Reciprocal Engagement and NGO Policy Influence on the Local State in China

May Farid[1]

Li Hui[2]

Abstract

While existing literature has conceptualized the multiple, complex ways in which NGOs might relate to the state, it has paid limited attention to how NGO-government collaboration leads to NGO policy influence. This study examines small, indigenous grassroots NGOs and their interactions with the local state in China. Using a grounded theory approach, we find that the aspiration for both NGOs and the local state is to establish reciprocal engagement, which consists of three dimensions—proximity and communication, mutual support, and joint action. We explain how reciprocal engagement might lead to NGO policy influence: a) shaping government departments' internal work methods, b) facilitating policy implementation, and c) influencing policy revision. We further define the boundary conditions for the reciprocal engagement and policy influence framework by examining how regions, administrative agencies, and evolving political climate affect the engagement-influence relationship. Our study provides a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of NGO-government relations in China and of non-contentious methods of policy influence from the grassroots.

[1] Department of Social Work and Social Administration, The University of Hong Kong

[2] Department of Politics and Public Administration, The University of Hong Kong

Introduction

Since the 1980s, governments across the globe have embraced collaborative and networked management of public services (Milward and Provan, 2000; Salamon, 2002). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have entered the arena and become heavily involved in delivering services and in some instances, shaping public policies (Hwang and Suárez, 2019; Mosley, 2012). NGO-government relations have become increasingly complex, involving resource flows, interaction styles, and divergent goals and strategies.

Existing studies have developed a bewildering array of typologies to capture the multiple, complex ways in which NGOs might relate to the state (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff, 2011). These studies, especially those focusing on the developing world, have primarily focused on NGOs' interactions with central governments; local governments have been studied far less (AbouAssi and Bowman, 2017). NGO-government interactions may vary considerably if we disaggregate the traditionally monolithic state into different government agencies and regions. As Hsu and Jiang (2015) note, in a context of fragmented state like China, it makes little sense to talk about the relationships of NGOs with the state, given the fissures and competing agendas between different localities, departments, and individual officials.

Studies on NGO-government relations in authoritarian regimes have traditionally focused on power imbalance and zero-sum interactions between NGOs and government (Hsu, 2010). This overt emphasis on antagonism does not reflect the increasingly complex and interdependent NGO-government relationships in many authoritarian states, where governments seek help from NGOs to improve governance, and NGOs rely on governments for financial support and scaling impact (Jing, 2015). In these studies, policy advocacy and influence are largely discussed in the

context of control, resistance and contention (Fu, 2017). Although an emerging line of literature has begun to examine NGO-government collaboration and its benefits, the question of NGO policy influence is largely absent from discussions of NGO-government collaborations (Fyall, 2016). Against this backdrop, this article seeks to address two research questions: How does engagement between grassroots NGOs and government influence public policy? What factors affect the engagement-influence link?

We focus on small, indigenous grassroots NGOs, many of which are unregistered, operate in rural areas, and do not benefit from preexisting connections with government or market forces[3]. These NGOs constitute the bulk of the third sector, both in terms of numbers and distribution, and according to Ma (2006), are "the most meaningful indicator of civil society." However, compared to well-established, well-funded NGOs in large metropolitan areas, these NGOs are under-studied, primarily due to lack of official data and access. The data in this study derive from 166 semi-structured interviews with government officials and NGO leaders, participant observation, and archival data in Hebei, Yunnan, and Ningxia provinces in China.

Using a grounded theory approach, we propose the concept of reciprocal engagement to characterize one possible relationship between small, indigenous grassroots NGOs and the local state. Reciprocal engagement consists of three dimensions: proximity and communication, mutual support, and joint action. By proposing the concept of reciprocal engagement, we do not intend to paint a rosy picture to ignore or camouflage the tensions between local governments and

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[3] We conducted an extensive review of 105 peer-reviewed articles published in English (1990-2018) and found that most articles focus broadly on state-NGO interactions, examining a) NGOs' relations with central government (9), provincial governments (9), and local governments (26); b) well-established groups in urban centers or NGO-friendly regions, such as Beijing (19), Yunnan (13), Guangdong (10), Sichuan (8), and Shanghai (6); c) NGOs in the environmental field (36), social services (11), social/community development (6), AIDs preventions (6), and education (6).

grassroots NGOs but to make explicit the elements of NGO-government interactions that both parties aspire to establish. This relationship is of particular interest because it facilitates policy influence under authoritarianism, in contrast to more contentious approaches to policy advocacy that are thought to be effective in other regime types. We then explain how different levels of reciprocal engagement in practice leads to varying NGO policy influence and define the boundary conditions for the engagement-influence link. This study contributes to the literature by uncovering the subtleties of NGO-government interactions between grassroots NGOs and the local state and the importance of state-society engagement to policy influence. Our findings highlight how the engagement-influence link varies across regions, administrative agencies, and under different political climates. The dynamics of the engagement-influence link may be applied to other political contexts.

Theoretical Orientation

Our study is informed by two lines of literature, the first of which examines literature on NGO-government interactions in the West, and the second state-NGO relations in China.

Literature on NGO-Government Interactions in the West

A large body of work studies the interactions between NGOs and governments across global contexts. Various attempts have been made to identify and categorize a range of government-NGO relationships. Coston (1998), for example, uses governmental acceptance of institutional pluralism as the basic criteria to differentiate varying NGO-government relations: repression, rivalry, competition, contracting, third-party government, cooperation, complementarity, and collaboration. Young (2000) proposes that the nonprofit sector can be supplementary, complementary, or adversarial to the government. Najam (2000) posits that depending on whether

both parties differ in their ends (goals) and means (strategies), the relationship between NGOs and government can be categorized into cooperation, confrontation, complementarity, and cooptation.

