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Having Peers and Becoming One: Collective Consciousness among Civil Society Actors in China

Fengshi Wu*

Abstract

Based on a unique survey of non-governmental organization (NGO) practitioners from diverse backgrounds, the article examines how they view their peers and people alike, and the interconnectedness, unity and solidarity of the NGO sector. The research has found that mutual awareness and trust is strong at the inter-personal level among interviewed activists and NGO practitioners. Yet, their views on the collective existence of an NGO and activism community remain divided. Preliminary statistical analysis shows that NGO specific working experiences such as connections with other NGOs and policy advocacy, activists and NGO practitioners tend to be more optimistic about their common community. More importantly, the more one has or feels having peers across organizations, the more favorable one thinks of the whole activism community. Therefore, the key to ‘becoming a community’ lies in ‘having peers’ for the emerging civil society in China.

Introduction

Since the 1990s, there has been a scholarly search for civil society in China.¹ The field has grown and by now produced a large body of literature and many pertinent debates. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), grassroots organizations and activism groups have caught particularly scholarly attention, as they, ‘chipping away at the edges’,² have broken various institutional barriers and introduced changes in social practices across many fields, such as labor, environmental protection, gender equality and human rights.³ When conditions

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¹ Liang Zhiping and Deng Zhenglai were among the first Chinese scholars to systematically translate and discuss the concept of ‘civil society’ and whether it is meaningful to apply it to understand post-Mao China. For a review of Chinese scholars’ views on the concept, see: Zhenglai Deng, *State and Civil Society: The Chinese Perspective, Series on Developing China* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2010). In English literature, the 1993 special volume of the *Modern China* journal and the book edited by Timothy Brook and Michael Frolic, *Civil Society in China* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1997) were the pioneering pieces.

² Jude Howell, ‘Civil society in China: chipping away at the edges’, *Development* 50(3), (2007), pp.17-23.

³ Sharon Wesoky, ‘Rural women knowing all: globalization and rural women's organizing in China’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 9 (3), (2007), pp. 339-358; Hualing Fu and Richard Cullen, ‘Weiquan (rights protection) lawyering in an authoritarian state: building a culture of public-interest lawyering’, *The China Journal* 59, (2008), pp. 111-127; Andrew Mertha, *China's Water Warriors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), pp. 1-26; Joan Kaufman, ‘HIV, Sex Work, and Civil Society in China’, *Journal of Infectious Diseases* 204, (Dec2011), pp. S1218-S1222; Fengshi Wu, ‘Environmental activism in provincial China: comparative evidence from Guangdong and Guangxi’, *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning* 15(1), (2013), pp. 89-108; Chris King-Chi Chan, ‘Community-Based Organizations for Migrant Workers Rights: The Emergence of Labour NGOs in China’, *Community Development Journal* 48(1), (Jan 2013), pp. 6-22.

are right, NGOs, equipped with expertise of particular fields, have even ‘negotiated’ and ‘repurposed’ the state in policy making and implementation.⁴

Nevertheless, the field has produced little empirical research on the views, discourses, political consciousness, and other ideational aspects of civil society actors. Although studying the ideational dimension of other social sectors or groups is not rare in China studies, not much has been explored about the same among the individuals usually associated with civil society in the country. This research aims at filling parts of this knowledge lacuna.

Based on a unique survey of NGO practitioners from diverse backgrounds, the article examines how they view their peers and people alike, and the interconnectedness, unity and solidarity of the NGO sector. To do so, the article proceeds as the following and consists of a literature review, three empirical sections and a conclusion. Drawing upon both contemporary China studies and comparative studies of political transition in Eastern Central Europe, the review part focuses on the need of an ideational turn in the studies of civil society in China. The first two empirical parts examine two ideational issues of the Chinese civil society, namely, inter-personal mutual awareness and collective consciousness of a shared community. The third empirical section then investigates the impact of inter-personal awareness on the sense of having a community, and explores other factors, particularly NGO specific working experience, that can contribute to the emergence of collective consciousness among individual activists and NGO practitioners. The main finding of the article suggests that the more one feels having peers across organizations, the more favorable one thinks of the whole activism community. Therefore, the key to ‘becoming a community’ lies in ‘having peers’ for the emerging civil society in China.

A note on the terms NGO and NGO practitioner is in order. The article considers NGOs as the most relevant category of civic organizations in contemporary China. Keeping the Chinese context in mind, NGOs can take up various organizational forms such as advocacy groups, non-profits, private charities, philanthropic foundations, community-based service and mutual help groups and independent research institutions. Therefore, they are better defined by political scientific criteria than official legal status⁵: volunteer-based, not-for-profit, and private organizations that exhibit a minimum level of institutionalization and self-governance.⁶ The NGO community offers individuals, ‘NGO practitioners’ in this article, socio-political space to organize activism and reach their goals. NGO practitioners examined by this research include three main groups of individuals: First, NGO affiliated activists. All of the interviewed activists, famous or unknown to the general public, are goal oriented and have established a social organization to reach their goals. They are not prisoners of conscience or literary dissidents, but more alike social entrepreneurs and community mobilizers, aiming at solving problems, helping policy victims and building up civil society in general. Second, core staff and regular voluntary members of NGOs. They

⁴ Tony Saich, ‘Negotiating the state: the development of social organizations in China’, *The China Quarterly* 161, (2000), pp. 125-141; Susan K. McCarthy, ‘Serving society, repurposing the state: religious charity and resistance in China’, *The China Journal* 70, (2013), pp. 48-72.

