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# China's Emerging Civil Society:

## The Autonomy of NGOs in China

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## Abstract

In 1978 China initiated its policy of 'reform and opening', and began the transition from a planned to a market economy. Since then, the government has recognized the need for a private and voluntary sector to help deal with the social consequences of the market reforms. The government has consequently been transferring some of its functions to an increasing number of so called nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Some observers see this trend as evidence of an emerging civil society, and look at this development as in the end leading to democracy. Others are more pessimistic.

This thesis examines this development and aims to explore the degree of autonomy that this new group of Chinese NGOs enjoys in relation to the state. The result is somewhat inconclusive. The Chinese society is becoming increasingly pluralistic and new arenas for participation are opened up as the state withdraws. At the same time, the government is still exercising a firm control on society and NGOs. Still, evidence suggests that there actually exists a larger space for autonomy than what might appear at a first glance.

Key words: *China, civil society, NGOs, autonomy, state-society relations, GONGOs*

Characters (with blanks): 70401

## List of Abbreviations

GONGOs – Government Organized NGOs

GRSOs – Grassroots Support Organizations

MCA – Ministry of Civil Affairs

NGNCEs – Nongovernmental Non-commercial Enterprises

NGOs – Nongovernmental Organizations

NPOs – Nonprofit Organizations

SOs – Social Organizations

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

China's policy of 'reform and opening', a unique model for development during the post-Mao era, has meant an economic liberalization without hardly any political democratization. This model has been referred to as perestroika without glasnost. It involves thorough economical reforms, such as the making of special economic zones, the semi-privatization of the agriculture, the allowing of private enterprise and the selling out of state-owned small- and medium-sized enterprises, deregulation of prices, the introduction of a stock market, etc. The economic achievements speak for themselves, but on the political side few progresses have been made. As economic freedom poses new challenges for the regime the government is taking measures to maintain its control. Some hail the capitalistic revolution and mean that the reforms, however, will eventually lead to political democratization. Others hold a more pessimistic view and claims that no real democratizations have been made and are not likely to occur in the near future either. Basically, as Peter Hays Gries and Stanley Rosen say, "optimists would examine a Starbucks in Shanghai, find two intellectuals having a conversation, and proclaim, 'Eureka! They're following our road to democracy!' Pessimists, by contrast, would lament: 'They're discussing the best way to make money in China's new economy – not politics. China will never democratize!'" (Gries & Rosen, 2004, p. 4). Officially the government is pursuing a socialistic politic with Chinese characteristics.

Another related issue is China's emerging civil society and its key role in the development towards pluralism and democracy, and at the bottom of this lie the changing relations between state and society. As the market economy expands and the reach of the state shrinks, new arenas for participation are opened up, and many services that were earlier provided by the state today rely completely on private entrepreneurs. New needs also create a variety of new types of services, and this has partly given rise to a new phenomenon in China: the emergence of NGOs.

Whatever view one holds on these issues, Chinese society has without doubt gone through, and is going through, enormous changes. These changes are worth examining.

## 1.2 Purpose and Question

I will in this work discuss civil society in China, and I will be focusing on the relation between state and society. My main purpose is to examine the emergence

of NGOs in China, and decide how autonomous these organizations really are and how they are working to become more so. My question for this thesis thus is: *How autonomous are NGOs in China in relation to the state, and are they autonomous enough to carry out functions normally attributed civil society?*

## 1.3 Theory and Operationalization

### 1.3.1 Operationalization of civil society

The concept of civil society is one of the most debated in the field of political science. The views differ on matters such as what to include in civil society and what to exclude, what are the preconditions for it and what are the effects. It is often described as a residual sector, where everything that is non-state and non-market is grouped together. We will, however, need to make some kind of definition in order to use the concept in an analysis.

When we speak about democracy movements we generally define them as part of civil society. But these democracy movements can often appear as if from nowhere and are hard to detect before the defining moment. Hence, I would say, there is a social capital that is activated and formed into civil society. But social capital, defined as a feature of social relations (Chandhoke 2004, p. 157) is very hard to measure, and this makes the definition of civil society much more complicated, as a social capital may very well exist without it being recognized as part of civil society. Most observers when defining civil society implicitly refer to the actions as being, or not being, part of civil society, rather than groups. My opinion is that a person who is not satisfied with his or her situation and therefore joins in protestings against the present regime, thus participating in a "democracy movement", is not necessarily a part of civil society. It is crucial to make this distinction between actions and groups (that may however represent a specific type of action). This is not because I perceive the value in importance and implications of these spontaneous actions to be necessarily less than that of organized groups, but simply because they are not easily defined, and are blunt tools in an analysis. Therefore I shall limit my scope for analysis in this study to organized groups and associations, widely defined as nongovernmental organizations, or NGOs. Another reason for my choice to focus on NGOs, is that these organizations are undoubtedly the most powerful tools through which the Chinese people today may participate in public affairs and make their voices heard.

If there is one thing that most political scientists agree on, it's that some kind of civil society is needed for any real democratizations to be made (even though they may argue that a depolitization and a demobilization of society must be made after the transition), and that NGOs are playing a key role in this civil society. It is a basic hypothesis that the emergence of autonomous NGOs, associations and institutions will stimulate popular demands for autonomy, and in the long run lead to democracy. "That is what happened in Europe" (Wank 1995, p. 56).

We also have to make a further distinction between the many different types of NGOs that exist. This is of particular importance when discussing authoritarian regimes such as China. Neera Chandhoke comments that whatever definition we chose, civil society is "definitely de-linked from the state and in some cases from the market" (Chandhoke 2004, p. 149). Using a society-centered western concept of civil society like the one referred to by Chandhoke, or the one offered by Gordon White (White 2004, p. 10), narrowly defining it as working against the state, will, however, be fruitless in any attempt to discuss the case of China. The interactions between state and society are simply too complex to be separated from each other, and are at the same time taking place within a framework that is provided by the state. NGOs may include a broad range of social institutions such as trade associations, foundations, environmental organizations, professional organizations, academic associations, women's right organizations, chambers of commerce, schools, homes for the elderly, hospitals, etc. The ideal may very well be for these to be operating outside the state and the market, but the number and importance of those that are not is in this case too great to be ignored.

On the other hand, applying a strict state-led model, describing any civil society activism as completely created and managed by the state, would be too simplistic. The Chinese society is too big and complex for the government to handle, and as Wu Fengshi argues there are "unintended consequences even when the state does create societal groups and set up NGOs" (generally labeled as government organized NGOs, or GONGOs) (Wu 2003, "The Good Society", p. 35).

Another common way to describe civil society is to make the distinction between economic, cultural and political civil society. Since I will make some use of this categorization I will make a brief outline of what this refers to. *Economic* civil society refers to "productive and commercial associations and networks". *Cultural* civil society covers "intellectual, religious, ethnic, communal, and other institutions that defend collective rights, values, faiths, beliefs, and symbols". *Political* civil society refers to "free and autonomous opposition groups or associations seeking in a non-partisan fashion to improve the political system through human rights monitoring, voter education, and mobilization, anti-corruption efforts, and so on" (He 1997, p. 7). Nongovernmental organizations, the core of civil society, are found in all three of these areas, and it is important to make a distinction because the dissemination might not be even and autonomy mostly concentrated in some areas.