A pervasive assumption underlying these studies is that state-NGO interactions in authoritarian and democratic political systems are qualitatively different (Foster, 2001). Whereas many studies on NGO-government interactions in authoritarian regimes focus more on conflict and opposition, studies in democratic regimes view government and the non-profit sector as potential partners and allies (Anheier and Salamon, 2006; Coston, 1998). A number of scholars have argued that nonprofits and governments can work synergistically in ways that accrue mutual benefits (Gazley and Brudney, 2007). Terms like "inter-sectoral collaboration" and "coproduction" have become a central feature of the new governance model of public service delivery and a major focus of current research and publication (Gazley, 2008). Building on such work, a host of theories have sought seek to explain the pre-conditions, processes and outcomes of alliances and collaborations (Foster and Meinhard, 2002; Gazley and Guo, 2020).

Despite the increasing emphasis on NGO-government collaboration in western literature, studies on NGO-government interactions in authoritarian regimes like China have traditionally focused on conflict and cooptation, and scholars have only recently begun to seriously examine collaboration between NGOs and the authoritarian state.

NGO-Government Interactions in China

Scholars have devoted increasing effort to studying the emerging nonprofit sector in China and its relationship with the authoritarian government. Within the civil society framework, observers point to the emergence of a nascent civil society, which could act as a stimulus for democratic

reform in China (Cooper 2006, Moore 2001, Morton 2005, White, Howell, and Shang 1996). In contrast, scholars who adopt the corporatist approach emphasize the various mechanisms that the Chinese government uses to incorporate NGOs to its canopy (Heurlin, 2010; Kang and Han, 2008; Thornton, 2013; Y. Zhang, 2015). Kang and Han (2008), for example, used "graduated controls" to describe the conditions under which the government used various control strategies toward different types of NGOs.

Most studies within civil society and corporatist perspectives assume a clear distinction between the public and private spheres and call for a healthy distance between the state and social organizations (Hsu 2010). Policy advocacy and influence are largely discussed in the context of control, resistance and contention. This underlying conflict perspective cannot fully capture the complex forms and motivations inherent in state-NGO relationships (Foster 2001).

Recognizing these limitations, scholars have begun to examine NGO-government collaboration and its benefits. The Chinese literature provides valuable insights into nonprofit-government relations, particularly in its mutually beneficial dimensions (Zhang and Guo 2020). For example, recent empirical evidence shows that the collaborative relations between government and NGOs within a polycentric social governance structure boosted the further growth of the nonprofit sector (Guan, 2015). Among articles published in English, Ho and Edmonds's (2007) early study of environmental NGOs proposes the notion of embedded activism, a form of social activism that emerges in a semi-authoritarian context characterized by formal structures of stringent state control that also allow significant latitude in informal practices. Teets (2014) observes the emergence of a "consultative authoritarianism" model in which increasing channels of interaction with the state increase NGOs' impact in service delivery and advocacy, and in which au-

thoritarian states benefit from NGOs while controlling perceived challenges. Spires (2011) uses "contingent symbiosis" to argue that grassroots NGOs can survive only if they promote welfare goals and limit political claims; these groups are far too weak to be the democratic agents. Ni and Zhan (2017) propose embedded government control to capture the complexity of government-nonprofit relationship along two dimensions: government regulation and political embeddedness.

In these ways, recent scholarship has begun to draw on the literature on state-NGO relations in the west and made inroads into a new paradigm for the study of NGO-state relations in which positive-sum interactions and policy influence are possible (Cai and Zhang, 2016; Hsu and Hasmath, 2017). However, absent from the literature is the linkage between engagement and NGO policy influence. Building on existing research, this study seeks to describe these collaborative relationships between grassroots NGOs and the local state and link such engagement to NGO policy influence.

Data and Methods

Data Sources

The data for the article come from a larger study conducted in six localities across Hebei, Yunnan, and Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. Provinces were selected based on variation in economic development, ethnic makeup and associational experience. Hebei has the highest level of economic development (by its GPD per capita 2010), followed by Ningxia and Yunnan. In terms of associational experience, Yunnan is considered to have high levels of associational activities, followed by Ningxia, and then Hebei. Both Yunnan and Ningxia have a highly heterogeneous ethnic makeup, whereas Hebei is relatively homogenous. Within each province, we selected two smaller research localities based on the authors' existing contacts and access, as well as

the degree of variations they exhibited with respect to the factors mentioned above. We focused on one locality that included an urban center and one that included a large county somewhat apart from an urban center. Names of the selected localities are omitted to ensure anonymity.

We specifically focused on those organizations that primarily focus on the environment or education. Environmental NGOs have been widely studied, and they have been playing an increasingly visible role in combating environmental pollution and promoting environmental governance. Educational NGOs have been active in rural and migrant education. These two areas were broad enough to increase opportunities for variation and encompass a range of different kinds of programs and agencies and to allow for study of interactions with issue-specific government agencies, such as Education Bureaus or Environmental Bureaus. These two issue areas also have the potential to be framed, construed, and dealt with by NGOs and government agencies in very different ways. On the one hand, they may both be seen as mundane, apolitical, day-to-day issues that fall within the official rhetoric and plans. On the other hand, they can both be very sensitive areas. Environmental issues, for example, can generate heated public debates and be a locus for mass mobilization against industry and the local state.

