The internationalization of Chinese development NGOs:

Policy-driven or resource-driven?

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Abstract

Paralleling China's increasing engagement in international development cooperation, Chinese development NGOs have expanded their projects abroad in recent years. Simultaneously, the government is encouraging NGOs to "go out" and foster "people-to-people connections" in countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This thesis explored the internationalization of Chinese NGOs to understand the underlying drivers of this process. The main preoccupation was to determine whether the NGOs' international engagement is driven by their access to resources, or a reaction to government policies, namely the BRI. Based on a comparative multiple-case study, qualitative semi-structured interviews with representatives from six Chinese development NGOs were conducted. Employing the theoretical perspectives of resource dependence theory and the resource-based view, the thesis concludes that the internationalization of these NGOs is resource-driven, rather than driven by BRI policy. The BRI does not generate revenue for the NGOs to implement projects overseas, but is used as a tool to enhance the organizations' legitimacy and broaden their chances for resource acquisition. Dependent on the domestic institutional environment, the internationalizing NGOs are relying on their unique organizational capabilities, sector-specific conditions and the social networks of their executive leadership to obtain sufficient resources for "going out" and achieving their mission.

Keywords: Non-governmental organizations, China, Social organizations, Internationalization, Resource Dependence, Resource-Based View, International development, Belt and Road Initiative

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Abbreviations

BRI – The Belt and Road Initiative

CDB – *China Development Brief*

CIDCA – China International Development Cooperation Agency

CSO – civil society organization

CSR – corporate social responsibility

ECA – ethnographic content analysis

ENGO – environmental non-governmental organization

GONGO – government-organized non-governmental organization

INGO – international non-governmental organization

NGO – non-governmental organization

RDT – resource dependence theory

RBV – resource-based view

SCIO – The State Council Information Office of China

SOE – state-owned enterprise

UN – The United Nations

WWF – The World Wide Fund for Nature

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1. INTRODUCTION

In 2017, President Xi Jinping announced the founding of a new Silk Road NGO Cooperation Network to facilitate cooperation between Belt and Road countries and enhance "people-to-people connectivity" (Xinhua 2017). This development demonstrated the growing importance placed on China's social organizations in expanding their projects overseas under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's leading transnational policy aimed at infrastructure development and the economic integration of participating countries. As a major economic and political power, China is increasingly making an impact on international relations and global governance, and has become a significant player in the global development realm. Published in 2021 by the State Council Information Office (SCIO), the landmark White Paper "China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era" set serving the interest of the BRI agenda as the goal of China's international development (2021, 4–5). Moreover, the establishment of the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) in 2018 incited the international community to anticipate a more institutionalized form of China's development cooperation under an agency akin to traditional national development agencies such as the UK Department for International Development or the US Agency for International Development – organizations known to cooperate with and support civil society organizations (CSOs) (Yin 2019). Instead, the creation of CIDCA has mainly helped professionalize China's pragmatic, commercial approach to development cooperation (Mardell 2018).

In the past decade, Chinese non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have undergone a process of internationalization through an increasing expansion of their humanitarian activities overseas. Although the passing of the Overseas NGO Law in 2016 narrowed the space for international cooperation between NGOs, a diverse array of Chinese NGOs have found new opportunities for carrying out their work in the Global South (Oud and Drinhausen 2021, 4). Most prominently, government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) – organizations closely affiliated with and historically established by the central government – are actively participating in global development, in addition to some more independent NGOs. Besides humanitarian assistance, Chinese NGOs are solidifying their footprint in Southeast Asia and East Africa through development aid, particularly in the fields of poverty alleviation, education and healthcare, and environmental protection (Hasmath 2016; Wang 2020a). As one of the key priorities of the BRI is "people-to-people connections", the government considers NGOs a potential instrument in facilitating this policy goal (Deng 2019; Wang 2020b). While NGOs presumably carry the potential to mitigate some negative environmental and social impacts of BRI projects, the

involvement of Chinese NGOs with ties to the government and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) has raised concerns over the credibility and impact of their international engagement (Hasmath 2016). However, increased acknowledgement of NGOs has thus far not translated into significant cooperation with CIDCA or support in the form of government grants (Zhang and Ji 2020), indicating that internationalizing Chinese NGOs are expected to mobilize resources from alternative sources.

Thus, the overarching objective of this thesis is to understand the extent to which the internationalization of Chinese NGOs is incentivised by government policies, particularly through the BRI. This question will be approached using a qualitative multiple-case study on six Chinese NGOs which are engaged in international development work. Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from the selected NGOs, mostly independent organizations without a government background. Through a thematic analysis of the interviews and triangulation relying on accompanying textual materials, the research concludes that the internationalization of Chinese NGOs is resource-driven, rather than driven by BRI policy. Employing an organizational studies perspective based on resource dependence theory (RDT) and the resource-based view (RBV), the analysis illuminated the internationalizing NGOs' strong dependency on resource capture. These NGOs are utilizing their unique organizational capacity, coupled with the state's supportive BRI-related discourse, to accomplish their individual missions. The process is facilitated by the BRI's decentralized nature and broad policy goals, which have created new spaces for micro-level actors.

1.1. Research question and aim

Situated in the fields of organizational studies and international development, this thesis is interested in exploring Chinese development NGOs' motivations and resource mobilization strategies for "going out", and the phenomenon's relationship to the BRI as a key government policy. The research has one principal research question:

> *"Is the internationalization of Chinese development NGOs driven by state policy or organizational resource dependency?"*

While answering this question is useful for advancing the knowledge on China's global development footprint, as well as the circumstances of the Chinese NGO sector, the findings can also contribute to research on the global trend of NGO internationalization.

In this thesis, the term 'internationalization' is synonymous to the prevalent terminology in the Chinese context – the practice of NGOs "going out" (*zou chuqu*) – referring to international engagement, in which the organizations are operating projects and even establishing branch offices abroad.

1.2. Research gap and academic contribution

Scholars (Sausmikat 2017; Zheng and Ran 2018; Deng 2019) have claimed that in accordance with the BRI, the Chinese government is actively encouraging NGOs to engage with international development. While Chinese internationalizing NGOs are increasingly committed and diverse in their overseas undertakings, the limited literature implies that this aspect of China's globalization remains under-researched. Research on the overseas activities of Chinese NGOs has thus far been based on case studies of specific NGOs, mostly GONGOs. Previous literature has focused on Chinese NGOs' internationalization until around 2017 (Brenner 2012; Hsu, Hildebrandt, and Hasmath 2016; Ji and Zhang 2016; Li and Dong 2018) and has not explicitly investigated their relationship to the BRI. As the 2015 Nepal earthquake was an important catalyst for Chinese NGOs' internationalization, it signifies critical changes in their overseas activities in recent years. In light of this, a new stage in the integration of Chinese NGOs into global civil society, together with their deepened participation in global governance can be predicted (Deng 2019, 681). This thesis therefore aims to fill the research gap and provide a contribution to the body of research on Chinese NGOs as international development actors.

1.3. Disposition

The thesis is organized into seven chapters. In the following chapter, an outline of the literature on NGOs in China in general and internationalization in particular is presented, to provide background and position this study in its field. The third chapter presents and discusses the theoretical framework of this thesis, composed of RDT and the RBV. In the fourth chapter, the methodological approach and research process of the thesis is explained. The fifth chapter forms a comprehensive presentation of the findings, followed by a discussion in the sixth chapter. The thesis is concluded in the seventh chapter, comprising reflections on the study and potential pathways for further research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

To provide background to the research, this chapter discusses the literature on NGOs in China and their internationalization. The chapter is organized as follows: first, an overview of the development of NGOs in China is provided, together with a conceptualization of NGOs in the Chinese context. Subsequently, a brief history of Chinese NGOs' internationalization is outlined, followed by previous academic literature on the subject, and the positioning of the thesis in this framework. Lastly, an overview of the BRI and China's development cooperation is given to substantiate this research.

2.1. Contextualizing Chinese NGOs

Modern Chinese civil society emerged in tight connection to both government and foreign actors. After the economic reforms in 1978, China received an influx of international development agencies and NGOs, whose contributions became critical to the emergence of indigenous NGOs (Li and Dong 2018, 1–2). The shift towards a market economy led to the state's withdrawal from various societal responsibilities, resulting in an increasing relevance of Chinese NGOs (Ma 2002). The number of registered Chinese social organizations increased from 320,000 in 2012 to over 900,000 in 2021 (Zhong 2021). Although this number excludes unregistered organizations, it nevertheless gives an informative account of the rapid expansion of China's social sector in the past decade.

While NGOs in China have become vital for the delivery of social services, institutional constraints remain (Hsu, Hildebrandt, and Hasmath 2016, 3). Recent legal revisions have downsized civil society and the role of foreign actors. The 2016 Overseas NGO Law stipulates that foreign NGOs must register a permanent office in China, requiring approval from a government-affiliated sponsor (Hasmath and Hsu 2021, 6) and new policies suggest increasing state control over social organizations by constraining the space for unregistered organizations (Snape 2021).

A conceptual confusion surrounds the meaning of civil society in the context of China. Although not always fully "autonomous", Chinese CSOs still form a distinctive third sector (Salmenkari 2017, 25). A widespread blanket term, 'social organization' (*shehui zuzhi*), is used in official policy terminology, referring to the whole spectrum of various non-governmental non-profit organizations (Simon and Snape 2017, 25–26). These organizations, having

developed in a domestic authoritarian institutional environment, differ from their "Western counterparts" as they did not develop to monitor and scrutinize state activities. In fact, many social organizations in China have a close relationship with the state. In this context, Chinese social organizations reflect the local institutional understandings of rights and norms, which might diverge from Western CSOs (Hasmath and Hsu 2021, 1–2).

At the international level, NGOs are understood as "organizations, whether formal or informal, private, self-governed, non-compulsory and totally or significantly limited from distributing any surplus they earn to investors, members, or others" (Salamon and Sokolowski 2014, 22), broadly corresponding to social organizations in China (Fulda and Hsu 2020, 55). This thesis uses the terms 'social organization' and 'NGO' interchangeably, as the latter constitutes a familiar and recognized term in the international context. Scholars (Bannister 2015; Hasmath, Hildebrandt, and Hsu 2019) suggest approaching Chinese CSOs on a case-by-case and functional basis, considering their aims and outputs. Thus, I employ an inclusive definition of 'NGOs', which incorporates GONGOs and social enterprises.

The unique context of Chinese CSOs initially gave rise to scholarly debates rooted in civil society and corporatism theories. While the former examined NGOs' degree of autonomy from the state and the potential of civil society to bring about political democratization (Nevitt 1996; Chamberlain 1998; Ma 2002), the latter argues that the rise of NGOs is part of the broader shift towards a neoliberal system in which the state's societal responsibilities are outsourced to NGOs (Hsu 2010, 264; Unger and Chan 1995; Hsu and Hasmath 2014). However, these approaches have been challenged due to their fixation on the issue of autonomy, and rootedness in Western political theory that assumes a division between state and society. Recent scholars have emphasized NGOs' organizational capacity and strategies (Hsu 2010; Hsu 2014), and the heterogeneity between seemingly similar CSOs (Hsu and Jiang 2015; Hasmath, Hildebrandt, and Hsu 2019). Hence, among new perspectives seeking to understand NGOs in China are studies focused on the institutional environment, organizational and resource-based approaches (Teets 2013; Zhang 2015; Wang and Yao 2016; Teets 2018; Lai and Spires 2020; Liu 2020; Pei and Parris 2020).

