*). This can make it easier for you to do your program on a large scale, and do it well.⁹⁵

Another interviewee gave a few examples of what this support looks like in practice: [Cooperation with government] has a positive effect on our organization. They provide us with information through a number of channels. They use their resources to support us. The government will say: “You can do this program and we can support you.” At the simplest level, when we did the Green Journey Project, for example, we wanted to make some videos, they said “We can’t support you in the big things, but let our department support you in these small things like the promotional materials.” Or other departments said “Let us support you with speakers and sound systems [for the event].” So we used their brand and our money and talked about our cooperation.⁹⁶

The founder of an environmental NGO mentioned such benefits as increased access to political elites and media, and discussed cooperation with government in a way that implied it can serve as a protection against getting into trouble with authorities for crossing taboo lines in its work:

⁹⁴ Interview Y158, NGO, director. Yunnan, July 2010.

⁹⁵ Interview N238, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

⁹⁶ Interview Y134, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, May 2010.

First, the government gives us some ‘official glory’ (*guanfang rongyu*)—the titles of vice president and CPPCC member.⁹⁷ Also they provide opportunities for us to attend meetings and forums. Third, they give us media attention. So I think the positive effects are greater [than the negative]. We also have some practical projects where we work together. They are very generous with us, if we do things that are not very good or very positive they don’t say anything to us about it.⁹⁸

The interview excerpts above refer to a number of ways in which engaging with local government can benefit and empower grassroots NGOs. Of the 22 NGO interviewees asked why they would work with government, the number and percentage of interviewees who mentioned (unprompted) each of the below reasons is summarized in Table 3-1:

Table 3-1: NGO Motivations for Working with Government

	Number of Responses	Percentage of Total
Sustainability	3	13%
Impact	2	9%
Scale	7	31%
Funding	4	18%
Technical Support	3	13%
Information	3	13%
Problem Solving	2	9%
Registration	2	9%
Legitimacy	3	13%
The People's Trust	14	64%
Policy Influence	2	9%

The motivating factors for which reasons and specific examples were given are discussed in further detail below.

Impact

Several interviewees spoke of their efforts to address social issues and those of government in terms of two separate, but aligned (*shun*) rather than counteracting, forces that

⁹⁷ The founder of this grassroots NGO was also named vice president of the Provincial Environmental Protection Union, a semi-official association under the Provincial Environmental Protection Bureau.

⁹⁸ Interview H165, NGO, founder director. Hebei, August 2010.

can increase the impact and effectiveness of a single effort. Cooperation ‘benefits local people and local society, too, because these are two forces, one from society, one from government, the two should cooperate to do things for local people.’⁹⁹

One educational NGO mentioned that they work with the Women’s Federation ‘because they also are working for women, so if we do something together with them, we will have a deeper impact.’¹⁰⁰ Another educational NGO also mentioned the possibility of increased impact: ‘If we and the government cooperate in our work, our strength will be greater, we will have greater social impact and help more people. So we hope to have a good cooperative relationship with them.’¹⁰¹

Scale

With the limited resources at their disposal, grassroots NGOs can often only reach small numbers of beneficiaries or work within a limited geographic area. Several of the NGOs working in the field of education, in particular, found themselves limited by trying to work outside the formal educational system. To enter public schools in the formal educational system requires permission and support from local government:

Because when you are engaged in cooperation with them... if you want to expand, or have more people benefit, you have to go to the schools, this way in a week you can have a few hundred people benefit. In this way they will help and educate their friends and brothers and sisters and this way it will expand faster, there will be more beneficiaries. And if you work in the schools everyone will see what you are doing, and come and support it, so the effect of the program will expand quickly. Because local schools are managed by the local government (*shou zhengfu guanli de*), so you have to cooperate with the government.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Interview Y132, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

¹⁰⁰ Interview Y158, NGO, director. Yunnan, July 2010.

¹⁰¹ Interview H168, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, November 2010.

¹⁰² Interview N236, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

Expanding social programs into new and sometimes unfamiliar geographic territory or across a wider geographic region is also difficult without some form of engagement with local authorities:

From the point of view of the survival of our organization, we also need to cooperate with government. Now there are many NGOs who have contact and cooperation with government, because with the government's support, they develop and widen their scope very quickly. Because if you don't have the government's agreement or cooperation with government, it is very difficult to expand or become strong.¹⁰³

Information

The sponsoring government department of an environmental grassroots NGO lets the NGO director know about relevant information or opportunities that they may become aware of. For example, when the provincial Civil Affairs Bureau and Poverty Alleviation office started to focus on and provide funding for rural economic associations and cooperatives, the sponsoring department passed this information on to the NGO so that it could organize villagers into cooperatives and apply for these funds. The founder says:

Because there are many documents and regulations that support private non-enterprise units (*minban feiqiye danwei*),¹⁰⁴ and special preferential policies for them. And because my projects are relatively remote, I spend a lot of time doing work in the rural areas, so I often don't know of them. So through strengthening these relationships, I hope to receive more support from government and have more access to this kind of information, as well as financial support, support in material resources, and direct support in carrying out work in the village. Through the government's support, the program can achieve large-scale, strong (*da lidu*) expansion.¹⁰⁵

Another environmental NGO said of its collaborating government department: 'We need to have a relationship with them, because they are professional, so the information at their disposal is greater than that of the environmental protection volunteers.'¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

¹⁰⁴ The official term for NGOs that register as nonprofit organizations.

¹⁰⁵ Interview N273, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, December 2010.

¹⁰⁶ Interview N142, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

Funding

As described above, cooperation with a government department can often allow access to sources of funding that require such cooperation.¹⁰⁷ But government departments can sometimes also directly provide some funding to grassroots NGOs: ‘if they observe that your program is very good, it is likely that they would invest some financial resources into it and give you some money.’¹⁰⁸ However, according to most interviewees, this is not yet a frequent occurrence for grassroots NGOs. When these organizations are able to access government funding, misunderstandings can arise:

Another factor is that people’s organizations don’t have any guaranteed funds, so the government can support them a bit. Sometimes it is difficult to communicate. For example the XYZ investigative research project that we did, we applied for a bit of funding to them. But these leaders, many of whom have worked with international NGOs before, believe that people’s organizations can access funds from these foreign foundations with large budgets, so they say “you should get money from abroad.” We have money too but we want to use it on things that are more important. So there will be these kinds of misunderstandings.¹⁰⁹

Engagement with government can also be a prerequisite to registration, which is another way to expand (legal) sources of funding for grassroots NGOs: ‘If we are able to register, we will be able to raise funds... and we will be able to grow sustainably.’ This impacts long term development and, ultimately, survival: ‘if we raise funds now it is actually against the law. But by registering it will be easier. Now our funding sources are very narrow. Organizations with insufficient funds will be unable to survive.’¹¹⁰

Technical Support

¹⁰⁷ Interview N143, NGO, director of external affairs. Ningxia, June 2010.

¹⁰⁸ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

¹⁰⁹ Interview Y158, NGO, director. Yunnan, July 2010.

¹¹⁰ Interview H263, NGO, deputy director. Hebei, August 2010.

Cooperation with local government departments can also provide grassroots NGOs with access to experts that can advise on technical aspects of their programs or even provide technical support for program participants. One environmental NGO explained that by working with government, ‘we receive some technical support and some policy support. For example, cooperation with the Water Resources Bureau (*shuiliju*) or Animal Husbandry Bureau (*xumuju*) can allow us to arrange free training for the villagers.’¹¹¹ From agricultural extension agents to educational experts, these resources can be invaluable to NGOs engaged in development work.

Administrative Infrastructure

Access to the administrative infrastructure of government agencies can also be valuable to grassroots NGOs often operating on a shoestring budget. Cooperating government departments can provide venues for events, and have been known to provide small office space for the use of grassroots NGOs. They can also loan sound or video equipment for special events, allow NGO staff to use printers, computers or equipment for reproducing publications.

Human Resources

While local government agencies do not often have surplus human resources, there are situations in which a government department collaborating with a grassroots NGO will provide the organization with access to human resources that can help with coordinating activities, preparing documents, and accounting. Communication and coordination across different departments is particularly important:

¹¹¹ Interview Y155, NGO, Staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

[Cooperation] strengthens communication, dialogue, sharing of resources, especially the asymmetry of information. We draw on government functions that can support the organization's work. For example, government can assist us to coordinate certain activities that are managed across different departments (*kuabumen guanli*), and with venues.¹¹²

Approvals

Engagement with local authorities can make it easier for grassroots NGOs to obtain the necessary approvals for activities and events. 'Because they are in charge, without their approval we cannot do many projects, exhibitions, and so on. If you don't have the signature of the police and so on, it is illegal, so we need their approval.'¹¹³

This approval can either be explicit or implicit, and approval from a government department can extend to other contexts. An environmental NGO explained how working with government benefits the organization:

It allows us to legally carry out large-scale activities.... For example, now we want to do an activity in [the city's] biggest shopping center. If we do it by ourselves they will hesitate. But the shopping center is actually subordinate to/takes their cues from the government (*mai zhengfu de zhang*), so they will do it.¹¹⁴

Circumventing Rules

Registration

It is well documented in the literature that Chinese NGOs must often undergo an arduous registration process that involves a 'dual management system' (*shuangcong guanli zhidu*).¹¹⁵ To register as an NGO, an organization must first find a sponsoring 'supervisory organization' (*zhuiguan danwei*) or, colloquially, 'mother-in-law' (*popo*), relevant to its field of operation. For an NGO working in the field of health, the sponsoring organization would

¹¹² Interview N142, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

¹¹³ Interview Y158, NGO, director. Yunnan, July 2010.

¹¹⁴ Interview H165, NGO, founder director. Hebei, August 2010.

¹¹⁵ Peoples Republic of China State Council Order No. 250, "Regulations for registration and management of Social Organisations," (Published by the State Council at the 8th ordinary session on 25/9/98, to take effect from that date.)

generally be the Health and Sanitation Bureau, for an NGO in the field of education, it would be the Education Bureau. The sponsoring government department would be responsible for supervising the organization and ensuring that it complies with government regulations. It would also be held responsible for any misconduct or trouble that may arise from the organization.

Since most officials fear the repercussions and risks arising from NGO misconduct, and local government agencies are often already responsible for dozens or even hundreds of organizations registered under them, and do not receive any additional benefits or resources for sponsoring additional organizations, they are often unwilling to agree to act as a sponsor. If an organization does eventually succeed in gaining approval from a sponsoring government organization to register under, or 'hook' (*guakeao*) under, it can then be eligible to register as an association or a private non-enterprise unit ¹¹⁶ under the Civil Affairs Bureau.

NGO policy also dictates that only one organization in a particular field and at a particular administrative level is permitted to register, with additional organizations barred from registration, limiting the number of social organizations in a particular region and hampering competition between them. For example, legally, only one NGO in the field of health at the municipal level of a particular city would be permitted to register, and this spot is often taken by a semi-official or government-backed NGO (or GONGO), technically making it impossible for new health NGOs to register at the municipal level. ¹¹⁷

There are also stringent requirements for maintaining formal registration status. Registered NGOs are supervised and audited annually. According to a provincial Ministry of Civil Affairs official:

¹¹⁶ Two of the main legal forms NGOs can take.

¹¹⁷ Regulations on Registration and Management of Social Organizations (*Shehui tuanti dengji guanli tiaoli*) arts. 27-28 (Sept. 25, 1998) (P.R.C.)

In Ningxia we work with popular organizations exactly according to the laws.... When we register them, we go to their site and look and see if they are really doing what they say they are doing. And each year they have to do an annual audit (*nianjian*). If for a couple of years there is no annual audit then we stop their registration. But if you have problems, you probably won't do your annual audit, so we know and then we'll terminate your registration.¹¹⁸

Registered NGOs must also keep up with certain management standards and requirements to maintain registration:

There are certain requirements for the management of social organizations set out by Ministry of Civil Affairs. For example, for associations, there is a '6+x system (*zhihu*)', which is six criteria of management plus local conditions that vary. The same kind of thing also exists for private non-enterprise units.¹¹⁹

Most analyses of China's NGO policy stop at this point, lamenting the restrictive regulations that stunt the growth of Chinese civil society. Given these restrictive and stringent regulations, it is easy for observers to come to the conclusion that Chinese NGOs are severely limited.¹²⁰ But this focus on legal regulations obscures much that is happening on the ground. This section outlines the many ways in which NGOs are actually able to do all kinds of things that are not allowed on paper, and argues that this ability often comes from engagement with the local state.

Circumventing Registration Rules

You know we talk about 'feeling, rationality, and law (*qing, li, fa*).'¹²¹ In China, law is the least important of these three. What can you *not* do in China (*you shenme zuobuliao de*)? It all depends on how you go about (*ban*) it.

Grassroots NGOs and local government departments do turn a blind eye to violations of regulations and go out of their way to circumvent the restrictive national registration policy if it is in their interests to do so.

¹¹⁸ Interview N174, Government, staff. Ningxia, December 2010.

¹¹⁹ Interview N177, Government, staff. Ningxia, December 2010.

¹²⁰ Lu, "NGOs in China: Development Dynamics and Challenges,"

¹²¹ Interview BJ66, NGO, staff. Beijing, August 2010.

According to a strict application of law, many NGOs should not even be permitted to exist. But do they exist unlawfully? When local authorities, with the apparent knowledge of central authorities, allow and in some cases work with these NGOs, what is their status? In reality, hundreds or thousands of NGOs are still able to operate, either by registering under more lax requirements as businesses, training centers or academic research centers, or by not registering at all. When fieldwork commenced in 2009, four of the NGOs included in this study were registered as private non-enterprise units, five as associations, and two as businesses. Exactly half, eleven of the 22 NGOs included in this study were unregistered. During the course of fieldwork, four of the unregistered organizations were able to register as private non-enterprise units.

Unregistered NGOs can enjoy significant freedom, especially when they have established relationships with local government departments. As one researcher pointed out, 'it's not the registration of the agency that is important, but the things it can do.'¹²² One educational NGO operated for almost six years without any form of registration. Despite the lack of registration, the organization had been able to operate with relative freedom, leasing office spaces, hiring four full time staff, mobilizing volunteers, working with public schools in the formal education system and village officials, and collaborating with the local education bureaus. The organization had also been receiving grants from foreign foundations, individual donors and supplementing this funding with income earned from charging for educational services for five years. The main incentive for the organization to register was that, though collaborating government departments were fully aware of these details, many were technically illegal. To achieve local compliance, the organization explored different avenues for registration over a period of a few years. Local Education Bureaus have given the organization

¹²² Interview BJ12, Academic, researcher. Beijing, February 2010.

extensive support and advice in how it might be able to register, and finally, in recent months, granted the organization formal approval to register as an educational NGO under the district Education Bureau.

This does not mean that unregistered NGOs abiding and operating outside formal legal regulations are not in an uncertain and risky position. But arguably, registered NGOs are no safer. Reports abound of NGOs registered as businesses, associations and private non-enterprise units being shut down on technicalities such as missing tax receipts or incomplete paperwork. When these organizations do get into trouble, it tends to be for reasons other than not having their permits in order, such as crossing lines that demarcate politically acceptable areas or becoming involved in scandals.¹²³ Thus, to state that ‘without an MCA [Ministry of Civil Affairs] registration, organizations are operating illegally, with their operations liable to be shut down at any time’¹²⁴ may be an overly simplistic characterization.

An NGO’s registration status can be revoked, but technically, sponsoring departments cannot revoke registration status unilaterally. Only Civil Affairs Bureaus have the right to take disciplinary action:

In our work managing people’s organizations, we set general policies. There is the dual registration system, which includes management and disciplinary action. The supervisory organization (*zhuguan bumen*) cannot take disciplinary action, they have to go through us to stop something.¹²⁵

An NGO engaged in educational and other charitable work was operating for over a year before registering, ‘hooking’ under the provincial Charity Assembly, a semi-official federation of charities. The work of the NGO included raising money for charity, but a short time after registering:

¹²³ A few examples of this encountered in fieldwork are discussed in *Chapter 5*.

¹²⁴ Hasmath p123

¹²⁵ Interview N180, Government, director. Ningxia, December 2010.

...three people posted three negative comments on the internet alleging we were involved in a fundraising scam, then the media got hold of it and reported it. We use seven percent of funds for activity costs, and it was because of this seven percent that all the media got riled up. Then when the media went to interview the Charity Assembly, they said what we are doing is lawful, and protected us. Why did they protect us? In 2008...we did a large donation drive for the Wenchuan earthquake, we gave 20,000 RMB to the XYZ Provincial Charity Assembly, and 15, 000 RMB to XYZ Municipal Civil Affairs Bureau—a total of 35,000 to the earthquake, so our fundraising strength was actually very great. Then the Ministry of Civil Affairs, in order to regulate all this, sent a document to the Civil Affairs Bureaus, saying that unregistered organizations are not allowed to solicit public donations. So they decided to separate their cooperation with us, because monitoring and supervision (*jianguan*) is difficult for them. It was like taking apart the bridge after crossing the river. But they still left us some space to operate. When this news was put online, it didn't leave a bad impression of us, they did it in a way that didn't detract public opinion of us, they handled it quite properly (*tuodang*).¹²⁶

As a result of the scandal, the NGO formally separated its relationship with the sponsoring department in January of 2009. Nonetheless, it was still able to obtain approvals for activities through another semi-governmental association, the Youth Charity Federation, and even applied for funds from the Communist Youth League and won government contracts. Interestingly, the NGO's initial experience with registration and its experience operating without formal registration status has led it to the conclusion that registration is not an urgent need:

Although we haven't registered yet, over the past five years we have had a significant effect on the public and on internet citizens. Now we are not in a hurry to register, only if the right opportunity presents itself. As a public benefit organization, they [collaborating government departments] give us some professional guidance (*yewu xing zhidao*), for example if we want to have an activity in a certain area, we have to go to them and tell them so that they can support us. It is the same with Provincial Civil Affairs.¹²⁷

Clearly, however, for this NGO, registration is neither a prerequisite, nor a substitute for continued engagement with local government.

¹²⁶ Interview H168, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, November 2010.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

NGOs are also able to get around the requirement that only one social organization in a given geographic region, administrative level and issue area is allowed to register. One problem grassroots NGOs sometimes face is that they should 'hook' under a particular sponsoring organization according to the issue area they work in. If an educational NGO is operating within a particular district, it should technically 'hook' under the district Education Bureau. If that particular department happens to be unresponsive or negative towards the NGO, this could be a major obstacle. Also, certain government departments, including Education Bureaus, given their particular influence and position within the structure and hierarchy of government, exercise and enjoy a special degree of power. From both a budgetary perspective, and in terms of authority, such actors wield special clout relative to other government departments. These government agencies are thus typically regarded as and commonly known to be more difficult to have as sponsoring organizations. Education Bureaus also often already act as sponsoring departments for hundreds of for-profit educational organizations, such as private schools and training centers. This makes them especially reluctant to add to the administrative burden of supervising yet another organization that brings high risks and few benefits. It would then seem that registration prospects look grim for NGOs working in the field of education.

But many grassroots NGOs are not without options in this regard. In thinking about registration options, the founder of one educational NGO was considering trying to register directly under the Provincial Ministry of Civil Affairs under the new experimental policy. Predictably, because of the nature of the organization's work, they initially directed him to the Education Bureau. Then, the founder mentioned that his organization might want to accept donations from companies in Beijing that wanted to donate books to schools in the locality, and that he needed a registered organization to accept these donations. Ministry of Civil

Affairs officials then suggested registering under the News Publication Bureau (*xinwen chuban ju*). When the founder then mentioned the possibility of bringing in experts to give a talk about women's health to students, they then said he should register under the Ministry of Health. Since the organization was also mobilizing volunteers to tutor students in migrant schools, the founder was also considering 'hooking' under the local Communist Youth League or one of the two large semi-official volunteer associations in the locality, where he had some friends.¹²⁸

In practice, though an NGO is often registered under one sponsoring organization, it still engages in many other areas of work, and can often choose any sponsoring organization under which it can easily register. One of the environmental NGOs included in this study is registered under the provincial Technology Bureau (*kejiting*), another environmental NGO under the State Council Poverty Alleviation office, and an educational NGO under the Bureau of Health and Sanitation.

NGOs can also take advantage of and benefit from the way policies are implemented differently in different localities. There has been recent experimentation in various municipalities with new policy that allows NGOs to register directly under the Civil Affairs Bureau, with the Department of Public Welfare (*shehui fulike*) within the Bureau acting as a sponsoring organization.¹²⁹ There is also experimentation with new policy to eliminate the need for a sponsoring organization altogether.¹³⁰ Such actions show that national policy can be implemented very differently at the local level in accordance with local needs and priorities, and suggest that in practice, the space open to NGOs is much larger than a cursory review of legal regulations leads many to assume. According to a local Civil Affairs official:

¹²⁸ Interview N273, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, December 2010.

¹²⁹ Interview Y156, Government, director. Yunnan, July 2010, Interview N180, Government, director. Ningxia, December 2010.

¹³⁰ Interview N180, Government, director. Ningxia, December 2010. For media coverage and discussion of this new policy, see T. W. Ng, "NGOs struggle with legal status despite new rules," *South China Morning Post* (2011).

General policies come from the central government, but the provincial and municipal government will have distinct policies, though the difference between them is not great. When the local government implements policy, it will have to deal with certain specific issues arising from local conditions. Only in the last ten years has the field of social organizations begun to take off, this section (*ke*) started only five or six years ago. So we are still exploring (*moso*) some specific conditions.¹³¹

Even though Civil Affairs Bureaus can often be under considerable pressure from superiors to limit registration or revoke registration status, they can also make exceptions and allow exemptions based on local conditions. While the common perception among observers is that ‘the development of NGOs is unfortunately affected by the underdeveloped legal system, where loopholes and lack of regulatory enforcement exist,’¹³² the fact that the legal and regulatory framework governing NGOs is incomplete can also help, rather than hinder, NGOs’ ability to register and survive. The director of the Social Organization Management department of a municipal Civil Affairs Bureau explained as follows:

If there are too many organizations, it is difficult to manage them. Also they may come into conflict with each other. So we have to register those that meet the registration requirements or standards, so that their work can be carried out routinely. Once you have registered, you have to operate according to the law. Otherwise, if you are not doing any work, why do you exist? If you are not doing anything I must penalize (*chufa*) you, so that other organizations can come in and do the same work. Also, the fewer illegal (*feifa*) organizations exist, the better. We have to investigate and discover illegal organizations, so the pressure on us is very great. Now, at the city level, we have 400 organizations, we have to make sure they do their work well and are not doing illegal (*feifa*) things. So these are our main responsibilities. This work is more and more important, more and more difficult, and we have more and more pressure.

The official went on to explain that since a large number of NGOs wish to register, sometimes within the same area of activity, the Bureau must to control and limit the number of registration approvals they issue. However, because of the importance placed on culture in the locality, they have been asked to be more permissive. To resolve this dilemma:

¹³¹ Interview Y156, Government, director. Yunnan, July 2010.

¹³² J.Hsu, R. Hasmath, “The rise and impact of the local state on the NGO sector,” in *The Chinese Corporatist State: Adaptation, survival and resistance*, eds J.Hsu, R. Hasmath (London: Routledge, 2013), 123.

We suggest that the organization make small changes to its name to limit its scope (*fanwei*). Rather than calling itself ‘XYZ Minority Research Association’, instead it can use ‘XYZ Minority Cultural Preservation Association’. So our burden is very heavy. Every year, the annual investigation and audit is more extensive because the standards are being raised and the work is more exhaustive. This is hard for social organizations to understand, and requires an adjustment process (*mohe qi*). Because this work has not yet taken on a fixed shape (*chengxing*). It’s not like the Commerce Bureau where there are clear tax laws and structures. In our work, many things are unclear, and for the organizations too, they don’t know how to register, they don’t know how to do their work.¹³³

As the above excerpt suggests, there is also evidence of local supervisory departments and Civil Affairs Bureaus finding ways to circumvent registration requirements for NGOs, often in collusion with grassroots NGOs they want to support. In one case, the Civil Affairs Bureau actively takes initiative in helping new NGOs register through such circumvention and by taking advantage of loopholes. For example, it may suggest that a new NGO make slight changes to its name so that it does not overlap directly with an existing NGO to facilitate registration. When asked about the difficulty many NGOs face in finding willing supervisory departments, the director replied:

We have thought about this problem for many years. The solution we came up with is that if you want to register, the first thing you have to do is come here and decide on the name of the organization, because the national regulations about naming are very strict. For example, if an NGO secures sponsoring department approval for an incorrect name, such as ‘XYZ City Sports Club,’ then comes here, it creates a lot of trouble. So they have to come here first and decide on a proper name. If the name is suitable, then you go to the sponsoring department and secure their approval. One has to help them think through it (*weitamen kaoli*), otherwise they will waste time and energy going the roundabout way (*zhou benduo wanlu*). Last year we were at the stage where every year we were approving one organization, because if they overlap, we can’t approve them.¹³⁴

Civil Affairs Bureaus also selectively apply regulations and sanctions related to shutting down ‘illegal’ organizations. Even though this is part of their mandate, they can come up with creative solutions to the problem:

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

The central directive on administrative sanctions (*xingzheng chufa*) was too broad as a legal provision. When social organizations are illegal (*feifa zuzhi*), sometimes what they've set their mind on (*rending*) is too big. For example, the Education Bureau approved a kindergarten, but it didn't seek approval from Civil Affairs to register, so it is technically illegal. Similarly, the Labor Department approves many Vocational Training Stations (*zhiye peixun zhan*). By law, we have to auction all their property and close them down. So how should this problem be solved? We coordinate with the supervisory department, to tell the organization to come here and register. This is a more gentle approach. Because it is not good to be too hotheaded (*ji*). Another example has to do with the annual audit. We have to do audits of organizations' accounts every year. This is easy to accomplish at the central or provincial level, but at the lower levels it is more difficult, especially at the county level and so on. The reason is that these associations have very little money, only a few thousand, they associate because of their hobbies and interests, and they have to then give part of this money to an accountant. So a rural education economic association, for example, has very little funds, and no income, because the state doesn't really support it financially, they just depend on the peasants and everyone contributes a little money. If you ask them to go through an audit, they can't even come up with the money. There are too few accountants here in XYZ city—they have to come to XYZ city to be audited—and they are expensive. So in this kind of situation we work with the supervisory department, we let them know that if the organization does not have enough funds, they don't need to go through the audit. Instead, we ask them to fill in these three forms themselves and give them to us. So they have to do this every three years. During this time we will send someone to their door and figure out their situation. You can only use this approach, otherwise they won't be able to come up with the money, especially old people's organizations, it's too painful (*xinteng*) for them to spend this money.¹³⁵

In the conception of positive-sum reciprocal engagement presented here, registration is not so much a prerequisite to NGO effectiveness or to these relationships, as a result of them. Being able to successfully register and to maintain registration status is one of the ways in which engagement with the state can empower grassroots NGOs, and is one part of the process of establishing positive-sum reciprocal engagement.

Circumventing other Rules

If they trust you, you can do even the most illegal thing. If they don't trust you, and you want to do the thing that is allowed on paper, they will say: 'No, this cannot be done.'¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Interview YN17, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, April 2010.

There are various other laws and regulations that apply to the operations of many grassroots NGOs, but that can also be circumvented when the NGO establishes relationships with local government agencies. Among these are restrictions on the publication of written materials, such as newsletters, training materials and reports, restrictions on fundraising and opening bank accounts, receiving and converting foreign currency, and regulations on the format and frequency of managerial board meetings: ‘According to Civil Affairs regulations, we are supposed to have annual meetings with all members, but we actually do this every two or three years.’¹³⁷

One provincial Civil Affairs Bureau issued a province-wide proclamation to all unregistered social organizations to stop all activities until registration status has been obtained, or be considered illegal organizations and face legal consequences.¹³⁸ The warning alarmed many local government departments that had been working with unregistered NGOs. One Hebei educational NGO received a visit from the local public security bureau soon after the proclamation was issued, during which PSB officials asked questions and ‘offered their help’ in getting the organization registered. The NGO director then visited the local education bureau, with whom it had been collaborating for several years to implement its program in local schools, to explore registration by ‘hooking’ under the bureau. While the education bureau director was somewhat reluctant to commit to acting as a supervisory department, he urged the NGO to continue working in the schools and expressed continued willingness to collaborate with and support the NGO, saying: ‘It’s not like Civil Affairs has any say in what we do (*minzheng ju ye guanbu zhao women*)!’¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Interview Y158, NGO, director. Yunnan, July 2010.

¹³⁸ Hebei Provincial Bureau of Civil Affairs Proclamation Number 6, February 13, 2012. <http://www.hebei.gov.cn/article/20120215/2045314.htm>, accessed March 15, 2012.

¹³⁹ Telephone communication with the NGO director, April 23, 2012.

Another unregistered educational NGO cooperating with the local Education Bureau, and through them, with rural public schools, wanted to organize educational activities for the students over the summer. But in an effort to lighten the burden on students, the provincial Education Bureau had issued strict policies prohibiting any educational activities for students during holidays. Despite these restrictions, the NGO was able to carry out its activities as planned, with the ‘silent consent’ of local education authorities, until towards the end of the summer, one of the participating students called the higher-level Education Bureau to ‘tattle’ (*gaozhuang*), after which the summer camp was halted.¹⁴⁰

An environmental NGO wanted to organize a large-scale outdoor gathering of thousands of people in support of environmental causes. Though this kind of mass assembly is generally considered quite sensitive, the organization was able to circumvent the need for complicated formal approvals and agreements because of its relationship with a local government department.

Because our work is scattered, we don’t have any formal contracts or cooperation agreements. The Municipal Committee Propaganda Ministry (*shinei xuanchuan bu*) is one of our new partners. They have an External Propaganda Office (*waixuan ban*)....We want to do the XYZ Green Journey (*chuxing*) activity, and have to get approval from the government for it. Actually if you don’t get the approval probably no one cares.

So in order to minimize this trouble, we submitted a report beforehand and the government approved it. For example, low-carbon and environmental protection fall within the jurisdiction of the Environmental Protection Bureau. Securing their approval and support will facilitate our work, so we will actively seek their support. We will go talk to them, and sometimes they are very willing, sometimes they are not very willing and not unwilling, and sometimes they are unwilling and don’t want us to do a particular project. This depends on the program, whether we do a good job the first time, if they see that we do well, they know we are working for the public’s benefit (*gongyi xing*) and it does not have many negative effects, then next time we can do it again.

But there will be no formal agreements, they won’t do that. And we don’t need this. But since we’ve had quite a few reports in newspapers and on TV in XYZ city, so

¹⁴⁰ Interview YN17, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, April 2010.

there haven't been many instances when they clearly opposed something. And we can't make it awkward or difficult for them (*weinan tamen*), they sometimes can't support something unless the others support it too. Each department has its own special characteristics and situation. It's not that 'if you give me money you support me,' or 'if you sign something with me you support me,' its that 'if you don't oppose me it is a support.' One can say: 'No money, no formalities', that also counts as supporting me (*meiqian meili ye shi zhichi wo*).¹⁴¹

Positive-sum reciprocal engagement facilitates what Tsai calls as 'adaptive informal institutions' in the economic sector. These are improvised, unofficial arrangements made between local entrepreneurs and local authorities to circumvent complicated formal regulations in the context of daily interactions.¹⁴² Chen identifies similar dynamics in the management of the NGO sector, in which 'civil-society activists and regulatory agencies reached a localized, tacit, and volatile *modus vivendi* that, under state acquiescence, granted an ambiguous, unspecified breathing space for daily operations and short-term development of local NGOs (even unregistered ones).'¹⁴³ Fieldwork amply demonstrated that NGOs often find it difficult to do things they are legally allowed to do, but are just as often able to do things that a strict adherence to law and policy would prohibit. According to one NGO director, the difference lies in 'making the other party understand you better. The same shirt can be worn this way or it can be worn inside out. It depends on the people. The regulations and laws are just sitting there, they don't have a great effect on what is actually done.'¹⁴⁴

Legitimacy, Trust and Recognition

An almost unanimous refrain among NGO interviewees was that in order to operate and to be effective, their organizations had to somehow establish legitimacy in the eyes of local government agencies and of the people. Various terms were used by interviewees in discussing

¹⁴¹ Interview Y134, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, May 2010.

¹⁴² K. S. Tsai, *Capitalism without Democracy: The Private Sector in Contemporary China* (Cornell Univ Pr, 2007).

¹⁴³ T. C. Chen, "China's Reaction to the Color Revolutions: Adaptive Authoritarianism in Full Swing," *Asian Perspective* 34, no. 2 (2010), 5-51.

¹⁴⁴ Interview Y250, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, July 2010.

this important ‘good’: trust (*xinren*), credibility (*gonglixing*), legality (*hefa*), illegality (*weifa*),¹⁴⁵ and *renke*, a term that means something between legitimacy, trust, and recognition.

As one NGO practitioner and academic described it, the role that NGOs can play in governance is great, but in order to fulfill this role, NGOs must be able to earn the trust and recognition of the people:

Social Management (*shehui guanli*)¹⁴⁶....has two aspects. One is the government’s management of society. The other is self-management (*zizhi guanli*). The role of social organizations is in this area. So the government is not denying civil society organizations. They have a part to play in this. So government has made a lot of policies to support these organizations. They want civil society organizations to do a great many things. But can society *renke* you? Can the government *renke* you?

Now the main challenge social organizations need to address is their self-development (*zishen jianshe*). If there’s work to be done, if the government doesn’t do it well, can you do it well? Can those around you trust you and put this task in your hands? So building capacity is important and it is related to the question of legitimacy (*renke*) and trust (*xinren*).¹⁴⁷

How do grassroots NGOs gain this trust, legitimacy and recognition? Particularly because most individuals and government officials have only a minimal or vague conception of non-governmental organizations, this is no easy task, and these organizations can be under significant scrutiny. According to the above excerpt, and according to many interviewees, these organizations build trust and credibility by improving self-management and self-development, or through acquiring experience and building capacity. As the founder of one environmental NGO said:

Our indigenous organizations are not backward or narrow. But the people’s perception of us has been ‘looking at flowers through a fog’ (*wuli kanhua*)—one can’t

¹⁴⁵ Two different terms are used to refer to something not being in accordance with the law, not legal (*buhefa*) and against the law (*weifa*). These two terms have slight different meanings, the latter usually referring to a more serious breach.

¹⁴⁶ See ‘Research report on speeding up the nation’s social management and public service reform’ (*jiakuai woguo shehui guanli he gonggong fuwu gaige de yanjiu baogao*) *China Policy Management* (*zhongguo xingzheng guanli*) 2 (2005). The Office of Social Construction (*shehui jianshe bangongshi*) and Committee on Social Work (*shehui gongzuo weiyuanhui*) supervise these areas of work respectively.

¹⁴⁷ Interview BJ09, NGO, network director, analyst. Beijing, September 2009.

see them clearly. And local organizations don't always behave well, or hold themselves to high standards. So in this field we advance the public credibility (*gongxin li*) of China's popular organizations. If you don't talk about public credibility...in America corporations and other organizations talk about it. China has walked a long road, if you don't do this, people won't have trust in you. Its not just economics which is important, you also need trust and credibility.

Because people are 'looking at flowers through a fog', if they can't see you clearly, people will misunderstand you and misjudge you. So it is even more important for people's organizations to have high standards. People don't scrutinize businesses, but if you do public benefit work, a big circle of people are watching you. So in this process, one challenge I face is to strengthen my determination, and effectively manage my organizational team. We have to evolve, or we will die.¹⁴⁸

However, on closer examination, the idea that grassroots NGOs earn the trust and recognition of government and society essentially by developing their own abilities (*zishen jianshe*) does not seem to be the whole story. As survey results as well as interviews indicated, establishing legitimacy and gaining the trust of the people is a motivating factor in NGOs' efforts to establish ties with local government. I argue that it is essentially an outcome of engagement with the state. While the building of capacity is an important determining factor in the establishment of these relationships, a conclusion which will be discussed in the next chapter, its primary function is in facilitating the emergence of positive-sum reciprocal engagement between grassroots NGOs and the local state, which in turn garners public trust.

In the Eyes of Government

The observation that establishing ties with local government helps grassroots NGOs establish legitimacy in the eyes of government is relatively intuitive, but is often difficult to achieve in practice. The director of the Social Organization Management Bureau under provincial Civil Affairs described the challenge of lacking 'a system for determining the

¹⁴⁸ Interview H164, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

credibility or trustworthiness (*chengxin*) of these organizations.’¹⁴⁹ The director had been on several trips abroad to observe the experience of other nations with managing social organizations, and noted that countries like Germany seem to have such systems. There is even a theory among NGO practitioners that maintaining legal gray areas and the practice of dual management in the NGO registration system is itself a system for determining credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of government. By having to interact and cooperate with a supervisory government department with respect to issue area or content, and Civil Affairs with respect to administration or management, there is a greater chance that mismanagement, illegal activity or undesirable actions will be caught.

This notion fits with the observation made in this research that registration is one step in a longer-term process of establishing relationships with local government. As mentioned in a previous chapter, grassroots NGOs are ‘wild’ and unknown entities, which do not initially enjoy the legitimacy that government-organized NGOs, international NGOs, or even businesses come with. In many regions, government officials in departments other than Civil Affairs at the village, township, county, district and even municipal levels have no familiarity with the concept of a ‘public benefit organization’ (*gongyi zuzhi*) or ‘nonprofit organization.’ To establish the legitimacy and trust necessary to register, and often just to operate, in the eyes of government officials wary of unknown organized social groups and suspicious of those who ostensibly wish to work ‘for free’ with no ulterior motives is no easy task. Government departments interact with grassroots NGOs over time to gain familiarity with the way such organizations carry out their work.

In the Eyes of the People

¹⁴⁹ Interview N180, Government, director. Ningxia, December 2010.

As shown in Table 3-1, the single most significant reason why respondents want to work with government has to do with the way they are seen by the populations they work with. Collaborating with government is an important factor in the ability of grassroots NGOs to establish legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of the people. For an NGO, establishing ties with government is useful, first, because 'it allows the government know and be clear about what we are doing, the nature of our work, and support us more. Second, we can use the government, because using the government's face in going to the lower levels is more effective than going ourselves.'¹⁵⁰

Chinese scholars have also begun to note how ties with the state can empower grassroots NGOs rather than simply compromise their independence: 'The hidden advantage of this mechanism is that the visible governmental hand in China's NGOs has actually added to the credibility so that they are more likely to convince the public because people tend to believe the role of the government in regulating and supervising operations.'¹⁵¹

This contrasts with the picture often painted in reports of the state of civil society in China where the Chinese government holds a menacing sword hanging over the heads of NGOs, threatening those that get out of line. According to this view, this is a 'smart strategy' on the part of government, where 'if you do what is good for me, I'll let you do what you like, but over your head there will always be a Sword of Damocles. So if I want to get rid of you, I can do that easily.'¹⁵²

In the contrasting picture painted by the majority of organizations included in this study, it is the people, from villagers to urbanites, that NGOs most need to win over. It is the people on whom their survival depends:

¹⁵⁰ Interview Y158, NGO, director. Yunnan, July 2010.

¹⁵¹ E. D. Chen, "NGOs in China: the Rise of Civil Awareness," *People's Daily Online* (2009).

¹⁵² V. Yu, "China's NGOs fear the worst," *Asia Times* (2009).

If you don't have support of government, then in the village or in the area, one can say it is 'difficult to move even a single step' (*cunbu nanxing*). After two years of working with the villagers I discovered a phenomenon: Whatever is the spirit or attitude of the leader, that is how the villagers will be. If the leader supports, the villagers will be positive and active. If the leader says 'Do it yourself,' or opposes, the villagers will oppose. They have the same direction of thought.¹⁵³

In working with government, we will have a larger space for working because the local people and local communities will be more at ease (*fangxin*), will trust us more and it will be easier for them to accept our project. If we just try to do things in an individual capacity (*yi geren de shenfen*), the people will often be suspicious of us and our purpose. So our social space will be bigger.¹⁵⁴

When these relationships exist, '...the villagers will be more positive. Initially, some people didn't really understand us, and were quite negative.' Cooperating with government 'increases trust in us (*kexin du*), no matter what locality you work in or what kind of leader you cooperate with, first of all people will trust you, they won't have so many doubts and suspicions. This will make our work progress more smoothly.'¹⁵⁵ In urban areas, too, the legitimacy that comes from government support can build confidence in volunteers.¹⁵⁶

Apparently, it is the suspicions of the people that form the greatest obstacle to the work of these organizations. Examples of these doubts abound, and may be related to a general lack of social trust. New NGOs faced deep suspicions in a locality where a charitable organization had later been found to be a scam, fleecing (*pianqian*) the people. Another locality had been plagued by pyramid schemes, and when a grassroots educational NGO first began operating there, government officials, schools, individuals, and even the founder's own family members constantly shut the door in her face in mistrust. The villagers in a region with a high incidence of drug use and forced rehabilitation were so wary of someone reporting to government the names of drug users that a grassroots NGO operating in the area, even though

¹⁵³ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

¹⁵⁴ Interview Y132, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

¹⁵⁵ Interview N237, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

¹⁵⁶ Interview H165, NGO, founder director. Hebei, August 2010.

the founder was one of the villagers, met with significant suspicion and mistrust which took months to overcome.¹⁵⁷ Being perceived to be in opposition to the government can also have a damaging effect:

One [reason for working with government] is that without this cooperation it would be very difficult for us to work here. Because if you are against (*duili*) the government they will say negative things about you in the village and it will affect the common people's view of you, they will think you are illegal.¹⁵⁸

One of the most common and damaging rumors that can spread about these organizations are allegations of involvement in Falungong or anti-government religious movements:

Local people are under the management of government. If you cooperate with government, the local people will be more trusting. They won't worry about other troublesome issues (*mafan*) coming up. Ten years ago there was the Falungong incident, now this issue has become politicized, just like the 7/5 incident of last year.¹⁵⁹ These are all quite negative things, and they will affect the local people. The attitude of the government towards these things will also affect the people's attitude.¹⁶⁰

An environmental NGO working in rural areas had been conducting environmental and agricultural trainings with villagers for a few months without the explicit support of village or higher-level leaders, when rumors began to spread that this activity was somehow related to Falungong. Soon after, villagers stopped attending training courses and interacting with NGO staff. The founder described this experience:

This is a non-governmental, grassroots, popular NGO program. So according to China's situation (*guoqing*) it must secure the government's agreement (*tongyi*) or recognition (*renke*) before it can begin to carry out such work in the locality. If there is no dialogue with government, the villagers will say 'Are you lawful or not (*ni hebu hefa*)?' or 'Have you gone against the law (*weifan falu*)?' Because without knowing the

¹⁵⁷ These three examples come from my own experience in the field working with newly established grassroots NGOs in the years 2005-2006.

¹⁵⁸ Interview Y155, NGO, Staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

¹⁵⁹ The interviewee is referring to the social unrest and riots that took place in the Western Chinese province of Xinjiang in July of 2009. Politically sensitive incidents often referred to in this form; for example, the Tiananmen square incident of 1989 is referred to as '6/4.'

¹⁶⁰ Interview N236, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

situation, the villagers are guessing and defining whether they can or cannot [participate]...this is the way we do things.

Initially, our program was very new in the whole of [this locality], people hadn't heard of such things and had never come into contact with programs that do public benefit work or training, so the government said "Let us first understand and learn about (*liaojie*) this." So they *liaojie*, *liaojie*...but eventually, because of our limited abilities, we didn't strengthen this contact or dialogue [with government] and it stopped. Then, some of the people in the village misunderstood our program, and thought it was not lawful (*buhefa de*) or illegal (*weifa de*), and on their own initiative, reported it to the relevant government departments. At this point, the government decided to once again go back and investigate (*shenshi*) and understand (*liaojie*) our program. Then at this time, we increased our dialogue with government to make it more regular and frequent.¹⁶¹

Through increased dialogue, the above organization was eventually able to overcome the issue and continue working in the village through the intervention and assistance of local government departments.

For the people, government backing can also be an indication of program quality and effectiveness. The founder of an NGO with positive relationships with local government explained: "Through government cooperation, the people can then feel that the nongovernmental organization is trustworthy and that the program is very good, because it has been able to secure the trust of the government."¹⁶² This suggests that government may be expected by the people to play a 'gatekeeper' role, protecting them from 'harmful elements.'

Sometimes intervention of higher authorities or even horizontally linked government departments can facilitate other relationships, and assist grassroots NGOs in 'going down to the grassroots':

For example, with respect to seeking support for our program, there are a great many government departments. For example, one county area might have seventy or eighty different departments, so you can't be in contact with every one. So we generally focus on Environmental Protection, and Water Resources, but not to the exclusion of other departments like Enterprise, Technology, etc. If it [the project] is related to them, then we will actively seek their support, and that of village and township

¹⁶¹ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

¹⁶² Interview N238, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

government. We take initiative to contact them and hope they support us. Otherwise, we can't go directly to the grassroots. If we do, we will run into certain problems. With China's administrative system, if the government doesn't support you, they will tell you that you can't or shouldn't do this, or say: 'We don't know about this thing.' This will be bad for the project. Secondly, without their support, if we directly operate in the local communities, our costs will go up a lot. But if we just call [the local officials] and tell them to do it, it keeps costs down. Also, as local people, they know the situation better and know how best to arrange things.¹⁶³

Local governments can also act as allies with NGOs in their efforts to gain trust and effect change in the private sector. One educational NGO operating in an area with a high incidence of HIV/AIDS is engaged in HIV/AIDS prevention education in addition to other kinds of educational work. Their AIDS prevention projects focused on construction workers, one of the most high-risk populations in terms of HIV/AIDS infection, because of their low education levels, and being far from home, frequent patrons of sex services. To effectively implement AIDS education projects with these populations, the NGO had to go through the construction companies:

If I go directly to construction company managers, they won't listen to me. They will think it will adversely affect their work, and then when I work with the workers, they won't listen to me either. But if it's done through the government office the officials will insist that the workers' health needs to be protected, and so on. They will tell the company it must work with me, because in China they will listen to whoever manages their work (*shui guanli tade gongzuo huiting shuide*). We just need the opportunity to start something, once we do, they see what we actually do, and they support us a lot. In the process, we also respect their thoughts and opinions. In relationships between people, as long as you respect someone, they will respect you. Usually it's only when the other party doesn't understand us that we draw on the coordinative power of the government. Even so, we still have to respect them in all we do, in our methods, timing, and so on. They recognize and appreciate it when they see that we are looking at things from their perspective and taking into account their needs.¹⁶⁴

Making use of government channels allows programs to be implemented more smoothly, especially when working at the grassroots. 'When the relationship with government is smooth, the program is more effective and has better results, because then we have the

¹⁶³ Interview Y134, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, May 2010.

¹⁶⁴ Interview Y250, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, July 2010.

government's assistance. Then the masses (*qunzhong*) trust us more, and many things are easier to arrange (*ban*).¹⁶⁵ Another NGO founder shared:

Last year the training in XYZ village was organized through the county Women's Federation, who contacted the township Women's Federation, who organized the people with the village leaders. It was a successful training. The county Women's Federation supported it very much. They arranged for an agricultural technical expert to speak about how to plant fruit trees, and for us to take photos together. For example, we put on a performance in the village, and the village leader collected some money and bought fruits for everyone. In another place he organized accommodations with his money...with this support they [the villagers] won't think it is a bad thing or illegal. Otherwise, no matter how good your program is, they won't work with you...If you cooperate with government the common people won't think you are illegal (*weifa*). Otherwise they will think so....because the common people's conception of people's organizations are blank.¹⁶⁶

The above excerpt implies that the need NGOs have for government ties in working with the people may stem from the general populace's lack of knowledge about NGOs. Could it be that as this fast-growing sector puts these kinds of organizations more and more in the public eye, and public recognition of private non-profit work as a legitimate and lawful area of activity grows, the need for government ties will decrease?

Some interviews suggest that the roots of the phenomenon lie deeper than a simple lack of knowledge or awareness of NGOs. Rather, it may have more to do with the fact that the people still take their cues from government, and that grassroots organizations are still no match government in ability and effectiveness:

For China's common people, they think the whole of Chinese society is directed by the government and they should be responsible to the people. So in their hearts they can live with or without people's organizations (*keyou kewan*), because they don't have any real effect.¹⁶⁷

It is also interesting to note that while grassroots NGOs almost unanimously see and welcome the power that government ties can give them to get things done, some also recognize that it can sometimes have a detrimental effect on efforts to garner true support in a

¹⁶⁵ Interview Y132, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

¹⁶⁶ Interview H260, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

¹⁶⁷ Interview H165, NGO, founder director. Hebei, August 2010.

locality, and can even backfire. An educational NGO cooperating with the local Education Bureau, and through them, with local schools described these concerns:

...I don't know whether it makes things difficult for (*weinan*) local people. For example, when we cooperate with government or schools, we've had this kind of situation, where the school doesn't necessarily really welcome this program, but because we are working with the government, they accept it. But they don't really understand or support our program, but in the process of implementation they create many obstacles and challenges for us. So when there is cooperation between grassroots organizations and government, they don't know in these cases whether to see this as a government action (*zhengfu xingwei*) or a grassroots action (*caogende xingwei*). So sometimes it will influence their ability to judge and choose. If it was a government action they would support it more and would do it even if it didn't have much result for them. If it is a grassroots action they would look at it in more detail...more diligently and see if it would really be helpful to them before they do it. With government actions they generally just comply, regardless of whether it is beneficial to them or not, they will accept it....But when the two cooperate, they don't know whether or not to accept it.¹⁶⁸

As the above example suggests, government links can result in only formalistic compliance with an initiative, rather than true support at the grassroots, which NGOs can also secure through other means. In general, however, the numerous examples provided by interviewees show that ties with government can empower grassroots NGOs to work with the people. These organizations know that to be most effective in the Chinese context, the traditionally divided advocacy and service functions of NGOs need to be integrated.¹⁶⁹ This implies that to have an impact, NGOs cannot neglect intimate engagement with the people and the implementation of programs at the grassroots. Field research suggests that establishing ties with local government facilitates NGOs in this undertaking.

Mobilization

Closely related to establishing trust and legitimacy in the eyes of the people, one of the most important ways in which local government officials facilitate the work of NGOs working

¹⁶⁸ Interview Y132, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

¹⁶⁹ See *Chapter 5* of this dissertation for further discussion.

at the grassroots is in their ability to organize and mobilize the people. The Communist Party's long history and extensive experience with 'mass mobilization' is a strength that NGOs can draw on. An environmental NGO says of local government that 'their mobilization ability (*dongyuan nengli*) is very strong. If NGOs don't have the cooperation of government, it is very hard for them to work in the local area. The common people prefer to listen to the government.'¹⁷⁰ This seems to be particularly true for NGOs operating in rural areas: 'The government can help my work because they organize and gather the villagers together. The villagers listen to them.'¹⁷¹

The state's ability to mobilize the populace also has some salience in urban settings. An urban environmental NGO pursued collaboration with government so that:

the government officials can come out and do some activities together with the volunteers, to show their attitude towards these kinds of issues, this will increase the volunteers' enthusiasm. Because the government's posture is important, to demonstrate this posture will have very deep and far-reaching impact on volunteers. Their zeal will be affected, they expend great time and energy on this work, their contribution should be recognized, affirmed and encouraged by the government, because their motives are good.¹⁷²

Both the actual organization of training participants and volunteers, and the fostering of their zeal and enthusiasm, then, are ways in which government collaboration can strengthen the work of grassroots NGOs.