⁵ Lest Salamon and Helmut K. Anheier, *Defining the Nonprofit Sector* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 33-34.

⁶ The article differentiates NGOs from quasi-state agencies or government organized NGOs (GONGOs). For more details on how to define NGOs in China and differentiate them from GONGOs, see: Fengshi Wu and Kin-man Chan, ‘Graduated control and beyond: the evolving governance over social organizations in China’, *China Perspectives* 3, (2012), pp. 9-17.

organize campaign, deliver social service and implement NGO goals; and, at the same time, they have to struggle with political pressure and practical challenges in their specific issue area on a daily basis. Third, NGO affiliated and activist-mind social workers. Since the 2000s, social work as a subject of high education and a career path has been introduced to China via both state and transnational professional channels.⁷ As a result, there are now close to half a million certified social workers, most of whom join state affiliated social service provision agencies and residential community (*jiedao*) governmental offices.⁸ However, parts of this emerging professional sector, particularly the fresh college graduates, have turned their eyes to NGOs and social enterprises.⁹ These independent and NGO affiliated social workers, observed by the author in fieldwork at multiple locations in China, have become important allies of and work side by side with activists. This research thus considers such activist-minded and NGO based social workers also ‘NGO practitioners’. Different from NGO founders or the administrative staff who run everyday operations of NGOs, professionally trained social workers are often NGOs’ in-house specialists as lawyers in a law firm, ecologists in an environmental protection agency, and teachers in a school.

The search for collective consciousness in China’s civil society

Most in the China field would agree that civil society has (re)emerged in the country for the past three decades and grown significantly according to both official and unofficial accounts.¹⁰ However, scholars disagree on many aspects of civil society in China, debating issues as basic as who constitutes Chinese civil society. Some only focus on civic associations and grassroots NGOs, or even as restrictive as ‘unofficial’ NGOs with no or partial legal status;¹¹ while, others expand the list to encompass public intellectuals, charities, non-profits (NPOs), university student groups, internet-based ‘virtual societies’ and even the extended state bodies such as government organized NGOs, mass ‘people’s organizations (*renmin tuanti*)’, state-affiliated research institutions and business associations.¹² As a result,

⁷ Iris Chi, ‘Social Work in China’, introduction to the Special Issue on China, *International Social Work* 48: 4 (Jul 2005), pp. 371-79; Jianguo Gao and Miu Chung Yan, ‘Social Work in the Making: The State and Social Work Development in China’, *International Journal of Social Welfare* 24(1), (Jan 2015), pp. 93-101.

⁸ Official website of China’s State Council: http://english.gov.cn/state_council/ministries/2016/03/15/content_281475308144616.htm, accessed 30 June 2016.

⁹ Ibid. There are 4,686 private social work institutions in China.

¹⁰ Ming Wang, ed., *Zhongguo NGO Yanjiu [Research on NGOs in China]* (Beijing: UNCRD Research Report Series, 2000); Shaoguang Wang and Jianyu He, ‘Associational revolution in China: mapping the landscape’, *Korea Observer* 35, (2004), pp. 485-532; Qiusha Ma, *Non-governmental Organisations in Contemporary China: Paving the Way to Civil Society?* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Anthony J. Spires, Lin Tao and Kin-man Chan, ‘Societal support for China’s grass-roots NGOs: evidence from Yunnan, Guangdong and Beijing’, *The China Journal* 71, (2014), pp. 65-90.

¹¹ For example: Anthony J. Spires, *China’s Un-official Civil Society*, PhD dissertation (Yale University, 2007).

¹² Fengshi Wu, ‘Environmental GONGO autonomy: unintended consequences of state strategies in China’, *Journal of the Good Society*, 12 (1), (2003), pp. 35-45; Wang and He, 2004; Scott Kennedy, *The business of lobbying in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Jonathan Unger, ed., *Associations and the Chinese State: Contested Spaces* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2008); Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Yongnian Zheng and Joseph Fewsmith, eds., *China’s Opening Society: The Non-State Sector and Governance* (London, New York: Routledge, 2008); Peter Ho and Richard L. Edmonds, eds., *China’s Embedded Activism: Opportunities and Constraints of a Social Movement* (London, New York: Routledge, 2008); Jessica C. Teets, *Civil Society under Authoritarianism : The China Model* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

the field is still divided with regard to grassroots NGOs' autonomy and capacity. Serious skepticism remains,¹³ in spite of many successful cases where NGOs and activists changed the state's behavior, educated the public, and introduced new policy norms and social practices.¹⁴

This article does not intend to conclude the above debates, but to suggest a different direction of inquiry that focuses on the collective ideational aspect of China's emerging civil society. This epistemological move to the collective level and the ideational dimension is not merely a tactic to overcome the research impasse in the field, but more as a necessary step to advance the field for three reasons. First, civil society in China has evolved substantially since the year of 2008 when a nationwide rise of volunteering took place after the Sichuan earthquake hit. Compared with the pioneering generation of the 1990s, the backgrounds of social leaders and NGO practitioners that have emerged after 2008 have diversified to a great degree.¹⁵ An empirical question has emerged: 'Are we seeing one civil society, or many?' At least one expert has observed that recent policy innovations since 2012, framed by the Chinese state as 'consultative democracy', have opened a short-lived, yet critical window of opportunity for public participation and NGO registration, and led to the flourishing of 'many civil societies.'¹⁶ Given this surging diversity, it is necessary to examine the inner collectivity of the activism community and civil society, rather than take the leap of faith and proclaim its presumed external power struggle with the regime.¹⁷ Many studies in the field are case studies with a small *n*, yet conclude with generalized claims without locating their cases into the overall picture or acknowledging the diversification of the world of social activism and NGOs in China. Even if some NGOs win major bargaining with particular state agencies, but if they are unaware of other peer NGOs, consider others' success irrelevant to their own organizational survival, or are not a part of a broadly network bottom-up advocacy effort, the individual victories remain as isolate cases with limited and highly localized socio-political impact.¹⁸ Such a methodological weakness haunts the field.