2.2. Historical overview of Chinese NGOs "going out"

China's "going out" (or "going global") strategy was formulated in the early 2000s with the aim to promote the international expansion of leading firms, as the government began offering support to overseas investments by SOEs and private enterprises in strategic sectors (Brenner 2012, 132). However, "going global" was initially solely aimed at enterprises, excluding the work of social organizations.

From a historical perspective, Chinese social organizations' engagement with international development began in the 1980s when a few GONGOs took part in international exchanges (Deng 2019, 681). An expansion of NGO participation in international development was brought about by involvement in humanitarian assistance during natural disasters, such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and the 2015 Nepalese earthquake, when Chinese NGOs carried out emergency relief and post-disaster reconstruction projects. Utilizing earlier experience of disaster relief expertise, Chinese NGOs were quick to respond in sending teams to Nepal (Li and Dong 2018, 3). For the development of the Chinese NGO sector's international profile, the rapid response to the Nepal earthquake represented a significant milestone. This parallels the domestic development of social organizations, which has been tightly connected to disaster relief (Gao and Xia 2015, 38).

Since around 2010, the beginning of a wider trend of NGOs "going global" can be observed. In the past decade, a number of Chinese NGOs have started operating projects overseas and have established permanent offices in host nations. This growth was pioneered by GONGOs, such as the China Youth Development Foundation, which initiated educational development programs in several African countries as early as 2011 (Bannister 2015, 6). Estimates indicate that currently, around one hundred NGOs actively implement international projects by sending staff and resources abroad (Hasmath 2016; Li and Dong 2018, 3). For Chinese NGOs "going out", Ethiopia, Myanmar and Nepal have been the countries with most project concentration (Wang 2020a). The NGOs primarily engage with social development-oriented activities in sectors such as education, healthcare, poverty alleviation and agricultural development (Hasmath and Hsu 2021, 7).

2.3.Academic literature on Chinese NGOs "going out"

As the participation of Chinese NGOs in overseas activities increasingly becomes recognized as part of China's globalization, its social and political implications require further analysis. In recent years, several Chinese academics have begun researching the topic of Chinese NGOs' internationalization. Deng (2013) concluded that the process was developing slowly and in a sporadic manner: Chinese NGOs tend to cooperate with overseas Chinese enterprises in corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects and incorporate expertise from domestic projects into their international projects. Additionally, Huang (2015) found that while the scale of Chinese NGOs' overseas participation was small, they still participate in international humanitarian aid and are developing partnerships with other organizations in host countries.

The English-language research on Chinese NGOs' internationalization is mostly based on case studies of specific NGOs (Brenner 2012; Ji and Zhang 2016; Li and Dong 2018) or of specific countries in connection to the behavior of Chinese NGOs in those regions (Hsu, Hildebrandt, and Hasmath 2016). Chinese literature on the subject has adopted similar methodologies, examining specific GONGOs, with a greater emphasis to the BRI (Zhao and Han 2016; Zheng and Ran 2018). Some studies have focused on Chinese NGOs' internationalization's implications to global governance (Zhang 2017; Hasmath and Hsu 2021).

Brenner (2012) analyzed Chinese NGOs involved in Sino-African relations, concluding that NGOs received significantly less support from the government, compared to enterprises under the "going out" policy. Hsu, Hildebrandt, and Hasmath (2016) studied the effect of host country regime on Chinese NGOs' overseas activity. They predicted that China's model of international development in which impermanent projects are preferred, will remain preeminent, and that GONGOs, as opposed to grassroots NGOs will dominate the field of development cooperation.

Recently, Li and Dong (2018) discovered that Chinese internationalized NGOs have achieved greatest impact in the provision of welfare services to developing country communities, but also in assisting Chinese companies to adapt to local contexts. Similarly, Hasmath and Hsu (2021) studied the impact of the internationalization of Chinese social organizations on the concept of global civil society. Examining several (mostly government-organized) organizations with operations in Africa, they anticipated that close ties with the state through the central government or SOEs will influence the internationalization process. Deng's (2019) research on Chinese foundations' overseas philanthropy attempted to quantitatively study

Chinese social organizations' overseas charitable activities. The study indicated that frequent exchanges between Chinese foundations and overseas NGOs, the amount of employees, as well as leadership's background are crucial factors influencing the scale of overseas engagement.

2.3.1. Challenges to internationalization

Previous research has identified various obstacles to Chinese NGOs' internationalization. Due to the absence of a coherent legal framework for overseas humanitarian activities, as well as China's stringent cross-border capital controls, Chinese development NGOs are working under a high level of uncertainty. Scholars agree that these NGOs lack experience and organizational capacity to achieve substantial impact beyond temporary relief projects overseas. Scarcity of stable sources of funding for overseas activities, a lack of qualified human capital and legal unclarity about financing operations abroad pose challenges for Chinese NGOs' deeper internationalization. In terms of funding, government support has been marginal and insufficient (Brenner 2012; Huang 2015; Li and Dong 2018, Deng 2019). Another major issue for fundraising is domestic public opinion, as the Chinese public tends to prioritize domestic development assistance and traditionally prefers to donate to international humanitarian relief over long-term development projects (Bannister 2015, 10; Li and Dong 2018, 6). Moreover, the revised Charity Law of 2016 did not offer provisions regarding fundraising for international projects (Ji and Zhang 2016, 13), leading to ambiguous legitimacy issues.

2.3.2. Focus on GONGOs

Studies on Chinese NGOs' internationalization have paid particular attention to GONGOs, since they form the majority and distinguished part of NGOs "going out". However, GONGOs and their degree of autonomy from the government is not the central issue of this research. Focusing solely on the question of autonomy, the possibility of other motivations and mechanisms' effect on the actions of NGOs is ignored. From the perspective of NGOs, autonomy might not be their central concern, particularly in the case of GONGOs, as for them, complete autonomy remains nearly impossible (Hsu 2016, 154). Irrefutably, GONGOs enjoy privileges in ease of registration and financial stability, and their importance in China's overseas development activities has increased under Xi's leadership (Hasmath, Hildebrandt, and Hsu 2019, 272–273). But "GONGO-ness" in the form of an organization's ties to the government should be understood across a spectrum which can change over time, instead of as a fixed absolute. Moreover, closeness to the government does not prevent GONGOs from contributing to civic engagement (Ibid, 279).

In sum, the research on Chinese NGOs "going out" concludes that the phenomenon is still in its infancy and Chinese NGOs are yet to make a significant impact in their host countries. Nevertheless, these studies also show how, despite various challenges, China's social organization sector is composed of various actors with diverse institutional set-ups, making numerous ways of overseas engagement possible. Finally, relevant research is limited by its excessive focus on internationalizing GONGOs and government-NGO relationships.

2.4. The BRI and China's international development cooperation

Rapid economic growth has transformed China from a recipient of international aid to a significant international donor. China's approach to development has been characterized as "commerce is development", as its aid model and narratives combine assistance with economic engagement (Ferchen 2020). Subsequently, the majority of China's overseas development assistance is channeled to countries in which China is involved with extracting natural resources and accessing low-cost labor – particularly in Southeast Asia and Africa. Assistance is mainly provided in the form of loans and government-financed or government-subsidized infrastructure projects (Hasmath and Hsu 2021, 7).

The recent White Paper on China's international development cooperation states that the BRI is a "major platform for international development cooperation", pledging to increase aid to developing countries within the BRI framework (SCIO 2021, 9). The establishment of CIDCA in 2018 was a significant breakthrough in the history of China's development cooperation, implicating a move towards better aid management. The primary goal of CIDCA, however, is to support the BRI through foreign aid (Zhang and Ji 2020).

Setting the construction of a trans-boundary economic belt at the forefront, the BRI was proposed in 2013 as a campaign-style mobilization to encourage Chinese enterprises' further expansion abroad, and has since become China's leading international initiative (Olinga-Shannon, Barbesgaard, and Vervest 2019, 5). BRI is often analyzed from the perspective of foreign policy, with an emphasis on its geopolitical and strategic motivations. Yet, scholars have emphasized that the BRI is not one coherent grand strategy, but combines various interests and objectives under its intentionally broad umbrella (Hale, Liu, and Urpelainen 2020, 14–15). Similarly to the earlier "going out" campaign, the BRI should be understood as a wide

framework of activities contributing to resolve the emergent crisis of China's capitalist development (Olinga-Shannon, Barbesgaard, and Vervest 2019, 3).

Essentially, the BRI is a policy slogan, subject to interpretation for various actors to achieve their individual goals. This indicates that virtually any activity can be branded as a BRI project. As most BRI projects are initiated and organized through a bottom-up process, in which commercial actors play the predominant role, the initiative should thus not be considered systematized, top-down and monolithic (Hale, Liu, and Urpelainen 2020, 18–19). Comprehension of the BRI therefore requires awareness of the various micro-level actors seeking to operationalize the initiative's broad objectives in pursuit of their own aims.

The BRI framework consists of priority areas, including "people-to-people connections", which aims to develop popular support for the initiative (Olinga-Shannon, Barbesgaard, and Vervest 2019, 6). Until recently, NGO participation in China's international development cooperation has been marginal. As China has taken a state-centric approach to the provision of development assistance based on intergovernmental relationships, the government rarely cooperates with social organizations to carry out projects (Zhang, Gu, and Chen 2015, 20). Correspondingly, while Chinese NGOs hoped that the creation of CIDCA would better define their role in China's development cooperation, in reality, CIDCA has paid minimal attention to NGO partnerships (Zhang and Ji 2020). However, the international community has expressed concerns over the financial, environmental, social, and political sustainability of government-funded commercial projects (Ferchen 2020). Simultaneously, the need to align the BRI with sustainable development targets is increasingly recognized in both China and BRI countries (Hale, Liu, and Urpelainen 2020, 12). Here, NGOs are considered to embody the potential for ameliorating these issues (Bannister 2015, 15).

Global research on international NGOs (INGOs) is increasingly considering their national dimension and home-country contexts. While operating in several countries, INGOs' headquarters are typically stationed in their originating country. This embeddedness in home country regulatory frameworks and donor systems contributes to the development of specific organizational strategies (Wilks, Richardson, and Bair 2021, 3). Accordingly, this research is focused on the domestic environment of Chinese NGOs, assuming that awareness of the domestic context will help to understand their behavior overseas.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter outlines the central theories and their operationalization in the thesis. First, important concepts and propositions constituting resource dependence theory are introduced. Then, in the second subsection, this theory is complemented by an alternative perspective, the resource-based view.

3.1. Resource Dependence Theory

Rooted in organizational studies and assuming a resource-based perspective, the resource dependence theory (RDT) focuses on the impact of interdependence and uncertainty on organizational behavior. Formalized by Pfeffer and Salancik (1978), RDT posits that the behavior of an organization must be understood in its context – the conditions in the environment determine the organization's survival (Pfeffer and Salancik 2003, 1). RDT shares similarities with both transaction cost economics and institutional theory, but differs in its emphasis – RDT places agency on the focal organization and concentrates on the power-dependence dynamic between organizations (Malatesta and Smith 2014, 15–16).

