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**Chinese Non-governmental Organizations as international conduits:
possibilities, limits and prospects**

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List of Acronyms

NGO	Non-governmental Organization
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
GONGO	Government-organized Non-governmental Organization
SONGO	State-organized Non-governmental Organization
PONGO	Party-organized Non-governmental Organization
VP	Venture Philanthropy
CONGO	Corporate-organized Non-governmental Organizations
G2P	Government-to-Public
VCC	Value Co-creation
INGO	International Non-governmental Organization
TSMO	Transnational Social Movement Organization
RSF	Reporters without Borders

Abstract

Chinese Non-governmental Organizations as international conduits: possibilities, limits and prospects

by

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This thesis has two primary purposes: one is to determine if the possibilities for Chinese NGOs to work as international conduits exist despite all the political and social constraints; the other is to demonstrate a feasible working sphere within the boundaries set by the Chinese policies and social environment. Furthermore, this thesis identifies fields and issues that require a working passage between China and the international world and suggests action approaches.

This thesis adopts a post-positivist research philosophy and interpretive research framework, as well as a qualitative approach to conduct the possibility exploring. A clear and localized Chinese NGO definition is the base ground in this thesis. After examining the policy opportunity, NGO institutional structure and dynamic, and experience in public diplomacy, this thesis is assertive that the possibility for Chinese NGOs being international conduits is considerably high. There could be some limitations in transnational, trans-culture and trans-organizational work: the need for value co-creation, small working scopes, hindered public influences and negligible policy influence. This thesis continues with the prospect of future working framework, organizational learning and operating fields. Following are suggestions on issues that need Chinese NGOs to work as a conveying channel, showcasing the whistle blowers' protection portrayal.

This thesis reveals an optimistic future for Chinese NGOs to work as an international conduit: one that needs to be with boundaries but valuable in the transcendence of ethics, nation and politics.

Chinese Non-governmental Organizations as international conduits: possibilities, limits and prospects

Chapter 1. Introduction

In recent years, the international community has developed mixed feelings when it comes to China. On the one hand, China's rapidly growing economic influence has made it a country that is impossible to be ignored; on the other, it does not seem that China intends to fit in with the international community at the level of diplomacy. China has created uncertainty in terms of international co-operation with its new iron-fist governing style and the seemingly secretive values and logic behind it. Issues such as human rights and the trading legitimacy of transnational enterprises have already caused tension between several participants in the international community, thus compromising overall global prosperity. The question that arises is whether it is possible for the international community to get to know and to work with China on issues of mutual concern. This thesis argues that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) could potentially be a channel for the international community and China to communicate, exchange ideas and opinions, and act on certain problems in an alternative way, without having recourse to diplomacy. As Ming Wang states in his book *A Discussion on Chinese Road of NGOs*, both the global influence of China and the international public welfare system demand the participation of Chinese NGOs (Wang, 2017). He continues to elaborate that going global 'is one of the important parts of China's international strategy... Therefore, it is imperative that a national support system be established to help NGOs to participate in global governance and international public welfare activities' (Wang, 2017, p.158). However, a series of challenging questions arise in this context. What are NGOs in China's specific political system, and are they the same thing as in the Western world? More importantly, with what kind of capacity and to what extent can NGOs work between China and the rest of the world?

This thesis has two primary objectives: first, to determine whether the possibility exists for Chinese NGOs to work as a channel of communication, despite all the political and social constraints; and second, to demonstrate a feasible working sphere within the boundaries set by the Chinese policies and social environment.

This thesis sets out to address the following questions: How are NGOs broadly understood as a concept in China, and what level of difference from the Western concept should be expected? How should the notion of a conduit should be defined, and what criteria should a well-functioning conduit meet? Do Chinese NGOs fulfil all the necessary requirements to to function as an international conduit? How do political and social constraints impact on the functioning of Chinese NGOs, and what are the resulting limitations? What factors should be taken into consideration when it comes to boundaries relating to the transnational functioning of NGOs? What kind of issues do these conduits work on, and what kind of outcomes can be expected?

This thesis suggests that NGOs have practical significance: they are current and relevant. Moreover, this type of research can potentially be a source to turn to when transnational co-operation is needed. There has been a dramatic increase in the study of Chinese NGOs in the past decade. One of the most well-recognized academic works is *A Discussion on Chinese Road of NGOs* by Ming Wang, published in 2017. This publication examines Chinese NGOs as a whole, analysing how and why this industry started and has survived and thrived over the past 30 years. This style of comprehensive examination is popular in the literature. *NGO Governance and Management in China* (Hasmath & Hsu, 2015.) is a further such example. These kinds of studies are usually carried out by researchers as observers, and conclusions are frequently drawn from holistic examinations on overall manifestations of the entire nation. In addition, there is another literature trend that tends to focus on a series of individual case studies, highlighting organizational or industrial strategies – for example, Hsu and Hasmath’s 2017 *NGO Strategies in an Authoritarian Context and Their Implications for Citizenship: The Case of the People’s Republic of China*. Surprisingly, previous studies have not been able to sufficiently explore the intentions and efforts of transnational co-operation or the implications thereof.

This thesis adopted a post-positivist research philosophy and an interpretive research framework. As far as methodology is concerned, a qualitative approach was adopted. The primary sources consulted were published articles and publicly accessible government documents. Both English and Chinese language sources were consulted, and certain sources were translated in order to better examine Chinese NGOs from both Chinese and Western perspectives.

The main body of this thesis consists of seven chapters, each devoted to a different aspect of Chinese NGOs working as an international conduit. Chapter 2 deals with conceptualization and methodology. It examines the nature of NGOs as a concept and presents the philosophical basis, research framework, and methodology. Chapter 3 examines the empirical literature with a view to creating a foundation for understanding the various concepts, the political and social constraints, as well as past attempts to work transnationally. It also closely examines key concepts such as authoritarian political settings, civil society, and institutional dynamics. This chapter demonstrates how the literature observes and interprets key factors relating to the Chinese NGO industry; factors such as government control, Chinese society's partial embracing of NGOs, and the international tactics of Chinese NGOs. Chapter 4 sets out to answer some of the research questions raised earlier and discusses how possible it is for NGOs to work as an international conduit, based on the findings of the literature. Moreover, it presents a detailed explanation of NGOs as a concept and places them within context. This is followed by an analysis of how Chinese NGOs differ from their Western counterparts, what it means to be an international conduit, and the existing political and social constraints. The analysis referred to above was undertaken on the basis of an examination of all the relevant factors. It reveals that a relatively well-developed NGO structure based on a tolerant policy environment and a viable institutional dynamic have already been established in China. The attempts that have already been made provide evidence of a willingness to communicate and co-operate. Furthermore, the new era has presented issues that require non-governmental transnational co-operation. Consequently, this thesis argues that, in practical terms, the potential for Chinese NGOs to work as international conduits is relatively high.

Chapter 5 discusses factors that limit the functioning of Chinese NGOs and presents corresponding recommendations. It acknowledges that the prevailing environment requires NGOs to internalize and localize foreign values as the first step towards service delivery – a requirement that presents further challenges. Moreover, funding and policy restrictions could result in transnational operations being relatively small in scope, thus diminishing the influence of NGOs as a conduit. Finally, policy influences might be negligible.

Chapter 6 identifies issues and areas that concern both China and the international community and suggests general approaches to address them. It also examines the limitations of working as a civil actor and highlights various examples: protection of whistle blowers, publicizing of Covid-related information, taking gender and racial minority groups into consideration, and industrial animal welfare. Chapter 7 is a case study on whistle blower protection which sums up all the aspects mentioned above: the possibilities, the limitations, and the prospects. It showcases what urgently needs to be done by Chinese NGOs in the international community. The issue of Covid-19 whistle blower protection not only concerns the world on human rights grounds, but also relates to the safety of the world in a wider context. This chapter analyses the issue, the recommended working processes, and their implications.

This thesis attempts to close the gap in the literature and in practice; it does this by examining Chinese NGOs as civil actors in the international community system and by exploring sensible working spheres within the boundaries of politics and society. The attitude adopted in this paper is one of cautious optimism. In summary, the argument proposed is that it is possible and viable for Chinese NGOs to work as international conduits; however, the limiting factors posed by the political and social environment require more attention.

Chapter 2. Conceptual Framework and Methodology

2.1. Conceptualisation

'Non-governmental' is a concept that would not be found or understood as being in line with mainstream Chinese culture. It is arguably rather modern and foreign. In essence, it is a Western-originated idea. Howell (1998) refers to this concept as the 'non-profit sector' and argues that in the case of China, there is a persistent type of cultural dominance. As a result, the 'non-profit sector' cannot be considered a Western counterpart of the idea of NGO. In fact, this concept in the Chinese context would be challenging to theorise (Saich, 2000), because it is a 'moving target' rather than a rigid entity. Generally speaking, the 'non-governmental' or 'non-profit' sector is a borrowed modern idea that has become popular in contemporary Chinese culture. Though the concept retains some core Western

elements in China, there is ample space for the concept to be interpreted and debated. This fundamental characteristic of the topic has determined the basic philosophy, the conceptual framework, and the research methodology of this thesis.

In addition to the concept of 'non-governmental', 'conduit' also needs to be clarified and measured in terms of the idea conveying possibility in this thesis. This thesis maintains that a working conduit should be a channel for ideas, a means of conveying ideas to reach mutual understandings, a network that enables participants to interact and to influence each other, and a sphere that allows actions to be taken. This thesis examines the factors that contribute to Chinese NGOs' abilities to act as a conduit between China and the international community. The key factors to be examined are namely the concept of a localized Chinese NGO and its implications, the policy environment and the constraints, the social environment, the willingness for international co-operation, and the issues needing attention. This thesis argues that a clear perception of these factors affecting the work of NGOs will provide a more profound understanding of where Chinese NGOs fit in the equation of having a two-way conversation internationally. This thesis identifies a tolerant policy environment, an operative community structure that scaffolds actions to be taken, willingness, and purpose of work as key components that allow interaction between Chinese NGOs and the international community. If these factors are deemed feasible, then it is safe to say that possibilities for international communication indeed exist.

2.2 Philosophical Basis, Research Framework and Methodology

This subsection will introduce the philosophical basis, research framework and research method utilized in this thesis.

The philosophical basis of the research sets the overall tone of the work. There are a few active intellectual actions involved in illustrating a specific philosophy: refining, specifying, clarifying and evaluating when necessary (Crossan, 2003). Moreover, according to Crossan, it can even serve as a scaffold for the researcher to be creative and innovative within some particular academic boundary.

Post-positivism as a research philosophy is often used when the subject does not have a rigid definition. This thesis maintains that this is the philosophy that comes naturally in the discourse of social issues and policy analysing because these are areas where personal experiences and perceptions, instead of well-recognised

facts, are often the objects of study. The post-positivist research philosophy, to a great extent, allows diverse perspectives and individual investigation to be included in research (Henderson, 2011). For this thesis, a post-positivist philosophy would be working as a general guide throughout the research and would emphasise its importance. Even though Van Thiel (2014) maintains that the philosophy of one's work should stay hidden in one's expression and inferences, this thesis argues otherwise. Given the complexity of the subject, it was crucial for this thesis to utilise all interpretations available to make the necessary selections of the sources, provide a means of understanding the Chinese NGO phenomena, and determine if Chinese NGOs can work as a conduit in the international context. Without the guiding foundation of post-positivism, this thesis would be battling unnecessary assumptions in its research and would fail to make critical, though debatable, inferences. Other than being open and critical, there is another suggestion made by the post-positivist research philosophy: try to use more than one technique so that a fuller view of the entire picture can be shown (Panhwar et al., 2017). Therefore, this thesis tries to demonstrate a better understanding of the Chinese NGO phenomenon by adopting providing visual presentations in the later sections to better explain relationships and vital factors in the proposition of Chinese non-government network.