¹³ Peter Ho, 'Self-imposed censorship and de-politicized politics in China: green activism or a Color Revolution?' in *China's Embedded Activism*, eds. Peter Ho et al, pp. 20-43; Spires, 2011; Patricia M. Thornton, 'The advance of the Party: transformation or takeover of urban grassroots society?' *The China Quarterly* 213, (2013), pp. 1-18.

¹⁴ Saich, 2000; Fu and Cullen, 2008; Kaufman, 2012; McCarthy, 2013; Katja M. Yang and Bjoern Alpermann, 'Children and youth NGOs in China: social activism between embeddedness and marginalization', *China Information* 28, (2014), pp. 311-337; Fengshi Wu and Shen Yang, 'Web 2.0 and political participation in China', *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 27(5), (2016), pp.2055-2076.

¹⁵ Yongguang Xu, 'Starting year of China's civil society [zhongguo gongmin shehui yuannian]', (2008), available at: <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1026/7336201>, accessed 25 June 2012; Shawn Shieh and Guosheng Deng, 'An emerging civil society: the impact of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake on grass-roots associations in China', *The China Journal* 65, (2011), pp.181-194.

¹⁶ Jessica Teets, 'Let many civil societies bloom: the rise of consultative authoritarianism in China', *The China Quarterly* 213, (2013), pp.19-38. Since Xi Jinping took over the power, civil society and political activism in China face severe challenges marked by the large number of arrests and detention cases of rights defense lawyers, women's rights activists, non-mainstream artists and independent book sellers (based in Hong Kong).

¹⁷ This warning has been elaborated by Taru Salmenkari in the article: 'Theoretical Poverty in the Research on Chinese Civil Society', *Modern Asian Studies* 47 (Mar 2013), pp. 682-711.

¹⁸ Such 'isolated yet limited success' has been well noted by scholars of popular protests and contentious politics in China, see: Thomas P. Bernstein and Xiaobo Lü, *Taxation without Representation in Rural China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 157; Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 9; Xi Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 212; Elizabeth Perry,

Moreover, if we are to use any comparative evidence as a yardstick to better understand the relevance and political potential of civil society for China, the former Communist countries in Central Europe in the 1980s arguably are the most suitable.¹⁹ The success of the Velvet Revolution effectively illustrates one aspect of civil society in the authoritarian context – loosely connected and self-limiting, but essentially unified in political aspirations. Many experts, particularly the ones who personally lived under the Communist rule in the region, have converged on the point that the kind of non-coercive and transformative power civil society possesses is rooted in its capacity of generating alternative social identities, public narratives and political symbols and ideals.²⁰ Regardless of whether it was a Catholic church-based peace prayer group, a union of shipyard workers, an underground literary group, or a student association, the existence of alternative political ideals – distinctive from Communism – metaphorically bonded all of them together, or made them alike. It was this ideational bond and shared conviction, existent yet often implicit, not the formation of various social associations per se, that made sense for those individuals coming from different walks of life who decided to step out of the private space and join in collective demonstrations. What the shared ideas and collective practices did was not necessarily the making of individual citizens more powerful against the state but the provision of new meanings and senses of social belonging to their own lives. This is what has been argued as ‘re-inventing politics’²¹ and ‘the power of the powerless’²² in the years leading to the political sea-change in Poland, former Czechoslovakia, former Democratic Republic of Germany, and Hungary.

How various social groups became ideationally connected on the journey to the Velvet Revolution can be further explained by Gramsci’s conceptualization of civil society as a part of the super-structure comprising not ‘all material relationships’, but ‘all ideological-cultural relations’ and ‘the whole of spiritual and intellectual life.’²³ Civil society, according to this

“Permanent Rebellion? Continuities and Discontinuities in Chinese Protest,” in *Popular Protest in China*, ed. Kevin J. O’Brien (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 205-216.

¹⁹ Both South Korea’s and Taiwan’s experiences of political transition are also relevant; however, the lack of a Communist Party makes these two cases still quite different from today’s China.

²⁰ Vladimir Tismaneanu, ed., *In Search of Civil Society: Independent Peace Movements in the Soviet Bloc* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Zbigniew Rau, ed., *The Re-emergence of Civil Society in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991); Knud E. Jorgensen, ‘The end of anti-politics in Central Europe’, in Paul G. Lewis, ed., *Democracy and Civil Society in Eastern Europe* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), pp. 32-60; Jan Kubik, *The power of symbols against the symbols of power: the rise of solidarity and the fall of state socialism in Poland* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994); Vladimir Tismaneanu, *The Revolutions of 1989: Rewriting History* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Sorin Antohi and Vladimir Tismaneanu, eds, *Between Past and Future* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2000); Elizabetha Matynia, ‘The lost treasure of Solidarity’, *Social Research* 68(4), (2001), pp. 917-936; Timothy Garton Ash, ‘1989!’, *New York Review of Books* (5 November Issue 2009); Costica Bradatan and Serguei A. Oushakine, eds, *In Marx’s Shadow: Knowledge, Power, and Intellectuals in Eastern Europe and Russia* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010).