Policy Influence

Perhaps the most politically significant way in which engagement with the state empowers grassroots NGOs is in providing them with highly sought-after opportunity to

¹⁷⁰ Interview Y155, NGO, Staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

¹⁷¹ Interview Y229, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

¹⁷² Interview N142, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

influence public policy on the issue areas they care about. This aspect of the relationship is more fully developed in *Chapter 7*.

The Role of Principle and Conviction

The building of a new world is a complex, long-term process in which most of humanity, including those who work within official systems, must participate.¹⁷³

There is a tendency, particularly in certain academic fields and certain cultural contexts, to reduce or simplify human motivation to rational calculation and self-interest. Certain assumptions stem from a culture and worldview that values such societal organizing principles as distinct spheres of state and society, autonomous checks and balances and individual freedoms. Other assumptions result from a more collective, communitarian worldview that emphasizes the integration of different components of a harmonious whole. Different underlying assumptions will implicitly shape individual choices as well as organizational behavior. Apart from the unconscious influence of culture and worldview, individuals and organizations also make conscious choices to act based on a certain conceptual framework, and several of the organizations included in this study go to great lengths to clarify and articulate the conceptual framework and principles that guide their work. This conceptual framework can include such elements as the nature of relationship between the individual and society, the nature of social transformation, the role of knowledge, a conception of historical processes, and the nature of the human being. In order not to miss seeing other kinds of forces that can be motivating government or non-governmental actors, it is worth pointing out that for many interviewees, while establishing ties between government and NGOs benefited them in a number of ways, many were also motivated by belief in certain norms or principles.

¹⁷³ F. Arbab, *Non-Governmental Development Organizations: Report of a Learning Project* (Cali, Colombia: CELATER, 1988), 46.

Many interviewees expressed a conviction that lasting social transformation comes from incremental improvements carried out by a variety of actors working in collaboration, rather than through passive criticism, opposition or conflict. A sincere desire of NGOs to be of assistance to their communities, and to their government, was not uncommon: ‘What we are doing is helping the government in a spirit of service. So we want to have cooperation with the organizations that are doing this kind of work and learn from each other.’¹⁷⁴

NGOs also saw similar motivations on the part of the government officials they work with:

Of course [collaboration] has benefits [for government]. Because the government is always seeking ways in which they can do good things for the common people (*laobaixing*). And they can see that if your program is truly good and can really do things for common people, then they are also very willing. Because serving the common people is also their duty (*yimin*). A lot of leaders are very sincerely willing to do good things for the common people, and to help them.¹⁷⁵

A collaborative relationship between social organizations and government was often seen as necessary for effective local development. One NGO founder put it quite simply as the combination and coordination of two forces:

[this kind of relationship] definitely benefits society. Let’s take economic growth as an example. The NGO in this area can contribute to economic growth, and the government also works for the area’s economic development, so if the two forces are combined (*liangge liliang jiaqilai*) in doing this, won’t this area develop faster? In turn, the people will reap more benefits, and develop more.¹⁷⁶

Other interviewees saw cooperation as a means to draw on the resources of society and harness them for development: ‘This is one of the benefits of the cooperation between nongovernment and government: the resources of society will be further discovered (*fajue*) and utilized...’¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ Interview H259, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August, 2010.

¹⁷⁵ Interview N238, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

¹⁷⁶ Interview N236, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

¹⁷⁷ Interview N238, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

Several organizations defined and worked towards a specific conception of development in which the role played by government, social organizations and society is quite different from those prevalent in Western philosophies and ideologies, in which the state is responsible for the provision of certain collective goods but is at risk of constantly overreaching its control, while the individual, represented by various social groups in order to magnify its power, protects its sphere of autonomy and clamors for additional freedoms. Rather, what could be deduced from the analysis of many interviewees was a historically and culturally rooted conception of development that put government in a position to 'lead' development, while soliciting the participation of society and channeling social resources as well as individual initiative. One well-known academic who studies rural development and NGOs put it this way:

With respect to the question of development, it is: 'government as the primary guiding force, peasants as the principal corpus, the whole of society as participants' (*zhengfu zhubao, nongmin zhubi, quan shehui canyu*). As a principle, this is really how it is, and this is how things are effectively done. The government is still the main directing force (*zhubao lilian*), because they have the money, the mobilization ability. Why peasants as the principal corpus? Because they live there [in rural areas] and development has to be carried out according to their needs. So how should this problem be resolved theoretically? You are talking about how to make development effective. I think it should be an 'internal resources development model' (*neiyuanshi de fazhan*), focused on the question of how to use local resources effectively. Development is not a question of lacking resources. Rural inhabitants themselves already possess many resources. It's about how to use their own existing resources effectively, this includes their human and financial resources. This implies dealing with how to raise their organizational capacity, how to develop their ability to utilize these resources. For example, many of the irrigation systems and structures come from the time of the people's communes, the government had found a way to get people to use their own abilities and resources for the communal good. So now this principle should be continued.... These are the things that are important to Chinese, from a development point of view.¹⁷⁸

The perspective and definition of development described above, and shared by a number of NGOs included in this study, is not limited to the provision of services, or the

¹⁷⁸ Interview BJ12, Academic, researcher. Beijing, February 2010.

improvement of a particular aspect of life, or to political empowerment. It implies the building of capacity, empowerment and participation, but in concert with, rather than in opposition to, or even autonomous from, collective and state goals.

3.5 Conclusion

In presenting the concept of positive-sum reciprocal engagement central to this study, I am not attempting to make a generalized statement about the state of NGOs in China. My claims are much more modest. Instead, by disaggregating the state as well as disaggregating society to look at one particular type of relationship that can emerge between two distinct types of actors, I hope to draw out insights about the kinds of patterns of state-society interaction that sometimes exist in the Chinese context. I believe this will be particularly fruitful in allowing for the identification of mutualistic patterns of interaction in a field where adversarial ones are more commonly featured in scholarly discussion, and seeing mutual influence where, more often, it is exclusively unequal relationships that are thought to exist.

The next three chapters will discuss the conditions and antecedents that facilitate the emergence of relationships characterized by positive-sum reciprocal engagement, and how these relationships can vary over time. Then, *Chapter 7* will consider some of the outcomes of these relationships where policy formulation and implementation at the local level are concerned.

Chapter 4: The Local State and the Emergence of Positive-Sum Reciprocal Engagement

The previous chapter defined the notion of positive-sum reciprocal engagement and shed light on some of the ways in which such engagement can empower grassroots NGOs and local government agencies. While it seeks to contribute to a 'better understanding of the nature of synergistic relations between state and society,' this study is also concerned with causal factors, as 'the conditions under which such relations can most easily be constructed should become a component of future theories of development.'¹

The three following chapters of this dissertation seek to explain the sources of variation in the emergence of positive-sum reciprocal engagement across a number of Chinese localities. They look at the preconditions and antecedents that facilitate the emergence of such engagement, roughly dividing these conditions into three broad categories, each of which is taken up in a separate chapter: conditions related to characteristics of the state and the strength of public institutions, those related to characteristics of grassroots NGOs, and those having to do with the social and political context of each locality.

Within each category, a list of potential contributing factors was compiled from the literature on mutually empowering relationships between state and society, as well as from my own experience in the field. Of these potentially facilitating conditions, a few were found to be significant in contributing to reciprocal engagement between grassroots NGOs and local government agencies. Among the conditions related to public institutions, the existence of 'reformists' in public agencies proved to significantly facilitate the occurrence of positive-sum

¹ P. Evans, "Government Action, Social Capital and Development: Reviewing the Evidence on Synergy," *World Development* 24, no. 6 (1996), 1130.

reciprocal engagement. This condition, as well as other hypothesized, but less significant, factors, will be discussed in this chapter.

4.1 The Strength of Public Institutions

This chapter seeks to determine the extent to which characteristics of public institutions in a given locality are responsible for the presence, or absence, of positive-sum reciprocal engagement between grassroots NGOs and local government departments. The characteristics that state bureaucracies and civil associations must possess in order for mutual empowerment to occur are defined in the existing literature:

The mutually reinforcing interactions between state and society will most likely take place when corporately coherent Weberian bureaucracies collaborate with active civil associations in seeking collective goals. Therefore, the achievement of mutual empowerment is probably conditioned on the strength of public institutions in terms of cohesiveness, the levels of consciousness and organization of social groups, and, most important, the convergence or divergence of the goals of state elites and of organized social groups.²

Scholars tend to agree that: 'Other things being equal, localities with stronger bureaucratic capacity tend to develop a less antagonistic and more cooperative state-society relationship.'³ The literature on synergy between citizens and government finds a positive relationship between 'a competent, engaged set of public institutions' and the emergence of synergy. In contrast to some social capital theorists' predictions that pre-existing stocks of social capital, or even a robust civil society, provide the necessary conditions for synergy to emerge, it appears that it is variations in the ability of governments to act as 'counterparts in the creation of developmentally effective civic organizations'⁴ that determines possibilities for synergy. Relevant scholarship discusses the strength of public institutions with respect to such

² X. Wang, "Mutual Empowerment of State and Society: Its Nature, Conditions, Mechanisms, and Limits," *Comparative Politics* 31, no. 2 (1999), 236.

³ Y. Huang and D. L. Yang, "Bureaucratic Capacity and State-Society Relations in China," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 7, no. 1 (2002), 19-46.

⁴ Evans, *Government Action, Social Capital and Development: Reviewing the Evidence on Synergy*, 1126.

characteristics as cohesiveness, competence, and engagement, and associates it with notions such as public accountability and political competitiveness. This section will present the findings of this study with regard to these characteristics and how they impact the emergence of reciprocal engagement in research localities. As background to this discussion, however, interviewees' general perception of the strength of local public institutions will be illustrated.

4.1.1 General Perception of Government

Interviewees' discussion of 'the common people's' perception of local government reflected their own views as well as those of the beneficiaries of their programs with whom they often come into contact, such as villagers, teachers, rural women, farmers, and so on.

High degrees of citizen satisfaction with government performance, particularly with the central government, have been well documented.⁵ Perceptions of the interviewees in this study confirmed this trend. NGO and government interviewees consistently represented local government in terms that were positive, while almost all noted that there were always a 'few bad apples' in the barrel. I found fewer negative perceptions of government expressed than would be expected among NGO interviewees in China's often-restrictive political environment, especially in contrast to other studies of 'grassroots' NGO perceptions. I attribute this difference to the sample of organizations selected in such studies. Focusing on areas that are more easily accessible to researchers, such studies usually represent 'grassroots' NGOs using well-known organizations that have typically had significant interaction with foreigners, and generally tend to be founded and run by elites.

Different categories of reasons were given for the positive perception of government on the part of local people and the NGOs themselves. The first line of reasoning was that the local

⁵ See, for example, T. Saich, "Governance seen through the People's Eyes," *East Asia Forum* 3, no. 2 (2011), 7-8.

people are satisfied with local government because of the way their interests are looked after and the way local government benefits them. One NGO director stated that her fellow villagers and program participants 'have a very good view of the local government, because they are thinking of the rural areas. Even if government doesn't have enough funds, they will get money and give it to the rural people.'⁶ In another locality, for example:

[the local economy is mainly centered around] potatoes, and government support. They give subsidies, or have this plan but have not yet done it. Towards the end of the year they will give subsidies to everyone....They [the villagers] think the government is good, they support it. Government support extends to bringing running water to the village and planting potatoes.⁷

Others spoke of the positive perception of local government in terms of collective, rather than individual, interests. One NGO founder believed that the local people 'agree in general with [the local government's] working approach and methods. Because the government's approach will often be directed toward the interests of the common people, they will do things for the development of the whole [city].'⁸ Another NGO founder discussed the perception of provincial leadership:

These few years the people have quite a positive view of the local government, especially of the provincial Party Secretary [X], his forward-thinking mindset (*chaoqian yishi*), and working approach. The city layout and infrastructure used to be poor, but his planning and large-scale projects have been effective. He was forward thinking, planned for the next twenty years, and his reach was long (*shoubi da*). They [the local people] think government is quite effective.... The main thing [motivation] is a kind of belief in our Chinese Communist Party. Political achievements (*zhengji*) come from doing their work well, and people seeing this. In [X] Province, the people see large improvements in urban development and a raise in incomes. The people believe this generation of leaders is really working for the common people, and that results come mainly from the higher levels [of local government]. The people of [X] Province, during the past ten years, truly feel they are fortunate.⁹

⁶ Interview Y229, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁷ Interview N237, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

⁸ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁹ Interview N142, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

A few interviewees cited negative perceptions of local government, particularly with respect to their work ethic and the difficulty NGOs faced in dealing with administrative hurdles. The founder of an educational NGO said: 'People know they have to go see the government officials on Monday mornings, otherwise they may not be there.' She added, however, that some departments 'now have better attitudes.'¹⁰ Another rural NGO discussed the local government's coercion of local villagers in experimenting with new crop varieties: 'For example, the government wants those who plant tobacco to switch to a new variety. Some villages can't accept this, but the government oppresses them. The villagers didn't want to plant this variety, but they must, because they are threatened, for example, with losing their subsidies or not being able to access credit.'¹¹

Even negative assessments, however, were generally limited to a certain facet or part of local government, as in the following example:

The local people on the one hand appreciate that the government has developed the tourism industry, which has brought economic income for local people...in this respect, they think the government has helped a lot. But of course the government of each place will have some unjust features, or points that the common people may not agree with or think are fair. For example, that government funds were not used to serve the local people very well, you also hear people complain about things like this.¹²

When negative perceptions were expressed, it was often by grassroots NGOs characterized by weak levels of reciprocal engagement with local government. Two NGOs, in particular, gave voice to negative perceptions, though they tended to attribute them to the local people, as in the following example:

Many people have objections (*yijian*) towards the government, because there is corruption and they don't trust government. They think they don't manage or care about (*guan*) the things they should, and get involved in the things they shouldn't manage (*gaiguande buguan, bugaiguande guan*). They also think the government should be serving them but are not doing it well. However, many common people are influenced by

¹⁰ Interview H259, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August, 2010.

¹¹ Interview Y229, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

¹² Interview Y132, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

traditional thinking and still believe the government is good and they should listen to them, so they don't think about these problems very much.¹³

Several interviews picked up on genuinely polarized perceptions of local government among the population of the locality.

The way I personally see it, our locality is very sensitive to general social practices (*fengqi*). Particularly with respect to corruption, the common people are very much against it and have a negative reaction to it (*fangan*). But with respect to our government and the Chinese Communist Party's leaders, they have a lot of faith in them (*feichang you xinxin*), and have a great hope in them (*baoyou feichang dade xiwang*). [X] County is a multi-ethnic place, we have many people who are Hui minority. From what I know, there are also many people who have lost jobs or need jobs. This creates two extremes. There are some rich people, who live better, and their view of and attitude towards the government is relatively positive. There is also a very small group of people that, for other reasons, does things they are not supposed to do, and does not fulfill its duties. But in general, the people here, both villagers and others, all participate very proactively in many of the government's affairs.¹⁴

The founder of another rural NGO also perceived frustration with clientelism, but did not see it as a widespread issue: 'Most people use relationships (*guanxi*) or the backdoor (*houmen*), and people don't like this. The people have a prejudice towards the government. Even though the government sometimes includes corrupt officials, it doesn't completely consist of people like this. Most of them actually want to do good things.'¹⁵ While corruption and clientelism were common concerns, NGO interviewees tended to have a rather sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the issues involved:

There is a great deal of dialogue in current Chinese society. The common people's evaluation of government is such that they still complain very much about government. Some of these complaints relate to real situations, some complain because they don't know the situation. Our judgments about a situation many not correspond to reality. In reality, in the provincial government, for example, some of the officials don't receive any interest or benefit. For example, a government official in an agricultural research center of the provincial government, what benefit does he or she receive? At the most they have to run back and forth to the rural areas.¹⁶

¹³ Interview Y155, NGO, Staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

¹⁴ Interview N238, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

¹⁵ Interview H260, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

¹⁶ Interview H165, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

In the context of this study, it was difficult to measure and compare local government cohesiveness, competence and engagement specifically across localities beyond assessing these characteristics from my direct interactions with the various individual officials with whom grassroots NGOs have interacted. However, interviews did shed light on how these characteristics, when present, can enhance reciprocal engagement and how and why it may vary across localities and departments.

4.1.2 Cohesive

Interviewees expressed mixed assessments of the extent to which government departments in a given locality were cohesive in nature, and these assessments were not consistent within each locality. Some of those who perceived local government as highly cohesive mentioned that cohesiveness has developed over time:

I think now it is better than before, it has improved. Now many of the relevant information and policies are open (*gongkai*) and are discussed among people, and the government will make on-site (*shidi*) visits to the people to investigate and work. Before, government departments may not have been aware of how to work effectively with each other to coordinate and to collectively promote local development. Now they engage in more reflection and are learning more about how to advance local development more effectively, so it has matured.¹⁷

Cohesiveness seemed like a particularly important issues with regard to relationships between different levels of the hierarchy within a government department: ‘Within a department, the relationship between the main director (*zhengde*) and vice director (*jude*) may not be very harmonious (*rongqia*), because of personal feelings and habits of thought. But in the larger general context, with respect to principle, they maintain integrity (*jianchi yuanze*), and when they encounter important problems they help each other to solve them.’¹⁸ Cohesiveness among the administrative and Party branches of government was also a concern: ‘The Party

¹⁷ Interview Y132, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

¹⁸ Interview N238, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

Committee and government cooperate quite closely (*dangwei zheng fu peihe de bijiao moqie*). After they consult and set the framework, they are able to implement it quite well. Many practical problems have been solved effectively, such as urban development issues, demolitions and farmers who lose their land.’¹⁹ Another NGO interviewee stressed the importance of cohesiveness to governance and organizational capacity:

I think their [government’s] cohesiveness is quite strong, because they have to manage a large geographic area. If they were not very cohesive and didn’t have the organizational capacity, how would they do it? As with the parents of a large family, even though they can’t manage every person, but in general they manage quite well.²⁰

Cohesiveness seems to be more difficult to achieve between different government departments than within a single department. According to one interviewee: ‘Within the same department they are very united. Across departments, coordination sometimes needs to be improved, as their effectiveness or efficiency is a bit slow.’²¹

Several of the government departments interviewed for this study, and several of those engaged in positive-sum reciprocal relationships with grassroots NGOs, played a coordinating role and worked to strengthen cohesiveness among different agencies, particularly in response to specific social problems. One poverty alleviation official explained that ‘...poverty alleviation work is integrated, so we have to work with other groups, for example in fixing roads, or education work, we have to cooperate with the relevant government departments.’²² Other departments, such as the Women’s Federation, are also expected not only to coordinate with other relevant government departments in carrying out their work, but in many regions are responsible for coordination between social organizations—including grassroots NGOs as

¹⁹ Interview N142, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

²⁰ Interview N236, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

²¹ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

²² Interview N179, Government, staff. Ningxia, December 2010.

well as foreign and domestic foundations and government funded projects—and local government departments.²³

The newly created AIDS office in another research locality, for example, was mandated to manage, coordinate, and supervise other relevant government departments in the locality, as well as to work with local NGOs and outside groups focused on AIDS issues. One of the staff of this office explained:

The Health Bureau is the main one [government department] with which we [work closely] and frequently engage in dialogue. [We] also [work] with Family Planning and Civil Affairs, because they do work related to care of the infected, Public Security, because they manage drug users, Women's Federation, and the Communist Youth League Committee. We also work with the Labor Bureau and Education Bureau, because high-risk populations fall under the management of these offices.²⁴

Several interviewees also mentioned a lack of coordination and cohesiveness among different government departments. One NGO working with schools, for example, noted that 'the Education Bureau gives work to schools, but they don't do this in a coordinated fashion. The educational research office [of the Education Bureau] assigns them work and the education office [of the Education Bureau] assigns them work, but much of the work is overlapping.'²⁵ Another NGO described how a lack of cohesion between different government departments hinders its work:

There are many challenges in cooperation between different government offices. For example, on the east side of the lake, the provincial Water Resources Bureau mandated that the county-level Water Resources Bureau that they have to establish a certain number of Water Resource Associations, so they were very eager and positive about our program. But the township government didn't want to charge for the water because the common people wouldn't want to pay for it, so they were very much opposed to the establishment of Water Resource Associations. In the end, the township government is the local bully (*ditoushè*). It's up to them, and the county government can't get involved (*guan*). The horizontal and vertical departments are divided (*tiaokuai fenge*). Even though

²³ Interview H167, Government, staff. Hebei, November 2010.

²⁴ Interview Y251, Government, staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

²⁵ Interview H259, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August, 2010.

the Water Resources Bureau was very much opposed to the township government's approach, but administratively, they couldn't do anything about it.²⁶

In conclusion, findings from interviews indicated that cohesiveness was perceived to exist across two dimensions: within a given government department and between different departments. Descriptions of the local government's lack of cohesiveness across these dimensions are consistent with a more fragmented view of the administrative system. However, as is described in the following chapter, capable grassroots NGOs can also use this fragmentation to their advantage in seeking allies within different government departments.

4.1.3 Competent

The competence of government agencies and the officials that make them up is another facet of the strength of public institutions thought to facilitate the emergence of reciprocal engagement with social groups. For NGO interviewees, competent officials were those who are cognizant of challenges and gaps in their work, and want to do something about them. An educational NGO collaborating with the local Education Bureau says of local government departments: "They are fairly effective. Most of them, like the Education Bureau, are aware of the current state of education and are dissatisfied with many things. That's why they support our program being implemented in schools, because they feel the students aren't learning much right now in the current system."²⁷ Another NGO discussed how competent officials can facilitate engagement with NGOs, but noted that this competence must be coupled with career incentives in order to be effective:

The county government officials believe that without connections (*guanxi*), they won't get promoted, and their salary will be the same whether or not they do extra work. By doing additional things, they also run the risk of making mistakes and getting demoted, so they dislike this system. They may have the ability to be competent, but not the

²⁶ Interview Y155, NGO, Staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

²⁷ Interview H259, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August, 2010.

motivation. One of the government officials told me that “as an official, its not what I say that goes, neither is it what the common people say that goes (*dangguan bushi wo shuode suan, ye bushi laobaixing shuode suan*).” So it’s very hard to observe their true abilities. We met with one Township Deputy Director in the town. He was very capable and wanted to do many things when he first came [to this post], and supported us a lot. Then, after a couple years, he saw that he was just staying in the same place, that he didn’t get promoted and wasn’t going anywhere, so he became more negative towards us.²⁸

Another environmental NGO founder was concerned that the prevalence of *guanxi* networks compromised meritocratic appointments in the government departments of his locality:

Some officials are quite capable, but now there are also some *guanxi* networks, which prevent capable people from entering government. Those people with good family backgrounds and strong *guanxi* can go work in government. One can say that maybe seventy percent of them are quite competent.²⁹

Interviewees mentioned that levels of competence can also vary across departments, generations, administrative levels and regions. According to one NGO founder: ‘Different departments vary. A few people are very competent, but a large proportion of officials are average.’³⁰ In another locality, interviewees evaluated certain government agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Bureau, as being particularly effective:

Certain government programs are carried out very effectively. For example, there is a social poverty alleviation program and an environmental program that restores agricultural land to forest. They carry out these projects with full force (*lidu tebie da*) and quite soundly (*zuode bijiao zhashi*), especially in relation to environmental protection. In the past few years, they have done a lot of planting and care for forestry, and have achieved certain results.³¹

Different generations or intakes of government employees also vary in competence: ‘The individual working ability of officials varies. Each generation (*jie*) is different, there will be

²⁸ Interview Y155, NGO, Staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

²⁹ Interview Y132, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

³⁰ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

³¹ Interview N238, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

some people who are not as strong in their working ability or organizational skills, but this is very normal, and the common people have a positive assessment of the new leaders.³²

Competence can also vary across administrative levels: ‘Certain specific departments and some of the high-level officials have an awareness that can match that of the Party Secretary. But officials at the lower level have insufficient awareness and implementation capacity (*zhixing li*). They recognize the policy, but they have their own, different, understanding of it.’³³

Interviews confirmed that competent officials, where they exist, can act as willing and able counterparts to grassroots NGOs in reciprocal engagement. At the same time, as mentioned in the previous chapter, a lack of official competence or expertise in specific areas can also serve as a motivating factor for officials to seek engagement with grassroots NGOs.

4.1.4 Engaged

Interviewees were generally in agreement about the lack of engagement between government departments and the communities they served. One NGO founder said of municipal-level officials: ‘As high-level officials, they don’t have enough interaction or participation with the common people. Their energy is limited, they have to solve some superficial and practical problems.’³⁴ Another NGO founder criticized insufficient effort to engage with local communities on the part of officials:

I think in this area the local government has not done enough. Usually the government officials work in their office. They have made some efforts to communicate with local people, but these efforts are quite superficial, and not very concrete (*shixu*). If the media reports on something, they may come out and investigate the situation, but I think they are generally quite weak in this respect.³⁵

³² Interview N236, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

³³ Interview N142, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Interview Y132, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

Particularly in rural areas, there was a sense that government officials are isolated and insulated from the realities of rural inhabitants. According to one rural NGO founder: “They are somewhat lacking in this area...When I am in the rural areas, the environment and conditions of the villagers are not well understood by the officials, they have little dialogue with the villagers at the grassroots.”³⁶ The founder of another rural NGO felt that:

The government officials are disconnected, because they don’t want to come to the countryside, they don’t have a positive perception of the local people, and some leaders don’t have a good attitude. They look down on you because you are from the village and you don’t receive good assistance because of this. Since it is difficult for them to get a day off, they don’t want to spend it coming out to the rural areas. So they are cut off.³⁷

A few interviewees considered local government to have relatively high levels of engagement with the local population, observing that ‘in the implementation of some of their policies, officials will carry out some relevant investigation and make some inquiries (*xunwen*).’³⁸

Ultimately, it seems that levels of engagement vary widely by type of government department and administrative level. Certain departments are ‘closer to the grassroots,’ such as ‘Women’s Federation, Poverty Alleviation, and village-level departments,’ and ‘will be in closer contact with local people, while higher levels will more isolated.’³⁹ A village head discussed the nature of his engagement with local villagers as follows: ‘I am always together [with the villagers]. We mainly talk about the economy, excess labor (*shengyu laoli*) and other topics. To adjust the structure of production, to encourage the sending of labor outside (*laowu shuchu*), is also part of the government’s work.’⁴⁰ The issues he discussed when probed suggested a focus on the more measurable and economic aspects of his portfolio of concerns, with less emphasis on other services or the more complex issues faced by villagers.

³⁶ Interview N238, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

³⁷ Interview Y229, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

³⁸ Interview N236, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

³⁹ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁴⁰ Interview NX40, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

While the literature on synergy and the mutual empowerment of state and society, drawing on global case studies, has found the strength of public institutions, specifically the extent to which they are cohesive, competent and engaged, to be an important facilitating factor in the emergence of these relationships, this was a difficult hypothesis to test in the Chinese context. On the one hand, the strength of public institutions in these the first two respects seemed to be relatively high across the six research localities, particularly relative to state actors in some of the case studies in the global literature on state-society synergy. Field research found a common consensus among informants regarding low levels of engagement between local government departments (above the village level) and local populations. However, it is still unclear whether this lack of engagement is, as the literature suggests, an obstacle to positive-sum reciprocal relationships, or whether it can also serve as a rationale for strengthening engagement with the public through engaging with grassroots NGOs.

At the same, time, while there is clearly some variation in the levels of cohesiveness, competence and engagement of government departments, the variation within each locality across departments and even individuals seems so great that meaningful comparison is unlikely within the scope of this study.

4.2 Public Accountability and Political Competitiveness

Studies of cases in which synergetic relationships between state and society have been observed have concluded that ‘political competitiveness seems to have a salutary effect on possibilities for synergy.’⁴¹ The notion of political accountability involves both power relations between the state and its citizens, operationalized through mechanisms such as electoral

⁴¹ Evans, *Government Action, Social Capital and Development: Reviewing the Evidence on Synergy*.

competition, as well as to institutional oversight, checks and balances within the state.⁴² However, the extent to which this condition, as it is typically defined, is present in the localities under consideration in this study is clearly difficult, if not impossible, to gauge in the Chinese one-Party state.

The value of political competitiveness in enhancing synergy is believed to lie in its ability to make what citizens think matter, and thus to make public officials more likely to establish ties with subordinate groups.⁴³ However, a comparative analysis of Russia and China's transition to market economy seems to contradict this hypothesis. While post-Soviet Russia is characterized by a higher degree of political competition than China, the coherent bureaucracy of the Chinese state has enabled it to structure local incentive systems in a way that promotes self-organization and entrepreneurship while Russia's weak administrative apparatus diminished its ability to deliver public goods required for effective economic transition.⁴⁴

A number of caveats have been associated with this condition. First, where synergetic structures and processes are present, it seems that public sector workers on the ground are 'motivated by their desire to realize organizational objectives, as opposed to an interest in strengthening a particular party or faction.'⁴⁵ Also, 'political competitiveness is useful first of all because it contributes to a climate in which citizens count. The effective delivery (or coproduction) of public services is only valued if citizens reactions make a difference in the eyes of government leaders.'⁴⁶ Even in situations where political competitiveness is lacking, there still may be cases in which the satisfaction and well-being of citizens is crucial to both the

⁴² See, for example, G. O'Donnell, "Horizontal Accountability: The Legal Institutionalization of Mistrust," in *Democratic Accountability in Latin America*, eds. S. Mainwaring and C. Welna (Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁴³ Evans, *Government Action, Social Capital and Development: Reviewing the Evidence on Synergy*.

⁴⁴ M. Burawoy, "The State and Economic Involution: Russia through a China Lens."

⁴⁵ Evans, *Government Action, Social Capital and Development: Reviewing the Evidence on Synergy*, 1127.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

motivations of local government officials seeking to realize organizational objectives, gain 'political points' (*zhengji*) or climb the organizational ladder, as well as to continuing state legitimacy. Tsai's work on 'moral standing' gained by local public officials as a motivating force for delivering public goods is one example of how this mechanism can operate even in a context without standard systems of public accountability.⁴⁷

One NGO founder's explanation as to what enables reciprocal engagement between NGOs and government departments illuminates the dynamics that make public accountability a contributing factor:

One [contributing factor] is the organization's point of departure. Ours is to serve development of the local community. The nation's institutions of government also do their work for the common people. They put the common people first. For each locality and area, it generally works for its development, the development of the masses in the locality, because we know that in each place the government is only a servant of the public (*gongpu*), if the common people do not receive development, the whole locality will not develop. Then the government's functions will not be manifested. It also needs some acknowledgement (*renke*), some acceptance, from the common people regarding its work.... We also do things for the common people. This is our connecting point, our point of departure. Maybe our specific objectives are different, but our final goal is the same. And this common interest facilitates cooperation.⁴⁸

NGO interviewees spoke and thought about accountability as: "The degree to which local officials accept and incorporate the opinions or suggestions of the common people under their jurisdiction management..."⁴⁹ Most approved of the extent to which local government leaders were accountable to the public:

I think all these local leaders, in their own duties, want to do some things. Even though some of them engage in corruption or shift funds, when it comes to really doing things, many leaders are very sound (*zhashi*). Of course, corruption is only an individual or occasional phenomenon (*gebie xianxiang*). They have a common principle, which is to work for the common people.

They do [incorporate the suggestions of the common people]. This year the government

⁴⁷ L. L. Tsai, "Solidary Groups, Informal Accountability, and Local Public Goods Provision in Rural China."

⁴⁸ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁴⁹ Interview N236, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

wanted to expand the area where potatoes are planted. This is an issue that was raised by the people, there was a petition to have a large-scale potato-planting area. So the government decided to bring this program to the village. This shows that the government is accepting and incorporating (*caina*) the suggestions of the common people. Also, over in [X] village, it is difficult to access drinking water. Many people went to report this feedback to the government, and two years later the government had a project to bring running water to the village, and from what I know, this project required a very high level of investment, and the number of common people who benefitted was very great.⁵⁰

A village head also mentioned significant pressures on him from villagers, especially with regard to ‘bringing basic infrastructure (*jichu sheshi jianshe*)’ to the village: ‘For example, using machines to plow. Or they are now building new rooms for the school. It’s the county level that chooses [which villages receive these projects] and they choose according to the local needs. Also, they want to see which villages and townships are proactive and positive (*jijixing hao*).’⁵¹ While government officials who are more accountable to their publics are more likely to engage in collaborative engagement with grassroots NGOs, it also seems that active publics, sometimes made more so by the involvement of grassroots NGOs, can enable local officials to secure infrastructure improvement projects for their localities, as well as contribute to their political achievements (*zhengji*).

Several interviewees implied that local leaders were—and should be—accountable to the long-term interests of the collectivity, rather than subject to individual interests. This reasoning diverges from more individualistic or constituency-based conceptions of accountability:

The common people, to some extent, enjoy the right to know how the policy is. For example...when the government wants to plant trees in their fields or put up greenhouse canopies, they must first coordinate (*xieshang*) with the villagers to do this if their fields are to be used, and what kind of compensation the farmers will receive.... They will respect the wishes of local villagers, sometimes. Sometimes, because they have to consider the development of the whole, they will not accept a portion of these suggestions. They will make decisions and act according to the will of the majority of the public. Also, the local people don’t really think in terms of long-term or general development, their perspective is quite narrow, so leaders will have a longer-term view.

⁵⁰ Interview N238, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

⁵¹ Interview N235, Government, village head. Ningxia, June 2010.

When leaders make their policies, they will ask for opinions and suggestions (*zhengqu yixie yijian*) as a reference, and take into account people's ideas in implementing their policies.

The common people are the main group of people who evaluate their [local government officials'] work, whether this government official is doing well or doing poorly. I don't know about their own evaluation (*pingjia*) system, or the details of their work internally. The common people will evaluate according to their own perspective. If the policy is conflicts with my interests I will say this government is very bad, but if this policy happens to be beneficial to me, I will say this government is very good. So their evaluations are subjective, not objective, because they don't see or understand the details (*xijie*) of the government's work, they only see the things that are directly related to themselves.⁵²

Other interviewees agreed that government leaders must sometimes be accountable, not to individual interests, but to the general and long-term interests of the public. With regard to a government program aiming to restore farmland to forest, which met with much resistance from villagers, but which was ultimately judged to be in the long-term interests of sustainability in the drought-stricken region, an NGO interviewee said:

The common people don't have any influence [on how local leaders are evaluated]. It depends, some villages have thirty to forty families, among these, some individuals will have an influence. They [government] will consult with these people. They may not adopt the opinions of some villagers because they are looking at the bigger picture. The villagers consider only their own immediate gain (*yanqiande liyi*), their individual gain, but the government will think about the collective, or the direction of development. So though some people oppose it quite strongly, the Restoring Agricultural Land to Forest (*tuigeng huanlin*) program has still gone forward (*baishi zuoxiaqu le*) nonetheless.⁵³

Consistent with the above interviewee's suggestion, others also believed that local officials were primarily accountable to a local elite, rather than the common people:

It depends on the people [expressing the opinion]. If they have someone more persuasive (*shuofuli genggao de ren*) on their side, they [government] may listen. But if they are all just ordinary people, the government may not actually consider it. A persuasive person, for example, is one who used to be in government when they were young, and is now an old cadre (*laoganbu*) in the village. Then he will be listened to.⁵⁴

A significant number of interviewees emphasized the importance of bureaucratic

⁵² Interview N236, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

⁵³ Interview N237, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

⁵⁴ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

careerism in channels of accountability: ‘the motivation for most government officials is securing their own position and getting promoted. I think a small portion of government officials are for the people and for local development. But most think this is just a job, and in this job they have to constantly move up.’⁵⁵ Interviewees observed that local officials are primarily accountable to higher ups:

Usually things are very top down. Superiors assign local leaders certain tasks, and they complete them. As for the voices of the common people, a portion of them will be adopted (*caina*). On the one hand, it may be that their [local leaders’] awareness (*yishi*) is not yet very strong, and on the other they also don’t have the methods or channels to do this. They don’t know how to receive the common people’s voices and help them resolve issues. I think this is an area in which they are weak—helping to do things for the common people.⁵⁶

The above interviewee attributes the weakness of public accountability to the lack of awareness among local officials as well as underdeveloped institutional channels that can allow for public demands to be communicated to or adopted by local officials. Another interviewee, however, maintained that while local officials are primarily accountable to higher-ups, accountability to the public is incorporated into cadre evaluation systems in such a way that the peoples’ opinions do matter:

[Local leaders’ work] is primarily directed by documents sent from above to lower levels. Evaluation is also conducted by the higher levels, but this evaluation also includes the participation of the common people, as well as the evaluation of those who are directly in charge of or supervising the work and the higher leaders. Their evaluation system is very comprehensive (*wanshan*). It includes on-site inspections, sometimes [senior leaders] visit and inquire into the feedback of the common people, conduct quality inspections, and gauge the satisfaction levels of the common people. At least that’s the way things are done here.⁵⁷

Local leaders receive positive evaluations to the extent that their actions promote public interests:

[The local leaders’] point of departure is the vital interests of the peasants (*nongmin de*

⁵⁵ Interview Y132, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Interview N238, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

qieshen liyi): drinking water, roads, and infrastructure for the peasants. In recent years, the people's primary source of income has been potatoes, but if the roads are poor, they can't sell the potatoes... The higher-level leaders will evaluate local leaders based on the extent to which the people benefit from it (*shouyi chengdu*). If they want to build a road, how effective is it? What help will the road bring to the people? And after the road is built, what kinds of projects can be brought in? For example, it may lead to the construction of a potato processing plant, or a wind farm. This is the criteria according to which their work will be evaluated.⁵⁸

As the above examples and excerpts have shown, the notion of political accountability, as applied in the Chinese context, is a complex one. Determining the extent to which local officials are accountable involves making judgments about which of the interests of a diverse public local officials are to promote, to what extent they are incentivized to be accountable by evaluation within the government hierarchy, how they are held responsible for the consequences of their actions, and the individuals and channels through which public demands are incorporated into local policy and practice. In this section, interviewees seemed to agree that local officials tended to be accountable to long-term, collective interests, sometimes at the expense of individual rights, and to other government agencies through internal mechanisms of accountability.

Finally, scholars have pointed to other facilitating conditions that can allow for reciprocal relationships between state and society even in the absence of political competitiveness: 'the presence of engaged public agencies may allow synergy to proceed in concrete cases independently of incentives generated by political competition.'⁵⁹ It has also been noted that in many cases of synergy described in the literature, officials 'share a relative disinterest in contributing to the political advantage of particular political factions.'⁶⁰ Thus, the importance of official motivations and its significance to the establishment of positive-sum reciprocal engagement will be further explored in the following section.

⁵⁸ Interview N237, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

⁵⁹ Evans, *Government Action, Social Capital and Development: Reviewing the Evidence on Synergy*, 1127.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

4.3 Individual Officials' Agency and Motivation

As suggested elsewhere in this dissertation, local officials' behavior with respect to grassroots NGOs varies widely and is subject to a number of environmental and structural forces as well as the motivations of individual officials. Institutions prescribe rules about what actions are required, prohibited and permitted,⁶¹ but individual behavior with respect to those rules depends on the motivations of agents. Both pecuniary and non-pecuniary motivations can be significant in determining individual behavior.⁶² Motivations can be 'produced endogenously within social networks or groups...through conventions, moral rules, or social norms, social networks or groups create a mixture of moral and instrumental rewards and benefits that motivate local officials' to behave in a certain way.⁶³ Group dynamics can give rise to communal consciousness, solidarity and belonging, transforming individuals from 'self' to 'collective-oriented' actors,⁶⁴ and create informal mechanisms of accountability even in the absence of personal pecuniary or instrumental gains.⁶⁵ Finally, theories of social exchange and collective action present the potential to gain the future cooperation of other members of a group as a motivating factor.⁶⁶

The dominance of theories that emphasize rational calculation in the field of politics results in a tendency to greatly oversimplify human motivation, particularly in scholarly treatment of Chinese government officials. This means, for example, that an individual

⁶¹ E. Ostrom, *Understanding Institutional Diversity* (Princeton Univ Pr 2005), 18.

⁶² J. Chen and N. Huhe, "Social Networks, Informal Accountability, and Public Goods Provision in Rural China: A Reassessment," (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., September 2, 2010).

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ M. I. Lichbach, *The Cooperator's Dilemma* (Univ of Michigan Pr, 1996).

⁶⁵ Tsai, *Solidary Groups, Informal Accountability, and Local Public Goods Provision in Rural China*.

⁶⁶ J. Chen and N. Huhe, "Social Networks, Informal Accountability, and Public Goods Provision in Rural China: A Reassessment."

official's decision to support the work of a grassroots NGO must be explained in terms of either the personal benefit such an official may receive for taking action on behalf of the NGO, or in terms of increased opportunities for career advancement, or out of a desire to facilitate monitoring and eventual cooptation of the organization, and so on. As many interviewees in this study suggest, however, officials are also sometimes motivated by their personal likes or dislikes of the NGO representatives they encounter, by their desire to contribute to the development of the locality, or simply by a need to do what seems right and moral. Rather than judging the explanations they put forward as naïve, or reinterpreting them to fit a rational calculation, I chose to see them as providing a fuller and richer interpretation of human motivation. Interviewees reflect a more complex reality in which individuals explain their actions within a number of different 'registers', including a self-interest register, a career register, a moral responsibility register, and a register that reflects a desire to do something for the people and the nation.

For example, consistent with many analyses of Chinese state-NGO relations, local state actors are said to engage with NGOs 'under the guise that they can assist the state's efforts in promoting harmonious development among its constituents and, in a meta-sense, to partially ensure that forms of dissidence do not escalate due to unbalanced development among its constituents.'⁶⁷ While such an interpretation does highlight an important facet of officials' potential motivations, it provides an unbalanced perspective and does not allow much room for other explanatory factors that could paint a more accurate picture.

As can be seen from the language used by interviewees in this study, the way both NGOs and local officials discuss official behavior and motivation is nuanced. They demonstrated the existence of a sophisticated discourse that encompasses a wide range of

⁶⁷ J.Hsu, R. Hasmath, "The rise and impact of the local state on the NGO sector," in *The Chinese Corporatist State: Adaptation, survival and resistance*, eds J.Hsu, R. Hasmath (London: Routledge, 2013), 133.

registers in which official actions can be expressed and understood. This discourse is politically savvy, but can also be genuinely idealistic.

4.3.1 Reformists

The literature on the emergence of synergetic relationships between state and society suggests that the presence of ‘reformists’ can facilitate such relationships. ‘Reformists’ are public servants in government agencies who ‘harbor visions of changing the societies they govern’ and who build synergistic ties with civil society even ‘at some risk to their own positions within the government.’⁶⁸ Reformists are motivated by the collective good, rather than purely motivated by self-interested- career benefit or material gain. They are competent and can take initiative. These enlightened leaders are open minded rather than conservative.

Focusing attention on these actors can avoid the implicit assumption among civil society theorists and practitioners:

[T]hat ‘the state is the enemy.’ The state may often be the enemy, but only in exceptional circumstances is it monolithically the enemy. Even in relatively authoritarian regimes, alliances with ‘reformists’ within the state can offer resources to popular organizations that are unavailable anywhere else. The implications for ‘reformists’ working with or inside governments are, as we would expect, complementary. The image of the good bureaucrat - carefully insulated from constituents - has its usefulness, but openness to the role of the ‘coproducer,’ whether of sewer systems or social capital, may be the best way to increase effectiveness and ultimately the best way to preserve the integrity of increasingly besieged public institutions.⁶⁹

Scholarship also suggests that such actors do exist in the Chinese case—Mertha’s ‘policy entrepreneurs’⁷⁰ and Chung’s ‘pioneers’ and ‘resisters’⁷¹ are some examples—and that the roles they play are strikingly similar to Fox’s ‘reformists.’

⁶⁸ Evans, *Government Action, Social Capital and Development: Reviewing the Evidence on Synergy*, 1128.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ A. Mertha, *China's Water Warriors: Citizen Action and Policy Change* (Cornell University Press, 2008).

⁷¹ J. H. Chung, *Central Control and Local Discretion in China: Leadership and Implementation during Post-Mao Decollectivization* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

Perhaps because of the scope of individual agency allocated to officials within public institutions, the characteristics of individual officials seemed much more relevant to the building of positive-sum reciprocal engagement than the organizational characteristics of government institutions as a whole. Both NGO and government interviewees linked the establishment of positive-sum reciprocal engagement to the existence and support of a certain kind of official. At the core of the notion of this identity of the official is a certain kind of collective-mindedness, as distinct from self-interestedness. One environmental NGO founder described this distinction and identified it as the critical determining factor in the establishment of reciprocal engagement:

The main determinant of success is the quality or character (*suzhi*) of the local leader. For example, some local leaders are always thinking in their hearts about the development of the villagers, and how to do things for them. They are doers, who make a great effort to help the villagers and consider their needs. When we dialogue with these leaders about the program, it is very relaxed and happy, and they support us very much. And, when discussing cooperation, if we want to train the villagers during the agricultural off-season, they are very willing.

But this kind of person is a very small proportion of the total. Most village or township-level leaders think: “For me to cooperate with you, there must be some benefit for me.” It is as though this matter is something *they* are doing for *us*. They have gotten the relationships backwards (*bazhege guanxi nongfanle*). They think “Oh, I am handling this matter for you, you must give me some benefit.” They don’t see it from the angle of their own problems, but as though what we are doing is not for the benefit of the villagers, but for our own benefit.⁷²

Several NGO interviewees believed that potential reciprocal engagement can be obstructed by self-interested officials or officials who have become accustomed to a certain way of thinking about or a certain attitude towards what they are entitled to. Engaging with local NGOs almost never falls within the formal scope of officials work (except for Civil Affairs Bureaus), and is seen as an additional or extra responsibility, for which some officials expect rewards or material benefit. A rural environmental NGO founder said of these officials:

⁷² Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

“Their motive is their own benefit. They only care about themselves. For example, they expect rewards for doing things: “Stuffed pancakes don’t fall from the sky! (*tianxia bubui diaoxia xianbing*)””⁷³

International and government organized NGOs that have faced these expectations and taken them as given ‘common practice’ deal with them by paying ‘coordination fees’ to collaborating government departments, as well as offering payments to each individual participating in technical or capacity building training programs. These payments are ostensibly meant to cover the daily income farmers lose by participating in training, but for many farmers, have become an income-generating activity in themselves:

Each leader’s methods (*banshi fangfa*) and style (*banshi fengge*) is different. Many of the leaders we contacted before were like this, they would think: “If our villagers attend the training, is there some kind of allowance (*buzhu*), do you give money or not? If there is money, we would one hundred percent be able to organize the people (*zuzhi daoren*). If there is no money, then there’s nothing we can do (*meibanfa*).” So it’s all related to money. To run such a program, you need to offer money. That’s what a lot of people think.⁷⁴

As subsequent chapters will show, this study finds that associational experience in a locality tended to enhance the possibility of reciprocal engagement.⁷⁵ Ironically, however, associational experience in the form of resource-rich official or international NGOs working in the locality can also produce expectations of material benefit for local officials and for program participants. NGO interviewees consistently indicated that both officials and villagers in more remote localities, though poorer, did not have such expectations and were, in fact, willing to

⁷³ This expression means something similar to the English expression: ‘There’s no such thing as a free lunch.’ Interview Y229, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁷⁴ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁷⁵ See *Chapter 7* for more details.

sacrifice time, energy and potential income for the chance to participate in such training and ‘receive precious knowledge.’⁷⁶

Expectations of material benefit on the part of officials presented significant obstacles to grassroots NGOs such as those included in this study, who do not have the budgets or financial resources to cover such payments as well as operational costs. Even organizations that do have such funds, however, tend to find that money doesn’t always solve the problem. Though it may temporarily pave the way for NGOs to carry out their activities of choice, the ‘collaborating’ officials on the receiving end of these payments take the funds, do the job as expected of them, and things go back to the way they were before when the contract is up. This kind of cooperation is distinct from true positive-sum reciprocal engagement, which requires the existence of initiative and influence on both sides. It becomes a transactional, rather than a truly collaborative and reciprocal relationship. Similarly, as mentioned briefly in *Chapter 3*, government contracting of NGO services is not to be confused with the notion reciprocal engagement presented in this study.

While particularly self-interested local officials can prove to be obstacles to reciprocal engagement, this problem can be exacerbated if the NGO in question does not possess the language to explain how the proposed collaboration benefits the people of the locality and to appeal to officials’ potential altruism, or to explain how it can benefit their own career prospects and political credit (*zhengji*). Interviewees recognized that these two motivations were not mutually exclusive and could coexist:

Their [government officials’] main motivation is to serve the local people, and the development of local people. What will motivate them to do their work well? This has two aspects. One motivation is to serve the people, that’s the main motivation. The other is their promotion (*shengzhi, jinsheng*). Because in this system, if you do well in a small place, serve well and achieve positive work results (*gongzuo chengji*), you will be

⁷⁶ Interview with a program participant included a video created by an NGO about the effects of its program with rural women.

promoted to serve in a higher office in a larger place. Of course, in going to a larger environment to work, you will experience a great improvement in many respects, such as your salary and your own living conditions. Your status (*shenfen*) and position (*dimez*) will all change. The administrative level (*jibie*) of the cadre will change.⁷⁷

Thus, for many NGO interviewees, the extent to which local officials are ‘collective-minded’ can be a determining factor in the emergence of positive-sum reciprocal engagement. The potential for engagement depends on officials’ character and ideas, and the balance of careerism and concern for the collective good.⁷⁸ It also ‘depends on the consciousness (*yishi*) of the government officials, as well as the organization’s impetus (*chufa dian*): whether or not they are genuinely and practically (*shishiizai*) doing things.’⁷⁹ Another NGO founder agreed that:

I think it’s a question of people. Because government is relatively strong and NGOs are relatively weak, so it depends on how they see NGOs. This, in turn, depends on their own worries, and whether the NGO will help their work. So there is no standard...it depends on people, you have to understand the other party.⁸⁰

Several interviewees suggested that while a concern for the public good genuinely motivates government officials, it may be linked to a certain generation of leaders, many of whom are due to retire. One NGO founder discussed the various motivations of the local leaders with whom he has come into contact:

For example, those who took the civil service exams during the past few years entered government because they would get a good salary, not because they would be able to serve people or do meaningful work. Before that, five or ten years ago, the older generation, they had a truly hardworking and hardship-enduring spirit (*chikunailao de jingshen*) and were very down-to-earth, sincere and honest (*pushi*). They would use their government position to really consider the actual problems of the common people and villagers. The young cadres these days are quite conflicted because often, as young people, they have very little actual experience, and they look down on the peasants. They think, “I got in, I have a job, I have an iron rice bowl.” They don’t really consider anything that comes after that, the meaningful things. Then the older government officials retire, and the younger ones want to take their positions. But they have so little experience, they are not accustomed to and do not have the skills necessary for that

⁷⁷ Interview N236, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

⁷⁸ Interview H259, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August, 2010.