Beyond a philosophical basis that permits broad interpretation, this thesis also employs an interpretive research framework. Interpretative research is a way of incorporating social reality into research (Mayrhofer, 2009). It differentiates the objective and the subjective meaning of a social topic and gives the researcher the chance to present their own observations with a method they see as appropriate. In her book, Darder (2019) challenges the underlying assumptions that have been made in conventional Western research. She gives credit to a critical method of issue engagement and recognises the active role of the researcher. The opinions of both Mayrhofer and Darder adhere to the requirement of the topic: an open-minded research space. In view of both the philosophical basis and the general framework, this thesis aims to permit the research to be open to explanation and interpretation.

Wishing to take advantage of its flexibility and interpretive nature, a qualitative approach was adopted for this research. This approach was deemed appropriate because of the complexity of the topic. Pierce (2008) has pointed out the strengths of the qualitative research method, and they are 'understanding and explaining'. He has

further stressed how these strengths are valuable in coping with the complexities of social and political discourse. There are numerous details, cultural and practical nuances, as well as various interpretations and comparisons involved when studying issues of Chinese NGOs and the political and social environment. The qualitative research method enables this thesis to provide observable and analytical inferences. Of the qualitative approaches to research, the analysing of empirical literature is the dominant method used in this research. A case study is also included as a replenishment of all the findings and analysis.

This thesis is almost entirely sourced from published works, but sources also include some publicly accessible official websites. Other sources were official announcements from the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs. However, English language academic articles and literature reviews were primarily used. In a small number of cases, original Chinese language news articles and reports were utilised as well. In these cases, an English version of the article is provided. It should be noted that in the process of translating and interpreting, some subjective judgements of keeping or leaving information would be made, especially with institutional cultural assumptions differences between the West and China, it is necessary for this thesis to do so.

In sum, the research and discussion of this thesis is based mostly on empirical literature, utilizes the post-positivist philosophy as a basis, and operates under the framework of interpretive research. It adopts a qualitative approach and includes a case study.

2.3 Research Limitations

There are some limitations to the methodology used in this thesis. Firstly, there are some delimitations to the scope of the research. These limits largely concern decisions of what to include and what not to include from existing opinions, experiences, and narratives, which leads to the reflexivity of this thesis.

The positions of resources might not be entirely objective and may have been influenced by the researcher's identity, ethnicity, and social status. Considering how heavily this dissertation relies on the empirical literature, the resources are indeed under this particular influence. Moreover, the data for the empirical literature were inevitably screened unintentionally (or intentionally) based on a specific power

dynamic. In some cases, NGOs could be underprivileged; in other cases, the observer could be. Especially when it comes to a massive but still developing industry, bias is more difficult to avoid. This thesis may have not been able to block all the negative influences that would have affected the decisions related to source selection. Nevertheless, this thesis seeks to provide a means, no matter how feeble, to finding out if and to what extent Chinese NGOs can function as an international conduit.

The research's lack of first-hand data could also be a potential challenge for making a sound argument. When conducting an investigation, the research is ideally based on the analysis of first-hand sourced data that has been collected with a purposefully designed paradigm. This thesis believes that if the willingness and actions of NGOs regarding international communications are considered, there will be a more reliable result. Ideally, horizontal and vertical surveys would include at least half of the NOGs from all the provinces, and practising fields would be the best database. With time and funds available, this dissertation maintains that would be meaningful to do for future researches. Lastly, this thesis did not have the chance to access official data from the authorities given the governing style of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Official data would not only show the possibility but could also potentially develop a valuable methodology. This research was unable to access more raw and unfiltered data and consequently limited in scope and nature, but this thesis would still be useful in the sense of providing an in-depth understanding of Chinese NGOs and a conduit possibility exploring.

Chapter 3. Literature Review

3.1 Introduction and Background

To determine whether Chinese NGOs can facilitate conversation, understanding, and cooperation with other countries, it is necessary to first accurately define and describe Chinese NGOs. For Western readers, nothing can be taken for granted regarding Chinese NGOs; therefore, a comprehensive examination will help determine if Chinese NGOs can function as conduits. Studies of Chinese NGOs often elicit the following fundamental questions: What does the concept of NGO mean in the Chinese context? What is the most accurate expression to look for

to describe this notion? To what extent is an ordinary reader's understanding of the concept of NGO in line with official definitions? It is necessary to reference existing studies to answer these questions and elucidate a position in terms of political and social perspectives; subsequently, further inferences, arguments, and explanations could be clarified.

Existing studies in English and Chinese provide a solid foundation for understanding Chinese NGOs, even though the terms used may vary. This literature review section begins with a list of expressions currently used to refer to Chinese NGOs. Most of these terms are Chinese-language terms that have nuanced meanings that vary by context; however, they all share a common general meaning and can be used as search terms when studying Chinese NGOs. These terms are public welfare (公益), civic welfare (社会公益), non-governmental organizations (or non-governmental organizations; 非政府组织), civic organizations (民间组织), social organizations (社会组织), civic groups (社会团体), charity groups (公益团体), philanthropy organizations (慈善组织), philanthropy foundations (慈善基金会), volunteer groups (志愿者组织), non-profit organizations (非盈利团体), and non-enterprise units (民非). Zhang and Guo (2021) have identified four more terms: third sector (第三部门), corporatism (法团组织), and social management (社会管理), which is also referred to as social governance (社会治理).

In addition to over a dozen distinctive terms and expressions that refer to the subject of Chinese NGOs, this thesis would also like to point out a few basic facts that that is agreed among nearly all existing studies. The following section begins with a brief review of existing studies on the basic history and development of Chinese NGOs. This dissertation discusses four specific studies to convey a basic understanding of the NGO industry in China. This review provides a foundation for subsequent in-depth discussions. These four studies have one characteristic in common: instead of focusing on minute details, they cover the overall status of Chinese NGOs and discuss a range of facts and issues. Moreover, each article has its own unique characteristics, and each article can be considered as representative

of its genre. For example, *A Discussion on the Chinese Road of NGOs* by Ming Wang, which was published in 2017, is a pillar of Chinese NGO research. It is a comprehensive review of the Chinese NGO industry, and it places Chinese NGOs in the context of new forms of governance and social changes in the current social media environment. Wang studied real-life examples from contemporary organizations and explicitly analysed NGOs' working factors in play and the interactions within one another. He made several conclusions about governing patterns and offered robust suggestions and recommendations on the future direction of collective power. Wang's book is an influential work in the field of Chinese NGO studies. In 2017, Wenjun Zhang published his PhD dissertation under the title *Caught Between the State, the Market, and Civil Society: The Divergent Paths of Chinese Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) Seeking to Make Social Change in China*. This study shares some similarities with Wang's work but on the other end of the spectrum of the author's public recognition. Zheng's dissertation also analyses the historical development and future prospects of Chinese NGOs. Unlike works by well-known professors in the field, Zheng's dissertation offers a refreshing perspective. A third representative study is *Nonprofit-Government Relations in Authoritarian China: A Review and Synthesis of the Chinese Literature* (Zhang & Guo, 2021). This study analyses 1,819 studies related to the affairs of Chinese NGOs; therefore, the findings and conclusions offered by this study are extremely convincing. Finally, this study also analyses *NGO and Governance and Management in China*, which was edited by Reza Hasmath and Jennifer Y.J. Hsh and published in 2015. It is a collection of innovatively arranged articles that provides a new theoretical approach and perspective on issues related to NGOs.

Among the tremendous number of studies on NGOs, many have made similar observations. For example, many studies conclude that the past decade of Chinese NGO industry building has been fruitful. Wang (2017) described this process as "establishing an NGO system," and Zheng (2018) deemed this period to be "a golden ten years". Moreover, it is well known that since then, the Chinese government has been intervening in the development of the NGO industry. Wang dedicated four chapters of his book to discussing the history of policy adaptations and corresponding NGO responses. Zhang and Guo describe governmental interventions in the research level of the issue as "for its own agenda" (Zhang & Guo,

2021, p. 71). Hasmath and Hsu (2015) applied neo-institutional theory to an analysis of the relationship between the state and NGOs. Finally, the civic development of society has functioned as a force that opposes government control over NGOs. Zhang and Guo found that there is a dichotomy between the government and social forces, which they describe as “a conflicting relationship” (Zhang & Guo, 2021, p. 86). Zheng (2018) discusses the examples of Guangdong Province and Hong Kong to demonstrate how social movements are a result of conflict between policy and social demands. Hasmath and Hsu introduced the concept of a “party-led people’s society” (Thornton, 2015). In summary, all existing studies discussed here acknowledge that the non-governmental sector has already become an important force in society regardless of how it is referred to and its relationship with authority.

Having established these foundational facts, this dissertation next seeks to specify how existing studies have understood Chinese NGOs and identify relevant patterns among these studies to determine if it is possible for Chinese NGOs to function as international conduits to.

3.2 The Concept of the Chinese NGO and Corresponding Models

In the early 1990s, China had just completed its civil revolution and had only recently begun opening to the world. Moreover, at this time, the term NGO and related terms were not well-known in Chinese society. Frolic (1997) has asserted that the Chinese concept of NGO is drastically different than the Western concept because NGOs in China are run by the state. Regardless of the facticity of this argument, it serves the purpose of separating the Chinese concept of NGOs from the common, Western understandings of NGOs. The indisputable difference between Chinese and Western conceptions of NGOs is the foundation for any discussion on Chinese NGOs.

The concept of the NGO did not emerge until 1945. According to Kellow and Murphy-Gregory's (2018) statements in *Handbook of Research on NGOs*, the concept originated in the United Nations and subsequently received wide recognition. Martens (2002) maintains that when studying non-governmental organizations, the terms “non”, “governmental”, and “organization” must be considered individually from the perspectives of international law and sociology. Martens concludes their study by offering a working definition of NGOs, stating,

“NGOs are formal (professionalized) independent societal organizations whose primary aim is to promote common goals at the national or the international level.” In the UN charter, Kellow and Murphy-Gregory stress that an NGO must represent a group of people who are not controlled by any treaty or government. Although there has always been a degree of suspicion regarding the relationship between NGOs and the nation. In the West, NGOs naturally obtained a consultative status free from the dominance of political authorities. Furthermore, the concept of the NGO also has three primary characteristics: representativeness, independence, and accountability (Kellow & Murphy-Gregory, 2018). Laraswati et al. (2020) identified unique, non-normative NGOs that “escaped the classical classifications and are increasingly regarded as, and regarding themselves, as mutant organizations occupying multiple spaces and functions’ (p. 3). Even though this particular type of NGO in China is non-tradition, it is still conceptualized using Western theory and can be defined as a policy actor (Laraswati et al., 2020). This thesis compares the conceptualization of Chinese NGOs with Martens’ and Laraswati’s definitions and Western institutional and cultural assumptions about NGOs while attempting to clarify the distinctions between China and the West. Further, this thesis attempts to avoid making systematic assumptions based on research on Chinese NGOs; it also attempts not to take any seemingly inherited characteristics for granted.

Saich (2000) states that Chinese NGOs cannot be simply defined as Chinese equivalents of Western NGOs. Being a foundation, Saich’s idea runs through the research of Chinese NGOs. This is unsurprising because China, an authoritarian nation, is known for its comprehensive political control. Consequently, in the empirical literature, the relationship between NGOs and the state has been the dominant frame employed to study Chinese NGOs. Numerous studies have sought to clarify the concept of the Chinese NGO while acknowledging that nothing can be taken for granted when studying NGOs.