Heimovics, Herman, and Jurkiewicz Coughlin (1993) suggested that the resource dependence model is effective in explaining the operations of NGOs, which depend on obtaining resources from the outside. As an open system, an NGO needs continuous transactions with the environment to survive, as it is incapable of generating all of the required resources internally (Ibid, 425). Malatesta and Smith (2014) summarize the principles of RDT as: first, for an organization to survive and reach its goals, it needs resources. Second, these resources can be obtained from the external environment (from other organizations). Finally, power and dependence are key factors to understand interorganizational relationships, as the power balance is usually favored towards the ones providing the resources. Consequently, the organization in need of resources must adapt to the providers' conditions. Organizations should therefore be perceived as part of the environment which constrains them and has an impact on their degree of dependence. The latter is determined by the significance of the resources to the organization and the availability of alternative resources (Wang and Yao 2016, 32).

RDT's advantage for studying NGOs in China lies in its focus on the institutional environment (Wang and Yao 2016, 33). As any organization, a Chinese NGO is concerned with securing a supply of resources needed for survival and fulfilling its mission (Hsu 2010, 260). Wang and

Yao (2016, 31) stress that although several earlier studies (Lu 2009; Hsu 2010; Teets 2013; Hsu and Jiang 2015) about the government-NGO relationship in China draw from RDT to an extent, empirical research to test the theory has thus far been limited. Recent studies on Chinese NGOs' resource dependency (Hsu, Hsu, and Hasmath 2017; Fulda and Hsu 2020; Liu 2020; Pei and Parris 2020) have employed and expanded the theory.

The resources NGOs require from the environment are not limited to merely financial resources – they may involve material resources, information or social legitimacy (Pfeffer and Salancik 2003, 43). Support from various social actors (donors, partners, employees, beneficiaries, state agencies) can be a vital resource (Hsu 2010, 267). Fulda and Hsu (2020) make use of Bourdieu's four forms of capital (cultural, economic, symbolic and social) to explain NGOs' resource mobilization strategies. They outline four different resource pools from which NGOs in China gather resources: global civil society, the Party-state, the private sector, and local constituents and communities. Resource mobilization from these resource pools can bring about diverse opportunities and dependencies (Ibid, 57), and NGOs can become under the influence of those with control over these resources (Pfeffer and Salancik 2003, 44).

However, in the authoritarian context of China, the state is not only a potential resource pool, but also controls the other, non-state sources of capital. NGOs in China must navigate a politically hampered environment, in which the state has monopoly over various resources and acts as a gatekeeper over the other resource pools. For instance, state agencies oversee the allocation of NGOs' registration licenses as well as the right to fundraise from the public (Fulda and Hsu 2020, 62). The government can therefore be the provider of contracts, legitimacy, political and administrative support, and information (Wang and Yao 2016, 40).

3.1.1. *Operationalization of RDT*
The theoretical framework is derived from Wang and Yao's (2016) interpretation of RDT. They identify four groups of variables that have been used to examine NGOs' resource dependency – organizational characteristics, board of directors, attitude and value, and the external environment. For the feasibility of this thesis, it helps to limit these variables to a few. I will thus focus on the category of "organizational characteristics" and its linkages to the external environment, which provide a useful framework for contextualizing the findings. According to Wang and Yao (Ibid.), several organizational characteristics play a role in an NGO's ability to obtain resources from the environment: the organization's size and age,

revenue diversification, leadership, policy area, and legitimacy. The empirical findings indicated that the latter three are most important for my analysis and will therefore make up the theoretical framework.

Executive leadership

Various studies have utilized RDT's potential to explain the role of leadership in responding to resource dependency (Heimovics, Herman, and Jurkiewicz Coughlin 1993; Malatesta and Smith 2014; Hsu and Jiang 2015; Liu 2020). Organizational action is motivated by resource scarcity, and leaders are crucial actors for developing strategies to access resources (Malatesta and Smith 2014, 21). As organizations, NGOs are vulnerable to environmental change, and depend to a great extent on chief executives to find ways for mobilizing resources to achieve their mission. The founders possess the necessary social capital which allows for the continuous development of social and symbolic capital of the organization (Fulda and Hsu 2020, 61). The founder's previous employment in government agencies might correlate with increased access to resources: a number of Chinese NGOs were founded by former employees of the state bureaucracy, resulting in greater chances for collaboration with the government and acquisition of cultural or political capital (Wang and Yao 2016, 35). Contrarily, founders without similar experience might choose to avoid the state and rely more on their professional expertise and alternative channels for resource mobilization (Hsu and Jiang 2015).

Policy area

The sector or policy area of an NGO might explain variation in resource dependence, as government policy priorities and issue sensitivity have an impact on the level of support granted to NGOs (Wang and Yao 2016, 37). For instance, NGOs working in social development have been able to mobilize financial resources from foreign funders, the state, as well as the private sector (Fulda and Hsu 2020, 69). Liu (2020) discovered that environmental NGOs (ENGOs) in China enjoy more latitude, more favorable relationships with government, and higher levels of resources than NGOs in many other sectors. But issue sensitivity is still relevant as securing funding has been found to be more difficult for ENGOs that take a confrontational approach towards the state (Fulda and Hsu 2020, 69). Policy area therefore relates to the external political environment and implies that change of government policies have an impact on NGOs' access to resources.

Legitimacy

Legitimacy is important for understanding organizations' relationships to their social environments, since they are competing for resources that could potentially be allocated elsewhere, and the usefulness and appropriateness of their output is under constant scrutiny (Pfeffer and Salancik 2003, 24). Legitimacy is achieved when the organization's actions correspond with societal values, which then leads to endorsement by external constituents. An NGO is thus motivated to boost its legitimacy to parallel the prevailing norms and expectations of the institutional environment (Wang and Yao 2016, 37). Wang and Yao (2016, 38) suggest that in China, registering with the civil affairs department and the government's high resource dependence on NGOs are vital sources of legitimacy for NGOs. It is unlikely for unregistered NGOs to receive resources from the government. By contrast, governmental endorsement will enhance an NGO's legitimacy in the eyes of the public and might increase the organization's chances in accessing alternative resource pools, such as public and private fundraising. However, Wang and Yao's (Ibid.) analysis relates the acquisition of legitimacy exclusively to the government and its gatekeeper role. But an NGO might alternatively derive legitimacy by revealing state failure or opposing the state, by facilitating civic engagement and critically monitoring state and private activities (Diamond 1994; Hasmath and Hsu 2021, 5).

In view of the above, I hypothesize that (1) the NGOs whose founders have experience with government agencies are better equipped to obtain the resources needed for internationalization, and (2) the sector in which the NGO works in leads to variation in resource dependence and therefore differing strategies and outcomes for internationalization.

The 2016 Overseas NGO Law reduced the financial support for NGOs from foreign sources, causing them to turn to alternative resource pools, including online fundraising and the private sector (Fulda and Hsu 2020, 76). RDT is therefore useful for examining Chinese NGOs' behavior, as it does not overemphasize the government's role, but rather sees it as part of the environmental reality, along with other potential resource pools (Wang and Yao 2016). Yet, although the theory helps to explain NGO behavior and strategies based on different resource conditions, it fails to clarify an organization's effectiveness or specific outcomes rising from resource dependency. RDT does not consider the organization's effectiveness as a sum of its individual capabilities and productivity – NGOs are understood as entities dependent on resources from the outside with the specific goal of achieving a mission. Alternatively, the

resource-based view provides an account that appraises organizations' internal resources and capabilities to explain resource capture and the subsequent heterogeneity within organizations.

3.2.Resource-based View

Similarly to RDT, the resource-based view (RBV) derives from strategic management and organizational theories and has found extensive use in studying firm capabilities and competitive advantage. Coined by Jay Barney (1991), the resource-based view of the firm offers a perspective to explain the specific conditions for a firm to gain a sustained competitive advantage. Firms generate this competitive advantage from their own resources – tangible and intangible assets which are valuable, rare, hard to imitate, and non-substitutable. Barney (Ibid, 101) defines resources as "all assets, capabilities, organizational processes, firm attributes, information, knowledge, etc. controlled by a firm". Resources are valuable when they help improve the firm's efficiency and effectiveness, and this value depends on the context and the external environment (Priem and Butler 2001).

The RBV therefore focuses on the internal characteristics of the differences in resource attributes across organizations and understands these differences as sources of competitive advantage. The organization's capabilities determine its success in drawing resources from the environment, combining these resources into a unique and competitive product – or, in the case of NGOs – service. Armstrong and Shimizu (2007, 967) suggested that qualitative approaches like comparative research designs based on in-depth interviews among high- and low-performing organizations within the same field can prove fruitful in determining their unique resources, thus making RBV compatible with this thesis.

Since the neoliberal turn of the 1980s, NGOs have increasingly become entities expected to provide public goods and social services, filling a gap induced by state withdrawal and government budget cuts (Salamon 1999; Feldman, Strier, and Koreh 2017). As mentioned in the literature review, a similar development has been observed in China, as government services are outsourced to social organizations to meet the public's need for social services (Teets and Jagusztyn 2016). In the non-profit literature, the term 'organizational capacity' is used to denote an NGO's capabilities and resources, referring to the resources, knowledge and processes employed by the organization to increase effectiveness (Nanthagopan, Williams and Page 2016, 1609).

Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) suggest that an organization's effectiveness is perceived and imposed on it from the outside environment. An NGO's specific capabilities and effectiveness in providing a service or pursuing a mission beneficial to the state, therefore, can influence the divergence of perceived legitimacy and subsequent support for varying policy areas. This relates to RDT's understanding of legitimacy obtained via the government's dependence on NGOs, but the RBV focuses on the unique capabilities of an NGO to accomplish its objective. According to the RBV, organizations are concerned with identifying their specific capacity. In light of this, in addition to the posed hypotheses, the empirical analysis will explore how NGOs define and communicate their organizational capacity.

4. METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I explain the method for data collection and analysis. After a discussion on the philosophical standpoints, the research design and strategy are introduced. Then, the research process will be presented. Lastly, ethical considerations, researcher positionality and the limitations of this research will be discussed.

4.1. Ontology and epistemology

In social science, ontology refers to the philosophical assumptions the researcher has about the nature of reality. Ontological commitments impact our epistemological concerns – perspectives about how "reality" can be known and studied. Thus, ontology and epistemology must be considered as they influence the possibilities and limits of the research design and methods I have chosen to employ.

This research is set in a constructionist ontology which assumes that "reality" is constructed and influenced by social actors. This thesis studies organizations and their interrelatedness with other organizations in the environment. The constructionist perspective does not deny that organizations are part of a reality, but they are understood as being continuously created by individuals, instead of as external realities that constrain people (Bryman 2016, 29–30).

Constructionist research acknowledges the existence of multiple realities – the researcher's task is to report the different perspectives emerging from their findings (Creswell and Poth 2017, 18). Accordingly, the thesis is based on an interpretivist epistemological paradigm, as multiple levels of interpretation formed this study. Subjective evidence has been obtained from participants relying on their individual accounts. In collecting and analyzing data, I have interpreted the participants' interpretations, and the findings have been further interpreted in light of the academic literature (Bryman 2016, 28). Reality can therefore be known through subjective experiences.

4.2. Research design and strategy

This thesis aims to understand the underlying motivations and drivers for Chinese NGOs' internationalization and to answer the question of whether the process of internationalization is driven by state policies. Based on the philosophical assumptions and explorative nature of the research question, a qualitative research design was employed, using the method of semi-

structured interviewing and triangulation. The research is rooted in an inductive grounded theory approach, conforming to an iterative strategy of continuously moving between data collection and analysis (Charmaz 2006, 54).