We used a grounded theory approach to collect and analyze data. Grounded theory is frequently used in qualitative data analysis, and it encompasses two essential strategies: theoretical sampling and constant comparisons (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Theoretical sampling involves collecting initial data, analyzing them, and then collecting additional cases to gather new insights or expand and refine concepts already developed. We detail the data collection process below.

Interviews

The first source of data are semi-structured, formal and informal interviews. Between 2009 and 2012, we conducted 122 interviews: 51 interviews with 22 NGOs, 55 with government officials, and 16 with scholars and researchers. In 2018-2019, we conducted a new round of 44 interviews and several visits, allowing for long-term observation of NGO-government interactions. In this round of fieldwork, 13 interviews were conducted with respondents from the original set of grassroots NGOs, and 3 interviews with representatives of government departments included in the original study. The rest of the interviews were with a range of other NGOs, government officials, and academics.

For interviews with NGOs, we first targeted those found from NGO listings or the Internet. We then used snowball sampling to recruit additional NGOs. Our sample may not be representative of the universe of Chinese grassroots NGOs, much less of Chinese social organizations in general. Nonetheless, we tried to approach data saturation—approaching every grassroots NGO meeting our criteria—in each research site.

Our interview questions focused on the mission, work, and history of the NGOs or government departments as well as the nature of engagement between NGOs and government agencies. Interviews were conducted in Chinese, without the assistance of a translator. For most interviews, we asked for and secured permission to record the interview, but in some cases, particularly interviews with government officials, we chose not to record interviews. In all interviews, however, extensive notes were taken.

Whenever possible, the founder and director of each NGO was interviewed. When this was not possible (for 5 out of 22 NGOs in the sample), the staff member responsible for government relations was interviewed. In many cases, several members of each NGO were interviewed,

and we were able to speak with most interviewees multiple times, in different social settings. For about one third of the organizations in the sample, because we already had extensive experience working with them and a strong foundation of mutual trust, one to two interviews were sufficient to yield the kind of data required. For some of the other NGOs in the sample, particularly when the initial formal interview was followed up by an informal meeting or meal, second or third interviews allowed for topics to be explored more candidly and frankly.

For the purposes of this study, we examine government agencies that oversee NGOs' work at the village, township, county, district or municipal levels. Specifically, we interviewed officials at *Civil Affairs Bureau*, *Environmental Protection Bureau*, *Education Bureau*, *Women's Federation*, *Poverty Alleviation Office* at different administrative levels. For example, a grassroots NGO at the municipal level working in the field of education corresponds to at least two government agencies—the municipal Civic Affairs Bureau, the regulatory agency for NGOs, and the municipal *Education Bureau*, which is responsible for supervising its work. As Hasmath and Hsu (2014) point out, it is at the local state level that the majority of meaningful interactions occur between the state and NGOs.

Those officials with whom we had previously established working relationships proved more forthcoming in initial interviews; for new contacts, it took time to build relationships. While painstaking, we were able to obtain more straightforward and less "prepared" answers to our questions. Our observations in such settings also provided important insights into the responsiveness, strength, and openness of local public institutions, and the way these officials handle our interview request was probably similar to the ways they respond to unknown grassroots organizations operating in the locality. Throughout the interview process, we became more attuned

to the underlying meanings of often high-context communication and nuanced official language.

Learning to use such terminology smoothed the communication process, put officials more at

ease and predisposed them to more less guarded information and deeper insights.

Participant observation

Our rich experience with NGOs also allowed us to observe aspects of the state-NGO rela-

tionships that are difficult to capture through interviews. We have accompanied members of sev-

eral fledgling grassroots NGOs on dozens of visits to government departments in their efforts to

establish relationships, sat with them to wait outside the office for hours, heard them introduce

their organizations, experienced doors being closed in our faces, seen open-minded officials

warm to their story, sat in on meetings in which project terms were negotiated and collaboration

reached, and partaken of meals at which trust was built and friendships established. We also par-

ticipated in bi-annual seminars where dozens of Chinese grassroots NGOs gathered together to

undergo training, discuss problems, and share experiences. These observations enabled us to de-

velop a deeper understanding of the subtle relationships between NGOs and the local state.

Aside from the interviews and participant observation, we also consulted NGO materials,

relevant bureaucratic documents, government websites, and newspapers. Table 1 outlines the

characteristics of NGOs in the study. Most grassroots NGOs had fewer than five core staff mem-

bers (including paid and unpaid staff), while only a couple had over ten core staff. Geographical-

ly, grassroots NGOs are local and indigenous in that they originated, operate, and/or have offices

located at the local level. Two thirds of the selected organizations are founded and run by indi-

viduals from the villages or cities in which they operate, while the rest by individuals from else-

where in the province. In these respects, the sample included in this study differs from Chinese

grassroots NGOs included in other studies, many of which are based in and operate in major

cities, or, if they do not, are founded and run by elites or urbanites from major cities (Zhan and

Tang, 2011). In terms of registration status, above half of the NGOs are registered as NGOs, and

9 out of the 22 NGOs are unregistered, despite recent changes in legislation that aimed to loosen

registration restrictions for grassroots NGOs in 2011.[4] All the organizations included in this study

engaged in concrete action in the form of social programs, as opposed to pure advocacy groups

or membership-based associations.