One of the most popular conceptualizations used to describe the Chinese NGO is the “government-organized non-governmental organization” (GONGO). On the official website of the Department for the Administration of Civil Organizations of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the term “non-governmental” (非政府) is not used. The authorities generally avoid the term and concept altogether. Instead, authorities use

the term “private non-enterprise unit” (*Interim Regulations on Registration Administration of Private Non-Enterprise Units*, 1998). Studies have developed various definitions and understandings of the Chinese NGO, which has historically been difficult to define. Although the initial conceptualization of GONGOs was based on the financial support that organizations received from the government (Rosenau, 1998), the significance of this understanding developed alongside the development of the NGO sector. Martens (2002) and Hasmath and Hsu (2014) identified a dramatic increase in organizations’ reliance on the government for a variety of resources beyond just financial resources. Hasmath et al. (2019) maintain that it is reasonable to conclude that despite the complexity of the concept of GONGO, it is a legitimate term for examining Chinese NGOs. They further identify the questions of “both how it began (organized at the government’s behest), and how it is lead (of the government’s choosing)” as factors that require scrutiny. Existing studies have given significant attention to the GONGO model, and, therefore, it is considered the most common and significant model for studying Chinese NGOs. The China Youth Development Foundation is the organization that has been studied most by researchers (Lu, 2007). Lu highlights the nation’s role in the development of NGOs in China. The All-China Federation of Trade Unions, Communist Youth League, All-China Women’s Federation, and China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation are other well-known GONGOs that were established under the support (Hsu et al., 2016) and supervision of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP; Spires, 2011). This observation conforms with the conventional understanding of GONGOs.

The concept of GONGO is not the only frame for understanding Chinese NGOs in the literature. For example, the terms state-organized NGO (SONGO) and Party-organized NGO (PONGO) have also been used (Hasmath et al., 2019), and these terms describe organizations that “run across the political and governing spectrum”. Hasmath et al. maintain that these two terms broaden the conceptual framework used to understand Chinese NGOs on the basis that the state and CCP are two separated entities in China in some stage in the history. Consequently, these ideas, which were borrowed from foreign scholarship, can be applied to China (Hasmath et al., 2019). However, following Deng Xiaoping’s rise to power, the party and national power began to become integrated, and de-collectivization reforms resulted in the synthesizing of the Chinese nation and CCP (Howell, 1998). Due to

this perception, GONGO is still the mainstream term that represents the leading position of the Party authorities in the empirical literature. Furthermore, the concept of GONGO encompasses the essence of SONGO and PONGO because all three terms focus on the relationship with the state; as a result, studies tend to group them under the model of GONGO.

Citizen-led NGOs have been another focus of empirical literature. The term “citizen-led” represents a relatively new idea (Spires, 2011). Citizen-led NGOs and mainstream GONGOs can be differentiated according to how each were formed. In many cases, “citizen-led” is a loosely defined term that refers to grassroots NGOs in China (Shapiro et al., 2018). Lacking a tight government connection (Mok et al., 2021b), citizen-led NGOs are mostly grassroots organizations in practice (Shapiro et al., 2018). Moreover, because grassroots NGOs in China are, to a great extent, citizen-led, these terms are used interchangeably in the literature. According to Spires et al. (2014), grassroots and citizen-led NGOs were primarily established in close relationship with individuals. In addition, they reflect the hopes and demands of citizens and are funded by citizens without significant government support (Ho, 2001). Over the last ten years, there has been a dramatic rise in the number of unsanctioned grassroots NGOs in China (Spires et al., 2014). This is a significant change from the past. Authorities may consider people's needs as legitimate calls for action (Zhou & Pan, 2017). As Zhou and Pan explain, the lack of political alliances and power leads to a lack of legal status for grassroots organizations. According to Zhou, Pan, and Spires, grassroots organizations are naturally more energetic and innovative than GONGOs (Ng, 2012). Johnson and Ni (2015) maintain that the model of the grassroots NGO has the potential to influence policymaking and the economy in a more vibrant society. In short, studies in recent years have developed a new focus and see grassroots NGOs as a part of the Chinese NGO environment. Although legal status contains an element of uncertainty that must be considered, it is inevitable that the grassroots NGO will become a model in the research realm.

There is another model that can be identified in the empirical literature. The terms corporate-organized non-governmental organizations (CONGO) and venture philanthropy (VP) are often used in studies examining GONGOs as the mainstream form of Chinese NGOs. Zhou and Pan (2017) discovered the idea of CONGOs after exploring several financial scandals involving GONGOs. They realized that CONGOs

are a part of the Chinese NGO ecosystem. Furthermore, “They are established by corporations, corporate executives, or associations of businesses. (Zhou & Pan, 2017, p.101)” An identifying characteristic of CONGOs is that they often have sufficient financial resources and are formally registered as public or private foundations (Organizing Council of China Private Foundation Forum, 2009; Zhou & Pan, 2017). This thesis found that when similar descriptions occur, the subject is VP. The characteristics are consistent: sufficient funding and the background of foundations. It is important to note that philanthropic foundations can be found in China in the health department as a conventional and typical form (Ryan et al., 2014). Lai and Spires (2021) state that VP is a developed model, and they further suggest that the concept of VP is originated in the United States. Moreover, not only can it be applied to the non-profit sector in China, but it is having success with the “non-profit partners” approach. The Ai You Philanthropy Plus project operated by the Ai You Foundation has set an example for Chinese industry by successfully attracting funding and using management strategies. Existing studies have identified both CONGO and VP as models of NGOs. The highlight of the notion moves away from state-led, government control and toward corporate control.

In summary, the spectating of empirical on the conceptualization of Chinese NGOs has two folds. The first fold is to clarify that the concept of the NGO in the Chinese context shares no characteristics with the Western concept of the NGO (Saich, 2000). The second fold is conceptualizing Chinese NGOs according to where the organizations originated from: the nation, society, or corporations. The respective corresponding models are GONGOs, citizen-led NGOs, and CONGOs (Figure. 1). Research demonstrates that NGOs in China are essentially an aggregation of the concept of non-authority social groups. Zhang and Guo (2021) survey the terms used in studies on Chinese NGOs and their findings. Zheng (2018) identifies the state, society, and market as powers that contribute to the formation of Chinese NGOs. Building on existing research, this thesis offers a close analysis of the aspects that shape Chinese NGOs.

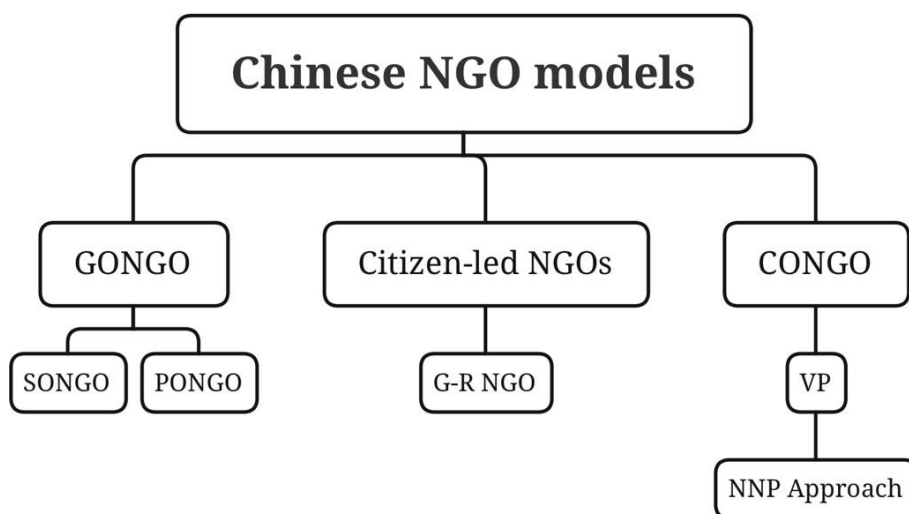


Figure.1

3.3 Authoritarian China and the Institutional Dynamics of Chinese NGOs

A considerable number of studies have analysed Chinese NGOs in the context of social environment. Some studies focus on the governmental perspective, while others focus on the social perspective.

Studies that focus on the governmental perspective often begin by discussing the authoritative nature of the nation. These studies mainly focus on the relationship between the government and NGOs. Existing studies tend to consider the Chinese NGO industry to be a state-led industry.

“The 1998 regulation (the current effective one) aims to increase control over social organizations through stringent registration procedures.” Ho (2001) identifies the very essence on the form of governmental control. NGO registration in China is closely tied to the supervision strategies of authorities. An NGO’s legal status does not affect an NGO’s ability to operate. Technically, organizations can begin operating without registering in the government database. However, legally registered organizations in China generally have more access to resources and are obligated to follow the directions of the authorities (Hildebrandt, 2011). The registration rule is not related to an NGO’s permission to operate; rather, it is closely related to the objective and benefit of government branches (Hildebrandt, 2011). Due to the decentralization of government, various branches of the government have gained the freedom to decide which organizations to grant legal status to in exchange for a greater scope of

control (Stern & O'Brien, 2012). Legitimate public groups can obtain partial financial independence (Lu, 2007); in contrast, unregistered organizations are more likely to be constrained by local governments during multiple steps of the process (Hsu et al., 2017). Hsu et al. (2017) noted that local governments' supervision works in two ways: For registered organizations, their limited fiscal support may alter the objectives of the organization in some way. For unregistered organizations, surveillance and bureaucratic procedures can take too long and consume the capacity of the organizations. This mechanism is concluded, and it was named a "mixed signal" by the Chinese government. Hsu et al. (2017) were not the only scholars to identify this characteristic, which Spires (2011) refers to as a "mixed signature". They both suggest that in an authoritarian setting, this "uncertainty" is a governing style developed to manage the potential threat posed by independent organizations. The techniques employed include establishing no clear or strict rule, requiring substantial proof that an organization is not a "trouble maker", and prolonging the process of legally recognizing an organization to minimize the impact of individual organizations. Lang (2018) maintains that workers at local government branches are more interested in promoting their own agendas than helping NGOs develop; as a result, their supervision and control over NGOs can be understood as an experimental hierarchy that operates to exploit NGOs' efforts to gain legal status.

Extensive research has shown that stress on state power in terms of Chinese NGO issues is not uncommon. In an article on the autonomy of Chinese NGOs, Ma (2002) asserts that this governing tactic using uncertainty "leaves ample room for the government to interpret the policy according to the CCP's current agenda or political situation" (p. 310). This type of observation is generally concerned with how China controls NGOs and on what level the registration control strategy is effective. In addition to the registration method, "graduated control" (Kang & Han, 2008) is another method for assessing government control. Kang and Han (2008) suggest,

In the distribution of power between the state and society, the state dominates totally and intrudes into every corner of society, including both the public sphere and private lives. To a certain extent, China's present system of graduated controls has inherited some features of totalitarianism. (Kang & Han, 2008, p. 51)

Interest alignment is the critical element in the model of graduated control (Zhang & Guo, 2021), and it varies depending on the situation and aim of each government branch. It is more flexible than straightforward registration and reflects a more profound and purposeful determination of governmental control.

In summary, existing studies have concluded that government branches execute strict control. From the government's perspective, this constitutes the core of the constraints that Chinese NGOs face in an authoritarian context. However, scholars who applied a social perspective demonstrated various opinions. They are interested in Chinese civil society and suggest that there is an active dynamic between the government and NGOs. Moreover, government policymaking can be affected by NGOs.