I will thus not limit myself to a specific model or concept of civil society in deciding which types of NGOs to include or to exclude. I will rather make a categorization of the different types of NGOs that exist, and seek to understand the nature of these as well as their relation to the state. The two main types of NGOs that I will use are: *registered NGOs* and *government organized NGOs* (GONGOs). I will also use the term *unregistered NGOs*, since this is a significant group, both in size and importance.

### 1.3.2 A Definition of NGOs and Their Role in Civil Society

There are many different definitions of an NGO, some of them are rather wide concepts, while other are more narrow and exclude all organizations which are not completely autonomous and self-governing. Professor Lester Salamon, a leading scholar on NGOs, of Johns Hopkins University, identifies five common characteristics of NGOs: they are (1) organized – they have an institutional presence and structure; (2) private – they are institutionally separate from the state; (3) non-profit distributing – they do not return profits to their managers or ‘owners’; (4) self-governing – they are fundamentally in control of their own affairs; and (5) voluntary – membership in them is not legally required and they attract voluntary contributions of time or money (Zhang 2003, p. 3). Most Chinese NGOs will certainly not live up to these norms, nor will all NGOs in Western countries, but this categorization gives us good standards against which to measure Chinese NGOs. As I said, I won’t ‘decide’ on a definition for which NGOs to study, but rather try and see where autonomy is found and what the chances for NGOs that measure up to Salamon’s criteria to emerge are.

In the literature on civil society non-governmental organizations are attributed a number of functions that are supposed to be beneficial to the society at large. For example, Neera Chandhoke states that when we define civil society as NGOs, we are conceptualizing them as ”providers of services and upholders of democracy” (Chandhoke 2004, p. 149). I will thus distinguish between two main functions that NGOs are supposed to carry out in civil society. The first one is to *benefit the public* and the second to *monitor the state*.

### 1.3.3 Operationalization of Autonomy

Autonomy is by many scholars seen as the most important characteristic of an NGO. As already stated, NGOs constitute an essential part of civil society, and in order to carry out civil society functions, NGOs have to have a certain amount of autonomy. How can we then decide the degree of autonomy enjoyed by NGOs in China? There is really no yes-or-no question for us to ask. As White, Howell and Shang put it, ”the extent to which a specific social organization embodies the defining qualities of ‘civil society’ – autonomy, separation and voluntariness – is a question of degree, rather than either/or” (White et al. 1996, p. 6).

Since there is no scale for us to use, I will rather have to make some sort of check list and see to what degree organizations in China compare to the criteria set up in this. Julie Fisher, a scholar on NGOs in the third world, makes a list of seven keys to organizational autonomy. She states that there is a contradiction between the demand for autonomy on the one side and the call for accountability on the other, and that it might appear that “the more successful NGOs are in achieving multiple accountability, the less autonomous they become”. She means that accountability is preferred downwards, while the meaning of autonomy should be confined to what might be called upward relationships (and not e.g. autonomy from the constituents) (Fisher 1998, p. 78). The seven keys to organizational autonomy that she identifies are:



1. *Organizational commitment* (With organizational commitment Fisher means that NGOs need a clear, self-conscious commitment to autonomy).
2. *Financial diversification* (NGOs need to receive their funding from many different sources, especially in Third World countries where philanthropic traditions are weak).
3. *A mass base* (NGOs need to have strong grassroots ties, which, in combination with financial diversification, will secure the survival of an NGO during repressive and unfavorable times).
4. *Technical expertise* (number 4, 5 and 6 are three related kinds of knowledge that will enhance the autonomy of grassroots support organizations (GRSOs)).
5. *Social and managerial knowledge*.
6. *Strategic knowledge*.
7. *Staff experience in training government workers* (NGO-government partnership in project implementation may lead to either increased autonomy or increased dependency, and autonomy is most likely to be strengthened when NGOs train government personnel).

I will use Fisher's criteria in my work here, but I will be focusing more on some of the listed keys to autonomy and less on others. Especially useful will be 'financial diversification' and 'organizational commitment'. I will also make some use of 'a mass base' and 'staff experience', while it will be more difficult for me to say something about 'technical expertise', 'social and managerial knowledge', and 'strategic knowledge' (which I also consider to be of lesser importance than the others for deciding the degree of autonomy). I will however also consider the *legal framework* as a key to organizational autonomy, including registration procedures, legal status, and rules and regulations for NGOs.

It would be feasible to think that organizations with a weak relation to the government are more autonomous than those that are closely linked to it. Fisher does not make such a final statement, but instead argues that autonomy can actually be gained in working with the government. She bases her work mainly on countries in the third world that are democratic, or at least not as authoritarian as China. So, dealing with China, I would still make the hypothesis that autonomy increases as the relation with the government weakens. I also hypothesize that autonomy will be found the most in organizations working in the area we defined as economic civil society, and the least in so called political civil society.

## 1.4 Structure and Method

I will in this study take a look at the condition of civil society in China, through the analyzing of the emerging NGO sector and its autonomy from the state.

I'll begin with a quick overview of civil society in China as a field of study, and the different theories on Chinese society that have emerged as a result. This will help to put the later discussion of NGOs in a larger perspective and offers a frame of reference for the reader on how to understand civil society in China.

Then, I will go on to focus on the actual emergence of NGOs in China, the different types that can be discerned, their relation to the state, and the implications that this phenomenon has for the communist regime and the Chinese society at large (the implications might be only briefly mentioned and further elaborated on at the end of the paper). A part that discusses the problems that NGOs are facing will also be natural here.

A major part will be dedicated to analyzing the degree of autonomy that organizations enjoy vis-à-vis the state. Here, in the fourth part, I will be presenting a number of examples of Chinese NGOs, and also apply some of the theories described in the operationalisation.

Finally, I will present my conclusions and make a general outlook, and also give some suggestions for future research.

## 2. Civil Society in China as a Field of Study

Civil society in China is certainly a growing field of study, and has been so since the events of 1989: the Tiananmen incident and the fall of the Berlin Wall in East Europe. Much has been written in the field, and there are many different views on the subject.

It has often been suggested that the concept of civil society cannot be applied to the case of China, because the Chinese society is not autonomous from the state. Robert Weatherley states that in the Chinese discourse on human rights the emphasis has always been on the individual's responsibilities and not its rights. (Weatherley 1999, p. 10). This is of course a kind of thinking that does not easily fit into the Western concept of civil society. Hegel went so far as to argue that China is in fact a state without a society (Brook & Frolic 1997, p. 3).

