

Advocacy in Action: China's Grassroots NGOs as Catalysts for Policy Innovation

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Abstract

How do small, grassroots NGOs influence a powerful authoritarian state and its policies? This paper presents data on instances of interaction between China's grassroots NGOs and party-state agencies through which NGOs are able to exert influence on policymaking and implementation by modeling innovations in action. The analysis begins by painting the backdrop against which policy influence occurs: a political context characterized by diminished bureaucratic capacity, policy discretion, and experimentation under authoritarianism. It then presents the argument that collaboration between grassroots NGOs and local government agencies can act as a risk mitigation strategy for official innovation in a system of experimentation under hierarchy. Extensive longitudinal field research across six sub-national units shows convergence among grassroots NGOs on a conception of advocacy in action. This expanded conception of advocacy overcomes the dichotomy between advocacy and service delivery functions, and allows for observation of a fuller range of efforts that include 'obstructive' as well as 'instructive' advocacy. Globally, traditional channels of political participation are decreasing in availability and efficacy. This research shows how, as growing numbers of the populace organize to address social and environmental challenges through grassroots organizations, they open alternate channels of political participation, in turn refashioning state practice.

Introduction

Nongovernmental organizations have been seen as important new political actors, with the potential to make significant contributions to political life and political change, a transformational impact on political structures and processes, and the ability to influence legislation and public policy.² Despite these high hopes, NGOs are not always successful in their efforts to exert pressure on local elites or local governments. Though they can act as catalysts for change,³ they often have an interest in maintaining the status quo.⁴ Widely heterogeneous state-NGO relationships make it difficult to generalize about the potential impact of such groups on

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² Clarke 1998; Edwards and Hulme 1996

³ Hirschman 1984; Sanyal 1994.

⁴ Fowler 1993; Ndegwa 1996.

the state or on patterns of governance, such that ‘there is no simple or consistent story of good NGOs confronting evil governments.’⁵

Observers of China’s NGO sector have also questioned the extent to which these organizations are able to influence an authoritarian state.⁶ Research shows that Chinese NGOs certainly pursue advocacy and aim to influence policy.⁷ There is also evidence that such groups are successfully impacting policy innovation and implementation.⁸ This line of research represents a departure from a simplistic narrative in which NGOs are objects of state control and repression, bringing to light the agency of Chinese NGOs in acting on the state.

However, extant scholarship on policy advocacy work by Chinese NGOs has primarily focused on organizations that are inherently well positioned to access policymakers. Government-organized NGOs naturally have close ties with the state and enjoy opportunities to serve policy advisory functions. Large private foundations and foreign NGOs operating in China are able to bring significant financial power and international legitimacy to bear in exerting influence on collaborating departments.

What is less clear, however, is the role of grassroots NGOs. Difficult to identify and access relative to other types of organizations, they are understudied and underrepresented in scholarship on this sector.⁹ These small, indigenous organizations often operate in rural areas or small cities without pre-existing ties to the Chinese government, foreign governments or established and credible international agencies. They are, nonetheless, an important part of the landscape of non-state actors. They are generally embedded in local communities and thus seen as a particularly meaningful indicator of civil society.¹⁰ Grassroots groups also likely constitute the bulk of social organizations in China, both in terms of numbers and reach.¹¹ Are China’s grassroots NGOs exerting policy influence and what are the mechanisms through which they are able to do so? This is the key question addressed by this paper.

⁵ Fisher 1997, 252.

⁶ China’s non-state, non-market sector includes a wide variety of groups and institutions, of which the organizations discussed here form only a part and thus cannot be taken to represent the whole. Sometimes referred to as civil society organizations, nonprofit organizations, or, in the Chinese context, social organizations, the term NGO is used in this paper. See methodological appendix for an explication of definitions and terminology.

⁷ An early indication of this advocacy impulse is discussed by Ho and Edmonds who note that ‘China’s environmental groups find ways, albeit incremental and ad hoc, to approach and influence relevant government departments with policy suggestions.’ They cite a 2000 survey of 1500 NGOs, of which 58.7 percent had provided policy advice to state institutions (Ho and Edmonds 2007, 27). See also a recent study of environmental NGOs by Li, Lo, and Tang (2017).

⁸ See Bondes 2011; Dai and Spires 2018; Salmenkari 2008; Teets 2018; Yang and Calhoun 2007.

⁹ For exceptions, see Zhang and Baum’s (Zhang and Baum 2004) important early study, Spires, Tao, and Chan 2014; and Fu (2017) study of unofficial civil society.

¹⁰ Ma 2002.

¹¹ See methodological appendix for specific estimates.

Observers suggest that Chinese grassroots NGOs are generally limited to the provision of social or cultural services.¹² Alternatively, they have been seen to function simply as ‘safety valves’ that relieve pressure for change. NGOs can act as what Nathan calls ‘input institutions,’ allowed by the Chinese regime to ‘allow Chinese to believe that they have some influence on policy decisions and personnel choices at the local level.’¹³ But the question remains as to whether the influence brought to bear through these institutions is simply illusory, or to some extent real. Understanding how grassroots groups influence government policy and practice allows for deeper insight into ‘the interpenetration and mutual shaping of state and society.’¹⁴

This understanding also allows for the discovery of alternate channels of political participation in an authoritarian system that generally lacks such channels.¹⁵ Where traditional means of participation using the institutional channels of representative government are largely unavailable, and engaging in contentious politics has proved costly and limited in achieving lasting change, can other forms of political participation be observed? What makes non-democracies particularly interesting contexts for study is that the obstruction of traditional channels allows for observation of new ways in which the will of the people to have a voice in development and governance finds expression. The discovery of new avenues for public participation becomes even more salient as the efficacy of traditional democratic channels is increasingly called into question, giving the mechanisms uncovered in this paper broader significance across a range of political contexts.¹⁶

Answering the question of whether and how China’s grassroots NGOs influence policy also has implications for understanding patterns of governance. Bondes’ study of social organizations in Western China concludes that ‘while their practices remain within the limits imposed by the authoritarian framework, they impact policy formulation, local political participation, and the formation of social networks...’¹⁷ A body of work looks specifically at how informal institutions can explain variation in governance outcomes in China.¹⁸ In particular, good governance is strengthened by civil society groups that ‘transmit credible information to local government about societal interests’ and ‘information to society and higher levels of government about local officials’ reputation and behavior.’ In doing so, they facilitate more pluralism and accountability in the policy process at the local level.¹⁹ Thus, exploring the role played by grassroots NGOs in policy influence contributes to our understanding of the forces shaping

¹² See, for example, Ashley and He 2008; Tang and Zhan 2008.