This thesis hesitates to use the term “civil society” to describe the power dynamic between the government and NGOs, even though it is a central term in a range of studies. In his influential work *The Power Dynamic Social Co-Governance*, Ming Wang (2017) argues that,

Social co-governance has the following features: on the one hand, it integrates the strengths of many new emerging governance modes. It also emphasizes enhancing society's self-governing capacity while stimulating social vitality and advocating for fair cooperation between multiple governing subjects for social governance. Moreover, it can solve major issues faced by the current society. However, it is highly adaptive in that it particularly stresses improving the government's governing capacity and management efficiency, which, in turn, can allow government departments to take the initiative in certain fields and propose to determine the structures and procedures for governance in accordance with the specific nature of the problem addressed. (Wang, 2017, p. 47)

This argument emphasizes that society has the potential to more actively address social problems. Although this passage does not emphasize the self-advocacy of participants, it is evident that Ming Wang is optimistic in a healthy institutional dynamic.

Similar assertions can be found in many other existing studies. Ma and DeDeo (2018) and Teets (2013) attribute this positive dynamic to the decentralization of government and welfare systems. Ma and DeDeo (2018) see social actors as large clusters of participants of equal status who have formed equal relationships within a network because of the decentralization of the Chinese NGO system. Moreover, the requirement that local governments collaborate with social actors by

the decentralized governing tactics of CCP ensures that the system maintains its activity (Teets, 2013). Other studies have observed this from distinctive points of view, and they come to a similar conclusion. Advocacy investment and resources allow the system to continually influence policies because the Chinese authoritarian state allows them to, as a softer approach of peacekeeping (Li et al., 2017). Hasmath and Hsu (2014) see this approach as reflecting the state's need to utilize the material power of NGOs; seeking help in this way keeps NGOs active and forms a working system. The plurality of actors is another factor. Nowadays, the international community is pressuring China to ensure that there is a working civil society in the process of international decision making (Sosa-Nuñez & Ed Atkins, 2016). Regarding decision-making, Saich (2000) says that "many social organizations have also been effective in negotiating with the state to influence the policymaking process or at least to bring key issues to the public domain" (p. 136). She sees the entire process as a transitioning society, but she has an optimistic outlook on the active dynamic of the equation. Mertha (2009) introduces the element of "information" while discussing why a beneficial dynamic should exist. Mertha states, "One of the most important aspects of power – information, inevitably will enter and significantly shape the policy process in China" (Mertha, 2009, p. 1011). In many cases, NGOs help open up the political field and expand civil society (Yang, 2005). NGOs serve many specific functions in this process; they can serve as both sites and agents in the process of political change where interactions amongst participants matter significantly. To a great extent, civic actions, that initiated by NGOs as agents, contributes paving the field of active and inclusive social sphere . Dai and Spires (2018) state that these civic actions occur more on the level of local government policy, and that they benefit from an active civil society. Dai and Spires (2018) assert that there is ample room for local NGOs to adapt advocacy strategies to influence policymaking and realize their mission on the local level. They assert that in the context of the state–society relationship, a more efficient approach to have some objects fulfilled. The government is still a more competent actor, and direct, on-site activities initiated by NGOs are achieving fruitful results. Tangible outcomes have resulted from this kind of NGO activity. Such non-authorized action arrangements allow officials to avoid risks and appropriate successes (May & Link to external site, 2019). Simultaneously, these on-site NGOs are also contributing to adaptability and

improved governance in the authoritarian regime (May & Link to external site, 2019). Gao and Teets (2021) provide the empirical studies a concluding method for observing the active, institutional dynamic of Chinese society. They categorize fragmented phenomenon into two stages in theory: “stage one is the participation of civil society organizations as an information mechanism, and stage two is the initiation of stakeholder discussions for inclusive policy implementation” (Gao & Teets, 2021).” These two stages lead to an inclusive policy environment that involves NGOs and local government branches acting as contributing participants. Furthermore, this adapted policymaking process, which allows NGOs to participate, reflects a working civil society, according to Gao and Teets. In addition to the approach mentioned above, Hasmath and Hus (2015) introduced a neo-institutional theory in an attempt to provide an approach for analysing the hidden reasons of the issue. They “argue that the political environment and power the state exerts will have different effects on the NGO sector: it can lead to coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphic pressures” (p. 110).

The above studies mainly focus on those who participate in the institutional dynamic. By confirming the active roles of participants and the results of the inclusiveness of the system, these studies maintain that the essence of civil society exists in China. Other studies offer new approaches to this particular conclusion. Yang & Cheong (2019) identify NGO incubators as the key element in network dynamics. They write, “NGO incubators were birthed to provide services to civil society actors, including capacity-building training, fundraising, information support, and network formation guidance” (Yang & Cheong, 2019). Yang and Cheong are particularly interested in whether incubators play a role in the development of civil society beyond these basic functions. They found that incubators in China “are connected to key social ties and economic resources to navigate China’s incipient and complex voluntary community (Yang & Cheong, 2019, p. 807). In addition, they also found that incubators “offer valuable opportunities for cross-sectoral alliances in the incipient Chinese civil sphere” (Yang & Cheong, 2019, p. 808). In their exploratory case study, it is impossible to ignore the comprehensive surveillance and constraints put in place by the government. However, Yang and Cheong remain convinced that Chinese civil society has a solid foundation, and that incubators are playing a vital role as mediators maintaining the overall institutional dynamic. Media,

as a force in this dynamic, shares some similarities. They are both relatively new, and both are important to building a healthy institutional dynamic in civil society. Yang and Calhoun (2007) identify media as the centre of critical discourse in civil society. The concept of the public sphere in Yang and Calhoun's analysis is broadly in line with Jurgen Habermas' use of the term, emphasizing the importance of a domain where independent public opinions can form. Moreover, Yang and Calhoun connect civil society and the public sphere in the sense of significance, suggesting that these two domains rely on each other for existence. As a result, Yang and Calhoun conclude that if China can form a working public sphere, it will be because there was a civil society to begin with. They utilized the flourishing development as evidence to prove that, as an actor, its influence is embedded in the policymaking process. Communication technologies – which in this case is the media – have an enabling effect on the public sphere and civil society.

Many studies have remained cautious when proposing that China has a civil society that can serve as a foundation for a healthy institutional dynamic. Howell (1998) stresses that “without a bourgeoisie, there can be no civil society” (Howell, 1998, p. 79). He maintains that this concept must be modified in the context of China, which is a nation that is undergoing an uncertain transition and lacks a mature bourgeoisie.

With regard to the relationship between democratization and civil society, the evidence from China suggests that the creation of a social space for new forms of association and the concomitant rise of a plurality of intermediary structures is not in itself sufficient for the development of a democratic challenge. (Howell, 1998, p. 80)

Hsu (2010) adopted an organizational perspective. While seeking for signs of a civil society in Chinese NGOs, he identifies the limitation of sources as a fundamental factor demonstrating that China does not have a civil society. In this case, the limit is not about funding, and the possibility of gaining resources is nowhere to be found other than from the state authorities. It is “impossible to scale up the impact past a certain point except by working through state agency” (Hsu, 2010, p. 261). Hsu maintains that this limitation is fatal, and that its impact on policy is negligible. He is not the only scholar to make this assertion. “We believe Chinese NGOs are yet to mature and thus are currently unlikely to make any significant

impact on the policy which will shape their sector of work in any substantial way in the near future stated by Hsu and Hasmath (2017). They do not see a healthy flow in the institutional dynamic between NGOs and the state in society. As a result, they suggest that there is no civil society in China. Liu and Palmer (2021) suggest that the NGO dynamic in China will not be stable for some time. Their research highlights GONGOS that are considered independent social actors and grassroots organizations that self-identify as state agents. The dynamic between the state and NGOs, “in which the NGO has to engage in complex negotiations with the actors of local society“ (Liu & Palmer, 2021, p.14), contains too much tension to employ practices and techniques to secure a seat at the bargaining table with the authorities. In their exploratory study, Gaudreau and Cao express their suspicions regarding the impacts of NGOs, writing, “The institutional arrangements guiding the distribution of power in civil society relations were found to impede the way that organizations and individuals are able to participate in governance activities” (Gaudreau & Cao, 2015, p. 438). They emphasize the barrier to adaptive governance building instead of surface-level phenomenon. Through an in-depth case study, they claim that the underlying political structure and the impacts it could have on various subjects are the main reasons why the institutional dynamic of Chinese NGOs is not as active as it may seem to be. Gaudreau and Cao (2015) examined labour NGOs in South China and discovered that activism-related practices were prohibited. They expressed a sentiment of helplessness after exploring various ways of carrying out activism. Government officials have no intention of hiding the distrust of NGOs, hence the strict and omnidirectional prohibition on action. In the realm of labour activism, Chen and Yang see no possibility of finding a space to work or make an influence on the policy level.

Beja states, “If no social group is in a position to overcome the limitations, it will be challenging for a vibrant civil society to be consolidated in China” (Beja, 2006, p. 18). This statement by Beja may be a summary of all the cautious opinions in empirical studies. Those who do not think China has a civil society also doubt whether NGOs have the capacity to overcome political and institutional limitations. This thesis utilizes this assertion to finish the literature review section. There is an ongoing debate over whether China has a civil society equipped with an active institutional dynamic for NGOs. Since the concept of the Chinese NGO and its

foundation are distinctive from the concept and foundation of Western NGOs, and because China is a large and complex country, it is almost impossible to reach a straightforward conclusion. As Gleiss and Saether (2017) state, “The blurred boundaries between state, party, and civil society actors in China make it challenging to understand the politics of civil society engagement” (p. 7). Even though the empirical literature offers various opinions and theories, the political role of civil society is not the only perspective.

3.4 New Challenges: The International Community and Public Diplomacy

Although this essay has spent considerable time discussing Chinese NGOs, it remains unclear whether Chinese NGOs can function as international conduits. The reason why it is necessary to comprehensively understand the distinctiveness of Chinese NGOs is the same reason why entering the international community is a complicated task for Chinese NGOs: political and social constraints prevent Chinese NGOs from making an impact. Moreover, the real question is how the characteristics of Chinese NGOs can explain their potential to fulfil its idea of conveying jobs in the world.

Existing studies have approached this issue from three perspectives: the performance of local NGOs in the international community, the situation of foreign NGOs in China, and the weight and potential of Chinese NGOs according to a public diplomacy framework.

Studies have identified a trend of local NGOs operating abroad. Yang and Taylor (2014) point out that Chinese NGOs have cooperated with African NGOs to combat HIV and AIDS. This long-term project has received considerable attention and has involved extensive cooperation on various levels of practice. Yang and Taylor state that this being a government-led programme is the reason of all the achievements. They assert that the initiation is still the Chinese state taking advantage of Chinese GONGOs operating over a more extensive network. Government agencies – not civil actors – are the main participants. However, “the line between domestic and international communication could be increasingly blurred” (Yang & Taylor, 2014, p. 578). made some closer observations on the matter of Chinese NGOs operating abroad. They found that the main format would be “state-run commercial investments – as embodied in the 10th Five Year Plan (2001–

5) 'Going Out' (Zou chu qu) policy" (p. 423). This finding of the background agrees with Yang and Taylor's finding. As Hsu et al. write, "Such future GONGO initiatives will have a one-off and ad hoc nature" (Hsu et al., 2016, p. 271). Furthermore, this experience will generate knowledge that will benefit the entire industry. As a result, Hsu et al. (2016) are somewhat optimistic regarding the ability for independent, citizen-led NGOs to participate in the international community, stating, "GOGON-isation of development may not be a major barrier" (Hsu et al., 2016, p. 436). They also assert that the "relationship between local NGOs and their international counterparts is going to change" (p. 878) as forms of collaboration change. Li and Dong (2018) build on this theory, suggesting that the current path-dependent and agenda-setting relied upon situation will eventually change. Li and Dong maintain that the need for Chinese NGOs to "explore new political and social aspects and path-breaking models" (Li & Dong, 2018, p.6) will be met mainly by improving professional talent and organizational learning. The example of Chinese NGOs working in Africa introduced by Liu et al. (2017) demonstrates the importance of forming a viable and internationally acceptable organizational learning norm. In addition to the discussion of working strategy acquisition, Liu (2020) proposed working fields for Chinese NGOs to work on an international level based on the needs of the new era: cyber, global environment, and regional peacekeeping.