Furthermore, this research is a comparative multiple-case study, in which the single NGOs form the units of analysis. A case study is "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context" (Yin 2003, 13). Since the internationalization of Chinese NGOs is quite recent, case study observation is appropriate for answering the research question. With multiple-case designs, several cases are chosen to develop a more detailed understanding of a phenomenon than would be possible with a single case (Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe 2010, 582). The chosen cases are exemplifying cases (Bryman 2016, 62), as they represent a broader category of which they are members (Chinese NGOs with international engagement). Multiple-case design was suitable for this thesis, as it allows to compare processes and outcomes between cases and identify how the individual cases are affected by their environment (Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe 2010, 582). These cases were therefore not studied extensively in-depth, but categorized and compared to understand how the organizations interpret their internationalization.

The literature review revealed the limited knowledge in the domain of Chinese NGOs' internationalization, due to the phenomenon's relative novelty. Since qualitative research is often employed to explore an issue and contribute to theory development to address knowledge gaps (Creswell and Poth 2017, 46), qualitative interviewing became the primary data collection method, deemed to provide the most direct access to information.

4.2.1. *Data collection method*
The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with representatives from NGOs. Qualitative interviews were chosen as they help explore the strategies and influencing factors for the NGOs' internationalization, to hear the participants' reasoning regarding the process of "going out", and provide detail about their experiences. Conducting semi-structured, open-ended interviews allows for flexibility and leeway in reaction to the participants' responses, yet still provides a coherent structure to the conversation (Bryman 2016, 466).

To validate and complement the interview findings, additional qualitative data were collected from media releases by Chinese NGO information platforms such as *China Development Brief*

(CDB), *The Silk Road NGO Cooperation Network* and other outlets*,* information disclosure by the NGOs on their official websites and annual reports, and secondary publications in the form of academic articles.

4.3. Data collection

Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from a diverse pool of Chinese development NGOs. The interview participants represented the organization in an official capacity and were engaged in various roles in the NGOs' international engagement. The interview process is explained in detail in Appendix B and interview guide provided in Appendix D.

Pseudonym	Date	Position at organization	Gender	Interview location
NGO1	03/02-2021	Program officer	F	Skype
NGO2	04/02-2021	Project coordinator	F	WeChat
NGO3	05/02-2021	Founder and CEO	F	Skype
NGO4	06/02-2021	International development director	M	VooV Meeting
NGO5	10/02-2021	Communications officer	F	Skype
NGO6	11/03-2021	Project manager	F	Skype

Table 1. Interviews with NGO representatives.

Video interviews became an alternative to fieldwork in China, allowing me to conduct a real-time interview with the participant in a conversational format, while being in different spatial locations and contexts (Maddox 2020, 6). I was thus able to access NGOs from various locations across China, which might not have been considered otherwise. Still, despite the benefits, the need of access to high-speed Internet can affect the outcome. Connectivity issues emerged during some interviews, thus disrupting the natural flow of the conversation. Moreover, in contrast to face-to-face interviews, online interactions create obstacles to observing the participant's body language and carry the risk of remaining distant and thus restrained (Janghorban, Roudsari, and Taghipour 2014).

4.3.1. Sampling

Sampling for the NGOs was purposive and non-random. The key criteria for sampling were that the NGO must originate from China and operate at least two projects abroad. First, two online databases geolocating Chinese NGOs' international humanitarian and development assistance projects by CDB and the Belt and Road Research Platform (Wang 2020b) were

screened to filter out NGOs that were operating more than one long-term project overseas. Due to the short-term and impermanent nature of humanitarian assistance, NGOs exclusively engaged in humanitarian aid were excluded.

Representatives from these NGOs were then contacted directly via email or LinkedIn. Ten NGOs were identified and contacted altogether, of which six agreed to participate in the research. The initial plan to contact more NGOs through snowball sampling proved unsuccessful, as it was discovered during the interviews that the participants were not in close contact with other similar organizations. I acknowledge the limitation and selection bias of this sampling technique, however, no viable alternative form of sampling was available, as no comprehensive list of NGOs (both operating domestically or overseas) is published in China. Moreover, even if such data were published, it would remain problematic as many NGOs refrain from registration (Hsu, Hsu, and Hasmath 2017, 1165).

4.4. Data analysis

Resting on principles of grounded theory, the research process began with open-ended research questions and an explorative approach to data collection and analysis (Charmaz 2006, 3). While the data analysis followed the phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2008, 87), in practice, this was an iterative rather than a linear process.

The initial thematic analysis began during the data collection and interviewing process, as some patterns and potential issues of interest were noticed in the data. After transcribing the interviews, I first familiarized myself with the comprehensive data to get a thorough overview of the transcriptions. The data were then transferred into the qualitative data analysis software NVivo for initial coding. Next, the codes were organized into broader themes and sub-themes by identifying common patterns, similarities and differences (Bryman 2016, 586). Following the case study design, cross-case comparisons started to emerge by identifying patterns and themes transcending the cases and analyzing across cases for variation (Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe 2010, 583). After revising and reorganizing the themes, they were named and interpreted in accordance with the theoretical framework (Braun and Clarke 2008, 86–87), defined by Charmaz (2006) as theoretical coding (see Appendix A for the coding chart).

After initial theoretical themes were identified, the complementing textual material was consulted to triangulate the findings. The data were subjected to a method of qualitative content analysis, ethnographic content analysis (ECA), a "reflexive analysis of documents" (Altheide and Schneider 2013, 23), in which the themes emerging from the analysis are constantly reflected on, compared and revised. Initially guided by preexisting categories, complementing categories are expected to emerge throughout the analysis. ECA therefore draws from grounded theory, while also considering the context within which the analyzed documents were created (Bryman 2016, 263–265). This approach was particularly suitable as the data consisted of Chinese media reports, the NGOs' annual reports and official websites. Based on the preexisting codes created from the thematic analysis of interview data, the complementing ECA informed the iterative modification and adjustment of themes.

4.5. Ethical considerations

As this study entails work with research participants, several ethical concerns need to be addressed. Firstly, researching NGOs in an authoritarian environment with a history of suppressing civil society relates to the ethical principle of minimizing harm for the participants. The participating organizations work in sectors considered less sensitive, and already had international connections due to the character of their work. Furthermore, this study does not investigate any particularly delicate subjects and the interview questions were designed with attention paid to avoiding politically sensitive topics (Glasius et al. 2018, 39–40) to minimize the possibility of placing participants at risk.

Ethicality was maintained by obtaining consent and ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants. Preceding and during the interviews, I provided full disclosure on all aspects of this research project. In conducting interviews via online channels, the security of the video call platform became another matter to consider. I therefore attempted to refrain from using platforms with known privacy concerns such as Zoom and WeChat, however, by request of the participant, one interview was held via WeChat, which is a commonly used social media platform in China. To ensure anonymity, the interviewees were given the option to decide on their preference. Although most participants agreed to publishing their name and organization details, I decided to anonymize everyone to maintain comparability of the data. Accordingly, any personal information associated with specific interviewees has been changed and pseudonyms created. Following the Swedish Research Council's (2017) ethical guidelines,

consent was obtained by using a consent form (see Appendix C). This form was sent out to the participants well in advance with the aim to provide written proof and ensure safety for the participants. Finally, before publishing the thesis, interviewees were offered the chance to review the draft for confirmation.

4.6. Positionality and reflexivity

A vital aspect of area studies is context sensitivity (Huotari 2014). As the author, my positioning as a researcher constructing knowledge is influenced by my identity as a white, European master's student from a post-Soviet, middle class background. Moreover, it is important to reflect on how my exposure to European notions of 'development' and the role of the third sector has influenced my understanding of these concepts. For instance, as demonstrated in the literature review, I acknowledge the risks of conflating different types of Chinese CSOs, as the term 'NGO' is not identical to the meaning it conveys in the European context (Salmenkari 2017). Further, reflexivity and positionality play a role in knowledge production, as knowledge can be partial and the representation of knowledge embodies power relations (Sultana 2007, 382). As an Estonian researching China, I have therefore reflected critically on the implications for production of knowledge throughout the research process.

Reflexivity and transparency are crucial in relation to unequal power relations and informed consent in conducting interviews, as "consensual research is possible when different identities are understood and accepted, not assuming that there is equality across all researcher and research participants involved" (Sultana 2007, 382). Most of the participants were women of a similar age and educational background as me, which somewhat alleviated the issue of power relations. I made an effort to create a relaxing atmosphere and build trust by being open to discuss my own previous professional experiences in the third sector and development field. The interviews were conducted in Chinese, establishing additional common ground between myself and the participants.

As the data were collected from NGOs' representatives and their published sources, it raises questions regarding the reliability and validity of information due to potential bias. The data frame a depiction of the NGOs that they have chosen to present to the public. Moreover, the research design makes it difficult to distinguish the participants' personal opinions from the official standpoint of the organization they represent, as the respondents' individual

experiences and beliefs influence their answers. However, for the aim of this thesis, representatives from NGOs were still considered the most valuable source of information. Potential bias in answers was mitigated through triangulation.

4.7. Limitations

The limitations to this research relate to the choice of method and small sample size. My sample cannot claim to represent the whole of Chinese INGOs, as the objective of qualitative research is not to make generalizations on the whole population, but to arrive at a detailed understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell and Poth 2017, 45). Further, qualitative research relies on the subjective judgement of the researcher (Bryman 2016, 398–399) who must therefore pay critical attention to their decisions and inferences. The research is further limited in its scope as it is solely based on the NGOs. While it would have provided a more comprehensive account, it was beyond the range of this short master's thesis to include the experiences and views of other stakeholders, such as funders, local partners or project beneficiaries.

Another limitation to the chosen research design is the question of language and risks involved in translations which can distort the meaning conveyed in the interviews. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and later translated to English to allow for better comparability in NVivo. The data consisted of both English and Chinese language sources. While my fluency in Chinese was sufficient to conduct interviews and analyze the materials, it is not comparable to the level of a native speaker, which might influence the reliability of the findings.

5. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I present and discuss the data obtained from interviews and the supporting materials. First, to give context and background on the NGOs in my sample, a brief outline of the organizations' characteristics is provided. This is followed by a presentation of the findings, based on the themes found in the data.

5.1. General characteristics of the NGOs

Six interviews were conducted with representatives from six different NGOs. The majority of the NGOs were grassroots, independent social organizations, and most of the participating organizations had official registration. NGO3 was recently established and therefore unregistered, while NGO6 had registered as a social enterprise, instead of a social organization. NGO5 is the only GONGO in my sample.

Based on the policy area, the organizations can broadly be divided into human-centered and environmental NGOs, in which NGO2 to NGO5 represent the former, working in sectors like poverty alleviation, education, women's empowerment, and NGO1 and NGO6 the latter, working with environmental protection. However, there is some overlap among all of these organizations, as NGO1 and NGO6 also implement human-centered projects in the areas of community development and capacity building.

Pseudonym	Organization type	Program area	Years active internationally	Regions active
NGO1	Registered NGO	Environmental protection	> 10	Southeast Asia, Africa, South America
NGO2	Registered NGO	Education	5–10	South Asia
NGO3	Unregistered	Gender equality	< 5	Western Europe, Southeast Asia
NGO4	Registered NGO	Poverty alleviation	< 5	Southeast Asia
NGO5	GONGO	Poverty alleviation	> 10	South- and Southeast Asia, Africa
NGO6	Social enterprise	Environmental protection	5–10	Southeast Asia, Africa, South America

Table 2. Record of participating NGOs.

NGO1 is an ENGO implementing projects in China and abroad. It began its internationalization more than ten years ago and is currently working in Southeast Asian countries such as Myanmar and Indonesia, and in Africa, in countries like Cameroon, Ghana, Uganda. It aims to

solve environmental problems through conservation, community development and livelihood projects, as well as research, business mechanisms and policy advocacy. NGO1 cooperates with governments and enterprises to provide policy suggestions and promote better environmental practices.