¹³ Nathan 2003.

¹⁴ Yang and Calhoun 2007.

¹⁵ Salmenkari 2014.

¹⁶ Achen and Bartels 2017.

¹⁷ Bondes 2011.

¹⁸ Tsai 2007; Xu and Yao 2015.

¹⁹ Teets 2008.

China's governance, how growing numbers of its populace organize to address social and environmental challenges, in turn refashioning state practice.

Overview

This article presents data on instances of interaction between grassroots NGOs and party-state agencies through which NGOs are able to exert influence on policymaking and implementation. The analysis begins by painting the backdrop against which policy influence occurs: a political context characterized by diminished bureaucratic capacity, policy discretion, and experimentation under authoritarianism. It then presents the argument that collaboration between grassroots NGOs and local government agencies can act as a risk mitigation strategy for official innovation in a system of experimentation under hierarchy.

Because local state officials often lack access to the technical expertise, human resources, budgets or political leeway to conduct research or experiments in many policy areas, NGOs are able to move into this space and act as agents in the testing of new approaches. Local officials need to solve governance challenges to solve local challenges or win promotion, but innovation carries significant political risks. By collaborating with NGOs, local officials avoid the risk of failure and gain political credit for successful innovations. Particularly when NGO-state relationships are informal or involve unregistered NGOs, local officials can claim plausible deniability of their activities if something goes wrong and avoid accusations of contributing to social instability. Collaborating with NGOs to innovate is a low-risk, high-benefit strategy for local cadres. When successful models emerge, new ideas and methods promoted by NGOs can be scaled-up and diffused. Innovative, promotion-minded officials provide 'access to the cellular structure of the Chinese state,' or horizontal, place-based networks as well as vertical, issue-based ones, expanding the reach of programs.²⁰ Through them, NGOs gain access to channels for influence.

The paper draws on an expanded conception of advocacy. It highlights the interrelationship between NGO advocacy and service delivery functions, often seen as distinct spheres. Emphasis is usually placed on the importance of the advocacy function in policy influence. However, that implementation can be equally important in informing policy. An expanded conception of 'advocacy' is not limited to the provision of information and influencing discourses on social issues. It also allows for observation of a spectrum of efforts ranging from 'obstructive' interventions intended to stop harmful practices to 'constructive' or 'instructive' efforts that aim at 'deliberative policy effects' and the innovation of new practices. If advocacy often refers to dialogue and campaigns aiming to bring the 'better argument' to light, then a

²⁰ Newland 2018.

diversity of policy innovations on an experimental basis is an opportunity for government to see the ‘better argument’ in action.

The findings of this study suggest convergence among grassroots NGOs on a conception of advocacy in action. It discusses mechanisms through which grassroots NGOs realize advocacy goals, focusing on a strategy of modeling successful innovations. This article presents instances of grassroots NGOs’ influence on the formulation and implementation of policy in several social domains at the local level, and discusses conditions under which this influence occurs. It should be noted that the instances of policy influence detailed in this paper are typically highly localized, with limited potential for effects to scale up to the provincial level, and even more rarely to the central level.

Findings presented in this paper are drawn from a broader comparative study of state-NGO relations across six sites across Hebei Province, Yunnan Province and Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region.²¹ The study included 122 semi-structured interviews with grassroots NGOs and local government officials; original survey data; a review of NGO materials, relevant bureaucratic documents; government websites, newspapers, national statistical yearbooks and attendance at government and NGO conferences. Specific parameters as were used in the definition of ‘grassroots NGOs.’ Groups had to be rooted in local communities, identify as an organization, and carry out concrete programs. To enable comparisons across issue areas while limiting issue-specific factors, only organizations operating in the fields of environment or education were included in the sample.²²

Findings presented here are also informed by over a decade of ethnographic research and participant observation among grassroots NGOs and in government policy research in China. Follow-up interviews were also carried out with several of the organizations included in the study in 2018, allowing for long-term observation of the interactions described in this article.

Diminished Bureaucratic Capacity and Expertise

Specific aspects of China’s political context work to facilitate the influence of grassroots NGOs in policy. Some of these forces emerged as a result of institutional reforms. For example, the confluence of decentralization and fiscal recentralization in early 2000s meant that local governments had to provide an expanded range of public goods with fewer resources from the

²¹ Provinces were selected based on variation in economic development, ethnic makeup and associational experience. Selected sites included one major urban center and one municipality covering a large county apart from urban centers so that the sample of NGOs would represent organizations working in urban, semi-urban, and rural realities.

²² Spires, Tao, and Chan (2014) define these as groups without a government background and in operation for over two years. This study similarly includes groups without a government background, but also excludes foreign NGOs, placing the focus on indigenous groups rooted in local communities. The selection criteria used in this study are outlined in detail in the methodological appendix, as is descriptive information on these organizations and further information on case selection.

central government.²³ These unfunded mandates also coincided with local government downsizing, reducing local capacity to deliver public services.²⁴ While central mandates come with detailed blueprints and stringent quotas, many take the form of broad directives handing down a general strategy or direction without providing specifics of how goals are to be achieved. While the lack of material resources poses a significant challenge for local officials, this study found that the lack of expertise and know-how is an equally pressing problem.