Some studies have clarified the actions of international and foreign NGOs in China. Generally, the main issue is the same as local NGOs: the uncertainty of governmental control and the organization–state relationship. This thesis takes particular interest in foreign NGOs' perceptions of working in China. Foreign NGOs often feel that they are treated as the object of a strategy rather than a legitimate stakeholder. The authorities in China can "visualize (foreign) NGOs as 'development alternatives' to the government" (Hsia & White, 2002). Shieh (2018) observed the same phenomenon. She states that foreign NGOs often struggle to work with the CCP. The ambiguity of regulations and changes to laws may be obstacles. In particular, she states, "foreign NOGs see themselves being viewed more as objects of suspicion" (Shieh, 2018, p. 1). Hsia and White as well as Shieh point out how NGOs in the Chinese context are not the same as NGOs in the Western context. Hsia and White (2002) state that contrary to traditional understandings of NGOs, donors can directly benefit from operating an NGO, with makes the role of the donor

uncertain in the political culture (p. 347). Nevertheless, Shieh (2018) states that the enforcement of laws in China depends on the fragment of the government branch other than the guide of the law as an excruciating struggle for overseas NGOs to work in China. Noakes and Teets (2020) summarize this situation while stressing the importance of not assessing Chinese NGOs according to traditional Western understandings. They also make several recommendations on how to collaborate with Chinese authorities. They introduce the idea of strategic adoption, the main idea of which is to “work quite conscientiously within the laws and norms established by host governments to protect staff and the organization itself” (Noakes & Teets, 2020).

Non-governmental organizations have been playing a role in public diplomacy. The experience of Russia has provided a “viable framework of Government-to-Public (G2P) communication in the international sphere” (Simons, 2018) in international relations and affairs. He further suggests political marketing as a theoretical and conceptual foundation. This thesis found that Wenjun Zhang, whose work was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, sees public diplomacy and global governance as an opportunity for Chinese NGOs to make an impact. He suggests that China has been gradually opening up to the international community on a deeper level, and that through public diplomacy strategies, the internationalization of non-state-led, independent NGOs will be accountable (Zhang, 2017).

3.5 Research Gaps and Recommendations

This literature review section provided an overview of empirical studies in order to clarify the concept of the NGO in the Chinese context and factors that affect Chinese NGOs’ ability to serve as an international conduit. In addition, this thesis attempts to point out gaps in the literature.

The first gap is the attention given to the overall situation of NGOs’ international engagement. Although many studies have analysed elements in the equation of Chinese NGOs’ work, much less is known about the current situation of Chinese NGOs and their ability to participate in the international community. Even though Liu et al. (2017), Liu (2020), and other scholars have studied the actions of Chinese NGOs overseas, their observations cannot be considered objective or comprehensive. Liu et al. (2017) and Liu (2020) mentioned that most ongoing projects follow the agenda of Chinese authorities, which is to broaden the influence

of China. For this reason, in this thesis, their research focus is considered one-sided. There is a need for both research and action to be carried out in disciplines that are independent and free from policy demands. Unfortunately, little research of this nature has been conducted.

The second shortcoming of existing studies is a lack of discussion on mission setting and goal realization. As the most vital component of any organization, missions naturally transcend ethnicity, religion, ideology, and perspectives (Heyes & Martin, 2015). It is more than a link in organizational learning; rather, it is a vision that can elevate skills. Furthermore, the mission is more likely to motivate NGOs to think and work on an international level, or at least strive for this objective. Existing studies tend to focus on the operational aspects of NGOs: registration, resources, and the roles of social actors. However, most studies neglect the mission setting, mission realization, and self-realizing aspects of Chinese NGOs. This thesis suggests that this neglect has resulted in narrow perspectives and grounded practice scopes. Given that severe political and social constraints are problems worth focusing on, shifting focus to missions may generate new approaches for working around some issues while still realizing the mission. For instance, since obtaining legal status is not a requirement for NGOs, some NGOs could avoid registration and focus on the mission instead.

The third gap is that there is little comprehensive research that spans various disciplines and regions. Zhang and Guo's (2021) Chinese-language essay that summarizes research on non-profit-government relations provide a novel approach. However, there are few similar studies in the literature. When making assertions about the overall situation of Chinese NGOs or the social background, first-hand data from various disciplines and regions are crucial. On the topic of civil society and the impact on NGO operations, Dai and Spires (2018), Gao and Teets (2021), and Yang and Calhoun (2007) all made contributions by deeply examining various phenomenon and making conclusions about their underlying patterns. However, these assertions can be questioned because they only studied environmental NGOs, which is the field that enjoys the most benefits in terms of both policy and social resources. If their observations and methodologies were applied to questions of human rights or gender equality, one may arrive at different conclusions. A similar problem exists in the study on Nanjing, Jiangsu (Gaudreau & Cao, 2015). Even

though this study provides insight that is both valid and considerably innovative, it is difficult to ignore the fact that the special status of Nanjing as a city may limit the generalizability of the study. As a capital city of a wealthy region, Nanjing enjoys privileged access to social resources and policy tolerance in ways that Gejiu and Yunnan, for instance, may not. In summary, to come to a conclusion regarding China as a whole, it is necessary to conduct first-hand research across various disciplines and regions. Although this is difficult because China is enormous and complex, it is still worthwhile to fill in the gaps in the existing literature.

This thesis presents additional recommendations in addition to pointing out gaps in the research. *“They Don’t Understand the Fear We Have”*: *How China’s Long Reach of Repression Undermines Academic Freedom at Australia’s Universities* (McNeill & Human Rights Watch, 2021) could be an example of the opportunity that could be taken by the research of the involvement and possibility of involvement of Chinese NGOs. This recent Human Rights Watch investigation demonstrates the need to the world of academics but mainly to the non-authorities entities on the aspect of China. According to this thesis, it is as a cry for help for Chinese NGOs. For Chinese citizens both on the mainland and in Hongkong, the perpetrator in this case is the CCP, and the solution can only be provided by Chinese NGOs that are independent of the CCP and equipped as social actors. This could be a call for the research of NGOs, to begin with. The analysis of the general situation and related factors can only be done via studies that showcase all the aspects that have been looked at by previous studies: the struggle to develop Chinese civil society, the public diplomacy function that NGOs should take on, and the factor that is most relevant to this thesis, which is the exchange of ideas between cultures. The literature would benefit from a closer examination of issues relevant to Chinese people in the international community. These needs are indeed worth paying attention to.

Chapter 4. Findings: Possibility of Chinese NGOs Being an International Conduit

4.1 Localisation of the Concept of NGO

This chapter discusses findings from the empirical literature to explore and demonstrate the logic of the possibility of Chinese NGOs operating internationally as a conduit for ideas.

To determine whether Chinese NGOs operate as international conduits, this thesis argues that the fundamental task is to identify the elements that contribute to the issue. The first element is understanding the local, Chinese concept of a Chinese NGO, which operates as the theoretical basis and the overall guidance for NGO practice. The second element is the relationship and interaction with the outer world, namely governmental steering and the community. A third, vital, element is the international connection with Chinese NGOs. In other words, a tolerant policy environment for NGOs' operations, the scaffold of an existing institutional structure, and the willingness to act create possibility.

As stated in the literature review, NGO is a concept open to considerable interpretation. Essentially, in China and the West, the concept is not understood similarly: in the West, tradition has laid the groundwork for the independence of NGOs, whereas in China, this idea is foreign and modern. The fundamental Chinese understanding of an NGO is that it cannot be viewed as a Chinese counterpart of its Western namesake (Saich, 2000).

The authorities' and domestic interpretations of the NGO in China reveal that an NGO is understood and operated in practice differently from in the West at various levels and in various parts of society. Rather than stressing independence and representativeness, the literature has made clear that in China, to a great extent, NGOs loosely indicate non-authority. Non-authority as a general characteristic serves merely as a natural definition: exclusion from the government agencies. The current study found that the following entities were referred to as NGOs in society: citizen service entities that were not funded by the government, philanthropic entities that could not meet the requirements of being financial foundations, and business entities with alternative agendas. In sum, the concept of NGO in China focuses on the idea of 'non-governmental'; it can refer to any agency that is not part of the government. The concept is similar to an aggregation of alternatives.

No systemically Western assumptions can be applied to the Chinese NGO concept: it involves complicated nation-agency, society-agency and capital-agency relationships. Research has categorised NGO models to explain that GONOG, G-R

NGO, and CONGO manifest the agencies and the power of, respectively, the government, the citizens and the corporations. Furthermore, these models inform the localisation of the Chinese NGO concept. NGO in China is a result arises from the battle among different social powers, one only partly enjoying independence and representing a specific group of people.

4.2 From the Local Concept: Investigations on Crucial Elements in the International Conduit's Practice

A search through the empirical literature for the characteristics of Chinese NGOs provided this thesis with the necessary factors for analysing whether Chinese NGOs contain all the elements required to operate transnationally, convey ideas, and contribute to solving international issues. The localisation of the concept clarified the prerequisites for their operations. This thesis finds it is essential to identify the potential factors that impact the possibilities and to analyse them. In doing so, this thesis compares Chinese NGOs and Western NGOs and discovered the elements.

Two underlying vital elements would, to some extent, endanger transnational cooperation. Even though research has revealed a series of distinctive factors of Chinese NGOs, including political background, systematic form, and institutional strategy, this thesis finds that the basic elements were the means of resource acquisition and autonomy in representativeness.

The first key factor that needs in-depth investigation is the means of resource acquisition. This is the factor related to both the authoritarian political environment and the institutional dynamic, yet it is caught in between these two powers. This prominent phenomenon is mentioned frequently throughout the empirical literature: Western NGOs are independent in nature, just as Kellow and Murphy-Gregory (2018) found in the descriptions of the UN's NGOs. The essence is the independence of the mechanism of financing and funding. More specifically, the financing and funding mechanism needs to comply with the regulation of the governing body but does not involve the government in practice. In the discussions of Western NGOs, the stakeholders frequently mentioned are the public and the funder, yet the government is not often viewed as a participant, whereas in China the situation is different. Throughout the readings, when the financing and funding mechanism was discussed, most of the time the struggle for survival was mentioned

as well. In particular, the “patterns of practice” (Hsu & Jiang, 2015, p. 105) is largely determined by the mechanisms that are unitized as principal proposition to Chinese NGOs. This thesis found that the reason that the nation-organisation relationship in China is not as separate as it is in the West is the difference in the financing and funding mechanisms—resource acquisition, in other words.

For Chinese NGOs, access to resource acquisition is severely limited. Private donors, in general, suffer from a “lack of access to information concerning organisational characteristics” (Johnson & Ni, 2015, p. 527), and, for most NGOs, access to private donors is almost non-existent (Johnson & Ni, 2015). Regulations are the primary barrier between NGOs and public funding. In some cases, NGOs utilise overseas funding. The literature treats these as two ways of replenishing funding or obtaining government funding. For most legally registered NGOs in China, direct government grants and government purchases are more accessible ways of acquiring resources. Especially under the influence of new public management (NPM), the Chinese government has adopted contracting-out services as its primary approach. The registration rule is, in a way, a means to control the ability of NGOs to obtain funding and a way to determine whether an organisation can survive.

A more innovative, even aggressive, approach to resource acquisition is much needed for Chinese NGOs. It is crippling for Chinese NGOs not to be able to obtain a well-functioned financing mechanism. This may become a fundamental barrier to the NGOs’ cooperation with their Western counterparts. As a result, to operate more transnationally, their funding ability, especially the connection to private donors, needs to be developed. There is indeed room for the development of this aspect. For this reason, this thesis finds that the factor funding ability would not undermine Chinese NGOs’ ability to operate as an international conduit.