NGO2 works in children's development and education both in China and Nepal. Initially, NGO2 started its international engagement to provide humanitarian relief after the 2015 Nepal earthquake, and later settled to focus on post-disaster help. To better provide their services, NGO2 registered a local NGO in Nepal, which works in partnership with the office in China. NGO2 has launched numerous projects across Nepal, such as youth development training and summer camp projects, offering extracurricular classes for underprivileged children.

NGO3 is an unregistered, volunteer-based youth organization working through an online network without an office or salaried staff. The NGO has been active for less than two years and aims to realize the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals through youth participation in social responsibility and global citizenship. Its key project is focused on helping overseas Chinese women suffering domestic violence in Western European countries. An environmental protection project in Southeast Asia was discontinued due to a lack of resources.

NGO4 works in rural poverty alleviation and community development. Although NGO4 started its overseas program less than five years ago, the organization had an international background since its inception – NGO4 used to be the branch office of a global poverty alleviation organization that entered China in the 1980s. NGO4 later became an independent legal entity. It currently operates both in China and in Thailand, where it implements education and health-related projects. NGO4 has established a charity center in Thailand, expected to serve as a platform to connect Chinese and overseas NGOs.

NGO5 works in poverty alleviation both domestically and overseas, with the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development as its supervisory unit. Although NGO5 has a high degree of autonomy from the government, it is nevertheless a GONGO with strong government links. Its internationalization began over ten years ago. Within my sample, NGO5 has the biggest budget for international activities and operates the largest number of projects. It is active in South Asian countries like Nepal, Southeast Asian countries such as Myanmar and Cambodia, as well as in Africa, in countries like Ethiopia,

Ghana and Uganda, and has established offices in some of these countries. The content of the projects ranges from education to health and sanitation, and economic empowerment through vocational training.

NGO6 is a social enterprise operating educational projects focused on environmental and wildlife protection, community development and women's empowerment. NGO6 provides educational tours to countries in the Global South, combining the social and economic development of the local communities in host nations with Chinese youth's interest in international experiences. NGO6 has been working in development for over five years and is active in African countries such as Kenya, South Africa, Namibia, and in Southeast Asian countries like Myanmar and Indonesia. NGO6 operates two offices, in China and Kenya.

In the following paragraphs, key themes emerging from the interviews are presented and discussed. These themes were organized under three main topics which will be introduced and expanded on respectively: leadership, fundraising and legal challenges to the NGOs' internationalization, and the NGOs' role in the BRI. Lastly, to explore the NGOs' heterogeneity, the final subchapter analyzes their unique capabilities.

5.2. Leadership

The importance of executive leadership in taking the step to "go out" was brought up by several participants during the conversation. This finding corresponds with the research by Li and Dong (2018, 4) who suggested that the work of internationalizing Chinese NGOs is greatly dependent on the leadership's individual vision and personal interests.

5.2.1. Strategy and mission

When asked about the mission and strategy for internationalization, most of the participants emphasized the role of their leader in making the decision to internationalize. The response of the interviewee from NGO5 illustrates this point:

> *"Our leader is a visionary. More than ten years ago, basically no domestic NGOs were thinking about "going out" to assist other countries and carry out projects. At that time – and I guess it's still like this today – many NGOs were thinking that they would just work in China. They weren't saying that they need to go global. But because one of our leaders had come from the Ministry of Agriculture, they had a kind of a "global vision". So we gradually started doing international projects. In the case of large organizations like us, if the leadership lacks this*

understanding, you probably will not go and do this. The leadership's judgement and foresight is a big reason." (NGO5)

The representative from NGO1 also brought up the "visionary" role of their executive leadership in the relative success of the organization's internationalization. They felt it was the key idea of their executive director to make international development work a core component of their strategy "*from early on*", and this is what distinguished them from other ENGOs in China. Similar responses were given by representatives from NGO2 and NGO4. Furthermore, answers from the representative from NGO3 expose the leadership's personal interests in decision-making. The interviewee was the CEO and founder of the organization. When asked about future plans for expansion, they referred to their personal interest in Southeast Asian countries as a reason for entering the region.

Based on the above findings which confirm the founders and managers' valuable role in developing the strategy to "go out", the theme of leadership's personal experience and its impact on acquiring resources will be discussed.

5.2.2. Professional experience and resource mobilization

The theoretical literature suggested that another variable which might impact an NGO's behavior and ability to attract resources is the leader's previous institutional experience and employment history. This phenomenon was highlighted in the quote above by the interviewee from NGO5, as they mentioned the leader's previous work experience in a government position. Prior to founding their own NGO, the executive director and founder of NGO1 was also employed in a state research institute. Similarly, the founder and director of NGO4 had worked in the Ministry of Agriculture before dedicating their professional life to charity work. They then became employed in the Chinese branch of the international poverty alleviation NGO and later established their own NGO.

However, the remainder of the participating NGOs' founders did not come from a government background. For instance, before taking up development work, the founder of NGO2 was an entrepreneur without any prior experience in the charity sector. Furthermore, the founders of the youth-oriented NGOs, NGO3 and NGO6, have both had international experiences in Ivy League Universities. The founder of NGO3 is a top-performing student with an international profile. During the interview, they highlighted these experiences as the main reason and

motivation to pursue international development work. Moreover, the individual story of the founder of NGO6 has been used as a brand of its own – it is often highlighted on the organization's website and social media, and the founder's international experiences have been featured in both international and Chinese media.

Overall, the previous professional experiences of the NGOs' leadership were diverse. With regards to these findings, the question of the leadership's ability to mobilize resources to pursue the organization's mission is of interest. Following on, I examine the social capital of the leader, which can confer social capital upon their organization, therefore increasing the chances for obtaining resources.

Social capital refers to the trust and reciprocity embedded in relationships and the aggregate of such social networks (Fulda and Hsu 2020, 60–61). Social networks can, for instance, be formed through mutual work experience (Wang and Yao 2016, 35). This topic was touched upon by several interviewees. The participant from NGO4 considered the social networks of the leader a key resource for the organization's internationalization. NGO4 implements development projects in Thailand in cooperation with a local partner organization with whom they had established connections due to the international nature of their founding organization:

> *"When we started the cooperation, we already had some individual contacts from the past – our founder knew people from the [international organization's] Thailand office. Moreover, after leaving their position [in that organization], the Thailand country director started their own local foundation. Therefore, when we went to Thailand, we started cooperating with them. Due to the working relations and networks from the past, and the personal friendship between the two of them, we began our work in Thailand."* (NGO4)

The interviewee further emphasized the value of the local connections for establishing relations with the local government. Similarly, the founder of NGO3 emphasized their personal connections as a key reason for choice of country:

> *"One of my coworkers was an intern at the European Union. They knew a lot of Chinese women during their internship. Then, they came back from Belgium to China. So that's why we started to reach out to Chinese women to see how they were doing during the pandemic, and it was easier for us to find some Chinese in Belgium and other European countries."* (NGO3)

The interviewee from NGO1 also mentioned personal networks as the rationale for starting operations abroad. NGO1 is described in previous research as a "well-connected" ENGO. At an early stage, the interpersonal networks of its founder allowed for resource mobilization from both international and domestic resource pools. The organization obtained seed funding

through the executive director's personal contacts within international environmental foundations. Moreover, these professional networks, combined with their previous employment at a state agency led to NGO1 cooperating with the central government on various domestic and international projects, thus receiving government funding. The institutional experience gained from working at a Chinese government agency both helps to establish a social network, and equips NGO founders with "competency in negotiating government bureaucracy, building alliances with state agencies, and extracting state resources" (Hsu 2010, 269).

The latter argument is exemplified by the experience of NGO5, which has cooperated with and enjoys the support of various government departments for its international work, such as the local embassies, the International Liaison Department of the Communist Party of China, several ministries, as well as its supervising entity in China.

5.3. Fundraising and legal challenges

This subsection focuses on the intersections of resource dependency and social legitimacy to acquire resources. In mobilizing economic capital, the NGOs in my sample were essentially independent from the government. NGO1 and NGO5, the organizations with the strongest connections to the state, have received such funding, however both specified that it made up a minor proportion of their international projects budget. All of the participants stressed difficulties in obtaining funding. The various challenges and diverse resource pools are presented below.

5.3.1. Resource pools

To differing extents, the participating NGOs had made use of all the various resource pools listed by Fulda and Hsu (2020): global civil society, Party-state, private sector, and the domestic public. The participants expressed hope for more state funding in the future, yet the interviewee from NGO1 explained the reason for minimal financial support from the government in the following way:

> *"We have received funding from the government for projects, but the Chinese government will fund projects through bidding, and it is a very complicated process. You need to provide some very rigorous materials and so on, and the amount of money is not particularly a lot."* (NGO1)

Similarly, NGO2 and NGO5 expressed uncertainty regarding the outcome of applying for government grants. NGO5 had recently applied for funding from the South-South Cooperation

Assistance Fund, which has previously been used to fund different UN development organizations, instead of domestic NGOs. However, the interviewee was uncertain about the results and, similarly to the above quote, stressed its insignificance due to small grant size.

These replies suggest that the NGOs rely primarily on alternative resource pools. For instance, several NGOs had received funding from international foundations to some extent. NGO5 had received grants from large international foundations that are registered and active in China, such as the Ford Foundation and Asia Foundation. Similarly, NGO6 had cooperation with INGOs like WWF, but considered it a marginal part of their revenue. NGO1, another ENGO, was most reliant on the global civil society for grant capture:

> *"We have different sources of funding. We have fixed, long-term cooperation with some foundations, including Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and they have supported us for a long time. […] The other source of funding is through open calls for proposals, and quite a lot of funding comes through this second way, from both Chinese and foreign foundations."* (NGO1)

The annual reports of NGO1 indicate that most project funding was initially provided by international foundations. However, after 2016, the support from international foundations made up about 45% of their funding, while funding from domestic foundations has increased significantly, to another 45%. The representative from NGO1 explained that this change in funding sources resulted from the revision of the Overseas NGO Law, which placed restrictions on foreign foundations' operations in China. NGO1 has thus turned to fundraising from Chinese foundations.

Changes in access to international resource pools were also discussed by the representative from NGO4, who admitted difficulties with raising funds for international projects. The organization had invested a sum out of its own budget to fund the projects in Thailand, which was complemented by a philanthropic donation from one of the NGO's board members. The issue of financial resource mobilization was the most acute for NGO3. The interviewee discussed the need to obtain sustainable sources of funding as a crucial problem for organizational survival.