When there is a broad-based policy directive from the central government and lower administrative levels lack the expertise, capacity and experience to take the step to implementation on their own, an opportunity for influence arises. For example, one educational NGO cited official lack of expertise enabling it to register by securing legal status under a government-organized charity association:

Why did [a provincial government-organized charity association] accept our incorporation? Because they didn't have any actual experience. People's organizations have actual practical experience, how to do things operationally. For them [government] it is just a blank, they are 'feeling stones to cross the river.' They go out to study. They can watch what we do and how we do things, and now they use some of these things. For example, we used to fund poor students, then they also started doing it. Many projects, as we started to do them they also started to do them. China Red Cross, for example, auctions donated goods to support heart disease victims. They draw on some of our people's experience.²⁵

In such cases, a decline in bureaucratic capacity and official inexperience can open opportunities for NGO influence.

Policy Discretion and Space for Local Initiative

Scholars tend to agree that significant variation in policy implementation has always existed in the PRC and have examined various factors that influence policy implementation in the post-Mao era. The nebulosity of broad central mandates discussed above, as well as the 'circumscribed but real latitude that street-level bureaucrats possess' means that 'front line officials often change policy as they execute it.'²⁶ Under 'fragmented authoritarianism,' central policy is refashioned by negotiation and discretion based on the parochial organizational and

²³ Shue and Wong 2007.

²⁴ For a detailed discussion of China's institutional streamlining and downsizing, and its effects on space created for civil society see Teets 2008.

²⁵ Interview H168, NGO founder and director. Hebei, November 2010.

²⁶ O'Brien and Li 1999.

political goals of local state agencies.²⁷ While a certain amount of discretion and flexibility can promote innovation and allow for the adaptation of broad guidelines to local conditions, it can also lead to self-serving and coercive behavior or produce unexpected outcomes.²⁸ For Mertha, fragmented decision making and divisions between bureaucracies enable policy entrepreneurship through the formation of alliances between non-state actors and reformist officials.²⁹

Varied policy implementation reflects the differing local conditions, but flexibility also varies by policy area. For example, while birth control policies are generally unpopular, they were consistently enforced because they were regarded as hard targets that must be met and because of their effects on how local cadres are appointed and evaluated. Other policies are broad-based directives coming from the center directly to local departments to promote a more vaguely defined ideal, such as ‘participatory education’ or ‘ecological development.’ In these cases, how, and even whether, to comply with directives is largely up to the discretion of local officials, and depends on available resources and opportunities. Because of these tendencies, it is often enabling/positive rather than prohibitive/negative policies that are subject to discretion and innovation, and the most open to policy influence.

Local conditions can also affect compliance, relaxing requirements for ‘hard’ or key policies, and increasing pressure to carry out ‘soft’ directives. In one locality with a high population of ethnic minorities, a Civil Affairs director mentioned that though his department is evaluated on getting rid of illegal NGOs, the requirement is relaxed and more NGOs are permitted to exist because ‘culture is important here.’³⁰ Other government interviewees reported significant flexibility in such policies as poverty line welfare provision³¹ and AIDS policy.³² For these cadres, flexible policy implementation is one characteristic of able leadership: ‘A government’s ruling capability has to fit local conditions. To implement policies flexibly according to the local conditions is a talent and quality of local officials.’³³ Selective policy implementation creates spaces for governance innovations that can be diffused elsewhere.

Officials can take advantage of policy flexibility and exercise discretion through such modes as ‘pioneering,’ ‘bandwagoning,’ and ‘resisting’. Pioneers’ behavior of ‘compliance in advance’ may simply represent voluntary (and often spontaneous) local innovations which are later captured by the central government in search of a nationally applicable solution to a serious policy problem. Alternatively, pioneering localities may possess local conditions most favorable to experiment with the proposed policy. In the former case, the decision to pioneer may be rooted

²⁷ Lieberthal 1992; Mertha 2009.

²⁸ O'Brien and Li 1999.

²⁹ Mertha 2008, p. 8-11.

³⁰ Interview Y156, Government director. Yunnan, July 2010.

³¹ Interview N235, Government village head. Ningxia, June 2010.

³² Interview Y251, Government staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

³³ Interview Y251, Government staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

in personal convictions of local leaders and/or popular demands for change. In the latter, the risk of pioneering is shared by the central government which controls and protects them through intricate networks of clientelism.³⁴ ‘Bureaucratic careerism’ may also affect the decision to ‘pioneer’.

NGO interviewees generally recognized that local cadres can be motivated by bureaucratic careerism as well as a sincere desire to respond to local needs:

For each official it will depend on their character and ideas. Some will be just for promotion, others really want to do things. For example, in the field of education, they want to make education better. But in the existing education system it is very hard for them to bring their ideals to reality, they see that this is not being done well, but don’t do a lot. But there is change little by little, not big reforms.³⁵

It should be noted that the sorts of innovations or strategic entrepreneurial behavior referred to here, in the context of Chinese policy-making and implementation at the local level, do not involve sudden or radical change. As the above interviewee points out, in many issue areas, it is incremental reforms that accumulate over time and change the field of what is possible for both NGOs and local cadres. NGOs have modeled small, local innovations that pioneering officials may appropriate when they demonstrate effectiveness.

‘Resisting’ local implementers do not comply with the center, either by delaying the execution of a given policy or bending it to serve other, more parochial interests.³⁶ Resisting ‘may also require ‘heroic’ leaders who sincerely view representing local needs and sentiments to be more important than saving their own necks.’³⁷ Research uncovered dozens of examples of resisting officials engaging with local, often unregistered, NGOs, even though by being aware of their existence without taking punitive action, resisting officials choose to ignore policies that are meant to restrict NGO scope and operations.³⁸ In doing so, they stand up to significant pressure and potentially damaging risks from higher-ups or from peers.

In both ‘pioneering’ and ‘resisting’ modes, officials bear significant risks. While these risks can be mitigated by the existence of clientelistic networks with higher administrative officials, they can also be lessened when NGOs act as agents or implementers of particular policies hitherto ignored by local officials. If implementation of such policies by local NGOs is successful, officials can claim positive experiences as their own successes. In the event of failure,

³⁴ Chung 2000.

³⁵ Interview H259, NGO founder and director. Hebei, August, 2010.

³⁶ Mei and Pearson 2014.

³⁷ Chung 2000.