²¹ Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics: Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel* (New York: The Free Press, 1993); Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, ‘1989 and the creativity of the political’, *Social Research*, 68 (4), (2001), pp. 993-1010.

²² Václav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1985).

²³ Norberto Bobbio, ‘Gramsci and the concept of civil society’, in John Keane, ed., *Civil Society and the State: New European Perspectives* (London; New York: Verso, 1988), p. 83; Antonio Gramsci (Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith ed. and trans.), *Selections from Prison Notebooks* (London: ElecBook, 1971), pp.11-12.

line of logic, is where ‘cultural hegemony’ exercised by the ruling class exists, and the resistance to it takes place. In the pre-1989 Central European context, instead of sabotaging public infrastructure or other parts of the physical state, what all forms of self-organizing, independent publications, peaceful demonstration, and union activities essentially accomplished was the engendering of alternative collective consciousness, social identities and cultural-political practices.

Both the Gramscian view on civil society and the Velvet Revolution in East Central Europe offer fresh perspectives on what bind different forms of social groups and civil society actors together and make them socio-politically potent and distinctive in an authoritarian context. In today’s China, NGOs, volunteer groups, and advocacy groups can differ drastically in terms of organizational size, framework and total budget, but they can essentially still be part of one civil society as long as they identify themselves with such a socio-political community and share aspirations. Similarly, actors or organizations can fall out of the same category of civil society even if they look alike from the outside, bearing similar names and conducting similar projects. Civil society in China remains politically weak not merely due to the limits of its overall institutional capacity, but, as the article will demonstrate in the following, the nascent development of collective consciousness and shared understandings among its various members.

Last not least, the lack of empirical studies of the ideational aspects of civil society actors is almost against the tradition and trend in China studies.²⁴ For instance, contemporary China studies have always paid sufficient attention to the ideas by leading public intellectuals and political dissidents.²⁵ Scholars of political economy have also noticed the relevance of normative orientations and social identities among Chinese business elites and the rising middle-class so to avoid jumping into the conclusion that market economy leads to democratization in China.²⁶ In contrast, scholarly writings often take the ideational collectivity among various civil society groups and actors in China for granted, and directly cluster them together and project them against the state. The goal of this article is to call critical reflection on this assumption, and to start filling the knowledge gap of the ideational aspect and collective consciousness of civil society in China.

The bulk of the empirical findings of the article are based on a survey of 310 interviewees, from 23 provinces, provincial-level municipalities and autonomous regions. 225 of them were based in capital and large cities, while 75 in rural areas and small towns. 55% of them are women, and with an average age of 30 (by the year of 2012). Reflected in the average young age, almost a quarter of them were fresh college graduates, and the rest had various

²⁴ Fengshi Wu’s 2012 article ‘The Left, Right and Neutral among Social Activists in China’ (*Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 8(2), pp. 25-34) is an initial attempt to address this question.

²⁵ For example: Merle Goldman, *China's Intellectuals: Advise and Dissent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); Merle Goldman, Timothy Cheek and Carol Lee Hamrin, *China's Intellectuals and the State: In Search of a New Relationship* (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies; Distributed by the Harvard University Press, 1987); Jean-Philippe Béja, Hualing Fu and Eva Pils, *Liu Xiaobo, Charter 08, and the Challenges of Political Reform in China* (Hong Kong, London: Hong Kong University Press, 2012).

²⁶ Bruce J. Dickson, *Red Capitalists in China: The Party, Private Entrepreneurs, and Prospects for Political Change* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Kellee S. Tsai, *Capitalism without Democracy: The Private Sector in Contemporary China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007); Minglu Chen, ‘From economic elites to political elites: private entrepreneurs in the People’s Political Consultative Conference’, *Journal of Contemporary China* 24 (94), (2015), pp. 613-27.

working experiences prior to joining or founding an NGO (Table 1). By the time of this survey research, the interviewees all had worked in the world of NGO and social activism for minimum six months, and some over 20 years. The issue focuses of their work include, not limited to, environmental protection, public health, women and social gender, children's rights and welfare, ethnic minority, education, rights for the disabled, labor and migrant workers, sexual minority, poverty relief, anti-discrimination and religious rights.

Systematic survey data on civil society actors in China is still limited, and what the field has are mostly datasets of organizational-level administrative information.²⁷ The current survey is the first of its kind to collect ideational information from activists and individuals involved in Chinese NGOs. The search for interviewees took the process resembling the 'snowball' method often used in the field,²⁸ mostly via the author's own contacts and assisted by the former Centre for Civil Society Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.²⁹ The current article is among a series of publications using the survey data to urge for a new research direction in the field.

[insert Table 1 here]

Inter-personal awareness and a strong sense of having peers

The article focuses on two main ideational issues of civil society in China and begins with the inquiry of inter-personal awareness and trust. In a sense, citizens who choose to work for an NGO in China are probably passionate about social causes and tend to make professional decisions by normative principles. The current survey data confirms this tendency: Despite diverse backgrounds, over two-thirds of the interviewees for this research expressed that they were 'passionate about the cause', and over half of them chose to work for an NGO because they identified with the NGO's missions (Table 2.1). In addition, over three-thirds of the interviewees shared a sense of pride in establishing and working for an NGO (Table 2.2). Such is important contextual information for all the questions to be addressed in the following.