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[4] Existing studies show that legally registered organizations are somewhat different from unregistered ones in terms of their interactions with the government (Chen and Xu, 2011; Hildebrandt, 2012). Registered groups tend to exploit their legal status to maximize resources drawn from both the state and the society, which enhances their autonomy. They typically establish mutually beneficial collaborations with the government. We did not find significant differences between registered and unregistered groups in their approaches to interacting with local government departments. All the unregistered groups in our sample wished to register but faced significant regulatory challenges in doing so. We found that successful registration was a function of reciprocal engagement, a step along the path of building close relationships with government departments—in particular, a supervisory department—and with respect to most of the unregistered groups in this study, a matter of time. Of the 9 unregistered NGOs interviewed in 2009-12, most had successfully registered by 2018-19.

Table 1 Characteristics of NGOs in the Study

|	Yunnan	Ningxia	Hebei	Total
Number of NGOs	8	7	7	22
Issue Area				
Environment	4	4	5	13
Education	4	3	2	9
Registration Status				
Registered as NGO	5	4	2	11
Registered as Others	0	0	2	2
Unregistered	3	3	3	9
Average Age	13.3	6.2	10.9	10.1
Founder Origin				
Same village or city as NGO	5	3	6	14
Same province	3	3	2	8
Other provinces	0	0	0	0
Size				
Under 5 Core Staff	5	5	5	15
5-10 Core Staff	2	1	2	5
Over 10 Core Staff	1	1	0	2
Geographic Scope				
Urban	0	1	2	3
Rural	4	4	2	10
Urban and Rural	4	2	3	9

Data Analysis

To form a complete picture of the information obtained during the data collection process, we used the constant comparative method to code and analyze the data. This involves three levels of analyses: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). We began open coding by identifying the initial concepts (e.g., trust, influence) and constantly asking questions about what is and is not understood. We then moved on to axial coding by piecing together the concepts to allow connections between them. By selective coding, we weave and refine all the major categories into high-order themes (e.g., reciprocal engagement). Coding is an iterative

process that involves moving back and forth between the data and the theory. This process ensures that theoretical concepts generated are grounded directly and indirectly on perspectives of the diverse actors who have perspectives on and interpretations of the phenomena studied (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Therefore, this article begins from NGO leaders' and government officials' own conceptualizations of the relationships that they seek to build.

Findings

Our analysis indicates that some NGO-local government interactions can be characterized as reciprocal engagement, which consists of three distinct dimensions—proximity and communication, mutual support, and joint action (See Figure 1). They combine to set the collaborative dynamics in motion. Below we draw on interviews with members of grassroots NGOs and local government officials to illustrate the reciprocal engagement concept and explain how it links to policy influence.

Figure 1 Reciprocal Engagement and Policy Influence Framework

Elements of reciprocal engagement
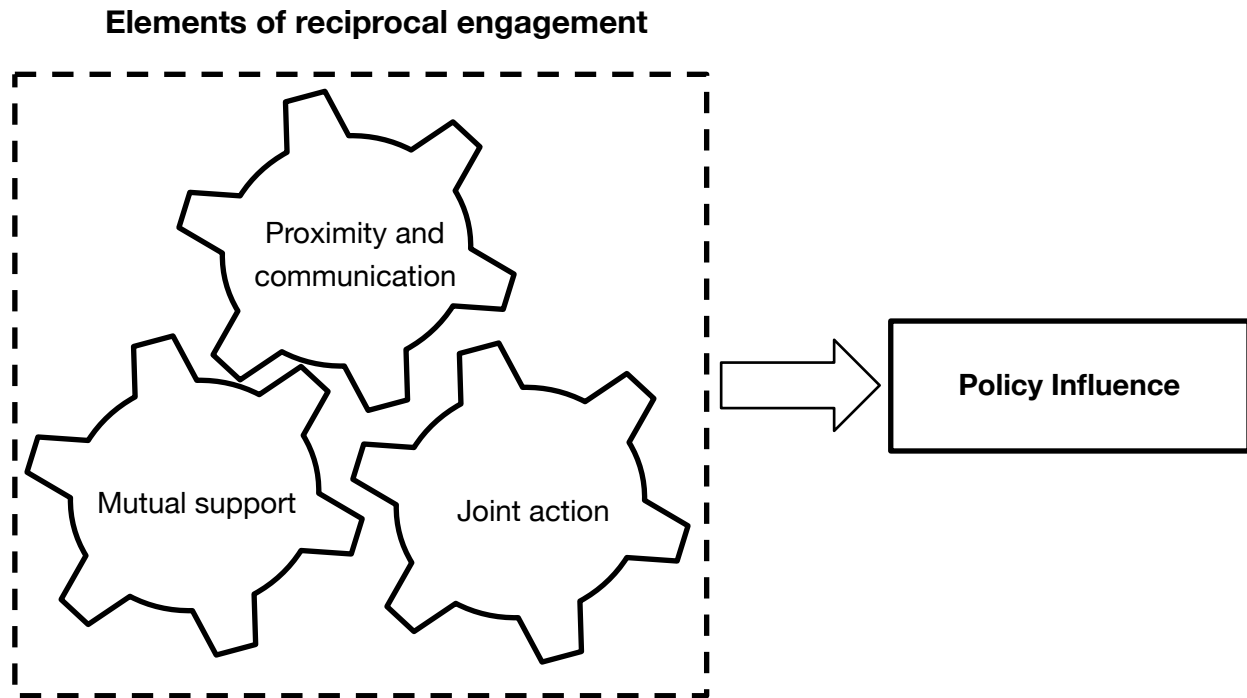
Elements of Reciprocal Engagement