³⁸ Interview Y133, Government Director of Educational Research. Yunnan, May 2010.; Interview Y156, Government director. Yunnan, July 2010.; Interview Y301, NGO founder and director. Yunnan, March 2018.

however, the consequences are borne by NGOs. Jennifer Hsu has noted how the cultivation of strategic ignorance in the context of state-NGO relations in China can be deployed as a material resource to protect state institutions or actors as a defense for non-liability of officials' actions.³⁹ Many of the examples of policy innovation discussed in this article are underpinned by plausible deniability. In the event of an adverse outcome, it is particularly easy for local officials to deny knowledge of actions taken by unregistered NGOs, which make up almost half of the grassroots NGOs included in this study, because they are not formally endorsed by any supervisory agency.

'Benign neglect' of local innovations and deviations also facilitates channels of influence from the grassroots. In crisis or uncertainty, the central government may 'gradually relax its control' over current policy without having 'a well thought-out package of alternative policies to remedy the situation.' Historically, 'a gap between the need for a new policy and the absence of an alternative was filled by local innovations... which the central government gradually co-opted as a national policy.'⁴⁰

The regulation of China's NGO sector includes significant 'grey areas' regarding how NGOs can operate and engage with the state. For many social issues, the absence of clear, effective alternate policies can lead to 'benign neglect', and heightened tolerance of 'innovations' and 'deviations' on the part of NGOs. While some argue that the state ignores innovative NGO activities because of limited administrative capacity,⁴¹ allowing such activities performs an important function, suggesting that neglect is often by design.

Grassroots NGOs are often cognizant of the opportunities for influence afforded by benign neglect in many of the issue areas they follow, and are thus better positioned to take advantage of them:

The larger policy environment will affect the building of this relationship. For example, if the one-level-up leaders come out with a document stipulating such a thing cannot be done, or is not permitted, then even if the mid-level leaders think this program is fine and can be carried out, will comply with their leaders' guidance because of stipulations from above. But I think there are some enlightened leaders... there are some leaders that will try experiments, they will allow such people to try experiments, they will take initiative to let you do these things.⁴²

Experimentation and Policy Innovation

³⁹ Jennifer Hsu 2015.

⁴⁰ Chung 2000.

⁴¹ Kuhn 2006; Tang and Zhan 2008.

⁴² Interview N236, NGO founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

Decentralization and vague mandates combined with vague central mandates opened the way for street-level discretion and local initiative. With regional variation in patterns of policy implementation, and a widening aperture for local officials to exercise initiative, experimentation becomes an important practice in policy formation. Across a range of fields, local initiative can generate ‘novel policy instruments and in transforming the parameters and priorities of central policymakers over time.’⁴³ Ang finds a strategy of experimental pockets widely practiced, and sees this strategy as a key source of China’s adaptive governance.⁴⁴ However, what appears to be local-level policy experimentation in China is often top-down. Cai and Treisman show how many reform-era ‘experiments’ were actually initiated or guided by factions within central and local elites, who then enabled their diffusion.⁴⁵ Heilmann’s experimentation under hierarchy integrates central and local forces. In this conceptualization, the volatile but productive combination of decentralized experimentation and ad hoc central interference results in selective integration of local experiences into national policymaking, and is key to understanding China’s policy process.⁴⁶

For officials functioning in a complex bureaucracy fraught with political sensitivities, innovation can be a risky enterprise. Driving a new experimental approach that may or may not be successful can upset a comfortable status quo and challenge vested interests. Teets explores why officials at the subnational level engage in such risky behavior given that they are not generally incentivized to do so as bureaucratic agents. Possible explanations she considers include that local innovation and experimentation is directed by the central government, that it emerges in response to exigencies of local needs, and concludes that local officials are ‘learning that an innovation strategy is the most successful path to career advancement and also to solving persistent local problems.’⁴⁷

This paper suggests that policy experimentation in the form of collaborative action with grassroots NGOs can serve as a risk mitigation strategy for innovative cadres. Heilmann notes that central policymakers use local governments to minimize costs of experimentation, leaving local governments to bear blame when experiments fail.⁴⁸ Similarly, interviews suggested that local cadres support grassroots NGOs’ innovative approaches to resolving governance challenges as a way to earn ‘political credit’ while lowering the costs of potential failure.⁴⁹ This dynamic, in turn, opened effective channels for NGO policy influence of a particular type.

⁴³ Heilmann 2008.

⁴⁴ Ang 2016.

⁴⁵ Cai and Treisman 2006

⁴⁶ Heilmann 2008.

⁴⁷ Teets 2015.

⁴⁸ Heilmann 2008.

⁴⁹ Interview Y133, Government Director of Educational Research. Yunnan, May 2010.; Interview Y301, NGO founder and director. Yunnan, March 2018.

As discussed above, lack of official capacity and expertise also in specific areas of social policy means that cadres also have much to gain from collaboration with NGOs. Incentive structures also reward innovative officials with status and promotion. NGOs are increasingly seen as a source of expertise in addressing a range of social issues, and ‘through direct interaction’ with government agencies, provide them with ‘community networks, specialized knowledge (training, new models, technology), and also run pilots for the government to test new policy ideas.’⁵⁰ Hsu and Hasmath report that it is ‘not unusual for the government to “steal” the ideas and programmes of small successful NGOs.’⁵¹ While this may reduce incentives for NGOs to innovate and diminish potential interpretive power, they suggest, along the lines of the evidence presented in the remainder of this paper, that ‘the borrowing of successful practices or ideas may be a positive example of organizational or policy-based learning.’⁵² Indeed, Newland reports that for some NGOs government adoption of an experimental NGO program is ‘the best evidence’ of success.⁵³ Interestingly, the channeling of NGO innovations and programs through state agencies could have significant long-term implications for public perceptions of state and non-state actors at the grassroots. The same way that hidden policies can channel benefits to citizens through market institutions, obscuring the role of a ‘submerged state,’⁵⁴ the dynamics discussed in this section could lead a similarly ‘submerged civil society’ reinforcing a sense that the state, and not markets or citizens, are responsible for addressing public needs.