Yet, China was considered to be at the forefront of the liberalization wave that swept through parts of the communist world in the 1980's, and the concept of civil society was also applied to the case of China. Many observers compared the situation in China with the one in Eastern Europe, and the expectations were high that the political liberalizations during this period would also lead up to a real democratization. In Europe, networks of autonomous organizations were created in a space parallel to the state. They did not confront the state directly, but "surrounded it with 'a wide spectrum of activities, from cultural and religious organizations and human rights groups to independent economic activities ranging from trade unions to private enterprises'" (Frolic 1997, p. 47). Similarities were particularly found in the case of Hungary where economic reforms and private business gave individuals independence from state control. (Wank 1995, p. 56; see also Tong 1997). In fact, it is a commonly held view among scholars on civil society that stable economic growth leads to the emergence of autonomous groups and organizations, and that civil society and the market are also mutually reinforcing (Baker 2004, p. 64). In Europe civil society emerged in the eighteenth century along with the industrial revolution. The market "produced a civil society in defense of property and mapped out an arena in which the bourgeoisie struggled for power, redefining relations between state and society" (Brook & Frolic 1997, p. 14). In "Civil Society in China", Timothy Brook and Michael Frolic, in line with this thinking, poses the question why the Chinese booming economy should not give rise to an autonomous civil society.

White, Howell and Shang speak of a 'dual dynamic' in the emergence of a civil society. The first is a 'political dynamic', which reflects the political tensions and conflicts in a society, and civil society is in this sense take the form of a society working against the state. The political dynamic has, according to White and his colleagues, been in place during the whole post-revolutionary era, since 1949, even though they don't go as far as to claim that there has been an existing civil society. The second dynamic of civil society is a 'market dynamic', and in this context civil society is a "consequence of a separation between state and society resulting from the rise of a market economy" (White et al. 1996, p. 7). White also

makes the comparison with Hungary and what Hungarian sociologists called a 'second society' (ibid). Since the initiation of the 1978 reforms, both of these dynamics have for the first time been in place. The development of civil society in the post-1978 era should therefore be thought of as "a complex interplay between these two sociopolitical dynamics", and it is shifting the balance between state and society in the latter's favor. This process will accordingly ultimately push for a transition towards political liberalization and in the end some form of "democratic polity" (ibid: p. 9f).

There have also emerged theories that point out the weaknesses of Chinese NGOs and ask if maybe this should be understood in the light of China's history and political culture. Lu Yiyi refers to various studies of China's political culture that have found several attributes that are not conducive to collective action and civil society activism, such as "elitism, fatalism, and lack of cooperative spirit and group solidarity" (Lu 2005, p. 6). Ma Qiusa points out that most NGO leaders "do not see their objective in confronting the government or protecting the society from the state. Rather, they see their mission as fulfilling their citizen responsibility in collaborating with the government" (Ma 2005, p. 3). This brings up questions regarding 'Asian values' and if maybe organizational culture in China is essentially different, and that the western concept of autonomous organizations might not be applicable to the case of China. Lu recommends that we be cautious when using Western concepts of nongovernmental organizations, but also not to completely discard them, because "the existence of cultural traits that are not conducive to civil society activism does not mean that such activism cannot develop in China" (ibid). It would certainly be interesting to go deeper into these questions, but that falls without the aim of this study.

Another debated issue is that of state-led civil society and state corporatism. Michael Frolic introduces in "Civil Society in China" the notion of a state-led civil society, which is created top-down, primarily to help the state govern, but also to "co-opt and socialize potentially politically active elements in the population" (Frolic 1997, p. 56). This civil society refers "to the hundreds of thousands of social organizations and quasi-administrative units created by the state to help it manage a complex and rapidly expanding economy and changing society" (ibid: p. 48). This description does not accord with most concepts of civil society, but Frolic wonders if this state corporatism actually might, in Asia, be "the preferred space between state and society, rather than the conventional western civil society" (ibid: p. 59). He concludes that what we see today in China are two emerging civil society, and it is the state-led civil society that predominates (ibid: p. 60).

## 3. The Emergence of NGOs

### 3.1 Types of NGOs

To make heads and tails of the NGO sector in China is certainly not easy and only ten years ago it would have been nearly impossible. Very often it's the relation to the state that is confusing and hard to determine. In some cases the relation is obvious, but more often it is not. The best way to establish whether an NGO is "genuine" or linked to the state is to look at its legal status. If the organization is registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) as a social organization or a nongovernmental and non-commercial enterprise, it is usually considered an NGO, and if it is registered with the Bureau of Industry and Commerce it is considered a commercial entity. Those not registered at all are technically considered illegal. (Zhang 2003, p. 3). Those that are called GONGOs (government-organized NGOs) are usually not required to register at all. It should however be noted that the name GONGO is itself very vague, and it includes often both organizations that are actually created by the government, as well as registered NGOs, which's relations are still too intimate with the state for observers to call them genuine NGOs.

Before 1998 there existed no clear regulations defining NGOs. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China there have at three different times been issued documents regarding the classification, registration and regulation of organizations outside of the government system: in 1950, 1989 and 1998. Before 1998, all types of institutions and associations were grouped in the single category 'social organizations'. Since there existed no private nonprofit organizations prior to 1978, these were all basically membership associations. In the 1998 "Regulations of Registrations of Social Organizations" a new group, *nongovernmental and non-commercial enterprises* (NGNCE), was created to provide legal status for, and to effectively manage, the rapidly growing group of private nonprofit service institutions. According to the new official classifications, NGOs include two main categories: social organizations (SOs, shehui tuanti) and nongovernmental and non-commercial enterprises (NGNCEs, minban fei qiye danwei) (see *figure 1*).

In "The regulations of registrations of social organizations", the government defines social organizations as "nonprofit organizations that are voluntarily founded by Chinese citizens for their common will and operated according to their charters". The NGNCEs are defined as "social entities engaging in nonprofit social service activities, and they are founded by for-profit or nonprofit enterprises, social organizations, other social forces or individual citizens using non state-owned property or funds". (Ma 2003, p. 4). If we return to the definition for NGOs offered at the onset of this study by Lester Salamon, (they are organized, private, non-profit-distributing, self-governing, and voluntary), the most striking difference between his 'Western' description and these two official

Chinese definitions, of course is the absence of the mentioning of ‘self-governance’ in the latter. This is the feature that says the most about the relation between state and society, and also the one we might expect to be most important for the degree of autonomy enjoyed by Chinese NGOs. It must be added that even though ‘self-governance’ does not appear in the Chinese official definition, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, since the 1990’s “has been pushing the ‘three selves of polity’: financially self-sufficient, self-governing, and self-recruiting” (Ma Congress homepage). There is of course a long way from talk to action, and as Ma Qiusha states, “how much autonomy Chinese NGOs enjoy is still the most controversial issue” (ibid).