[insert Tables 2.1 and 2.2]

In a sense, it is not particularly surprising to find out that an overwhelming majority of the interviewed activists and NGO staff viewed their relationship with immediate workmates in the same organization as more than 'working together by mere chance', given the their share passions mentioned above. According to the data listed in Table 2.3, despite differences in practical choices, 104 interviewees expressed that they 'shared similar ideas' with their colleagues of the same organization, and they were more than 'co-workers'. Moreover, 144

²⁷ For example, NGO case studies compiled by the Tsinghua University NGO Research Center and the Centre for Civil Society Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

²⁸ For example, Timothy Hildebrandt, *Social Organizations and the Authoritarian State in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

²⁹ In 2015, this Centre changed its name to Centre for Social Innovation Studies. For detailed information, see: <https://www.cuhk.edu.hk/hkiaps/research/csis.html>.

believed that there were ‘solid normative foundations (*linian jichu*)’ in their NGO and they considered their colleagues as ‘teammates who share beliefs and ideals (*zhitong daohe*)’.

[insert Table 2.3]

What about inter-personal trust beyond organizational boundaries? Answers to this question are crucial to explore whether the strong sense of mutual trust and solidarity within an NGO can extend beyond organizational limits or even transcend to the collective level in China’s civil society. A decent level of mutual awareness and trust could be a critical step for the emergence of a broad sense of social belonging within the NGO sector and the civil society sphere. To explore this possibility, the interviewees were asked how they viewed their relationship with the people affiliated with other NGOs and to rank their attitudes towards other NGO practitioners, known or unknown, along a scale of 1-5 in terms of wheather and how strongly they considered them ‘peers (*tonghang*, or *tongren*)’ who would share some forms of visions and aspirations. Similar to the findings on solidarity within an NGO, there is a quite clear trend indicating a solid sense of having peers beyond immediate co-workers of the same NGO among the interviewees (Table 3.1). Of the 305 valid answers, 87.5% were 3 and above. The most frequent answer was 4, and 117 NGO practitioners (38.4% of the total) consider those who work with other NGOs, known or unknown, as peers.

To further explore this sense of having peers in other NGOs among the interviewees, the research asked two more questions. These questions are about from whom the interviewees would seek for urgent help and strategic advice. The answers to these two questions further shed light on the existent mutual awareness, trust and support among activists and NGO practitioners across organizational boundaries (Figure 1). In an emergent situation, it is most likely that NGO practitioners would think of and seek advice from immediate co-workers, supervisors, working partners (usually the pupolation who receive funds and services from the NGO), and peers from other NGOs, significantly superceding personal friends, donors, or the mass media.³⁰ The most frequently referred examples of such emergences include, not limited to, submitting irregular reports requested by various state authorities, receiving personal warnings from security authorities, and being invited to ‘have tea’ or other forms of in-person inquiries and interrogations. Answers to this question suggest that peers from another NGO are among the most trust circle for an NGO practitioner to handle crisis situation that often involve personal risks.

When facing major challenges in work and career, ‘peers from other NGOs’ become the most favored sources for advice and support. Almost 1/5 of all the interviewees would take major problems in work first to peers from other NGOs, instead of supervisors, colleagues, donors, or personal friends. For them, peers from other NGOs both share ‘genuine empathy’, and keep ‘a healthy distance’ and ‘fresh perspectives’.³¹ What is noteworthy here is that having peers outside of an NGO gives activists and NGO staff an extra advantage beyond a sense of solidarity. Compassionate co-workers, supervisors, donor and partners at the

³⁰ Such emergences include, not limited to, submitting irregular reports requested by various state authorities, receiving personal warnings from security authorities, and being invited to ‘have tea’ or other forms of in-person inquiries and interrogations.

³¹ Interviews No. 68 and 80.

communities all contribute to NGO practitioners' sense of being connected to a bigger community, but peers from a different NGO can offer more objective advice and discuss long-term trends of the community. At the overall level, answers to these two questions are diverse, but the preference for and trust in peers outside of one's organization is obvious.

[insert Table 3.1 and Figure 1 here]

The examination of the inter-personal awareness and trust within an organization and across organizational boundaries reveals that there exists a sufficient level of collective consciousness and a sense of having peers in the NGO and activism community in China. Most of the activists and NGO staff do not see themselves as lone fighters, but a part of a much broader network of socially concerned citizens with specific goals and policy agenda in mind. In short, NGO practitioners have found and enjoyed having their own social and professional circles.

Mixed recognition of a social community

After learning about the inter-personal mutual awareness and trust among NGO practitioners, within and beyond one's own organization, the next step of the research attempts to understand interviewees' views on the entire NGO sector of which they are a part of, and whether a more abstract sense of solidarity exists at the collective level. The interviewees were given the statement 'in your field of work, all the social organizations stand together as a recognizable social force' and asked to rank their agreement with the statement on a scale of 1 to 5 (from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'). Different from the previous questions, there is no definite consensus (Table 4.1). 1/3 of the interviewees (105 out of 305 valid answers) chose '3' and stood neutral on the question. Only 58 interviewees ranked their agreement with the statement above '3', significantly fewer than the number of those who disagree with the statement (142 ranked below '3').