Questions have arisen as to the extent to which space for innovation continues to exist in the Xi era. Historically, changes in political climate, as in the period of the Great Leap Forward, have been known to shrink the political space available for innovative experimentation. Current centralizing norms and anti-corruption reforms have caused a sharp decline in policy experimentation under the Xi Jinping administration.⁵⁵ Clearly, the current tone from the top and the sweeping changes implemented under the administration have affected the appetite for boldness and risk among local officials. Despite these changes, significant variation in subnational policy experimentation exists. While some local officials can be categorized as ‘higher position seeking,’ most are ‘status quo’ officials focused on local needs.⁵⁶ Because of this, and the social networks in which these ‘ceilinged native officials’ are embedded, Teets, Hasmath and Lewis find that officials respond more to local governance challenges than to vertical control mechanisms, indicating that significant scope for innovation continues to exist.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ Teets 2015.

⁵¹ Hasmath and Hsu 2014.

⁵² Hasmath and Hsu 2014.

⁵³ Newland 2018.

⁵⁴ Mettler and SoRelle 2014.

⁵⁵ Chen and Göbel 2016.

⁵⁶ Yu 2013.

⁵⁷ Teets, Hasmath, and Lewis 2017.

As with experimentation, it would be hasty to conclude that channels for grassroots influence and participation have diminished since the Hu era. Fu and Distelhorst question the prevailing narrative that Xi administration has narrowed pathways to grassroots political participation. Rather, they find that while opportunities for contentious participation have been severely limited, other channels, such as formal channels of dialogue between local officials and citizens, continue to remain open—and, indeed, expand—under Xi.⁵⁸ Hence, even with oscillations in political climate and central change, local grassroots NGOs can also play a role in fostering local innovation and decreasing the costs associated with it. The ability to do so, however, is predicated on close engagement with the state.

Where close engagement with representatives of the party-state exists, the potential for social organizations to influence policy is increased: when NGOs enjoy institutional or personal ties with the state, not only do they strengthen their ability to negotiate and expand their autonomy and influence, but they also ‘tend to exercise more leverage when it comes to asking for cooperation from the state, or influencing policy.’⁵⁹

Recent scholarship suggests that partnership with the state is a critical element in the ability of NGOs to influence government policy. Fulda, Li and Song argue that civil society organizations can realize ‘system innovation’ by influencing policy, which can ‘only be realistically achieved through face-to-face collaboration between civil society practitioners and government officials in specific fields.’⁶⁰ Hsu finds that ‘state alliance NGOs’ are ‘in a better position to engage in political advocacy than those organizations which prioritized autonomy to the point of shunning any connection with the government.’ The members of these organizations ‘worked directly with state actors and had the opportunity to influence them to act differently.’⁶¹ Teets and Jagusztyn identify factors that enable civil society organizations to engage in successful policy advocacy actions, including ‘long term, cooperative relationship and ensuing trust built with authorities, carefully selected methods of communication with authorities and ability to collect and present solid data on policy issues.’⁶²

Along with potential benefits, a strategy of influencing policy through close engagement with the state also carries unintended consequences for NGOs themselves. First, while this paper has primarily focused on how NGOs shape policy, the relationship can exist in reverse. As Mettler and Sorelle note, ‘public policies themselves can also shape which kinds of groups form and grow and which fail to coalesce.’⁶³ Policy feedback theory identifies how resources and

⁵⁸ Fu and Distelhorst 2018.

⁵⁹ Shieh 2009.

⁶⁰ Fulda, LI, and Song 2009.

⁶¹ Hsu and Jiang 2015.

⁶² Teets and Jagusztyn 2016.

⁶³ Mettler and SoRelle 2014.

opportunities created by existing policies nurture or stymie the growth of new associations, which in turn influence policy. Thus, while they influence policy, NGOs themselves are also remade in the process.

Then, there is the perennial concern that groups with close government engagement, particularly when in possession of successful policy innovations, become coopted by the state. The field has generally moved beyond the idea that cooptation is a foregone conclusion of collaboration. For Teets, government relationships are necessary for NGOs ‘to secure access to a closed policy process’ but, importantly, do not signal cooptation by the state. Rather, they allow groups to ‘to partner with an asymmetrically powerful state in order to expand their influence in an emerging public sphere.’⁶⁴ Carolyn Hsu and Yuzhou Jiang note that ‘even when Chinese NGOs have close and entangling relationships with party-state agencies, the state organ does not necessarily control the NGO. Instead, the relationships are fluid and multidirectional.’⁶⁵ Salmenkari questions the autonomy-cooptation continuum as an analytical concept by identifying how NGO autonomy is shaped by ‘interaction not only with the state, but with media, donors and foreign NGOs,’ and showing that close relationships with state agencies can increase operational autonomy.⁶⁶ For Newland, productive partnerships with innovating local officials complicate the notion that autonomy is a desirable goal for NGOs.⁶⁷

There are also significant costs for NGOs who fail to model innovations successfully. These groups can have their permission to work in a locality rescinded, programs shut down or registration status revoked. The groups included in this study were very much aware of the risks of ‘mission drift’ and unsuccessful programs, but alternatives to state engagement—censure or irrelevance—tended to outweigh these risks in organizational cost-benefit analyses.

Finally, Mattingly shows that ‘local civil society groups often serve as tools of political control’ by empowering local elites ‘who can use their influence to capture rents and confiscate property,’⁶⁸ these dynamics seem to apply more directly to membership-based associations, rather than the program-implementing NGOs included in this study. However, while this study did not bring to light such examples, it would certainly be possible for officials to use their association with local NGOs for self-serving purposes, such as rent-seeking or implementing unpopular policies.

Towards a Conception of Advocacy in Action

⁶⁴ Teets 2008.

⁶⁵ Hsu and Jiang 2015.

⁶⁶ Salmenkari 2014.

⁶⁷ Newland 2018.

⁶⁸ Mattingly 2016.