The second key factor that needs to be investigated more is the autonomy of representativeness. This issue lies deep in the system and institutional mechanisms. The reasons could be numerous. Cultural tradition, particularly the tendency towards homogeneity in Eastern culture, could be one of them. This thesis focuses on the aspects of funding in practice. The tight and complex state-NGO relationship is one of the main reasons. For NGOs, this kind of relationship “would already determine the scope of choices for service recipients” (Mok et al., 2021, p. 687). The diversity of representativeness and the autonomy of choices for service delivery have been

compromised by the state purchasing policy (Mok et al., 2021). The overall alignment of individual missions and political missions could be another reason. Over the years, the values and missions of the Party-nation have been inculcated into citizens' collective perception, and their value orientation may lean towards the side of the nation. It could be problematic. Nonetheless, representativeness issues only become undermining when issues are complicated to comprehend. This thesis does not view them as a necessarily undermining factor.

4.3 The Possibilities of Chinese NGOs Being an International Conduit

As stated above, the primary aim of the thesis is to determine whether there is the possibility of Chinese NGOs being an international conduit. A conduit is a channel for the exchange of ideas and provides a possible sphere for cooperation to help solve issues that concern all parties. This thesis particularly focuses on the factors that impact the possibility of Chinese NGOs being an international conduit. This section closely examines the factors and determines whether Chinese NGOs exemplify them.

The first factor is a viable policy environment. For China, a fundamental concern for cooperation is the authoritarian political restrictions. For NGOs, the questions raised were mainly the following: are there independent NGOs, and to what extent do they enjoy autonomy in practice? The literature demonstrated that there is more than one type of NGO in China. Except for GONGOs, the typical state-led NGOs that are obliged to follow the government's agenda, both citizen-led and corporate-led NGOs are permitted to operate with some autonomy, as long as the basic rules of the Chinese system are followed. In essence, the registration policy can be viewed as a means of institutional control over the distribution and acquisition of resources. Moreover, despite the fragmented and uncertain governance, there is no restriction against establishing and operating as an NGO independently.

This thesis views this gap in regulation as a kind of delay in the implementation of government control. This delay is a sphere in which many citizen-led NGOs operate, with the greatest autonomy they can obtain under the authoritarian regime. Importantly, this sphere indicates that a viable policy environment exists. Much of the empirical research suggested that there was even a chance for NGOs to influence part of the governance and policy as one kind of active

social actor. This observation attests to a two-way communication between the government and NGOs, which indicates that a workable environment has already been established in China. Even though there is a debate on whether there is a legitimate civil society in China to ensure the independence and autonomy of individual civil actors so that they are free to execute their social goals, a viable operating environment certainly exists and serves as the base ground. Depending on their field of practice, NGOs may face tighter or looser surveillance and supervision. However, with respect to the function and expectation of international conduits, this thesis finds no reason for alarm at the redlines of the CCP. In sum, this thesis holds that a viable policy environment is in place.

The second factor required for the conduit to operate is an operative institutional structure. An existing institutional structure could serve as a scaffold when action is needed. The Chinese branch of an NGO needs to ensure its entire operating pattern to ensure that its process will work at an international level. The literature covers the system's structure by examining the mechanism of and the participants in the institution of Chinese NGOs. Research has confirmed that individual NGOs in the system have the capacity to fulfil their functions. The neo-institutional theory was utilised as an approach to demonstrate that the dynamic of the system was to a great extent beneficial. Incubators were particularly examined in the literature as a product of the activeness of the system. The dynamic is questioned by some; however, this thesis finds that the questionings are not entirely sound because they largely tend to focus on the nature of the activeness, namely on whether it arises from the true freedom of civil society or from the strategic negotiation of the authoritarian nation. It is clear that China has developed a functional institution of NGOs with the ability to adapt to the policy environment and the requirements that flow from it.

The last factor in the equation of an operating conduit is the need for and the will to operate in the international community. This factor is rather complicated to observe. From the perspective of public diplomacy, the foundation needs to be an active actor with independence, expertise and credibility (A. Yang & Taylor, 2014). Independence returns us to the question of how much autonomy the Chinese NGOs enjoy. On this question, this thesis asserted earlier that, even though under an

authoritarian regime, Chinese NGOs do enjoy some independence to act of their own free will, especially on issues that may interest the international community.

Expertise is mainly ensured by the capacity of the institutional structure and its dynamics. Examining the operation, experiences and successes of Chinese domestic NGOs can yield a proof of well-functioning expertise.

Credibility pertains to the need and willingness to operate and gain experience transnationally. This need is evident in the domestic sphere. Recent social problems such as COVID-19 have revealed that many citizens are asking for transparency in government and procedural justice for whistleblowers. The case study section of this thesis showcases this need in the public sphere.

In conclusion, this thesis finds that all three vital factors bear witness to the possibility for Chinese NGOs to operate as international conduits. During the process of validating three vital factors, it occurred there are two elements require further investigation: the problems of resource acquisition and autonomy in representativeness. However, after a closer examination, this thesis does not identify determinants that undermine the possibility for Chinese NGOs to operate as an international conduit.

Chapter 5. Analysis of the Limitations on Chinese NGOs Being an International Conduit

5.1 Values: Localisation and Value Co-creation

As stated above, the concept of the Chinese NGO needs to be localised so that no assumptions are made about transnational NGO cooperation. The barrier between institutional assumptions and real-life implications creates a limitation to practicing. Moreover, the concept of the Chinese NGO itself is not the only element that needs to be localised. This thesis argues that, to be a conduit, Chinese NGOs need to localise some Western values to ensure that their value can be realised in the Chinese environment.

The landscape of NGOs has 'realising values' as one of the mandates in its nature (Kellow & Murphy-Gregory, 2018). For conveying ideas, however, conflicts may emerge. From the perspective of Chinese NGOs, it is most straightforward to graft Western ideas as a means for Chinese society to become better acquainted

with new ideas and values so as to blend in better with the international community, although this might not be practical. This thesis maintains that conveying ideas between China and the West requires a process for the internalisation and localisation of ideas.

The first reason is CCP supervision: there is no foreseeable tolerance for non-local values. There is considerable evidence, from posters with mottos on them to all kinds of publications with the intention of self-promotion, of the CCP's noticeable determination to promote its values, and its values only. In his book *China, the UN and Human Rights: Implications for World Politics*, Primiano (2019) mentioned the process of rational choice and strategic calculation that has been used by the CCP for value propositions. In a nutshell, the CCP tends to provide their preferred explanation of value as part of strategic governance, and the expectation is for the entire society to implement it. In light of this constraint, it falls to Chinese NGOs to internalise the Western concept of value and interpret it such that it does not contradict the fundamental values of the Chinese environment, so that it has the chance to be conveyed in the first place.

The second reason is society. Capricious though they may be, political constraints are merely one aspect of a holistic consideration of NGO practice; another aspect is the effect and efficiency of service delivery to society. In the case study section, this thesis uses an example to demonstrate how complex it is to deliver an NGO service in the public sphere, many steps are involved. Colliding with or simply shying away from the mainstream values could cause a publicity disaster. The object of the service, mainstream society, needs a relatively integrated narration as a carrier rather than a straightforward presentation.

This thesis argues that, due to the two aspects stated above, it is vital for NGOs to internalise and localise values when they act as a conduit. This process is the way to ensure that the next steps can be taken. This may be more basic than it seems. However, internalising and localising values could be immensely challenging. First, it requires a profound understanding of value. Second, the process of internalisation and localisation could be demanding. Lastly, completing the testing process may require extra resources. Consequently, this thesis views this entire process as creating a vast limitation for NGOs. The process limits the breadth of NGOs when they work towards being a potential conduit. In addition, it limits the

number of eligible NGOs that can take on the role of conduits. This thesis presents a strategy to address these limitations.

According to this thesis, neither Chinese nor Western values may be completely retained when Chinese NGOs must operate as conduits. A one-way invasion is not the proper way forward for this proposition; its consequences could be fatal for the attempt to be a channel of conveyance. In light of this fundamental view, this thesis proposes the tactic of value co-creation.

Value co-creation (VCC) is an approach used especially in the management of NGOs during public service delivery. Best et al. (2018) argued that VCC is well designed and well equipped to face problems such as a rigid environment. Mills et al. (2013) stressed how it could work effectively in a complex interaction between actors. In particular, when multiple stakeholders face an issue that has more than one dimension, VCC can supply all parties with a dyadic transactional perspective (Best et al., 2018). Moreover, the network perspective, comprising indirect and direct service, can contribute to the NGO's mission (Best et al., 2018).

This thesis views VCC as a proper tool to exploit for the following reasons. First, the policy environment in China is indeed rigid and complicated; as discussed in the findings section, the change in governing style, especially the changes in the CCP's regulatory system for NGOs, has created more challenges. VCC has shown its efficacy in dealing with complexity, according to Best et al. (2018).

Second, the CCP has a fundamental spirit of adaptation and flexibility. The case study by Best et al. that focused on empirical research demonstrated that a solid network through distinguished dimensions could be reached by utilising VCC as a tool to deliver services. The aim of operating as a conduit instead of functioning as a translator is mainly to be flexible in interpreting and adapting values. These two characteristics are much needed in this field with multiple perspectives.

Third, VCC could be a mediator in practice amongst a number of stakeholders. In the case of Chinese NGOs, due to political constraints and social constraints, there are two connatural stakeholders in the first place: the political branch and social conventions. In addition to these two, multiple organisations in different cultures, new era customers, as well as potential funding providers all need to be taken into consideration. The transnational perspective, along with the ability to operate amongst different parties, would yield ideal results with VCC.

In sum, this thesis views the localisation of value re-creation for NGOs as the first limitation on Chinese NGOs operating as international conduits. Even though a workable paradigm assists this process, complications may still arise between NGOs and transnational operating.

5.2 Scopes: Limited and Fragmented

In the foreseeable future, the scopes of conveying new ideas and transnational projects could be limited and presented in a fragmented fashion by Chinese NGOs. There are two reasons: resource acquisition restrictions and governing style of CCP.

A section above analysed how the issue of resource acquisition is as deep as the essence of government control of NGOs. As stated above, control by the Chinese government has a 'delay' in implementation. NGO-related policy does not stop NGOs from establishing themselves and practising; control and supervision do not start until an NGO seeks legal status with the Ministry of Civil Affairs. This situation creates possibilities for NGOs to operate with a degree of autonomy. However, the cost is evident, too: without a legal status, the means and ability to acquire resources are limited. According to *The Regulation of Overseas Foundation* (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2014), there is strict control over funding from overseas. The requirements and clauses in this regulation are, in reality, a means for the government to prevent NGOs from being controlled through overseas funding (Zhang, 2012). For NGOs that wish to operate as international conduits, this regulation is a dead-end in the approach to sourcing, the access has been cut off by regulation.

Moreover, this could indicate limited ways to acquire resources for NGOs that conduct translational operations. Following a conventional fundraising method that involves interested individual donors is inevitably a limitation on the scope of operation. This needs to be noted by all participants in transnational operations.

That being said, this thesis does not hold that resource acquisition is entirely controlled by the government; there are other, more flexible ways of fundraising. As suggested in an earlier section, other than foundations, which are a traditional way of resourcing, private donors can be an ideal way as well. For NGOs that operate as

international conduits, after adapting and developing VCC, alternative resourcing approaches could be pursued.