The interviewees saw notable opportunities in cooperating with the private sector to raise funds and most have received donations from companies to various extents. An acknowledgement of

Chinese enterprises' increasing awareness of the advantages of CSR work and a rise in interest to cooperate with NGOs was shared by the participants:

> *"[…] especially the SOEs have realized the importance of CSR. They are really willing to have someone talking to them [about this] and cooperating with them. As some Chinese enterprises will encounter issues with the local communities, they are very welcoming towards organizations that will come to them and discuss these issues."* (NGO1)

Correspondingly, the representative from NGO5 considered CSR an important reason for cooperation with Chinese enterprises abroad. One of their earliest development projects abroad was financed by a Chinese SOE that had encountered conflicts with the local community:

> *"Today, plenty of companies will actively initiate CSR. We cooperate with a number of companies in Ethiopia, because there are many Chinese companies there. One of them donated to us to implement a two-year project on women's economic development training."* (NGO5)

Regardless, not all of the participants had succeeded in mobilizing resources from the private sector. Although the interviewee from NGO3 considered CSR cooperation a vital source for sustainable funding, the organization's attempts to partner up proved ineffective:

> *"We hadn't registered when we tried to reach out to them. […] They don't really care about your mission, your goal, [the fact that] you are doing good, that you are young and passionate about it – it doesn't work. You have to show that you have officially registered in China or other countries. And you need to have more years of experience in this area. So corporations really value your identity. That is a challenge. As a volunteer group at this time, it is basically impossible for us to cooperate with big companies."* (NGO3)

5.3.2. *The impact of legal regulations on resource mobilization*

The previous quote not only illustrates NGO3's low level of social and symbolic capital, but further brings up the theme of legal challenges to NGOs' internationalization. In this theme, theory dimensions relating to social legitimacy and NGOs' dependency on the government's gatekeeper position for resource mobilization emerged. As mentioned in the literature review, recent legal revisions impacted how NGOs operate in China. According to the interviewee from NGO4, funding from international sources decreased significantly after the Overseas NGO Law came into effect, causing the organization to significantly reduce its staff.

During the interview, the founder of NGO3 admitted the need to register as a social organization but considered this to be a complicated process due to uncertainty regarding the choice of a supervisory unit and establishing connections with government agencies. Alternatively, NGO3 was contemplating cooperation with a local foundation to continue its work under the foundation's supervision. However, while some organizations choose not to register at the civil affairs bureau, others register as a social enterprise instead. This was the

strategy of NGO6, whose representative explained that in addition to the complicated process of registering as a social organization, this decision is related to their business model, in which NGO6 provides its students educational services in exchange for tuition fees. NGO6 found this model to be the most suitable for securing a stable source of revenue:

> *"[...] NGOs and other organizations are all concerned with the sustainability of their long-term development. If we want to develop sustainably, we need to have sustainable funding. And when we have earned these resources by providing services, we have more freedom regarding the use of these funds."* (NGO6)

Furthermore, the revision of the Charity Law in 2016 had a significant impact on social organizations' opportunities for public fundraising, enabling a diversification of revenue sources (Fulda and Hsu 2020, 62). The revised law gave charitable organizations which had been legally registered for over two years the right to apply for public fundraising status and conduct online fundraising on public platforms (Corsetti 2018). NGO5 was among the first charitable organizations to obtain this qualification from the Ministry of Civil Affairs. Accordingly, the largest proportion of its funds is collected from online donations:

> *"These days, the internet is everywhere in China and everyone has a smartphone, so you can donate on your phone. On Taobao, there's this function called "Charity Baby" – when you buy something, some of the money will be donated to us. Perhaps individual donations are small, and one person will give just 10 yuan, but the volume is just so huge, which means that the total amount of funds is still large."* (NGO5)

For the charity sector in China, the growth of online fundraising has been an important development. The interviewees brought up the ubiquity of the mobile internet and the universal use of apps like WeChat and Taobao, creating a beneficial online environment for public fundraising. However, online fundraising across the different platforms tends to be dominated by a limited number of large charities with a government background. Their accumulated social and cultural capital give them an advantage in carrying out large-scale fundraising campaigns. Furthermore, two Chinese tech giants, Tencent and Alibaba, own the platforms on which the majority of online fundraising takes place (Corsetti 2018). NGO5 has a separate department for cooperation with online fundraising platforms and is in a strategic partnership with Alibaba, with whom they cooperate in an educational project operated both domestically and internationally. The fundraising is carried out on Taobao and pooled together for both domestic and international activities.

NGO6 uses an innovative way to fundraise without the need to obtain charitable status, by cooperating with domestic charitable foundations:

> *"[...] the content of the project is provided by us, but we cooperate with the foundation, as the foundation has already been reviewed by the fundraising platform, so they are allowed to raise funds from the public. [...] It is as if we are in a partnering relationship, in which we are the implementing party, and they are responsible for the fundraising on Tencent's platforms."* (NGO6)

Simultaneously, grassroots organizations still struggle to raise funds from the public. Most NGOs referred to difficulties in gathering public donations for overseas endeavors. Although NGO1 has operated international projects for over a decade, they had not obtained the right to fundraise from the public. The interviewee from NGO1 touched upon this issue:

> *"We do not qualify for this. If you want to collect donations from the public in China, you need a public fundraising qualification. But it is difficult to obtain this qualification. For instance, NGO5 has a government background, so it is easy for them, and for some big domestic foundations. But [organizations] like us do not [qualify]."* (NGO1)

The interviewee clarified that most donations in China are collected in more human-centered sectors like poverty alleviation, education, children and health. They argued that the public has not been as concerned with environmental protection. Yet, the representative from NGO4, a poverty alleviation organization, similarly acknowledged the superiority of well-known domestic foundations in online fundraising:

> *"They are doing this well due to their broader social resources. They have the popularity and their social influence is huge. In comparison, we are still quite small and really rather grassroots. Our social influence is smaller. With regards to the industry, perhaps people know who we are, but among the whole public, few people are aware of our projects. Due to this, we have not been able to gather enough funds for our overseas projects."* (NGO4)

The revised Charity Law bestowed the power to regulate online fundraising on the central government, as the Ministry of Civil Affairs grants charitable status on social organizations and determines the platforms to be used for fundraising (Snape 2017). However, the findings indicate that some smaller NGOs are able to make use of the system by partnering up with established foundations.

5.3.3. *Donor dependence*

As discussed in the theoretical chapter, successful resource capture can be both an opportunity and a constraint. Donor dependence means that NGOs risk becoming under the influence of their funders, drifting further from their original missions (Lai and Spires 2021). The topic of donor influence was implied by the interviewee from NGO6 who suggested that raising funds through service fees provides the organization with greater freedom in their work. This is in contrast with the experience of NGO5 which has substantial cooperation with Chinese SOEs

abroad. The representative considered this "resource-oriented" strategy one of the central reasons for entering a country:

> *"Because we don't have our own funds, we fundraise, so if there is a sponsor, for instance a company, let's say in Ethiopia, that has a project and a factory in Ethiopia, and wants to do a charitable project over there. Then they provide us funding of, let's say 2–5 million yuan, and ask us to do the project. Once we have received the money, we go to that country to implement the project according to their wishes. So this is the will of the individual donor. Because you can only do projects if you have the funds."* (NGO5)

This quote by the interviewee was expressed as a reality of their international work rather than a negative consequence of partnering with the private sector. In fact, it can be desirable. Fulda and Hsu (2020, 64) argue that successful fundraising and grant capture translates the obtained economic capital into symbolic capital, enhancing the legitimacy and attractiveness of the NGO's actions and enabling access to both the public and the project beneficiaries.

Donor dependency was also indicated by the participant from NGO1, which relies primarily on grant capture from overseas and domestic foundations. In this case, entering a country via donor invitation was initiated by an international foundation, which has financed the organization's timber industry-related projects in Southeast Asian and African countries: *"[…] since they believed that as a Chinese NGO, we could play a mediating role. So, they actually asked us if we could do a project and communicate with some Chinese companies."* (NGO1)

NGO4 has experienced another kind of organizational interdependency. Domestically, the organization has been working in the field of rural poverty alleviation through animal husbandry and agriculture for decades. However, the content of their international projects is focused on education and healthcare:

> *"This difference is due to our current position, as we have not been able to register in Thailand yet, which is why we rely more on [our partner] and their foundation. Their focus is currently on education-related activities."* (NGO4)

The above findings warrant several observations. Firstly, regardless of limited state funding, the NGOs have found diverse and innovative ways to take advantage of the resource pools available to them. Simultaneously, the changing legal environment has meant both opportunities and restraints for NGOs' development and resource mobilization. Finally, as suggested by the RDT, successful resource capture engenders a dependent relationship between organizations. These observations lead to the following subsection, in which the data will be analyzed to understand the NGOs' relationship to the BRI.

5.4. The Belt and Road Initiative

During the interviews, the respondents discussed their international development work in relation to the BRI. In general, the participants had a welcoming and positive attitude towards the BRI as they commended the Chinese government's recognition of NGOs' role in the initiative. According to the participants, this has resulted in a feeling of encouragement to "go out", but not in any tangible, material support. Furthermore, most interviewees emphasized that their internationalization process had preceded the BRI. Regardless, some participants felt the benefits from increased media exposure.

5.4.1. Supporting discourse

The interviewee from NGO5 elaborated extensively on the positive impact from media exposure and the opportunities arising from being able to make use of the mainstream discourse. This means that NGO5 uses BRI-related discourse such as 'people-to-people connections' in their promotional materials "*to show that [their work] is also in accordance with China's national policies*". Moreover, as an organization that relies primarily on public donations, NGO5 has found value in the government's guidance of public opinion to legitimize China's engagement in international development:

> "*[...] some people do not understand why you need to go abroad to do projects which help people in Africa. They will say that there are still so many poor people in China. But there are less and less of these kind of people now. And this is related to the government's public policy advocacy and rhetoric. If the government says it out more, perhaps more people will understand.*" (NGO5)

The increased media attention is justified by NGO5's links to the central government. Yet, some other NGOs in my sample have also been increasingly featured in domestic media. Additionally, they have found ways to use the official language to their advantage by, for instance, naming their projects after the BRI. The participant from NGO6 emphasized that their connections to the government are limited, but this does not obstruct them from using the BRI profitably. They stressed that although the organization's international development work began before the BRI, it has nevertheless proven helpful in raising public awareness and sparking interest among their target group:

> "*The proposal of the BRI gave a name to a globalizing China, and the Chinese enterprises which had been "going out" for a long time already. [...] And the work that we are doing matches well with it. So the proposal of the BRI has made our work easier, as people are able to better understand it. It has given us the terminology to introduce what we are doing, so we will bring a lot of our projects together under the headline of "Sustainable BRI". Actually, we had already been doing this kind of work before the BRI, but it has provided an official discourse for us.*" (NGO6)

From the RDT perspective, this supporting discourse should therefore be understood as a vital resource that an organization can accumulate and transform into economic and symbolic capital through increased access to charitable funding or social legitimacy.

5.4.2. *Filling a void in state and private sector shortcomings*

In this subchapter, I examine how the internationalizing NGOs perceive their role in the BRI. The themes in this chapter relate to the topic of acquiring legitimacy through revealing state failure, as well as the RBV, which posited that an NGO's specific capabilities and resources shape its advantageous position.