Proximity and Communication

Dialogue and communication are considered an essential ingredient for effective collaboration. Ansell and Gash (2008), for example, argue that collaboration implies a two-way communication between agencies and stakeholders and opportunities for stakeholders to talk with each other. Emerson et al. (2012) emphasize the importance of open and inclusive communications among participants in the collaborative governance process. Through communication, participants can develop a shared sense of purpose and shared theory of action for achieving that purpose. In the NGO literature, scholars consider proximity and communication as the precondition to influence policymaking. Hsu and Jiang (2015), for example, argue that NGOs that have larger societal impacts are usually the ones with the closest ties to the state. Hasmath, Hildebrandt, and Hsu (2019) similarly find that "becoming closer to the state can be desirable from an organiza-

tional evolutionary standpoint and can operationally place an organization at a comparative advantage."

From this perspective, one key characteristic of reciprocal engagement is related to the close, intimate interactions between grassroots NGOs and the local state. While NGO leaders and government officials acknowledge that they may have divergent interests and capacity, they agree that both parties should be mutually aware, close, and even intimate. For them, proximity entails communication. Dialogue is thus a frequently mentioned word. As one government official said,

> The government is the heart of the society, and the CSOs [civil society organizations] are the other organs. There must be communication and veins between these. You have to develop good relations with the government so that the blood can flow, and the communication can flow.[5]

These relationships involve engagement and communication at both the individual and at the organizational level. The communication can occur through discussion and dialogue, visits, reports and meetings. The content of communication may include the exchange of ideas and experience, where "the government would have some activities that we [the NGO] participate in, and some of the meetings we hold to share and discuss the topic of education, they can also participate in, so that ideas and theories could be shared and information flow between the two." [6] Therefore, some government officials expressed hope that NGOs can actively participate in their work. As one government official indicated, "In the past, government did everything. But now, things are different. Government has to decentralize and involve other parties. NGOs are important social resources and can help undertake some of the social service responsibilities."

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[5] Interview BJ07, Government, staff. Beijing, September 2009.

[6] Interview H259, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

Mutual Support

Productive NGO-state relations are based on mutual support and trust, which typically takes time and requires understanding (Emerson et al., 2012; Gazley, 2010). As AbouAssi and Bowman (2017) show, effective NGO-government relationships often require mutual support: NGOs provide expertise and community outreach, while the government lends material support and sometimes moral support—even legitimacy—to NGOs.

A number of respondents brought up the idea of mutual support, which "refers to the government's support of the NGO's programs with human, financial, and other resources. NGOs can also support the work of the government."[7] This kind of support is coupled with a degree of independence: "On the one hand we get this support, but also our work is very independent, they won't come and meddle in our affairs. Because first of all their money is not involved."[8] At the same time, the same respondent suggested that "the best relationship" is one in which government "gives some resources to social organizations."[9] Government officials, too, discussed a complementary division of labor and the provision of support in the form of resources. A health department official said that

> With respect to [our department's] projects, we hand over a portion of our work to the social organizations to complete. We will suggest certain tasks according to the work they are doing and provide them with resources accordingly. So in this way, the cooperation is very positive.[10],[11]

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[7] Ibid.

[8] Interview Y250, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, July 2010.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Interview Y251, Government, staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

[11] This official's rhetoric is not uncommon. In fact, the Chinese government has been advocating for social management, which aims to guide and shape autonomous social institutions and mechanisms, primarily referring to but not limited to NGOs, that were complementary to the government in resolving social tensions and providing public services. In a sense, many government agencies are learning to develop "a social governance model based on collaboration, participation, and common interests," as mentioned in the 19th CCP National Congress in 2017.

Many interviewees highlighted the importance of trust in mutually supportive relations. They defined this to mean that the two parties "understand each other."[12] For instance, an NGO leader said: "By mutually trusting, I mean the government should welcome NGOs to do things and should support their work."[13] Another believed that "the local government approves of our work. When they think of our organization, they see that it is meticulous and helps their work, and the common people like it."[14]

Grassroots NGOs imagined their relationships with local authorities as "coexisting and interdependent,"[15] "win-win"[16] and "equal and cooperative."[17] An environmental NGO leader asserted that "it should be a mutually trusting, mutually encouraging, mutually supporting, and mutually monitoring relationship."[18] This trust can lead to greater leeway in operations: "The government trusts me…For example, if I go and do other things, I don't have to let them know, because I have their tacit consent." Finally, trust goes both ways: "our organization also has trust in the government's function." It is also strengthened by mutual regulation or monitoring, which includes "financial monitoring, financial auditing and investigating, and [monitoring] funding sources"

> This is also of assistance to the NGO. Because the government's monitoring of the NGO can allow the NGO to use its money suitably, to use its funding in the places where it

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Interview Y250, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, July 2010.

[15] Interview Y250, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, July 2010.