⁷⁹ Interview N142, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

⁸⁰ Interview Y250, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, July 2010.

position or field. They are also lacking in humility. They are subjective, they act however they wish, but are often lacking the spirit of responsibility.⁸¹

Another NGO director saw a similar divergence in the motivations of older and younger officials with respect to their commitment to the public good:

The ones [leaders] that I've come into contact with, I think the older ones, who are about forty or fifty years old, they really want to do things for the common people, because they are from the generation of Mao Zedong. They are almost retired and it's not worth it for them to pursue official positions (*guanwei*), so they want to do something meaningful (*zuodian shi*). The young ones, on the other hand, just want to "get promoted and get rich" (*shengguan facai*). One of the local township officials in this area said: "Whatever you do is alright, as long as you don't get in the way of my 'getting promoted and getting rich.'" ⁸²

In addition to being motivated by a concern for the public good, reformists who can facilitate reciprocal engagement between grassroots NGOs and government agencies should also have a certain amount of influence:

Government departments are organized hierarchically, from the top down. It is the cadres at the grassroots who have direct contact with the villagers, who can see that our program is indeed effective and helpful to the villagers. They are able to personally experience the value and utility of our program. For what these grassroots cadres have seen, understood and grasped to be reported to higher levels, will depend on the attitude of the higher leaders. If their attitude is proper and correct (*duanzheng de*), they say "This is indeed a good thing, I have time, I will familiarize myself with it." If the higher leader's attitude or approach...is not wholeheartedly concerned with serving the people, or their attitude is negative, then this information won't really go anywhere, and will lie dormant until another person discovers that this situation in the village is indeed real. Because society is very complex; they are accustomed to a method of communicating commands from top to bottom. They are not used to knowledge being transmitted from bottom to top.

At the same time, you also have to look at the ability of the grassroots leader who is doing the reporting, and how he is viewed by his superiors. He should be competent in his ability, have influence in the locality. When he speaks, people feel they can believe him, he is trusted. If this grassroots leader is only ordinary, or is not paid much attention to, or when he talks people don't tend to believe him...this depends very much on people's internal communication methods.⁸³

⁸¹ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁸² Interview Y155, NGO, Staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

⁸³ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

The founder of an educational NGO described how one such enlightened and influential leader facilitated reciprocal engagement with the local education bureau in the initial stages of the NGO's establishment:

We went to [X] municipal Education Bureau because I already knew of the director from my relatives, and had heard that he was very enlightened and had initiated many reforms. He used to be the principal of [a local] middle school, and had created a very participatory and explorative atmosphere there, in which students were encouraged to ask questions and to participate. He asked me where we want to go, and I said [Y] county because it is [my hometown and] the place I know best. He supported us from the beginning. He looked at our materials and asked a few questions about our methods and goals. The [X] county Education Bureau also supported us from the beginning, but this was mostly because of the higher-level director's support, because he is very influential.⁸⁴

In addition to being motivated by the collective good, and sometimes influential, reformists are competent and willing to take initiative, particularly in the face of ambiguity. A Civil Affairs Bureau official in charge of NGO management suggested that these qualities in officials are important in allowing engagement with NGOs:

This depends on the competence of the people in this field. There are many policies relating to this. But if they [officials] are not familiar with the policies, they won't be able to let go (*fangshou*) and do it well. Because the central government doesn't provide financial support [for anything relating to working with NGOs]. [This locality] has been at the forefront of this work, because we attend many training courses, and we study these laws online. If you are only able to deal with it passively (*beidong yingfu*), if you are not clear about the laws, you can't do your work well.

Actually it is very hazy, because [the NGO field] only started in 1998, so many things are still unclear. There is too large a space. So much of our work is very open, it depends on the situation and has special characteristics. In such cases, we look at other departments' legislation (*bumen fagui*). For example, if the organization is working in the field of education, we look up the law relating to education development. But if you don't look up these laws you will never know.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Interview H259, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August, 2010.

⁸⁵ Interview Y156, Government, director. Yunnan, July 2010.

In seeking engagement with government, NGOs also seek ‘individuals who are likeminded.’⁸⁶ The closeness of the relationship between the two can depend on the extent to which mutual understanding can be achieved:

We should let the government know what we are doing and what our purpose is. Then, if we find some individuals in government with whom there can be mutual understanding, and our goals and intentions are similar, then we should have a very close connection with them and do things together. In this way the two parties can help each other. If we have not found these kinds of individuals or these kinds of relationships, then, at least, our responsibility is to keep them informed of whatever we do, what we are doing and what our purpose is. And within the space that the law permits, they should allow us enough freedom to do what we want to do.⁸⁷

The establishment of ‘mutual understanding’ can also depend, to some extent, on officials who can be open-minded. These officials ‘let you do things and experiment, and then see what the next step is. Even this is an open-minded attitude, since they are willing to let you try.’⁸⁸ An environmental NGO director shared her organization’s conclusion that regional differences in engagement with government can depend on whether local officials are open-minded or have a more conservative mindset:

We also talked about this question in private (*sidixia*), though we didn’t do research on it. One [reason for this variation] is that the government doesn’t understand these people’s organizations because they are used to operating within a model where “What I say goes, I am the Number One (*wo shuode suan, wo laoda*)”, and if an organization comes in which does what it wants, the government officials’ first reaction will be to reject this. Also, they believe that stability is of primary importance. If a new element comes in and interferes, their stability is threatened. In the places where it [engagement] works, it has a lot to do with the individuals. Some officials are very open and enlightened (*kaiming*), but if they are conservative it is more difficult.⁸⁹

Risk and Responsibility

The question of how open or conservative officials are is closely related to their willingness to bear risks. One NGO founder said, with regard to government’s willingness to engage with

⁸⁶ Interview Y132, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Interview H259, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August, 2010.

⁸⁹ Interview Y155, NGO, Staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

NGOs: ‘I think this has to do with the personal characteristics of the government officials...For [X locality], the officials said “There is no way we can give you a certificate (*zhengming*), because if a problem comes up, we can’t take on the responsibility.” They say it very directly.’⁹⁰ Another NGO director’s explanation of the difference between the willing support of some departments towards local NGOs and the rejection of others was as follows:

The difference is due to China’s national conditions (*guoqing*).... In China things are different from other places. Many things are very limited. Last month there were a few students from [X] University who came to volunteer as tutors for the summer. I contacted the Youth Party Committee (*tuannwei*) and Education Party Committee (*jiaowei*), and they didn’t support this because these students are outside of school and they thought there would be safety concerns. They were worried about something going wrong (*chushi*), they didn’t want to take on the responsibility. The national circumstances limit and prevents them from doing this kind of thing. For example, if I had been able to organize this tutoring project and one of the students got in trouble, everyone would be in trouble. So they are not willing to take on the responsibility, they are not like our volunteers who think about things simply, because they are in a different position.⁹¹

The themes of risk and responsibility in official mindsets were extremely common among interviewees. The founder of a new NGO speculated about the reasons that local government had thus far met the organization with suspicion and rejection: ‘Maybe it will be a burden for them. For example, if something goes wrong (*chule shenme shiqing*) they have to take responsibility. They don’t want to take this responsibility.’⁹²

One of the most frequent formulations describing official calculations of risk and responsibility, referred to by a significant number of interviewees was the saying ‘one additional matter is not as good as one less matter’ (*duoyishi buru shaoyishi*). For local officials, the benefit of a potentially good thing is worth less than the risk of one risky thing that could potentially go wrong:

From the government’s perspective, as soon as there is a problem (*chuwenti*), they have to get involved, manage it (*guan*) and supervise this matter. So they are very afraid. If no

⁹⁰ Interview H165, NGO, founder director. Hebei, August 2010.

⁹¹ Interview H263, NGO, deputy director. Hebei, August 2010.

⁹² Interview Y229, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

problem arises, it doesn't matter, but as soon as there is a problem, then any issue create trouble for the government and they will have to come show their face. Many people have a kind of ideology, that for me to have one additional matter is not as good as having one less matter to deal with (*wo duoyishi buru shaoyishi*), which means, "I know undoubtedly that this is a good thing, but I am afraid to bring trouble on myself (*gei ziji re mafen*), so I run away."⁹³

Another NGO founder used the same formulation to distinguish between such risk-averse officials and reformists who are forward-thinking and willing to take risks, and thus contribute to the emergence of reciprocal engagement:

It also depends on the quality or character (*suzhi*) and standard (*shuiping*) of the leaders. Some officials are sensitive and keep up with new things (*minggan, genjin xinshi*), but a few believe "one more thing is not as good as one less thing" (*duoyishi buru shaoyishi*). Some, if they can either choose to approve or not to approve something, will choose to approve it, while others will do the opposite. It depends on the person.⁹⁴

The nature of risk and responsibility faced by officials is a product of structural forces at work within China's vast and shifting administrative system. However, officials exercise agency in negotiating the delicate balance between risk and responsibility.

Pushing Off Decisions

Another manifestation of aversion to risk among government officials involves pushing the decision to another department, perhaps to avoid making a decision themselves, but also perhaps to see how other departments react. Local government officials who are approached by NGOs for their support and do not want to give their support outright may push the decision horizontally, to other departments, or vertically, up the administrative ladder.

The founder of an environmental organization working with rural women in a highly sensitive rural area was bounced back and forth between different departments horizontally, and was ultimately asked to seek approval from a higher authority. The organization had been operating in the area for over a year, but the founder had been afraid to make contact with

⁹³ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁹⁴ Interview Y134, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, May 2010.

county-level officials. When her sister came home for a visit, she offered to introduce the NGO founder to the principal of the county Communist Party School. He was interested in her work and arranged for her to see the vice-director of the county government Standing Committee. After asking for materials and a draft of a cooperation agreement, the vice-director sent her to go and see the county Women's Federation, who, in turn, told her to seek approval from another department: 'the Women's Federation didn't say they won't cooperate with me, but they said I have to go through the Provincial Women's Federation. So we are still trying.'⁹⁵

From my own observations in the field, the strategy of pushing decisions up the administrative ladder is especially common in situations where officials are hesitant to make the decision independently. Several NGOs that began working in a locality and sought out a local government department were told that they have to gain approval from municipal, provincial or even central government departments, even though in practice, this is not the case.⁹⁶

Clearly, risk-averse officials are most comfortable supporting an endeavor when higher level officials give their blessing, thus the conventional wisdom among NGOs seeking approval from government for activities or registration that 'you have to go to the top' (*yiding yaozhaoyibashou*). A village level official who supported an environmental NGO conducting training in his village suggested that such decisions should be made by higher-level officials. Ideally, in such situations, 'the township government recognizes or approves (*renke*) such a matter, and delegates it as a 'work responsibility' (*gongzuo neirong*) in the meeting.'⁹⁷ In reality, it is often increasingly difficult for grassroots NGOs to establish trust and relationships with official

⁹⁵ Interview Y229, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁹⁶ Interestingly, I experienced the same dynamic in the course of fieldwork. When I visited a municipal level government department in a locality in which I encountered less cooperative officials to conduct interviews for this study, I was told to first seek approval from the provincial department office and then return for my interviews.

⁹⁷ Interview N235, Government, village head. Ningxia, June 2010.

departments the higher up the administrative ladder they aim because such departments lack on-the-ground familiarity with local conditions, the work of the NGO and its staff.

The ‘pushing off’ of decisions can also occur horizontally. In such cases, grassroots NGOs are sent on an often-fruitless quest from department to department to seek necessary approvals:

Initially, when we contacted the government, we believed that they could support us. If the government supported it, the villagers would know that this is a good thing. But because of some circumstances, my personal situation [pregnancy], we had very little contact with government. In September of 2009 we went and saw the deputy-director of Poverty Alleviation, and introduced the program, and talked about our hope to achieve their support. But then they said this kind of matter has nothing to do with them (*tamen gen zhefangmian meiguanxi*). They only have the responsibility to solve labor employment. Instead, they advised us to contact the Civil Affairs Bureau. I went twice to the Civil Affairs Bureau, but the bureau chief was in the countryside (*xiangxiang*) during that time, so I never saw him.⁹⁸

No Support, No Opposition

When reciprocal engagement is made possible by the presence of officials who are willing to take risks, these reformists seldom show their support through an immediate and complete endorsement of the NGO or its activities. Instead, the establishment of reciprocal engagement is a long-term process that often begins with nothing more than benign neglect, neutrality, or an opening in which grassroots NGOs can begin to operate. As they carry out action, and as government departments interact with grassroots NGOs over time, they can observe various aspects of these organizations’ work, effectiveness and management:

Because we have not yet established a relationship at the level of dialogue, cooperation and doing things together, their posture is still one of consideration, they don’t oppose—because they know some things about the situation but don’t know everything—and don’t support. They say ‘I need to understand more, I will continue to understand.’ They will ask and find out from different angles (*cong cemian lai liaojie*), and deepen their understanding. This is a very long-term process. It’s not that a new matter appears in front of them and they immediately respond saying ‘I can support this,’ or ‘This is good.’ They need to look at some of the results of action, or the real situation of the villagers, whether it is really feasible or whether there is room for

⁹⁸ Interview N237, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

cooperation. They evaluate, watch and consider many aspects, including our personal ability to implement the program, they will ask whether or not we have the character, the moral standards and the ability required for this kind of program. Because they are considering the next step....a collaborative relationship. But now is still a period of examination. In this process, they have to understand step by step.⁹⁹

To ‘neither support, nor oppose’ often represents the extent of reformists’ initial endorsement, and, in many cases, is tantamount to tacit consent. The majority of NGOs included in this study communicated that they had experienced this withholding of judgment from local officials in relation to their organization’s existence or to the implementation of a certain activity or project that pushed the boundaries of the commonly acceptable.

The founder of an environmental NGO cited this as a common response in ‘dialogue and cooperation’ with government authorities: ‘their attitude is “I neither support, nor oppose,” but we can still go into the village and organize people and carry out some activities.’¹⁰⁰ Another environmental NGO had approached the township government in the initial months of its establishment in order to secure their support in carrying out training in the local village, but received the same response:

The first difficulty was that the township government leader said: “I will neither support, nor interfere (*ganshe*). Just do it yourself, but ensure that it is legal (*hefa*).” Then when I went to the village, I had hoped that the township leaders would let the village leaders know (*da yisheng zhaohu*), which would have made things easier, but this never happened. Then when I actually carried out the training program, many villagers didn’t know about this program and thought it was an anti-government or religious thing.¹⁰¹

The village head in this case evinced a similar attitude in refusing to take on responsibility without standing in the way. He recounted that an NGO staff member ‘came to me saying

⁹⁹ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Interview N273, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, December 2010.

they want to do a training [in our village]. I suggested that you can go ahead and get people, and I can organize the place for you, but I won't get involved in the getting people together.'¹⁰²

The experience of another environmental NGO in the initial stages of its establishment is also demonstrative of this dynamic. When the founder initially approached the township Women's Federation, because of its common interests with the NGO: 'they told me to start operating for now, and then see how the results turn out.' After the NGO had trained some of the rural women in one village, the participants held a 'sharing meeting' and organized a cultural performance and celebration. Local leaders, including village heads and Women's Federation officials, attended the activities:

In the process of participating, they liked what we were doing, but they didn't know what it was. Sometimes I wonder, they have participated in our activity, how do they still not understand what we are doing? They say: "What you are doing is very good," they don't oppose and they don't support. One of the work team leaders (*gongzuo duizhang*) also participated in the course and said it was very good and supported me a lot, but we seldom see each other now. Maybe he is busy. He tells the villagers to continue studying these courses with me.¹⁰³

As the township Women's Federation leaders observed the positive changes taking place among the villagers who had undergone training, such as increased adoption of sustainable agricultural practices and technologies, openness to learning from agricultural extension agents, more harmonious family relationships and decreased physical abuse of children, and a more conscious effort to preserve certain aspects of minority culture, their support and assistance to the grassroots NGO grew. But 'while they support my work, they don't want to take on the responsibility. They say: "If you go to the county-level [officials], don't tell them that I already know of these things."¹⁰⁴ In this case, while the township level officials are willing to extend their support, they are unwilling to risk the displeasure of superiors and higher-level officials if

¹⁰² Interview N235, Government, village head. Ningxia, June 2010.

¹⁰³ Interview Y229, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

this support becomes known. A similar dynamic was observed in other cases, in which Education Bureau or Environmental Protection Bureau officials were willing to extend their support as a ‘personal matter’, without formally endorsing the organization or disclosing its existence to higher authorities.

While this minimal level of backing is not much, when reformists ‘do not support, and do not oppose’ they still provide enough of an opening for capable grassroots NGOs to expand and move forward.

Here they say: ‘This is a good thing, do it for now.’ Then, of course, if it is a negative thing, they will stop it. Otherwise, they allow you to keep experimenting and continue step by step. I think here the general feeling is that they really desire to see what things are like outside, they have never left this place but they want to know about the things that come from the outside environment.¹⁰⁵

Such comments point to the fragility of reciprocal engagement and its dependence on individual agency. It can seem as though such engagement may be easily disturbed and subject to discontinuity in the event of one misstep, or a change in leadership. While this can often be the case, it also seems that positive-sum reciprocal engagement can be developed over time and reach a certain point at which legitimacy has been sufficiently established and engagement is stable enough to withstand changes in leadership or minor crises.

Maintaining Engagement through Official Turnover

One of the common challenges faced by NGOs in their attempts to establish reciprocal relationships with local officials was the instability of such relationships occasioned by turnover in the government hierarchy: ‘The leaders change so frequently. Right when you start to build the relationship, the people change.’¹⁰⁶ The founder of an educational NGO described how the support of one reformist leader for the organization’s work facilitated the

¹⁰⁵ Interview H259, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August, 2010.

¹⁰⁶ Interview H165, NGO, founder director. Hebei, August 2010.

implementation of the program and the cooperation of lower-level administrators, but that this support disappeared when the official was promoted:

A few years ago...the previous leader very much approved of (*rentong*) this way of thinking and of carrying out this program in that place. But later, when the leader changed, the new one didn't really approve of this program, so there was no way to continue cooperation. Also, when the previous leader had approved the project, the...administrators all supported it quite a lot. But after that, their attitude and thinking changed.¹⁰⁷

The founder of an environmental NGO described the critical role played by government reformists in the initial stages of the organization's establishment, and the effect of this official's departure on the organization and its relationship with government:

When we organized activities like Ten Thousand Signatures, or the transportation awareness publicity campaign, we would coordinate with relevant government department, usually the Environmental Protection Bureau. Initially, by holding activities in the local area, we were allowing the local government to see what we are doing and beginning to interact with them. After about a year, we were able to register. We had frequent communication with them. At the time, the director of the Environmental Protection Bureau was very open-minded and enlightened (*kaiming*), he was also a scholar, [his philosophy was to] "encourage what should be encouraged" (*gaiguli jin yao guli*). Environmental protection and promotion was our passion (*aihao*), our understanding was satisfactory (*daowe*), and there was a need for such systematic work in the promotion of environmental protection. He thought this was a good thing, so we should do it. He trusted us.

Then, in about 2009, the director of the Environmental Protection Bureau changed. The new director did not give us the same kind of recognition (*renke*), he had a lot of work to do. This is also understandable, if one is lacking in awareness as to the importance of the participation of people's organizations (*minjian zuzhi canyu*), this will have an affect. Since then we haven't really had much contact with other organizations and government departments.¹⁰⁸

While one 'enlightened' leader can facilitate reciprocal engagement at an organizational level, this is not always sufficient. Such relationships need to be sustained over time, and this requires significant and constant effort. The history of previous relationships will also exert an

¹⁰⁷ Interview N236, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

¹⁰⁸ Interview N142, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

effect on relationships with subsequent leaders. The founder of another environmental NGO discussed the maintenance of these relationships over time:

The municipal Party Secretary of [X locality] has changed many times. What he thinks affects what happens here. This will have a great affect on the [X] lake. The way they [different leaders] see the situation [and their approach] varies, and this is harmful to the sustainable development of the lake. The government should have a long-term plan. Each time [the leadership changes], we have to build new relationships with new leaders, it is a lot of trouble. But the new Secretary will always know something about the situation when they come to office and see the existing files and reports, and then they will come to see us.¹⁰⁹

An environmental NGO was able to secure the support of ‘reformist’ officials at the district level by involving them in technical support of villagers that the organization had trained. The founder of the NGO recounts his initial interactions with these officials:

The villagers who had participated in training courses would themselves investigate and explore, and, in this process, they would meet certain challenges and difficulties, such as agricultural and cultivation technical problems. When they would face these problems we work with them and think about how to solve the problems together. In this process there might be some division of work, they might say “In our group or team, we would like the facilitator to help us contact the relevant departments to give us some specialized training or technical guidance.” So we visited the [X] District Animal Husbandry Bureau and Agriculture Bureau.

When these departments heard about the nature of our program and the characteristics of our work, they were very supportive. Because they usually do quite a lot for the common people (*baixing*), and when they look at our work they think what we are doing, this kind of public benefit work (*gongyi fangmian de dongxi*), is also a kind of development, a promotion or further development of their work. [They said] “When we hear you are doing such a thing we are very surprised, and we are very willing to cooperate with you in this.” So when we discuss cooperation with them, they do not say “I want such and such benefit, or money.” They will say “During times outside of my work time, such as weekends and so on, I can go with you to see the villagers you work with, engage in dialogue with them and assist with some technical guidance.” So they are willing to use their time off to do this.¹¹⁰

This example illustrates the kind of reformists that can become allies of grassroots NGOs. Though the officials in question were responsible for certain geographic areas, they were willing to work outside of their designated geographies to support the NGO’s work, even

¹⁰⁹ Interview H261, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

¹¹⁰ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

during their time off. These district-level officials are contrasted to the township-level officials encountered by the NGO:

These departments are also represented at the township level, as the Agricultural Science Station (*nongkexzhan*) and the Livestock Protection Station (*shoufangzhan*). We have contacted them, but because they are at the township level, once they understood the general situation, they never responded. They said they are working and will get back to us later. But secretly, they contacted the local village head, because they did not really trust us, or they thought, “This person is not even a local villager.” They will think to themselves that there are, indeed, these kinds of problems in the village that need help. But they won’t have direct dialogue with the villagers when we have invited them. They will run to the village head and say: “I heard of such and such situation, does such a situation actually exist? I want to verify.” This has happened several times, where we contact them and they run to the village to verify for themselves.

The district level is more open, because they are a higher administrative level than the township, and the technicians in it are good. I don’t know, maybe we were lucky, because we found senior people in it, above the section (*ke*) level, so they don’t have to report to anyone. They think “These young people need me, so I’ll just go with them.” The leaders under them may have a lot of misgivings, so they will find other channels to verify or talk to the village leader. Often they will use the contact with us as a kind of information, then based on this information they will go and solve the problem themselves, and don’t need us anymore.¹¹¹

As suggested by other interviewees above, this NGO founder suggests that being higher up the administrative ladder allowed officials the latitude and openness to act as ‘reformists.’ This kind of support, extended even under significant risk, is contrasted to the ‘relaxed’ attitude evinced by other departments such as Civil Affairs, which, in contrast to technical or supervisory departments engaged in reciprocal engagement with grassroots NGOs, does not have to bear real risk in showing its support:

We have contacted the municipal Civil Affairs Bureau, when they heard our basic introduction they said it is quite good. But now the policy requirement is to find a sponsoring organization. We just have to get the sponsoring organization agreement approval document (*guakao danwei tongyi piben*) with the stamp, then register. According to this description it is a simple process. But to carry it out...it is very hard to find the sponsoring organization, even though they think there’s not much to it. Because the Civil Affairs Bureau is not one of our supervisory organizations, it doesn’t have to take on any responsibility, it can be very relaxed, it doesn’t have to consider whether what you are doing...it doesn’t have to consider the question of lawfulness. The one who is

¹¹¹ Ibid.

most worried and the most sensitive is our sponsoring organization. Because if we “have a problem” (*chuwenti*), they have to be responsible.¹¹²

‘Time reveals a person’s heart’

While reformists can provide openings, the onus is still on NGOs to prove themselves. For wary local officials, words are not convincing enough, only time will tell whether an organization ‘will have a positive effect on society’ and can be trusted.¹¹³ The founder of another environmental NGO discussed the difficulties faced when she was pursuing the organization’s registration:

There is a historical background. Because of the effect of Falungong at that time, they [local officials] were very cautious about registration. Even now, it’s the same, because for the government to acknowledge people’s organizations will take some time. “Time reveals a person’s heart” (*rijiu jian renxin*)- it takes time to get to know a person.

When I look back now, I think that if I was a government official at that time I wouldn’t have approved my organization either. While “there may be human sensibilities and relationships (*renxin reqing*) between us, but what you will actually do if you register, I don’t know.” It is like a husband and wife that go through a gradual process of ‘polishing’ (*mohe*) [becoming more integrated through extended contact].¹¹⁴

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the extent to which characteristics of the local state are responsible for the emergence of positive-sum reciprocal relationships. Some of the characteristics of strong public institutions, such as cohesiveness, competence and engagement, as well as the existence of public accountability, were explored in their relationships to the emergence of reciprocal engagement, but this study was unable to conclusively determine the extent to which the presence or absence of these characteristics in Chinese research localities contributed to the emergence of reciprocal engagement between grassroots NGOs and the local state.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Interview H261, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

This chapter then presented one of the findings of this study: that the presence of reformists in a given locality can facilitate the emergence of positive-sum reciprocal engagement between grassroots NGOs and government agencies. Reformists juggle a complex calculus of risk and responsibility, and can subtly or quietly provide small openings that allow grassroots NGOs to gain a foothold and build legitimacy over time. Whether grassroots NGOs have the ability to identify potential reformists and take advantage of the openings afforded them is another crucial ingredient in the emergence positive-sum reciprocal engagement, which will be explored in the next chapter.

While individual agency has proved to be of great importance in determining reciprocal outcomes, as always, agency cannot be artificially separated from structural factors. Individual officials who act as reformists operate within a particular structure that fosters certain individual characteristics, allows them certain leeway and enables them to manage risks and responsibilities in a unique way. As one scholar concluded in speculating about the reasons why collaborative relationships between NGOs and government emerge: 'It has to do with the individuals in charge. But the individuals also have to do with the structure, how are these cadres existing?'¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Interview BJ12, Academic, researcher. Beijing, February 2010.

Chapter 5: NGOs and the Emergence of Positive-Sum Reciprocal Engagement

Chapter 4 discussed the effect of the characteristics of and individuals that make up the local state on the emergence of positive-sum reciprocal engagement. This chapter explores the extent to which characteristics of the social organizations in question—grassroots NGOs—are responsible for the creation of reciprocal relationships. This study finds that of the factors posited to contribute to the emergence of reciprocal engagement, those having to do with the characteristics of grassroots NGOs were of greatest significance. These characteristics fall into two broad categories: inherent characteristics of the organization and its members, and organizational capabilities that are developed over time.

5.1 Capabilities

Of these two categories, organizational capabilities proved to be more important in contributing to the emergence of positive-sum reciprocal engagement. Interviewees from two thirds of the organizations included in this study independently identified NGO capabilities, such as the organization's ability to communicate and dialogue with government, elicit the participation of government officials in their projects, and effective program implementation as the most important contributing factors to reciprocal engagement.

One interviewee described this as 'a question of the NGO's self-organization, character and quality, or work (NGO *zishen zuzhi de suzhi wenti huogongzuo wenti*),' which includes how an individual can achieve organizational aims through communication with government departments, and the effectiveness of action carried out. For this interviewee, reciprocal engagement 'depends on the ability of our NGOs themselves. This depends on the ability of

our NGO members. If you can't achieve this, they won't let you do things....¹ Another NGO interviewee agreed that 'if an organization does well and has strength (*liliang da*), it will obtain the support of government. If its strength is diffused, then the government will not support it.'² Another discussed possible reasons for this lack of professionalism:

Practically, there should be more training and selection with regard to existing people's organizations. This time in X [at a conference for environmental NGOs] we saw this firsthand. Some of the new environmental organizations that attended were of low character or quality (*suzhi*). They neither have knowledge nor convictions; they only do this because they can't find other work, or because they just think it is fun. So there aren't many people with both the heart and the experience.³

Several government interviewees also placed an emphasis on grassroots NGOs' skills and professionalism. One official said of local NGOs' competence and organization: "They are making effort, but fail to meet the standard."⁴ Another NGO founder noted that organizational capabilities and program effectiveness take precedence over political leanings or loyalties and personal contacts in facilitating registration and the emergence of reciprocal engagement:

One's own personal political appearance or face (*zhengzhi mianmao*) will have an effect, but the government's main concern is one's own working ability and service effectiveness. Before I registered, I also didn't know anyone from the Civil Affairs Bureau or any of the Poverty Alleviation leaders...It was extremely difficult, and I did have to run back and forth...but I believe that as long as one keeps trying and persists without giving up, one can succeed in registration.⁵

As the above excerpts suggest, there was a general consensus among NGO and government interviewees that NGO abilities are important, but there were also different conceptions of what this means. The themes of dialogue and effectiveness came up particularly often. One educational NGO founder stressed that as an NGO: 'We have to take initiative. If we have some meetings or activities we can invite them [government], or ask them if they have some meetings that

¹ Interview Y134, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, May 2010.

² Interview H168, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, November 2010.

³ Interview H165, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

⁴ Interview H167, Government, staff. Hebei, November 2010.

⁵ Interview N238, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

we can participate in. Another element is that we have to constantly demonstrate to them the fruits of our program.’⁶ The founder of an environmental NGO agreed that: ‘Since we are always working for a positive, a friendly relationship, we usually let them know our goals and ideas and engage in a dialogue. We don’t say a lot, we just try to do our own work well.’⁷

In the remainder of this chapter, a number of NGO capabilities, particularly two of the most important, issue framing and effective action, will be explored.

5.1.1 Framing issues to open spaces

One of the most important capabilities in the emergence of reciprocal engagement, as identified by the majority of NGO interviewees, is the ability to effectively engage in dialogue with government. Specifically, a key factor in the emergence of reciprocal relationships is the existence of at least one staff member possessing the ability to frame issues in a way that opens political spaces to the organization.

Across national contexts, the way NGOs frame issues in working with governments and the public is essential to their ability to influence government and public perceptions.⁸ Models that seek to explain mechanisms of influence on governments emphasize the creation of political space through effective ‘framing’ or presentation of ideas and discourses, particularly in NGO

⁶ Interview H259, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August, 2010.

⁷ Interview H261, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

⁸ See J. L. Campbell, "Institutional Analysis and the Role of Ideas in Political Economy," *Theory and Society* 27, no. 3 (1998), 377-409; A. M. Clark, E. J. Friedman and K. Hochstetler, "The Sovereign Limits of Global Civil Society: A Comparison of NGO Participation in UN World Conferences on the Environment, Human Rights, and Women," *World Politics* (1998), 1-35; J. Joachim, "Framing Issues and Seizing Opportunities: The UN, NGOs, and Women’s Rights" *International Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (2003), 247-274; M. E. Keck and K. Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Cambridge Univ Press, 1998); S. Khagram, J. V. Riker and K. Sikkink, *Restructuring World Politics: Transnational Social Movements, Networks, and Norms*, Vol. 14 (Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2002); D. C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism* (Princeton Univ Pr, 2001).

campaigning.⁹ 'Framing' is the ability to make issues 'comprehensible to target audiences, to attract attention and encourage action, and to 'fit' with favorable institutional venues.'¹⁰ Scholars recognize the need for NGOs to be politically expedient when choosing a frame,¹¹ and to take into account external circumstances or political opportunity structures 'that NGOs both act through and seek to exploit.'¹² Features of political opportunity structures include 'access to spaces of political dialogue and policy making; *influential allies* which NGOs and others in the advocacy network gain; and changes in political alignments and conflicts which create further openings for effective lobbying.'¹³ Within the literature on government-NGO collaboration, framing has been identified as playing an influential role in the building of collaborative relationships and networks. 'Delineating a frame within which agreement can be reached' is an important factor in establishing collaboration, and finding common ground by adjusting communication and the re-construction of social accounts can facilitate cooperation even between disputants.¹⁴

Rights-Based Frames

At the most basic level, social issues are dealt with using different approaches governed by distinct frameworks and assumptions: the same issue can be approached from either a

⁹ See Joachim, "Framing Issues and Seizing Opportunities: The UN, NGOs, and Women's Rights"; Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*; Khagram, Riker and Sikkink, *Restructuring World Politics: Transnational Social Movements, Networks, and Norms*; T. Risse and K. Sikkink, *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism*.

¹⁰ Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*.

¹¹ Joachim, "Framing Issues and Seizing Opportunities: The UN, NGOs, and Women's Rights"; Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*.

¹² P. C. Gilbert, "NGOs and Human Rights Promotion, Socialisation, Framing, and the Case of West Papua" (M.A. in Political Science, University of Caterbury), .

¹³ Joachim, "Framing Issues and Seizing Opportunities: The UN, NGOs, and Women's Rights".

¹⁴ A. Dewulf et al., "Disentangling Approaches to Framing: Mapping the Terrain" (paper presented at IACM 18th Annual Conference, 2005), 3.

rights-based framework or a development framework.¹⁵ NGOs operate in the development field, where trends come and go, and funding and attention follows those trends. A rights-based approach to development is increasingly being promoted by funders and lauded by observers. Chinese NGOs are also affected by these trends, though they see a tension between long-term effectiveness on the one hand and following global trends, gaining publicity and securing funding on the other.

Even within a single broad framework, such as human rights, more specific frames can be selected: 'How the human rights campaign has been framed at both the domestic and international levels has had a major impact on how the human rights agenda has been received by government....Human rights campaign "frames", in other words, are seen as important vehicles of influence.'¹⁶ For example, when NGOs used a frame that paired human rights concerns with nationalist aspirations, they 'severely undermined dialogue that had the potential to alleviate' a dire situation, and that using alternative frames 'based on physical security and subsistence, may be a much more fruitful strategy for the promotion of human rights.'¹⁷

Development practitioners and scholars have begun to use rights-based frames and approaches on the assumption that they can allow actors involved in development to engage with issues of power and reclaim notions of 'participation' and 'empowerment' from neo-liberal instrumentalism.¹⁸ Other commentators caution that the 'strident language of rights' that has developed, particularly in the United States, 'has become the principal language that we use

¹⁵ P. J. Nelson and E. Dorsey, "At the Nexus of Human Rights and Development: New Methods and Strategies of Global NGOs," *World Development* 31, no. 12 (2003), 2013-2026.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ A. Cornwall and C. Nyamu-Musembi, "Putting the 'rights-based approach' to Development into Perspective," *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 8 (2004), 1415-1437.

in public settings to discuss weighty questions of right and wrong, but time and again it proves inadequate, or leads to a standoff of one right against another.’¹⁹

Rights-based frames were not commonly used among the NGOs included in this study. Pragmatic as well as normative arguments are raised against rights-based frames. One scholar concludes that while ‘authentic human rights principles bear many positive qualities and that their achievement is desirable to a large extent, a critical approach remains necessary when enquiring into the effects of *promoting* human rights principles.’²⁰ Another warns that ‘human rights advocacy has the potential to produce both positive and negative consequences.’²¹ Advocating politically sensitive rights ‘may exacerbate the human rights situation and give disincentives to governments to address human rights issues.’

At the same time, the work of many of the grassroots NGOs involved in this study could also be described with reference to their efforts to expand rights, particularly economic and social rights, but also more controversial rights. At the most basic level, the provision of educational, health, or other services are necessary to the achievement of most basic human rights standards.²² ‘Development NGOs, it can be argued, can be classified as human rights organisations because their work, when effective, helps to alleviate breaches of subsistence rights.’²³

The majority of interviewees in this study had a keen awareness the use of more traditional adversarial approaches and the consequences of their utilization, and while they knew of Chinese NGOs adopted such approaches, these tended to be looked down on. An

¹⁹ M. A. Glendon, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse* (Simon and Schuster, 1993).

²⁰ Gilbert, *NGOs and Human Rights Promotion, Socialisation, Framing, and the Case of West Papua*.

²¹ W. F. Fisher, "Doing Good? the Politics and Antipolitics of NGO Practices," *Annual Review of Anthropology* (1997), 442.

²² See T. G. Weiss, L. Gordenker and T. J. Watson Jr, *NGOs, the UN, and Global Governance* (Lynne Rienner Boulder, CO, 1996); P. Van Tuijl, "NGOs and Human Rights: Sources of Justice and Democracy," *Journal of International Affairs* 52 (1999).

²³ Gilbert, *NGOs and Human Rights Promotion, Socialisation, Framing, and the Case of West Papua*.

NGO founder described this approach and its consequences in the following terms: 'Sometimes NGOs will agitate and create a mess for (*raoluan*) the government, because some NGOs do advocacy or tell the local masses to fight for their rights, so the government will be attacked.'²⁴ The founder of another longstanding environmental NGO explained:

The way I understand it, government is like a parent. From public finances to policy, they have this kind of parental status. Government departments are members of this family. If you want to have their support and encouragement you have to 'manage yourself well' (*zuohao ni ziji*). If you are extreme (*pianji*) or radical (*jijin*), someone who doesn't get along with anyone in the family, the parents will try to change you or limit you, because the family is like a small environment....If you don't have good communication skills, when a family member uses a radical attitude (*jijin taidu*) to solve problems it will have negative consequences. In this work, there is no 'me' and 'you' and 'them'. We have different views and these may collide, but we have to find a solution, not to focus on one of us being right and the other wrong.²⁵

As the above interviewee suggests, recognition of the complexity of problems and focus on solutions can facilitate collaboration. Pasquero's study of the development of Canadian environmental policy found that 'when people and organizations were able to demonstrate a deeper appreciation for the interconnected nature of the problems of environmental pollution, they were more likely to collaborate.' Stakeholders in collaboration begin to adopt collective responsibility for problems faced 'instead of blaming particular partners (especially polluters).'

For parties to such collaboration, 'a shared vision and commitment to a supraorganizational goal allowed them to move toward problem solving rather than problem blaming.'²⁶ That many of the NGOs included in this study framed issues with respect to problem solving rather than rights is consistent with Pasquero's conclusion.

Only two of the 22 organizations included in this study had utilized rights-based approaches and dialogue in their dealings with government and with the people. These two

²⁴ Interview Y132, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

²⁵ Interview H261, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

²⁶ J. Pasquero, "Supraorganizational Collaboration: The Canadian Environmental Experiment," *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 27, no. 1 (1991), 38-64, quoted in A. M. Thomson and J. L. Perry, "Collaboration Processes: Inside the Black Box," *Public Administration Review* 66 (2006), 20-32.

organizations, along with six others, were characterized by weak levels of engagement with local government. It is interesting to note that while local government did not interfere directly in the operations of either of these organizations, over time, both organizations made conscious decisions to revise their strategy to a less adversarial and more cooperative approach.

One of these NGOs' description of the issues involved is a good example of framing environmental issues within a rights-based framework. For this environmental NGO, the solutions that present themselves accordingly involve mobilizing people against business and, by extension, government.

It is difficult for us to work because of the negative relationship with government and their negative perception of us. The interests of these government offices are intertwined with business interests....So how can they oppose businesses that pollute?

If you talk about these things, the businesses that are polluting, they think you are meddling in what is not your business (*guan xianshi*) and focusing on the ugly things, making them look bad. The only way is to raise the consciousness of volunteers and common people, they will be the ones to monitor the businesses. If it comes from the common people then it is all right. That's the only way. Breathing clean air and having clean water are rights. When people are aware of these rights they will stand up and fight to protect them. The government is most afraid of trouble or uprisings (*naoshi*), especially in this region. Because Ningxia is a Hui area, it is more sensitive. They are more cautious.

Ultimately, he finds that a rights-based frame creates difficulty by bringing the rights of different parties into conflict with each other, and concludes that the organization will pursue a closer working relationship with government going forward:

There is a fine line that is very hard to maintain (*du hennan baowo*). Where do the rights of one party stop and the other begin? For example, if a thief is trying to steal things, and you try to stop him and harm him, you will be in trouble, even if you were doing a good thing. You can be in trouble for your actions stopping him instead of him being in trouble for his actions. Government can come down on either side. Next year will try to work with government more closely.²⁷

²⁷ Interview N181, Government, staff. Ningxia, December 2010.

Alternate Frames

Other scholars have highlighted the need for NGOs, in a variety of social contexts, to ‘build frames more carefully to fit the situations in which NGOs find themselves.’²⁸ To open political spaces and fit appropriate ‘institutional venues’ may require more ‘conservative frames’ that attempt to ‘minimise the most controversial aspects of an issue in order to mitigate the negative consequences of competing political interests that may overwhelm the political access that NGOs are able to open.’²⁹ In the case of China, as will be shown below, this may include a certain amount of—but is not limited to or equivalent to—self-censorship. The extent to which Chinese NGOs are capable of strategically framing issues is a key factor in determining the emergence of positive sum reciprocal engagement, and by extension, the ability of NGOs to exert significant influence on the formulation and implementation of policy. Examples of how grassroots NGOs make use of alternate frames are provided below.

Language and communication style

One NGO founder describes framing in terms of a ‘conversion’ of language that faithfully represents issues, as it avoids approaches that may be popular outside China but are not conducive to fostering understanding in the other party:

Because you have to think about the traditional culture of China, if you say “civil society” the officials will think: “You think our citizens don’t have rights? You want to advocate (*changdao*)?” So when we enter into cooperative agreements with international organizations, they are preoccupied with people’s rights and citizen awareness. This is fine because this is their framework, but in China, it’s different because of the national conditions and sentiment (*guoqing*). How do you effectively make your NGO’s language become the language that your collaborating partner can internalize? If you don’t have this ability, you will have great difficulty doing things. But if you can describe these ideals in a good way to the local officials, it is very positive. I think this language conversion (*zhuanhua*) is a very important skill. But I think sometimes we lack this skill as NGO staff. For example, with groups such as homosexuals or others, they say: “Our rights are not being protected.” But they need to say this in a way that is not so jarring (*cier*) for government. Otherwise they will feel

²⁸ Gilbert, *NGOs and Human Rights Promotion, Socialisation, Framing, and the Case of West Papua*.

²⁹ Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism*, 217.

you are being very difficult. Yes, we are all born with rights, but you have to say it in a way that they can understand, and they will see what you are doing is the same thing as what they want to do, but you are just choosing different methods. It's about how you reach your goal. When you talk to the leaders, the same thing can be expressed in different ways by different people, and liked by different people. So you have to know how to say it.³⁰

The same interviewee held that reciprocal relationships between local government and NGOs failed to emerge when the NGO's 'communication style makes people suspicious and as a result, those people won't support them.'³¹ Another NGO director similarly maintained that reciprocal engagement depends on

...how one communicates. For example, as we begin to carry out this program, we go and apply to them [government]. First, we have to make them interested and explain to them what we want to do, so that they can support us, and so that we carry out our original plan according to our original ideas. Then we report the situation to them and show them that this action is directed to a common goal. In this way both sides will understand.³²

Several of the most programmatically effective and longstanding organizations in this study were adept at framing their initiatives—ranging from education of sex-workers, environmental lobbying and poverty alleviation—in terms of national policy slogans or the current leadership's focus on building a 'harmonious society' and 'scientific concept of development' to establish legitimacy. A Chinese scholar studying how NGO-government relations showed how the same ideas can be expressed differently in NGO and government discourse:³³

³⁰ Interview Y250, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, July 2010.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Interview Y158, NGO, director. Yunnan, July 2010.

³³ Government terminology on the left of the table was taken from the first two paragraphs of a talk entitled 'Using the spirit of the 17th CPC National Congress to unify thought: Wholly fulfill the important functions social organizations play in the building of modern society' given by Li Xueju, Director of the Ministry of Civil Affairs on November 21st, 2007. The terminology is translated into commonly used terms in NPO language. Official language draws heavily on four-character idioms, while NPO language includes many foreign concepts. Adapted from Y. Li, "*Guanyu Cujin NPO Yu Zhengfu Jianli Hezuo Guanxi De Youxiao Tiaoli Zhi Tanta--Yi Anli Fenxi Wei Zhongxin* (Exploring Effective

Table 5-1: A Comparison of Official Language and NPO Language

Official Language	官方语言	NPO Language	NPO 语言
New era	新时期	Transition period	转型期
Community building	社区建设	Community governance	社区治理
Jointly build	共建	Participate	参与
Vigorously promote	大力推进	Advocate	倡导
Initiate new situations	开创新局面	Social innovation	社会创新
Build commonality of thought	统一思想	Raise citizen awareness	提高公民意识
Clearly understand circumstances	认清形势	Clearly feel needs	摸清需求
Grasp opportunities	抓住机遇	Seek and create opportunities	寻求和创造机遇
Advance through taking advantage of favorable situations	乘势而上	Create favorable conditions	造势
Diligently do this task well	认真做好这项工作	Evaluation, implementation, and absolute transparency of information	不仅实施还要评估, 绝对做到信息公开
Healthy development	健康发展	Survival	生存
Reform and exploration	改革探索	Cross the river by feeling stones	摸着石头过河
Difficult responsibility	任务艰巨	Challenge	挑战
Adjust to the needs of the construction of modern socialism	适应社会主义现代化建设的需要	Satisfy social needs	满足社会需求
Thoroughly carry out the spirit of....	(贯彻.....的精神)	Advocate the ideal of....	(提倡.....的理念)

The language used in each column of the above table does not always refer to exactly the same concept. Nonetheless, many of these concepts are vaguely enough defined in most circles that NGOs can use this blurriness to establish a shared understanding on which further understanding can be built.

Interviews sometimes elicited responses that drew heavily on official discourse, particularly when NGO staff introduced their organizations. The following is one such example:

We are a people's organization under the management of the government. They have strict rules and regulations; we strictly follow these, love our country, and do our work under the guidance of the Communist Party. Every year we will also report to them our

Conditions for Promoting Nonprofit Organizations Building Collaborative Relationships with Local Government: A Case Study Analysis)," *China Nonprofit Review* 1 (2010).

work situation, and if we have new collective projects, we communicate with relevant offices such as our sponsoring organization and the police station, because it is a large-scale project. In each case we will look for the relevant government offices and do our work under their approval.³⁴

It should be noted that a reliance on official discourse, as in the above example, did not necessarily mean a reluctance to engage in politically sensitive action. The above organization, for example, did not hesitate to prepare and disseminate research reports critical of government policy. In fact, it would seem that the organization's ability to draw on official language allowed it to make such criticisms in ways that appeared less threatening.

Self-Identification

Strategic framing is exercised and manifested in the way organizations represent themselves and their role in society. The term staff members choose to describe the nature of the NGO, for instance, is particularly telling. For example, many organizations used 'NGO' to refer to themselves in interviews without my ever having used the term. But those who were adept at framing and had been engaged in reciprocal relationships with local government were aware of and brought up the fact that the term 'non-governmental (*feizhengfu*)' is often misunderstood as 'anti-government (*fanzhengfu*),' and choose alternate terms such as 'people's organization' (*minjian zuzhi*) or 'public welfare organization' (*gongyi zuzhi*) to refer to themselves publicly. The savviest NGO staff members not only carefully used a number of different terms in different contexts with different audiences, but were also able to explain the nature of an NGO in terms compatible with the understanding and framework of the listener. One environmental NGO sometimes referred to itself as 'a people's environmental NGO (*minjian huanbao* NGO)' but described itself to local government officials in a different way: 'To the

³⁴ Interview Y158, NGO, director. Yunnan, July 2010. Interestingly, this is the same organization that, as described in *Chapter 7*, conducted investigations and prepared reports critical of local government actions with regard to commercializing a heritage part of town.

government we say we want to explore a model where villagers can achieve economic growth together with environmental protection.³⁵ Another NGO also noted a distinction between the way members define the organization internally and the way it is portrayed to government:

A simple way for people here to understand our organization is an educational training center (*peixun zhongxin*). We explain to them that we mainly study English courses, but there is also a larger purpose, it is not only to study English and raise their English marks, but also to develop their integral abilities, so they can make valuable contributions to society. Internally, we use more technical (*zhuanyue*) terms like ‘empowering organization’ or ‘youth empowerment center.’ But actually we have become most used to using the terms we use with government, but we still know that underlying it we are different from other training centers.³⁶

Another NGO director described three different presentations aimed at three different audiences: international individuals, which would include potential funders and collaborators, local citizens, which would include program participants, and government departments, including those with which the potential for collaboration exists:

If I’m talking to international individuals, I say we are a domestically registered NGO. If I am introducing the organization to local common people, I say that we are an organization that does “public welfare” or “charity” work, our organization is distinct from the government, that we don’t need the approval of government to do things, that we can decide for ourselves what to do, but that our work is within the scope of the law, and that our resources don’t come from government, though we can apply to government for resources (even though in China this isn’t very realistic). Because most people don’t have knowledge of this [kind of organization], they think it might be anti-government. When I present to government, especially if I am talking to a new department [with which previous cooperation does not exist] I say that we are an organization cooperating with international agencies, that we bring advanced foreign ideas and methods here to work with them, to do this work better. We have money, resources, and we can bring in good methods, we won’t bring trouble (*mafan*) for them.³⁷

What is notable about the above example of framing is that the director’s presentation of the organization speaks directly to the potential concerns and interests of each different audience. The term ‘NGO,’ most familiar to Western audiences, is used, and potential funders are reassured of their two most common concerns: that the organization is both distinct from

³⁵ Interview Y155, NGO, Staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

³⁶ Interview Y132, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

³⁷ Interview Y250, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, July 2010.

government and registered (meaning it can legally receive grants). The explanation to local citizens highlights the ability of the organization to undertake independent action, allaying potential suspicions of action undertaken without the overt involvement of local officials and highlighting the legality of the NGO's actions to facilitate public participation. The presentation to government highlights the potential benefits to government collaborators, and assuages fears of the organization creating trouble.

Frequency and regularity of communication

Maintaining regular communication with local government departments also serves to alleviate potential concerns. Several NGO interviewees felt that cooperation is achieved through '...more communication with government departments, ...through constant dialogue and communication, frequently going and talking to them about the recent status of our work and our situation, listening to their opinions about our work and how they view our organization. [We have to] enable them to understand our organization's situation better, and of course, we have to better understand the local government's policies and how they view social service organizations.'³⁸

Government interviewees concurred that weak or negative relationships between grassroots NGOs and local government arise because 'in some places, maybe the people's organizations are not able to manage their relationships (*minjian zuzhi guanxi chuli buhao*), so there isn't a lot of communication [between the two].'³⁹ Certainly, it seems that maintaining some regular contact with local government departments is as important as handling the content of this communication in strengthening reciprocal engagement. Regular communication creates familiarity and comfort, and can assure officials that they are being kept up to date, and helps grassroots organizations avoid being an unknown variable.

³⁸ Interview N237, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

³⁹ Interview H262, Government, Director. Hebei, August 2010.

Alleviating Potential Concerns

As the above example illustrates, the ability to frame issues in a way that takes account of political opportunity structures and avoids potentially undermining issues seemed to be an essential skill that experienced NGO founders possessed. One registered Yunnan NGO that has been in operation since 2002 has been able to engage in potentially sensitive action. One recent project involved organizing a large-scale outdoor gathering of thousands of people in support of environmental causes. To pre-empt potential discord with the local government, the director visited a number of government departments to gain support and address concerns:

If you don't have the ability to convince them they will think: "Why should I approve this for you? There will be problems of people fighting, many safety problems, and so on." So I will say: "We have a safety team, a health team, the relevant people will be there. We have a few emergency plans, if fighting happens, we will deal with it in this way, etc." The department needs to know the event won't have a negative result, and that...to do this big good thing will have a positive effect....if I can't speak about it in a way that is deep and thorough (*jiangshen jiangton*), it won't happen....The most important thing is the NGO's ability itself.⁴⁰

Highlighting Commonalities

Organizations that are adept at strategic framing seem to stress commonalities between their work and the work of local government. One NGO founder described her organization's goal to 'help each villager have a harmonious community....I want to do some service for the village, to help my hometown improve and help the women have better productions skills and raise their income.'⁴¹ Interviewees characterized their approach as one in which 'one should appreciate and learn from the positive attributes of others [government], but should not place

⁴⁰ Interview Y134, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁴¹ Interview Y229, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

blame on their shortcomings,’⁴² and highlighted the consequences of taking an adversarial approach:

The government’s point of departure in many matters is different from that of NGOs, sometimes they are inconsistent. But between the two there are also common interests, to cooperate there are common goals. For example, to promote the development of the locality, or serve the common people of the locality, these are directions on which consensus can be reached. In this way the two will move closer and closer together. If there is no common direction, there may be some conflict between the two. The relationship between the two should be imbued with a desire to cooperate and the point of departure and direction should be the same. For example, some NGOs do human rights, rights protection, and this kind of thing is something the government really hates. The NGO will publicize the government’s way of dealing with certain things in different forums, the government feels that it is being sold out (*tazai chumai*). They dislike the existence of this kind of NGO and will try to find ways to suppress these organizations, or not let their programs or scope of activity grow. If you can find an entry point (*qierudian*), and this entry point is in keeping with the conceptual framework and direction of the NGO, the real needs of the locality, and the government’s efforts in the path of developing the rural areas, then there will not be conflict, there will not be friction.’⁴³

The ability highlighted by this interviewee is both a complex and an important one for NGOs seeking to strengthen reciprocal engagement with government departments: to remain true to the organization’s conceptual framework and the real needs of the locality, while seeking commonalities with government efforts.