Advocacy is a relatively broad term that can encompass any activity that a person or organization undertakes to influence policies through means other than governing.⁶⁹ NGO scholars and practitioners tend to see a sharp distinction between organizations that engage in advocacy and those that merely provide services. The ‘operational’ aspect of NGO involves activities that directly provide services to those in need, such as education, health, clean water, or disaster relief.⁷⁰ Development practitioners and regulators see this as distinct from work that involves political advocacy or public education, which is provided by a separate set of advocacy NGOs which ‘work primarily at the centres of power.’⁷¹

However, even globally, many NGOs tie advocacy functions to operational ones, and therefore ‘act as both advocates and practitioners.’⁷² This dual function applies even more broadly to the Chinese case, where traditional approaches to advocacy are costly and of limited effectiveness. A report on advocacy in China notes that over the past decade, a growing space has emerged ‘for individuals and social groups to express their views (or to *demonstrate them through practical actions*)’ [italics added] and by extension ‘exert influence on policy and public opinion.’⁷³

This study found not only a much more blurred distinction between operational and advocacy functions in Chinese grassroots NGOs, but also that advocacy influence is exerted ‘in action,’ when integrated with service provision. Despite observations to the contrary, China’s grassroots NGOs are not limited to service-delivery. Of the 22 grassroots NGOs interviewed in 2009-12, over 90 percent expressed an explicit concern with influencing government policy in their work despite the fact that they would generally be categorized as ‘service delivery organizations’. This proportion did not change significantly in the population of 31 NGOs interviewed in 2019, despite oscillations in the political environment in the intervening decade. However, the distinctive ways in which influence is wielded under varying political conditions can obscure it from view.

This obscurity arises when advocacy is reduced to its ‘obstructive’ dimension. Instead, advocacy can be parsed out to identify a fuller range of efforts.⁷⁴ Civil society and media are expected to play important roles in accountability processes in democratic contexts by monitoring those in power, and by facilitating negative sanctions against them. Media actors, for example, are thought to influence policy in two ways. Media’s power for reputation damage through public exposure contributes to a ‘politics of shaming.’⁷⁵ By contrast, a constructive

⁶⁹ Young and Everitt 2004 and <http://www.npaction.org/article/articleview/76/1/248> accessed August 10, 2011

⁷⁰Weiss and Gordenker 1996:37-38; Van Tuijl 1999.

⁷¹ Gilbert 2008.

⁷² Van Tuijl 1999.

⁷³ Wexler, Xu, and Young 2006.

⁷⁴ Repnikova 2015

⁷⁵ Waisbord 2000, 236.

dimension of media can ‘influence officials to deliberate on issues raised in media investigations,’ giving rise to a ‘deliberative policy effect.’⁷⁶ Similarly, many reports of Chinese NGOs focus on ‘obstructive’ advocacy efforts, in which NGOs reactively exert pressure on officials and factories, or mobilize publics to stop pollution, corruption or discrimination.⁷⁷ However, there is much to be learned from ‘constructive’ or ‘instructive’ advocacy efforts, in which new concepts and approaches can have deliberative effects and lead to new creative practices.

In the words of an early report on NGO advocacy in China: ‘We don’t just wave flags and shout battle cries....Environmental organisations like ours can’t just stop there ... We also need to practice what we preach to change the situation....’⁷⁸ Thus, for many groups, influence is achieved through action:

We do some things that the government is not paying a lot of attention to, but that we think are very important. And when the government sees what we are doing and how important it is, even if we leave the government continues to do it...as an organization, our power is very limited, so to be able to do it well, the government’s involvement is very important. If they support, participate and observe what we are doing and the positive results of our actions, they accept it. Then it fulfills an advocacy function.⁷⁹

However, a requirement of advocacy influence is effective action. Grassroots NGOs must demonstrate the viability of their models and approaches, especially if they are being offered as alternatives to government programs. Such groups are cognizant that influence depends on program quality, and that local officials are paying close attention to demonstrated program impacts, incorporating effective elements into local policy and implementation. An environmental organization used a set of training materials and approaches for rural women which was eventually adopted by the Women’s Federation:

Sometimes their level of trust in us is not very high. One reason is time; this program has not been here for a long time, they need long-term observation and understanding. Another reason is the reaction of the villagers to our training and program, and the feedback they get. What are the results of the program on the village? How much does it help us? Slowly, slowly, often this cooperative relationship or the trust in our program is built on the process of doing things and exploring....When we were discussing our

⁷⁶ Protess 1992, 23.

⁷⁷ See, for example, Dai and Spires 2018; Bondes and Alpermann 2018.

⁷⁸ Wexler, Xu, and Young 2006.

⁷⁹ Interview Y252, NGO staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

project with the district level Women's Federation, they said "We really want to find an organization like this. We don't have a set of materials to train villagers in capacity building and we are doing so many different things, our time is very limited."⁸⁰

In this case, the NGO was able to extend the influence of its programs beyond its own purview to encompass a larger population. More importantly, it was able to introduce new ideas—such as the role of sustainable agriculture and participatory methods in rural development—into the official conversation and the minds of policymakers. While causal influence and the tracing of ideas is notoriously difficult to demonstrate, interviews carried out almost a decade later with representatives of party-state agencies, including the State Council Poverty Alleviation, the Women's Federation, the Academy of Social Sciences (a government think-tank), as well as a number of well established NGOs and projects with close government linkages suggest that the approaches and ideas of this grassroots NGO have been taken up by many a broad range of state actors.

Both participant observation and interviews revealed other similar examples of grassroots NGO action affecting government policy and programs, even when action was in its early stages and had only been carried out on a small scale. An environmental NGO organized an activity to clear weeds and algae from a local lake and invited officials to participate. A local Environmental Protection Bureau official said: "We hadn't done this before, but...we will pay attention to this in future environmental protection work." He continued, saying of the organization: "We are very eager to work with them. Even though they are a popular organization, their activities have a great effect...Some of their ideas will also affect us and we are learning from each other and dialoguing about experience."⁸¹ One interviewee described how an environmental protection NGO worked to find alternate sources of income for mountain-dwellers whose livelihoods depended on deforestation resulting in soil erosion and environmental damage. Eventually, the local government "took some corresponding measures to stop this kind of exploitation too."⁸² When local Poverty Alleviation officials in Ningxia lacked knowledge of effective ways to fulfill "educational poverty alleviation" mandates from above, they drew on the experience of an environmental NGO that ran training courses for villagers aiming to alleviate poverty.⁸³ Over the ensuing decade, the organization ran joint experimental projects in animal husbandry, sustainable agriculture, and health (albeit with varying levels of success) in collaboration with the Poverty Alleviation office in the rural county in which it operates. More recently, provincial-level officials, including representatives of the Civil Affairs Bureau and environmental NGOs

⁸⁰ Interview Y131, NGO founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁸¹ Interview H262, Government Director. Hebei, August 2010.