[16] Interview Y252, NGO, staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

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

[18] Interview N238, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

should be used. And the opposite is also true, the NGO's influence on the government is also positive.[19]

Joint Action

As Emerson et al. (2012) show, the purpose of collaboration is to move beyond individual action toward joint action—individuals and organizations of diverse backgrounds coming together for effective action. This could include sharing and leveraging knowledge and resources, dividing up labor, and developing requisite skills for program implementation. Therefore, the third characteristic of reciprocal engagement involves some form of action outside of what the local state is already doing. It also implies a transformative purpose, which would presumably effect changes in the involved parties' approaches and goals. For example, when discussing health services in a particular locality, one official asserted that "we have a very complete cycle, each government office and social organization is doing a different part of it, so it runs very smoothly." In this context, resources are also shared: "NGO resources can come in, and government resources can be shared with NGOs."[20]

The complementary division of work between grassroots NGOs and local authorities naturally leads to mutual influence: "The NGO's actions can equally affect the actions of the government, because the NGO can do a lot and the government…can realize the deficiencies in its functioning, which will strengthen government's work and fill in gaps in their work."[21] Another NGO leader suggested that "NGO-government collaboration can fill in some of the areas they [government] have left blank. We do some things that the government is not paying a lot of at-

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[19] Interview N238, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

[20] Interview Y251, Government, staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

[21] Interview N238, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

tention to, but that we think are very important. And when the government sees what we are do-

ing and how important it is, even if we leave, the government will continue to do this work."[22]

Of course, if NGOs want to be part of the game, they need to pay careful attention to

quality and program effectiveness. For example, one official indicated that NGOs working in her

locality "survive according to quality. In doing this work they do it well, and it is of great as-

sistance to our work."[23] The question of quality was directly linked to government support and

popular support:

> ...whether it's government offices or NGOs, [we all] have to improve our abilities. Be-
> cause only when you have good working methods and skills can you ensure the quality
> and survival of your organization. But if you can't do this you won't secure the approval
> or recognition of government or of the people.[24]

Linking Reciprocal Engagement to Policy Influence

Both government and NGO respondents agreed that productive reciprocal engagement

leads to policy influence. However, in practice, fostering reciprocal engagement seems challeng-

ing to many NGOs. As Hasmath and Hsu (2014) observe, although there are many potential ben-

efits to collaboration, there are only low levels of voluntary collaboration between the local state

and NGOs in China. There seems to be a gap between the aspirations of positive-sum interac-

tions and the reality of NGO-government interactions. In some instances, grassroots NGOs' ef-

forts to draw government officials into spaces where dialogue can occur are not always success-

ful. One NGO leader expressed, "we work on how government can be more influenced by the

common peoples' views and opinions and merge the interests of different parties. We tried sever-

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[22] Interview Y252, NGO, staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

al ways to invite the township government to attend these meetings, but they never come. These officials are just worried too much." Another environmental NGO tried several months to contact officials at *Environmental Protection Bureau* but was rejected multiple times.

With low levels of reciprocal engagement, policy influence seems like a distant possibility. Several NGOs did not believe they had any ability to impact policy at all. One NGO founder said of government, "because they are an administrative organization, they haven't really clearly said how they should work with civil society groups. It is not their main work. For us there is not really any effect on policy, they don't listen to our opinions." Another NGO founder expressed similar lack of hope: "I feel I don't know how to influence them and cannot influence them. We are just too tiny and weak. They say we can go do things, but what we say doesn't have a lot of weight in their eyes."

NGOs with a higher level of reciprocal engagement, however, expressed a belief in their ability to influence policy: "big policies are more difficulty…[but] in small things we can do some advocacy and have an effect." Yet, such influence often occurs in a highly localized context, typically affecting the implementation of existing policies at the local, or at most, provincial level. We acknowledge that it is notoriously difficult to prove policy influence, especially in China, where the policy process is characterized by a lack of transparency. Our interviews reveal that grassroots NGOs' influence manifests in three major ways (See Table 2).

Table 2 Reciprocal Engagement and Policy Influence

Levels of Reciprocal Engagement	Policy Influence
Low	• Minimal. • NGOs trying to build connections with the government, and their efforts are not always successful • Some hold negative views toward NGOs' role in the policy process
High	• Mainly small scale, at the local level • Influence government departments' internal work methods • Facilitate policy implementation by bringing in new expertise and experience, such as the participatory approach • Contribute to refinement of policy by identifying policy weaknesses

Some NGOs were able to influence government departments' internal work methods. For instance, the founder of a long-standing environmental NGO described how local officials sometimes seek her advice about internal management: "After the current director came to office, we had a dialogue with him. We talked about how to build the human resource team of the *Environmental Protection Bureau*. I gave him some suggestions about how to train his staff to nurture their development, so they grow together."

Grassroots NGOs with specialized know-how and experience can affect existing policy by facilitating implementation. One environmental NGO, for example, helped *Women's Federation* and *Environmental Protection Bureau* to train villagers how to use the sustainable waste management bio-gas system, which was previously promoted by the two agencies but rarely used by villagers. One educational NGO collaborated closely with district-level and county-level Educational Bureaus and local public schools to implement participatory educational methods. Government officials are receptive to these programs, as they can take credit for the good work that

NGOs do. As an NGO leader stated,

> Because as NGOs, we are at the grassroots level, and much of our work involves dealing with government; we coordinate and communicate with them so that they know what we are doing, what the benefits are, and what we need in terms of support from them. Another important task, because we are supplementary to government, is to keep abreast of the changes in the community and then share with government the results of what is happening, how to guide policy, and where the weaknesses are, so that our resources can be effectively integrated with the government resources.[25]

NGOs can also contribute to the reform and refinement of policy through discovering and pointing out policy weaknesses. An environmental NGO was able to influence the provincial microfinance policy, because "we have a thorough understanding of the situation at the grassroots…we can provide information to the government on how policy should be…Our thoughts, methods, and approaches are adopted by government because of our practical experiences."[26]

Both participant observation and interviews revealed numerous other examples of NGOs' reciprocal engagement affecting government policy and programs, even when action was in its early stages and had only been carried out on a small scale.