Overcoming sensitivities

Finally, it was also noted that while sensitivity does affect possibilities for positive-sum reciprocal engagement in a given locality,⁴⁴ framing ability can enable NGOs to overcome this sensitivity by anticipating and addressing potential or existing concerns. A lengthy but illuminating example of such framing is provided in the appendix to this chapter.

Navigating tricky situations

⁴² Interview Y134, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁴³ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁴⁴ This point is discussed in *Chapter 6*.

Sometimes, framing can be about what is *not* said. Particularly when faced with tricky situations on the edges of what is acceptable, grassroots NGOs can be quite ingenious in navigating to open spaces in which to operate. The founder of one rural educational NGO characterized by weak relationships with local government in a sensitive locality was able to manage interactions with local officials in such a way as to enable the organization to carry out a planned summer activity.

The organization had recruited university volunteers from a nearby city to go to their home villages during the 2010 summer holiday and carry out summer camps for rural children and youth. In many of the villages, volunteers would need a venue in which to hold classes, and usually the only venues available were local primary school classrooms or village government buildings. The founder knew from past experience that gaining access to these venues would be difficult without the support of village officials, but that village officials would be hesitant to grant access to public spaces because of a recent ‘incident’ in the area.⁴⁵

After several attempts to see the deputy director of the county Education Bureau, the founder finally gained an audience and told him about his plan. The deputy director ‘said, “this is your own individual action (*geren xingwei*), go ahead and do it.” I said I will give him a report on it when I come back, he didn’t say anything.’ This interaction implied a distancing of the deputy director from the situation; by characterizing the project as an ‘individual action,’ and not replying to an offer to report back to him, the official avoided explicitly granting or refusing permission.

The founder then visited one of the project villages together with a volunteer. ‘When I requested classroom space from the school principal, he asked: “Who told you to come here

⁴⁵ Several local interviewees reported that a Christian group was found to have been teaching school children the Bible and to sing hymns, under the guise of ‘volunteer teaching’ (*zhijiao*) in schools in this poor area. According to interviewees, the incident was ‘handled internally, don’t dare publicize (*neibu chuli, bugan gongbu*),’ and made local officials much more cautious about NGO activity.

and do this?” I said “Deputy director Wang said I can do it.” He couldn’t ask further questions, he couldn’t ask deputy director Wang if he really said this or not, and deputy director Wang didn’t know where [in which villages] I was going to do this project. So he gave us permission. It was “playing edgeball” (*ca bian qiu*).’ This term literally means to play a ball close to the sideline, but also means to skirt the line legally and morally.

When the founder returned after the summer project, he compiled a written summary of the project, feedback from the students and photos into a report and took it to the deputy director: ‘He looked at it, and said “It’s ok. Then you keep doing it (*na nijiu zuoba*).”’ This example shows adept maneuvering on the part of both the NGO founder, and the government officials involved, to gain access, open space for future activity, and avoid repercussions.⁴⁶

Finally, one interesting finding with respect to framing was that NGOs characterized by the highest levels of positive-sum reciprocal engagement with local government, as well as the two NGOs characterized by weak ties, tended to exercise more latitude in the way they framed issues. This implies that more conservative frames need to be used particularly in the initial stages when legitimacy is being built. Contrary to the predictions of corporatist theory, decreased distance from the state enables organizations to use incrementally more risky frames and further open political spaces and fulfill advocacy goals.

5.1.2 Effective action and the building of trust

While sensitivities can be overcome and trust can be established through effective framing, talk does not usually suffice. Before reciprocal engagement can be established, the

⁴⁶ Interview N269, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, December 2010.

trust of potential government collaborators must be secured. One of the ways this is accomplished by grassroots NGOs is through engaging in effective action, with or without initial approval and permission, and displaying results of effective action to potential collaborators.

Several NGOs actively invited government officials to participate in their projects as speakers, observers, or even assistants, to strengthen their understanding and solidify trust: 'By having them participate in our courses, we help them see that in the process of our work we are already achieving things, and that in this process, we want to do better and better. Its not just what is written, but in action, getting them to trust us.'⁴⁷ Another respondent adopted a similar strategy in engaging with the local government:

[to build this relationship], on the one hand, as long as they don't oppose, we keep implementing our program very diligently and very well. Then we continually expand the beneficiaries of our program. In this way, the government's interest will be attracted, they pay attention to this program. At the same time, we maintain contact with them. For example, sometimes when we are doing an activity in a village, we invite them to come, observe and participate. Then they will see our true situation, and we increase our mutual familiarity and understanding. The more they understand our program, the stronger their trust in us will be, and the more they will trust and approve of it. Having this kind of relationship is beneficial to and facilitates future cooperation and registration.⁴⁸

Both scholars looking at the restrictive regulatory environment for NGOs and practitioners faced with the difficulties of registration often expect that grassroots NGOs will always face an inherently hostile environment or a negative reception from local government in the initial stages of operation. In reality, while a few organizations do initially find themselves barred from social spaces in which they want to operate, it seems that the majority of organizations do initially experience a period of time in which they can operate relatively freely and have an opportunity to prove themselves. The founder of one educational organization visited the county Education Bureau to present the organization's work in its initial months of

⁴⁷ Interview Y229, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁴⁸ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

operation only to be told: “You are talking too much about theory, just go and do for now,” which she interpreted as meaning ‘I don’t know you, so you have to operate for a while so that I can observe your work.’⁴⁹

An environmental NGO initially had difficulty gaining approval to register, since this involved convincing the Environmental Protection Bureau to become their sponsoring organization. The organization had not yet proved itself in the field of action, so ‘...at that time you don’t have the right to speak (*huayu quan*), so there is no way to convince them to take on this responsibility.’ A few months later, the organization successfully organized a large group of volunteers to undertake a tree-planting project. “They [the government department] suddenly realized then that people’s organizations have a kind of energy. They saw that we care about the protection of X lake.’⁵⁰

For many interviewees, carrying out programs, organizing events or even raising funds were important ways to attract positive attention and prove themselves to potential government collaborators:

[To establish] the ideal relationship requires that one do many things. Taking my own organization as an example, I will carry out the environmental training program, and I will do it in a relatively steady and stable (*tashi*) fashion, in this way the government will discover and pay attention to you (*faxian ni*), understand and get to know you (*liaojie ni*) and draw near you (*zongjin ni*). At the same time, when the government knows and understands the thing you are doing, then you have also drawn near to the government. In this way, a mutually trusting relationship will be built.

[This relationship is mainly built] through effective program implementation, because as an organization, you are operating within a geographic area under the control of government. You are also within a larger entire social context, and operating in this context means that the government’s function (*zhengfu zhineng*) has a great effect on you. The way people in society look at you, they see you as though your effect is very small, or even very weak. But if you take hold of this one point (*zhuanzhu zhe yidian*), and do your work diligently and well—because the government also hopes that nongovernmental organizations can help them by doing many things well—then your concrete actions will move (*dadong*) them, and you will draw nearer to

⁴⁹ Interview H259, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August, 2010.

⁵⁰ Interview H261, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

them. In this way you can achieve mutual trust.⁵¹

As the above excerpt identifies, to secure the support of local government agencies, action must be effective. In some cases, effectiveness can be proved on a simple, small scale. One volunteer association initially faced significant difficulties establishing itself, but was able to secure government allies through practical action:

Now the Youth League supports us very much. They have seen us grow a lot. At the beginning, Old Chen and I would often go and seek them to talk about peoples' organizations. Last year there was a snowstorm that caused damage, so we assisted them to clear the main highway. The Provincial Youth League Committee (*tuanshengwei*) sent down a directive telling the local Youth League to sweep snow on the icy, snowy road and we helped, and they saw that we are very sincere. But they have always been paying attention to us. It was a slow process to build trust, just like it was with the common people's perception of us, at the beginning they didn't believe us and would post negative things about us online.⁵²

By contrast, when local officials do not see the potential for effective action on the part of grassroots NGOs, they seem less likely to engage with the organization. When, for example, the same organization had also approached the Civil Affairs Bureau with a plan to 'organize aid and do relief work for disabled people, they said: "There are so many disabled people in China, what can *you* do?"⁵³

Local officials' perception of effective action is most commonly shaped by tangible outcomes such as visible improvements in infrastructure, the holding of events and a rise in living standards or incomes, but can also encompass such intangibles as positive feedback from program participants and a change in mindset, culture and behavior. One environmental NGO identified the critical factor in building strong reciprocal engagement with local government as 'the unity and cooperation of the villagers. Because if the government sees the transformation of the villagers, the harmony of the villagers with nature, they will see that what

⁵¹ Interview N238, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

⁵² Interview H263, NGO, deputy director. Hebei, August 2010.

⁵³ Ibid.

we are doing is real. Then they will be relaxed and allow us to do our work to build a prosperous and harmonious community.’⁵⁴

The importance of effective action in the building of trust and the establishment of reciprocal engagement as outlined in this section has two implications. The first, that this is a process that takes time, was identified by a significant number of NGO interviewees. The director of an environmental NGO explained:

Sometimes, the government’s trust in us is not very great. One reason is temporal, this program has not been here for a long time, they need long-term observation and understanding. Another is the reaction of the villagers to our training and program, and the feedback they get. What are the results of the program on the village? How much does it help us? Gradually, this cooperative relationship or the trust in our program is built on the process of doing things and exploring. Sometimes our effects in the community are not very great, so they don’t see many results that help them. ...But this is a process. Just like two strangers meeting, they need to get to know each other (*xianghude liaojie*), then they after they have interacted (*xiangchu*) for a period of time, and come to trust each other, they can work together.⁵⁵

This interpretation is confirmed by basic statistics on the NGOs included in this study—the longer a grassroots NGO has been in operation, the more likely it is to be able to register and to establish positive-sum reciprocal engagement. The average age of grassroots NGOs characterized by high reciprocal engagement with local government departments was eight years, while the average age of those organizations characterized by low and medium levels of engagement was five years. Based on the chronology of experiences and my observations of many of these NGOs over a number of years, it seems likely that an organization’s length of time in operation is significant in its ability to register and to engage with local government, and that these factors are also mutually reinforcing. Though the finding that one of the facilitating conditions of reciprocal engagement is that the NGOs in question have been engaged in effective action for a significant length of time seems like an intuitive one, it is at

⁵⁴ Interview Y229, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁵⁵ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

odds with accepted wisdom. In highly legalistic societies, the assumption is that legal recognition precedes, and is a prerequisite of, collaboration and action. As such, many foreign NGOs and practitioners, as well as the Chinese NGOs they sometimes help create, hold similar expectations in their initial period of establishment. It can be difficult for them to foresee that a different social context may give rise to a different sequence of events for the achievement of recognition and access. Rather than two parties establishing their identities and setting forth all the conditions of their collaboration in pre-determined contracts before action occurs, the approach here seems to be one where the parties get to know each other, work together, and formality, recognition and legitimacy follow.

A second implication is that grassroots NGOs adopting a somewhat common mode of operation consisting of frenetic action directed to many spheres of activity and supported by media publicity are less likely to achieve practical development outcomes and thus, less likely be involved in positive-sum reciprocal engagement. While grassroots NGOs have also been known to start with this mode of operation and move towards a more systematic and focused activity, the adoption of a more sophisticated and systematic approach to development, poverty alleviation, environmental protection or education also requires the development of a number of other organizational capabilities, which will further explored below.

5.1.3 Achieving professionalism, organizational coherence and formality

For social groupings to maintain coherence over time in a sustainable fashion, a certain degree of organization and formality is required. The level of formality of the social organizations under consideration, the degree to which they are guided by a formal organizational mission, incorporate formal rules and procedures into their daily operations, are systematic in their plans and projects, will affect the extent to which they are able to build positive-sum reciprocal relationships with local

government departments. Grassroots NGOs' efforts in achieving formality, strengthening professionalism, maintaining organizational identity and mobilizing financial and human resources are briefly discussed below.

Formality

While many grassroots NGOs start as a loose collection of individuals acting for the benefit of the community, they eventually increase in formality if they are to engage in systematic action, establish legitimacy and engage with local government. One NGO founder who started as a volunteer explained the distinction between voluntarism and organizational formality in a personal way:

I am from the rural areas myself and am very interested in rural development and service.... Because as a young person, in thinking about whether or not to do this work as a career, you need to consider many things. For example, the enterprise of public benefit (*gongyi*) projects that promote the development of the family and society were related to my own interests, character and personality; I liked it and wanted to do it. But why do it as an organization, full-time, rather than being a volunteer? To be a volunteer, in my understanding, is a really respectable and great thing. But you have to think about the long-term and about sustainability. To found a program or an enterprise (*zuowei ziji de yige chuangsbi*) and foster its development is a longer road. You make this your own thing, something you want to do. Someone may volunteer to help their future career prospects, or volunteering may be one part of their lives. But as a career in itself, it takes up a large proportion of one's life. For a volunteer, after a certain project is over, its finished. But as a career, it is sustainable.⁵⁶

Organizational formality does not necessarily correspond to an organization's registration status, or even organizational structure. One unregistered rural environmental NGO described formality in terms of programmatic formality and full-time employment. 'We started working in [locality] in 2009.... From our point of view, the organization is established very formally. Even though we aren't under the management of the local government, or registered, the rural work we are doing is very formal work. I never had any other work, I am solely dedicated to this work.'⁵⁷

Professionalism

Related to organizational formality is professionalism. Calling for greater NGO professionalism is

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Interview N236, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

a theme that has made frequent appearance in official reports and plans, particularly in those coming from the Ministry of Civil Affairs.⁵⁸ According to one government official, 'in some areas, non-governmental organizations are even more professional than government,'⁵⁹ and this professionalism can be a drawing card for government departments and potential collaborators. Another government official identified professionalism as a key reason for maintaining a strong collaborative relationship with local NGOs.

Everyone knows that the requirements for program quality, from finances to fulfillment of program goals, are very strict. If you are engaged this work, you have to carry it out according to the project requirements, the quality is very important. So [local] organizations, in order to do their work, have to hold to a high standard, and their contact and relationship with us as government organizations is very close.⁶⁰

The founder of an environmental NGO recounted the initial years of the organization's establishment, and how professionalism and organizational abilities, in both programmatic and administrative spheres, were developed over time:

Our organization was established in September, 2005. We did one year of preparation for its establishment. In the first two years after its establishment, our situation was not ideal. We didn't know how to write project proposals, we didn't know how to contact fundraisers. We would see other organizations carry out programs with positive results and would feel very envious, and that such things are unattainable for us. We felt very far from success.... So we entered a period of difficulty, how would we realize our [X] organization's mission? So, in this process, we began to read, reflect, learn, to participate in different meetings and in institutional capacity building trainings.... Those first two years were very difficult because we couldn't find our way, but the experience helped me understand...that we should have the ability. Specifically, we should have the ability to carry out environmental protection with professional standards. When we understood this, we started to look for relevant books and online materials to learn. We also want to develop administrative abilities with high standards and wished there would be trainings on this. Nevertheless, our own individual discipline was

⁵⁸ See China Ministry of Civil Affairs, *Guiding Recommendations of the Ministry of Civil Affairs regarding the Promotion of Evaluation Work in Popular Organizations* (*Minzhengbu Guanyu Tuijin Minjian Zuzhi Pinggu Gongzuo De Zhidao Yijian*), (2007); Y. L. Ruan, "Urgently Strengthen Capacity Building of Popular Organizations (*Minjian Zuzhi Nengli Jianshe Jidai Jiaqiang*)," *China News* November 25, 2007; and for a discussion of NGO professionalism, see H. M. Huang, "Regarding Building Professionalism in Popular Organizations (*Lun Minjian Zuzhi Zhuanyehua Jianshe*)" *Association Management Research* (*Shehuan Guanli Yanjiu*), no. 2 (2010).

⁵⁹ Interview N176, Government / NGO, director. Ningxia, December 2010.

⁶⁰ Interview Y251, Government, staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

strengthened.⁶¹

Retaining a nonprofit organizational identity:

Another capability that strong and effective NGOs made an effort to develop was that of maintaining their non-commercial and non-profit nature in the face of opportunities for financial gain. In extreme cases, grassroots NGOs have been known to engage in fraudulent activities or fundraising schemes. Interviewees were well aware of many of these cases: ‘There are also some organizations that have other purposes, not just public welfare (*gongyi*), or for private gain (*sili*). During the Wenchuan earthquake there were many organizations that cheated the people.’⁶²

But even within the framework of what is legally and socially acceptable, NGOs and those who run them possess opportunities to benefit financially from adjustments or modifications in the work they carry out. Some of these adjustments are even supported and encouraged by social enterprise and ‘financial sustainability’ trends in the non-profit field, which encourage NGOs to engage in profit-making activities when they can, or, better yet, operate as businesses that try to do some good as they generate income. Many grassroots NGOs ‘set out as non-profit, but some go on and do profit-making activities, they make money. But we don’t want to make money. Our association also had some opportunities to receive financial benefit, but after we thought about it, we didn’t want to get this money.’⁶³ The capability of adhering to an organizational identity, while it requires maintaining focus, not only contributes to organizational effectiveness and public trust, but also facilitates the emergence of reciprocal engagement:

I want to emphasize one point. Confucius said: “When your actions have not achieved your expected goal, reflect on yourself (*xingyou bude fanqiu zhiyi*). When a problem comes up, quiet down (*jingxialai*) and look for the reasons within yourself. There may be something in your own approach that is not right. For people’s organizations, building their own capacity (*zishen nengli de jianshe*) is a big problem. Only after many years of doing environmental work did I find out what is at the root of it. Many organizations, if they have any self-interest (*sixin*), or they

⁶¹ Interview H164, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

⁶² Interview H168, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, November 2010.

⁶³ Interview H261, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

want to make a profit, then they will have a problem. One can be austere if one has no selfish desires (*wuyu zegang*). When you are not doing things for yourself, many people will come to your aid.⁶⁴

Several interviewees lent credence to the notion that a firm non-commercial organizational identity and altruistic motives can attract allies within government, garner trust, and facilitate reciprocal engagement. Virtually all the organizations included in this study (to the best of my knowledge) maintained a relatively clear non-commercial organizational identity, and it was thus not possible to compare variation in this respect to the emergence of positive-sum reciprocal engagement. However, it was clear that where and when local NGOs lacking this capability had existed, and had turned to profit making activity, local government control over the whole NGO was tightened.

Mobilization of financial and human resources

While maintaining an organization's non-commercial identity is important, at the same time, financial resources are necessary for an organization's operation. The ability to mobilize financial resources also seems important to government collaboration. Contrasting grassroots NGOs in the region with provincial charity assemblies and government-organized charities and organizations, a Civil Affairs Bureau official said:

For these kinds of social welfare organizations, it is actually not simple to do [this work]. To do it, you have to have money and ability. It is not something you can do one or two times; it has to be long term. They are nonprofit, unlike a company that can make money, how do they maintain their existence and activities? So they raise some funds, do an activity, then do something to raise more funds, do another activity, etc.⁶⁵

An Environmental Protection Bureau official similarly ventured that grassroots NGOs cannot survive without the ability to mobilize and secure significant financial resources, and that without this capability, government agencies have no incentive to engage with them:

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Interview N174, Government, staff. Ningxia, December 2010.

Social organizations can't do very much. They don't have a lot of money. Why are so many of the social organizations government-organized? Because they receive government funds. Without money, how would they do things? Someone who doesn't have their own means of survival, how will they go about helping society? We don't have the social regime (*shehui zhidu*) to support this.... The conditions for them to do these things are very poor. 'Eating the Treasury's food' (*chi caizheng fan*) is a systemic problem in China. Every time we want to reform, to decrease [government] financing, the more it increases. So working with these organizations is of no use to government, they don't have the necessary financial or other resources. And China's excellent human resources are all already within the massive government system.⁶⁶

If the value of NGOs is seen primarily in their ability to lessen the government burden and take on social service provision, then the above official's speculation as to the reasons for regional variation in government-NGO collaboration would be correct. Based on the results of this study, however, this hypothesis does not hold. No correlation existed between the strength of reciprocal engagement and GDP per capita in each locality. Also, none of the organizations in this study, to the best of my knowledge, were supported financially by local elites, and almost none were even supported by wealthy individuals elsewhere. The majority of their financial support came from international or domestic foundations, local government (this primarily through the provision of small grants to cover transportation costs or in-kind contributions of venues, equipment, transportation and human resource time), and small financial and in-kind contributions from local common people, many of whom were poor themselves. The discrepancy between this official's perception and the findings of this study probably stem from a different conception of these organizations and what they do. This official probably has in mind large charitable foundations that provide thousands in stipends to poor students and bear major administrative costs, and have had little experience with small, localized organizations working at the grassroots or with their modes of operation. In project-planning discussions and negotiations which I have observed or in which I have participated, many officials have little idea how much can be done with minimal funding.

Clearly, however, the ability to secure and mobilize certain basic financial resources is an

⁶⁶ Interview N175, Government, director. Ningxia, December 2010.

important capability for a strong and effective grassroots NGO to possess. How do these organizations develop this capability without detracting from their non-commercial identity and compromising organizational integrity? Many of the organizations included in this study took a simple approach. They applied for funding from foreign and domestic foundations, and supplemented this with a small amount of government funding. More importantly, they maintained their activities on a relatively small scale, expanding and growing slowly over time, surviving with small but constant budgets.

5.2 Characteristics

A second set of factors relating to NGOs that could contribute to the emergence of positive-sum reciprocal engagement is more closely related to the inherent characteristics of the organizations themselves, rather than capabilities that can be developed. One of these characteristics is the mission or purpose that directs the organization and animated its establishment. Another relates to how 'localized' an organization's founder and key staff are. A third involves the background of the founder and key staff, while the last has to do with the personal relationships and networks available to the organization. As shown in *Chapter 1*, the sample of NGOs in this study did not vary enough with respect to breadth of mission and purpose or with respect to localization for meaningful comparisons to be made for these factors. The availability of personal contacts and networks did not prove to be particularly significant in the emergence of reciprocal engagement. However, the extent to which a grassroots NGO's founder or key staff came from 'official' backgrounds did prove to be significant in allowing for positive-sum reciprocal engagement with local government.

5.2.1 Encompassing Broad Mission

At the beginning of this study, I speculated that one of the characteristics of NGOs likely to lead to positive-sum reciprocal engagement with local government agencies is the degree to which the

NGO espouses a broad mission that seeks to benefit the larger community. In contrast to advocacy or special interest groups that explicitly seek to promote the interests of a particular social group, be they local businesses, members of a kinship group, or homeowners, social organizations with an encompassing mission are concerned with the advancement of the larger community. With regard to civil society organizations, Chamberlain argues that 'The qualifier "civil" connotes, among other things, concern with the commonweal.'⁶⁷ 'The virtue of civil society,' writes Shils, 'is the readiness to moderate particular, individual or parochial interests and to give precedence to the common good.'⁶⁸ Tsai's research shows that one of the key factors affecting the provision of public goods by local government officials is the existence of 'encompassing' and 'embedding' solidarity groups.⁶⁹ While Tsai limits her definition of 'encompassing' solidarity groups to those whose membership encompasses the entire community, I hypothesized that a similar effect could be achieved by social organizations that, while they do not include all members of the community as formal members, define as their mission a concern for the 'common good,' or view the whole community as their beneficiaries or target population.

While I still suspect that this hypothesis could hold true, it was impossible to put to the test in this research. Almost all the NGOs included in this study could be said to be characterized by a broad and encompassing mission, even when they worked primarily with one particular target population or beneficiary group. Below are some examples of the way these organizations characterized their organizational mission and purpose:

The purpose [of X organization] is to initiate individual learning and empowerment through training and establishing learning centers in the rural areas to promote the social and economic development of the whole community.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ H. B. Chamberlain, "On the Search for Civil Society in China," *Modern China* 19, no. 2 (1993), 199.

⁶⁸ E. Shils, "The Virtue of Civil Society," *Government and Opposition* 26, no. 1 (1991), 16.

⁶⁹ L. L. Tsai, "Solidary Groups, Informal Accountability, and Local Public Goods Provision in Rural China," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 02 (2007), 355-372.

⁷⁰ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

[X organization's mission is] to promote the development of youth in this area and, through education, to discover their potential and enable them to make some contributions to the community. We believe that they have the ability to, in this process, advance the social and economic development of the community. Our long-term goal, while we currently work in the local area, is to eventually expand to the whole green mountainous area (*hpan shanqu*)...because it is a structurally poor area (*jiegouxing pinkun diqu*). In order to transform the situation of this community, the most important thing is to change the thoughts and mental models of people, so that a new generation of youth comes up, and we can also affect their parents and their brothers and sisters to, in turn, affect them, and in this way we will be able to make a greater impact.⁷¹

Our long-term goal is to act as a network or a center of learning [about development] in the community.⁷²

Our organization is devoted to the development of the community and toward the goal of balanced material and spiritual development, so that they promote each other and grow together. At the same time, it is devoted to the unity, mutual aid and cooperation of the members of the community. Through our implementation of the [X] environmental program or other supporting programs, we work towards the final goal of the prosperity and harmony of the community.... We directly implement the [X] program, the leader-training program, carry out training of human resources, and institutional capacity building. We also run some supplementary programs to pave the way for the [X] program, like folk embroidery training, helping and supporting leukemia patients, and literacy training. Part of this work is also relations with NGOs and government.⁷³

Interviewees' own analysis, however, tended to agree with the idea that a broad and encompassing mission can facilitate cooperative and reciprocal engagement with other agencies:

Now I have come to understand something: whatever you do [as an organization], the basis of the matter is 'for the people' (*wei dazhong*). So with all kinds of organizations, if you can cooperate well, then it means what you are doing is correct, because there is no absolute wrong or right. The relationship I currently have with these [government] organizations is good. If you are a good person, everyone will work with you, and vice versa.⁷⁴

5.2.2 Localization

Other facilitating conditions for the establishment of positive-sum reciprocal engagement have to do with the personal background of the NGO founder or key staff. My initial conjecture was that the more 'local' an organization's founder and key staff was, the more likely it would be to establish

⁷¹ Interview N236, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

⁷² Interview N237, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

⁷³ Interview N238, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

⁷⁴ Interview H260, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

reciprocal relationships with local government departments.

First, a locally-run organization would be more familiar with local conditions and thus be generally more effective in program implementation and adjusting operations to the local situation. Most interviewees were clear that organizations coming from the outside did not tend to do well in the long term: 'Organizations come in from the outside and start doing things, and they may have high academic credentials (*gao xueli*) and strong theoretical characteristics (*lilun xing qiang*), but they were unable to connect it to the local environment, to the minority culture and situation. So they would do things for a year or two and leave.'⁷⁵ Government interviewees, in particular, seemed to have had negative experiences with NGOs that were not sufficiently 'local':

It depends on how your organization gets along with or integrates with (*ronghe*) local government. If the cooperation is positive, then it will be good. Why get along and integrate well (*ronghe hao*)? First you have to recognize local conditions and people's attitudes. For example, the planting conditions. They have traditional ways of doing things, but the crops are not high-quality, yields are low, and so on. You may give them a new variety, but the local people may not accept it at first, you have to show them. Another example of not integrating well is if you only emphasize your own ideas, and don't try to understand the local situation. For example, the situation of the Hui ethnic groups, you have to consider that too.⁷⁶

Secondly, local key staff would already possess a network of personal contacts and relationships, such as friends, relatives, classmates and colleagues, with which a foundation of trust had already been built and could be called on for assistance. In explaining his reason for supporting a local grassroots NGO, the village head simply said of the founder: 'He was from our village, we knew him and the people knew him.'⁷⁷ The specific role played by personal contacts and connections will be discussed in the subsequent section.

However, there was ultimately insufficient variation in the sample to test this hypothesis. As the below table shows, almost all of the grassroots NGOs included in this study were founded and run by individuals who were either local to the village in which they operate or are based, or native to the

⁷⁵ Interview Y134, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁷⁶ Interview N179, Government, staff. Ningxia, December 2010.

⁷⁷ Interview N235, Government, village head. Ningxia, June 2010.

city or province in which they are based. The few who were not native to the locality were married to locals, and were thus ‘adopted’ into and belonged to local networks. This could be because few attempts were made by ‘outsiders’ to establish NGOs, or because NGOs established by ‘outsiders’ simply did not survive in the selected localities.

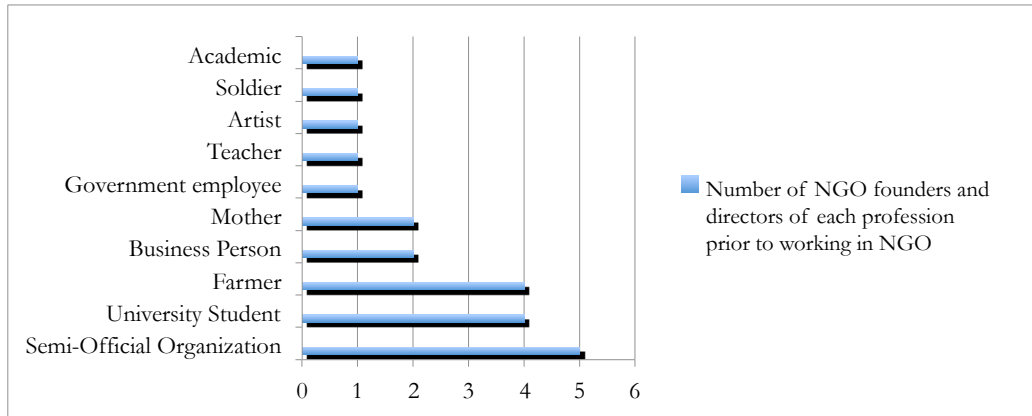
Table 5-2: NGO Founder Origins by Locality

	Locality	Y1	Y2	N1	N2	H1	H2	Total
Founder Origin	Local (village)	1	2	0	2	0	2	7
	Local (city)	1	1	1	0	2	2	7
	Local (province)	2	0	2	0	0	0	4
	Local (married to local)	1	0	0	1	1	0	3
	Other province	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

5.2.3 Official backgrounds

One of the most significant inherent NGO characteristics relevant to the emergence of positive-sum reciprocal engagement was the extent to which key grassroots NGO personnel were of ‘official’ backgrounds. The NGOs included in this study were founded or run by individuals of diverse backgrounds. Several of these individuals originally worked as employees in semi-official organizations, for example, as doctors in state-run hospitals, as academics or researchers in government-funded institutes, or as journalists for government newspapers. Several were also university students, mostly recent university graduates, before deciding to found an NGO. A number of these individuals were farmers from a rural background. A few were businesspeople and housewives, while others were previously soldiers, artists, teachers or academics. The chart below shows the previous professions of key NGO personnel (founders or directors) for each of the 22 organizations included in this study.

Figure 5-1: Previous Professions of Key NGO Personnel



Results strongly suggested NGOs with key personnel from ‘official’ backgrounds were more likely to have established reciprocal relationships with local government agencies. At one end of the spectrum are organizations run by individuals who used to be government officials. NGOs founded by current or retired government officials have been well documented.⁷⁸ Presumably, for retired officials, starting or running an NGO is a way to supplement their income by capitalizing on their skillset and bringing their contacts and personal relationships to bear in new organizational settings. Only one of the NGOs included in this study was of this category, and, as one might think, was characterized by high levels of reciprocal engagement with local government.

Our Secretary General (*mishu zhang*) is in charge of working with government. He also has the role of Director of the X County Project Office [a county-level government department]. So he has a double identity. I am retired. Before I retired, I was the Deputy Chief of the Autonomous Region Bureau of [X]. Now I have been at this organization for three years.⁷⁹

Prior employees of semi-official organizations, soldiers, teachers and academics make up a second category of personnel with moderately official backgrounds, while the remaining backgrounds make up the last set. NGOs led by personnel with official or moderately official backgrounds were

⁷⁸ See, for example, Q. Ma, "Defining Chinese Nongovernmental Organizations," *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 13, no. 2 (2002), 122.

⁷⁹ Interview N143, NGO, director of external affairs. Ningxia, June 2010.

significantly more likely to be engaged in reciprocal relationships with local government. While I initially believed this was because of the prior personal relationships those who had worked in official or semi-official systems had been able to form with local officials, as the next section will discuss, these prior official relationships did not have a significant effect on an NGO's ability to engage with the state. Rather, it seems to have more to do with the fact that key personnel from official or semi-official backgrounds have been exposed to official environments and language, allowing them to develop the ability to frame issues in a way that opens social spaces. Finally, coming from an official or semi-official background makes it more likely that they will have some legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of local officials with whom they come into contact, and thus be more easily able to gain their trust, in contrast to grassroots NGOs run by individuals with 'unknown' backgrounds.

5.2.4 Personal relationships

There was a common perception among interviewees that personal relationships were important to the establishment of reciprocal engagement with government entities, particularly among those grassroots NGOs who were founders and directors self-identifying as 'common people' who did not enjoy the same connections and influence as elites. Interestingly, a similar perception existed among NGOs founded or run by elites, such as academics or journalists, who did initially have these personal relationships. However, in reality, this latter category of NGOs did not tend to be characterized by a higher degree of reciprocal engagement than the former. It became clear that while personal relationships do play a limited role, they are usually only useful in the initial stages of relationships with government departments. 'Social relationships' are helpful in efforts to establish government collaboration because 'if you are introduced through familiar people (*shouxi deren*), this trust will be established more quickly.'⁸⁰ A few NGOs also mentioned engaging in collaboration with

⁸⁰ Interview N236, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

government departments through classmates and old friends.⁸¹ Several NGOs were also able to gain access to villages and collaborate with village officials by having personal relationships with village heads or Party secretaries, who in turn introduced them to other leaders who organized venues and gathered villagers for them.⁸²

Personal relationships come with significant limitations, however. Several interviewees recognized that personal relationships are not equivalent to organizational relationships, though they can facilitate each other, it is not clear whether in 'individual trust relationships versus organizational relationships, which comes first?'⁸³ Reliance on personal relationships is seldom sufficient. Instead, as one NGO expert advised a gathering of grassroots NGOs:

[It is necessary to] create a personal trust network. This requires personal connections (*renji guanxi*). You can't just have one person with whom you have trust, rather, you need a network of trust...Do you have people in the government that you can count as friends (*gemen*)? How do you sustain those relationships? It starts with a personal relationship. Then it grows into an organizational relationship. Then you have a problem—when the person leaves, the relationship also leaves. So you need to pay attention to how you sustain these relationships. The personal relationships cannot go beyond the organizational relationship level. Otherwise they might take it to another organization. But you can use relationships to foster more relationships.... But how do you have a strategic partnership or collaborative relationship? This is a challenge that many of us have. We focus on the relationships of one or two people rather than organizational relationships.⁸⁴

Finally, the general consensus among interviewees was the personal relationships or networks are neither equivalent to collaborative engagement, nor were they particularly helpful in the establishment of this engagement:

Our hope is actually that we don't have to use our own personal relationships to build up the organization, but can do so through our actual programs. We can also use the media's power in this effort. It can't be denied that personal relationships are important in the beginning, especially when you first knock at the door. But to develop collaborative relationships, it is not enough to have personal charm. So we have to think about how to create and sustain our strategic collaborative relationships (*zhanluexing beizuo huoban guanxi*).⁸⁵

⁸¹ Interview H165, NGO, founder director. Hebei, August 2010.

⁸² Interview N237, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

⁸³ Interview BJ12, Academic, researcher. Beijing, February 2010.

⁸⁴ Interview BJ09, NGO director and analyst. Beijing, September 2009.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

The fact that several of the grassroots NGOs with the highest levels of reciprocal engagement with local government agencies did not start off with any such helpful personal relationships is the clearest indicator that the establishment of reciprocal engagement depends primarily on other factors.

5.3 Conclusion

This chapter has explored a number of characteristics related to grassroots NGOs to identify those factors that seem most conducive to the emergence of positive-sum reciprocal engagement. It found that while such inherent organizational characteristics as the background of NGO founders and staff did facilitate reciprocal engagement, organizational capabilities such as the ability to frame issues in such a way as to open political spaces and the ability to engage in effective action while communicating the results of this action to government agencies were of much greater significance in the establishment of reciprocal engagement.

One of the key implications of this conclusion is that the establishment of positive-sum reciprocal engagement depends, to a great extent, on certain organizational capabilities that a grassroots NGO can develop and acquire. This perspective emphasizes the agency of these organizations and the individuals who run them, and stands in stark contrast to studies carrying the assumption that Chinese NGOs should either be granted autonomy from government agencies, or if some form of collaboration and government support is desirable, it should be initiated by the state and enabled by formal, legal mechanisms, such as, for example, a regime for government contracting social services out to NGOs.⁸⁶

In addition to the capabilities that NGOs can acquire and develop, and the agency of government reformists, as discussed in *Chapter 4*, certain social and political features also play a role in the

⁸⁶ See, for example, the discussion of public-private partnership through government contracting in X. Jia, "Relationship between Social Organizations and Government (*Minjian Zuzhi Yu Zhengfu De Guanxi*)" in *China's Popular Organizations: 30 Years (Zhongguo Minjian Zuzhi Sanshi Nian)*, ed. M. Wang (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2008), 227.

emergence of positive-sum reciprocal engagement. These features will be explored and evaluated in the following chapter.

Appendix A: Special Appendix to Chapter 5

The below transcript of an interaction between an educational NGO and a collaborating local school is an excellent example of such sensitivities and the way they are addressed through adept framing. Although the example is lengthy, it has been reproduced in full because the dialogue was rich and salient to the issue of overcoming sensitivity.

The NGO in question had been carrying out educational activities with migrant students in a school on the outskirts of a Ningxia city. The students were of mostly rural backgrounds, and many were of the Hui minority, as were most of the inhabitants in that area. The prevalence of Hui in the area and the school, together with a recent NGO scandal no doubt contributed to heightened political sensitivities. This NGO's educational activities included elements of English and multimedia, and were carried out during normal school hours, until the NGO director was approached by the school's Director of Political Education:

After my first class at the collaborating school this week I had a free period while Teacher Xi's students worked on producing a video. During the break, Mr. Ma, the Director of Political Education, sought me out to talk to me.

School: 'Some people suspect that your project is carrying out missionary work or teaching religion, and as a result the principal intends to end the project. Is this true?'

Me: 'Is it true? Absolutely not! The reasons are as follows. First, the educational materials I have been using were carefully read by your school's English teachers, they can be said to have been reviewed, and have no problems! Second, as for me, after so many years of being nurtured by the state, is it possible that I could take anti-government, illegal actions? And the consequences of these actions for me are very clear and understood. Third, from the point of view of my family, there are three PhDs in my family, one of whom is the Vice Chairman of the Autonomous Region [X] Federation, which is an organization under the jurisdiction of the Autonomous Region Party Committee. Without undergoing a political examination, how would it be possible for him to "infiltrate" the Federation? Obviously my family background is "Correct root, red sapling." Fourth, nowadays to do a bit of a good thing is very difficult, it is subject to speculation, suppression, vilification, and banning, this is very common. I believe that as long as one observes with one's own eyes and analyzes with one's own mind, one will come to the right judgment.'

School: 'We also did not think it possible, but we are still worried, the school does not want to take this risk, Teacher X, do you think you could stop the program for a little while and then see what happens?'

Me: Leader, if the school is determined to do so, I can do nothing, but will be very sorry. First of all, I am working with students, these are middle school students who can already distinguish right from wrong, the school can fully look into this matter, the suspicion of whether or not my class is teaching religion, this is the simplest and most direct approach.

Second, in the final analysis, if the school would like to use this as an excuse to end our cooperation, then it would be redundant, as the school can directly call for an end, so I think that the school should think of the growth of the students, and I thank the school on behalf of the students, and thank the leadership. Last, you mention the risk, and I can fully understand, but my organization and my person are honorable (*guangming*), my enterprise is upright, and the ultimate beneficiaries of our cooperation are the children, who are also our common aspiration! Can this program really be stopped? ?

School: This matter still needs to be studied by the school Party Committee, let's wait and see what their decision is.

Me: Yes, Director! I am very confident that our cooperation will continue, because we are all educators, we are all trying to contribute our efforts to the children of the migrant district.'⁸⁷

⁸⁷ It should be noted that while this interaction is between the NGO and a school official, rather than a government department per se, the fact that it is a public school means that it is essentially a semi-official organ under the strict purview of the local Education Bureau, and the Director of Political Education with whom the NGO director is speaking is most certainly a Party member. The transcript was included in a written communication to me from the NGO director, dated November 7, 2010.

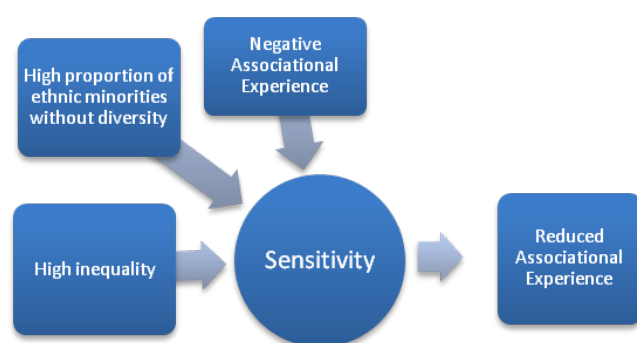
Chapter 6: Social and Political Context in the Emergence of Positive-Sum Reciprocal Engagement

The preceding two chapters explored how, and to what extent, features of public institutions and grassroots NGOs shaped reciprocal outcomes. In addition to state-centered and NGO-centered factors, the emergence of positive-sum reciprocal engagement between grassroots NGOs and local government agencies is also affected by characteristics of the social and political context. ‘Although state-society synergy has become a subject of research for more and more scholars they have reached no agreement about how the existing sociopolitical context facilitates or constrains its emergence.’¹ Some of these contextual characteristics, such as income levels, inequality, the presence of ethnic minorities, and the extent and nature of prior associational experience vary across localities. This chapter seeks to uncover the contextual features that influence reciprocal engagement and how they do so.

I find that several of the contextual characteristics originally hypothesized to affect positive-sum reciprocal engagement between grassroots NGOs and local government do not directly influence reciprocal outcomes, but are closely interrelated. Specifically, economic factors, such as

levels of income, inequality and poverty, or demographic factors, such as the presence and distribution of ethnic minorities in a locality, do not facilitate or hinder possibilities for positive-sum reciprocal engagement.

Figure 6-1: Determinants of Sensitivity and Associational Experience



¹ X. Wang, "Mutual Empowerment of State and Society: Its Nature, Conditions, Mechanisms, and Limits," *Comparative Politics* 31, no. 2 (1999), 231-249.

However, together with the nature of prior associational experience, they do affect what interviewees call a locality's relative 'openness' or 'sensitivity.' Sensitivity, in turn, hinders further associational experience. Openness and significant, positive or neutral associational experience, on the other hand, do facilitate reciprocal engagement.

6.1 Openness and Sensitivity

One notion that came up frequently in interviews was that of 'openness' as a characteristic of localities in which grassroots NGOs can more easily operate and engage with the state. By contrast, 'sensitivity' was frequently cited as a contextual and temporal characteristic that hindered such engagement. My own analysis of varying levels of sensitivity across localities and levels of positive-sum reciprocal engagement largely confirmed this view.

There was a great deal of consensus among interviewees about what kinds of phenomena cause a particular time or place to be sensitive; for example, recent 'incidents' in the form of mobilizations against the local government, potential mobilizations of this nature, political scandals, upcoming national or local political transitions or important political meetings, prevalent social challenges such as widespread drug use or a high incidence of HIV/AIDS, or proximity to border regions. However, what contributes to 'openness' was much less clear. While several explanations of openness were put forward by interviewees, some of these explanations conflicted with each other, and others were challenged by empirical evidence.

6.1.1 Access to Information

One common perception among interviewees considered access and exposure to information an important determinant in the relative openness of a locality, and, by extension, enhanced conditions for engagement between local government and grassroots NGOs. The director of an educational NGO ascribed the sensitivity sometimes encountered by the organization in its dealings with local

government to limited access to information and experience coming from outside:

It has to do with the local government's working approach (*gongzuo fangshi*). They don't have a lot of contact with the outside world. For example, local authorities don't have much experience with [a local cultural practice researched by this NGO], so if a people's organization steps in, they will get very sensitive.²

The founder of an educational NGO also described the reaction of local officials when he introduced the non-profit and non-governmental nature of his organization in similar terms:

These terms, if used in a larger town or city, can easily be understood. But in this place, in mountainous areas, people may have heard these terms on television or on the radio, but when we explain what we are doing, they are still very surprised. They say "How is it that we have this kind of organization in our place?" Because before [another local NGO], no such thing has historically existed (*lishishang shi meiyoude*). With respect to such public welfare organizations, some teachers, administrators or staff of government management departments are exposed to (*jiechu*) a lot of information, so they understand what these organizations are about. But in the village, if you go and say 'This is a public welfare organization, this is a non-profit or non-governmental organization,' and carry out some activities, they don't really understand. For example, when I first started running this program in our own village, and organized the first training in the small village school, the parents and teachers all referred to it as 'tutoring' (*buke*), rather than a program. After I explained the program, they wrote it down in their books, but they still called it tutoring, so we slowly have to change their thinking.

These are regional differences. Regions that are characterized by a greater flow of information and higher levels of development are easier [to work in], since such things will be more common. But regions that are very, very backward will not have such things.... It has to do with the social environment, the peoples' awareness (*renzhi chengdu*) and mental models. For example, if everyone thinks this is a good thing, the NGO will develop well in this place. If they have already heard of such things from different channels, they will more easily accept this kind of organization. But if they don't have this kind of information and are living in a very traditional mindset, they will say: "What is this thing?" So it depends on local people's aspirations (*xuqiu*). For example, if you talk about poverty alleviation, they will think of material things. If you suddenly come and say you want to promote people's development, to train local people so that they can develop themselves (*ziji fazhan ziji*), they will say: "What kind of poverty alleviation is this? It doesn't even involve money or other things?"³

6.1.2 Economic Development

Several other interviewees also made a connection between access to information and

² Interview Y158, NGO, director. Yunnan, July 2010.

³ Interview N236, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

economic development. This was a very common perception among interviewees, and seemed to form a sort of common discourse, even though according to the findings of this study, it was not consistent with the empirical evidence. The deputy director of an environmental NGO attributed increased possibilities for cooperation with local government departments to openness stemming from economic development and access to information: 'Some places are open in nature (*kaifang xing*), some are closed in nature (*fengbixing*). They don't have access to much information. This has to do with the size and level of economic development of the place, whether there are more outsiders, more organizations, culture and information coming in.'⁴

The perception that grassroots NGOs can more easily flourish and that greater possibilities for engagement with the state exist in economically developed regions was a common one among both NGO and government interviewees. A representative of a Provincial Civil Affairs Bureau attributed the fewness of people's organizations in the province to low levels of economic development—because such organizations need significant funds to operate, and the province is a relatively poor one, conditions are not amenable to the development of this sector.⁵ An Environmental Protection Bureau official in the province followed a similar line of reasoning. Referring to local government engagement with grassroots NGOs, the official reasoned that:

In the south [of China] they do this better, they have more organizations, because they have money. Companies give them money, individuals want to do good things, so they support these organizations. But in this kind of area, where there are fewer rich people, it is backward, there is no one to support them.⁶

Another provincial civil affairs official echoed this logic: 'In [this province] there are few social organizations because they need money to do this, they must rely on social support. [This province] is a poor region, so there are fewer rich people to support them, compared to the south where these

⁴ Interview Y134, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁵ Interview N174, Government, staff. Ningxia, December 2010.

⁶ Interview N175, Government, director. Ningxia, December 2010.

organizations are more developed, because there are more rich people and entrepreneurs.⁷ A third provincial civil affairs official made a similar link between economic development and the growth of social organizations and their engagement with the state:

It depends how much leaders support social organizations. Social development needs the resources and vitality that social organizations can contribute. So the state is supporting this area a lot. It has a lot to do with economics too; social organizations develop better in areas with high economic growth. In China, there are 5.5 social organizations per 10,000 people. As economic development increases, social organizations are needed. As peoples' needs become greater, they need more services.⁸

The prevalence of this perception among officials was notable. In fact, the explanation they provide may hold true if the consideration is the total number of *all* social organizations in a locality or province. Provincial statistics do confirm that that total number of registered social organizations, including social, commercial, cultural, religious and educational organizations including schools, health organizations including hospitals, volunteer groups and government organized associations, do increase as average income increases.⁹ To say that the number of such organizations proliferates as economic conditions improve, however, does not tell us much about the development of civil society and its interaction with the state.

The director of a Civil Affairs Bureau in charge of NGO management in another province described his department's work in terms of strengthening the NGO sector, but similarly concluded that the development of the sector ultimately depends on the level of economic development:

We are not too satisfied with [the development of NGOs in this locality] because they are just starting out, they are still in the process of feeling their way around (*mosuo tansuo zhong*), so they haven't been able to have a significant effect on society yet. They have drawn the attention of the whole of society. Social organizations [in this locality] started out late, they really only began to develop in 2006, but they have grown very quickly. The main reasons are the strengthening of tourism, economic and social development

⁷ Interview N177, Government, staff. Ningxia, December 2010.

⁸ Interview N180, Government, director. Ningxia, December 2010.

⁹ Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2011 Provincial Civil Affairs Statistics (*2011 nian jidu gesheng minzheng shiye tongji shuju*), www.mca.gov.cn accessed February 12, 2012.

and general awareness (*renzhi du*). Early on, we were propagating and promoting (*xuanchuan*) these things [the NGO sector]. We did television programs and announcements. Then it developed more and more, people started thinking, ‘what can I do?’ Old people, retired people... so it grew quickly. I think the development of social organizations in a place will advance together with its economic development. So it is an expression of society’s development.¹⁰

An environmental NGO founder also discussed openness in terms of economic development and the characteristics of the local population:

They [grassroots NGOs] will have more success in places where the quality and character (*suzhi*) of the people is higher, where it is more open (*kaiyang xing*). But an out of the way (*bise*) city like ours will be slower in this respect. Many people don’t know about such things. [The city] is not as open as other places, in terms of economic development and general character of the people, it is very closed off.¹¹

The founder of another environmental NGO in a small county town in one of the poorest regions in the country similarly attributed low levels of engagement with local government to the locality’s remoteness, low levels of economic development and access to information:

I think our relationship with government is...lukewarm (*buleng bure de nazhong*). It has to do with the local situation, with the thinking (*guannian*) of the people. In places with good economic growth, people will accept this kind of program more easily. But in places with low economic growth they will be afraid, they will think that while, now, it looks like a good program, but it is unclear what will happen in the future. So they have a suspicious attitude; they are watching. It also has to do with the thinking of the people, not just their economic situation, but because there is economic development, the flow of information is greater. But if this place is remote, then the flow of information is less, then they will receive very little information from the outside world.¹²

As the above excerpt indicates, several interviewees, particularly those with government backgrounds, were of the view that economic development creates the conditions for increased engagement between grassroots NGOs and local government. Empirically, however, the sample of cases in this study included several examples that contradict this relationship, including one case in the very locality discussed by the above interviewee.