None of the participants expressed an outstanding opposition to the state, but rather saw themselves assuming a supporting and complementing role in the BRI agenda. Nevertheless, several respondents were critical of the government's traditional ways of procuring foreign aid, admitting the shortcomings of China's government-to-government approach to development cooperation. The interviewee from NGO5 considered aid provided directly to host country governments difficult to control and manage. To illustrate this, they contrasted a government-led hospital project with a similar project of their own, which they felt was better managed and beneficial to the local population. The participant perceived NGOs to be better equipped to work with local communities:

> *"Of course the government level projects are good, but it is hard to make the locals get a sense of "ah, this is what you're here for", and feel that this project has helped them in some way. Their relationship with it is just so distant. [...] So, from the aspect of NGOs, on a kind of people and community level, there has not been sufficient communication. There's just been a lot of government activity and building factories."* (NGO5)

This perspective was supported by the participant from NGO1, who likewise expressed doubts over the impact of government-financed development projects on the local population:

> *"Basically, what China has been doing is, for example, airports – just building an airport over there, or a really big hospital. But actually the people will rarely use these. Because Myanmar can be considered a very poor country, few people will take flights. So, if you build an airport, only the people from the upper class will know that China has built this. But in reality, regular people have never even seen these sorts of things. So you might as well give them some medicine or something that would actually be useful for them. China has used a lot of money on aid, but has not achieved good results regarding impact."* (NGO1)

By contrast, the NGOs suggested playing a mediating role, as they possess the real capacity to fill this void on the community level, left untended by the Chinese government and enterprises:

> *"For NGOs, there is a lot to be done on the level of popular sentiments. When the government provides aid, they need to consider cooperation with NGOs. And they should not only do those*

construction projects, but also some work on the community level that can meet the needs of the local people. […] So we hope to be able to provide more sustainable assistance." (NGO1)

This opinion is maintained in a report published by NGO1, in which they discuss the role of the third sector in engaging with the BRI and China's aid provision. In fact, NGO1 has carried out projects with the aim to monitor and evaluate China's management of foreign aid. In their view, NGOs should supplement the government and private sector by helping with communication on the community level and by providing expertise on environmental and social issues. NGOs can solicit a sustainable, inclusive form of development and ensure the effectiveness of the assistance. NGO6, another ENGO, agreed by stressing the need for more on-the-ground communication and attention paid to sustainability:

> *"If a Chinese enterprise has investments or a factory in a country and there have been issues with environmental pollution or communication with local communities, we as a Chinese organization can play a mediating role and should therefore go do that. […] The key focus of the BRI are often companies, who are mainly concerned with economic gains. But we are more focused on issues such as environmental protection, wildlife protection and local community development.*
>
> *We hope to be able to promote more actions of sustainable development by the Chinese companies in these areas. Their investments, factories and commercial activities could benefit the locals more, instead of making the locals feel that such projects have not had much impact on their lives, or even brought about negative impacts."* (NGO6)

The interviewees shared an overall consensus that their work in the host country is primarily aimed to benefit the local population directly, as opposed to governments or the upper classes.

5.4.3. Promoting people-to-people connections

A priority area of the BRI – building closer "people-to-people connections" – aims to establish public support for the initiative by encouraging exchanges between people and institutions within the BRI. The organizations saw a clear link between their work and this policy goal. When discussing NGOs' role in the promotion of people-to-people connections, the interviewees responded in a similar way, expressing a conviction that through their international development work, they are fostering community exchanges, simultaneously advancing "civil diplomacy":

> *"Among the five principles of the BRI, the first four are aimed at material things, for instance infrastructure or finance. But "people-to-people connections" means a mutual understanding between people and improving communication. Under the official BRI framework […], "people-to-people connections" mostly includes cultural exchanges and poverty alleviation. But from the organization's perspective, our interpretation is more aimed at in-depth communication and exchange on the community level."* (NGO5)

With this remark, the interviewee from NGO5 aimed to convey an understanding of people-to-people connections as a long-term, in-depth exchange between the NGO and the local beneficiaries. There was a general consensus that through these exchanges, the NGOs are able to change the locals' predominantly negative feelings towards China:

> *"By doing this work, we are playing more of a role in civil diplomacy. Previously, the locals had mostly encountered Japanese or Korean [organizations] in Thailand. There's not a lot of Chinese doing charity. Yet, through these small projects, their impression of us has truly improved. They will unconsciously think, „oh, Chinese people helped us with this", and will sense this friendship. In fact, it is not like we deliberately wanted to do this so-called civil diplomacy work. But I think that when we are doing these small things, to a certain extent, we are definitely promoting „people-to-people connections"."* (NGO4)

This quote by the participant from NGO4 illustrates the response from most of the interviewees who emphasized that fostering people-to-people connections was not their original intention. Rather, they considered it a natural secondary effect arising during project implementation. Several participants believed that the locals' misconceptions towards people from China resulted from a lack of personal relationships and segregation between the local and Chinese communities in host countries. The NGOs' unique capabilities were perceived from this aspect, as having the capacity for long-term engagement with underprivileged groups.

5.5. Organizational capacity and impact

Regardless of the shared views of the participants, the NGOs diverged in their effectiveness. The RBV attributes this divergence to specific organizational characteristics that shape the differing outcomes. The well-established internationalized NGOs, NGO1 and NGO5, operate the greatest number of projects in numerous countries, commanding the largest budgets for these activities. NGO1 acknowledges its uniqueness among Chinese ENGOs and portrays itself as an independent research facility, an advisory body providing its deep-rooted expertise to achieve a win-win situation for all stakeholders. As a result, NGO1 cooperates with the central government and host country governments and organizes trainings to government officials, SOEs and other Chinese enterprises along the BRI. The organization trusts that the success results from its unconventional approach of combining for-profit market mechanisms with non-profit environmental protection. In comparison, NGO5 enjoys access to various forms of capital greatly due to its government background. The organization boasts a history of 30 years' experience in poverty alleviation and, in accordance with China's overall principles of development cooperation, places emphasis on sharing the Chinese experience of poverty eradication and economic development with developing countries. Moreover, NGO5 considers

its large-scale fundraising capability within China as an advantage, which can increasingly be used for overseas projects.

By contrast, NGO4 maintains that their internationalization is in a trial phase, making its impact difficult to measure. Yet, the overall objective is to evolve into an established INGO with a global impact. Ultimately, the organization's competitive advantage to internationalization could be attributed to path dependent factors, namely its historically accumulated international networks. Likewise, while NGO3 is in the early stages of its organizational development, the founder of NGO3 considered their global member base as a potential advantage over other internationalizing Chinese NGOs.

Domestically, NGO2 has a decade of experience with welfare provision to children in China's poorer mountainous areas. This experience has been transferred to Nepal. The interviewee from NGO2 compared their work with other INGOs in the following way:

> *"Our aim is to give children a childhood and a promising future. Some organizations have plans to expand and become bigger, but we haven't really considered this. We just hope to improve the services we are able to provide to the local population."* (NGO2)

With this quote, the representative from NGO2 articulated their organizational objective of deepening capacity within their constituencies in Nepal, instead of expansion to more countries. Finally, NGO6 appraised its youth-based model as both a valuable resource and specific capability, in both economic and human capital aspects. The organization exhibits an achievement of having accompanied over 1,000 Chinese students abroad through their programs, claiming it to be a more effective way to make an impact in comparison to China's intergovernmental approach. Chinese youth's growing interest in the philanthropy sector and globalizing China was discussed by the interviewee from NGO6:

> *"Young people are a good group to influence, they are very active. They are eager to study and willing to pay for the opportunity to learn about these [global] issues and act on them. We feel that our current model is able to provide us with a sustainable source of funding and achieve more. Also, this way of doing things does not mean that our full-time staff is doing it alone, but we are able to mobilize many youths to do these things together. Therefore, the impact can be even greater."* (NGO6)

The youth-based approach, combined with the organization's knowledge and networks within Chinese overseas communities, is identified as a unique strength by NGO6. The RBV inquires the intra-industry differences between organizations, arguing that heterogeneity derives from each organization's unique array of resources and capabilities (Hoopes, Madsen, and Walker

2003). This subchapter analyzed the specific organizational capabilities as perceived by the NGOs, suggesting that the diverse experiences and available resources of the organizations help explain divergence between their effectiveness.

This chapter outlined the empirical data and explained the participating NGOs' unique characteristics and experiences in resource mobilization for their overseas engagement. To investigate links to the theoretical framework, the findings are further elaborated on in the following discussion chapter.

6. DISCUSSION

This chapter analyzes the findings from the theoretical perspective. Following the literature review and theoretical framework, the RDT approach suggested that the specific environment shapes how NGOs behave and mobilize resources. The latter idea is complemented by the RBV which assumes that an NGO's organizational capacity determines their advantageous position and perceived legitimacy.

6.1. Executive leadership

The RDT considered NGOs' executive leadership crucial for resource mobilization. The founder's individual social capital, connections and networks can be utilized to access resources, either tangible, in the form of financial support, or intangible, such as support from state agencies or other social actors (Hsu 2010, 267). Furthermore, it was hypothesized that the leadership's previous professional experience impacted access to resources required for internationalization. These ideas were supported by the findings, as the NGOs with the highest access to resources were those with former state employees as their leaders. These NGOs were more prone to see the government as an ally and resource to exploit, and had benefited from collaboration with various state agencies in their overseas projects.

Hsu and Jiang's (2015) discovery that NGO leaders lacking relevant institutional experience would turn to alternative channels for resource mobilization was confirmed in the findings. The NGOs made use of their personal social networks and professional experiences to establish projects abroad. However, the data do not uphold their argument (Ibid.) about these NGOs deliberately finding ways to avoid the state altogether. For instance, NGO6 has connections within CIDCA, for which it has provided professional expertise, yet the organization's leader had no prior employment experience in the government. Rather, the NGOs were optimistic and expectant of increased government support for "going out".

6.2. Policy area

Based on the RDT, I hypothesized that the NGO's policy area can bring about variations in the organizations' resource mobilization processes, as sector-specific particularities in the environment can lead to different outcomes due to differing access to resource pools. The NGOs in my sample were divided into human-centered and environmental organizations. As determined in previous studies (Fulda and Hsu 2020; Liu 2020), both environmental

organizations and social development organizations in China retained favorable access to financial resources and government networks. However, ENGOs place more emphasis on their cultural capital – their specific academic and practical expertise – whereas human-centered NGOs are additionally able to make use of their symbolic and social capital to attract resources (Fulda and Hsu 2020, 68).

This observation corresponds with comments by a participant who drew attention to the issue of charitable funding in China being largely channeled to social development NGOs. While charitable giving in China has been on the rise in the past decade, dominated by corporations and individual donations, the most popular causes receiving support are related to social development: education, poverty alleviation and healthcare. Increase in donations to environmental protection has been slow and marginal in comparison to the amount donated to human-centered sectors (Chu and Wang 2018). As a result, ENGOs employ their professional expertise with a focus on alternative resource pools – service fees, domestic and international foundations.

Furthermore, the NGO's policy area relates to government priorities, which may lead to different levels of support to NGOs' access to resources (Wang and Yao 2016, 37). In China, poverty alleviation has been a government priority for decades. The campaign intensified in recent years, as part of Xi Jinping's goal to eradicate extreme poverty by the end of 2020. The substantial success in domestic poverty alleviation forms a crucial basis for China's international development assistance, as the government has encouraged experience and knowledge sharing to facilitate poverty alleviation in developing countries along the BRI (Diallo 2019). This indicates that the NGOs working in poverty alleviation should receive favorable treatment from the various domestic resource pools to implement their international development projects. However, the human-centered NGOs' international scope and capacities deviated vastly, which can be ascribed to differing levels of social and symbolic capital.

6.3. Legitimacy

The theoretical framework assumed that in order to capture resources from the environment, NGOs need to appear legitimate in the eyes of the external constituents. Wang and Yao (2016, 38) argued that social organizations in China mainly derive their legitimacy from the government, thus creating an unbalanced dependence relationship between NGOs and the state.

From a legal aspect, the government's gatekeeper role in enabling the environment for NGO development and philanthropic giving was reflected in the findings, as some organizations' actions were constrained due to the complicated nature of the registration process, while others appreciated the opportunities arising from the revised Charity Law. Nevertheless, the NGOs are motivated to seize any of the different resource pools to increase their legitimacy, since successful fundraising and project implementation bestows symbolic capital on the NGO's actions, subsequently enhancing their attractiveness to the government, potential fundraisers, media and the public (Fulda and Hsu 2020, 64).