⁸² Interview Y131, NGO founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁸³ Interview NX40, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

operating in the provincial capital indicated the organization's methods and approaches had been subsequently incorporated into government poverty alleviation projects and adopted by other semi-official charitable groups.⁸⁴ Interestingly, the source of these ideas and approaches was sometimes unknown by the actors, and only uncovered in the course of exhaustive conversations and thorough questioning.

As the above cases suggest, grassroots NGOs with specialized know-how and experience can enable pioneering officials to carry out broad-based directives that government departments would not otherwise be able to fulfill. In another case, a district-level Education Bureau official discussed her department's difficulty complying with numerous central government policy documents requiring the promotion of participatory educational methods because of a lack of knowledge about these methods or how to implement them in local schools. Collaboration with a grassroots NGO specializing in participatory educational methods allowed the Education Bureau to pioneer such approaches in keeping with policy directives.

The district Education Bureau's director of educational research also sits in on the activities and classes of the NGO, and in the training it provides to teachers. Informal dialogue and communication between the two parties is frequent and touches on education policy. As seen in the next section, insights gained by officials through collaboration with the NGO affect their perception of education in the region, the adoption of new educational approaches, and through diffusion in the government hierarchy, influence educational policy.

Modeling Successful Innovations

One of the most effective forms of persuasion for pragmatic officials has been direct observation of successful models. Salmenkari identifies one of the roles of Chinese NGOs as providing examples for the state to emulate: 'By their concrete work, NGOs want to demonstrate solutions to problems for the state to adopt and disseminate.'⁸⁵ Hsu has similarly found that Chinese NGOs often seek to establish an effective model for the solution of a social problem, and then 'persuade a state agency to adopt it and implement it on a large scale.' As part of a general strategy of partnership with the state, this gives 'NGOs the potential to create a large impact relative to the size of the organization.'⁸⁶

Government and NGO interviewees agreed that local government agencies can lack expertise in social programs and look to NGOs for successful models. One Poverty Alleviation official explained:

⁸⁴ Interview N190, Government Party Secretary. Ningxia, October 2018.; Interview N200, NGO Founder and director. Ningxia, October 24, 2018.; Interview N291, NGO Founder and director. Ningxia, October 20, 2018.; Interview N293, NGO Founder and director. Ningxia, October 24, 2018.

⁸⁵ Salmenkari 2014.

⁸⁶ Hsu and Jiang 2015.

In some areas, non-governmental organizations are even more professional than government. For example, in Poverty Alleviation, they have a set of systems and methods, for example, they have participatory methods. When we come into contact with these things we also emulate and learn from them, if you don't emulate and learn, how do you improve? You can't isolate yourself, you have to dialogue with outside world.⁸⁷

Policy influence is more likely where authorities are seeking new methods and approaches, particularly in policy areas that figure prominently in central directives, but are broad based. Such directives are less quantifiable, measurable and less straightforward to implement:

They [local officials] are, to a great extent, thinking about a question: how can I raise the general consciousness of the villagers? I want to build the new countryside, I want to advance the development of the whole village, I want group development. But where do the answers come from? It is exploring. It also cannot think of any good methods. But we have gone and attempted things. We have gone directly into the village, and engaged in dialogue and learning with the villagers. The consciousness of those villagers who have participated in our training has been raised.⁸⁸

The director of another NGO focused on the education of women and children talked about the government's recent focus on early childhood education and the organization's plan to implement rural early childhood education programs. 'If we do it well,' she said, 'we will give the government some suggestions and models about how, within a small scope, this can be promoted.'⁸⁹ The same organization, which has been working in the locality for over ten years, also works with populations affected by HIV/AIDS, which has spread rapidly in the area. 'Many officials come here to learn about it. So our model of AIDS communities will be transmitted to higher leaders when they go back, and then conveyed to the central government. So [X town's] trace is in all this. When you bring about a successful model, it has an impact.'⁹⁰

Since it was established, one of the NGO's main areas of focus has been HIV/AIDS prevention among vulnerable populations. In an interview with the local Health and Sanitation Bureau, the local government agency responsible for AIDS, the official proudly pointed out that

⁸⁷ Interview N179, Government staff. Ningxia, December 2010.

⁸⁸ Interview Y131, NGO founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁸⁹ Interview Y250, NGO director of external relations. Yunnan, July 2010.

⁹⁰ Interview Y250, NGO director of external relations. Yunnan, July 2010.

the locality in which the NGO and local government agency cooperatively worked was named ‘the National AIDS Prevention Model County.’⁹¹

While local officials often get the credit, and the origins of such innovations are not publicized, they can originate from grassroots popular organizations. In this case, many of the department initiatives and innovations described by the official were initially piloted and promoted by the partner grassroots NGO. In the case of the entertainment services population, for example, the NGO acted as a policy entrepreneur by beginning to work in this sensitive space, proving effectiveness, and inviting emulation by government agencies. The official confirmed that: ‘NGOs can be quite flexible in much of their work. [This NGO] was working with entertainment services population...but then we saw that this area of work was very important and so the government started doing it too. At the time it was hard to imagine that this would ever be an area of work that the government would do.’⁹²

Another NGO working in the same region piloted an innovative program with AIDS orphans, which was adopted, and ultimately replicated, by the local Bureau of Civil Affairs.⁹³ A grassroots NGO working in an ethnic minority region concerned with the preservation of minority traditional culture created educational materials to teach local children their mother language. In collecting folk music and arts, the organization took particular care to obtain the locals’ agreement and protect their interests and compensate the local community. This practice was later taken up by a local government agency: ‘For example, the Education Committee itself also has some mother language educational materials. But when they saw what we have done, they learned from it...So we hope to use these cooperative methods to influence them. And the government, through cooperation, sees this and reflects on it. We have also communicated [these principles regarding the protection of traditional intellectual property] to the Intellectual Property Bureau.’⁹⁴

A grassroots environmental NGO stated one of its organizational aims as ‘to establish some development models for China and even the world.’ By promoting a sustainable honey production program in a rural community to raise incomes and protect the local environment, the organization aimed to disseminate successful models of development.