To what extent do economic factors, such as income and inequality, affect the establishment

¹⁰ Interview Y156, Government, director. Yunnan, July 2010.

¹¹ Interview H263, NGO, deputy director. Hebei, August 2010.

¹² Interview N237, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

of positive-sum reciprocal engagement? One view is that the Chinese state is more interventionist in poorer areas and takes on a nanny state role.¹³ This increased intervention could mean that since the state plays a greater role, it is less willing to share this activity with social organizations. But increased state involvement could also create a climate that is conducive to increased government engagement with grassroots NGOs, as local government agencies are more receptive to innovative social programs and the mobilization of societal resources for poverty alleviation. As one environmental NGO staff put it, the economic resources available to the locality are a determining factor in official attitudes towards grassroots NGOs: ‘We notice that the poorer places with fewer resources are very open to NGOs coming and working there, but the others say “You aren’t even bringing a lot of money, what are you coming here for?”’¹⁴ Thus, the argument regarding the effects of economic development levels on NGO engagement with the state can go both ways.

6.1.3 Mindsets and Attitudes

Ultimately, it seems that economic factors, such as GDP per capita, income levels and inequality do not have a significant effect on positive-sum reciprocal engagement. Neither do they contribute significantly to openness, which is important to reciprocal engagement. While many interviewees emphasized economic factors, several also brought up other contextual characteristics that contribute to openness. The founder of one environmental NGO, for example, emphasized the awareness of local officials, and the gradual raising of such awareness by the central government:

The government’s point of view varies between larger cities and smaller places. In larger cities, where the officials are of a higher standard (*shuiping*), at the least they will know about people’s organizations, or at least about public participation (*gongzhong canyu*). But small places it is more difficult. For example, fifteen years ago I asked the director of the Environmental Protection Bureau in a small city in Hebei: “How is your public participation?” He said: “Even without their participation, our work is already

¹³ Koldyk, forthcoming. *From Coercion to Cooptation in Urban China: Social Stratification, Property, and Grassroots Politics in a Leninist State in Transition*. Koldyk’s conclusion was drawn from the study of urban environments, and it remains to be seen whether the same dynamic applies to rural areas.

¹⁴ Interview Y155, NGO, Staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

troublesome enough.” So he didn’t even understand its significance. Over the past ten years, the government has increasingly emphasized public participation. There is some guidance from the central government about environmental impact assessment and so on, which require public participation, also media assessments. But [they only happen] when they are positive, when these activities give them political achievements (*zhengji*). For example, when there are big events like Earth Day, the Environmental Protection Bureau asks you to participate in the promotion (*xuanchuan*). Also, they have some money [allocated for this], so they get citizens to participate and do things, like surveys or some activities just for show (*zuoxiu*). Also, for example, in [the city’s] transportation planning, they actually invited the citizens many times to the Planning Bureau to come and discuss things, to speak freely (*suibian shuo*). Some citizens were very active (*jiji*); they came and presented their own plans, and [the officials] really accepted it well. But I think for China, for the long term, government will continue to be in the main role (*zhengfu weizhu*).¹⁵

Another environmental NGO founder also emphasized the importance of culture, education and mindsets to openness:

Compared to other places, our place here is more backward....in various respects, such as people’s thinking, and so on....Being able to register and securing government approval (*shenshi*) are quite difficult. Because level of culture or education (*wenhua chengdu*) varies, the level of culture or education required in order to clearly understand this type of program is different, the level of thought is different (*sixiang jingjie*). For example, some leaders receive and understand more information and knowledge from outside, some leaders have more vision for the development of society. Some places, in terms of transportation and other aspects, are very out of the way and closed (*bise*), they don’t have access to outside information.¹⁶

While the above interviewee equated geographic isolation and a lack of information with a lack of openness, she had also shared that the leaders in her locality were quite open and welcoming of her organization from the start, despite her characterization of it as a backward and isolated area. When I asked about this, she thought about it and added: ‘Yes, they are quite open. Maybe sometimes people’s thinking and mindsets (*sixiang jingjie*) also vary.’¹⁷ A municipal level official whose department was engaged in collaboration with local grassroots NGOs elaborated on how a change in mindsets and thinking, particularly among local officials, enabled increased engagement with local NGOs in a high HIV/AIDS locality:

¹⁵ Interview H165, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

¹⁶ Interview NX40, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Actually in much of this work, people are an important element—people's thoughts, how they understand things. I think this is the key factor. For example, if, as the government, I don't have the necessary information about the work of the organizations, how will I know whether to support them? So I think changing officials' thinking and ideals is very important. Since tourism is of primary importance to the economy of [this locality], so [the local government] doesn't want local tourism to be negatively affected because of AIDS. When I started working in 2000, there was a lot of work done to open the mindset of the local officials. At that time, when the mindset of officials changed, many doors opened, and as the officials changed, the situation changed more and more. So the first step in much of this work is to change how people think about management. Many people believe that government is an axle (*zhouxin*) in China. If the axle doesn't turn the rest won't turn. So their mindsets are very important.¹⁸

Based on interviewees' feedback, then, it seems that a given locality's relative openness is more a factor of access to information and official mindsets than levels of economic development. These characteristics can also vary within a locality, across government departments or social groups.

6.1.4 Ethnic Minorities

Another contextual factor that was posited to facilitate or constrain the potential for positive-sum reciprocal engagement is homogeneity. Where ethnic and religious identity is shared, it has been argued, collaborative relations across the public-private divide are easier to build.¹⁹ But again, the existing empirical evidence does not fully support this view.²⁰

Based on initial field experience, I had also posited that ethnic heterogeneity in China, as measured by the proportion of the population in a region belonging to recognized ethnic minority groups, would be a facilitating factor in allowing for the emergence of reciprocal engagement between social organizations and local governments in such regions. The central government is greatly preoccupied with maintaining social stability in these localities through enhancing social welfare

¹⁸ Interview Y251, Government, staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

¹⁹ E. Ostrom, "Crossing the Great Divide: Coproduction, Synergy, and Development," *World Development* 24, no. 6 (1996), 1073-1087.

²⁰ P. Evans, "Government Action, Social Capital and Development: Reviewing the Evidence on Synergy," *World Development* 24, no. 6 (1996), 1125.

provision, and at the same time, seems to grant greater leeway to local government bureaus situated in ethnic minority regions to experiment with and implement innovative, locally-tailored educational, environmental and poverty alleviation programs. This both opens up additional spaces for NGO activity and increases the convergence of their interests with those of local government officials.

Some evidence to support this hypothesis emerged from interviews. On the one hand, minority regions seem to enjoy greater flexibility and leeway in policy implementation. A Bureau of Civil Affairs official in a minority locality in Yunnan explained how NGO policy is to be implemented more selectively because of minority culture:

Social organizations develop most rapidly in [this city]. When I began this job a few years ago, there were only five or six such organizations. Now there are so many wanting to register, we have to control it. You can't approve too many organizations doing the same thing in one area. But because culture is so important here, they told us to be more permissive (*fang yidian*).²¹

In minority regions, other laws may also be implemented with greater laxity and discretion. Family planning regulations in a Ningxia minority locality are one example:

In many ways, things are relaxed here in [X]. Laws are not enforced the way they are in other places....Take the family planning policy, for example. There was a situation in the 1990s where officials were overzealous in implementing the family planning policy. They took some young Hui women and did forced sterilizations or abortions on them. When the other Hui and religious leaders heard about it, they were very angry, and there was even some fighting between the Hui and Han people here. After this, the central leaders said to the local leaders not emphasize too much enforcing those policies here, because social stability is of the greatest importance. That's why you see many families here with three or four children. In our family, too, we are many brothers and sisters, and my brothers and sisters all have more than one child, even though we are Han.²²

However, the results of this study were not fully consistent with the hypothesis that ethnic minority localities would be more likely to give rise to positive-sum reciprocal engagement. While levels of reciprocal engagement were higher in some ethnic minority

²¹Interview Y156, Government, director. Yunnan, July 2010.

²² Interview N239, NGO, staff. Ningxia, June 2010.

populations, they were particularly low in others. It seems that while high ethnic minority populations do not directly facilitate positive-sum reciprocal engagement in a given locality, 'ethnic structure' can contribute to sensitivity or openness, which in turn shapes reciprocal outcomes.

A given nation or locality's ethnic structure can be captured by a number of conceptualizations. Ethnic fractionalization, or the probability that two randomly selected individuals in a country will be from different ethnic groups, for instance, is used as a measure of ethnic diversity. Measures of the cultural distance between existing ethnic groups²³ and the extent of ethnic polarization highlight the degree of ethnic cleavages, while different ethnic structures, such as highly fragmented, bipolar, multipolar, balanced, dominant majority or dominant minority have also been categorized.²⁴ Ethnic structures make a difference in potential for ethnic mobilization, conflict and politicization. In particular, theorists have posited 'that ethnic conflict is more likely in countries with an ethnic majority and a large ethnic minority, as opposed to homogeneous or highly heterogeneous countries.'²⁵ Similarly, '...the relationship between ethnic diversity and civil wars is not monotonic: there is less violence in highly homogeneous and highly heterogeneous societies, and more conflicts in societies where a large ethnic minority faces an ethnic majority.'²⁶

Ethnic structures also have an effect on broader contextual characteristics, such as generalized trust and civic engagement. While ethnic diversity does not, in itself, reduce generalized trust, the existence of large minorities segregated from majority groups can weaken

²³ J. D. Fearon, "Ethnic and Cultural Diversity by Country," *Journal of Economic Growth* 8, no. 2 (2003), 195-222.

²⁴ B. Reilly, "Democracy, Ethnic Fragmentation, and Internal Conflict: Confused Theories, Faulty Data, and the "Crucial Case" of Papua New Guinea," *International Security* 25, no. 3 (2001), 162-185.

²⁵ D. L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Vol. 387 (Univ of California Pr, 1985).

²⁶ J. G. Montalvo and M. Reynal-Querol, "Ethnic Diversity and Economic Development," *Journal of Development Economics* 76, no. 2 (2005), 293-323.

such trust. Generalized or moralistic trust is differentiated from strategic trust, which ‘cannot answer why people get involved in their communities. The linkage with moralistic trust is much more straightforward. Strategic trust can only lead to cooperation among people you have gotten to know, so it can only resolve problems of trust among small numbers of people. We need moralistic trust to get to civic engagement.’²⁷ When large minorities are segregated from majority groups, fewer opportunities for interaction exist, and while minority groups develop higher in-group trust, they are often of lower economic status, and thus more likely to express grievances in the form of nationalistic sentiments and be exploited by strong nationalistic and clientelistic leaders. ‘Such corruption both feeds on high in-group trust and low out-group trust—and reinforces low generalized trust.’²⁸

While there are many possible conceptualizations of ‘ethnicity’,²⁹ ethnic groups in China are relatively standardized and defined (officially), and this official view is widely accepted. Based on official distinctions and categorizations of ethnicity, analysis showed that ethnically heterogeneous localities where the population is divided between a number of different ethnic minorities, such as those in Yunnan Province, were the most ‘open,’ and the most likely to give rise to reciprocal engagement. Ethnically homogenous localities made up almost entirely of Han, such as those in Hebei Province also gave rise to moderate levels of reciprocal engagement. However, ethnic minority localities with a single dominant minority in addition to the Han majority, particularly when minority populations reside in segregated communities, such as some localities in Ningxia Hui

Autonomous Region, were much more ‘sensitive’ and less likely to give rise to reciprocal engagement between local government and grassroots NGOs. This sensitivity seems

²⁷ E. Uslaner, "Does Diversity Drive Down Trust?" *FEEM Working Paper no.69.2006* (2006), 2.

²⁸ Ibid, 21.

²⁹ J. D. Fearon, "Ethnic and Cultural Diversity by Country."

to be compounded by the religious nature of the dominant minority in Ningxia, as opposed to the largely non-religious minority groups in Yunnan. Table 6-1 lists the average scores of positive-sum reciprocal engagement for each of the localities included in this study.

Table 6-1: Average Positive-Sum Reciprocal Engagement Scores by Locality

Locality	Average Positive-Sum Reciprocal Engagement Score
Yunnan 1	.63
Yunnan 2	.43
Hebei 1	.58
Hebei 2	.38
Ningxia 1	.49
Ningxia 2	.35

Interviewee comments supported and explained this tendency. A central government official responsible for ethnic minority regions discussed the differences between ethnically pluralistic regions, such as Yunnan, and those with larger dominant minorities:

Yunnan is very interesting mix of sensitivity and openness. With the leaders here, you can do many things. On the one hand, you can do many things and the [political] atmosphere is very open. I think this is because of the diversity and plurality here, all the different ethnicities and cultures and traditions. On the other hand, exactly because of this feature of diversity, and because of all the ethnic minorities, it is very sensitive too. But not in the way that places with just one or two dominant minorities are, because in those places there is more risk of social instability. The minorities in Yunnan do not have that trait in general.³⁰

Another central government official overseeing ethnic minority regions discussed NGO operation in minority regions as follows:

Because Yunnan is a minority area, the central government pays great attention to the region, and to the NGOs, religious groups and charities operating there. But because Yunnan is close to the border and it is a Tibetan area, the central government also watches it, and some NGOs, closely. Thus, [NGO] cooperation has to be with the local government. This is helpful to carrying out the work; if you go in [to communities] on your own you'll receive negative attention.

Yunnan is a good area for this [NGO work] because it has a lot of diversity and no

³⁰ Interview BJ93, Government staff. Beijing, April 2011.

issues or conflicts. The northwestern areas have many issues, so it is more sensitive. Now ethnic minority education is a very important topic...because many issues arise from this. There is a contrast between different minority areas. Education can't be 'cut with one knife' (*yidaoque*) [one size fits all]. In Yunnan such things are easier, the environment for them is better.³¹

As suggested above, it seems that ethnic diversity can provide a rationale for policy experimentation and openings for engagement with NGO, but that certain minority areas, such as border regions and areas with one or two dominant minority groups are particularly sensitive. The same official shared that sensitivity in such minority regions can arise from the potential for extremism:

Now one of our big problems is with extremism. The May 12th incident in Xinjiang was a big challenge for us; it was caused by such extremism. Now many Imams enter the region and start Arabic schools for the Muslim minority youth and children. On the surface, they are teaching Arabic, which is permitted by law so that Muslim minorities can study the Koran and attend the mosque. However, in reality they are teaching extremism and teaching the young people to hate the Han. But we cannot stop them.³²

It is clear how civic engagement and NGO activities, particularly educational programs, would be more difficult to carry out under such sensitive conditions, hindering possibilities for reciprocal engagement. Where positive-sum reciprocal engagement between grassroots NGOs and local government agencies does emerge, NGO operations take into account local sensitivities and minority culture. The founder of a Yunnan NGO described the importance of catering to local culture and norms:

The most important factor is the nature of the organization or program, what issue area it works in. For example, there are many NGOs, some do sanitation, some do health, some do environmental protection, some do human rights, some do capacity building, some send money or goods—they are all different in nature. China has a huge legal system, which covers many different places and provinces which are considered minority areas, and have their own local laws and regulations. Yunnan is a province with a high concentration of ethnic minorities. If aspects of the program or organization's existence violate or are not suited to the local customs or traditions of the ethnic minorities, it could suffer opposition. It is difficult to give examples, because each person's habits, customs and lifestyles are different. But one thing is common to all: the yearning for a

³¹ Interview BJ119, Government, Director. Beijing, November 2011.

³² Interview BJ85, Government, Director. Beijing, April 2011.

beautiful and good life.³³

This section has discussed several of the contextual factors thought to contribute to positive-sum reciprocal engagement at the outset of this study, including economic factors such as income levels and inequality, as well as demographic factors such as ethnic composition. While none of these factors were found to have a direct effect on reciprocal outcomes, some did influence the relative openness or sensitivity that characterized a given locality. In particular, localities with large, dominant minority groups, high levels of inequality, and a lack of information affecting official mindsets tended to be more sensitive and less open, and thus less likely to give rise to positive-sum reciprocal engagement between grassroots NGOs and local government agencies.

6.2 Associational Experience

The contextual factor that had the greatest direct effect on the potential for positive-sum reciprocal engagement was a historical one: the presence and quality of prior associational experience in the locality. Theorists have argued that existing stocks of social capital or the prior existence of a vigorous civil society are necessary preconditions for state-society synergy:

Endowments of social capital are obviously crucial to synergy. Putnam's original analysis of the Italian case suggested that stocks of social capital accumulated over long periods of time (perhaps hundreds of years) were the crucial ingredient in creating the "virtuous circle" in which civic engagement nurtured good government and good government in turn fostered civic engagement.³⁴

A few interviewees also brought up the importance of historical factors such as community memory and social networks to civic participation. One Chinese scholar of rural civil society discussed his research findings, placing an emphasis on historical and social factors over income

³³ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

³⁴ P. Evans, "Government Action, Social Capital and Development: Reviewing the Evidence on Synergy."

levels:

Different places vary with respect to local government attitudes. Places where local government [is more open] were less repressed during the Cultural Revolution. In the 30 years since then, some places have experienced many changes. In some places, like Zhejiang and Guangdong, private enterprises are stronger, so the networks of society are stronger. In places where there is a strong reliance on government to make money or get jobs, there isn't a lot of social space... When I did research on village elections...[foreign scholars] were asking: under what conditions of economic growth would people be more likely to participate in elections? But [in my research] it didn't turn out to have much to do with the income of villages. However, it really was the case that people's active participation (*jiji canyu*) varied across different villages. Villages in which it was easier for people to be involved in each others' affairs, places that had higher levels of sociality (*shehui guanliandu gao*). Why was this the case? It had to do with the historical memory, the community memory, social stratification(*shehui fenbua chengdu*), and whether most able-bodied members of the community were outside the village. It was these internal factors that had a greater effect [than income levels]. Actually, inhabitants of villages with an average annual income of 2000 *renmenbi* might be more comfortable than those in villages with average annual incomes of 3000, because they have face (*mianzi*).³⁵

While existing stocks of social capital are clearly important to fostering further civic engagement and, by extension, engagement between citizens and the state, are they necessary preconditions to such engagement? This view has been challenged by empirical studies of cases in which synergy has been observed.³⁶ It is argued that traditional social networks based on locality or kinship, for example, matter only to the extent that a transformation occurs of 'social ties from engines of parochial loyalties into vehicles for more encompassing forms of organization':

The question remains whether in most Third World settings the requisite social capital is in such short supply as to exclude the possibility of synergy or whether the norms and networks that characterize "normal" Third World communities constitute sufficiently fertile ground for the construction of developmental projects that span the public-private divide. The cases analyzed here suggest that prior endowments of social capital are not the key constraining factor. The limits seem to be set less by the initial density of trust and ties at the micro level and more by the difficulties involved in "scaling up" micro-level social capital to generate solidary ties and social action on a scale that is politically and economically efficacious.³⁷

³⁵ Interview BJ12, Academic, researcher. Beijing, February 2010.

³⁶ W. F. Lam, "Institutional Design of Public Agencies and Coproduction: A Study of Irrigation Associations in Taiwan," *World Development* 24, no. 6 (1996), 1039-1054.

³⁷ P. Evans, "Government Action, Social Capital and Development: Reviewing the Evidence on Synergy," 1125.

As suggested above, the prior existence of such ‘encompassing forms of organization’ is one contextual factor that had a significant effect on the emergence of positive-sum reciprocal engagement between grassroots NGOs and local government departments. The numbers of social organizations that have existed and operated in a given locality, regardless of whether they are still in existence, as well as the positivity or negativity of prior associational experience are important factors in the establishment of positive-sum reciprocal engagement.

Experience in the field indicates that where prior existence of social organizations in a region has been characterized by negative experience (for example, the existence of scandals), the social space open to existing organizations contracts, and their ability to engage with local government is constrained. On the other hand, where a locality enjoys a lengthier and positive or neutral experience of social organization activity, the possibilities for such engagement are heightened.

Associational experience in a given locality can be of three kinds. Government-organized organizations, such as professional associations, volunteer groups, and charities that exist and operate in an area are widespread and relatively standardized. Examples of such organizations include potato planting associations, Youth League volunteer groups, environmental protection associations, and conflict resolution organizations. Because there is little variation over time and across localities with respect to associational experience that is government-organized, it was not possible to gauge the effects of such experience on possibilities for reciprocal engagement.³⁸

Organizations from outside the locality may also carry out short-term projects in the area, and while several localities had experience of foreign foundations and charities implementing

³⁸ Government-organized associations and organizations seem relatively standardized, in that the same organization exists in parallel in each locality and at each administrative level. For example, there will generally be one environmental protection volunteers association under the Environmental Protection Bureau at each administrative level. However, this observation is largely based on my experience in the field, as I have not been able to find statistical data to confirm it.

projects in the area, there was no evidence of Chinese organizations from outside having entered the selected localities. In one locality with a high incidence of HIV/AIDS, for example, a large number of foreign foundations, including Save the Children, the Clinton Foundation, the China-Australia Project, and World Vision had all carried out programs in collaboration with local government. Experience with such organizations seems to facilitate positive-sum reciprocal engagement in the sense that it familiarizes local officials with the mission and methods of nonprofit sector. The director of an educational NGO suggested that possibilities for cooperation with local government depend on:

...the degree to which the local government is open to NGOs, because in [this locality] there are many NGOs and a lot of money coming from outside, so they are less conservative and more open. But also different regions vary in terms of results. For example, Yunnan is easier than other places in terms of NGO development, but I don't know the reason. Different provinces will have different experiences. Local authorities' recognition or approval (*renke*) of NGOs will vary.³⁹

Finally, the history of local, grassroots organizations in a locality seems to have the most significant effect on levels of positive-sum reciprocal engagement. This experience includes both local grassroots NGOs of the type considered in this study, as well as more traditional forms of organization, such as temple associations or folk music groups. To the extent that local government agencies were aware of, or had worked with, such organizations in the past (if this experience was positive or neutral), they were more trusting and open to engaging with similar groups. This meant that the relevant factor was not the number of such local organizations currently in existence, but those that had existed in the recent past, whether or not they had survived. It is also interesting to note that the official number of registered social organizations in a given locality, which is usually quite large because it includes primarily government-organized

³⁹ Interview Y252, NGO, staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

organizations, did not bear a relationship to levels of reciprocal engagement.⁴⁰

Associational experience can pave the way for positive-sum reciprocal engagement between grassroots NGOs and local government by enhancing the local populace and local government's familiarity with the nonprofit sector. According to one interviewee, a cooperative relationship depends on 'the social context and background. For example, if the social context recognizes and understands NGOs, and thinks they should receive attention from government, this will have an effect.'⁴¹ Several NGO interviewees faced obstacles in engaging with local government simply because local officials were unfamiliar with public benefit work and suspicious of anyone offering a 'free lunch'.⁴² The founder of an educational NGO working in public schools described the response of Education Bureau and school officials as follows: 'Rejection and misunderstandings arise...if they have been confused by materialism, they think there is no such thing as what you are doing, they don't believe you would not ask for a salary and work in their school.'⁴³

It is not only the extent of associational experience that matters, but also its quality. According to a significant number of interviewees, one of the greatest obstacles to engagement between grassroots NGOs and local government is negative associational experience in the locality:

You have to look at the work and situation of the organization. For example, of course every organization will work towards its own goals, towards its own direction of contributing to the development of the community. In the process, they may engage in some actions that may not be suitable, or ways of working (*gongzuo fangshi*) or choices that are not appropriate. These will have a negative effect. This will affect the local government and their attitude, and how they see these organizations. For the common

⁴⁰ Based on 2011 statistics from the Ministry of Civil Affairs *2011 nian 4 jidu gesheng minzheng shiye tongji shuju* www.mca.gov.cn accessed February 12, 2012.

⁴¹ Interview H259, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August, 2010.

⁴² See Yan's discussion of the prevalence in contemporary Chinese society of 'disbelief in unselfish compassion.' Y. Yan, "The Good Samaritan's New Trouble: A Study of the Changing Moral Landscape in Contemporary China," *Social Anthropology* 17, no. 1 (2009), 9-24.

⁴³ Ibid.

people and villagers too, the way they see these organizations will change. They will affect the perception of such organizations.⁴⁴

A prior scandal or incident relating to NGOs, or ‘if some issue has come up (*shiqing chuxian*)’⁴⁵ can make officials particularly wary. Local officials who have welcomed, or even tolerated, civic engagement that later created an incident seem to be ‘once bitten, twice shy.’ Past scandals can cause local authorities to enforce stricter controls on such organizations, narrowing spaces available for operation and engagement with the state. According to the founder of one educational NGO:

Why are some places more cooperative? If places have had some scandal in the past, they will control it very tightly. ... There are also some organizations that have other purposes, not just public welfare (*gongyi*), but private gain (*sili*). During the Wenchuan earthquake, there were many organizations that deceived the people. At the lower levels it is more and more difficult because they [the leaders] don’t understand the national policy.⁴⁶

One of the common types of scandals relating to the work of NGOs that can lead to such tightening of control is misuse of charitable funds. While, in recent years, this has been an increasingly common and problematic issue on a national scale,⁴⁷ even small-scale, localized scandals have presented obstacles to grassroots NGOs trying to engage with local officials. An environmental NGO founder described one such scandal in the locality, in which an orphanage founded by a local citizen received significant funds from a US-based charitable organization for several years, before it was discovered that funds were being misused and the orphanage founder ran away with the remaining funds. The orphanage was registered (*guakao*) under the local Education Bureau as an NGO, and the Bureau was then involved in a lawsuit about the issue for several years. Clearly, a government department that has been embroiled in such an ordeal, expending significant resources and losing face with senior government departments and foreign

⁴⁴ Interview N236, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

⁴⁵ Interview H259, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August, 2010.

⁴⁶ Interview H168, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, November 2010.

⁴⁷ See the recent explosion of press about the 2011 Red Cross Guo Meimei scandal.

organizations, would be much more wary about engaging with grassroots NGOs in future.

As further examples show, the effects of such an incident can extend beyond a given locality, depending on the size of the scandal, sometimes creating obstacles to engagement across a whole province. The founder of an educational NGO describes how a scandal in the region proved to be a challenge for the organization in the initial months of its establishment:

At the beginning, I had high hopes. I thought this organization's establishment would be of great assistance to the local people. I thought the government would really support it. But when I went to talk to them, I saw that the situation was not so. Because of external reasons, when something is not well understood, they just watch and wait to see if this organization...what it is doing. If you do well, they may cooperate with you. If you do something bad, this will cause your work to come to an end, because this is within the scope of their work, part of their work. I've been seeking cooperation from the beginning, but it was very difficult, because there was no such organization here in the past, this is a new phenomenon here and they don't understand it. So we have to do some work for them to see. It is the negative effects of such groups in the past that make them worried. For example, there was a Christian group that did some things, so there was an Autonomous Region-wide notice to not welcome these kinds of organizations or cooperate with them. So I went every so often to visit [local officials], and in my heart I thought if I visit them and let them know that there is such an organization existing here, doing this kind of work, they will eventually cooperate. We have hope and are waiting for their approval or recognition (*renke*) and striving for (*zhengqu*) their approval or recognition. But we have not yet achieved this.⁴⁸

Scandals having to do with religious issues, such as the one described above, were a relatively common and serious form of negative associational experience that stood in the way of positive-sum reciprocal engagement in a locality. One of the most direct manifestations of their influence was the way they immediately made registration more difficult:

I had wanted to register for over a year, but because of the situation with Falungong at the time, Civil Affairs had issued a guiding document preventing the registration of associations, so all the associations were stuck and couldn't register. We didn't know this, so we kept running back and forth to try to register, but were unable. They [local authorities] just kept telling us to go and get this and that. It was very painful. I felt as though there was no way forward (*meiyou lu kezou*), because if you don't register, you are illegal (*feifa*). But no one was listening to our voice, and they didn't tell us the reason [that we couldn't register].⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Interview N236, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

⁴⁹ Interview H261, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

The environmental association discussed above, which operated without registration for four years, was eventually able to register as an NGO, and is now characterized by relatively high levels of reciprocal engagement with the local Environmental Protection Bureau and several other government departments. Another environmental association was unable to register as an NGO because of negative associational experience related to religion, but got around the issue by registering as a business.

The organization was established on Feb 2nd, 2000 in order to participate in the 2000 Earth Day national environmental movement.... We had tried to register for three years, but the Municipal Environmental Protection Bureau couldn't become our sponsoring organization. Then we tried to register again in [a county under the municipality]. But because a Taoist organization had registered incorrectly, they discontinued all registration. So we registered under the Bureau of Industry and Commerce, but haven't completed the necessary annual audit for a while, so it's as though we are not registered.⁵⁰

For the above organization, securing registration as an NGO, as a business, or not having a clear registration status at all, did not seem to make much difference in its ability to operate. For other organizations, however, the effects of negative associational experience can be so severe that not only their legal status, but also their ability to operate, and thus their existence, is threatened. NGOs that operate in such a way as to damage the image of local government, in particular, are subject to being shut down and form negative associational experience that can limit other NGOs in the area:

Government will limit [this kind of] organization. [This locality] has had such experience. The NGO may be unwise in the methods it employs, it...would be very critical of government. Naturally, they would be less tolerant (*rongren*) and this kind of NGO would have difficulty surviving in this area. So, in certain meetings, the county leader or county committee party secretary would name names. This would limit the organization's functioning, not only with government, but among the people too, and the communities. Under these conditions, you just can't continue.⁵¹

While negative associational experience primarily affects other grassroots NGOs in a given

⁵⁰ Interview H165, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

⁵¹ Interview Y134, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, May 2010.

locality, possibilities for positive-sum reciprocal engagement can also be hindered by negative experience with foreign NGOs and any connections grassroots NGOs may have with these organizations. The founder of one grassroots environmental NGO believed that the fact that his organization was receiving funding and program support from a foreign foundation generated suspicion in local authorities, and hampered his organization's ability to engage with local government.⁵² The director of an educational organization explained that applying for funding from one particular foreign NGO with operations in China would jeopardize their relationship with local government:

In the past few years, some foundations have engaged in action with negative effects in China. One of these, for example, is Oxfam. The Civil Affairs Bureau told us we can't apply to Oxfam [for funding], even though Oxfam [like this NGO] supports a lot of social gender work. The security departments observe the NGO's work, and people that understand can see that this [receiving funding from an organization like Oxfam] is normal, but people that don't understand get worried and think that there must be some problem with your organization. This can cause misunderstandings with outsiders.⁵³

Oxfam had also been supporting another grassroots NGO in the same locality and included this study that publicized government misuse of local natural resources, and was characterized by weak relationships with local government.⁵⁴ For reasons even Oxfam itself is unclear about, the organization has, in recent years been seen in a negative light by Chinese authorities. It is believed that a notice issued in February 2010 by the Ministry of Education characterized Oxfam of being 'ill-intentioned.'⁵⁵

6.3 Conclusion

This chapter has covered features of the social and political context, in addition to characteristics of public institutions and grassroots NGOs discussed in previous chapters, with

⁵² Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁵³ Interview Y158, NGO, director. Yunnan, July 2010.

⁵⁴ Interview Y155, NGO, Staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

⁵⁵ T. W. Ng, "New Controls on Religious Groups' Work," *South China Morning Post* February 28, 2012, 2012.

a view to identifying which contextual features facilitate positive-sum reciprocal engagement between grassroots NGOs and local government agencies. While I found that contextual factors, like those relating to characteristics of public institutions, generally carry less weight than characteristics of grassroots NGOs themselves, sensitivity and low levels of prior associational experience tended to make it more difficult for positive-sum reciprocal engagement to occur. The sensitivity of a locality can arise from high levels of inequality, the dominance of single minority groups, and weak flows of information leading to parochial mindsets among officials. Negative associational experience in a locality, particularly experience that has touched on religious or political sensitivities, or involved the mismanagement of funds, can also heighten sensitivity in a locality and hinder reciprocal engagement.

The extent of associational experience in a locality, particularly positive or neutral experience, also had a direct effect on reciprocal outcomes. One of the implications of this finding is that the natural accumulation of associational experience which is taking place across the country can facilitate future positive-sum reciprocal engagement. However, another implication is that in order to facilitate reciprocal engagement, such experience must be positive. Negative associational experience could contract the space open to grassroots NGOs and hamper positive-sum reciprocal engagement.

Chapter 7: Mechanisms of Policy Influence

7.1 Introduction

Observers have had high hopes for nongovernmental organizations as important new political actors, emphasizing their significant contributions to political life and political change,¹ the transformational impact they can have on political structures and processes,² and their ability to influence legislation and public policy.³ However, 'the relationships between NGOs and governments are so heterogeneous that it is difficult to generalize about the potential impact of NGOs on the state and patterns of governance.'⁴ NGOs are not always successful in their efforts to exert pressure on local elites or local governments, and though they can act as catalysts for change,⁵ they often have an interest in maintaining the status quo.⁶ 'There is no simple or consistent story of good NGOs confronting evil governments.'⁷

Scholars of Chinese civil society, too, have been preoccupied with the question: to what extent are China's social organizations able to exert an influence on the state? The answer varies according to the type of social group under consideration. Government-organized NGOs, like official and semi-official think tanks, are inherently characterized by close ties with

¹ See G. Clarke, "Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Politics in the Developing World," *Political Studies* 46, no. 1 (1998), 36-52.

² W. F. Fisher, "Doing Good? The Politics and Antipolitics of NGO Practices," *Annual Review of Anthropology* (1997), 439-464.

³ D. M. Edwards, "Too Close for Comfort? The Impact of Official Aid on Nongovernmental Organizations," *World Development* 24, no. 6 (1996), 961-973.

⁴ W. F. Fisher, "Doing Good? The Politics and Antipolitics of NGO Practices."

⁵ See A. O. Hirschman, *Getting Ahead Collectively: Grassroots Experiences in Latin America* (New York: Pergamon, 1984); B. Sanyal, *Cooperative Autonomy: The Dialectics of State-NGO Relationships in Developing Countries* (Geneva: ILO, 1994).

⁶ See N. Chazan, "Africa's Democratic Challenge," *World Policy Journal* 9, no. 2 (1992), 279-307; A. Fowler, "Non-governmental Organizations as Agents of Democratization: An African Perspective," *Journal of International Development* 5, no. 3 (1993), 325-339; S. N. Ndegwa, *The Two Faces of Civil Society: NGOs and Politics in Africa* Kumarian Press, 1996).

⁷ W. F. Fisher, "Doing Good? The Politics and Antipolitics of NGO Practices."

the state and have opportunities to serve policy advisory functions.⁸ Large private foundations and international NGOs operating in China are also often able to bring significant financial power and international legitimacy to bear in exerting pressure and influence on government departments with which they collaborate. But small, grassroots NGOs operating in rural areas or small cities do not initially benefit from pre-existing ties to the Chinese government, foreign governments or large, well-known international agencies. Are they, as many observers suggest, generally limited to the provision of social or cultural services?⁹ There is a paucity of empirical work on these grassroots NGOs,¹⁰ even though they constitute the bulk of the third sector, both in terms of numbers and distribution,¹¹ and, according to some scholars, represent 'the most meaningful indicator of civil society.'¹² To understand to what extent and in what ways these grassroots organizations are able to exert an influence on government policy and practice allows for deeper insight into 'the interpenetration and mutual shaping of state and society.'¹³

In his work on authoritarian resilience, Nathan argues that the Chinese regime has 'developed a series of input institutions (that is, institutions that people can use to apprise the state of their concerns) that allow Chinese to believe that they have some influence on policy

⁸ K. W. Foster, "Associations in the Embrace of an Authoritarian State: State Domination of Society?" *Studies in Comparative International Development (SCID)* 35, no. 4 (2001), 84-109.

⁹ Most studies of Chinese NGOs take this view, particularly with regard to grassroots NGOs. For a few examples see J. S. Ashley and P. Y. He, "Opening One Eye and Closing the Other: The Legal and Regulatory Environment for Grassroots NGOs in China Today," *Boston University International Law Journal* 26 (2008), 29-96; Q. Ma, "The Governance of NGOs in China since 1978: How Much Autonomy?" *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2002), 305; S. Y. Tang and X. Zhan, "Civic Environmental NGOs, Civil Society, and Democratisation in China," *The Journal of Development Studies* 44, no. 3 (2008), 425-448.

¹⁰ X. Zhang and R. Baum, "Civil Society and the Anatomy of a Rural NGO," *The China Journal* (2004), 97-107.

¹¹ M. Wang, "The Development and Present Situation of NGOs in China," *Social Sciences in China - English Edition* 28, no. 2 (2007), 96.

¹² Ma, "The governance of NGOs in China since 1978: How much autonomy?"

¹³ G. Yang and C. Calhoun, "Media, Civil Society, and the Rise of a Green Public Sphere in China," *China Information* 21, no. 2 (2007), 211.

decisions and personnel choices at the local level.’¹⁴ Grassroots NGOs can act as such input institutions, but do authorities only allow people to believe they can have such an influence, or is the possibility of such influence real?

Among interviewees in this study, opinions varied as to whether real policy input was realizable. Several of the NGOs included in this study did not believe they had any ability to impact policy. One NGO founder said of government, ‘because they are an administrative organization, because they haven’t really clearly said how they should work with this kind of organization. It is not their main work. For us there is not really any effect on policy, they don’t listen to our opinions.’¹⁵ Another NGO founder expressed similar lack of hope: ‘I feel I don’t know how to influence them, and cannot influence them (*yingxiang budong tamen*). Our strength is weak. They say we can go do things, but what we say doesn’t have a lot of weight in their eyes.’¹⁶

But the majority of NGOs in this study did express a belief in their ability to exert an influence on government policy, and provided examples of their ability to do so to a limited extent: ‘big policies are more difficult...[but] in small things we can do some advocacy and have an effect.’¹⁷ Media reports, citing examples from the experience of environmental NGOs, are also reporting that NGOs ‘played a more active role in influencing the government’s policy making, supervising the government’s task of environmental responsibility and raising public awareness in environmental protection.’¹⁸

This chapter seeks to uncover mechanisms through which influence is exerted by NGOs on the Chinese state. The object of this influence is government policy and practice,

¹⁴ A. J. Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience," *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 1 (2003), 6-17.

¹⁵ Interview N142, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

¹⁶ Interview H259, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August, 2010.

¹⁷ Interview H165, NGO, founder director. Hebei, August 2010.

¹⁸ "China's Environmental NGOs' Influence increases," *Xinhua* October 31, 2008.

broadly defined. At the central level, this can encompass a range of direction, from high policy articulated by the State Council and Politburo in legislation and plans, to guiding documents and interpretations issued by relevant ministries and bureaus, to less concrete central directives and approaches instituted through informal means, to the methods invented by bureaucracies in implementing such directives, etc. Similar patterns are replicated at provincial and local levels.¹⁹ Most of the examples described in this chapter are of changes made at very local levels, while others might be more accurately classified as changes in procedure, rather than policy per se. Some distinction should be made between high policy and the realm in which lower level governments exercise a certain degree of latitude in implementing or developing policy. Most of the grassroots NGOs included in this study, when they aim at 'policy change', do so in a highly localized context, typically affecting the implementation of existing policies at the local, or at most, provincial, level. However, as the remainder of this chapter will discuss, they do not do so to the exclusion of eventual effect on high policy. First, the gaps often left by high policy are so large that local implementation is, in effect, policy. Second, even a well articulated policy is significantly affected by its implementation, particularly where local bureaucrats are given flexibility, which is quite often.²⁰ Last, when so much of high policy is informed by local experience and models of success and experimentation, local experiences and learning developed from policy implementation can sometimes be scaled up and more widely adopted. Thus, relatively small changes in local practice can have long-term, multiplier effects.

¹⁹ For a description of the lawmaking and policy-making process in China see K. J. O'Brien, "Legislative Development and Chinese Political Change," *Studies in Comparative Communism* 22, no. 1 (1989), 59; B. Van Rooij, *Regulating Land and Pollution in China: Lawmaking, Compliance, and Enforcement: Theory and Cases* Amsterdam University Press, 2006).

²⁰ See M. Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* Russell Sage Foundation Publications, 2010); K. J. O'Brien and L. Li, "Selective Policy Implementation in Rural China," *Comparative Politics* (1999), 167-186.

Of course, even in western industrialized nations, the policy process is seen as a black box, and it is notoriously difficult to prove policy influence. In the Chinese context, where the policy process is characterized by a lack of transparency, direct causations would be impossible to prove. Nonetheless, based on analysis of field observations and interviews, I argue that grassroots NGOs are able to exert some influence on the formulation and implementation of policy in several social domains at the local level.

This chapter discusses policy influence as one of the significant outcomes of positive-sum reciprocal engagement between local government agencies and grassroots NGOs. As described in *Chapter 3*, these relationships, by definition, include a component of mutual influence, and the extent to which policy influence occurs seems to have a great deal to do with the presence and depth of reciprocal engagement with local government agencies.

This chapter provides examples gathered through fieldwork of two mechanisms by which grassroots NGOs have been able to influence government policy through what they say and by what they do. First, NGOs are able to affect discourses on a number of social issues and act as channels for the conveyance of policy information and suggestions in the context of a mass-line model of communication between state and society. They are also able to model innovations and contribute to policy formulation and reform in carrying out concrete programs, which is made possible by an environment characterized by policy flexibility and amenable to experimental points.

7.2 Mechanism 1: Participation in Discourse and Deliberation

The participation of NGOs and individuals associated with them in discourses²¹ about social issues is another mechanism through which they are able to exert influence on policy. ‘Substantive campaigns raised by NGOs place alternative considerations into the minds of

²¹ I use this term loosely to refer to dialogue that happens around social issues.

decision-makers through the exercise of normative authority, lobbying and the carrying of ideas.²² Both instrumental rationality and moral argumentation are processes through which governments interact with NGO advocates.²³

In the Chinese context, the central government has highlighted the function NGOs play in channeling communication between citizens and governments. Chen Guangyao, deputy director at the Non-Governmental Organizations Administrative Bureau under the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs, asserts that NGOs 'serve as a bridge for mutual communication that will link government and society,' 'disseminate expert information' and, 'through various means, NGOs help the government draft laws, regulations and policies.'²⁴ Wang Qiyao, director of the Policy Research Center under the Ministry of Civil Affairs commented of NGOs: 'As organizations, they can represent individuals to voice their concerns, coordinate dialogues with the government, and supervise the government, which are quite important to the building of democracy in China.'²⁵

7.3 Context: The Mass-Line Model

For some scholars, official statements such as these are manifestations of mass-line vocabulary, evidence that the pattern of political influence wielded by NGOs fits characteristics of the mass-line model.²⁶ This model is one in which information about the people's needs and demands is systematized and incorporated into policy by the Communist

²² J. Donnelly, "International Human Rights: A Regime Analysis," *International Organization* 40, no. 03 (1986), 599-642; K. Sikkink, "The Power of Principled Ideas: Human Rights Policies in the United States and Western Europe," in *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change*, eds. J. Goldstein and R. O. Keohane (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), 141.

²³ T. Risse and K. Sikkink, *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 12-14.

²⁴ Deputy director at the Non-Governmental Organizations Administrative Bureau under the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs, G. Y. Chen, "China's Nongovernmental Organizations," *International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law* 3 (2001) accessed September 12, 2011.

²⁵ "Official: NGOs can play bigger role in China's human rights protection," *Xinhua* (2008), accessed Feb 5, 2011.

²⁶ T. Salmenkari, "Searching for a Chinese Civil Society Model," *China Information* 22, no. 3 (2008), 397.

Party. The populace then provides feedback on official policies during the implementation process. This is an 'input, output, and feedback process' that has also been applied by the Party in its relationships with mass organizations, democratic parties, and professional associations.²⁷

Salmenkari argues that Chinese NGOs 'work in a social and political environment characterized by deliberative roles for social actors' and that this deliberation is directed to the state as well as to the public. The state 'uses NGOs as objects of consultation for improving its policymaking. This model of consultation is based on the mass-line model and on its application within democratic centralist administrative hierarchies.'²⁸ Democratic centralism is a Leninist principle of organization that 'combines central leadership with local initiative and creative activity and with the responsibility of the each state body and official for the work entrusted to them.'²⁹ The principle is also referred to in Article 3 of the 1982 Constitution of the People's Republic of China.

In the Chinese context, 'Hierarchical mass-line type of consultation through a democratic centralist process is meant to provide truthful and many-sided information for policymaking.'³⁰ Consistent with the argument I have presented above, the model encourages vertical and cooperative linkages with the state and 'assumes permeating boundaries between social organizations and the state, especially when it comes to individual contacts between state officials and ordinary citizens, since these are contacts the mass line explicitly promotes.'³¹

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ USSR Constitution of 1977, art. III.

³⁰ Salmenkari, "Searching for a Chinese Civil Society Model."

³¹ M. Blecher, "The Mass Line and Leader-Mass Relations and Communication in Basic-Level Rural Communities," in *China's New Social Fabric*, eds. G. C. Chu and F. L. K. Hsu (London: Kegan Paul Intl, 1983), 63-88.

In contrast to a typical advocacy model in which an independent civil society influences the government through pressure, the mass-line model allows for influence to be exerted through providing the state with information. In this sense, 'this model seems to concentrate on the *deliberative* functions of civil society rather than on its associative functions.' Of the two types of information to be relayed to the state in this model, information about the situation and needs of social groups has already been assigned to mass organizations designated by the Party to represent these various groups, while the provision of expert information about technical and developmental issues is a task that the Party may expect NGOs, as well as relevant governmental and quasi-governmental units such as think-tanks and policy advisory agencies, to carry out. In this sense, the role of NGOs as seen by the state 'is deliberative and directed towards the solution of problems in official arenas or towards the provision of information for official use.'³² Thus, NGOs can 'apply deliberative means to persuade the government to act. Deliberative power is wielded not by pressuring the government, but rather by introducing and framing issues so that new views and conceptualizations would change the thinking both inside and outside the government.'³³

Grassroots NGOs participate in ongoing dialogue about social issues taking place in the official, semi-official and public realms when they provide 'evidence-based' specialized or expert advice about particular issues, by their involvement in intermediary entities and in public spheres. When they contribute their views, what they say is not always what officialdom wants to hear. In such cases, their survival and the degree to which their input successfully influences policy depends to a large degree on the extent to which their relationships with local government are characterized by positive-sum reciprocal engagement.

³² Salmenkari, "Searching for a Chinese Civil Society Model."

³³ Ibid.

7.3.1 Expert Advice

This participation in discourse can aim specifically at influencing ‘policy or opinion makers with informed, expert research or analysis.’³⁴ For one Chinese scholar, Chinese NGOs are ‘striking a balance in their approach between struggle and cooperation....Rather than simply relying on accountability and protesting, they focused on the ‘practice’ of expertise to provide constructive advice.’³⁵ They have tended to approach ‘efforts to influence in terms that were not merely critiquing government policy but seeking constructive ways of developing and improving it.’³⁶

Other empirical work on Chinese NGOs has noted that these organizations ‘send specialist reports to the local or central government on subjects such as the AIDS situation, environmental risks, work-related health hazards, and lapses in either local government’s or enterprises’ adherence to the official norms.’³⁷ Research and analysis is presented at conferences and seminars to which NGOs, officials, as well as media representatives and academics are invited. Other studies have found that Chinese NGOs engage with local government in intermediary spaces by inviting officials to conferences and training sessions they organize in which dialogue and the exchange of information can occur. This can also happen when NGOs are invited to forums organized by government and centered on their fields of expertise. ‘NGOs take part in government activities, especially at the local level, and offer expertise for policymaking.’³⁸

³⁴ R. Wexler, Y. Xu and N. Young, *NGO Advocacy in China: A Special Report from China Development Brief* (China Development Brief, 2006).

³⁵ Yuxin Lan, Fang Rong and Huijin Yu, "Addressing Global Climate Change and NGO Participation: Lessons from International Experience (*Quanguo Qibou Bianhua Yingdui Yu NGO Canyu: Guoji Jingyan Jiejian*)", *China Nonprofit Review* 1 (2010), 87-105.

³⁶ Wexler, Xu, and Young, "NGO Advocacy in China: A Special Report from China Development Brief."

³⁷ Salmenkari, "Searching for a Chinese Civil Society Model."

³⁸ Ibid.

The preparation of publications and research reports concerning specific social issues is also used as a tool of communication and influence. For example, one organization focused on ethnic minority issues and with a relatively strong relationship with local government conducted an investigation into the influx of outsiders taking over businesses and moving into the local ancient town, driving local residents out, and the effects of this influx on minority culture:

We submitted the report to Ancient Town Management Bureau. They supported this project financially..... But they will frankly talk about their views. For example, this research we did on the ancient town, we criticized the trend that so many outside groups are coming in and taking over ancient town spaces. The government said that the original residents were not local either, they became [the local ethnic minority] and these will also become [the ethnic minority]. Every citizen has their own freedom whether or not to rent, and the historical reasons for moving are different, so it's not just the government's fault, but they thought we were blaming them. So we don't see ourselves as opposed to them, but provide research and opinions so they themselves can reflect on these issues, which may also affect individual interests.³⁹

The founder of a longstanding environmental NGO strongly supported by the local government described how local officials sometimes seek her advice and how she shares her expertise in the field:

We also give the Environmental Protection Bureau some recommendations. For example, after the current director came to office, we had a dialogue with him. We talked about how to build the human resource team (*duimin jianshe*) of the Environmental Protection Bureau. I gave him some suggestions about how to train their staff to nurture their development so they grow together. In their interactions with society, the individual Bureau staff represent, and will affect the image of, the Environmental Protection Bureau. So I thought they should undergo a long-term training process....Another suggestion I gave is to produce an environmental newsletter (*xuanchuan bao*) and to give talks on environmental protection in the district, so that everyone will have an awareness of their work and see the changes they are working for. They also ask us to conduct training for enterprises, etc.⁴⁰

³⁹ Interview Y158, NGO, director. Yunnan, July 2010.

⁴⁰ Interview H261, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

Several of the NGOs in this study included the training of officials as one of their primary areas of activity, either with the purpose of fostering understanding and support for the programs they implement in local areas, or explicitly for the purposes of influencing policy.⁴¹

7.3.2 Involvement in Intermediary Entities

While 'the idea of ongoing public-private intimacy' seen by public administration purists as 'threatening the insulation necessary for clearheaded decisions that are in the public interest' and by market advocates as 'hopelessly muddying the logic of individual incentives and rational resource allocation' is said to offend 'everyone's sense of propriety,'⁴² classic work on the 'blurred public and private divide'⁴³ emphasizes the potential benefits of networks that span the divide between state and civil society. There are fears such relationships can too easily cross the fine line to corruption and clientelism, but 'if the remedy to corruption is seen as the creation of a strict bureaucratic structure to separate the servants of the public from the public, it is likely that behind the closed doors of a centralized system corrupt practices can flourish without much fear of exposure.' Doing so 'may encourage other forms of opportunistic behavior to proliferate along with corruption. When public officials and the citizens they are supposed to serve work together in diverse sets of open, nested arenas, productivity can be higher and all forms of opportunistic behavior are more likely to be exposed, but never totally eliminated.'⁴⁴

⁴¹ Interview N238, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010; Interview H260, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

⁴² P. Evans, "Introduction: Development Strategies Across the Public-Private Divide," *World Development* 24, no. 6 (1996), 1036.

⁴³ Judith Tendler, "'Social Capital and the Public Sector: The Blurred Boundaries between Private and Public' Paper Presented to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences Conference of the Economic Development Working Group, Social Capital and Public Affairs Project (1995).