The other reason why this thesis posits a limited scope of NGO operation is restrictions coming from governing style. This assertion is based on the phenomenon of fragmented authoritarianism in the style of government in China. Recent research has revealed that movements and programmes on moral issues, the fragmentation of authoritarian power, and the hierarchical structure can create barriers to NGO operation (Itzhaki-Braun et al., 2021). The number of NGO-related functions in domestic neighbourhoods has declined dramatically (Peiru et al., 2009) and local government branches' officials are becoming ever more cautious about holding local functions. This caution has limited the mobilisation of citizens. Especially in regard to conveying ideas on issues of international concern, this thesis concludes that NGOs will encounter more difficulty in front-line operation. In other words, it is predictable that the scope of operation will be affected negatively by the fragmented authoritative governing of CCP.

5.3 Hindered Public Influence

Hindered influence signifies 'limited influence on the overall population of China.' The reason for hindered influence is mainly cultural. Influencing people that are not initially concerned about international affairs or moral issues is particularly difficult. Conventionally, the ways of influencing have been on-site front-line service delivery or creating online hype and publicity; evidently, online operations have been the more popular methods in recent years. This subsection focuses on the second point: the online method of influencing people.

Even though Zhou and Pan (2017) observed a positive self-media such as Weibo (Chinese version of Twitter) impact on ordinary people, this had changed by 2021. After the Umbrella Movement and the 2021 Hongkong Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement, the CCP tightened its control over social media even more. The time when one could advocate for a mission online passed more rapidly than expected, as observed by Zhou and Pan (2010). Accounts on social media platforms and chatting applications were deleted without warning, and leaders in group chats were questioned by the authority in the name of 'peace keeping'. It has become harder to be visible on Chinese platforms (Stockmann et al., 2020).

Stockmann et al. (2020) quantitatively measured voicing opinions on Chinese social media; the result was discouraging. It was clear that the majority of platforms had undergone 'treatment'; the 'treatment' in this case was a filter system that was designed to pick up any 'sensitive' content. 'Sensitivity' has not been defined on any platform or by any regulation of the government. The nature of operating as an international conduit would require conversations on moral matters and world issues, so it is logical to predict that NGO-related and value-related content will be censored heavily by the authority. Consequently, influence will be limited due to limited publicity.

One would argue that official channels such as television stations are possible platforms to operate from. Unfortunately, official channels are not of service to NGOs. In China, the official stations are all owned by the government, and their mandate is to operate as mouthpieces.

5.4 Negligible Policy Influences

This thesis states that, even though it is possible for Chinese NGOs to operate as international conduits, to convey ideas between China and the international community, and to cooperate on mutually concerning issues, it is unlikely that NGOs will be capable of being domestic policy influencers.

In the literature review section, some empirical research suggested that there was a civil society in China in which NGOs could be active social actors and influence the government's policymaking. In contrast, some other studies did not share this view. This thesis takes the nature of an international conduit into consideration and remains cautious on the issue of influencing the policymaking of government.

On the one hand, the CCP's evident governing style is to remain conservative on international issues. Here is a recent example: Xi Jinping did not attend the climate change conference held in Glasgow in 2021. His reluctance has been criticised by many countries. His policy changes on international issues are difficult to accomplish at the diplomatic level. This thesis does not posit any change at the public diplomatic level. Furthermore, the tradition of individual actors influencing policy does not exist in authoritarian China. Consequently, conveying ideas and

operating in a characteristically transnational way would not be acceptable to the government either.

Chapter 6. The Prospect of Chinese NGOs Operating as International Conduits

This chapter will investigate the portrayal of Chinese NGOs operating as international conduits in detail. Having discussed the local perception of Chinese NGOs, it is necessary to examine its characteristics in the context of the international community.

6.1 Framework

The framework is a system that comprises transnational, transcultural, and trans-organisational aspects of practice. Each element has mandates to fulfil, issues to tackle, or principles to follow.

Under the transnational aspect, this thesis emphasises Chinese local NGOs' role of initiation and their landing point. This is to distinguish local Chinese NGOs' transnational operations as a conduit from international NGO (INGO) operations in China. As stated above, government control over overseas funding is stricter than funding by Chinese sources. In addition, the ambiguity of the regulations and laws on foreign and international NGOs is a significant barrier to their operation (Shieh, 2018). Shieh (2018) investigated the Chinese regulatory issue and found that in the aftermath of the 'colour revolution', investigation and control, along with ambiguity about the law's implementation, raised the question of the legitimacy of foreign and international NGOs' actions in China. To avoid this problem and its complexity, it is crucial for Chinese NGOs to remain in the leading role. The law and regulation, as well as the convention of domestic NGOs, can be of help when transnational operation is involved. In this way, there need be no concern that the legitimacy problem would undo the existing effect.

Under the aspect of transcultural practice, Chan (2008) stressed the importance for Chinese NGOs to "act as skilful cross-cultural brokers" (p. 232). As Murdie (2014) claimed, "organizations behave differently based on where they originate from" (p. 328). Consequently, INGOs and transnational social movement organisations (TSMOs) can be viewed only as indicators. Still, there is no paradigm

of practice for domestic NGOs. Participants need to operate in a way familiar to them and retain their identity as an organisation as much as possible. Being a cross-cultural broker puts emphasis on maintaining the participants' identities and not reshaping the participants according to an international template.

Mitigating cultural conflicts is another possible mandate. Chinese NGOs need to take responsibility for both the organisations and their practice and to keep an open mind towards the multiple allegiances of their operators. Chan (2008) stressed that respecting the multiple beliefs and complexities of both Chinese and foreign operations potentially gives them the motivation to handle transnational operations better. This thesis maintains that, as the industry develops, cross-cultural brokers' characteristics should be increasingly evident in NGOs that operate as conduits.

The aspect of trans-organisational operation within the framework comes with considerable benefits. According to Murdie (2014),

Organizations cooperate to help their bottom line: they gain expertise that can help them innovate, share costs among multiple organizations, gain market exposure, and organize against competitors (Oliver, 1990). If the organizations share common goals, cooperation helps ensure that these goals are met. (pp. 312-313).

Growth of both Chinese domestic and foreign partners is likely to occur when cooperation occurs, which means that Chinese NGOs being international conduits will greatly help the development of organisations.

6.2 Organisational Learning

Organisational learning is a crucial part of prospective Chinese NGOs' international operation as a conduit: it reveals issues and tasks in the process of operating and predicts possible difficulties. Furthermore, it provides a vision for the organisation.

The starting point in the process is building trust and credibility, according to this thesis. The first step in building trust and credibility building is forming interpersonal relationships. Pan et al. (2020) studied the operating pattern of Western NGOs and local Chinese operators on this topic and found that one of the most valuable factors in forming and tightening a partnership was interpersonal relationships amongst the organisations. They observed the Chinese pattern of operating in an international context and found that two factors needed to be

present: expertise and interpersonal relationships. They viewed interpersonal relationships as a stepping stone towards creating a healthy and active working sphere. Cooperation amongst organisations facilitates the formation of an “interwoven community” (Pan et al., 2020, p. 6214). In many cases, this happens when realisable interpersonal relationships are built into the structure of the institutions.

Another point on organisational learning in NGOs operating as international conduits highlights the function of conveying an idea. Sharing knowledge is significant. Sharing knowledge is defined as “employees exchanging information and supporting tasks” (Lu & Li, 2015, p. 118). It is arguably the foundation of transnational and transcultural work. Knowledge-sharing can be divided into a two-part process: intention-sharing and behaviour-sharing. This thesis concludes that sharing knowledge will boost the development of Chinese NGOs’ operations as a conduit. The exchange and conveyance of ideas will result in the delivery of experiences, skills and knowledge to local and foreign organisations. A small-scale exchange could grow with the expansion of the operating scale; consequently, idea exchange on a foreseeably larger scale will eventually happen. Schroeder (2008) added another dimension to the concept of sharing knowledge: norm internalisation. She viewed norm internalisation as a constructive approach that helps to provide an in-depth understanding of cultural differences. For instance, in the study of climate change, it is clear that a radical norm internalisation has triggered a high-level behavioural change and even a policy change.

6.3 Operating Fields

This thesis does not envisage Chinese NGOs functioning as international conduits operating in every field in the near future. Due to the authoritarian nature of the government and the pervasive surveillance, there will be sensitivity to NGOs functioning as conduits transnationally for some time to come.

Here is a starting point: humanitarian intervention could be one of the most appropriate fields; it is relevant and current. After the rapid spread of COVID-19, the attention of the world fell on China’s approaches to handling COVID-related issues. Amongst these issues, human rights and justice for whistle blowers might be one of

the weak links, and the problem desperately needs an intervention. The case study section of this thesis showcases the process of and expectations on this issue.

This thesis also finds that there are it is necessary to provide more examples to elaborate on the topic of working fields: climate change, animal welfare, and the regulation of transnational companies could be the fields that need cross national and cross-organisational attention too. Considering all the characteristic in operating conduits' projects, these operations can be expected.

Chapter 7. Case Study - COVID-19 Whistle Blower's Protection

7.1 Background

In late December 2019, Dr. Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist at Wuhan Central Hospital, became aware of a possible disease outbreak after seeing seven patients with SARS-like symptoms. Li warned colleagues and former classmates about the outbreak in a closed group on WeChat, the Chinese social media platform, suggesting that they take protective measures. Days after his warning, Li was censured by hospital leaders and summoned to the Public Security Bureau in Wuhan, where he was forced to sign a statement in which he was accused of spreading false rumours and disturbing the public order. Just over three weeks later, Wuhan, a city of over eleven million people, was placed under an unprecedented and draconian quarantine which would last seventy-six days. On February 7, 2020, Li died after becoming infected with SARS-CoV-2. He was thirty-three years old (Qin et al. [2020](#); BBC News [2020](#); Green [2020](#)).

The paper of Nie and Elliott (2020) cited a particular paragraph from a local Chinese website, Caixin Wang (The Site of New Finance). The news article that the paragraph comes from covered the story of Doctor Li Wenliang, the whistle blower of COVID-19. When this site is accessed now, a picture is shown (Figure 2).

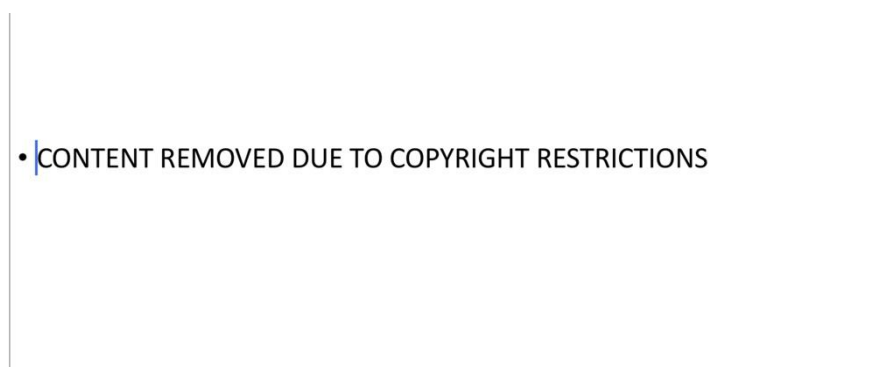


Figure 2

One does not need to understand the Chinese language to grasp the meaning of the image. '404 not found' is the theme of a proposition for the protection of whistle blowers in China.

Neither human rights issues nor whistle blower protection issues are by any means in the mainstream culture in China. For many Chinese, the term 'whistle blower' did not even exist in their vocabulary until 2019, the year of COVID-19. It was not until the death of Li Wenliang did people start to recognize the issue of whistle blowers as a whole. The primary reason behind is the authority's policy of '404 not found' and silence under coercion. This is a conventional strategy that targets dissidents and whistle blowers. Instead of categorizing dissidents and whistle blowers' acts as "private disobedience and psychological disturbance (Nie & Elliott, 2020, p.3)", a more radical approach is used frequently by the Chinese authority. Their approach is to put dissidents and whistle blowers in jail and to erase their existence in publicly accessible news. Another example is Liu Xiaobo, the Nobel prize winner. On the almost all Chinese websites, there is no mention of why he won the prize. The authority attempts to erase the publicities of the Nobel prize winner's acts to avoid justifying them to the public.

