

Grassroots NGOs in China: Filling in the Landscape

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Since the late 1980s, the Chinese government has expended great effort to develop and institutionalize a corporatist civil society model that aims to incorporate popular associations and bring them under government control. Over the past 20 years, Beijing has established more than 440,000 'GONGOS' (government-organized nongovernmental organizations) that ostensibly serve the interests of society in a range of areas, including business, sport, and academia. While much scholarly attention has been devoted to making sense of these government-initiated organizations, the past decade has also witnessed the emergence of bottom-up grassroots NGOs that do not fit within the standard corporatist framework.

Our study breaks new empirical ground by focusing attention on these un-official, 'bottom-up' grassroots NGOs (*caogen zuzhi*). Located outside the vertical control mechanisms the party has tried to impose, grassroots groups are formed by Chinese citizens without the government's initiative, congealing in the social spaces where the government is absent, impotent, or unwilling to act. Tocquevillean expectations that NGOs can push for democratic change abound in the literature on authoritarian regimes and on China specifically. Whether this is borne out by empirical reality remains to be seen, but the extreme political sensitivity of true civil society associations in China – as in any authoritarian state – makes gathering first-hand data a serious practical and political challenge. Because NGOs potentially provide alternative spaces for political organizing and mobilization, they are viewed by some in China's government as a serious threat.

Despite these difficulties, between 2008 and 2010 our interdisciplinary team of researchers developed and administered a standardized questionnaire to over 300 NGOs in three areas of China: 1) Guangzhou and the Pearl River Delta area of Guangdong; 2) Beijing; and 3) Kunming and its environs in Yunnan province. These sites comprise, respectively, China's foremost export-oriented coastal region, the country's political center, and a somewhat 'typical' poor, under-resourced region. Our basic criteria for including an NGO in our study was that the organization needed to have been running for at least two years and to have been 'active' during that time. Social-service delivery and advocacy groups were included in the study. Groups were found using snowball sampling. Many of the ones in our study are either registered as businesses or not registered at all with the relevant government agencies.

Data were gathered on a wide range of concerns, including: financial resources; government ties; staff and volunteer turnover; organizational structure; founders' backgrounds; and networking with other NGOs. Utilizing these first-hand data, we are able to map out issue areas where NGOs are active, to build a picture of the size and scale of NGO operations, and to draw comparisons across different regions.

With this broader picture, we can begin considering in a more grounded way the implications of the rise of grassroots NGOs in contemporary China.

Although still in the initial phases of analysis, our data indicate that unregistered groups and groups registered 'improperly' as businesses are more likely than those inside the official NGO system to engage in advocacy and civil rights work, casting doubt on the potential for GONGOs and other 'properly' registered groups to influence government policy. This is only one of several important findings. As our data offer a rich, unprecedented, and detailed view of the resources, structures, and challenges facing grassroots NGOs in contemporary China, we expect our paper to stimulate new research questions that will drive the field forward for some time to come.