⁴⁴ E. Ostrom, "Crossing the Great Divide: Coproduction, Synergy, and Development," *World Development* 24, no. 6 (1996), 1073-1087.

With this perspective in view, the multiple hats that China's local officials sometimes wear and their involvement social organizations, acting as board members or advisors can provide them alternate spheres of experience, ownership and participation, socialize them in alternate norms and values, in such a way that these are passed on to other spheres of political engagement. Similarly, the involvement of NGO leaders in formal political and academic spheres can facilitate the flow of learning in the opposite direction.

For instance, one environmental NGO leader also functions as the managing director of the government-organized Provincial Environmental Protection Union, regularly participating in their meetings. He says:

This is good for us, because the public participate in it too. People think that government is doing environmental protection work, so they see that we work for environmental protection too. In this way, by participating, we can speak at these meetings, and can know about the policies. So the Environmental Protection Union has played a big role in our relationships with government. And there are government leaders in the meeting, so twice a year I can participate in these fora and dialogue with them.⁴⁵

Another environmental NGO founder is also a university professor, vice-president of the provincial and municipal Environmental Protection Union, and a CPPCC member for his municipality. He sees these various roles as enabling his NGO work: 'Why can I do this? Because I am in government, media and I can affect the public.... Also I can have an effect and give work to the students I teach.... When we have meetings with government, sometimes I participate as an expert, sometimes as an NGO representative.'⁴⁶

Government-organized associations and fora also provide spaces for issue-related discourse to occur. An environmental science association under a provincial Environmental Protection Bureau explained that those who participate in the association meetings 'have to be representative of society and the government. This is required by policy.' Participants include

⁴⁵ Interview H164, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

⁴⁶ Interview H165, NGO, founder director. Hebei, August 2010.

‘those in fields related to technology and environmental protection: for example, from society to industry representatives and academics.... Through an organization like us, government can hear more about the views and opinions of people. For example, one of the important areas of work is scientific-departmental interaction, training of rural people in scientific and technological knowledge, environmental protection schools, etc. We are an interactive academic association.... This can convey the opinions of the people to the government.’⁴⁷

Other studies have pointed out the tendency of Chinese grassroots NGOs to become involved in umbrella organizations located in Beijing or provincial capitals. These intermediary entities can provide often-isolated grassroots organizations with coordination, exchange, funding, and access to central officials.⁴⁸ Of the 22 organizations included in this study, nine were members of such umbrella organizations.

Relationships with academic institutions, often semi-governmental, are also important channels through which policy recommendations and more informal forms and influence flow. One development NGO was founded by two close friends and members of the local Academy of Social Sciences. They each took on different responsibilities in the two organizations: ‘On this side, I’m the head, on that side, he’s the head.’⁴⁹ A Yunnan environmental NGO highlighted the central role played by another academic in his successful petition to the provincial government to reform microfinance policy.⁵⁰

However, efforts to draw government officials into spaces where dialogue can occur are not always successful:

We work on how government can be more influenced by the common peoples’ views and opinions and merge the interests of different parties. We tried several ways to invite the township government to attend these meetings, but they never come. One

⁴⁷ Interview N176, Government / NGO, director. Ningxia, December 2010.

⁴⁸ Salmenkari, "Searching for a Chinese Civil Society Model."

⁴⁹ Interview YN91, NGO, Government, Academic, deputy director and director. Yunnan, April 2011.

⁵⁰ Interview Y134, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, May 2010.

reason is that they have Party rules that they can't attend outside-Party meetings. Also, they are worried that they will be influenced by our ideas. But we are still trying.⁵¹

When suggestions and feedback are not heeded, some NGOs, particularly those that enjoy significant legitimacy and strong relationships with government, may take other measures:

We give government some suggestions. My own identity is as a CPPCC member (*zhengxie weiyuan*), I wrote my own ideas about the protection of [name of lake], that it is not a scenic tourist area, there are many tourist sites, these are things we don't want to see. If they build some entertainment facilities there, we firmly oppose it (*jianjue fandui*)....we oppose the government to build more construction to the south of the city near the lake. This will affect the biodiversity and birds. And if a flood comes, these developments will certainly be flooded. So as an individual I have to express my own voice. They may accept this opinion; or, on the other hand, they may find it impracticable. As for me, I tell it like I see it when I am with them. But whether or not they absorb it, only time will tell....There also exist other ways to influence them. For example, I may write some recommendations based on my observations, but if these are not heeded, I will go to the media. Some issues can be explored with government, but other issues are very close to our hearts and we have to conveyed more broadly.⁵²

7.3.3 Public Spheres and Media

As the above interviewee points out, the media is another public space in which discourse on social issues takes place, and through which NGO influence can be brought to bear on both state and society. Scholars have noted that in their interactions with mass media, alternative media, and the internet, Chinese NGOs' 'use of public debates and media campaigns has a discursive outcome, since they introduce new discourses into the public sphere.'⁵³ With regard to environmental issues, for example, they posit that 'a fledgling green public sphere is emerging in China' with environmental NGOs as 'its primary discourse-

⁵¹ Interview Y155, NGO, Staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

⁵² Interview H261, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

⁵³ Yang and Calhoun, "Media, civil society, and the rise of a green public sphere in China," 211.

producing publics.⁵⁴ A Chinese media academic also referred to the media and internet as equivalent to Habermas' 'public sphere' where the people and NGOs can 'participate actively in public issues and the reform of the country.'⁵⁵

Since media is used as a channel for distribution of information to both administrators and the public, it is consistent with the mass-line model. NGOs can 'use the media both to invite government attention to the problems and to arouse public awareness.'⁵⁶ Particularly when partnerships are forged with journalists who are 'advocate professionals,' able to draw on the Chinese intellectual and media tradition and contribute to media coverage which strives explicitly to 'educate the populace and build a better China.'⁵⁷ Media can plan an agenda-setting role, giving voice to the people's voice as well as to the Party's, though this is generally accomplished without challenging the political order.⁵⁸

Media can be used as an indirect channel to voice opinions. One interviewee said: 'if you want to criticize (*pipíng*) the government, it is hard to do it directly, you can only do it through the media.' At the same time, care needs to be exercised:

They will worry, because I do social work. [They will think] "In writing your reports, will you share too many negative things with outside?" So we will say: "I am just describing it like this, is that alright? You can just give me the official statistics that are public." Or if I want to accept media interviews, I have to first tell them and make sure its ok with them, because sometimes the media just looks at it from their own perspective. It reflects social problems, so if it has a negative effect on the government you have to be cautious. Sometimes media attention is not necessarily a good thing.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Ibid, 226-230.

⁵⁵ Interview BJ08, Academic, professor. Beijing, September 2009.

⁵⁶ Salmenkari, "Searching for a Chinese Civil Society Model."

⁵⁷ J. Hassid, "Four Models of the Fourth Estate: A Typology of Contemporary Chinese Journalists," *The China Quarterly* 208, no. 1 (2011), 813-832.

⁵⁸ A. Chan, "From Propaganda to Hegemony: Jiaodian Fangtan and China's Media Policy," *Journal of Contemporary China* 11, no. 30 (2002), 35-51.

⁵⁹ Interview Y250, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, July 2010.

Another respondent gave an analogy of NGOs advancing on two legs: a strong program and strong relationships with government. When one of these is weak, however, the media can be a 'crutch' to carry NGOs through.⁶⁰ Where wary government officials are unwilling to approve projects, NGOs that 'have had quite a few reports in newspapers and on TV' have faced less opposition.⁶¹

An environmental association, part of whose work is exposing government environmental violations through the media, described how the power of the media is channeled to fulfill their mission and to provide social legitimacy:

Through our own effort, we raise people's awareness of environmental protection, and their initiative to protect the environment.... Through media, we draw attention to issues and government offices that are not protecting the environment. Because the environment always comes second to economic growth....so one of our objectives was to improve journalists' environmental consciousness and the degree of their participation, so that there can be more good articles and reports on the environment so that this awareness could be raised. This is possible, to have the media as the main promoter.... We don't have a lot of dependence on government. We can still do our thing regardless of whether the supports us or not.⁶²

The media is also used by NGOs to influence society and government by introducing new ideas and approaches into public discourse. Government and NGO interviewees reported that NGOs have been effective in introducing new environmental concepts and terminology into official discourse,⁶³ often through media channels: 'It is very clear that we have had a subtle influence (*qianyimohua de yingxiang*). We often appear in the news and on TV. And we have forums where we speak. The leaders listen....'⁶⁴

Another organization publicized their work to protect a local forest in the media. As a result, the local government ended up providing significant funds for its expansion. The

⁶⁰ Interview Y153, NGO, staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

⁶¹ Interview Y134, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁶² Interview N142, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

⁶³ Interview H165, NGO, founder director. Hebei, August 2010.

⁶⁴ Interview H164, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

founder confirmed that ‘new environmental ideas (*linian*) and words...are being told to the people through our efforts in the media.’⁶⁵

These examples indicate that grassroots NGOs may be able to use the channel of media to influence government discourse and practice. With regard to policy influence, however, the results of this study differed from other work on the subject. While other empirical studies of NGOs (usually larger or better known NGOs in Beijing or major cities) have found evidence that NGOs are able to ‘initiate real policy change’⁶⁶ using the media, for the NGOs included in this study, using media to pressure for change was not considered an effective strategy. In fact, among the NGOs included in this study, the only incidence where an NGO actively tried to use media as a strategy to change government policy was largely unsuccessful.

An environmental NGO with strong ties to international actors and a tendency towards traditional civil society approaches wanted villagers to be compensated for natural resources being used for tourism. According to another environmental NGO in the area:

What they did was a little extreme. They exposed the whole story of [the city] misusing [the resource] on Hong Kong’s Phoenix TV station. The government was quite angry: “You could have just told me! (*ni genwo shuojiu xing*) Why would you go and publicize (*shuochuqu*) these kinds of ugly things on Hong Kong Phoenix TV? This is an obstacle to our tourism and negatively affects our development!” So there was some discord.After this happened she [the director] said it was also very painful for them. She said this program was very difficult to move forward after that, so they were trying to think of ways to cooperate with the government and they dedicated much money and energy to this task. For example, local farmers wanted to buy fruit trees, so the organization got funds to buy fruit trees for them, they created water management associations for the villagers, they bought cement to build sewers for them, and so on. Much of their important work regressed because of this incident.⁶⁷

In an interview with the director of the program, she explained that the NGO decided to shift its strategy in 2006 to strengthen cooperation with local government and try to effect

⁶⁵ Interview H165, NGO, founder director. Hebei, August 2010.

⁶⁶ Salmenkari, "Searching for a Chinese Civil Society Model," 406.

⁶⁷ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

policy change in other ways. After the shift, the organization was more cautious about how they used media coverage:

We had a lot of media coverage, but the government was very opposed to the negative publicity so we were very careful that these things would not go outside [to the general public] because this would affect our relationship [with the government]. The government is very sensitive. I remember not long ago, one of the officials said: 'I see that lately there are fewer and fewer negative media reports (*baodao*) about our government online. So you are slowly learning and changing.'⁶⁸

While some of the more longstanding NGOs included in this study have been able to establish independent relationships with media, many of the organizations relate to media through government contacts.⁶⁹ For example, an educational NGO was unable to get journalists to report on its rural education projects until after they had carried out a training of local teachers organized through the district Education Bureau. The Education Bureau officials independently contacted and invited journalists from the local TV station to report on the training, and other media reports of the NGO's work followed. An environmental NGO in the same region experienced similar obstacles:

Only after we collaborated with a government agency, or worked in a village, the village leader or government leader would contact the media, and then they would come. If we contacted them ourselves, they probably wouldn't come. We would talk to them informally about the program when we met, and they would say "When we have time we want to come and see." But they never came.⁷⁰

While interviewees occasionally expressed the need to be cautious about the picture of government and local conditions they painted in media, they generally expressed more concern about the effects of media publicity on healthy organizational growth. Too much positive attention from media and public can set charismatic NGO leaders up for a fall and should be

⁶⁸ Interview Y155, NGO, Staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

⁶⁹ Interview Y132, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁷⁰ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

used sparingly.⁷¹ In contrast to some large, well-known Chinese NGOs that thrive on media attention, interviewees working at the grassroots often recognized the greater importance of effective programs and practical results to their long-term development. Even where media publicity is available to them, some NGO leaders note that where they ‘haven’t done anything with [real meaningful] results yet, if we immediately go and do promotion work (*xuanchuan*), it comes across as very empty; it may not be good.’⁷²

If we have not yet had any great effect till now, it is not suitable to use loudspeakers to promote what we do. Impact will be achieved through the gradual expansion of your effective action, not through the media.... My work should rely on my own actual strength (*shili*), it should be carried out steadily and peacefully (*tata shishi*), and its light should be allowed to slowly expand. Otherwise, if they put me up on some pedestal, I won’t be able to come down.⁷³

In general, the grassroots NGOs in this study tended to use media as a forum to influence government discourse, to showcase their work and to raise government’s and the public’s consciousness about issues, rather than as a tool to pressure government to change policy.

7.3.4 Coordination of Dialogue

In addition to being consulted as experts, participating in semi-governmental, academic and public forums, and exerting influence through the media, NGOs can occasionally play the role of mediators in ongoing dialogues and disputes between government and society. In one notable case, an environmental contamination dispute caused by a coal-fired power plant had escalated to the attention of the central government and local authorities were paralyzed in dealing with aggrieved citizens. Local leaders were unwilling to directly engage with the citizenry, so the involvement of one environmental NGO included in this study was enlisted

⁷¹ Interview H261, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

⁷² Interview N236, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

⁷³ Interview H260, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

by the villagers. The NGO mediated six-sided roundtable discussions in which the polluted (the villagers), the polluter (the local plant), administrators (local and central government), experts (environmental experts), media (television stations and newspapers), and the organizer (the NGO), were represented.

Though he faced significant opposition and political pressure, the organization's founder was able to use strategies such as establishing ties with local and central authorities and strategic framing to effect policy change. As a result of discussions, the government decided to 'increase their responsibility and care for the polluted, and they established relevant policies based on this. When the government comes across real problems, they will not evade (*huibi*) them.'⁷⁴

Grassroots NGOs can use their unique role to affect policy outcomes, but this role does not, as observers might expect, necessarily involve taking sides or representing constituencies: 'What is the role of public benefit organizations? ...They can independently talk and do things, but they have to stand in the third place. They cannot stand in the place of government, or media, or companies. You may represent the villagers but you are not them.'⁷⁵

7.4 Mechanism 2: Advocacy in Action

The previous mechanism shows how grassroots NGOs influence government policy through discursive participation—by what they *say*. The other important mechanism through which policy influence occurs is when grassroots NGOs model innovations in action—by what they *do*.

⁷⁴ For a more detailed account and further analysis of this informant's experience, please refer to the special appendix at the end of this chapter.

⁷⁵ Interview H164, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

Even globally, many NGOs tie advocacy functions to operational ones, and therefore ‘act as both advocates and practitioners.’⁷⁶ While emphasis is usually placed on the importance of the advocacy function in policy influence, in the Chinese context, implementation can be just as important, if not more effective in informing policy. The kind of ‘advocacy’ discussed here is not limited to the provision of information and influencing discourses on social issues. If deliberation refers to dialogue and exchange of information such that the ‘better argument’ comes to light, then a diversity of policy innovations on an experimental basis is an opportunity for government to see the ‘better argument’ in action. The context and characteristics of the Chinese policy-making process facilitate influence in a number of ways described below.

7.5 Context: Administrative Decentralization and Regional Variation

The literature has ‘clearly demonstrated the important role that decentralization has played in promoting local initiative since the late 1970s.’⁷⁷ Chung’s work on administrative decentralization in China and its effects on regional variation in policy implementation takes decentralization to mean ‘intergovernmental devolution of authority.’⁷⁸ He argues that the effects of decentralization are shaped by the complex interactions of various factors. While the scope of local discretion is expanded, it is also constrained by ‘bureaucratic inertia’ and the prevalence of centralizing norms. Other scholars have highlighted the role bureaucratic capacity plays, pointing out that: ‘The Chinese state is not a strong, muscular state that gets

⁷⁶ P. Van Tuijl, “NGOs and Human Rights: Sources of Justice and Democracy,” *Journal of International Affairs* 52 (1999), 500.

⁷⁷ J. H. Chung, *Central Control and Local Discretion in China: Leadership and Implementation during Post-Mao Decollectivization* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 2.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 4.

whatever it wants or a weak, hollowed-out state that achieves little, but rather elements of both, and not in the mixture one might expect.’⁷⁹

Especially with respect to broad-based policy directives that come down from the central government, government agencies at lower administrative levels sometimes do not possess the expertise, capacity and experience to take the step to implementation on their own. One educational NGO resolved registration issues by incorporating a legal vehicle under a government-organized charity association. The founder discussed local government agencies’ lack of experience and the opportunities this opens for NGO influence to occur:

Why did [a provincial government-organized charity association] accept our incorporation? Because they didn’t have any actual experience. People’s organizations have actual practical experience, how to do things operationally. For them [government] it is just a blank (*yipian kongbai*), they are ‘feeling stones to cross the river.’ They go out to study. They can watch what we do and how we do things, and now they use some of these things. For example, we used to fund poor students, then they also started doing it. Many projects, as we started to do them they also started to do them. Red Cross, for example, auctions donated goods to support heart disease victims. They draw on some of our people’s (*minjian*) experience.⁸⁰

But the capacity and expertise of government departments varies across localities and over time. Another NGO founder discussed the lack of officials’ specialist expertise in government departments in the locality is changing:

The third [reason for government to work with social organizations] is that it can make up for their lack of knowledge and experience. I think now there is a clear change over these twenty years. The public officials of the past, their character or quality (*suzhi*) was quite low, they had ‘entered through the back door,’ or their specialty was not suited to the job (*zhuanye budui*). But now their character or quality (*suzhi*) is already very high. When we dialogue they are very impressed by our knowledge and ideas. So now the issue is not knowledge, it is interests. It’s not about not knowing what kind of tree to plant, it’s about someone’s cousin selling a certain kind of tree.⁸¹

⁷⁹ K. J. O'Brien and L. Li, "Selective Policy Implementation in Rural China," *Comparative Politics* (1999), 167-186.

⁸⁰ Interview H168, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, November 2010.

⁸¹ Interview H165, NGO, founder director. Hebei, August 2010.

This interviewee suggests that access to practical knowledge and experience has been a motivating factor in government granting support to NGOs, this is likely to be less important as time goes on. By extension, policy differences resulting from variation in government capacity and expertise are likely to be superseded by variation clientelism and parochial interests.

7.5.1 Policy Flexibility and Street-Level Discretion

A 'fragmented authoritarian' system permits a certain degree of flexibility in decision-making by administrative authorities.⁸² Scholars tend to agree that significant variation in policy implementation exists and have examined various factors that influence policy implementation in the post-Mao era. While a certain amount of discretion and flexibility can promote innovation and allow for the adaptation of broad guidelines to local conditions, it can also lead to self-serving and coercive behavior or produce unexpected outcomes.⁸³

Varied policy implementation reflects the differing conditions and needs of each locality, but policy areas also vary in flexibility. For example, while birth control policies are generally thought to be among the most unpopular, yet they are consistently enforced because they are regarded as hard targets that must be met and because of their effects on how local cadres are appointed and evaluated. Other policies are broad-based directives coming from the center directly to local departments to promote a more vaguely defined ideal, such as 'participatory education' or 'ecological development.' In these cases, how, and even whether, to comply with directives is largely up to the discretion of local officials, and depends on available

⁸² K. G. Lieberthal, "Introduction: The 'fragmented Authoritarianism' Model and its Limitations," *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Decision-Making in Post-Mao China*, *Studies on China* 14 (1992).

⁸³ K. J. O'Brien and L. Li, "Selective Policy Implementation in Rural China," *Comparative Politics* (1999), 167-186.

resources and opportunities. One environmental protection official described the municipality's approach in promoting such broad-based policies:

'We do "Ecological County Creation" and "Ecological Community Creation". They have a set of national criteria, we choose places based on these criteria and work in them.... We do things according to national criteria, and according to local conditions. The state sets the general direction for us, we translate it into action.'⁸⁴

Local conditions can also affect compliance, relaxing requirements for 'hard' and key policies, and increasing pressure to carry out 'soft' directives. For example, as fieldwork was being carried out in one rural locality in Ningxia Province, I noted that almost all families, whether of the majority Hui ethnicity or minority Han, had more than three children. One local interviewee later told me about an incident in which a particularly brutal forced sterilization was carried out on a few Hui women in the early 1990s. The incident provoked outrage in the Hui community and rioting and fighting broke out between Hui and Han. After the incident, central directives came down calling for maintenance of social stability at all costs and deemphasizing the enforcement of birth control policies in the region.⁸⁵

In another locality with a high population of ethnic minorities, a Civil Affairs director mentioned that though his department is evaluated on getting rid of illegal NGOs, the requirement is relaxed and more NGOs are permitted to exist because 'culture is important here.'⁸⁶ Other government interviewees reported significant flexibility in such policies as poverty line welfare provision (*dibao*)⁸⁷ and AIDS policy.⁸⁸ For these cadres, flexible policy implementation is one characteristic of able leadership: 'A government's ruling capability

⁸⁴ Interview H262, Government, Director. Hebei, August 2010.

⁸⁵ Interview N239, NGO, staff. Ningxia, June 2010.

⁸⁶ Interview Y156, Government, director. Yunnan, July 2010.

⁸⁷ Interview N235, Government, village head. Ningxia, June 2010.

⁸⁸ Interview Y251, Government, staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

(*zhizheng nengli*) has to fit local conditions. To implement policies flexibly according to the local conditions is a talent and standard (*shuiping*) of local officials.’⁸⁹

7.5.2 Pioneering and Resisting

Officials can take advantage of policy flexibility and exercise discretion in various ways and to various extents. Chung’s work on variation in regional policy implementation during the decollectivization era, for example, identifies modes of ‘pioneering’ ‘bandwagoning’ and ‘resisting’. ‘Pioneering’ and ‘resisting’ are of particular interest here.

Pioneering ‘refers to a type of behavior by local implementers who go far ahead of others in carrying out central policy. Two rationales may explain the pioneers’ behavior of ‘compliance in advance’. First, pioneering may simply represent voluntary (and often spontaneous local innovations which are later captured by the central government in search of a nationally applicable solution to a serious policy problem. Second, alternatively, pioneering localities may possess local conditions most favorable to experiment with the proposed policy. That is, the central government seeks to raise the possibility of success by designating them as experimental sites. In the former case, the decision to pioneer may be rooted in personal convictions of local leaders and/or popular demands for change. In the latter, the risk of pioneering is shared by the central government which controls and protects them through intricate networks of clientelism.’⁹⁰ ‘Bureaucratic careerism’ may also affect the decision to ‘pioneer’. Local implementers may stand to gain ‘political credit’ (*zhengji*) or expect promotion to a higher position in the event of a successful innovation.’⁹¹

⁸⁹ Interview Y251, Government, staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

⁹⁰ Chung, *Central Control and Local Discretion in China: Leadership and Implementation during Post-Mao Decollectivization*, 7.

⁹¹ For the importance of central support for the diffusion of local innovations, see S. Maynard-Moody and A. W. Herbert, "Beyond Implementation: Developing an Institutional Theory of Administrative Policy Making," *Public Administration Review* (1989), 137-143.

Several of the examples of policy influence cited by NGO interviewees in this study were facilitated by officials ‘pioneering’ the implementation of certain policies, though motivations for ‘pioneering’ behavior may vary. NGO interviewees generally recognized that local cadres can be motivated by bureaucratic careerism as well as a sincere desire to respond to local needs:

For each official it will depend on their character and ideas. Some will be just for promotion, others really want to do things. For example, in the field of education they want to make education better. But in the existing education system it is very hard for them to bring their ideals to reality, they see that this is not being done well, but don’t do a lot. But there is change little by little, not big reforms.⁹²

It is important to note that the sorts of innovations or strategic entrepreneurial behavior referred to here, in the context of Chinese policy-making and implementation at the local level, do not refer to dramatic or radical change. As the above interviewee points out, in many issue areas, it is incremental reforms and innovations that accumulate over time and change the field of what is possible for both NGOs and local cadres. NGOs have, in many cases, been able to model small local innovations that pioneering officials appropriate when they demonstrate effectiveness.

There are also ‘resisting’ local implementers who do not comply with the center, either delaying the execution of a given policy or bending it to serve other, more parochial interests. Resisting ‘may also require ‘heroic’ leaders who sincerely view representing local needs and sentiments to be more important than saving their own necks.’⁹³ By cooperating with local, often unregistered NGOs, or even being aware of their existence without taking punitive action, resisting officials are choosing not to implement or to ignore policies that restrict NGO

⁹² Interview H259, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August, 2010.

⁹³ Chung, *Central Control and Local Discretion in China: Leadership and Implementation during Post-Mao Decollectivization*, 7-8.

scope and operations. In doing so, they stand up to significant pressure from above or from peers that could be damaging to their careers and their necks.

7.5.3 Mitigating Risks of Pioneering and Strategic Entrepreneurism

In both ‘pioneering’ and ‘resisting’ modes, as well as ‘strategic entrepreneurship,’⁹⁴ officials bear significant risks. While, as Chung points out, these risks can be mitigated by the existence of clientelistic networks with higher administrative officials, I suggest that a third factor may also be at play here: NGOs can act as agents or implementers of particular policies hitherto ignored by local officials. If implementation of such policies by local NGOs is successful, officials stand to gain from this success, and are enabled to claim positive experiences and innovations that have come about in their domains as their own successes. In the event of failure, however, the consequences are borne by NGOs. Officials can claim a plausible deniability of any knowledge of actions taken by local NGOs in the event of a negative reaction from higher-ups, especially if the NGO in question is not formally endorsed by or registered with a supervisory agency.

7.5.4 Benign Neglect to Allow for Innovation

Chung also shows how the social and economic circumstances of a region can give rise to ‘benign neglect’ of the central government toward local innovations and deviations. In the decollectivization period he studies, for example, under circumstances of crisis shortages, falling productivity and declining regime legitimacy, the central government had no choice but to ‘gradually relax its control’ over current policy. At the same time, ‘the center did not have a

⁹⁴ For strategic entrepreneurship, see M. Schneider, P. E. Teske, and M. Mintrom, *Public entrepreneurs: Agents for change in American government*, Princeton University Press, 1995). P. T. Y. Cheung and Z. Lin, *Provincial strategies of Economic reform in Post-Mao China: leadership, politics, and implementation*, ME Sharpe, 1998). For its manifestation at the provincial and sub-provincial levels, see P. T. Y. Cheung and Z. Lin, *Provincial strategies of Economic reform in Post-Mao China: leadership, politics, and implementation*, ME Sharpe, (1998).

well thought-out package of alternative policies to remedy the situation. Such a gap between the need for a new policy and the absence of an alternative was filled by local innovations...which the central government gradually co-opted as a national policy.”⁹⁵

Even with some relaxation of the pressures on localities, however, continued central state controls and regulations remained in place. Chung argues that the two were not mutually exclusive, but were ‘both crucial dimensions of the process.’ The center may opt for ‘benign neglect’ when ‘it makes a strategic choice to promote the “developmental power” (i.e. the capacity to bring about socio-economic development) at the expense of its “centralizing power” (i.e. the capacity to enforce sanctions against localities).’⁹⁶ This strategy continues to be relevant today, as the central government has continued to allow for local initiatives and permit some leeway in implementation.

In the case of China’s NGOs, legal regulation is characterized by a large ‘grey area’ in how NGOs can operate and engage with the state. For many social issues, the lack of a ‘well-thought out package of alternative policies,’ can lead to many of the situations described by Chung, including ‘benign neglect’, and heightened tolerance of ‘innovations’ and ‘deviations’ on the part of NGOs.

Practitioners in the field also observe benign neglect of innovations being tested outside the realm of the formally legal: ‘Some innovative development activities have started to operate in “grey areas” and without proper registration and governmental backup. They have subsequently sought official approval. Government officials have sometimes recognized such initiatives as contributions to China’s overall objectives.’⁹⁷ While some scholars argue that such

⁹⁵ Chung, *Central Control and Local Discretion in China: Leadership and Implementation during Post-Mao Decollectivization*, 85.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 174.

⁹⁷ B. Kuhn, "Government-NGO Cooperation in the People's Republic of China Experiences from Yunnan Province," *International Journal of Civil Society Law* 4 (2006), 62.

activities are ignored by government due to limited administrative capacity,⁹⁸ what is being suggested here is that allowing such activities performs an important function, implying that it is often by design.

Some of the grassroots NGOs included in this study are cognizant of the spaces opened up and opportunities for influence afforded by possibilities for benign neglect in many of the issue areas they work in, and thus, better positioned to take advantage of them:

The higher levels will give direction to the lower levels. Local government officials also have some independent, self-directed (*zizhu*) work to do. For example, they don't have to have approval or direction from superiors for all their work. They will also choose to do some things themselves.

The larger policy environment will affect the building of this relationship. For example, if the higher-higher levels (*shangshangji*), the level above the higher levels, come out with a document stipulating such a thing cannot be done, or is not permitted, then even if the mid-level leaders think this program is fine and can be carried out, will comply with their leaders' guidance because of stipulations from above. But I think there are some enlightened (*kaiming*) leaders... there are some leaders that will try experiments, they will allow such people to try experiments, they will take initiative to let you do these things. Some will do this. For example, a few years ago, when I was...in X region, the previous leader very much identified with and approved of this way of thinking and of our carrying out this program in that place. But later, when the leader changed, the new one didn't really approve of this program, so there was no way to continue cooperation. Also, when the previous leader had approved the project, the...administrators all supported it quite a lot. But after that, their attitude and thinking changed.⁹⁹

7.5.5 Experimental Points

With regional variation in patterns of policy implementation, and a widening scope for innovation and initiative open to local officials, experimentation becomes an increasingly important practice in policy formation and implementation. Heilmann's discussion of the experimental approach shows that it has its roots in China's republican and Maoist eras, was adapted to the reform process under Deng, and continues to be relevant today. According to

⁹⁸ Tang and Zhan, "Civic Environmental NGOs, Civil Society, and Democratisation in China," 425-448.

⁹⁹ Interview N236, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

Heilmann, "The Chinese point-to-surface approach entails a policy process that is initiated from individual "experimental points" (*shidian*) and driven by local initiative with the formal or informal backing of higher-level policymakers.'¹⁰⁰

This technique 'gives room to local officials to develop models on their own, while ultimate control over confirming, revising, terminating, and spreading model experiments rests with top level decision-makers. Importantly, the mode of experimentation practiced in the PRC is focused on finding innovative policy instruments, not designed to define policy objectives which is to remain the prerogative of the Party leadership.'¹⁰¹

The experimental approach as practiced today is less ideologically motivated and uniformly applied than it was under Mao. Instead, under post-Mao leadership, the approach has 'acknowledged regional variation, and promoted concurrent experiments and multiple models. Locally produced institutional and policy innovations were taken up by reformist policymakers eager to bolster their political standing and to keep rivals at bay by godfathering "model experiments" that could demonstrate the success and superiority of their policy preferences. If experiments went wrong in the eyes of their advocates, they typically were phased out and brought to a stop silently just by not giving attention to them anymore.'¹⁰²

Analyses of political decision-making and policy implementation such as in Lieberthal's work on fragmented authoritarianism can be strengthened by an appreciation of the importance and extent of local initiative in 'generating novel policy instruments and in transforming the parameters and priorities of central policymakers over time.'¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ S. Heilmann, "From Local Experiments to National Policy: The Origins of China's Distinctive Policy Process," *China Journal* 59 (2008), 3.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid, 31.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 32.

Conceptual dichotomies such as centralization vs. decentralization, or constitutional concepts such as federalism that suggest a stability of vertical checks and balances that is not actually characteristic of China's polity, cannot capture the oscillating dynamics of China's policymaking approach. It is experimentation under hierarchy, i.e., the volatile, yet productive combination of decentralized experimentation with ad hoc central interference, resulting in selective integration of local experiences into national policymaking, that is the key to understanding China's policy process.¹⁰⁴

Heilmann also notes how changes in the political climate, as in the period of the Great Leap Forward, shrank the political space available for innovative experimentation. With the oscillations in political climate and officials' attunement to political sensitivities that continue to rise and fall today, the risks associated with supporting NGO initiatives and innovations are also affected. What remains less clear, however, is the precise ways in which a lessened scope for and an increased risk in experimentation and innovation affect NGOs and the initiatives they undertake.

On the one hand, there is evidence to suggest that under such circumstances local officials would be less willing to engage in collaborative relationships with social organizations, especially unregistered organizations, because doing so is itself a discretionary decision that pushes the boundaries of acceptable behavior. On the other hand, unloading some of the risks associated with implementing risky or resource-intensive policies onto social organizations would also be a rational strategy.

Where engagement exists, the potential for social organizations to influence policy is increased: when NGOs enjoy institutional or personal ties with the state, not only do they strengthen their ability to negotiate and expand their autonomy and influence, but they also

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

‘tend to exercise more leverage when it comes to asking for cooperation from the state, or influencing policy.’¹⁰⁵ For instance, Saich argues that the existence of often decried regulatory controls that are meant to limit NGOs has at times ended up leading to an increased influence from them. Because relatively few NGOs exist in China, and because their dependence on official support means they must interact closely with government, they can end up having considerably more impact on the policy-making process than more autonomous and numerous agencies in other national contexts.¹⁰⁶

Thus, policy influence is often achieved precisely through successful social programming in an environment amenable to ‘experimental points’, in which NGOs can act as proxies for government in testing new approaches. By allowing or even encouraging an NGO to implement innovations, local leaders can take credit for success and evade the risks of failure. Other scholars also suggest that civil society organizations can realize ‘system innovation’ by influencing government policies, which can ‘only be realistically achieved through face-to-face collaboration between civil society practitioners and government officials in specific fields.’¹⁰⁷ Thus, the potential implications of positive-sum reciprocal engagement for policy influence are more far-reaching than they seem.

¹⁰⁵ S. Shieh, "Beyond Corporatism and Civil Society: Three Modes of State-NGO Interaction in China," in *State and Society Responses to Social Welfare Needs in China: Serving the People*, eds. J. Shwartz and S. Shieh (Routledge, 2009), 33.

¹⁰⁶ T. Saich, "Negotiating the State: The Development of Social Organizations in China," *China Quarterly* (2000), 124-141.

¹⁰⁷ A. Fulda, Y. Li, and Q. Song, "How to Gain Trust and Promote System Innovation: Strategies of Chinese Civil Society Organisations Collaborating with the Government," *The University of Nottingham, China Policy Institute, Discussion Paper* (2009).

7.6 Advocacy in Action

Advocacy is a relatively broad term that can encompass any activity that a person or organization undertakes to influence policies through means other than governing.¹⁰⁸

Advocacy groups are different from political parties that 'seek to influence government policy by governing.' They are 'any organization that seeks to influence government policy, but not to govern.'¹⁰⁹ It can encompass such varied approaches as legal advocacy to press for change in policy or raise awareness of issues, human rights advocacy, in which human rights compliance is promoted through monitoring, reporting and raising awareness, policy research advocacy in which 'expert' specialists in a particular field assemble evidence and offer recommendations to influence policy decisions, constituency based advocacy on behalf of a particular vulnerable or excluded constituency, campaigning advocacy on single-issues that pressure people to take a 'for' or 'against' position, and social movement advocacy which aims at broad change in existing power relations.¹¹⁰

Globally, NGO scholars and practitioners tend to see a sharp distinction between organizations that engage in advocacy and those that merely provide services. The 'operational' aspect of NGO involves activities that directly provide services to those in need, such as education, health, clean water, or disaster relief.¹¹¹ This is seen as distinct from work that involves political advocacy or public education, and is provided by a separate set of NGOs

¹⁰⁸ See L. Young and J. M. Everitt, *Advocacy groups*, (Univ of British Columbia Pr, 2004) and <http://www.npaction.org/article/articleview/76/1/248> accessed August 10, 2011.

¹⁰⁹ Young and Everitt., *Advocacy groups*.

¹¹⁰ Wexler, Xu, and Young, "NGO Advocacy in China: A Special Report from China Development Brief."

¹¹¹ T. G. Weiss, L. Gordenker and T. J. Watson Jr, *NGOs, the UN, and Global Governance* Lynne Rienner Boulder, CO, 1996); P. Van Tuijl, "NGOs and Human Rights: Sources of Justice and Democracy," *Journal of International Affairs* 52 (1999), 499.

than advocacy NGOs which ‘work primarily at the centres of power.’¹¹² This polarity is particularly common among international practitioners: ‘It is not uncommon, for example, to hear international development organisations state emphatically that “We don’t do service delivery,” as if this were a kind of lower-order activity, inherently and obviously inferior to rights-promotion, policy influence, advocacy, etc.’¹¹³

Efforts have been made by international NGOs operating in China to strengthen the perceived weakness of Chinese NGOs advocacy functions, and studies carried out to determine the extent to which these organizations are able to successfully engage in advocacy. But the methods and approaches associated with advocacy and even the idea of advocacy itself are associated with a particular context in which ‘political, legal and social institutions are themselves largely adversarial.’ In this context, NGO advocacy is ‘very often defined by what it is against’ and ‘assumes the form of rallying opposition to specific government or corporate projects, programmes or policies.’¹¹⁴

Given these adversarial tendencies, a few scholars and practitioners question both the applicability of advocacy to the Chinese context and even the normative value of mainstream advocacy approaches. They question ‘how this adversarial and oppositional streak might sit with China’s rather different traditions (whether these are seen as primarily “political” or “cultural”) of a strong state—arguably the most successful and enduring in global history—administering a large and diverse society with a strong, rhetorical commitment to social order, stability and “harmony.”’¹¹⁵

¹¹² P. C. Gilbert, "NGOs and Human Rights Promotion, Socialisation, Framing, and the Case of West Papua" (M.A. in Political Science, University of Caterbury), (2008).

¹¹³ Wexler, Xu, and Young, "NGO Advocacy in China: A Special Report from China Development Brief."

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

While ‘very many people who talk of “advocacy” (and “civil society”) appear to take it for granted that these are good things,’ these scholars ‘take a more impartial and sceptical approach, acknowledging that there are grounds for scepticism about advocacy even in Western societies.’¹¹⁶ Accordingly, they find that Chinese NGO usage of advocacy ‘tends to emphasise changes in attitudes and behaviour, and cooperative, cross-sectoral partnerships with the whole of society working together. Even “self-described advocates” are in general neither oppositional in their thinking nor adversarial in their conduct. Many seem on the whole to be concerned mainly with public education and/or moral renewal rather than with political change. For some, indeed, there is perhaps a tendency to see themselves as natural partners with government in educating society.’¹¹⁷

While it would be easy to dismiss Chinese NGOs as taking a pragmatic, depoliticized approach in the face of state constraints, I argue that room should be left for the possibility that, at least sometimes, these approaches stem from different assumptions about the nature of social change. Certainly, if by advocacy is meant a particular narrow set of methods and language, it is difficult to see evidence of successful advocacy among Chinese NGOs. But it can be argued that the very existence of such organizations performs some of the functions involved in advocacy. ‘At the very least, non-governmental actors give some an avenue to express their views in either a domestic or an international setting. However, one may go beyond this minimal view and claim that NGOs give meaningful expression to those who may otherwise be disenfranchised.’¹¹⁸ NGOs can provide a plurality of opinions and voices,¹¹⁹ acting as channels by which sectors of society are enabled to express views and shape society. ‘Hence,

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ P. C. Gilbert, "NGOs and Human Rights Promotion, Socialisation, Framing, and the Case of West Papua."

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

while they do not represent a democratic process, they can act in ways that enhance democratic processes.’¹²⁰ ‘Even in a one-Party state advocacy and civil society may broaden the range of voices and opinions that influence decision making; this would itself constitute a democratic gain and might conceivably be a staging post en route to political pluralism.’¹²¹

In this section, I make the argument that not only is there a much more blurred distinction between operational or service provision functions and advocacy functions in Chinese grassroots NGOs, but also that advocacy influence is exerted most successfully ‘in action,’ when it is united with service provision. In contrast to many observations, China’s grassroots NGOs are not content with or limited to service-delivery or improving some aspect of life in the populations they work with. Almost all of the NGOs included in this study expressed an explicit concern with influencing government policy in their work. But the different way in which this influence is exerted in the Chinese context can obscure it from view.

Previous work done on NGO advocacy in China has also pointed to the precedence that practical solutions take over denunciations in advocacy: ‘We don’t just wave flags and shout battle cries: we don’t just ‘guide the nation with inflammatory prose’¹²²... Environmental organisations like ours can’t just stop there...We also need to practice what we preach to change the situation....’¹²³ Action is the medium through which advocacy and influence can flow:

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Wexler, Xu, and Young, "NGO Advocacy in China: A Special Report from China Development Brief."

¹²² An alternate translation of the lines 指点江山, 激扬文字; 粪土当年万户侯 from the 1925 poem *Changsha* by Mao Zedong. The official translation reads: ‘Pointing to our mountains and rivers,/Setting people afire with our words,/We counted the mighty no more than muck.’ See Mao Tse-tung, *Poems* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976), 50.

¹²³ Wexler, Xu, and Young, "NGO Advocacy in China: A Special Report from China Development Brief."

We do some things that the government is not paying a lot of attention to, but that we think are very important. And when the government sees what we are doing and how important it is, even if we leave the government will continue to do it...as an organization, our power is very limited, so to be able to do it well, the government's involvement is very important. If they support, participate and observe what we are doing and the positive results of our actions, they will accept it. Then it will fulfill an advocacy function. Because our ability is limited, and the number of people we can reach is limited, and we can't replace the government, we can only supplement a little bit.¹²⁴

However, to fulfill an advocacy function, action must be effective. Grassroots NGOs need to be able to demonstrate the viability of their models and approaches, especially if they are holding them out as alternatives to government programs. This requires a certain degree of operational capacity and program quality, the results of which are observed by local officials and are potentially incorporated into local policy and implementation:

Sometimes our effect in the community is not great, so they don't see significant results that help them. So I think maybe one day they will suddenly realize "Oh, this is something we don't have time or energy to do, but this organization does it well, they are dependable, they have the ability to do it." So we will enter into a kind of cooperation and they will hand this area of work over to us to do (*ranggei women qu zuo*)....When we were discussing our project with the district level Women's Federation, they said "We really want to find an organization like this. We don't have a set of materials to train villagers in capacity building and we are doing so many different things, our time is very limited. They do many things, child welfare activities, drug prevention activities, women's rights activities, AIDS activities, anything that is related to women, they do. But our organization is just work on one point, in one area, training in capacity building."¹²⁵

In this case, the Women's Federation officials suggested adopting the NGO's training materials on environment and sustainable agriculture and participatory methods in its own work. Both participant observation and interviews revealed numerous other examples of grassroots NGO action affecting government policy and programs, even when action was in its early stages and had only been carried out on a small scale.

¹²⁴ Interview Y252, NGO, staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

¹²⁵ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

One NGO organized an activity to clear weeds and algae from a local lake and invited officials to participate. A local Environmental Protection Bureau official said: 'We hadn't done this before, but...we will pay attention to this in future environmental protection work.' He continued, saying of the organization: 'We are very eager to work with them. Even though they are a people's organization, their activities have a great effect...Some of their ideas will also affect us and we are learning from each other and dialoguing about experience.'¹²⁶ One interviewee described how an environmental protection NGO worked to find alternate sources of income for mountain-dwellers whose livelihoods depended on deforestation resulting in soil erosion and environmental damage. Eventually, the local government 'took some corresponding measures to stop this kind of exploitation too.'¹²⁷

Another environmental NGO conducting training courses with local villagers suggested that local Poverty Alleviation officials did not know of effective ways to fulfill 'educational poverty alleviation' mandates from above:

[Our work] has an effect on them. Because when we did this training, there was a high degree of participation from the villagers. It transformed villagers' mindsets, their character, thought and development. People have to develop. When people's thinking develops, then the rate of general development accelerates. For example, after our training, the villagers will do some things for the village, clean the village and do some public benefit work (*gongyi shiye*). In this way, the government will say...this kind of training changed the villagers.¹²⁸

Grassroots NGOs with specialized know-how and experience can enable pioneering officials to carry out broad-based directives that government departments would not otherwise be able to fulfill. For example, one educational NGO in this study collaborates closely with a district-level and a county-level Educational Bureau and with local public schools in the locality. A district-level Education Bureau official described numerous policy documents

¹²⁶ Interview H262, Government, Director. Hebei, August 2010.

¹²⁷ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

¹²⁸ Interview NX40, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

coming from above requiring the promotion of participatory educational methods. But, the official implied, the department had no idea of what was meant by participatory educational methods or how to implement them in the public schools they oversaw. Collaboration with the grassroots NGO, which specialized in participatory educational methods, allowed the Education Bureau to pioneer such approaches in keeping with policy directives.

The district Education Bureau's director of educational research also sits in on the activities and classes of the NGO, and in the training it provides to teachers. Informal dialogue and communication between the two parties is frequent and touches on implementation of education policy. Though a causal relationship is impossible to prove, it would appear that many of the insights gained by officials through collaboration with the NGO affect its perception of education in the region, its adoption of new educational approaches, and that some of these insights and approaches flow upwards through the government hierarchy, influencing educational policy implementation and even formulation.

7.6.1 Models

Government as well as NGO interviewees agreed that local government agencies often lack expertise in social programs and look to NGOs for successful models. A Poverty Alleviation official explained:

In some areas, non-governmental organizations are even more professional than government. For example, in Poverty Alleviation, they have a set of systems (*zhidu*) and methods, for example, they have participatory methods. When we come into contact with these things we also emulate and learn from them (*jiejian xuexi*), if you don't emulate and learn, how do you improve? You can't isolate yourself, you have to dialogue with outside world.¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Interview N179, Government, staff. Ningxia, December 2010.

Policy influence is more likely to occur where authorities are seeking new methods and approaches, particularly in policy areas that figure prominently in central directives, but are broad based, and thus less quantifiable, measurable and less straightforward to implement:

This relationship [with government] does not have negative effects on them, but it does have small positive effects. Because they are, to a great extent, thinking about a question: how can I raise the general consciousness of the villagers? I want to build the new countryside (*xinnongcun jianshe*), I want to advance the development of the whole village (*zhengcun tuijin*), I want group development. (*qunti fazhan*) But where do the answers come from? It is exploring. It also cannot think of any good methods. But we have gone and attempted things. We have gone directly into the village, and engaged in dialogue and learning with the villagers. The consciousness of those villagers who have participated in our training has been raised.¹³⁰

The director of another NGO focused on the education of women and children talked about the government's recent focus on early childhood education and the organization's plan to implement rural early childhood education programs. 'If we do it well,' she said, 'we will give the government some suggestions and models about how, within a small scope, this can be promoted.'¹³¹ The same organization, which has been working in the locality for over ten years, also works with populations affected by HIV/AIDS, which has spread rapidly in the area. 'Many officials come here to learn about it. So our model of AIDS communities will be transmitted to higher leaders when they go back, and then conveyed to the central government. So [X town's] trace (*yinzhi*) is in all this. When you bring about a successful model, it has an impact.'¹³²

Since it was established, one of the NGO's main areas of focus has been HIV/AIDS prevention among vulnerable populations.

In an interview with the local government agency responsible for AIDS, the official proudly pointed out that the locality in which the NGO and local government agency

¹³⁰ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

¹³¹ Interview Y250, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, July 2010.

¹³² Interview Y250, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, July 2010.

cooperatively worked was named ‘the National AIDS Prevention Model County.’¹³³ In the official’s description of the department’s innovations, it was possible to see many areas of intersection with the work of the local NGO:

Our biggest innovation is that actually in AIDS prevention, there are many good working approaches that come from above, but how to actually realize them (*luoshi*)...it would be very good if they could be realized (*luoshi*). But what we do well is implementation....In mass education, too, we are slowly changing our methods. Because before, when we did mass education, all the different departments would go on the street and distribute leaflets. This wasn’t very useful, because such materials can only give people very superficial information, but AIDS is about behavioral change, just because I know the information it doesn’t mean I change my behavior. So we thought having face-to-face training would be helpful. Also, in China we very much value education, even in the rural areas all children should have nine years of compulsory education. So now the state has said that in middle and high school, we have to give them some information about AIDS and reproductive (*shengli*) information. I believe in the future, the earlier students can learn this information, the better. This is effective in achieving the AIDS prevention. So we now primarily work in schools, so that at an early age they can receive this kind of information.¹³⁴

Many of the initiatives described by this official were initially piloted and promoted by the partner grassroots NGO. With respect to one area of work, the government official directly referenced the influence the organization was able to exert on local policy and practice: ‘NGOs can be quite flexible in much of their work. [This NGO] was working with entertainment services population...but then we saw that this area of work was very important and so the government started doing it too. At the time it was hard to imagine that this would ever be an area of work that the government would do.’¹³⁵

Another NGO working in the same region reported that their model of working with AIDS orphans was adopted, and ultimately duplicated, by the local Bureau of Civil Affairs.¹³⁶ A grassroots NGO working in an ethnic minority region concerned with the preservation of minority traditional culture created educational materials to teach local children their mother

¹³³ Interview Y251, Government, staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Interview Y252, NGO, staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

language. In collecting folk music and arts, the organization took particular care to obtain the locals' agreement and protect their interests and compensate the local community. This practice was later taken up by a local government agency: 'For example, the Education Committee (*jiaowei*) itself also has some mother language educational materials. But when they saw what we have done, they learned from it....So we hope to use these cooperative methods to influence them. And the government, through cooperation, sees this and reflects on it. We have also communicated [these principles regarding the protection of traditional intellectual property] to the Intellectual Property Bureau.'¹³⁷

A grassroots environmental NGO stated one of its organizational aims as 'to establish some development models for China and even the world, and to promote our work through our past programs and current programs.' One of these programs was a sustainable honey production program in a rural community to raise incomes and protect the local environment.

How do you develop the community's economy? ...No one has a method or program to sustainably improve the production and ecology, and in this way be able to protect the area....So it helps them [government] and also the community. It also advances the government's goals. So we are trying to operationalize this. In this way we hope to create a model. Then when you go to Sichuan or Xinjiang or Qinghai you can also use our methods and promote them in more places.¹³⁸

7.6.2 Training Officials

Another operational area of work carried out by these NGOs, often categorized as service delivery, is the training of local officials. Participating in training courses seems to be an activity that local level officials are open to and even welcome. In an interaction I observed between a newly established grassroots NGO and the principle of the county Party School, the NGO founder was describing the organization's work in poverty alleviation and environmental training courses for villagers to try to gain his support. Not until the possibility of 'leader

¹³⁷ Interview Y158, NGO, director. Yunnan, July 2010.

¹³⁸ Interview Y134, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, May 2010.

training' was mentioned did the official show a response. He asked for details, and then got up to call the county Committee Party Secretary (*changwei shuji*), describing to him the training opportunity and securing an audience with him. We then visited the county government offices, where the NGO founder discussed cooperation possibilities with the Party Secretary.