### China’s Official Classification of NGOs

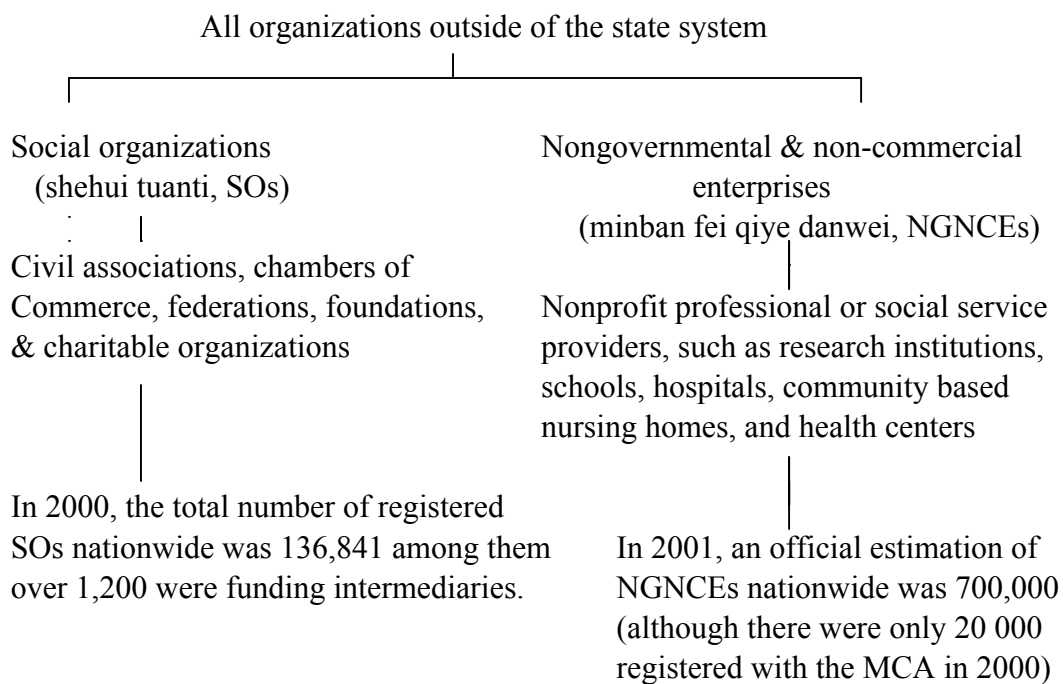


Figure 1. (<http://www.cecc.gov>)

In addition to the two categories SOs and NGNCEs, there are several other names for organizations in China, and it is not easy to make clear between them. As *figure 2* shows, there are at least six different names distinguishing organizations.

These names are however not used consistently and are sometimes used interchangeably, but there are still some political nuances to be aware of. First of all, the name social organizations here should not be equated with the SOs in the 1998 regulations. As mentioned, the term ‘social organizations’ was adopted for categorizing organizations outside of the state. Renmin tuanti (People’s Organizations) and Qunzhong zuzhi (mass organizations) are both old names that are however still in use. They are serving a political purpose and have through PRC’s history provided a bridge between the CCP and the people. Many of these

organizations existed before 1949, and were grassroots organizations fighting for their members' interests. Both types of organizations have close relations with the government, even though more and more are being encouraged to become self-sufficient. *Fei zhengfu zuzhi* and *fei yingli zuzhi* are used without consistence for both domestic and foreign NGOs, even though the former is being avoided as a term for domestic NGOs, since the word 'fei', in addition to 'non', also has the meaning of 'anti'.

### Chinese Terminology of NGOs

ENGLISH TERM	CHINESE TERM	EXAMPLES OF ORGANIZATIONS
Social Organizations	Shehui tuanti	A general term for member-serving associations and foundations
People's Organizations (19 at the national level)	Renmin tuanti	"The eight big organizations", such as: All-China Federation of Trade Unions, Chinese People's Friendship Association, All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese
Mass organizations	Qunzhong zuzhi	All-China Federation of Trade Unions, Chinese Communist Youth League, All-China Women's Federation
Folk organizations	Minjian zuzhi	All-China General Chamber of Industry and Commerce, China International Chambers of Commerce
Nongovernmental organization (NGOs)	Fei zhengfu zuzhi	Usually referred to as foreign NGOs, but some Chinese NGOs adopt this term
Nonprofit organization (NPOs)	Fei yingli zuzhi	New term for Chinese SOs and NGNCEs

Figure 2. (<http://www.cecc.gov>)

The two main categories for NGOs that I will use are registered NGOs (SOs and NGNCEs registered with MCA) and government organized NGOs (GONGOs). I will also use the term 'unregistered NGOs', since this represents a large and important group.

## 3.2 The Emergence of NGOs

The argument for not allowing the existence of non-governmental organizations and associations is basically that the state is the only, and sufficient, provider of social services. When a market economy is introduced and private business and interests are taking over, the ability of the regime to control the society however

limits. A service gap emerges when needs for new types of services are created, and several social services that the state used to provide are left to private entrepreneurs. In this situation the emergence of NGOs is vital for filling this gap. There are however many ways that NGOs can emerge. They can emerge at a state initiative, top-down, or as genuine grass-root organizations, bottom-up. The latter has been scarce in China for obvious reasons. In 1978 it was however decided that the Party and the government would be distinguished from each other, and the political reforms that were initiated "removed the Party's right to intervene in social entities" (Brook 1997, p. 37f). This created some space between Party organs and mass organizations (qunzhong tuanti), that had since 1949 been closely linked with each other. Furthermore, the Chinese government has since the beginning of the 1990's been advocating the policy of 'small government, big society'. This emphasized the expansion of the nongovernmental sector and for the government to "mobilize resources from within the society in order to tackle the negative consequences of the transition from a planned to a market economy" (Ma 2005, p. 6). The government has since then been transferring some of its functions to nongovernmental organizations.

Since the reforms were initiated in 1978, a large number of NGOs have emerged, and as mentioned there are various different types. According to official statistics, China had 142,121 registered non-governmental organizations (local-level social organizations) by the end of 2003, which is an increase by 6.8 % from the year before (Lu 2005, p. 2; [www.china.org.cn](http://www.china.org.cn)). In 1978 only 6000 existed. The number of national social organizations, rose from 100 in 1978 to 1,736 in 2003. Another way to classify is to make the distinction between SOs and NGNCEs. China did in 2001 accordingly have 129 000 organizations registered as SOs and about 82 000 as NGNCEs (Ma 2005, p. 13). By this we can conclude that the majority of registered NGOs are local-level SOs. As a comparison there were officially 1500 GONGOs by the end of 1998. What this number actually refers to is however not clear, and it is probable that it does not include any of the organizations registered with the MCA. The actual number may thus be much higher if we count all organizations that are strongly related to the state. The number of unregistered NGOs was, by NPO Network, estimated to 2000 000. ([www.usembassy-china.org.cn](http://www.usembassy-china.org.cn))

By any standards, the number of NGOs has grown dramatically (both the national and the local social organizations). Some emerge as 'genuine' NGOs, and others are more or less government organized NGOs.

### 3.3 Problems Facing Chinese NGOs

The major concern for the government is to prevent the emergence of autonomous NGOs that might challenge the authority of the CCP. As a result, the government's attitude towards the NGO sector is somewhat inconsistent. On the one hand they are working to promote the emergence of NGOs, and on the other hand they are adopting measures to control them.