[insert Table 4.1 here]

Furthermore, for those 163 interviewees who ranked their agreement with the original statement of 'a recognizable social force' as '3' or above, they were given three more statements and asked for their opinions (Table 4.2). These three sub-statements are: 'The social organizations in your field are distinguishable from other actors such as research institutions or community social service centers;' 'Members of this community act together when needed;' and, '(t)he members share a sense of solidary and normative principles.' These questions are designed to test interviewees' perceptions, not their actual knowledge, of the actions taken and the normative principles shared by the NGO community.

[Insert Table 4.2 here]

On each of these three sub-statements, about half agreed with them, more than expected, as over two-thirds of the 163 interviewees originally expressed either 'no opinion' or 'cannot

really decide' on the statement of 'a recognizable social force.' This implies that when given more detailed information such as contrasting social organizations against research institutions, or a chance to further elaborate what they had in mind, more interviewees seemed to lean towards the optimistic side. Although some of them were not sure about all aspects of the NGO community in contrast to other types of societal actors, they recognized the differences between an NGO and a government-organized quasi-NGO, a university affiliated research institute, or a socially concerned business. Some would call GONGOs and quasi-NGOs 'fake NGOs'.³²

When mentioning 'act together', the interviewees who agreed with the sub-statement usually gave an example of such collective acts which they either participated in or witnessed closely. Leading NGOs or activists play the role of rallying relevant peer NGOs together and push for shared agenda.³³ Nevertheless, reservations remain. One commented that 'it is hard to collaborate with some NGO people nowadays, because they are in fact connected with the government via various [unknown] ties.'³⁴ Frictions and disagreements among NGOs and advocacy groups due to competition over funding, clashes of personalities and other reasons were also noted in the interviews. Several interviewees conveyed that they saw more fragmentation than alliance building within the NGO community of HIV/AIDS prevention and policy advocacy. The tug of 'war of words' between leading activists in this community, particularly during the time between 2006 and 2008 when the funding for AIDS related work in China increased significantly, was frequently mentioned as a concrete example.³⁵ A few Beijing-based activists referred to the hastened closing down of the English version of the China Development Brief (CDB), an independent media outlet publishing stories of grassroots activism, by the authorities in the summer of 2007 as an example of NGOs' lack of the capacity, not the will, to act together in a situation where political pressure was high. At the time, though many Chinese NGOs sent their sympathy to CDB in private, few did so openly.³⁶

The last sub-statement in this section, which touched upon some of most abstract issues of the whole research shared principles, unexpectedly received the highest percentage of support (53.75%) among the group of 163 interviewees of the 163. This score indicates that the interviewees still held idealistic conviction of their perceived community, even though they might not know well all the facts about peer organizations and the activism community. For example, as one commented: 'Even though we [the NGOs] don't work together or favor each other...we still all served the similar types of people, who were left out by mainstream and governmental agencies. No matter what, most organizations behave according to some shared

³² Interview No. 83.

³³ Interview No. 96.

³⁴ Interview No. 168.

³⁵ For background of the turbulent policy and funding environment for HIV/AIDS related activism in the 2000s, see: Timothy Hildebrandt, 'Development and division: the effect of transnational linkages and local politics on LGBT activism in China', *Journal of Contemporary China* 21(77), (2012), pp. 845-62; Joan Kaufman, 'China's evolving AIDS policy: the influence of global norms and transnational non-governmental organizations', *Contemporary Politics* 18, (2012), pp. 225-38; Gu Jing and Neil Renwick, 'China's fight against HIV/AIDS', *Journal of Contemporary China* 17(54), (2008), pp. 85-106.

³⁶ For details of the incident, see: Nick Young, 'Why China cracked down on my nonprofit', *The Christian Science Monitor* (4 December 2007), available at <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/1204/p09s01-coop.html>, accessed 10 March 2015. The author also interviewed Nick Young about the incident and how local NGOs reacted to it in New York city, 21 May 2009.

bottom lines.’³⁷ In fact, even among the 40 interviewees who expressed the least agreement with the statement ‘social organizations stand together as a recognizable social force’, some still believed in the meaning and importance of NGOs’ existence in the society. Their pessimism came mostly from their assessment of public opinions, as they had encountered a lot of social stigma and misunderstanding in their work. This is again not to completely dismiss the concerns some interviewees had about the diversification, fragmentation and even conflict of normative orientation in the NGO community. One even commented that ‘for a long time, there are real political disagreements in the NGO community [in the fields of women’s rights and social welfare] that have divided the community.’³⁸

Overall, the responses to these related statements about the unity and strength of the activism community cannot be interpreted as enthusiastic or definite, but a tentative optimism mixed with reservations at the most. Such a weak optimism combines both the realistic recognition of the limited unity of the activism community and the idealistic conviction that NGOs and activists in general share some fundamental normative principles and visions. For the optimists, the activism community held together primarily because of shared principles. For the pessimists, the doubt is rooted in their experiences of friction and conflicts between particular NGOs, their distrust of some ‘peers’ with governmental ties and their concerns of the lack of public knowledge and acceptance of the NGO community.