Many NGOs that carry out leader training courses do so with the purpose of securing legitimacy and support for their programs from local government, but also in an effort to affect local policy and practice. One Ningxia organization works with rural women in and around the founder's home village, conducting participatory trainings that aim to empower rural women to engage in collective decision-making and action to improve village life, as well as make use of sustainable agricultural technologies. As a result of training, past participants have mobilized to petition village authorities to improve village infrastructure, have worked together with the village leader to repair roads leading to the village, and formed cultural and artistic groups as well as agricultural cooperatives for goat-raising. While the organization has experienced ups and downs in working with the county government, it was able to successfully register as an NGO after one year of operation.¹³⁹ Observing that the rise in mobilization and initiative among villagers who participated in trainings was at times making village leaders nervous, the organization also began to train local leaders and Poverty Alleviation officials. According to the village Party secretary: '[The founder] is working easily now, because he has the relationship already with government... he was from our village, we knew him and the people knew him.... Their work is complementary (*xiangfu xiangcheng*) with the policies of various levels of government, [of] harmonious society, harmonious family, harmonious

¹³⁹ In the form of a private, non-enterprise unit (*minban feiqiye danwei*).

community, even though there aren't specific indicators for this, but this is what they are talking about.'¹⁴⁰

Other NGOs conduct training courses in environmental or educational issues, for example, in how to work with youth or training in gender sensitivity for local government agencies.¹⁴¹ The content of many of these courses carries an explicit purpose of changing official viewpoints: 'When we do this type of training....its not only for civil society organizations, but also for government officials, because we want to change their mindset too.'

¹⁴²

7.6.3 Facilitating Implementation of Existing Policy

The grassroots NGOs in this study were also able to affect existing policy by facilitating implementation. One environmental NGO that conducts trainings on agricultural science for farmers reported that after undergoing training, villagers were much more willing to receive technical training given by government agricultural extension agents and use crop varieties promoted by the government.

Another NGO, for example, when working with villagers includes training in a sustainable waste management bio-gas system promoted in rural areas by government departments such as the Women's Federation and Environmental Protection Bureau. Though local government agencies provide subsidies for villagers to install the bio-gas systems, most villagers do not make use of the systems because of a lack of technical knowledge. After undergoing training and follow-up support from the local NGO, the vast majority of villagers take advantage of the government subsidy and make use of the installed bio-gas tanks. When part of the evaluation criteria for relevant officials is the number of villagers who have installed and make

¹⁴⁰ Interview N235, Government, village head. Ningxia, June 2010.

¹⁴¹ Interview Y158, NGO, director. Yunnan, July 2010.

¹⁴² Interview BJ09, NGO, director and analyst. Beijing, September 2009.

use of bio-gas tanks, the grassroots NGO's facilitation of such outcomes can serve official purposes.

7.6.4 Providing Feedback about Policy Weaknesses

NGOs can also contribute to the reform and refinement of policy through discovering and pointing out policy weaknesses. As NGOs implement programs, interact with beneficiaries and local government officials, they are well positioned to provide feedback to government. This feedback is based on practical, on-the-ground experience, rather than the abstract study of policy weaknesses. Feedback is mingled with empirical data and anecdotes from the field, rather than simply delivered as criticism through media channels, petitions, or other forms commonly seen in advocacy, lobbying or policy reform approaches.

The grassroots NGO collaborating with a government department focused on HIV/AIDS issues emphasized this: 'Because in carrying out programs we are able to affect the way they do things, when we see the weaknesses, so the AIDS office can change some of their procedures.'¹⁴³ An environmental NGO that was able to change the provincial microfinance policy by lowering the standard interest rate for loans, also described this process: 'Because of our thorough understanding of the situation at the grassroots we were able to affect the policy. So as NGOs, we have the ability to give them information on how policy should be.... Our thoughts, methods and approaches are adopted (*caina*) by government because of our practical experiences, if you go and ask the relevant government offices they will verify this.'¹⁴⁴

But the way policy weaknesses are pointed out matters. The director of a grassroots NGO that has been able to exert a significant influence on policy gives an account of how policy feedback can be given that is worth quoting at length:

¹⁴³ Interview Y250, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, July 2010.

¹⁴⁴ Interview Y134, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, May 2010.

Our main goal is for society to benefit. Because our service is meticulous and detailed, it can allow government policies to be implemented well in the local area so that they can benefit. In the process of doing things, we may see that there are policies that are not being implemented. Through investigation, you may see that certain people are not getting certain things, you can give feedback to the higher levels and affect things. But this shouldn't be done in a way that places blame. Instead, you say: 'Are there certain links (*huanjie*) that can be strengthened?' This isn't something we NGOs can do, but the government internally can strengthen it. In China, generally the policy from above is very good, but the implementation differs, because it is people who are doing things, so the level of responsibility is different, so we may discover certain issues and reflect or report them to higher officials and give suggestions. This is something that anyone can really hear (*tingde jinqu*), because it can improve their work....Because abroad they see problems in a different way, they say things very directly, but this is not acceptable in our culture. You have to achieve a balance in this, so the other party doesn't think....It has to be expressed in a way that local people can accept, because we have to survive in this environment. You can't destroy principles that the government wants to support (*dapo zhengfu yao zhichi de yixie yuanze*). This is a process, it's not just through your one organization.¹⁴⁵

The above examples suggest that when care is taken in how weaknesses are described and the context in which suggestions are raised, there can be significant scope for policy reform by grassroots NGOs.

7.6.5 Experience flows to other regions

Though most of the examples given in this section apply to policy implementation and formulation at the local level, as discussed above, a model of policy innovations as 'experimental points' can allow policy innovations to be promoted on a wider scale when they are successful. The NGO director quoted above related that officials from around the country came to observe local innovations and models, and conveyed this experience to the central leadership: 'Government officials come and see what you are doing and want to take it back to their own places, they see how we have helped the local areas.'¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Interview Y250, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, July 2010.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

7.7 Conclusion

In comparison with the overt forms of advocacy and rights protection in which NGOs in other countries engage, and the influence those efforts can bear on political and social structures, these examples from the Chinese context may seem negligible. But their significance should be seen in light of numerous portrayals of Chinese NGOs as powerless, circumscribed by a repressive state and that see only the influences *acting on* these organizations and not the influence they are able to *exert on* the state.

Other studies have reported that while NGO activists can provide information and suggestions to the government, they express dissatisfaction that they are sought out for advice only at the government's choosing, and 'have very little influence on whether the government chooses to be responsive.' A desire to play a role in the decision-making process itself, rather than solely in deliberations about policy, reflects assumptions 'that the ideal NGO role resembles the presence of Western social organizations in advisory bodies or in corporatist negotiations rather than their use of communicative power to conceptualize and frame social problems in novel ways, which is their role according to the tenets of deliberative democracy.'

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The mechanisms of influence uncovered through field research and participant observation indicate that even small, grassroots NGOs are often able to affect government policy and practice. In a context characterized by fragmented decision-making, decentralization and regional variation in policy implementation provides such NGOs with significant opportunities to participate in the formulation and implementation of policy on the issue areas in which they work.

¹⁴⁷ Salmenkari, "Searching for a Chinese Civil Society Model," 397.

It is hoped that future research can further uncover theoretical insights that can allow for more light to be shed on these dynamics of influence. The more clearly they are seen, the keener will be our vision of social and political change in China, and in authoritarian regimes more broadly.

This is a kind of influence, but this influence is just a small piece in the corner of the huge government system. If you are perceptive, if you use keen vision, some people may be able to see a little. But many people, probably many government officials, cannot see this change. They have not yet seen this change, but...in future they will see it.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

Appendix B: Special Appendix to Chapter 7

The informant quoted in Section 7.3.4 on ‘Coordination of Dialogue’ provided a detailed account of his experience, which has been included in this special appendix for the interested reader:

Last year there was a special situation in which I carried out an environmental roundtable discussion. This was a good example of how people’s organizations establish cooperative relationships with government.

The background is that a central government enterprise, a coal-fired power plant, had polluted the river. The people living nearby were badly affected by the pollution, and it ran into the village wells. When people drank the water they would get rashes and skin diseases. This couldn’t be solved for a long time. The people went to protest and blocked the factory doors and ruined the driveway with tractors, smashed the windows, so the big trucks that carried the coal couldn’t get past. So this was an ‘incident’ (*shijian*), this kind of incident happens every year but we don’t hear about it. So later the villagers and the village leader got in touch with me as a journalist and someone who does environmental protection work, because they had seen a newspaper article about me. They found out about this article from someone in the provincial government who was from [that area] and had relatives in the village, but he didn’t want to do anything because he was only in the provincial government and couldn’t do anything related to the central government. So instead he just gave them the newspaper article about me. So the village leader came and met me and I decided to go take a look.

I went with my video camera and I saw the pollution was very severe. There was big mountain of waste soot beside the village. I saw it was very serious, but I didn’t have much power to change the situation. The villagers’ leaders organized the villagers and took them to Beijing to the State Council Citizen Complaints—letters-and-visits Bureau (*guowuyuan xinfangju*). The central government told the Citizen Complaints Bureau to go to [X town] and solve this problem. So nothing happened for a while, there was no solution.

This was a good test for us people’s organizations. Nothing is impossible. I didn’t do anything wrong, what can anyone do to me? Someone comes to bully (*qifu*) me, I am not afraid. I am mentally prepared (*wo xinli you zhunbei*). In this issue the local government doesn’t welcome you, quite a few villagers came to see me and they were worried. So I suggested using the roundtable discussion. The villagers didn’t agree, some wanted to fight, some wanted to appeal to higher authorities and lodge a complaint or sue (*shangfang gaozhuang*). Mine is a people’s organization, what view do I represent? Should I go fight with them? Should I go appeal to higher authorities? What is my role? I had to decide or set (*ding*) my role in society. Which is to suggest public or citizen participation (*gongzhong gongmin canyu*) roundtable discussion. Civil society development is part of the mission of [the NGO]. This is our vision, it has to

be congruent with the identity of citizenship (*gongmin shenfen*), otherwise everyone uses the word “public,” including in the Seventeenth CPC National Congress.

So people asked what is a roundtable? In discussion everyone is equal. There were six participants: the polluted (the villagers), the polluter (relevant interest) (*liyixiangguan zhe*), the administrator (government), the organizer (NGO), the experts (environmental or other experts), and media (TV stations and newspapers). So it was a six-sided dialogue. They were suspicious about whether it would really be equal, I said we can try, it is natural to be suspicious, and that they may not feel equal in their hearts when they come.

This model is promoted by the state, in 2006 this was a program promoted and invested in by the World Bank to the National Ministry of Environmental Protection Center (*guojia huanbaoju xiaoyao zhongxin*). I was lucky enough to participate in their training. This tool was used in two communities in [Z city] as experiments. When the leaders heard of this plan to do this here they didn't agree, I said there is an opportunity to solve a problem that has been here for a few years, the foul smells. He said: “No, we just have to do our work well and that's it.” It's like “hands grasping hot sticky rice cakes” (*shouzhua niangao*), when you pick up the hot sticky rice, you can't put it down and it burns you.

Usually, to do this properly you are supposed to apply for approval from the central government, step by step, it takes years. Dr. W-- used to be a consultant with the World Bank in the US, this is his specialty, so he agreed to come to help. So I took the lawyer friend with me for safety and so no one could bully (*qifu*) me, because I wasn't sure about the situation the popular mood (*minqin*) there.

They [the local officials] received us with “good eating, good drinking, good hospitality.” They drank during lunch. They took up all the time with this, no dialogue. They didn't want to participate because there was no direct leader (from the city government) to lead.

So in this predicament I went home. I had gotten a grant to do this from the X Foundation in Beijing. When I came back I told him the government doesn't cooperate and won't let us have dialogue there. So I said I would return the money and couldn't do anything more, it was very painful. I saw all the challenges there, with the system (*zhidu*), with the government, there was a lot of inner turmoil. I was promoting justice but there was no way to realize it.

The government officials said the common people are bad, artful or wicked people (*diaomin*), that they like to make trouble (*ai naoshi*), and create trouble for them (*gei women zao mafan*). So the [X town] Environmental Protection Bureau didn't accept us. I had to go one level higher, to the Provincial Environmental Protection Bureau. I had to find someone, a leader who knew me there. I went at least 18 times. Finally I was able to move one of them and he said “I admire (*peifu*) you”, he said he would think of a way for me. So he talked to the relevant people in the general office (*banwuting*), so this program got the support of the Provincial Environmental Protection Bureau and the Environmental Protection Union organized it.

When they saw I had gotten someone from there, I brought it up in a conference with European Union and Greenpeace, over 20 countries, I brought this case up in front of all of them, and there was someone from the National Ministry of Environmental Protection there, and they said they would support me too. And we became friends. How to make government officials personal friends? Using your sincerity, your integrity, your kindness. So that people in the end get rid of their suspicions and resolve (*xiading juexin*). They finally called the Provincial Environmental Protection Bureau, and said: "This is a good thing, we will participate in it." So, finally, they decided to participate in it.

It took 18 days, you have to have dignity, you can't make them annoyed, it's like when you court someone (*tanlian ai*), you can't go overboard. I had to beg for this, they are officials, high and mighty, remote and aloof (*gaogao zhaishang*), why should they support you? But finally through our actions and persistence, they supported.

A "red letterhead document" (*hongtou wenjian*) was sent down and told the [X town] Environmental Protection Bureau to actively provide assistance (*jiji xiezhu*). His face went from red to white. He had a bad temper. I said: "What do you think?" He said, "I will participate in the roundtable. But I won't speak (*fayan*)."

Finally we held [the roundtable], all parties participated, except the energy plant. This discussion was very interesting. We have a video of it. The government behaved well because of the camera. They felt they should increase their responsibility and care for the polluted, and they established relevant policies based on this. When the government comes across (*yudao*) real problems, they will not evade (*huibi*) them. Before, photos of the pollution had been hidden, now after this, they could be exposed (*baolu*), posted in newspapers.

What is the role of public welfare organizations? The third sector. To complement (*mibu*) and coordinate (*xietiao*) the inadequacies (*buzu*) of the first sector. They can independently talk and do things, but they have to stand in the third place. They cannot stand in the place of government, or media, or companies. You may represent the villagers but you are not them. If you talk for them, you will be caught. For example when it was the 60th anniversary you couldn't do anything. All the outsiders had to leave the city. All the people seeking an audience with the higher ups (*shangfang*) had to leave. The sky had to be blue. So two people from this village who went to Beijing were caught and put in jail till it is over. This was 2009. And the roundtable was held on July 17th, near July 5 when the Xinjiang riots happened. It was a very dangerous, very sensitive time.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This study has proposed the concept of positive-sum reciprocal engagement to capture one type of relationship that can emerge between grassroots NGOs and local government agencies in China. This concluding chapter summarizes the evidence presented in the preceding chapters to answer the two central research questions. First, what organizational and contextual characteristics give rise to positive-sum reciprocal engagement? Second, what are the effects of positive-sum reciprocal engagement on the formulation and implementation of policy at the local level? In answering these questions, the various factors that are found to contribute to positive-sum reciprocal engagement are synthesized into an integrated framework and the implications of such engagement for policy influence are evaluated. In the next section of the chapter, the implications of these findings for practice are discussed and an agenda for future research proposed. Finally, the implications of the findings of this study for both fostering political change and maintaining social and political stability are explored.

8.1 Explaining the Emergence of Positive-Sum Reciprocal Engagement

Positive-sum reciprocal engagement refers to one permutation that mutually empowering relationships between grassroots NGOs and local government agencies can take. It is characterized by proximity and communication between two parties, who jointly engage in some form of action. It implies mutual influence and mutual benefit, resulting in added value for society.

This study posited that variation in the characteristics of grassroots NGOs and local government departments, as well as in factors relating to the social and political context of each locality, would account for variation in levels of positive-sum reciprocal engagement. The analysis found that, under conditions of a broad convergence of interests between the mission

and purpose of grassroots NGOs and local government agencies, positive-sum reciprocal engagement was enabled by four key factors.

The first of these involved the presence of bureaucratic officials that can be thought of as ‘reformists.’ Such individuals face a complex combination of risks and pressures, but can exercise the latitude and agency afforded to them by the political and social context of the departments in which they work to open small spaces for grassroots NGOs, allowing them to gain a foothold and build legitimacy over time.

The second explanatory factor had to do with the institutional capacity of grassroots NGOs themselves. Organizational capabilities that can be developed over time proved to be of greater significance than inherent organizational characteristics. In particular, NGO members’ ability to identify potential reformists and take advantage of potential openings by expanding the political space available to them was a key determinant. To be able to do so, grassroots NGOs had to possess the ability to frame issues and to engage in effective action, the results of which were communicated to local government agencies.

Two other facilitating conditions were to be found in the social and political context of certain localities. First, low levels of prior associational experience in a given locality made it more difficult for positive-sum reciprocal engagement to be established. Depending on levels of economic development, access to information, official mindsets and attitudes, and the distribution of ethnic minorities, localities were also characterized by varying levels of ‘openness’ or ‘sensitivity’ that could help or hinder the emergence of positive-sum reciprocal engagement. Relative openness in a given locality was the final significant factor helping to create the conditions for local government agencies to engage with grassroots NGOs.

The presence of these four factors in a locality allowed for an initial opening to be created through benign neglect of independent NGO activities on the part of local officials,

which could then be taken advantage of by capable grassroots NGOs. As they engaged in effective action and began to engage with local officials, they were able to expand these openings, undertake more extensive action and further build legitimacy within the local community and in the eyes of local bureaucrats. A dynamic was then established in which positive-sum reciprocal engagement between grassroots NGOs and local government agencies could be then deepened over time.¹

8.2 Enabling Policy Influence

One of the key findings of this study is that positive-sum reciprocal engagement can enable grassroots NGOs to exert an influence on the formulation and implementation of policy at the local level. Specifically, this is accomplished through the operation of two mechanisms.

First, in the context of a mass-line model of interaction between the state and the people, grassroots NGOs act as channels for the conveyance of policy information and suggestions to the state. They participate in and influence discourses on various social issues by providing expert advice, through their involvement in intermediary entities, in public spheres and the media, and when they occasionally mediate dialogue between the local state and citizens.

As many policy areas, particularly those relating to social and economic development, are characterized by flexibility, discretion and an experimental approach, grassroots NGOs are also able to affect policy through the action they carry out. NGOs' implementation of programs and the modeling of innovations, when they are engaged in reciprocal relationships with local government departments, can allow them to advance new models and provide feedback about existing policy. From the perspective of local officials, grassroots NGOs can

¹ See Figure 1-2 of *Chapter 1* of this dissertation for the illustration of the model described above.

fulfill the function of mitigating risks involved in pioneering new initiatives until experiments have proved successful.

8.3 Limitations of the Study

As the data gathered and arguments advanced by this study paint a rather different picture than what other observers and scholars of China's state-NGO relationships may be seeing, it becomes particularly important to once again stress the limitations and specificity of its conclusions.

For reasons outlined in *Chapter 1* in the section on methodology, I have chosen to focus on a very small, specific subset of the NGO universe: organizations that are nonprofit, indigenous, carry out concrete programs in the fields of education or the environment and that operate at the grassroots in rural areas or smaller cities. Overall, within this small and not necessarily representative subset and its relationships with the disaggregated state, on balance one finds reciprocal engagement which is reasonably non-conflictual. Again, this engagement is not being advanced as a representative or model of China's NGO-state relationships. Let there be no mistake, the arguments in this thesis in no way mean to suggest that the Chinese one is a liberal environment free of control over NGOs or any NGO attempts at subversion. The Chinese government at all levels is cautious about NGOs and afraid of what they could become, but at the same time knows they are necessary, and thus selectively stifles those that may go 'wild.' What this study does suggest is that the Chinese environment is one in which spaces exist for natural, organic and non-revolutionary change to occur gradually and incrementally, through the emergence of collaborative dynamics that gain traction and change the landscape over time. These observations of positive-sum reciprocal engagement, then, are more akin to plants that take root and eventually split rocks. Of course, many such plants never take root, and many wither and die due to harsh conditions. But others are able to

subsist and even to flourish. Thus, it is one dynamic with important implications that deserves to be watched, and not a picture of a whole.

Positive-sum reciprocal engagement is, rather, one specific type of relationship that can commonly emerge between two specific subsets of actors. It also happens to provide fresh insights into mutually empowering patterns of engagement and mutual influence where oppressive or conflictual patterns have more traditionally been observed.² However, it should not be assumed that this type of engagement is entirely stable or pacific. First, as *Chapter 3* discusses, positive-sum reciprocal engagement is not realized in the ideal, but exists to different degrees. Second, even in localities where relatively high degrees of reciprocal engagement are observed, there also exists evidence of certain important tensions. These tensions and their implications will be further explored below. Despite these caveats, however, this study has found that within this subset of cases reciprocal engagement is a phenomenon that is occurring to a degree and that more attention should be devoted to understanding and theorizing it. That is why this thesis has focused analysis and explanation on reciprocal engagement rather than other modes of engagement or non-engagement that exist between NGOs and governments, in the hope that doing so would be more relevant and faithful the reality of what is being observed, and would constitute a more useful contribution to the field.

8.3.1 Conflicts and Tensions

Students of politics understandably have a special interest in and make effort to analyze conflicts as indicators of inequalities in power relations. However, inequality in power relations cannot automatically be equated with relations of domination and exploitation. Clearly, by any

² See Section 3.5 for an initial discussion on the limitations of the positive-sum reciprocal engagement concept.

established measure of power, the Chinese case is one in which the state is overwhelmingly more powerful than grassroots NGOs.

Secondly, we must be aware that while conflicts can bring such inequalities to light, they are not the only indicators of efforts being made to rectify them. That is, successful efforts to right inequalities or even exploitation and oppression may take non-adversarial forms that can be missed in political analyses that are primarily concerned with conflict. In an unequal power relationship, empowerment of one party need not occur at the expense of the power of the other. Hence the emphasis in this work on mutual empowerment and positive-sum as opposed to zero-sum engagement.

Nonetheless, it is important to give due regard to the potential impact of conflictual dynamics. In an effort to be thorough and to avoid overlooking any conflictual aspects of NGO-state relationships, all primary data resulting from fieldwork was once more analyzed specifically through a lens aimed at uncovering indications of conflictual relations. In doing so, because the empirical examples in this study seldom conformed to prevalent modes of contention found in the literature on NGO-state relations, a somewhat broader notion of conflict was used in this analysis. Indeed, within this subset it may be more apt to speak in terms of tensions rather than conflicts.

These conflicts or tensions can be thought of according to two broad categories—those initiated by NGO actors and those that have their origin in the actions of state actors. In both categories, tensions can range in severity from subtle differences of opinion to outright conflict or hostility.

State-Initiated Tensions

Lack of support

This thesis finds that reformist government officials are of particular importance to the emergence of positive-sum reciprocal engagement. Similarly, one major source of tension between the state and grassroots NGOs arises simply from officials' lack of support of NGO activities. In the words of one NGO founder:

There are many [NGOs] that start up and then quickly disappear. They start from momentary excitement, then people see it is difficult and don't continue. They are unstable (*tiaoyue xing*) and fragile. The government doesn't support them, they solve problems by themselves.³

How such tensions are played out between officials and NGO members is discussed at length in *Chapter 4*. Section 4.3.1, in particular, discusses officials' motivations and modes of withholding support. A reluctance to take risks and assume responsibilities that could interfere with opportunities for promotion, for example, leads many officials in a position to support NGOs to be unavailable, to push decisions off to other departments or fail to respond to communications. Eventually, officials are found or convinced to take a position of 'no support, no opposition,' and tensions are sometimes resolved through an ongoing process of interaction and negotiation.

Obstruction of Action

Tension created by lack of support can be taken a step further to obstructing NGO actions. When an NGO requires government introductions or assistance to begin to carry out a program but the relevant department declines to provide this assistance, it is effectively refusing an NGO permission to carry out the project. Several educational NGOs, for example, who wished to work with local schools first reached out to the local Education Bureau and asked them to introduce the program to local schools. Wary officials, lacking prior knowledge

³ Interview H168, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, November 2010.

of or trust in the organization, or simply not wanting to take on additional risks or trouble, often simply refused.

Such refusals can be significant obstacles for NGOs struggling to begin operating in a locality. However, some NGOs overcame such obstacles through the employment of various methods. First, as discussed in *Chapter 5*, most of the NGOs included in this study had to deal with many such refusals in initial months or years, but were eventually able to gain the support they needed with the passage of time and the incremental building of trust and legitimacy. Second, the way many NGOs dealt with this tension was simply to avoid asking for permission or assistance, relying on personal contacts or relationships—in one's home village or a friendship with a teacher in a public school—to begin to carry out a program on a small scale. After several months, once a project yielded some results, these would be reported to the relevant government agencies and their support slowly earned. This strategy of 'asking for forgiveness, not for permission' relies on officials' bounded authority and feeble capacity to regulate what lies outside their immediate jurisdiction.

Investigations

An indirect but very real tension comes to light when investigations of NGOs are carried out by Public Security or State Security departments. Such investigations can not only cause alarm and distress within the NGO, but can also rouse the suspicions of program beneficiaries and partners, and have been known to destabilize collaboration between an NGO and local government departments. The founder of an environmental NGO relates her experience:

I participated in the municipal Women's Federation roundtable and introduced our program. Those who participated in that event included State Security, Public Security, the Civil Affairs Bureau, and the Bureau of Justice. After hearing me present they were suspicious. The Municipal State Security and Public Security Bureau came to ask the County Women's Federation about me. They asked about [the funder] and about the program. [The Women's Federation Chairwoman] was unhappy that they had come to investigate when this is a positive effort.... After she told me, I felt very bad and didn't know what to do. I thought the Public Security people would come see me.

Someone from the township police station came to talk to me. He looked at our course materials and was suspicious, but he didn't say anything and left. Then after a while the Public Security came too. I explained the program to him, how we do this, why we do this. He is friends with and related to the municipal Women's Federation chairwoman. After listening, he said I should go ahead and do this, that it is a good thing, and if I have any problems I should go see him. But I was very worried and depressed for a long time before I came out of it. They were worried because I was doing this work in the rural areas and had not registered, so they thought it might be something like Falungong or a cult, because there are a lot of things like that here.⁴

In the above example, the NGO's relationship with the collaborating department, in this case the Women's Federation, withstood the potentially destabilizing effect of the investigation. The strength of the relationship and trust that had been cultivated with the Federation Chairwoman, and, by extension, her friend the Public Security officer, was able to insulate the NGO from possible effects of the investigation on the NGO's work. While the founder of this NGO was caused significant distress by the investigation, more seasoned NGO members are accustomed to such investigations and see them as a necessary evil. One director explained:

Security departments look into and observe the work of the organization. People who understand see that this is normal, but people who don't understand get worried and think that there must be some problem with your organization. It causes external misunderstandings.⁵

According to the manager of another established NGO, such investigations are normal and to be expected every few years, especially in times of political sensitivities and leadership transitions. In fact, such investigations should be welcomed as opportunities to strengthen relationships with security departments, raise the profile of the NGO and build understanding of its work within the state apparatus.⁶

Interference

⁴ Interview H260, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

⁵ Interview Y158, NGO, director. Yunnan, July 2010.

⁶ Interview MA02, president. Macau, November 2005.

Tension is also created when government departments, particularly those acting as registration sponsors, interfere in the NGO's work. What is seen by officials as necessary monitoring and management can be perceived by NGOs as meddling or pressuring. Official interviewees often voiced the opinion that NGOs need to be 'managed': 'They are making effort but there is no standard.'⁷ Another official stressed the importance of local NGOs accepting to meet the strict standards and requirements for projects carried out in the locality.⁸ As discussed in Section 5.1, NGOs carefully manage pressures to carry out a project in a particular geography or in a particular way. A few interviewees mentioned such tensions being heightened by unfavorable impressions given by NGOs to the media.⁹

The scope for such interference was increased with registration, particularly in relationships with sponsoring government departments. It should be noted, however, that in general, NGOs and government agencies did not differ often or much with regard day-to-day operations or projects. In other words, tensions arising from government interference in NGO work were relatively insignificant—in fact, many NGOs faced considerably more pressure and interference from funders than from government collaborators.

Occupying Spaces

State actions or official modes of operation can indirectly give rise to tensions by enabling government agencies or 'official NGOs' to occupy available spaces. For example, under the dual registration system which only allows one NGO registered in each issue area at a given administrative level of a locality, 'official NGOs' can occupy these spaces, making it difficult for grassroots NGOs to register.¹⁰

⁷ Interview H167, Government, staff. Hebei, November 2010.

⁸ Interview Y251, Government, staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

⁹ Interview H165, NGO, founder director. Hebei, August 2010.

¹⁰ See the subsection on registration in Section 3.4.2

Every government office has a government-organized people's organization. For example, The Forestry Bureau has a Forestry Research Committee. Because Civil Affairs has a law that you cannot have another organization that does the same work in the same place, this effectively prohibits other organizations from starting up. And you go into a [government-organized NGO] office and you see a brass plate (*pai*) hanging there, and some of them do real work, but some of them don't.¹¹

Obstructing Registration

Registration, in general, is an arena in which conflicts can often arise. NGOs that have not yet established legitimacy in the eyes of local government agencies and wish to register are often blocked from doing so. One NGO founder talked about her difficulties registering the organization because of negative associational experience in the locality. The real reason for the obstruction was not revealed to her, instead she was told to obtain different approvals and documents for over a year to delay and rebuff registration efforts.¹² Another NGO experienced similar difficulties with registration for three years.¹³ The following description from the founder of an environmental NGO illustrates this tension and how it was managed to successfully secure NGO registration status:

The first time I went [without any introduction], the deputy director received me. Then someone gave me his number, so I called him. I also called many times. I stood at the door of his office many times. I ran back and forth many times (*paole haoduo tang*). The last time was...I remember it was a Saturday, I went to find him. I introduced the program very carefully and in great detail to him. I provided many verifying documents (*zhengming wenjian*), my personal credentials (*wo geren de zhengming*), including where we've done the program, including verifying documents of work units who have collaborated with our organization. I submitted all these to him. At the same time I introduced to him the things I would need to do after registration, what assistance it would be. This matter was then lodged for about one month, during this period....because to allow me to hook under them (*guakao*), he would need to take on certain responsibility (*fu yiding zeren*), so he looked into it (*liaojie*), and then he agreed for me to register.¹⁴

Withdrawing Registration Status

¹¹ Interview H165, NGO, founder director. Hebei, August 2010.

¹² Interview H261, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

¹³ Interview H165, NGO, founder director. Hebei, August 2010.

¹⁴ Interview N238, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

The threat of taking away an organization's registration status—usually in response to pressure generated by some aspect of the NGO's work—is another tool used by officials to exert control when differences arise. The organization discussed above faced a major challenge when it was thought the NGO would lose its registration status for reasons unknown to it.¹⁵ Registration status has also been taken away for not carrying out annual audits, failing to fulfill minimum requirements of operating or engaging in illegal or politically sensitive action.

It should be noted, however, that even when registration status is in danger of being rescinded, NGOs can often pursue other options that allow them to continue operations. These include re-registering under different sponsoring departments, at different administrative levels (including at the provincial level), registering without a sponsor under new regulations, registering as an economic association or a business, or operating as an unregistered entity.

Shutting Down and Penalizing

Though ending an organization's registration status can be a serious blow to fledgling NGOs, it is not as can often be assumed equivalent to shutting the NGO down. As has been discussed at length in this thesis, many NGOs operate with relative autonomy and ease without an NGO registration status. Shutting down an NGO, however, is a much more serious action with often devastating consequences to grassroots NGOs and the individuals involved in them. While none of the interviews included in this study had direct experience with shutting down an NGO, several discussed it when asked to describe what a negative relationship with local government would look like:

You could be kicked out or your program could get stuck (*xiangmu kazhule*). It depends on the degree of openness and what the NGO is actually doing, not what they are saying. When others observe it they could see it as sensitive. Most important

¹⁵ This episode is recounted in detail in Appendix C.

is the background of the organization, what you are doing behind the scenes, what your purpose is.¹⁶

In the worst case they would mistrust you and not allow you do this work. They might threaten you and say it is unlawful; that you have to go to jail. They would interfere every time you do something, tell the villagers not to participate in your courses. Maybe they would organize some of the participants to attack you with accusations (*gongji*). Disunity among the villagers and mistrust would cause this situation—not finding the reality but just listening to rumors.¹⁷

Fieldwork also brought to light a few stories of NGOs in other localities being shut down and their founders penalized. One interviewee described how the founder of an orphanage who misappropriated donations was disciplined and the orphanage shut down.¹⁸ Another knew of ‘an organization in Guizhou that couldn’t find a sponsoring organization so it was closed down, because it was doing some sensitive things like migrant labor work.’¹⁹ Another interviewee discussed the example of a religious group that crossed the boundaries of acceptability:

The government could force you to discontinue operations. It sweeps you out the door (*saodi chumen*). Two conditions could give rise to this kind of situation. One aspect is of the organization’s self-work (*ziwo gongzuo*) is not done well, and negative effects emerge, and these negative effects are quite severe. Let’s again take the example of the Christian group that sang hymns in schools. The other aspect has to do with policy prohibitions (*zhengce shangde buyunxu*), or when policy stipulates you cannot do such-and-such thing, when it does not allow you to do it. For example, if you want to open a clothing shop, you have to go to the Commerce Bureau (*gongshang ju*) and apply for a plaque (*paizhi*). If you don’t have this sign, the Commerce Bureau will close your shop.²⁰

NGO-Initiated Tensions

Engagement in Politically Sensitive Action

As the above excerpt indicates, conflicts can also be initiated by NGO actions. Again, these can range in degree from explicit conflict to subtle tensions. According to interviewees,

¹⁶ Interview Y252, NGO, staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

¹⁷ Interview Y229, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

¹⁸ Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

¹⁹ Interview Y158, NGO, director. Yunnan, July 2010.

²⁰ Interview N236, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

serious conflicts between NGOs and the state are almost always brought on by engagement in politically sensitive action. The line that demarcates acceptable with overly sensitive action is by no means always clear and what constitutes a trespass over this line is debated by practitioners and scholars.²¹ Because politically sensitive action by Chinese NGOs and conflicts that arise from it are topics much discussed in the literature, this section will focus specifically on instances of politically sensitive action experienced or mentioned by interviewees in this study.²²

Both government and NGO interviewees evinced a heightened awareness of the political implications of NGO actions and how these might be perceived or misconstrued. Individuals or organizations without this awareness tended not to get very far, while this ever-present tension is one that experienced NGO practitioners have learned to skillfully navigate.²³ Fieldwork also uncovered several examples of politically sensitive action that crossed boundaries of acceptability.

Three such boundaries were identified in this research: when grassroots NGOs acted in ways that turned the people against government, when they brought religion explicitly into a public arena, and when they belonged to or championed the rights of groups that can be thought of as ‘dissidents.’ In the case of the first boundary, depending on the extent and nature of the transgression, it was possible for the resulting conflict to occur within a relationship of positive-sum reciprocal engagement and for the engagement to survive and even thrive. In the case of the latter two boundaries, however, as far as this study identified, it did not seem possible for grassroots NGOs to survive when they were crossed. Interviewees provided examples from direct experience as well as the experience of others of interactions across the

²¹ R.E. Stern, K.J. O’Brien, "Politics at the Boundary Mixed Signals and the Chinese State," *Modern China* 38, no. 2 (2012): 174-198.

²² See section 2.2.1 and 2.2.2 of this thesis for a general discussion of politically sensitive action.

²³ See section 5.1.1 of this thesis for examples.

first boundary, but the NGOs included in this study had no direct experience with the latter two.

Examples of NGO actions that were seen as turning the populace (or segments of it) against the state were wide ranging. Some equated ‘doing things in a political way’ with getting involved in ‘the self-governance of villagers’ and ‘elections,’²⁴ ‘telling the local masses to fight for their rights’ in such a way that ‘the government will be attacked’²⁵ and engaging in activities that are anti-government or are not ‘in the interest of the government or the whole political environment.’²⁶

The deputy director of an environmental NGO discussed government ‘management’ as one of the consequences of crossing this boundary:

[The relationship] depends on the content of the NGOs work and the area they work in. We do work that supports and complements the work of the government. But if they do rights protection or they do things that are harmful to the government, of course [government] will manage [the organization].²⁷

Other NGO interviewees provided concrete examples of when they themselves had engaged in such action or were perceived to have done so. The founder of a rural environmental NGO that gathered rural women to participate in training courses found that even the suspicion that her organization was turning people against the government was creating difficulties for the NGO: ‘They are worried that the participants of the group will come and study together and go against the government. The Women’s Federation official said this. Other leaders also said this. But they didn’t say it directly.’²⁸

A few NGOs included in this study employed approaches and strategies that relied on consciousness-raising among the local populace to exert pressure on government to bring

²⁴ Interview Y250, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, July 2010.

²⁵ Interview Y132, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

²⁶ Interview N238, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

²⁷ Interview N143, NGO, director of external affairs. Ningxia, June 2010.

²⁸ Interview Y229, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

about change. One environmental NGO's mission was to use the media to bring to account companies and government offices that were contributing to environmental deterioration.²⁹ Shaming local government in the media and turning citizens against them in an effort to bring about changes may be a common strategy for environmental NGOs in the West, but as discussed in *Chapter 7*, China's grassroots NGOs generally choose to use other effective strategies for fostering environmental change. In this case, the actions of the NGO contributed to ongoing tension between it and local Environmental Protection Bureau. The founder of the NGO stated his intention to work more closely with government in the coming year.³⁰

In another case, an environmental NGO publicized the local government's misuse of water resources internationally and found it extremely difficult to continue carrying out projects in the area. It was slowly able to regain a foothold and mend relations but this history and the NGO's sometimes adversarial mindset resulted in a continuing undercurrent of tension in the relationship.³¹ Finally, the example of how a local polluter and collusive local government were induced to make reparations to villagers through the intervention of a grassroots NGO and higher authorities provided in *Section 7.3.4* and the *Special Appendix to Chapter 7* shows the tensions and sometimes outright conflict that can emerge. This case typifies many such conflicts in China, where the fault lines do not lie neatly across a state vs. society divide. A complicated set of issues and tensions crisscrossed multiple parties – the villagers, the local government, the polluting plant, the provincial and central government authorities, the grassroots NGO, the media, and so on. What seems to be of note in cases like these, and has thus been the focus of this work, is how reciprocal engagement established

²⁹ Interview N142, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

³⁰ Interview N181, Government, staff. Ningxia, December 2010.

³¹ Interview Y155, NGO, Staff. Yunnan, July 2010. See section 5.1.1 on the two organizations included in this study that utilized rights-based approaches in dealing with local government.

between an NGO and a government department not only facilitated an acceptable resolution of the conflict, but survived and was strengthened by it.

Indirect examples of more intolerable boundary crossing behavior were also uncovered in fieldwork. While NGOs that were faith-based or inspired by religious principles, and that even included semi-religious content in their training materials, were deemed acceptable and were able to establish positive-sum reciprocal engagement with local government, NGOs that brought religion explicitly into the public arena were severely chastised. One example is a Christian group that was assisting rural Ningxia schools and taught the students to sing hymns. The incident was ‘dealt with internally (*neibu chuli*),’ the group was immediately shut down and caused a contraction in the political space open to other groups operating in the region.³² NGOs that were considered to be or championed the rights of what can be termed ‘dissident groups,’ such as those associated with Tibetan dissidents, Falungong and so on, were also deemed to be acting outside the boundaries of acceptable behavior.

For many NGO as well as government interviewees, at the heart of these tensions are essentially different visions of the society China is trying to build. One government interviewee described China’s government and society as being made up of three ideologically differing groups. At one end of the spectrum is the fast-paced, economically prosperous China, with most educated people and those who have spent time abroad falling into this category. At the other end is the China that wants to return to the time of Mao, that sees the speed of economic development and is afraid of it. Finally, in the middle is a group that sees economic growth as necessary and beneficial, but also feels the need for real social justice.³³ Many NGOs

³² Interview N269, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, December 2010.

³³ Interview BJ119, Government, Director. Beijing, November 2011.

also belong to these different categories. One NGO practitioner's comments highlight their differing visions for society and how some of these can be problematic:

There is one type of NGO that was born in the economically prosperous China. There are other NGOs whose basic agenda is to change China into American democracy. They work for the West, whether explicitly or ideologically. We should not touch these as they are in some sense subversive. Each time there has been a revolution in another country, these NGOs have had quite a role to play...³⁴

The above quoted practitioner, along with most of the NGOs included in this study, see themselves aligned essentially with the middle (majority) group of Chinese society and government as described above. Conflicts and tensions that arise between NGOs and the state can often have their source in tensions between these factions, both within the state and between the state and other social groups.

Expressing Divergent Approaches and Opinions

These groups not only have different visions of the society taking shape in China, they also utilize and are accustomed to different approaches. One NGO director discussed the tendency for those from outside China to see problems differently and to express themselves very directly as one important source of tension in NGO-state relationships.³⁵ Another pointed to government's perception of NGOs as troublemakers and NGOs' adversarial approaches as major sources of conflict:

[a negative situation could arise when] government thinks that people's organizations are dispensable (*keyou kenu*), and even bring trouble and chaos (*tianluan*), or when people's organizations have an emotional (*qingxubua*) and oppositional (*duili*) attitude towards government. We have a lot of failed examples.³⁶

³⁴ Interview BJ89, NGO, Consultant. Beijing, April 2011.

³⁵ Interview Y250, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, July 2010.

³⁶ Interview H165, NGO, founder director. Hebei, August 2010.

The same interviewee adds that ‘if local people’s organizations want to survive, they have to maintain a moderate (*wenhe*) attitude towards government.’³⁷ As discussed at length in *Section 7.6.4*, however, this study found that this moderation and mildness applied primarily at the level of approach. In other words, when the approach used was suited to the political context, content could more freely touch on areas of tension and potential conflict. Particularly within positive-sum reciprocal engagement, NGO members and government officials were much more likely to and comfortable in sharing different opinions and voicing criticisms, provided this was done in private and in an appropriate fashion. Several examples of such policy advice are provided in that section.³⁸

Cooptation and Collusion

Whenever entities enter into close collaborative arrangements across the public-private divide, concerns about the potential for clientelism and collusion arise. This is a particularly pressing concern when such arrangements take shape between NGOs and state entities under conditions of authoritarianism. A simplified version of the argument and underlying assumptions is as follows: the purpose of NGOs is to act as watchdogs on the state and rectify situations in which the state oversteps its authority and does not act in the interests of the people. Through monitoring policy implementation, advocacy, raising public awareness, joining mass movements and lobbying, these NGOs pressure governments to bring about the equitable resolution of environmental, social and political issues. When the institutional environment impedes NGOs’ ability to realize this function, NGOs are either suppressed or forced to compromise their principled stance to survive. Collaboration or close relations between NGOs and states in such contexts is thus often a sign of collusion, in which NGOs’

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ See in particular: Interview Y158, NGO, director. Yunnan, July 2010, Interview H261, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010, Interview Y250, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, July 2010, Interview N238, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

silence on certain issues is purchased in exchange for access and survival. Each side turns a blind eye to each others' failings, to the detriment of the public good.

Such forms of collusion are thought to be common in the Chinese context: 'Given the strong incentives to collude with Chinese authorities, many foreign NGOs opt to pursue a path of "self-censored advocacy," muffling themselves on issues of core concern, in some cases even abandoning or retreating from their original objective rather than risking expulsion.'³⁹ Examples of high-profile international NGOs such as Greenpeace and the International Campaign for Tibet are cited as having compromised principles or changed their position in order to curry favor with Chinese authorities.

Undoubtedly, the Chinese context is one in which certain viewpoints and agendas are not well received, or even penalized, by the authorities. It is also a context in which many, many efforts to promote the public good, in the form of NGOs or other societal arrangements, start up but do not survive. As detailed by the examples in this thesis, many of these fail simply because of a lack of organization or momentum, others because of weak institutional capacity or shortages of funds, and some from a lack of government support resulting from unpopular or threatening positions on social issues. Still others do compromise core principles or ideas in order to avoid potential negative repercussions and ensure their survival. A significant number of NGOs, however, as this study has attempted to detail, have been able to find a way to operate amid tensions, sensitivities and an uninviting political context in a way that protects them from negative repercussions without compromising core beliefs and agendas. The identification of *these* modes of operation, collaboration and influence is a central aim of this work.

³⁹ K. Morton, "The Emergence of NGOs in China and their Transnational Linkages: Implications for Domestic Reform," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 59, no. 4 (2005), 522.

Of course, any reasonable observer would recognize that organizations do not operate in a vacuum. Their strategies, approaches and methods are constantly being adjusted according to the priorities of funders and investors, strategies of competitors, feedback from beneficiaries or customers and the priorities of governments. The question of interest, then, is at what point the dividing line is crossed between natural adjustments as part of a learning process and compromise of core values and mission.⁴⁰ Finally, as discussed in *Section 2.3.1*, there is reason to believe that forms of opportunistic behavior are more likely to flourish in systems with a deep divide between state and society, while close collaborative relationships between officials and citizens enhance productivity while enabling such behavior more likely to be exposed.

Some modifications of action on the part of NGOs are seen by observers and practitioners as a betrayal of principles. Others 'rarely see flexibility with respect to core values as "selling out," but instead as necessary for making the most out of a tough situation, and a path to desirable, if somewhat less-than-perfect results.'⁴¹ Still others find the idea of having an immutable predetermined agenda for social change or even a rigid value system in approaching questions of social development an arrogant and inflexible position. They, as a matter of principle, see social change as a process and outcome that must be shaped by a number of different voices and actors, and as such try to approach it with a set of guiding principles and starting approaches, but also with openness and flexibility.

This section has presented the conclusions of a round of data analysis specifically dedicated to uncovering conflictual dynamics between NGOs and authorities. To uncover these dynamics the notion of conflict was somewhat broadened and diversified to include a

⁴⁰ See section 2.2.1 on autonomy and cooptation.

⁴¹ S. Noakes, "Aiding by China's Rules: How China Changes Foreign NGOs," Canadian International Council <http://opencanada.org/features/the-think-tank/essays/aiding-by-chinas-rules/> accessed August 15, 2013.

number of different actions and interactions that point to underlying tensions. What I have tried to show throughout this thesis and what this section also confirms is that these tensions and occasional conflicts do not always appear in the absence of positive-sum reciprocal engagement or vice versa, but often coexist with them.

A few of the tensions described above, such as interference or ‘management’ and the voicing of opposing opinions, are more likely to surface in relationships characterized by reciprocal engagement than outside of them. Other tensions, such as those that break out when government actors occupy social spaces, withhold support, bar NGO action, conduct investigations, block registration, shut down operations, and when NGO actors undertake unacceptable political action or utilize undesirable approaches, have all characterized many of the relationships between grassroots NGOs and local government agencies in this study. Many of these relationships have subsequently evolved into positive-sum reciprocal engagement, and not always to the exclusion of such tensions. As such, it does not seem apt to think about a cooperative, consistent and ideal relationship of positive-sum reciprocal engagement on the one hand, and a conflictual relationship of diverging views and approaches on the other. This thesis has talked in terms of degrees of positive-sum reciprocal engagement. If there is some spectrum, then the ‘opposite’ of positive-sum reciprocal engagement seems not to be a conflictual relationship, but none at all. NGO-state relationships, in China and elsewhere, can also be characterized by relative distance, independence and lack of regulation or advocacy, particularly among groups that are small and unregistered.

Although this analysis has attempted to explore the limitations of the conventional focus on conflict between state and society, it does not imply that grassroots NGOs do not engage in conflict or can never be seen as subjects of state domination of society. Rather, it aims to bring to light the diversity among these organizations and their relationships with the state and

to develop systematic explanations for this variation and its implications. As with Foster's incorporated associations, grassroots NGOs 'reflect efforts by particular parts of states and societies to accomplish certain tasks and goals. They are sites of both conflict and cooperation, shaped by both contextual factors and the strategic choices of a hodgepodge of political actors. By situating local-level organizational action within the context of key systemic factors (such as regime type), theoretical explanations can be developed that speak constructively to debates and issues within the fields of comparative politics, organizational behavior, and development studies.'⁴²

Critical readers of this work will likely find its analysis naïve and its conclusions overly optimistic. Students of politics and scholars in general are understandably suspicious of analyses that seem to privilege harmony and cooperation. After all, 'consensual and organic conceptions of society have historically been invoked by privileged social groups as a means of imposing a false harmony under terms that are favourable to their own self-interests. Organic metaphors and the rhetoric of consensus have thus been used to stifle diversity, suppress human rights and perpetuate status quo relations. Recognizing this, many people assert that conflict is more desirable than a false or imposed consensus and that adversarial practices are therefore essential if an oppressive social order is to be reformed.'⁴³ However, this argument can embody a false choice because it obscures other alternatives that may be worth exploring. This study hopes to bring to light some alternative social arrangements and methods of achieving social change that are neither necessarily adversarial, nor falsely 'harmonized.'

It should be noted that the effort made in this work to explore variation in types of state-society relationships represents a conscious choice on the part of the researcher to not to fall

⁴² K. W. Foster, "Associations in the Embrace of an Authoritarian State: State Domination of Society?" 103.

⁴³ M.R. Karlberg, *Beyond the culture of contest: From adversarialism to mutualism in an age of interdependence*, George Ronald, (2004) 185.

into the trap of taking for granted certain assumptions about the way state society relations can and should be structured. The reasons for this choice should be made explicit. First, I felt it was important to avoid any potential ideological bias arising from submersion in western-liberal cultures, in which 'contest models of social organization and protest models of social change are so ubiquitous that they appear normal, natural and inevitable.'⁴⁴

Second, I felt it was important, to the extent possible, to be faithful to the voices and perspectives of the interviewees in this study. While a certain amount of second guessing is part of good data analysis, it does not seem fair to assume that conflict, collusion and oppression must be underlying the general state-NGO relationship, and if interviewees do not talk about their relationships in these terms, they must be hiding these aspects of their relationships from the researcher. As discussed in *Chapter 1*, whenever possible I made effort to triangulate information that was being given to me by interviewees and cross-referencing it with their actions, with data from other interviewees and with my own observations and experience as a researcher and practitioner in this field over the past seven years. But, at a certain point, a researcher must incorporate consistent representations of reality from research subjects into his or her interpretation.

Lastly, from a practical perspective, I attempted to trace the source of this preoccupation and address its underlying concern. Why is a keen perception of state-society conflict important? If conflicts reveal opposing interests and underlying power inequalities, and the practical interest in these is to discover how these might be altered, to glean lessons in how relations of domination can be overcome and a more balanced distribution of power obtained, should not various means to achieve these ends be important objects of scholarly inquiry? As *Chapter 7* suggests, China's grassroots NGO have a variety of means at their disposal to exert

⁴⁴ M.R. Karlberg, *Beyond the culture of contest: From adversarialism to mutualism in an age of interdependence*, George Ronald, (2004) xiv.

influence over the state, most of which are not adversarial. Though such methods many have only small or incremental effects in the short term as compared with adversarial approaches, their long-term accumulated effects could arguably go far in redressing injustices and inequalities sustainably.

8.4 Implications for Future Research and Practice

The two preceding sections summarized this study's findings in relation to its two main research questions. These findings were limited in a number of ways, and thus indicate fruitful future areas of research.

8.4.1 Research

One of the aims of this study has been to explore the complexities of state-society engagement and interpenetration through exploring state-NGO relationships. The resulting organizational and institutional linkages between state and society are best conceived as part of a dynamic process that evolves as it transforms each party over time. While this study has drawn on insights gleaned from observations made over a period of several years, it has been unable to trace these dynamics over a significant period of time. More detailed longitudinal studies of a few cases, showing the formation, ups and downs, as well as, perhaps, the breakdown of positive-sum reciprocal engagement would allow for a more granular conception of positive-sum reciprocal engagement and how to track its development more accurately over time.