The Boundary Conditions for the Engagement-Influence Framework

According to Busse, Kach, and Wagner (2017), an important dimension of theory building involves defining boundary conditions, which refer to the "who, where, when" aspects of a theory and describe the limits of generalizability of a theory. Below we examine how the engagement-influence link is contingent on various boundary conditions, including regions, administrative agencies, and evolving political climate. Propositions drawn from the data and literature are offered throughout.

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[25] Interview Y250, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, July 2010.

[26] Interview Y134, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, May 2010.

Regional Variation

As Wu and Chan (2012) point out, although central government set the direction of social development at the national level as strengthening "party leadership, government responsibility, society's cooperation, and public participation," local governments have interpreted this "direction" in different ways by emphasizing either one or more of the four components. We thus examined the variation of reciprocal engagement across the three regions—Hebei, Ningxia, and Yunnan. During our interviews, we asked grassroots NGOs in the three regions to assess their interactions with the government across several dimensions, including communication, support, and joint action, and their perceived impact in the policy process. Yunnan stands out as having a higher level of NGO-government interactions and policy influence. Several NGO leaders described officials in Yunnan as "quite open and welcoming of social organizations."

The respondents provided two possible explanations. The first is geopolitical: Yunnan is a minority area, and it is close to the border and Tibet. Central government provides more flexibility and leeway to provincial and local governments, allowing them to experiment with and implement innovative, locally-tailored educational, environmental, and poverty alleviation programs. This opens up additional spaces for NGO activity and increases the convergence of their interests with those of local government officials. The second reason is related to its rich associational experience. A large number of foreign foundations, such as Save the Children, The Clinton Foundation, and World Vision, had worked with local governments, and the collaboration has familiarized local officials with NGOs' mission and methods. This finding is consistent with Teets (2015), who shows that compared with the Beijing model, which focuses more on a gov-

ernment-led process of group development, the Yunnan model relies on a heavier role for INGOs

and more collaboration between local government agencies and civil society groups.

Proposition 1: The engagement-influence link is stronger in regions with higher policy flexibility and/or more associational experience.

Variation Across Administrative Agencies

We also disaggregate the state into different administrative agencies. Findings indicate

that NGOs are closely connected with local government agencies at the county, district, and vil-

lage levels, suggesting that grassroots NGOs ground their work in local social or policy issues.

Since the NGOs we examined are in the education and environmental fields, they work closely

with *Education* and *Environmental Bureaus*; NGOs reported higher levels of communication,

mutual support, joint action, and perceived influence with these two agencies, indicating their

higher levels of interactions with and trust in NGOs. These two agencies also involve NGOs in

their work and allow NGOs to enter and exert some influence in the policy process. *Poverty Al-*

leviation Office also stands out as an NGO partner agency, suggesting that local governments

rely on NGOs to help ameliorate poverty.

Interestingly, many NGOs shared their frustration in working with the *Civil Affairs Bu-*

reau, the regulatory body that supervises NGOs' work by requiring meetings and documentation.

As an NGO founder shared,

> We kept running back and forth to try to register but were unable to. *Local Civil Affairs* just kept telling us to go and get this and that. It was very painful. I felt as though there was no way forward, because if you don't register, you are illegal. But no one was listening to our voice, and they didn't tell us the reason [that we couldn't register].[27]

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[27]Interview H261, NGO, founder and director, Hebei, August 2010.

An official at the *Civil Affairs Bureau* indicated their position, "Overall, we are responsible for NGO registration and dissolution. There are many different sorts of social organizations out there, such as health, social services, educational, and environmental. We cannot know them all. That's why we rely on supervisory agencies to manage NGOs." In fact, Teets (2015) indicated that *Civil Affairs Bureaus* act as rubber stamps—taking care of the paperwork process and counting on the supervisory agency to manage NGOs. This passive approach put grassroots NGOs in a precarious position, as they are dependent on supervisory agencies.

The variation across administrative agencies suggests that government agencies take a practical approach with grassroots NGOs. As Newland (2018) shows, within the multilevel political structure, government officials who can be characterized as innovators are willing to build civil society partnerships and leverage NGOs' knowledge and expertise to promote their career goals.

Proposition 2: The engagement-influence link is stronger when NGOs and government agencies have more overlap in areas of activity.

Evolving Political Climate

There were two notable changes to reciprocal engagement patterns and policy influence over time. First, building substantive and formal partnerships can deepen the interactions and trust between NGOs and government agencies and help open up an additional venue for NGOs to exert influence in the policy process. However, given the deeply rooted divide between government and grassroots NGOs, many NGOs in our study were unable to develop substantive collaborative relationship with the government, and government contracting of services to grassroots NGOs was still quite rare. While government contracting to NGOs has been an increasingly

popular subject of discussion, only a few first-tier cities have well-established NGO contracting regimes.