At the same time, the government's dependency on NGOs is another source of legitimacy. The government's lack of expertise in a field like development assistance can grant NGOs with legitimacy (Wang and Yao 2016, 38), as they draw attention to the state's incapacity in order to justify their own existence. In lieu of explicitly opposing the state, however, the NGOs had identified a space in the BRI for fulfilling their mission. Since the BRI has become the key platform for China's international development cooperation (Chen, Calabrese, and Willitts-King 2021), the NGOs, some of whom were engaged with international development years before the proposal of the initiative, are aligning their work accordingly, referring to their role as stakeholder mediators and facilitators of people-to-people connections. Thus, the BRI creates a new form of legitimacy for NGOs to associate themselves with certain policies and discourse. The favorable BRI discourse is deployed as a communication tool to enhance the symbolic legitimacy of the organizations.

6.4. Organizational capacity

The variable of organizational capacity was applied to understand the NGOs' unique capabilities for internationalization in light of the RBV. My findings indicated how, despite the NGOs' abilities to identify and utilize diverse resources to their advantage, the well-established NGOs with links to the government were the most successful in "going out", due to their social networks and fundraising capacity. This conclusion relates to Hsu, Hildebrandt, and Hasmath's (2016) prognosis about the "GONGO-ization of development" – owing to greater resource mobilization opportunities, GONGOs will dominate the field of Chinese social organizations as international development actors.

Because the government and other funding organizations are prone to support larger, trustworthy organizations which have shown satisfactory results in service delivery, this activity reinforces a cycle of resource mobilization, in which well-established organizations are preferred (Fulda and Hsu 2020). But the resource mobilization cycle also has implications for grassroots NGOs that might be able to employ their organizational capacity in the form of sector-specific expertise to attract prospective funders, as was the case with the ENGOs.

7. CONCLUSION

With a special focus on the BRI, the thesis examined the underlying drivers for the internationalization of Chinese development NGOs by analyzing their resource mobilization strategies and motivations. Based on a comparative multiple-case study research design, six NGOs operating development projects abroad were chosen for inquiry. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from the respective NGOs, and then subjected to a thematic analysis. From this analysis, four themes emerged: the role of the executive leadership in "going out"; fundraising and legal challenges to the NGOs' internationalization; NGOs' role in the BRI, and organizational efficiency and impact. These four themes were analyzed from a theoretical framework composed of the resource dependency theory and resource-based view on organizational behavior and capacity. Within the analysis, a particular emphasis was placed on the variables of executive leadership, policy area, legitimacy, and organizational capacity.

To answer the research question of whether the internationalization of Chinese NGOs is driven by government policy, this study concludes that the international engagement of these NGOs is guided by opportunities for resource acquisition, rather than policy in the form of the BRI. The findings indicated how, contingent on the organization's sector-specific conditions and social networks of executive leadership, the NGOs are turning to various resource pools for resource acquisition, necessary to reach their mission of "going out" and contributing to international development work. Due to decreased financial support from international organizations on the one hand, and the changing philanthropic landscape in China on the other, domestic resource pools – foundations, enterprises and the local public – have become increasingly significant for the NGOs. Legitimacy, a crucial precondition for successful resource capture, is derived both from the organization's professional experience in the development field, and the Chinese state's supportive discourse regarding the role of social organizations within the BRI. However, not all NGOs are equally capable of making an impact on the international stage. Legal regulations enacted to control CSOs complicate the process of "going out" for less established actors, thus reinforcing a cycle in which larger, well-established organizations obtain funding and dominate the field.

Contrasting the circumstances of internationalized Chinese enterprises, NGOs, particularly the more grassroots organizations, have thus far not received significant material or legal support from the government to "go out". As many of these NGOs had some forms of international

engagement before the inception of the BRI, they are now finding ways to use the BRI rhetoric and favorable policy to their advantage. This signifies the decentralized nature of the BRI campaign, in which micro-level actors, represented by the NGOs, are putting the initiative's broad ambitions into effect to pursue their individual aims.

This research makes a contribution to the study of the international engagement of Chinese NGOs due to its focus on relatively grassroots NGOs, simultaneously raising further questions on the ambitions for GONGOs to internationalize. Answers from the only GONGO in my sample revealed how, in some cases, these organizations are expected to mobilize resources independently. Assuming heterogeneity between GONGOs, further studies could probe into the resource mobilization strategies of Chinese GONGOs "going out".

Case study methodology sets limits to generalization of the findings on the wider population. However, for this study, the use of a comparative, multiple-case study methodology was helpful for exploring the under-analyzed phenomenon of NGO internationalization. While case studies provide the basis for generalizations, their wider relevance should be controlled through further research once more systematic and quantitative data become available.

Furthermore, the research explored the relationship between the domestic environment and NGO behavior, mainly based on the narratives of the NGOs. For a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of Chinese NGOs' internationalization and their positioning in transnational aid chains, building on my findings, a network analysis approach might analyze interorganizational relationships from the international dimension, considering the NGOs, their donors, local partners and other stakeholders. On a general note, this study contributes to global research on INGOs, and the literature on Chinese social organizations from a resource-based approach, by indicating increased diversification of revenue sources for civil society actors.

8. APPENDICES

Appendix A: Coding chart
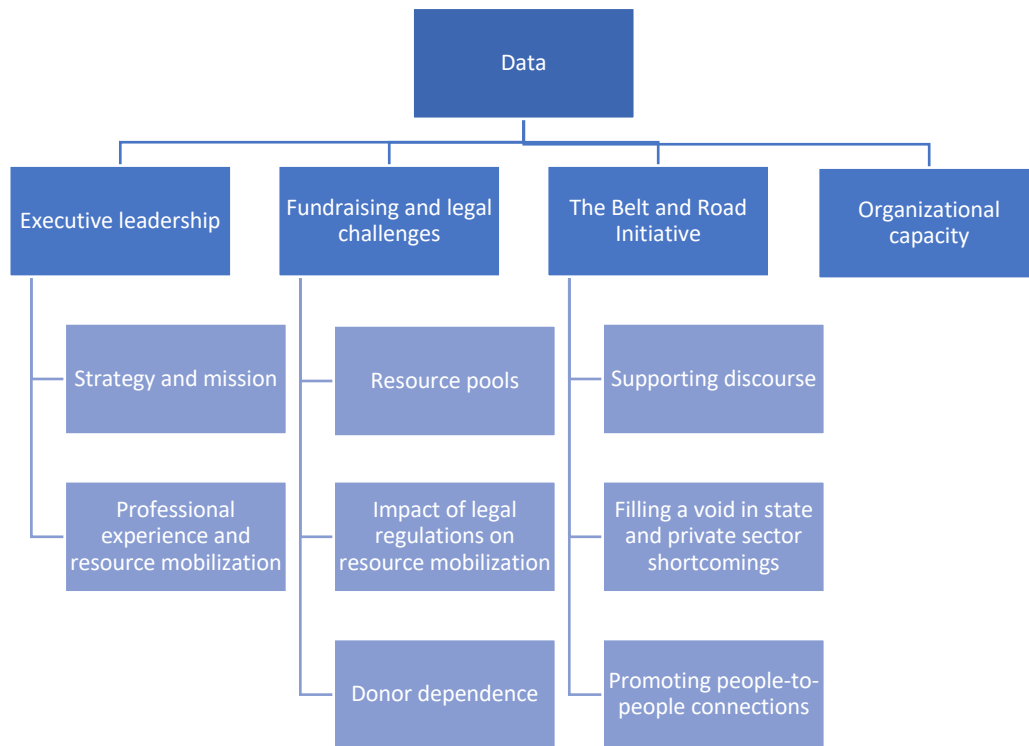
Appendix B: The interview process

The video interviews were held in early February and March 2021 mostly via Skype. The interviews were scheduled ahead of time, thus allowing the interviewees the possibility to change their mind or ask additional questions. The exact time of the interview and software used for the interviews were agreed upon with the participants according to their wishes, while considering the security of parties involved. Before the interview, the participants were informed of their rights to withdraw from the interview at any given time and to remain anonymous. The interviewees were provided information about the aim of the research, timeframe and specific research topics, and forwarded an interview guide with the core questions to be discussed. The time of the interviews ranged between 45–90 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Chinese, with the exception of one interview that was held in English by request of the participant. After obtaining consent from the participants, the interviews were recorded on my phone and later transcribed verbatim on the same or next day.

The semi-structured interviews probed into topics such as organizational behavior in terms of resource strategies, engagement with other domestic and host country organizational actors, organizational ecology and development, and relationship to the BRI. An interview guide was compiled beforehand, although some questions were omitted when not applicable (see Appendix D). Due to the nature of semi-structured open-ended interviewing, extra questions were added spontaneously, following the participants' input.

Appendix C: Interview Guide

Interview Guide for Master's Thesis Data Collection

Mirjam Ait

I, Mirjam Ait, am a master's student in Asian Studies at Lund University, Sweden. For my master's thesis, I am researching Chinese NGOs with development projects abroad and the relationship between the Belt and Road Initiative and NGOs' strategies for "going out".

For conducting the interview, I would like to get your approval to record the interview. If given consent, the interview will be voice recorded. The original audio recordings will only be stored on my personal Google Drive and personal computer and will not be made accessible to any third person. The recording will be deleted from the devices after the thesis has been submitted.

This interview will remain completely confidential and anonymous, which means that – unless agreed otherwise – no personal details about your identity will be displayed in the thesis. Unless you agree to your name and/or position being mentioned in the thesis, anonymity will be guaranteed by changing your name and disguising any details of the interview which may reveal your identity, or the identity of other people mentioned. Information given during the interview may be quoted in the master's thesis and during thesis opposition.

The interview will last for a maximum of one hour. You have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time and refuse to answer any question you do not feel comfortable with answering. Participation in this interview is voluntary and even if you agree to participate now, you are free to withdraw permission to use data from your interview after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

You are free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information:

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Appendix D: Interview Themes and Questions

General questions

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself – your name, age, position in the organization, how long you have worked in the organization and for how many years have you been involved in the NGO/development world in general?

2. Your NGO is currently operating development projects abroad. In which countries and what sectors are you active?

3. Please tell me about how your interest in implementing international development projects began. What is the reason for internationalization? What motivates you to "go out"?

4. If you have domestic projects in China, are your international projects different from your work domestically?

5. For the overseas projects, how do you define or measure performance?

6. Are you planning to expand to more countries? If yes, how do you choose the countries to operate projects in?

The Belt and Road Initiative

1. Have there been changes to your internationalization strategy and practices related to the Belt and Road Initiative? Do you feel like you are in some ways benefitting from the BRI?

2. Is it easier or more difficult to "go out" since the BRI?

3. Has the government been more supportive of NGOs' "going out" since the BRI? If yes, in what way exactly?

4. Considering your NGO's activities abroad, what kind of role can your organization play in facilitating "people-to-people connections"?

The process of "going out"

1. What kind of preconditions and capabilities are required for an NGO to "go out"?

2. What do you consider to be the biggest challenges for your organization in "going out"?

3. How do you raise funds for your overseas projects? What are the main sources of funding?

4. Do you have local partners in the destination countries and how are they funded?

6. Have you cooperated with other Chinese NGOs in overseas development projects?

7. Do you cooperate with (Chinese) enterprises? In what way and how is this cooperation initiated?

8. Does the local Chinese embassy provide support in any way, for instance to establish an office or by donating to projects?

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