There are today a number of factors that are hindering the development of NGOs, and, for those that exist, from effectively performing public-benefit functions. To begin with, the Tiananmen incident of 1989 made the Chinese regime regulate to control the operation and activities of NGOs. Most important is the procedure of registration, which requires all NGOs to have a government line agency as their sponsoring agency for two years, before being legally registered at the MCA. The sponsoring agency is responsible for "supervising the NGOs day-to-day activities and for annually reviewing the work of its affiliated NGOs" (Zhang 2003, s. 11). This is of course posing an enormous obstacle in the way of NGOs trying to work in more politically sensitive areas. The difficulty of finding an official sponsor, in China popularly referred to as the 'mother in law', drives many NGOs to register as businesses with the Bureau of Industry and Commerce in order to have a legal identity. ([www.chinadevelopmentbrief.com](http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.com)). If there is, as I hypothesized, a larger space for autonomy in the profit oriented field, one might also assume that there is a large amount of organizations that are able to carry out NGO functions while being registered as businesses.

Another impediment for setting up an NGO in China is a law stating that an NGO applying to register as a national organization must have start-up funds of at least 100 000 RMB (12 000 US\$ in 2005), while regional organizations must have funds of at least 30 000 RMB (3600 US\$ in 2005). Most problematic is the fact that they are not allowed to raise any funds until their application is accepted.

The emergence of the Falun Gong Movement also made the regime adopt further measures to control the development of NGOs. For example, it was stipulated that "no NGO set up by 'specific social groups', such as migrant laborers, laid off workers, or ex-servicemen, should be allowed to exist" (Lu 2005, p. 2). The measures also include the preventing of NGOs from growing to big by prohibiting them from establishing regional branches (*ibid.*). Limiting the diversity of the NGO sector is also the fact that "only one NGO of one type is allowed to register at each administrative level (Ma 2005, p. 9). All these regulations are of course posing enormous constraints on the NGOs, and also tie them to the government. It is a fact that many Chinese foundations, trade associations, and professional associations that are registered as NGOs are in fact organized by the government (GONGOs) or closely tied to it. Ma Qiusha interviewed a high official in MCA in 1996, who admitted that "less than 50% of Social Organizations were self-organized, self-supported, and self-governed" (Ma 2002, p. 306). Others are even less optimistic. Julie Fisher, with her emphasis on organizational autonomy, says that China may only have a handful of genuine NGOs (Fisher 1998, p. 48).

Another problem with the organizations registered with MCA, is that the majority of them are academic ones, making up slightly more than a third. Another third are industry associations, and the remaining one-third are "the likes of public welfare and friendship organizations" ([www.icnl.org](http://www.icnl.org)). A survey that was conducted in 2000, by the NGO Research Center of Qinghua University in Beijing, shows that the proportion of NGOs in the field of charity and aid to vulnerable groups is too small. There are only 1.45 NGOs for every 10,000 Chinese, "which is a lot less than in developed countries, or in some developing

countries such as India and Brazil” (www.china.org.cn). There is also a problem with funding and attracting competent personnel, which these types of organizations are particularly exposed to.

The funding problem is a growing problem for many NGOs, especially for those that were earlier sponsored by the government. The government put in 2002 a three-year deadline for trade associations to become self-sufficient (Ma 2002, p. 315). Further adding to the difficulties with funding is the fact that there is no aid and donation culture in Chinese society today and that the tax and donation laws provide little incentive for contributions to NGOs. The public image of NGOs, as well as the confidence of donors, has also been hurt by corruption and a series of scandals in the NGO community. So, poor accountability might be an important factor damaging the NGOs channels for funding. A Chinese survey actually found out that “a large percentage of urban citizens would want to donate funds to address various kinds of societal needs, but their major concern is the lack of proper channels and the absence of accountability of those who handle the donations” (Ye 2003, p. 20). As will be further elaborated on later on, the problem with funding is double-egged, and could be viewed both as favoring and working against the gaining of autonomy for NGOs.

Since there are a great number of foreign NGOs working in China (including the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Amity Foundation, and Save the Children), one might perhaps ask if there is the risk that the international donor community is creating an artificial civil society, and that the only real bottom-up NGOs are foreign. Patrice McMahon argues that international actors “failed to foster a domestic advocacy network” in East Central Europe, and that they may actually have “hindered the success of the very goals they pursued” (McMahon 2004, p. 250f). In China, however, the number of domestic organizations is much greater, even at the grass-root level, and it seems unlikely that the third sector would be purely artificial.

Then there is of course the question of uneven development of civil society. The growth of NGOs is mainly taking place in the urban areas, and especially in the large cities along the eastern coast and the Yangzi River. In addition, it is the already empowered groups in society that have the best chances of making their voices heard. The problem of an ‘elite’ civil society is however not a specific Chinese one, but a global one.

A brief summary of the main problems facing Chinese NGOs today could look like this:

1. Registration: a) the demands for a sponsor agency and the two-year evaluation period; b) not all groups of people are allowed to start an NGO; c) citizens who want to found an NGO have to have some significant personal resources before hand.
2. Uneven development of NGOs: a) geographical – development is mainly taking place along the eastern coast and the Yangzi River; b) social – NGO development favors already empowered elites; c) diversity – e.g. there are too few NGOs involved in charity and aid (and naturally also in the political field).

3. Constraints on the development in size of NGOs.
4. Poor accountability
5. Funding: problems with funding when organizations get no state funding, as well as unclear or unfavorable tax and donation laws.

Two of these problems are directly affecting the space for autonomy for NGOs: the demands for a sponsor agency and problems with the funding. These problems will be discussed more in depth later on.

# 4 Analysis

## 4.1 Examples of Chinese NGOs

It is not very hard to determine whether or not an NGO is registered. It is however a much more difficult task to decide the degree of autonomy that Chinese NGOs enjoy. Here, I will be presenting a number of examples of Chinese NGOs, and onto these apply some of the theories outlined in the beginning of this work.

I will begin with a discussion of the government organized NGOs and see if they are completely tied to the government and if there may be a variety within this group. I will however mainly focus on the NGOs registered with MCA. In a third part I will discuss unregistered organizations, working in the political field, and present some examples of this.

### 4.1.1 Government Organized NGOs

The reason for including a discussion of government organized NGOs is to show how even here there is a gradual shift from state-dependency towards self-governance and autonomy, and that some organizations go all the way from being state-initiated and state-controlled to becoming 'genuine' NGOs.

Since the reforms started and the need for a private voluntary sector was recognized, the government and party departments have been setting up nongovernmental organizations, by some observers labeled GONGOs. There are three main reasons for the creation of GONGOs. *Firstly*, the participation of NGOs in development projects has "made it easier for the Chinese government to obtain funding and technical assistance from multilateral, bilateral or international sources" (Ma 2005, p. 11). *Secondly*, GONGOs have the role of relieving the social consequences of the transition to a market economy, and *thirdly*, they help to absorb the large group of former government employees who have lost their jobs due to the economic reforms (ibid). Although GONGOs were set up by the government there is evidence that they are becoming increasingly autonomous.

The *All-China Lawyers' Associations* (ACLA) is an association that has emerged as result of the market reforms and the opening up to the world, and has an important role to play in a new system based on the rule of law. It "operates a code of conduct, provides professional training for it's members, and attempts to delineate and protect their rights" (White et al. 1996, p. 107). It is a semi-official association, and could by no means be classified as an NGO. It receives state funding, has a quota staff from the government, and it is required for all lawyers to join the association. Still, the association has taken steps towards financial independence, e.g. by establishing it's own law firm in 1993, and it's members

were “gaining greater independence by setting up private or quasi-private partnership-based law firms outside government service” (ibid).