Second, the government has strengthened party building in domestic NGOs in the Xi era. Since the 18th National Party Congress (2012), party-building has routinely been an important measure for social organization evaluation. In 2015, for example, the CCP Central Committee issued the *Interim Opinions on Strengthening the Party-Building in Social Organizations*, which indicates that grassroots party branches should be established in social organizations (Section 1.1). On visits to NGOs, literature about and visual representations of party building efforts were on much more prominent display. In interviews, NGO staff and leaders frequently referenced these efforts, particularly in the context of discussions on government interaction, in a way that was not the case a decade ago. The shift in emphasis tends to privilege better-established NGOs that have the capacity and wherewithal to build party cells and signal political loyalties. Organizations that were better positioned to show a strong internal party structure and corresponding practices seemed to have an advantage in establishing formal collaborations with government agencies and exerting policy influence. Many of the grassroots groups included in this study, however, did not have party members on staff or as members, meaning that they had to jump through several hoops to build party cells in compliance with regulations.

Overall, the political climate has led to decreasing levels of mutual support and increased risks for joint action, resulting in fewer reciprocal relationships and less policy influence. Where reciprocal engagement does persist, it can be mediated by political and administrative factors, such as party building or government contracting.

Proposition 3: The engagement-influence link weakens as the political climate tightens.

Discussion and Conclusion

Existing studies on NGO-government interactions in authoritarian regimes have histori-cally assumed zero-sum relationships between grassroots NGOs and the government, highlight-ing either autonomy, control, or contingency. Although scholars have begun to incorporate in-sights from the literature on NGO-government relations in the West and examine the benefits of NGO-government collaboration, they have paid insufficient attention to the link between collab-oration and NGO policy influence. In this study, we used a grounded-theory approach to analyze the subtleties of grassroots NGO-local state interactions and policy influence in authoritarian China.

Our study shows that reciprocal engagement, a positive-sum relationship characterized by proximity and communication, mutual support and joint action, is the relationship that small, in-digenous grassroots NGOs aspire to establish with the local state. As Hsu (2010) shows, NGOs are much more interested in building alliances with state agencies and actors than in autonomy from the government, and such alliances can help both parties to secure necessary resources and gain legitimacy. While existing studies have discussed the diversified strategies that NGOs use to advocate for policy change, such as using legal channels, developing an expert status to consult with the government, and use of media to create visibility and pressure on the government (Dai and Spires, 2017; Li, Lo, and Tang, 2017; Teets and Almen, 2018), few have showed the substan-tive policy influence that NGOs have made. Our study highlights that high levels of reciprocal engagement lead to policy influence, which manifests in three major ways: 1) shaping govern-

ment departments' internal work methods, 2) facilitating policy implementation by bringing in knowledge and expertise, and 3) influencing policy revision by pointing out policy weaknesses.[28]

The landscape of NGO-government interactions in practice are multifaceted, dynamic, and complex. As Spires (2011) shows, grassroots NGOs exist in a fragile "contingent symbiosis" with China's authoritarian government, and broader contextual factors, such as fragmentation of governance and enforcement, shape such contingencies. We further define the boundary conditions for the reciprocal engagement and policy influence framework by examining how regions, administrative agencies, and evolving political climate influence the engagement-influence relationship. Testable propositions are proposed.

Nevertheless, there are several caveats. First, while respondents converge on a conception of reciprocal engagement, this does not imply a rosy picture in which the Chinese government provides a liberal environment free of control over NGOs. Rather, governments at all levels are cautious about NGOs and their potential to mobilize citizens against the state. Variation across regions, government agencies, and over time are manifestations of such concerns. However, state actors also recognize the need for NGOs, and thus selectively contain those that transgress political boundaries. Thus, the Chinese environment is one in which spaces exist for natural, organic, and non-revolutionary change to occur gradually and incrementally, through the emergence of collaborative dynamics that gain traction and change the landscape over time. These observations of reciprocal engagement and resultant policy influence, then, are more akin to plants that take root and eventually split rocks.

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[28] A more comprehensive discussion of mechanisms used by the grassroots NGOs in this study to achieve policy influence and advocacy goals can be found in Farid (2019).

Second, reciprocal engagement may not be applicable across all civil society groups, because the discussion here is confined to organizations that are working for change from "within the system.". It would be meaningless to talk about reciprocal engagement between dissident groups and the state. By identifying and describing one state-NGO relationship that is non-contentious yet lends itself to the exertion of influence on the local state, we hope to provide a richer and more diverse set of concepts on which scholars and practitioners can draw when studying the functioning of grassroots NGOs in diverse political contexts.

Third, our study only focuses on grassroots NGOs in three typical under-developed regions, resulting in potential representation issues. Future studies should compare NGOs in more regions, including both developed and less developed areas. Similarly, future studies should compare NGOs across service areas, such as those working on social service provision and rights advocacy, to examine whether they exhibit different patterns of reciprocal engagement between NGOs and the local state.

Overall, in this article, we examined the subtle interactions between grassroots NGO leaders and the local state in three under-developed regions. In taking up the task of close observation, on the ground, of sometimes-overlooked variation in a diverse field, this study opens new peepholes into the complexity of China's governance and reveals the "internal strains of criss-crossed and intersecting trends within political systems" (Shue and Thornton, 2017). Beyond the Chinese context, our findings imply that if, as emerging scholarship suggests, policy influence is as much a function of reciprocal engagement and collaboration as it is of autonomy and contention between civil society and the state, further scholarship can explore the dynamics of the engagement-influence link in other political contexts. In this sense, patterns of variation and

mechanisms of influence uncovered in the Chinese context are applicable not only in other authoritarian systems but across a range of regime types.

Compliance with Ethical Requirements

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval: All procedures performed in studies involving human participants was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Oxford University.

Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study

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