The case of Zhang Zhan follows the same scenario. Zhang Zhan, an independent reporter, was the first to cover the COVID-19 situation in Wuhan for the international community. She was awarded the prize for courage by Reporters Without Borders (RSF). RSF is an international NGO specializing in the defence of media freedom. By the time Zhang Zhan won the prize, she was in jail in China and was denied bail (Initium Media, 2021). Notably, traces of Zhang Zhan on Chinese websites and forums all lead to pages reading '404 not found'. The picture can be found in a photoshoot in November 2020; people in Pasadena, United States, are voicing her release (Figure 3).

- CONTENT REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

Figure 3

The cases studied in this thesis are of the COVID-19 whistle blowers Li Wenliang and Zhang Zhan. The former died of the coronavirus, and the latter was imprisoned and no news has been given of whether she is alive or dead. This thesis looks at the issue of Chinese whistle blowers' protection to showcase the factors and possibility for Chinese NGOs to serve as an international conduit. Moreover, this thesis examines the urgency for Chinese NGOs to be the bridge between China and the world for conveying ideas and critical information that concerns the entire international community.

7.2 Chinese NGOs Fitting in the Equation

Chordiya et al. (2020) have stated that it is essential to use strategic organizational protection programs to protect whistle blowers. They think that since the nature of whistleblowing is ethics oriented, it should draw attention from all across the world. Smith (2014) in the *International Handbook on Whistleblowing Research* mentioned that the protection from an international organizational level has the potential to help whistle blowers to feel safe.

The protection of whistle blowers is an international position that needs to be initiated by Chinese NGOs and dealt with in the international community. The reason why this thesis thinks Chinese NGOs are the only appropriate party in the equation is two-fold. Firstly, the proposition itself eliminates the possibility of CCP's participation.

Non-governmental entities are the only agencies that would be appropriate for dealing with the problem. Due to the governing style of the CCP, there is no other authority officially in power. Only those who are independent of the government can therefore be part of the equation of the movement or enforcement of whistle blower protections. Secondly, the issue of whistle blowing is an international issue in nature, rather than a local issue. This was demonstrated particularly in the case of COVID-19. RSF's recognition by giving an award shows the attention and care from the international community. Li Wenliang noticed the COVID-19 was highly contagious early in the pandemic, and Zhang Zhan told the world about the virus. Both of these actions held the attention of the entire world.

The policy and social environment in China provide ample space for Chinese NGOs to work on this issue. First of all, the overall NGO policy, as discussed in earlier sections, does not prevent NGOs from working. As analysed in former sections, there is a delay in the government's control, the tight supervision from the authority does not start until an NGO seeks to be registered. This delay, in a way, provides NGOs some autonomy. On the social aspect, despite the debate about whether civil society exists in China, it is undeniable that the institutional dynamic has already equipped the NGOs with the resources, organizational intelligence, and experiences to work. The society itself presents the capability of forming an operative community structure. In sum, this thesis suggests both the environment and the practising scaffolds are viable.

7.3 Approaches and Expectations

There are four vital elements for a whistle blower protection programme to work. They are namely: structural environment, organizational learning, international attention and international NGO cooperation. These elements are shown below

(Figure 4).



Figure 4

The elements would need to be initiated by Chinese NGOs and the attention of the international community would have to be attracted. Cooperation between Chinese NGOs and international NGOs would be vital and would need to be established before actions could be taken by Chinese NGOs. Moreover, all the liaisons and layers between NGOs would have to be protected. Thus, the outline of the protection program could be drawn.

The expected outcome can be put straightforwardly: safety. However, security is on several levels. The safety of whistle blowers and other related individuals is the first and primary consideration. In the case of Zhang Zhan, what is needed is political asylum in any form. After that, a safe sphere for other issues that concern the world need to be created.

Intuium Media interviewed a former police officer in the education camps for Uygur people in Xinjiang, China earlier this year. The officer had quit for ethical reasons and was hesitant to reveal information about the camps to any press because of concerns for possible persecution against his partner and children. The issue of Uygur education camps has been a heated human rights issue in the

international community. If protections to all the people working for the protection of whistle blowers could be provided, more information would be revealed.

Lastly, the most crucial safety concern is for the safety of the international community. The Uygur education camps, for instance, have also raised concerns and worries for other nations. If the safety of a former guard from the camps could provide more information regarding China's agenda and goals, it could potentially alleviate conflicts. The process and the expected outcomes are shown below (Figure 5).

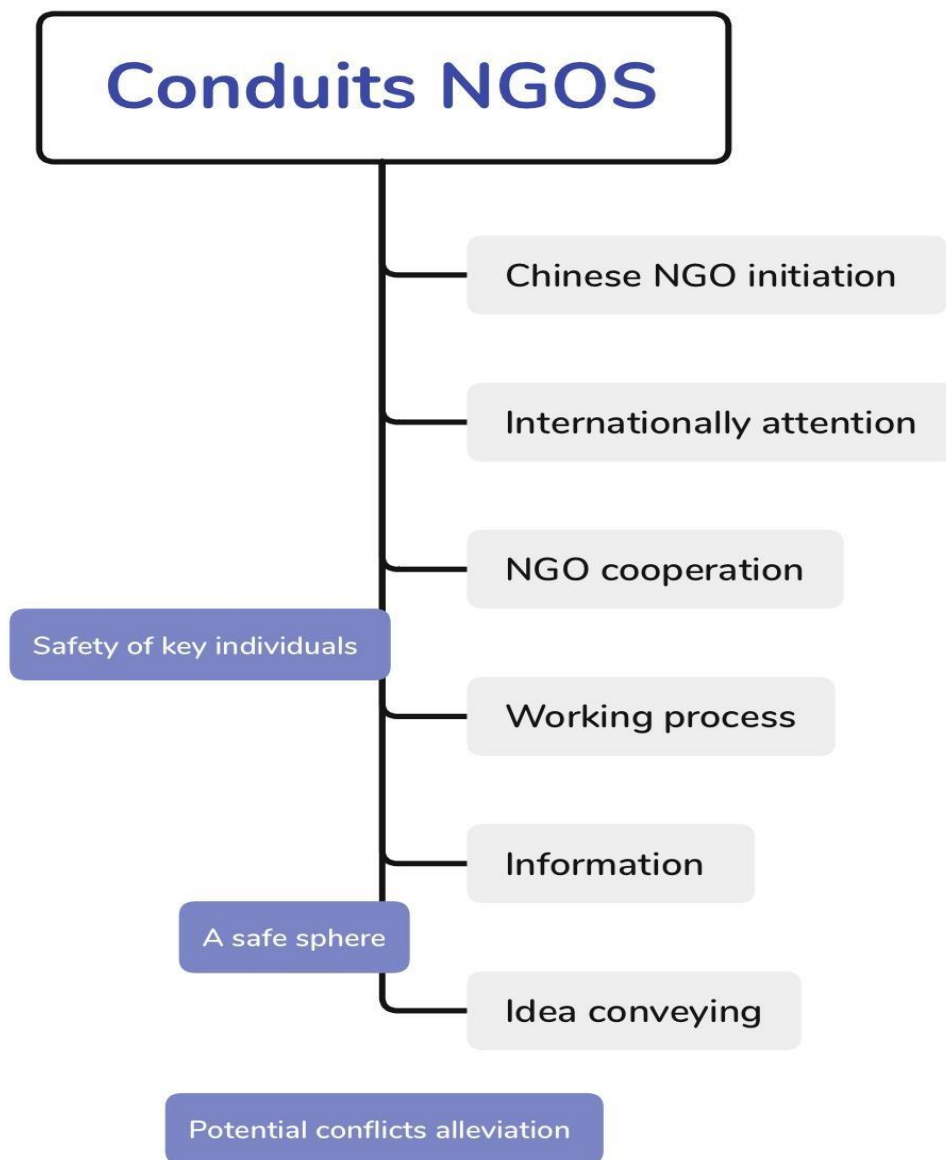


Figure 5

7.4 Limitations

The scope and influence of an international whistle blower protection programme would, to a great deal, still be limited despite successes. Will '404 not found' happen again? Almost absolutely. Will the prosecutions stop? The chance is too slim to be seen.

The resource could be a struggle to support the action. As analysed, the registration rule as a means of government controlling could restrict resource acquisition. For this reason, the funding can neither be from overseas nor from public funding. Private funding, to some extent, would also limit the scope and the action for some NGO working.

Moreover, the governing style of the CCP determines that even with projects like whistle blowers' protection, the political influence will still be negligible, as this thesis has suggested earlier. Any programme like this one can only help but not solve problems. A workable environment in authoritarian China has been established, but the core power dynamic of the country would be difficult to change.

Are these reasons going to stop Chinese NGOs or transnational cooperation? One would hope the answer is no.

Chapter 8. Conclusion

This thesis has explored what can be expected in the future for conduit working for Chinese NGOs, given the various restrictions that apply to NGOs in China. With recourse to the literature, this thesis attempted to discover what the existing policy restrictions mean for an industry that is dedicated to representing people's best intentions. It found that given the nature of an authoritarian nation, there is indeed a way for NGOs to reach out to the world and to take action on Chinese issues that concern the international community. Boundaries and red lines will not stop China from being an active actor in public diplomacy.

The exploration of the possibility of Chinese NGOs being an international conduit to assume the responsibility of exchanging ideas and to work on issues of mutual concern was conducted in the following way. Due to the complexity of the issue of Chinese NGOs, an interpretive research framework and a qualitative methodology were adopted. Based on this framework and methodology, this thesis

went on to analyse the information provided by empirical research. The thesis began by providing an in-depth examination of Chinese NGOs as a concept and tried to localize it so that the cultural assumptions about NGOs in the West could be applied to the proposed role of Chinese NGOs. In order to establish whether there is a workable foundation for Chinese NGOs to assume the role of a conduit, the literature review examined the policy and social environment in China, as well as the policy implications and institutional dynamics of the non-governmental sector. This was followed by an examination of previous attempts made by Chinese NGOs overseas. The literature revealed that despite all the policy restrictions on the functioning of NGOs, citizen-led, unregistered, independent NGOs still enjoy a degree of autonomy in relation to their functioning. With the help of a functional institutional structure, they can indeed work transnationally if the willingness and required techniques are in place. Moreover, in the light of the propositions presented by the international community, Chinese NGOs do have the potential to function as a global conduit.

The next part of the thesis considered what factors would limit the functioning of Chinese NGOs working as international conduits. The need for the process of value localization and value co-reaction was identified as a significant limitation. Value co-creation (VCC) was identified as a tool that could assist in this regard. Moreover, it was suggested that the scope of Chinese NGOs working as international conduits would be limited and fragmented, and that their practical influence may not be as significant as expected. It was also suggested that negligible policy influences could be a further limitation. To provide a picture of the prospect of Chinese NGOs working as an international conduit, this thesis laid out a framework of the functioning of conduits – one consisting of transnational, transcultural, and trans-organisational aspects. An estimation of the required organisational learning skills was also provided. The analysis was concluded with a case study on a whistle blower protection project. By demonstrating the need for action, the opportunities for working, a general process, and rationally expected outcomes – limitations also being taken into account – the objective was to demonstrate the feasibility of the overall idea that Chinese NGOs could function as an international conduit.

Future studies could focus on first-hand data gathering and on-site interviews with Chinese NGOs, which would contribute to overall research in this field.

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