In the rapid growth of the security industry, the *Chinese Securities Industry Association* was founded in 1991, as a result of the pressure on the government from companies wanting to protect their interest securities. The organization was thus an outcome of both a push from below and support from above (ibid: p. 110). The tasks of the association include the monitoring of members’ behavior, regulation of qualifications, and the enforcement of a professional code of conduct. The associations sources of revenues are “diverse and diversifying”, and officials of that association expected it to achieve more independence and greater institutional importance in the future (ibid).

The *China Association of Science and Technology* (CAST) is an official social organization that is becoming more and more autonomous from the state. Just as with other official social organizations, the CAST is not required to register with the MCA, and does therefore not have a supervisory agency. On the contrary, other associations wish to attach themselves to it to gain prestige and support. CAST actually describes itself as a non-profit nongovernmental organization (<http://english.cast.org.cn>), but it’s relation to the government is simply too close for any observers to agree with this. However, as the government is becoming more reluctant to provide funds, CAST has sought out new ways of generating money, including raising revenues from it’s real estate and even developing profit-making entities. As a consequence, officials of CAST have expressed a desire for their relationship with the government to become looser (White et al. 1996, p. 108). The organization sees as one of it’s main tasks to “provide policy advice and other services to the government” (<http://english.cast.org.cn>). If CAST in the future acquire a certain amount of autonomy from the government, it will result in a healthy dynamic where it is supporting and helping in training government personell. The organization will thus build up a, as Julie Fishers calls it, “staff experience in training government workers”, and accordingly also it’s organizational autonomy.

It might at first appear as if though the only autonomy gained by these organizations is a financial one as the government is cutting of funding. But, there is also a change taking place in these organizations’ images of themselves and of their role in society. As Nick Young, editor of *China Development Brief*, points out “many of these organizations are steadily acquiring a more independent identity, and developing a sense of themselves as belonging to a distinctive, non-government community” (<http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.com>). They are, with Fisher’s words, building up an organizational commitment to autonomy.

Young also states that there seems to be a significant government intent to rationalize the NGO sector. “Many SONGOs (state-owned NGOs - a term used by Young for GONGOs; writer’s note) themselves have made significant progress towards financial transparency (for example, through the publishing of audited accounts), improved governance (through the appointment of management boards and grants approval committees), and improved professional standards (through various efforts to train staff in NGO management)” (ibid). Young sees a clear tendency for these organizations to emphasize their non-profit and non-

government identity, and believes this to reflect a gradual evolution of some of these organizations into more independent social actors (ibid). A change in the organizational culture of the NGO sector will prove to be essential in the future development of autonomous and self-governing organizations.

Wu Fengshi discusses environmental GONGOs and describes how many of these organizations, that were originally set up by the government, are gaining greater organizational autonomy (Wu 2003, p. 41). His keys to organizational autonomy include legal status, financial and personnel resources, capacity building abilities, and access to international sources. He argues that the withdrawal of state funding is forcing GONGOs to seek support elsewhere, mostly abroad. In order to have a standing chance in this struggle over international donors, they have to expand their own level of capacity. With higher capacity levels “they can develop their own expertise, expand their activity scope, and gradually obtain more autonomy from the government” (ibid: p. 42). Wu points out the examples with the *Beijing Energy Efficiency Center* (BECon) and the *Chinese Renewable Energy Industry Association* (CREIA), and how they have become more independent in decision-making and project implementation. He states that “the evolution in their organizational ideologies, the scope of their activities, and the recognition they have obtained from both insiders and outsiders have gone far beyond what the state ever intended” (ibid: p. 40).

#### 4.1.2 Registered NGOs

Many of the organizations that do manage to register are founded by influential and relatively wealthy individuals, and do also have a strong governmental backing.

One such NGO is the *China Youth Development Foundation* (CYDF), which was founded in 1989 as a nonprofit social organization, by Xu Yongguang who along with several other officials resigned from the government-controlled CCYL. The CYDF is one of China’s more well-known NGOs and has the aim of improving the health and well-being of Chinese youth. In 1989 it initiated the *Hope Project* which has often been recognized as the most successful single nongovernmental project in China. The project encouraged millions of common people to get involved, and between 1989 and 1996 it received donations from China and abroad totaling about 100,000,000 US\$ (Ma 2002b, p. 126). A national survey of more than 30,000 young people in 20 provinces, found in 1996 that more than 73% had donated money to the Hope Project (ibid). This would negate the claim that there is no philanthropic culture in China, or at least suggest that there is a developing such culture. Not all observers are however as optimistic about the CYDF and it’s independence from the government. Michael Frolic points out that the CYDF is controlled by the All-China Youth Federation, one of China’s oldest “Communist Party front organizations” (Frolic 1997, p. 61). Although he recognizes the value and importance of the work of the organization, he considers the CYDF to be nothing more than a good example of state-led civil society. *China Charity Foundation* (CCF) on the other hand provides us, according to Frolic, with a more encouraging example. He points out that

“substantial numbers of citizens as well as influential foreigners, who are contributing funds, are actively involved in the CCF’s work (ibid). This allows for a greater degree of transparency and holds the NGO accountable to its constituents. In this process, one might expect the organization to gain some autonomy from the government.

There are also examples of how organizations that are registered with the Bureau of Industry and Commerce (which we earlier discarded as for-profit organizations) as enterprises have actually developed into NGOs and become more autonomous. *Global Village of Beijing*, an example of this kind of organization, is working hard to raise public awareness on environmental protection issues. “It has produced a series of environmental education TV programs, and has also (...) reached out to college students to organize volunteers for environmental protection projects.” (Zhang 2003, p. 14). It also emphasizes the importance of autonomy, and e.g. states that “funds are used to (...) help nurture civil society through increased autonomy and decision-making at the village level” (www.gvbchina.org). The organization also fulfils Fisher’s demand for financial diversification, and receives funding from many different public foundations, trusts, individuals and development organizations (see www.gvbchina.org).

In order to make their organizations more efficient than the governmental institutions, many NGOs have introduced market mechanisms into these nonprofit organizations. *Hetong Home for the Elderly* in Tianjin is an example of this. Hetong is, with its 500 beds, the largest private nonprofit nursing home in China. State-owned or private for-profit institutions constitute the majority in the highly competitive eldercare market, and in order to survive, Hetong has focused on increasing efficiency while reducing costs. At present, “the cost per bed in Hetong is only 28% to 33% of the cost in state institutions. Meanwhile, the quality of Hetong’s service is much better than the service in private institutions that care only about profit” (Ma 2002a, p. 321). The registration of profit-oriented organizations, such as private nursing homes and childcare institutions, has been made possible by loopholes in the government’s NGO management system (Lu 2005, p. 5). Many would immediately disqualify these types of organizations for being profit-oriented, but on the other hand they are still beneficial to society and are ultimately driven by a philanthropic ambition.