From having peers to seeing a social community

What can be further said about the mixed impressions of a shared community among the interviewees? Besides that fact that most of them are passionate about their work and tend to see those working for NGOs as peers with trust and respect, what else contributes to the lingering idealism within the community? More importantly, what makes the activists and NGO practitioners differ in their views on their shared community? Although to fully address these related questions will need more space than this article can provide, this section of the article intends to present tentative explanations based on quantitative analysis of the survey data, focusing on the responses to the statement ‘social organizations stand together as a recognizable social force.’ The main goal is to sort out and, to a degree, compare any important associations between an interviewee’s particular background, working experience, or attitude and her opinion on the community of activists and NGOs as a whole.

To reach the above goal, the first step is to comb through possible associations between an interviewee’s particular attributes and her reflections on the social activism community (i.e., agreement with the statement ‘social organizations stand together as a recognizable social force’) by statistical correlation tests. Besides basic socio-economic factors (i.e., age, gender, education and economic status), the research is particularly interested in finding out whether the sense of having peers and work related experiences have any impact on one’s assessment of the collective existence of a social community (Table 5.1). For work related experiences, the research has looked into four aspects: one’s role within the NGO and more specifically whether she is the founder of an NGO, length of the time working within an NGO, working connections with other NGOs, and the content of work.

³⁷ Interview No. 29.

³⁸ Interview No. 227.

[Insert Table 5.1 here]

The last aspect of NGO related work experience, the content of work, needs additional explanation. The research collected information on what kinds of activities each interviewee regularly conducted, which falls into two main categories, one focusing on delivering care and service to the people in need, and the other on reaching out to the broad public (such as public education, campaigning and social mobilization) and getting involved in public policy issues (such as conducting policy advocacy and recommendation, and monitoring of policy implementation). There is no direct contradiction between the two types of work, and many NGOs and activists in fact conduct both types of work. It may surprise some readers that quite a large number of NGOs now engage with the general public and get involved in policy related issues on a regular basis (Table 5.2). This research has paid particular attention to the second type of work due to the hunch that being involved with general public related activities necessitates an NGO practitioner to interact with diverse types of social and political agencies, which in turn could affect one's view and assessment on the overall development of the NGO and activism community.

[insert Table 5.2 here]

All preliminary results of statistical analysis of what contributes to one's agreement with the statement that 'social organizations stand together as a recognizable social force' are presented in Table 5.3. The middle column in the table lists the findings about the possible associations between an interviewee's particular attributes and his/her views on the NGO and activism community as a whole, in terms of Pearson Correlation Coefficients. While none of the basic socio-economic factors shows statistically significant correlation, almost all work related factors (except the length of work) do. Being an NGO founder – indicating a stronger conviction of the importance of NGOs in general, having more connections with other similar social organizations and working with a broad audience and policy related issues can contribute to one's positive assessment of the collective existence of the activism community. The most noteworthy finding in this part of the research is the significant and relatively strong correlation between one's view on having peers and that on the whole NGO and activism community. As the previous section has shown that inter-personal awareness and trust is high among interviewed activists and NGO practitioners, the new finding here can modify what has been said about the recognition of the collective existence of the activism community.

[insert Table 5.3 here]

The second step of this part of the research is to further test the above correlations in one regression model and see whether some factors stand out. The right column of Table 5.3 lists the findings of Ordinary Least Square (OLS) Multiple Regressions test. The dependent variable remains as one's view on the statement 'social organizations stand together as a recognizable social force.' Tested against all control and focused factors, the sense of having peers from other social organizations triumphs and is clearly the strongest predictor of one's overall conviction of the collective presence and strength of an NGO and activism

community. Public and policy engagement also matters, but the impact of NGO connections is overshadowed in the OLS model. The age factor, uncorrelated independently, becomes significant, in spite of a relatively small B value. This means that age is negatively associated one's view on the activism community. The possible explanation would be one becomes less optimistic and more cynical about being part of any collective movement or a virtue community as she grows older.

Conceptually, the main finding in this section is interesting and thought-provoking, as the sense of having peers appears, which is an ideational factor itself, to have more influence than practical cross-organizational connections on the cohesion and solidarity of the whole NGO and activism community.³⁹ Such a finding suggests that ideational development at the collective level is more related to ideational factors at inter-personal level rather than non-ideational factors at the collective level. The practical implication of this find can be that the key to boost collective consciousness among civil society actors lies in strong inter-personal trust. If one can find and trust her peers associated with NGOs, one will probably get a grasp of the collective existence of an activism community in China.

Conclusions

Much has been written about the organizational development and practical activities of Chinese social activism, NGOs and policy advocacy campaigns, yet little is known about whether the individuals involved are actually aware of each other's existence, what they think about their potential peers and whether they are becoming a social group. Focusing on the ideational dimension, this research has first found that the prospect for the NGO sector and civil society as a whole to consolidate is evident, as trust and solidarity at the inter-personal level is strong. Most interviewed activists and NGO staff are aware of who their peers are, and they enjoy and often benefit from being associated with them. They seek and provide advice to each other in need and for important decision making.

Furthermore, the survey data show that the interviewee activists and NGO practitioners differ in their conviction of the strength, unity and public recognizability of the social group that they are a part of. Personal background, work related experience and attitudinal factors all contribute one's final assessment of the social activism community. One might be more cynical as she grows older. Also, people who have formed an NGO on their own are most probably the ones with stronger convictions of the collective existence of all NGOs as a social community. NGO practitioners who have had the experience of reaching out to the broad public audience and working on policy related projects instead of only engaging with particular victims or socially marginalized population and service delivery tend to believe in more that all NGOs together are becoming a recognizable social force.