How do you develop the community’s economy?...No one has a method or program to sustainably improve the production and ecology, and in this way be able to protect the area...So it helps them [government] and also the community. It also advances the government’s goals. So we are trying to operationalize this. In this way we hope to

⁹¹ Interview Y251, Government staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

⁹² Interview Y251, Government staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

⁹³ Interview Y252, NGO staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

⁹⁴ Interview Y158, NGO director. Yunnan, July 2010.

create a model. Then when you go to Sichuan or Xinjiang or Qinghai you can also use our methods and promote them in more places.⁹⁵

The above examples illustrate the ways in which NGO experimentation gives rise to effective models that are incorporated into policy by local officials. These, in turn, can diffuse to other localities, incorporating additional governmental and societal actors.

Research also identified several other mechanisms through which NGOs influence policy. While this paper has primarily discussed the strategy of modeling innovations in action, NGOs also conduct training programs for government officials, introducing them to new ideas and approaches, and provide field based feedback on policy weaknesses-mingled with empirical data and anecdotes from the field. A final channel of influence is through NGO programs themselves. Aside from deliberate efforts to influence policy, NGO programs can serve to reinforce passivity and dampen political participation among populations, or increase it through empowering local communities and enabling them to engage constructively with the local state, resulting in positive or negative “feedback effects”.⁹⁶ These feedback effects reflect the ways in which ‘policy, once enacted, restructures subsequent political processes’⁹⁷ by shaping the ‘attitudes and behaviors of political elites and mass publics,’ shaping subsequent policymaking processes.⁹⁸

Conclusion

The findings presented here supplement a narrative of civil society in China as circumscribed under authoritarianism, taking focus from the influences *acting on* these organizations by highlighting the influence *exerted by* them. This paper suggests that China’s grassroots NGOs are converging on a conception of advocacy in action, in which they influence the local state through concrete actions with tangible outcomes. The channels of influence uncovered through field research and participant observation indicate that small, grassroots NGOs are able to affect government policy and practice at the local level, and in some cases beyond. A context characterized by diminished bureaucratic capacity, policy discretion and experimentation provides them with opportunities to participate in the formulation and implementation of policy on issue areas in which they work. Particularly in areas where regulatory infrastructure and capacity is limited, NGOs can model innovations or act as agents of policies hitherto ignored by local officials. Officials, in turn, demonstrate ‘benign neglect’ and a

⁹⁵ Interview Y134, NGO director of external relations. Yunnan, May 2010.

⁹⁶ Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995 discuss how educational programs and policies, for example, enable individuals to accumulate skills, resources and social networks, strengthening civic capacity and participation.

⁹⁷ Skocpol 1991, 58.

⁹⁸ Mettler and SoRelle 2014.

heightened tolerance of such ‘deviations’ on the part of NGOs, not from a lack of administrative capacity, but this arrangement allows officials to avoid risks and appropriate successes.

Teets, Hasmath and Lewis suggest that local policy experimentation and innovation generate solutions to governance problems, becoming an ‘adaptable’ governance mechanism that has contributed to the economic and political success of the Chinese state. If, as argued in this paper, grassroots NGOs are catalyzing innovation on the part of local governments and enabling diffusion, this suggests that these groups are also contributing to adaptability and improved governance in the regime as a whole.⁹⁹ Sorace sees the CCP’s self-definition as a ‘learning party’ in danger as the epistemological infrastructure of cadre embeddedness in the mass-line weakens, and its ability to formulate policy ‘on the basis of investigation into local, objective circumstances’ fails.¹⁰⁰ Partnering with grassroots groups to both read and respond to these changing circumstances is one way to amend this limitation.

It is worth noting that while this article confines its discussion of policy influence to changes in practice, lasting and meaningful innovation requires knowledge of and change in the thinking behind practices. This is why the additional role of NGOs as producers of knowledge and participants—together with their government counterparts—in communities of practice and epistemic communities is of key importance, and a subject taken up in a separate paper.¹⁰¹ In these localized and specialized groupings, members share learning around specific policy issues, engage in joint exploration, research, experimentation and problem solving, generating knowledge which is sometimes diffused more broadly.

In the final analysis, studies such as this one highlight the transformative capacity of small, local, indigenous organizations on a vast and complex state. Hsu and Jiang similarly find that such organizations ‘want to transform the Chinese party-state’ to make it more responsive and effective, but that they ‘advocated transformations that were so gradual that they would not register as political reforms, much less revolution.’¹⁰² Combined with subnational policy innovation, which Teets sees as ‘a gradual process of political and economic reform without fundamental change in existing governance institutions’, ‘represents a pathway for reform in China without revolution.’¹⁰³ It also represents a pathway to political development for other nations whose citizens are striving to have a voice in tracing their collective path of progress. In the words of one NGO director:

⁹⁹ Teets, Hasmath, and Lewis 2017.

¹⁰⁰ Sorace 2015, 493.

¹⁰¹ [Farid and Noguchi 2019](#)

¹⁰² Hsu and Jiang 2015.

¹⁰³ Teets 2015.

This is a kind of influence, but this influence is just a small piece in the corner of the huge government system. If you are perceptive, if you use keen vision, some people may be able to see a little. But many people, probably many government officials, cannot see this change. They have not yet seen this change, but...in future they will see it.¹⁰⁴

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¹⁰⁴ Interview Y131, NGO founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

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