An example of a ‘hybrid organization’ is the *Rural Women Knowing All* (RWKA) that was founded in 1993. It is working to “empower and create more opportunities for rural Chinese women, particularly those who are poverty-stricken” (www.suscom-maine.net). This organization operates several programs to help rural women to become independent mentally and financially, such as providing small loans, literacy classes, counseling, and hotline services. It also publishes a magazine, the only one in China targeting this audience, that disseminates knowledge about women’s rights, market information and agricultural technology. (Zhang 2003, p. 14). RWKA is affiliated with the Women of China Newspaper, which is registered as a for-profit entity, while itself is best described as a grass-root organization. We thus see how organizations may be of

many different types, how they can move from one to another, and also how they gain autonomy by doing so.

### 4.1.3 Unregistered NGOs

As a result of the difficulties with registering, leaders of NGOs have found other ways of establishing their organization. Some use the tactic of registering as a for-profit organization with the Bureau of Industry and Commerce, while others choose to become secondary organizations affiliated with e.g. universities, institutions, and commercial enterprises. This is a loophole in the registration law which saves them the trouble of registering. There is however also a large group that choose to not register at all. As mentioned, this is by far the largest group of NGOs, and they often take the shape of ‘salons’ and ‘clubs’ (Ma 2005, p. 14). Since they are not registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, they are in principle illegal. The majority of these can however work without interference or restrictions from the government. Of course the extent to which an unregistered NGO is spared from repression ultimately is decided by the area in which it is working. Consequently, there are not many NGOs that work in politically sensitive areas such as human rights, religion and labor.

One of the most obvious political organizations to emerge in the 1990’s was the *China Democratic Party* (CDP). It was founded by the former imprisoned student leader Wang Youcai during the relative political loosening in the late 1990’s and in connection with Bill Clinton’s China visit in 1998. Wang and several dissident colleagues quickly built up a network that encompassed eight provinces. Their tactic relied on the emphasis on peaceful methods and the establishment of *preparatory* party branches. In China’s 1982 constitution the right to form political parties is guaranteed (Gries & Rosen 2004, p. 127), but there are no clear legal procedures for the establishment of this kind of organization. As a result, the CDP received mixed messages when the party branches all over the country tried to apply to register at the local authorities. The CDP was allowed to exist for six months before they employed a more aggressive tactic and omitted the word preparatory from their name, thus implying that they were already an established party, and the government started arresting the leaders. Still, the government “refrained from outright suppression as long as the group engaged in moderate activities that followed legal procedures” (ibid: p. 137). Overall, the experience of the CDP “illustrate that the CCP is far from monolithic, and that autonomous groups can, and do, successfully exploit openings created by decentralized rule and conflicting official interests” (ibid: p. 125).

Other well-known organizations that work in politically sensitive areas are e.g. *Human Rights in China* (HRIC), the *Tiananmen Mothers* and the *China Labor Bulletin* (CLB). The latter emerged during the same time as the CDP, but has chosen a more modest way in their work. They promote “independent, democratic union organizing, and the protection of labour rights and standards in mainland China” (<http://www.china-labour.org>). Robin Munro, research director of the CLB



said in an interview this year that they've recently started a new 'case intervention program', where the organization provides legal help for workers in China. In one recent case, where some workers were arrested and tried in Suizhou city, in Hubei province, the defendants were either freed or sentenced very lightly as a result of their lawyer's work. In another case nine workers from the Taiwanese Stella shoe factory were detained. Munro calls this a "milestone event in Chinese labor history", since their lawyers managed to effectively put the Stella company against the wall, on account of the company's "abusive employment practices" (<http://www.wmd.org>). Teresa Wright means that it is the "consistent promotion of legal and orderly worker actions" that have made the CLB remain active for so long without any harassment or repression (Wright 2004, p. 136). There is in fact some evidence that a seed to a working-class movement might be growing in China. About a month ago, 10 000 strikers at a Japanese-owned factory in Shenzhen, on the border of Hong Kong won the right to form a union. Workers do have a legal right to form a branch of the state union (All-China Federation of Trade Unions, ACFTU), but the law has not been upheld since the government doesn't want to scare of foreign investors. The factory, belonging to the Japanese Uniden, is a subcontractor to the American Wal-Mart, which has continuously pressured the ACFTU to allow the formation of unions on their factories (Wong, *Sydsvenskan*, 050426). There hasn't been any changes for the workers at the Uniden factory yet, but the victory itself proves that the process of globalization and pressure from the outside world is forcing the Chinese government to let go of some of it's control, and allow for actors and organizations outside of the state realm to gain in autonomy.

## 4.2 Analysis

### 4.2.1 The Autonomy of Chinese NGOs

Here follows a brief summary of the facts favoring respectively hindering the gaining of autonomy of NGOs:

Autonomy (+):

1. Funding: a) The government is gradually withdrawing it's funding of NGOs; b) increasing possibilities for 'financial diversity'
2. Strengthening of the rule of law
3. Increasing organizational commitment to autonomy and a change in the self-image of NGOs

Autonomy (-):

1. Registration: All NGOs are required to have a government line agency as their sponsoring agency, before being legally registered at the MCA.

2. Ambiguous government attitude towards NGOs and random crack-downs on politically oriented organizations.
3. Weak philanthropic tradition

When it comes to political and ideological matters, in the end Chinese organizations can't make their own decisions. In this sense, we might say that no NGO in China could be completely autonomous. Still we must, as Ma Qiusha points out, "recognize the significant gap between the rhetoric of the party-state's intention and what actually can be enforced by the government" (<http://www.cecc.gov>). The government have been continuously taking measures for controlling the emergence of nongovernmental organizations. The regulations for registration and the system with a sponsor agency have worked as effective mechanisms for controlling and limiting the emergence of unwanted organizations. At the same time there seems to exist a greater space for autonomy than is actually used. Agencies charged with monitoring NGO activity are seriously understaffed and simply do not have the possibilities of evaluating the organizations they were supervising. The staff at the MCA's Popular Organization Management Bureau (POMB), one Chinese researcher remarked, "did not even have the time to read the annual reports of all the NGOs under their supervision, let alone effectively monitor and review their activities. The situation at provincial and lower levels was similar or even worse" (Lu 2005, p. 3).

We'll continue by looking at the issue with financing. The lack of funding, both from the Chinese state and the Chinese society, is one of the main problem that NGOs in China face today. But it represents at the same time great possibilities. As a result of the state withdrawal from the NGO arena, 80% to 90% of Chinese NGO funding is today coming from international sources (Ma 2005, p. 19). One might ask if there is the risk that Chinese NGOs are simply going from one master to another, when they are becoming financially dependent of international donors instead of the Chinese government. Thereby no autonomy would be gained. It must however be said that this is a global problem and not a mere Chinese one. If an NGO is dependent of one single donor it is a problem, but when they are getting their funding from several different places is in fact ensuring more autonomy in their operation. Since 1992 NGOs are also allowed to set up their own enterprises, which allows for NGOs to "increase their financial base and secure greater operational autonomy" (White et al. 1996, p. 105). It is however true that the withdrawal of state funding does not immediately lead to full autonomy for an organization. Some organizations that find no new channels of revenues will simply vanish. Returning to Fishers second key to autonomy, that of financial diversification, we can see that there is a problem. Organizations are often depending only on a few sources for funding and might be improperly influenced by dominant donors. For example in the the international case with Kenya, where the Voluntary Agencies Development Assistance (VADA) was too closely tied to both the USAID and the Kenyan government. As a result, VADA "undercut it's own organizing ability by accepting USAID's goals rather than defining it's own" (Fisher 1998, p. 79). Furthermore, it should be noted that state funding is not per se a bad thing, only when it restricts and shapes the

organization. Leaders of Chinese organizations sometimes insist they are NGOs because they are free from government funding, and “do not realize that NGOs in many countries receive large amounts of government funds” (Ma 2002, p. 310). It is however my belief that the withdrawal of government funding represents a delinking from the state that is more beneficial for the development of autonomy and pluralism in China, than the possible new dependency of other single donors is bad.