The most interesting and important finding of the research is the close linkage between individual NGO practitioner's sense of having peers and her conviction of the collectivity of the social activism community. The two are highly correlated statistically speaking, and the former is the strongest predictor of the latter amongst all relevant factors tested by a multiple regression model. Inter-personal mutual awareness and trust can contribute to the overall

³⁹ The preliminary statistical analysis presented in this article is not meant to provide a full interpretation of the impact of cross-organizational relations on the overall identity building of the civil society in China. The statistical findings are at most suggestive at current stage.

collective consciousness of the NGO community and even civil society in general. However, such ideational transcendence is not linear, or can be conceptualized in a simplistic way. This article, with all its empirical evidence, would not put an end to but encourage more systematic exploration of this finding.

The article concludes that civil society development in China has arrived at a critical juncture: nurtured mostly by a high level of inter-personal awareness and trust, a collective social identity among activists and NGO practitioners is on the verge of breaking out and becoming tangible. State repressive policies may effectively interrupt NGOs' activities and their practical networks, but not necessarily destroy the inter-personal level empathy and the sense of having peers among them. On the contrary, shared experience of going through political harassment may enhance mutual empathy and respect among NGO practitioners, and thus give unexpected stimulus for the consolidation of a collective identity among civil society actors.

Table 1. Pre-NGO work experience

Answer	Frequency
No work experience	87
University or educational institutions	33
International NGO	15
Media	26
Governmental agency	24
Public enterprise (<i>shiye danwei</i>)	29
State or township enterprise	95
Private business	24
Farmer	7
Retired	4
Other	31

Total: 310; Valid: 306

Table 2.1. Reasons for joining the NGO

Reason	Frequency
Just need a job	86
Passionate about the cause, want to ‘do something’	220
Identify with the NGO’s specific missions	164
Respect and would like to work with the NGO founder/leader	62

Total: 310; Valid: 309

Table 2.2. Self-pride

Scale	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1 (strongly disagree)	5	1.6
2 (somewhat disagree)	15	4.8
3 (neutral)	57	18.6
4 (somewhat agree)	120	39.2
5 (strongly agree)	109	35.6

Total: 310; Valid: 306

Table 2.3. Relationship with people working for the same NGO

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Co-workers	14	4.6
Peers	31	10.1
Teammates with similar ideas but maybe different practical choices	104	34.0
‘Comrades’ with same ideals	144	47.1
Others	13	4.2

Total: 310; Valid: 306

Table 3.1. Do you consider people working for other NGOs as peers?

Scale	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1 (strongly disagree)	13	4.3
2 (somewhat disagree)	25	8.2
3 (neutral)	91	29.8
4 (somewhat agree)	117	38.4
5 (strongly agree)	59	19.3

Total: 310; Valid: 305

Figure 1. Whom do you go to when facing emergency and major challenge in work?

Total: 310; Facing emergency missing: 22; Facing major challenge missing: 59

Table 4.1. Do you agree with the statement ‘social organizations stand together as one recognizable social force’?

Scale	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1 (strongly disagree)	40	13.1
2 (somewhat disagree)	102	33.4
3 (neutral)	105	34.4
4 (somewhat agree)	39	12.8
5 (strongly agree)	19	6.2

Total: 310; Valid: 305

Table 4.2. Views on the NGO community among the optimists

Statement	‘Yes’ Frequency	Percentage (%)
Distinguishable from other social sectors	77	48.1
Members act together if necessary	82	51.25
A sense of solidary and shared principles	86	53.75
None of the above	18	11.25

Total: 163; Valid: 160

Table 5.1. Definitions of the variables

Variable	Values
<i>General background (control variables)</i>	
Age	19-65, numerical
Gender	1-female; 2-male
Education	0-below college level; 1-college; 2-above college level
Economic status	1-10: self-evaluation (1-lowest social strata; 10-highest social strata)
<i>Focused factors (independent variables)</i>	
Founder of the NGO	0-no; 1-yes
Work length (by month)	1-300, numerical
Peers	1-5: self-evaluation (1-least sense of having peers, 5-most)
Connections with other NGOs	0-total number of connected NGOs below 5; 1- 5 to 20; 2- above 20
Public and policy engagement	1-4: numerical (e.g., if conducted two types of the work listed in Table 5.2, then the value is 2 here.)
<i>Dependent variable</i>	
Agreement with the statement on ‘social organizations stand together as one recognizable social force’	1-5: self-evaluation (1-strongly disagree, 5-strongly agree)

Table 5.2. NGO’s work related to public and policy engagement

Specific content of work	No. of answers
Public education	166
Policy advocacy and recommendation	110
Campaign and social mobilization	61
Public monitoring of policy implementation	41

Total: 310; Valid: 259

Table 5.3. Analysis of the statement on ‘social organizations stand together’

Independent Variables	Pearson Correlation Coefficients (2-tailed) ¹	OSL Unstandardized coefficients B (Std. Error)	
Age	--	-.019**	(.008)
Gender	--	.066	(.129)
Education	--	-.151	(.101)
Economic status	--	.012	(.044)
Founder of the NGO	.106*	.077	(.175)
Work length	--	.002	(.002)
Peers	.327***	.291***	(.063)
Connections with other NGOs	.118**	.048	(.096)
Public and policy engagement	.168***	.125**	(.063)
Constant		1.719***	(.424)
R^2		15.9%	
N		228	

(*p<.1, ** p<.05, ***p<.01)

Note: 1. Only significant correlation results are listed.

Notes on Contributor

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