Thus far, much of the research on state-social organization relationships in China, including my own work, is qualitative. It would be difficult to deny the importance and necessity of qualitative empirical work in this field, as the nuances, subtlety and context that are uncovered in such research informs much of the discussion, especially in the concept-

refining and theory-building stages. However, insofar as some of the preliminary findings of this study are interesting, but need to be tested as to their generalizability and wider application, it would be excellent to have some large-n studies on Chinese state-social organization relationships. While some efforts have been made in this direction, they largely draw on official statistics, which exclude unregistered organizations and do not allow for differentiation of sub-sectors based on some of the criteria which I have found to be vital in this study. Thus, such quantitative studies would necessitate that researchers construct their own datasets based on extensive field research, and would obviously be costly. Unless data was very carefully gathered, they would also have their limitations, so mixed methods approaches could also be used.

Despite the escalating interest in China's NGO sector among scholars and observers, as well as the rapidly multiplying studies on the subject, detailed empirical work on indigenous grassroots NGOs outside China's major urban centers is still very rare. This scarcity would be less surprising if it were limited to foreign scholars that may have difficulty accessing such groups, but interestingly, even Chinese researchers seldom seem to include this important segment of the sector into their work. Given that the findings of this study have differed in many significant ways from studies that have focused on foreign NGOs, government-organized NGOs, or elite-run NGOs, careful selection of sub-groups from civil society seems paramount if generalized conclusions about 'China's civil society' are to be drawn. Any further research specifically on indigenous grassroots NGOs in rural or semi-rural areas, or broader studies of the NGO sector that includes this subset of organizations, would be of benefit to the field.

Finally, this study has highlighted the importance of making explicit and revisiting underlying assumptions about state, society their relationships in empirical work of this kind.

Thus, one implication for future research is for further research on social organizations and their relationships with the state in China or other national contexts to address and clarify assumptions about autonomy, power and the underlying concerns of theoretical frameworks before presenting conclusions or recommendations.

Also, this study has contributed to concept-generation in the notion of positive-sum reciprocal engagement, the concept would need to be further tested in other projects examining different social and political contexts to verify results. Since the scope of this study has been limited to the Chinese context, and thus, may be limited in its immediate generalizability to authoritarian contexts, it would be of great value to explore the applications of positive-sum reciprocal engagement to a wider variety of political contexts. Foster questions the assumption that conclusions drawn from authoritarian and democratic political systems are fundamentally irreconcilable:

From a broader perspective, the kinds of interactions and relationships found in the realm of incorporated associations call into question the pervasive assumption in the comparative politics literature that association-state relations in authoritarian and democratic political systems are qualitatively different. To be sure, in some senses the two types of systems are fundamentally different. However politics and governance in authoritarian and democratic countries alike involves the complex interaction of a variety of organizational and individual actors pursuing diverse sorts of goals. In countries as different as the United States and China, one observes a similar dynamic in the interaction between associations and government agencies: a search for patrons and allies, along with efforts to forge cooperative and mutually beneficial relationships. Whereas analysts of American politics frequently speak of the “capture” of agencies by interest groups, scholars of authoritarian regimes in the developing world see everywhere the “co-optation” of societal groups. These are two sides of the same coin, and given the difficulty of accurately measuring influence (to determine who co-opts or captures whom), such a gross and, I would argue, often fairly arbitrary distinction obscures similarities in the processes by which boundary-blurring linkages between state and society emerge within different kinds of political regimes.⁴⁵

To enable fruitful dialogue between scholarship on state-social organization relationships in widely varying political contexts, ideologically premised lenses would need to

⁴⁵ K. W. Foster, "Associations in the Embrace of an Authoritarian State: State Domination of Society?" *Studies in Comparative International Development (SCID)* 35, no. 4 (2001), 103.

be set aside in favor of empirical analysis of mutual benefit and influence. In other words, future research should 'look carefully at what determines the flow of benefits in such arrangements and at the mutually transformative effects of state-society interpenetration.'⁴⁶

8.4.2 Constructability

As indicated by the summary presented at the outset of this chapter, the most significant of all factors in the emergence of positive-sum reciprocal engagement between grassroots NGOs and local government agencies were those having to do with NGO capacity. One interesting implication of this result is that collaborative patterns of state-society engagement may be more 'constructible'⁴⁷ than purely structural.

The literature on the related concept of state-society synergy discussed in *Chapter 2* refutes the idea advanced by theorists like Putnam that prior endowments of social capital are crucial to synergy and thus a key constraining factor in its emergence. It then finds, however, that 'egalitarian societies with robust public bureaucracies provide the most fertile ground for synergistic state-society relations,' and thus, that 'most of the Third World offers arid prospects,' yet it is still 'possible that synergy can be constructed out of small-scale changes implemented in relatively compressed periods of time, even in adverse environments.'⁴⁸ This study comes to a similar conclusion: the possibility of positive-sum reciprocal engagement does not depend primarily on structural endowments that must be taken as given, but is a latent possibility that can be produced over time.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Evans uses this term to refer to the potential to create state-society synergy. P. Evans, "Government Action, Social Capital and Development: Reviewing the Evidence on Synergy," *World Development* 24, no. 6 (1996), 1128.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

This implication is at odds with a perception and attitude common among outside observers and Chinese NGOs themselves that the constrained space available to Chinese NGOs and their weak relationships with the state are a result of government choices and policy. The excerpt below, from an interview with the founder of an educational NGO, captures this perception:

Many people feel that we are actually doing something for government, but that the government doesn't care about this, and it is unjust to us. For now, there is still a gulf between government and people's organizations. So there needs to be a bridge between the two. This bridge cannot be built by the people's organizations, the government has to build it. They have to give us a space. We don't want money or anything, we just want some facilitating conditions (*bianli tiaojian*).

For example you need approval to solicit public donations. We are not formally allowed to solicit donations. It was 'don't support, don't oppose' (*buzhichi buyandui*), now it is 'silent acceptance' (*moren*). It is not illegal and it is a good thing, so they allow it. So why do they support it? This has to do with the person, the officials themselves. If they care about these populations and have a loving heart or charitable consciousness, then they will be very eager to support such actions. Some officials don't want to extend their support because they think 'This will make people think my area is very pitiful, as though I didn't do well in this area, so I must have you participate.' It will have a negative impact on their political achievements (*zhengji*).⁴⁹

This perception, which places the burden of a more open environment for and the building of ties to Chinese NGOs on the shoulders of the state is also implied in much of the literature on Chinese civil society. Many of these studies outline the limited space available to Chinese NGOs and call for policy change and reform of the regulatory environment as the solution.⁵⁰

By contrast, the findings of this study indicate that grassroots NGOs have significant scope for opening spaces for themselves and initiating and strengthening ties with the state.

⁴⁹ Interview H168, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, November 2010.

⁵⁰ See, for example, T. V. Hippel and K. B. Pissler, "Non-Profit Organizations in the People's Republic of China," in *Comparative Corporate Governance of Non-Profit Organizations*, eds. K. J. Hopt and T. V. Hippel (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 428-477; Y. Lu, "NGOs in China: Development Dynamics and Challenges," *The University of Nottingham, China Policy Institute, Discussion Paper* (2007); J. S. Ashley and P. Y. He, "Opening One Eye and Closing the Other: The Legal and Regulatory Environment for Grassroots NGOs in China Today," *Boston University International Law Journal* 26 (2008), 29-96.

This places much agency back into the hands of NGOs themselves, and suggests that by strengthening certain organizational capabilities, such as the capability of framing issues, engaging in effective action and communicating the results of such action to local government agencies, and identifying potential reformists, these organizations can open up significant spaces in which to operate. By deepening levels of positive-sum reciprocal engagement with the local state, they can also exert an influence on policy—including NGO policy. This is not to deny that central government initiatives to loosen regulatory controls and foster the development of the NGO sector—initiatives that may indeed be forthcoming—are important. Rather, it suggests ways in which NGOs themselves can shape their interactions with the state, a finding which, I hope, can be made to be both useful and empowering to practitioners in the field.

That possibilities for positive-sum reciprocal engagement also depend on another factor more relevant to agency than to structure—the actions of reformists—reinforces its our understanding of it as constructable. To the extent that central or local government actors have an interest in forging closer ties with NGOs—and evidence seems to suggest that many generally do—individual officials also have some scope for establishing such bonds despite existing structural constraints.

Finally, this study has defined and empirically documented an emerging form of collaborative relationship between grassroots NGOs and local government. My hope is that findings presented here about the potential for mutual empowerment inherent in this relationship can inform local government practice, if not general policy. For it is evident that, like Chinese NGOs and their counterparts across much of the developing world, the Chinese state is also struggling to define alternative modes of engagement between state and social

organizations to contention or cooptation. Positive-sum reciprocal engagement may provide one alternative vision of interaction that can be taken up and fostered by policy-makers.

8.5 Implications for Political Stability and Change

The concept of positive-sum reciprocal engagement advanced in this study highlights a collaborative dimension of the Chinese state-society relationship, a dimension that exists alongside other patterns of interaction characterized, for example, by domination or contention. What are the implications of this form of engagement for political stability or political change?

Chapter 2 has argued that the type of grassroots NGOs included in this study—if they really are representative of the bulk and mainstream of Chinese NGOs—are unlikely to contribute to democratization in the ways expected by observers. Few have an interest in following in the footsteps of the NGOs involved in Eastern Europe’s color revolutions and challenge the regime, or even in working towards a Western liberal ideal of democracy in less contentious ways. Nonetheless, through their involvement in positive-sum reciprocal engagement with the state, they are subtly making significant contributions to the reform and transformation of the Chinese state and society.

8.5.1 Fostering Political Change

As such organizations continue to flourish in number and efficacy, their contribution to political culture is likely to grow. While political change and reform are not to be automatically equated with a transition to a liberal democratic system of governance, nor solely limited to the central government’s promotion of inner-party democracy or grassroots democracy, it can involve the broader construction of a more democratic culture.

At the most basic level, as Putnam argues, even non-political organizations in civil society build social capital, trust, and shared values that can be transferred to the political sphere and are thus essential for democracy.⁵¹ In this conception, it is the social interactions that take place through association that play a key role, while the specific purpose for which interaction takes place is less relevant.

Similarly, Almond and Verba see in the political element of civil society the potential for facilitating a more informed and aware citizenry, who are better able to participate in politics and make voting choices.⁵² NGOs can help ensure effective, transparent and accountable democratic government by aggregating and conveying the disparate demands of various interest groups and hold the state accountable.⁵³ In this sense, Chinese grassroots NGOs can contribute to the democratic ideal in that they can empower individuals to make choices and participate in decisions that concern their well-being.

However, the culture that is emerging from the growth of these NGOs and the deepening of their engagement with the state goes beyond a definition of democratic activity as 'making choices.' Another, and arguably more important, aspect of their contribution is in fostering capacity for action, often side-by-side with local officials, to implement decisions having to do with their own well-being. Through their involvement in such organizations, whether as staff, volunteers, or program participants, citizens learn not just to *make* choices, but also to *act* on them, usually in concert with individuals from other diverse sectors of society. This form of empowerment and initiative represents a facet of political development

⁵¹ R. D. Putnam, R. Leonardi and R. Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton Univ Pr 1994).

⁵² G. A. Almond and S. Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Sage Publications, Inc, 1989).

⁵³ L. Diamond, "Rethinking Civil Society: Toward Democratic Consolidation," *Journal of Democracy* 5 (1994), 4-18.

that is often overlooked in both authoritarian and Western liberal democratic contexts, even though it can play a critical role in shaping political outcomes.

The evidence presented in this study suggests, then, that China's grassroots NGOs can have gradual but transformative impact on Chinese society and politics, particularly to the extent that they are engaged in reciprocal relationships with local government departments.

8.5.2 Contributing to Authoritarian Resilience

While they can foster political change, grassroots NGOs can also play a role in maintaining social stability. For Nathan, authoritarian resilience is maintained by 'input institutions' that appear to give citizens a voice in conveying their concerns to the state.⁵⁴ Some such institutions have been identified by Shi, and offer opportunities for participation and activism through voting, assisting candidates in local-level elections, and lobbying unit leaders.⁵⁵ Nathan identifies four other sets of input institutions that contribute to regime legitimacy: allowing citizens to sue government agencies for alleged violations of policy, the existence of offices for citizen complaints (*xinfangju*), the heightened independence of people's congresses and people's political consultative conferences, and a more autonomous and market-driven mass media.

These channels of demand and complaint-making, Nathan argues, have two common features. First, 'they encourage individual rather than group-based inputs, the latter of which are viewed as threatening by the regime.' Second 'they focus complaints against specific local-level agencies or officials, diffusing possible aggression against the Chinese party-state

⁵⁴ A. J. Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience," *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 1 (2003), 6-17.

⁵⁵ T. Shi, *Political Participation in Beijing* (Harvard University Press, 1997).

generally. Accordingly, they enable citizens to pursue grievances without creating the potential to threaten the regime as a whole.⁵⁶

Based on Nathan's definition, it could be argued that the above are features shared by many NGOs. By channeling citizen participation into non-political, non-threatening action, such organizations can allow disadvantaged groups to believe they have a voice, stymieing potential unrest and maintaining social stability.

However, it is also possible that these organizations are contributing to the resilience of the Chinese state in a different sense. Perhaps this resilience is not equivalent to maintaining stability or a status quo, to defusing social action that may be challenging to the state, or to creating pressure valves that grant citizens a false sense of control over their fates. Rather, this resilience may point to a deeper ability of the Chinese state to engage in learning, adaptation and social innovation. As grassroots NGOs aggregate and channel individual interests and, through ties with the local officials, convey these interests to the state, engage in dialogue and influence policy, they participate in a broader learning process. Beyond advocacy, these organizations also allow citizens, as well as the officials working with them, opportunities for genuine participation—that is, opportunities to actually engage themselves in activities that can address the challenges facing Chinese state and society.

⁵⁶ A. J. Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience," 15.

Appendix C: Special Appendix to Chapter 8

The following interview excerpt with the founder of an environmental NGO that had painstakingly established a collaborative relationship with the county Office of Poverty Alleviation and successfully registered as a private non-enterprise unit illustrates how grassroots NGOs interpret, react to and navigate the often murky waters of positive-sum reciprocal engagement when tensions arise between them and local government agencies.

I was applying for a Poverty Alleviation Innovation Award administered by the Ministry of Commerce in September 2010. For this award I needed the stamp of the sponsoring organization, so I visited the Poverty Alleviation Office to get their stamp. During this visit their tone was very negative. They said “Now what are you doing? Isn’t there any way you not be sponsored by (*guakao*) Poverty Alleviation?” When I asked him for the stamp, he asked the assistant, “Will this bring us any trouble?” But he stamped it in the end. I thought maybe this happened because I hadn’t given him gifts or visited for holidays. So I went to visit him for the holidays.

As for the Civil Affairs Bureau, the official who was in charge of registering organizations used to have a very positive impression of me. He would give me suggestions or think of ways to help me. Once I called him to ask him if he could help coordinate one of our trainings. But then his attitude changed very much. Before we used to talk on the phone and it would be no problem. Then [one time] when I called Civil Affairs to arrange a meeting, he picked up the phone, and then hung up. In the past, when I would go to his home or contact him to report to him he would always answer, even during county-wide meetings. But this time he didn’t answer. Then I called the Poverty Alleviation official and he wouldn’t answer, then his phone was turned off. So I got very nervous, because our relationship used to be very good, I would often go and see him when he was sick.

This situation was very negative compared to before. I think they had some misunderstandings. I don’t know what was behind it, but we were very afraid that they would make this decision [to stop the NGO’s registration status], or use other ways to limit us. I was very afraid. We think maybe it is because the county Public Security was investigating around the summer of 2010. At that time my friend at Civil Affairs called me and told me to come see him. He asked me if there was any trouble with me recently. He said that a few plainclothes people had come to Civil Affairs and walked around for a while then left. Then they came again the next day and asked which organizations in this locality are being funding by foreign organizations. Then they took a few copies of the list of local organizations and left.

The Civil Affairs friend said I have to do things that are in line with government laws and policies. He said there has never before been anyone who has gone to their department to check this kind of thing. But nobody from Public Security ever came to

our own office. This happened months ago so we don't think this was the reason for the change in attitude from Civil Affairs and Poverty Alleviation.⁵⁷

The NGO founder and his collaborators strategized about how to resolve this challenge. He decided to put together a concrete proposal for an animal husbandry project that would involve several different government agencies and a media presence. By creating an opportunity for different parties to interact in implementing a concrete project of interest to all the organization was able to raise its profile and build legitimacy among a variety of government actors. Eventually the founder's contacts at Civil Affairs and Poverty Alleviation were appeased and organization's registration status seemed secure.

⁵⁷ Interview N273, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010

Research Methodology Appendices

Appendix D: List of Informants

Code	Date	Province	Position	Sector	Administrative Level
BJ06	2007	Beijing	Official	Government	Central
MA02	2005 11	Macau	President	NGO	
BJ03	2005 11	Beijing	Chief Executive	NGO	
SX01	2005 11 09	Shanxi	President of the Board	NGO	
Y104	2005 12	Yunnan	Founder/Director	NGO	
GD05	2006 07 05	Guangdong	Founder/Director	NGO	
N107	2009 07	Ningxia	Staff	NGO	
BJ08	2009 08	Beijing	Staff	Academic	
BJ121	2009 08	Beijing	Staff	Government	Municipal
BJ09	2009 09	Beijing	Director	Academic	
BJ10	2009 09	Beijing	Professor	Academic	
BJ11	2009 10	Beijing	Director	Academic	
BJ12	2010 02	Beijing	Professor	Academic	
BJ13	2010 02	Beijing	Professor	Academic	
GD109	2010 02	Guangdong	Staff	Government	Provincial
BJ14	2010 03	Beijing	Staff	Government	Municipal
H2101	2010 03 22	Hebei	Founder/Director	NGO	
H2102	2010 03 22	Hebei	Founder/Director	NGO	
H2103	2010 03 23	Hebei	Chairperson	Government	County
BJ25	2010 04 19	Beijing	Professor	Academic	
BJ26	2010 04 21	Beijing	Professor	Academic	
BJ27	2010 04 21	Beijing	Professor	Academic	

BJ24	2010 04 26	Beijing	Professor	Academic	
BJ23	2010 04 26	Beijing	Professor	Academic	
Y115	2010 04 3	Yunnan	Founder/Director	NGO	
Y116	2010 04 4	Yunnan	Founder/Director	NGO	
YD17	2010 04 5	Yunnan	Founder/Director	NGO	
Y218	2010 04 7	Yunnan	Founder/Director	NGO	
YK19	2010 04 8	Yunnan	Staff	Government	Municipal
Y220	2010 04 8	Yunnan	Deputy Secretary	Government	Municipal
Y221	2010 04 8	Yunnan	Principal	Government	County
Y222	2010 04 8	Yunnan	Standing Committee Secretary	Government	County
YK28	2010 05 19	Yunnan	Founder/Director	NGO	
Y229	2010 05 21	Yunnan	Founder/Director	NGO	
YD30	2010 05 23	Yunnan	Founder/Director	NGO	
Y131	2010 05 24	Yunnan	Founder/Director	NGO	
Y132	2010 05 25	Yunnan	Founder/Director	NGO	
Y133	2010 05 26	Yunnan	Director of Educational Research	Government	District
Y134	2010 05 28	Yunnan	Director of External Relations	NGO	
GD45	2010 06 08	Guangdong	Professor	Academic	
N235	2010 06 20	Ningxia	Village Head	Government	Village
N236	2010 06 21	Ningxia	Founder/Director	NGO	
N237	2010 06 21	Ningxia	Founder/Director	NGO	
N238	2010 06 21	Ningxia	Founder/Director	NGO	
N239	2010 06 22	Ningxia	Staff	NGO	
NH40	2010 06 23	Ningxia	Founder/Director	NGO	
N141	2010 06 24	Ningxia	Founder/Director	NGO	
N142	2010 06 24	Ningxia	Founder/Director	NGO	
N143	2010 06 24	Ningxia	Director of External Relations	NGO	
N144	2010 06 25	Ningxia	Staff	NGO	
YK46	2010 07 04	Yunnan	Founder/Director	NGO	

Y248	2010 07 06	Yunnan	Staff	Government	County
Y249	2010 07 06	Yunnan	Principal	Government	County
Y247	2010 07 06	Yunnan	Founder/Director	NGO	
Y251	2010 07 07	Yunnan	Staff	Government	Municipal
Y250	2010 07 07	Yunnan	Director of External Relations	NGO	
Y252	2010 07 07	Yunnan	Staff	NGO	
Y153	2010 07 12	Yunnan	Staff	NGO	
Y154	2010 07 12	Yunnan	Founder/Director	NGO	
Y157	2010 07 13	Yunnan	Staff	Government	Municipal
Y155	2010 07 13	Yunnan	Staff	NGO	
Y156	2010 07 14	Yunnan	Director	Government	Municipal
Y158	2010 07 14	Yunnan	Director	NGO	
H259	2010 08 03	Hebei	Founder/Director	NGO	
H2104	2010 08 04	Hebei	Chairperson	Government	County
H2105	2010 08 04	Hebei	Village Head	Government	Village
H260	2010 08 04	Hebei	Founder/Director	NGO	
H162	2010 08 05	Hebei	Director	Government	Municipal
H261	2010 08 05	Hebei	Founder/Director	NGO	
H263	2010 08 05	Hebei	Vice Director	NGO	
H1106	2010 08 06	Hebei	Staff	Government	Provincial
H164	2010 08 06	Hebei	Founder/Director	NGO	
H165	2010 08 06	Hebei	Founder/Director	NGO	
BJ66	2010 08 10	Beijing	Staff	NGO	
H167	2010 11 08	Hebei	Staff	Government	Provincial
H168	2010 11 09	Hebei	Founder/Director	NGO	
N269	2010 12 04	Ningxia	Founder/Director	NGO	
N270	2010 12 05	Ningxia	Founder/Director	NGO	
NH71	2010 12 05	Ningxia	Founder/Director	NGO	
N172	2010 12 08	Ningxia	Founder/Director	NGO	
N273	2010 12 08	Ningxia	Founder/Director	NGO	

N174	2010 12 09	Ningxia	Staff	Government	Provincial
N175	2010 12 09	Ningxia	Director	Government	Provincial
N176	2010 12 09	Ningxia	Director	Government	Provincial
N177	2010 12 09	Ningxia	Staff	Government	Provincial
N178	2010 12 10	Ningxia	Staff	Government	Provincial
N179	2010 12 10	Ningxia	Staff	Government	Provincial
N180	2010 12 10	Ningxia	Director	Government	Provincial
N181	2010 12 10	Ningxia	Founder/Director	NGO	
N182	2010 12 11	Ningxia	Director	Government	Provincial
BJ83	2011 01 17	Beijing	Staff	Government	Municipal
BJ84	2011 01 27	Beijing	Staff	Government	Central
BJ87	2011 04 11	Beijing	Professor	Academic	
BJ85	2011 04 11	Beijing	Director	Government	Central
BJ86	2011 04 11	Beijing	Staff	Government	Central
BJ88	2011 04 11	Beijing	Professor	Government	Central
BJ89	2011 04 13	Beijing	Consultant	NGO	
YK90	2011 04 18	Yunnan	Director	Government	Provincial
Y091	2011 04 18	Yunnan	Director	Government	Provincial
YK92	2011 04 18	Yunnan	Director	NGO	
BJ93	2011 04 19	Beijing	Staff	Government	Central
SC94	2011 04 19	Sichuan	Director	Government	Provincial
SC95	2011 04 19	Sichuan	Vice Director	Government	Provincial
SC96	2011 04 19	Sichuan	Staff	Government	Provincial
SX97	2011 04 22	Shaanxi	Director	Academic	
SX98	2011 04 22	Shaanxi	Researcher	Academic	
BJ99	2011 06 07	Beijing	Professor	Government	Central
N1100	2011 06 25	Ningxia	Staff	Government	Provincial
Y2107	2011 07 30	Yunnan	Staff	Government	Municipal
Y2108	2011 08 01	Yunnan	Director	Government	Municipal
YK110	2011 10 18	Yunnan	Vice Director, Dean	Government, Academic	Provincial

YK111	2011 10 19	Yunnan	Director	Government, Academic	Provincial
YK112	2011 10 19	Yunnan	Researcher	Government, Academic	Provincial
YK113	2011 10 19	Yunnan	Director	Government, Academic	Provincial
BJ114	2011 11 11	Beijing	Section Director	Government	Provincial
YK115	2011 11 14	Yunnan	Vice-Director	Government	Provincial
BJ116	2011 11 14	Beijing	Staff	Government	Central
YK117	2011 11 15	Yunnan	Director	Government, Academic	Provincial
YK118	2011 11 15	Yunnan	Researcher	Government, Academic	Provincial
BJ120	2011 11 21	Beijing	Professor	Academic	
BJ119	2011 11 21	Beijing	Director	Government	Central
YK122	2011 12 24	Yunnan	Staff	Government	County

Appendix E: NGO Questionnaire

编码：

访问日期：__年__月__日

本调查属于自愿性调查

社会组织与当地政府部门之间的关系

社会组织问卷

访问开始

这份问卷问题的回答是严格保密的。如果有些问题不知道确切的答案，你可以查一查有关的记录。如果没有记录可查，请尽你所知估计一个答案。对每一个问题，请选一个答案，并在你选的答案“是”或“否”打上钩。如果不愿意回答某个问题，请在问题旁边打叉。在回答的过程中，如果你有任何问题，请随时告诉我们，同时非常感谢您的参与！

A. 基本信息

A1. 组织名称

A2. 组织行政级别

A3. 组织地理工作范围：省 州 市

a. 县/区 乡/镇 村

b. 县/区 乡/镇 村

c. 县/区 乡/镇 村

d. 县/区 乡/镇 村

c. 县/区_____乡/镇_____村

A4.被访者姓名_____

A5. 被访者的职务_____

A6. 被访者在组织工作几年? _____

B.与当地政府部门的关系

B1	你认为你的组织是否应该跟当地政府部门建立关系?		是 ☐	否 ☐
请到此结束问卷				
根据你机构的地理位置和活动性质, 应该跟哪些政府部门建立关系? 请列出这些部门:				
	当地政府部门名称		行政级别	
B2				
B3				
B4				
B5				
B6				
B7				
B8				
B9				
B10				
B11				
你的组织已经与哪些当地政府部门开始建立关系? 请列出每一部门的名称、行政级别。				
B12	当地政府部门 1:			
B13	当地政府部门 2:			
B14	当地政府部门 3:			
B15	当地政府部门 4:			
B16	当地政府部门 5:			

C. 当地政府部门 1

		是	否
C1	我本人跟这个当地政府部门的人员有过直接的沟通。	☐	☐ 请继续到 D
C2	我组织的其他同事跟这各当地政府部门的人员有过交流。	☐	☐
C3	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流只有一次。	☐	☐
C4	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流次数有 2-5 次。	☐	☐
C5	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有 5-10 此。	☐	☐
C6	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有 10 次以上。	☐	☐
C7	我经常或定期跟这个政府部门人员有交流，大概几个月一次。	☐	☐
C8	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流属于正式的交流。	☐	☐
C9	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流属于非正式的交流。	☐	☐
C10	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流主要是当面交流的形式。	☐	☐
C11	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流主要是电话交流的形势。	☐	☐
C12	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流是采用其他的形势。	☐ 请说明	☐
C13	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有这个组织的办公室进行过。	☐	☐
C14	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有在我政府部门的办公室进行过。	☐	☐
C15	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有在我自己的家里进行过。	☐	☐
C16	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有在这个人员自己的家里进行过。	☐	☐
C17	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有在其它地方进行过。	☐ 请说明	☐
C18	我参加过这个政府部门安排的活动。	☐	☐
C19	我组织跟这个部门进行过非正式的合作。	☐	☐
C20	我组织跟这个部门进行过正式的合作。	☐	☐
C21	我组织跟这个部门曾经有过合作协议。	☐	☐
C22	我组织的目标跟这个部门的目标有共同点。	☐ 请说明	☐
C23	我组织的目标跟这个部门的目标没有什么共同点。	☐	☐
C24	我组织对这个政府部门的工作有帮助。	☐ 请说明	☐
C25	我组织的工作影响了这个部门采取新的或不一样的工作方式。	☐ 请说明	☐
C26	我组织的工作对这个部门怎样执行政策有了影响。	☐ 请说明	☐
C27	我组织的工作对这个部门怎样形成政策有了影响。	☐ 请说明	☐

D. 当地政府部门 2

		是	否
D1	我本人跟这个当地政府部门的人员有过直接的沟通。	☐	☐ 请继续到 E
D2	我组织的其他同事跟这各当地政府部门的人员有过交流。	☐	☐
D3	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流只有一次。	☐	☐
D4	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流次数有 2-5 次。	☐	☐
D5	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有 5-10 次。	☐	☐
D6	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有 10 次以上。	☐	☐
D7	我经常或定期跟这个政府部门人员有交流，大概几个月一次。	☐	☐
D8	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流属于正式的交流。	☐	☐
D9	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流属于非正式的交流。	☐	☐
D10	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流主要是当面交流的形式。	☐	☐
D11	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流主要是电话交流的形势。	☐	☐
D12	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流是采用其他的形势。	☐ 请说明	☐
D13	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有这个组织的办公室进行过。	☐	☐
D14	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有在我政府部门的办公室进行过。	☐	☐
D15	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有在我自己的家里进行过。	☐	☐
D16	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有在这个人员自己的家里进行过。	☐	☐
D17	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有在其它地方进行过。	☐ 请说明	☐
D18	我参加过这个政府部门安排的活动。	☐	☐
D19	我组织跟这个部门进行过非正式的合作。	☐	☐
D20	我组织跟这个部门进行过正式的合作。	☐	☐
D21	我组织跟这个部门曾经有过合作协议。	☐	☐
D22	我组织的目标跟这个部门的目标有共同点。	☐ 请说明	☐
D23	我组织的目标跟这个部门的目标没有什么共同点。	☐	☐
D24	我组织对这个政府部门的工作有帮助。	☐ 请说明	☐
D25	我组织的工作影响了这个部门采取新的或不一样的工作方式。	☐ 请说明	☐
D26	我组织的工作对这个部门怎样执行政策有了影响。	☐ 请说明	☐
D27	我组织的工作对这个部门怎样形成政策有了影响。	☐ 请说明	☐

E. 当地政府部门 3

		是	否
E1	我本人跟这个当地政府部门的人员有过直接的沟通。	☐	☐ 请继续到 F
E2	我组织的其他同事跟这各当地政府部门的人员有过交流。	☐	☐
E3	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流只有一次。	☐	☐
E4	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流次数有 2-5 次。	☐	☐
E5	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有 5-10 此。	☐	☐
E6	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有 10 次以上。	☐	☐
E7	我经常或定期跟这个政府部门人员有交流，大概几个月一次。	☐	☐
E8	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流属于正式的交流。	☐	☐
E9	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流属于非正式的交流。	☐	☐
E10	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流主要是当面交流的形式。	☐	☐
E11	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流主要是电话交流的形势。	☐	☐
E12	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流是采用其他的形势。	☐ 请说明	☐
E13	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有这个组织的办公室进行过。	☐	☐
E14	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有在我政府部门的办公室进行过。	☐	☐
E15	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有在我自己的家里进行过。	☐	☐
E16	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有在这个人员自己的家里进行过。	☐	☐
E17	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有在其它地方进行过。	☐ 请说明	☐
E18	我参加过这个政府部门安排的活动。	☐	☐
E19	我组织跟这个部门进行过非正式的合作。	☐	☐
E20	我组织跟这个部门进行过正式的合作。	☐	☐
E21	我组织跟这个部门曾经有过合作协议。	☐	☐
E22	我组织的目标跟这个部门的目标有共同点。	☐ 请说明	☐
E23	我组织的目标跟这个部门的目标没有什么共同点。	☐	☐
E24	我组织对这个政府部门的工作有帮助。	☐ 请说明	☐
E25	我组织的工作影响了这个部门采取新的或不一样的工作方式。	☐ 请说明	☐
E26	我组织的工作对这个部门怎样执行政策有了影响。	☐ 请说明	☐
E27	我组织的工作对这个部门怎样形成政策有了影响。	☐ 请说明	☐

F. 当地政府部门 4

		是	否
F1	我本人跟这个当地政府部门的人员有过直接的沟通。	☐	☐ 请继续到 G
F2	我组织的其他同事跟这各当地政府部门的人员有过交流。	☐	☐
F3	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流只有一次。	☐	☐
F4	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流次数有 2-5 次。	☐	☐
F5	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有 5-10 次。	☐	☐
F6	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有 10 次以上。	☐	☐
F7	我经常或定期跟这个政府部门人员有交流，大概几个月一次。	☐	☐
F8	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流属于正式的交流。	☐	☐
F9	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流属于非正式的交流。	☐	☐
F10	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流主要是当面交流的形式。	☐	☐
F11	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流主要是电话交流的形势。	☐	☐
F12	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流是采用其他的形势。	☐ 请说明	☐
F13	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有这个组织的办公室进行过。	☐	☐
F14	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有在我政府部门的办公室进行过。	☐	☐
F15	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有在我自己的家里进行过。	☐	☐
F16	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有在这个人员自己的家里进行过。	☐	☐
F17	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有在其它地方进行过。	☐ 请说明	☐
F18	我参加过这个政府部门安排的活动。	☐	☐
F19	我组织跟这个部门进行过非正式的合作。	☐	☐
F20	我组织跟这个部门进行过正式的合作。	☐	☐
F21	我组织跟这个部门曾经有过合作协议。	☐	☐
F22	我组织的目标跟这个部门的目标有共同点。	☐ 请说明	☐
F23	我组织的目标跟这个部门的目标没有什么共同点。	☐	☐
F24	我组织对这个政府部门的工作有帮助。	☐ 请说明	☐
F25	我的工作影响了这个部门采取新的或不一样的工作方式。	☐ 请说明	☐
F26	我的工作对这个部门怎样执行政策有了影响。	☐ 请说明	☐
F27	我的工作对这个部门怎样形成政策有了影响。	☐ 请说明	☐

G. 当地政府部门 5

		是	否
G1	我本人跟这个当地政府部门的人员有过直接的沟通。	☐	☐ 请到此结束 问卷
G2	我组织的其他同事跟这各当地政府部门的人员有过交流。	☐	☐
G3	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流只有一次。	☐	☐
G4	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流次数有 2-5 次。	☐	☐
G5	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有 5-10 次。	☐	☐
G6	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有 10 次以上。	☐	☐
G7	我经常或定期跟这个政府部门人员有交流，大概几个月一次。	☐	☐
G8	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流属于正式的交流。	☐	☐
G9	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流属于非正式的交流。	☐	☐
G10	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流主要是当面交流的形式。	☐	☐
G11	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流主要是电话交流的形势。	☐	☐
G12	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流是采用其他的形势。	☐ 请说明	☐
G13	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有这个组织的办公室进行过。	☐	☐
G14	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有在我政府部门的办公室进行过。	☐	☐
G15	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有在我自己的家里进行过。	☐	☐
G16	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有在这个人员自己的家里进行过。	☐	☐
G17	我跟这个政府部门人员的交流有在其它地方进行过。	☐ 请说明	☐
G18	我参加过这个政府部门安排的活动。	☐	☐
G19	我组织跟这个部门进行过非正式的合作。	☐	☐
G20	我组织跟这个部门进行过正式的合作。	☐	☐
G21	我组织跟这个部门曾经有过合作协议。	☐	☐
G22	我组织的目标跟这个部门的目标有共同点。	☐ 请说明	☐
G23	我组织的目标跟这个部门的目标没有什么共同点。	☐	☐
G24	我组织对这个政府部门的工作有帮助。	☐ 请说明	☐
G25	我组织的工作影响了这个部门采取新的或不一样的工作方式。	☐ 请说明	☐
G26	我组织的工作对这个部门怎样执行政策有了影响。	☐ 请说明	☐
G27	我组织的工作对这个部门怎样形成政策有了影响。	☐ 请说明	☐

Appendix F: Government Questionnaire

编码：

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 访问日期： 年 月 日

本调查属于自愿性调查

社会组织与当地政府部门之间的关系
干 部 问 卷
访问开始

这份问卷问题的回答是严格保密的。如果有些问题不知道确切的答案，你可以查一查有关的记录。如果没有记录可查，请尽你所知估计一个答案。对每一个问题，请选一个答案，并在你选的答案“是”或“否”打上钩。如果不愿意回答某个问题，请在问题旁边打叉。在回答的过程中，如果你有任何问题，请随时告诉我们，同时非常感谢您的参与！

A. 基本信息

- A1.干部姓名 _____
- A2.被访者部门名称_____
- A3. 被访者部门行政级别：省_____州_____市_____县/区_____镇/乡
_____村_____
- A4. 被访者的职务_____

B.当地社会组织

备注：此问卷用“当地社会组织”一词代表被当地人成立的、自发性的、在此行政地区开展与环境或教育有关的社会服务活动的公益组织。回答以下问题的过程当中可以包括过去存在过的但现在已经没有了的符合这些条件的社会组织。

B1	据我所知，此地区不存在这样的组织。	是□ 请到此结束问卷	否□
B2	此地区存在这样的组织。我了解到的有_____个。		
B3	请列出您了解到的本地的社会组织的名称：		
B4	社会组织 1：		
B5	社会组织 2：		
B6	社会组织 3：		
B7	社会组织 4：		
B8	社会组织 5：		

C. 社会组织 1

		是	否
C1	我知道 或听说过这个组织，但我部门的人员与它的成员没有任何沟通。	☐	☐ 请继续到 D
C2	我本人跟这个组织有过直接的沟通。	☐	☐ 请继续到 D
C3	我部门的其他同事跟这个机构的成员有过交流。	☐	☐
C4	我跟这个组织成员的交流只有一次。	☐	☐
C5	我跟这个组织成员的交流次数有 2-5 次。	☐	☐
C6	我跟这个组织成员的交流有 5-10 次。	☐	☐
C7	我跟这个组织成员的交流有 10 次以上。	☐	☐
C8	我经常或定期跟这个组织成员有交流，大概几个月一次。	☐	☐
C9	我跟这个组织成员的交流属于正式的交流。	☐	☐
C10	我跟这个组织成员的交流属于非正式的交流。	☐	☐
C11	我跟这个组织成员的交流主要是当面交流的形式。	☐	☐
C12	我跟这个组织成员的交流主要是电话交流的形式。	☐	☐
C13	我跟这个组织成员的交流是采用其他的形式。	☐ 请说明	☐
C14	我跟这个组织成员的交流有这个组织的办公室进行过。	☐	☐
C15	我跟这个组织成员的交流有在我政府部门的办公室进行过。	☐	☐
C16	我跟这个组织成员的交流有在我自己的家里进行过。	☐	☐
C17	我跟这个组织成员的交流有在这个成员自己的家里进行过。	☐	☐
C18	我跟这个组织成员的交流有在其它地方进行过。	☐ 请说明	☐
C19	我参加过这个组织安排的活动多于三次。	☐	☐
C20	我部门跟这个组织进行过非正式的合作。	☐	☐
C21	我部门跟这个组织进行过正式的合作。	☐	☐
C22	我部门跟这个组织曾经有过合作协议。	☐	☐
C23	这个社会组织的目标跟我们部门的目标有共同点。	☐ 请说明	☐
C24	这个社会组织的目标跟我们部门的目标没有什么共同点。	☐	☐
C25	这个社会组织对我们部门的工作有帮助。	☐ 请说明	☐
C26	这个社会组织对我们部门的工作造成麻烦。	☐ 请说明	☐
C27	这个社会组织的工作影响了我们部门采取新的或不一样的工作方式。	☐ 请说明	☐
C28	这个社会组织的工作对我们部门怎样执行政策有了影响。	☐	☐

		请说明	
C29	这个社会组织的工作对我们部门怎样形成政策有了影响。	☐ 请说明	☐

D. 社会组织 2

		是	否
D1	我知道 或听说过这个组织，但我部门的人员与它的成员没有任何沟通。	☐	☐ 请继续到 E
D2	我本人跟这个组织有过直接的沟通。	☐	☐ 请继续到 E
D3	我部门的其他同事跟这个机构的成员有过交流。	☐	☐
D4	我跟这个组织成员的交流只有一次。	☐	☐
D5	我跟这个组织成员的交流次数有 2-5 次。	☐	☐
D6	我跟这个组织成员的交流有 5-10 此。	☐	☐
D7	我跟这个组织成员的交流有 10 次以上。	☐	☐
D8	我经常或定期跟这个组织成员有交流，大概几个月一次。	☐	☐
D9	我跟这个组织成员的交流属于正式的交流。	☐	☐
D10	我跟这个组织成员的交流属于非正式的交流。	☐	☐
D11	我跟这个组织成员的交流主要是当面交流的形式。	☐	☐
D12	我跟这个组织成员的交流主要是电话交流的形势。	☐	☐
D13	我跟这个组织成员的交流是采用其他的形势。	☐ 请说明	☐
D14	我跟这个组织成员的交流有这个组织的办公室进行过。	☐	☐
D15	我跟这个组织成员的交流有在我政府部门的办公室进行过。	☐	☐
D16	我跟这个组织成员的交流有在我自己的家里进行过。	☐	☐
D17	我跟这个组织成员的交流有在这个成员自己的家里进行过。	☐	☐
D18	我跟这个组织成员的交流有在其它地方进行过。	☐ 请说明	☐
D19	我参加过这个组织安排的活动多于三次。	☐	☐
D20	我部门跟这个组织进行过非正式的合作。	☐	☐
D21	我部门跟这个组织进行过正式的合作。	☐	☐
D22	我部门跟这个组织曾经有过合作协议。	☐	☐
D23	这个社会组织的目标跟我们部门的目标有共同点。	☐ 请说明	☐
D24	这个社会组织的目标跟我们部门的目标没有什么共同点。	☐	☐
D25	这个社会组织对我们部门的工作有帮助。	☐ 请说明	☐
D26	这个社会组织对我们部门的工作造成麻烦。	☐ 请说明	☐
D27	这个社会组织的工作影响了我们部门采取新的或不一样的工作方式。	☐ 请说明	☐
D28	这个社会组织的工作对我们部门怎样执行政策有了影响。	☐	☐

		请说明	
D29	这个社会组织的工作对我们部门怎样形成政策有了影响。	☐ 请说明	☐

E. 社会组织 3

		是	否
E1	我知道 或听说过这个组织，但我部门的人员与它的成员没有任何沟通。	☐	☐ 请继续到 F
E2	我本人跟这个组织有过直接的沟通。	☐	☐ 请继续到 F
E3	我部门的其他同事跟这个机构的成员有过交流。	☐	☐
E4	我跟这个组织成员的交流只有一次。	☐	☐
E5	我跟这个组织成员的交流次数有 2-5 次。	☐	☐
E6	我跟这个组织成员的交流有 5-10 此。	☐	☐
E7	我跟这个组织成员的交流有 10 次以上。	☐	☐
E8	我经常或定期跟这个组织成员有交流，大概几个月一次。	☐	☐
E9	我跟这个组织成员的交流属于正式的交流。	☐	☐
E10	我跟这个组织成员的交流属于非正式的交流。	☐	☐
E11	我跟这个组织成员的交流主要是当面交流的形式。	☐	☐
E12	我跟这个组织成员的交流主要是电话交流的形势。	☐	☐
E13	我跟这个组织成员的交流是采用其他的形势。	☐ 请说明	☐
E14	我跟这个组织成员的交流有这个组织的办公室进行过。	☐	☐
E15	我跟这个组织成员的交流有在我政府部门的办公室进行过。	☐	☐
E16	我跟这个组织成员的交流有在我自己的家里进行过。	☐	☐
E17	我跟这个组织成员的交流有在这个成员自己的家里进行过。	☐	☐
E18	我跟这个组织成员的交流有在其它地方进行过。	☐ 请说明	☐
E19	我参加过这个组织安排的活动多于三次。	☐	☐
E20	我部门跟这个组织进行过非正式的合作。	☐	☐
E21	我部门跟这个组织进行过正式的合作。	☐	☐
E22	我部门跟这个组织曾经有过合作协议。	☐	☐
E23	这个社会组织的目标跟我们部门的目标有共同点。	☐ 请说明	☐
E24	这个社会组织的目标跟我们部门的目标没有什么共同点。	☐	☐
E25	这个社会组织对我们部门的工作有帮助。	☐ 请说明	☐
E26	这个社会组织对我们部门的工作造成麻烦。	☐ 请说明	☐
E27	这个社会组织的工作影响了我们部门采取新的或不一样的工作方式。	☐ 请说明	☐
E28	这个社会组织的工作对我们部门怎样执行政策有了影响。	☐	☐

		请说明	
E29	这个社会组织的工作对我们部门怎样形成政策有了影响。	☐ 请说明	☐

F. 社会组织 4

		是	否
F1	我知道 或听说过这个组织，但我部门的人员与它的成员没有任何沟通。	☐	☐ 请继续到 G
F2	我本人跟这个组织有过直接的沟通。	☐	☐ 请继续到 G
F3	我部门的其他同事跟这个机构的成员有过交流。	☐	☐
F4	我跟这个组织成员的交流只有一次。	☐	☐
F5	我跟这个组织成员的交流次数有 2-5 次。	☐	☐
F6	我跟这个组织成员的交流有 5-10 次。	☐	☐
F7	我跟这个组织成员的交流有 10 次以上。	☐	☐
F8	我经常或定期跟这个组织成员有交流，大概几个月一次。	☐	☐
F9	我跟这个组织成员的交流属于正式的交流。	☐	☐
F10	我跟这个组织成员的交流属于非正式的交流。	☐	☐
F11	我跟这个组织成员的交流主要是当面交流的形式。	☐	☐
F12	我跟这个组织成员的交流主要是电话交流的形势。	☐	☐
F13	我跟这个组织成员的交流是采用其他的形势。	☐ 请说明	☐
F14	我跟这个组织成员的交流有这个组织的办公室进行过。	☐	☐
F15	我跟这个组织成员的交流有在我政府部门的办公室进行过。	☐	☐
F16	我跟这个组织成员的交流有在我自己的家里进行过。	☐	☐
F17	我跟这个组织成员的交流有在这个成员自己的家里进行过。	☐	☐
F18	我跟这个组织成员的交流有在其它地方进行过。	☐ 请说明	☐
F19	我参加过这个组织安排的活动多于三次。	☐	☐
F20	我部门跟这个组织进行过非正式的合作。	☐	☐
F21	我部门跟这个组织进行过正式的合作。	☐	☐
F22	我部门跟这个组织曾经有过合作协议。	☐	☐
F23	这个社会组织的目标跟我们部门的目标有共同点。	☐ 请说明	☐
F24	这个社会组织的目标跟我们部门的目标没有什么共同点。	☐	☐
F25	这个社会组织对我们部门的工作有帮助。	☐ 请说明	☐
F26	这个社会组织对我们部门的工作造成麻烦。	☐ 请说明	☐
F27	这个社会组织的工作影响了我们部门采取新的或不一样的工作方式。	☐ 请说明	☐
F28	这个社会组织的工作对我们部门怎样执行政策有了影响。	☐	☐

		请说明	
F29	这个社会组织的工作对我们部门怎样形成政策有了影响。	☐ 请说明	☐

G. 社会组织 5

		是	否
G1	我知道 或听说过这个组织，但我部门的人员与它的成员没有任何沟通。	☐	☐ 请到此结束问卷
G2	我本人跟这个组织有过直接的沟通。	☐	☐ 请到此结束问卷
G3	我部门的其他同事跟这个机构的成员有过交流。	☐	☐
G4	我跟这个组织成员的交流只有一次。	☐	☐
G5	我跟这个组织成员的交流次数有 2-5 次。	☐	☐
G6	我跟这个组织成员的交流有 5-10 次。	☐	☐
G7	我跟这个组织成员的交流有 10 次以上。	☐	☐
G8	我经常或定期跟这个组织成员有交流，大概几个月一次。	☐	☐
G9	我跟这个组织成员的交流属于正式的交流。	☐	☐
G10	我跟这个组织成员的交流属于非正式的交流。	☐	☐
G11	我跟这个组织成员的交流主要是当面交流的形式。	☐	☐
G12	我跟这个组织成员的交流主要是电话交流的形式。	☐	☐
G13	我跟这个组织成员的交流是采用其他的形式。	☐ 请说明	☐
G14	我跟这个组织成员的交流有这个组织的办公室进行过。	☐	☐
G15	我跟这个组织成员的交流有在我政府部门的办公室进行过。	☐	☐
G16	我跟这个组织成员的交流有在我自己的家里进行过。	☐	☐
G17	我跟这个组织成员的交流有在这个成员自己的家里进行过。	☐	☐
G18	我跟这个组织成员的交流有在其它地方进行过。	☐ 请说明	☐
G19	我参加过这个组织安排的活动多于三次。	☐	☐
G20	我部门跟这个组织进行过非正式的合作。	☐	☐
G21	我部门跟这个组织进行过正式的合作。	☐	☐
G22	我部门跟这个组织曾经有过合作协议。	☐	☐
G23	这个社会组织的目标跟我们部门的目标有共同点。	☐ 请说明	☐
G24	这个社会组织的目标跟我们部门的目标没有什么共同点。	☐	☐
G25	这个社会组织对我们部门的工作有帮助。	☐ 请说明	☐
G26	这个社会组织对我们部门的工作造成麻烦。	☐ 请说明	☐
G27	这个社会组织的工作影响了我们部门采取新的或不一样的工作方式。	☐ 请说明	☐
G28	这个社会组织的工作对我们部门怎样执行政策有了影响。	☐	☐

		请说明	
G29	这个社会组织的工作对我们部门怎样形成政策有了影响。	☐ 请说明	☐

Appendix G: Tabular Display of Categories and Factors

Category	Construct	Factor	Data Sources	Observation 1...	Observation 2...
Level of Positive-Sum Reciprocal Engagement			Questionnaires NGO documents NGO interviews Government interviews Participant observation		
NGO CENTERED FACTORS	Strength of NGO Institutional Capacity	Encompassing, broad mission	NGO documents NGO interviews Government interviews Participant observation		
		Coherence and Formality	NGO documents NGO interviews Government interviews Participant observation		
		Size (human resources)	NGO interviews		
		Ability to mobilize funds	NGO documents NGO interviews Government interviews Participant observation		
		Ability to utilize media	NGO documents NGO interviews Government interviews Participant observation		
		Founder/director 'localness'	NGO interviews		
		Founder/director 'official background'	NGO interviews		
		Framing ability	NGO documents NGO interviews Government interviews Participant observation		
	Program Effectiveness		NGO documents NGO interviews Government interviews		

			Participant observation		
STATE CENTERED FACTORS	Strength of Public Institutions	Cohesive	NGO interviews Government interviews Informational interviews Participant observation		
		Competent	NGO interviews Government interviews Informational interviews Participant observation		
		Engaged	Government websites NGO interviews Government interviews Informational interviews Participant observation		
		Public Accountability	Government websites NGO interviews Government interviews Informational interviews Participant observation		
	Existence of 'Reformists'		NGO interviews Government interviews Participant observation		
CONTEXTUAL FACTORS	Associational Experience	Official NGOs	Official statistics NGO interviews Government interviews Informational interviews Participant observation		
		International NGOs	Internet sources NGO interviews Government interviews Informational interviews Participant observation		
		Grassroots NGOs	Internet sources NGO interviews Government interviews Informational interviews Participant observation		
		Average NGO Age	NGO interviews		

			Questionnaires		
		No. of Registered Social Organizations	Official statistics		
		Positivity or Negativity	Internet sources NGO interviews Government interviews Informational interviews Participant observation		
	Openness or Sensitivity	Perceptions of openness	NGO interviews Government interviews Informational interviews Participant observation		
		Proportion of population belonging to ethnic minorities	Official statistics Internet sources		
		Diversity in ethnic minorities	Official statistics Internet sources Informational interviews		
		Income	Official statistics Internet sources		
		Poverty	Official statistics Internet sources		

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