There seems to be a change occurring in the organizational culture in China. As mentioned earlier, there are many observers pointing to the difference in the way NGOs in China and elsewhere view themselves and their role in society. Looking at the different cases I’ve described, it seems to be a general trend of an increasing organizational commitment to autonomy as NGO leaders today are emphasizing their independency and autonomy as service providers in society. This is an essential step on the road towards organizational autonomy. Returning to another of Fisher’s criteria, that of ‘staff experience in training government personell’, there are no evidence to suggest such a trend, but this will however be a natural developemnt when organizations are becoming more separated from the state.

China is gradually establishing a system based on the rule of law. This is strengthening the autonomy of NGOs, and is in the long run the key factor for NGOs to become fully autonomous. For this to happen the CCP must of course let go of some of it’s power and allow for the society to counter-monitor it. Still, it’s a fact that Chinese citizens for the first time in China’s history can sue government officials. And it’s not just pretty words, but the actual number of lawsuits against government officials has increased a lot, and “reliance on lawsuits and judicial processes has reached a level that surprises many observers” (Balzer 2004, p. 241). Minxin Pei finds that from 1988 to 1996, the number of lawsuits filed against violations of property and personal rights tripled, from 2,434 to 7,467 (Yang 2003, p. 11). He attributes this growing ‘right consciousness’ to several interrelated factors such as “a decline in repression, constraints on the leadership stemming from increased participation in international organizations and commitments to international norms, and legal reforms within China” (Balzer 2004, p. 241). Although the number of law cases that actually reach court might still be very small, this growing resort to the legal system must be seen as something inherently good and something that is vital for the fostering of a system based on the rule of law . As Zhang Ye points out, as society becomes more open, “a middle class with more education and stronger economic base is emerging, claiming citizens’ right and trying to assert itself in the policy-making process” (Zhang 2003, p. 10).

#### 4.2.2 What civil society functions can Chinese NGOs carry out?

In some areas NGOs in China can carry out civil society functions in the same degree as NGOs in democratic countries. Just because NGOs are carrying out functions that are also approved and wanted by the government, it does not mean that they are not beneficial to the Chinese society. In this sense Chinese NGOs

are capable of carrying out functions that are normally attributed to a civil society. Of course, another problem might be that they often do not have the organizational capacity and service provision effectiveness needed to perform well, but to evaluate the quality of the services provided by the NGOs goes outside of the purpose of this study. We can thus draw the conclusion that NGOs do not need the same amount of autonomy to carry out the first of the two civil society functions, being beneficial to the public, as they have to be in order to monitor the state.

Returning to Julie Fisher and her outline of an oppositional relationship between autonomy and accountability, the NGO situation in China could be characterized as the least wanted. There is a poor accountability downwards (and a rather strong upwards) and little autonomy upwards (much autonomy downwards). This means that the government has a good control on NGOs, while the constituents have little insight and influence over the same organizations. This situation is, as already mentioned, negatively affecting the public image of NGOs. In a country where philanthropic traditions are weak and the state is in retreat, an expanding NGO sector is heavily dependent on the benevolence of the public. A positive development would in this regard bring the organizations closer to its constituents, and thereby securing the financial viability as well as improving the organizational capacity of NGOs. However, While there, according to my research, is a change taking place regarding the self-image of NGOs, there are no evidence of an equivalent development occurring among the public (even though the Hope Project is encouraging). On the other hand it seems likely that such a development will occur in the near future, since NGOs are becoming increasingly dependent on the public. NGOs will in this process gain autonomy from the government, while the organizations themselves become accountable to the public. Such a development will in combination with a strengthening of the rule of law allow for NGOs to counter-monitor the state and its activities.

NGOs do today not have the ability to monitor the state, and can thus not carry out the, by many observers considered to be, most important civil society function.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper has been able to offer only a schematic overview of the development of NGOs and civil society in China. I still, however, claim that there is a clear tendency of a development towards a more pluralistic society, and that the Chinese society is becoming a fertile ground for NGOs that are becoming more and more autonomous in relation to the state. The Chinese society with its expanding market, private interests and entrepreneurs, is simply becoming too big for the regime to monitor and control. But this development is not without question marks. The fact that more and more NGOs (GONGOs and registered) are becoming financially independent from the government, I have argued, is a mainly positive development. Still, even though NGOs do not receive any funding from the government, they are still dependent on it for their ability to operate. In this sense, the existence of an organization is ultimately in the hands of the government, and thus no autonomy could exist. On the other hand the government does not have the capability to monitor the activities of all NGOs in China. They do however effectively still screen out all to the regime potentially dangerous organizations, normally those belonging to what we at the beginning branded as 'political civil society'.

When defining civil society, many scholars, such as White, Diamond, and Schmitter (He 1997, p. 14f), all emphasize political civil society and the democratic functions that it is supposed to have. A narrow concept of civil society like this has proven to be fruitless in any attempt to discuss the case of China. Organizations in China do today simply not have the autonomy or ability to monitor the state and its activities to a satisfiable extent. The state is much too in control for this to occur. There seems however to exist a larger space for autonomy than is actually used. Furthermore, even though the society-centered Western concept of civil society might not be applicable to the case of China today, does not mean that it will not be useful in the future. China does today not have a civil society, at least not in the Western political sense, but the infrastructure is being laid.

The results so far might seem contradictive; a state in retreat, but still very much in control. Harley Balzer refer to this as 'managed pluralism', a system where the government simultaneously encourage and place limits on cultural and political diversity (Balzer 2004, p. 238). There is a struggle going on between the state and the society, and it is, in my view, the latter that has got the upperhand.

Although I won't make any predictions about the future of democracy in China, it should be noted that the probability of Chinese civil society and NGOs alone to create a democratic transition is rather small. As Gideon Baker points out, referring to the case of East Europe, "the civil society project present before transition occurred could not, of itself, create a democratic society in the absence of 'official institutions' and 'legal rules of the game'" (Baker 2004, p. 45). The changes in China are however more gradual than those in East Europe, and NGOs might over a longer period of time improve China's regulatory framework, and move their operation into more politically sensitive areas.

In monitoring this development, further research would be most useful conducting case studies of Chinese NGOs, the degree of autonomy they enjoy, and their strategies for counter-monitoring the state.

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