Chinese Civil Society under Xi Jinping: the Case of Gender-Related NGOs

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Abstract

The article tries to contribute to the understanding of the civil society in contemporary China by using the qualitative analysis of five gender-related non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The issues of NGOs’ legal status, activities, funding, and surviving strategies were of the paper’s main interest. Semi-structured interviews with the activists revealed that all studied NGOs presented themselves as proactive rights advocacy organizations, those agenda, however, did not contradict with the governmental politics. Additionally, all NGOs saw their role of educational resource that spreads knowledge in this sphere of sex and gender awareness. Although a small sample of the research does not allow to make general conclusions about China, the paper demonstrates that civil society in China under Xi Jinping is not completely suffocated.

Keywords list (en): civil society in authoritarian states, NGOs in China, gender issues in China, NGOs’ registration, NGOs’ strategies, politics of Xi Jinping

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1 Is There a Civil Society in China?
2 The fact that traditional democratic channels are called nowadays into question more often
than before makes research on authoritarian countries getting the most relevance [Farid, 2019, p. 531]. In this context, the case of China has been a prolific area of inquiry due to the outstanding features of Xi Jinping’s governance. Although some social scientists outline that it is too early to make arguments about the consequences that politics of the current Chinese administration can lead to, the majority of them recognize trends of centralization\(^1\) and personalization of political power in contemporary China. The tightening of the political grip under the rule of Xi Jinping takes place throughout the polity and influences every sphere of social life but civil society becomes an exemplary object of increasing authoritarianism in China.

Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, a lot of experts outline the growing pressure on civil society from the party-state, fairly noticing tighter media control, frequent raids on NGOs’ offices, detainment of Chinese and foreign activists, severe monitoring of foreign funding and support. The above political decisions indeed affected the freedom of activism in China, therefore, ideas about the squeezing opportunities for civil society actors cannot be called unfounded.

However, there is a prominent trend of evolving civil society in China. For example, numbers of social protests in People’s Republic of China (PRC) have climbed from 87,000 in 2005 to 172,000 in 2014 [Li, 2018, p. 2]. The number of NGOs is constantly increasing as well. In 2018, China had 817,000 social organizations nationwide\(^2\). However, it is important to remember that the accuracy of this statistic is arguable due to numerous reasons. Generally speaking, some scholars beware of hasty conclusions regarding the possibility of civil mobilization. There are shreds of evidence about the number of civic actions taken by Chinese NGOs with relative success [Hsu, 2020, pp. 7–13]. They contradict the ultimate opinion about the politics of Xi Jinping as nothing more but destructive for the growing social sector in China.

The aforementioned conflict of repressive politics and expanding civil society raises the question about the NGOs’ surviving strategies and forms of self-presentation in today’s China. This article presents a qualitative analysis of five Chinese gender-related NGOs. The choice of this activity area is not random. It seemed important to select spheres located in the grey area of sensitivity, so they are neither favored by the state nor explicitly repressed because of the reformist agenda.

What does it mean? The duality of the politics under Xi Jinping allows NGOs in some areas to flourish, while others are brutally repressed. Like this, PRC is eager to guide civil activity in directions favored by the state. For example, among all international NGOs registered in China, those related to trade and industry issues as well as to education, youth, and poverty strongly dominate\(^3\) (Fig. 1). It demonstrates the willingness of the Chinese Communist Party to use civil society resources for the support of its economy, basic and higher education, or improvement of facilities in rural schools. Like this, it explains the existence of autonomous social organizations in China in general. It can be suggested that Chinese leaders have found a certain level of civil society useful, therefore, they permit it on an interim basis as long as it is relatively obedient and helpful to the regime.
Fig. 1. International NGO Representative Offices in China, by Sphere of Activity (01/2017-06/2020). Based on: URL: >>>> and >>>> ngo/registered-foreign-ngo-offices-map-full-screen. Accessed 13.05.2020.

On the contrary, there is no doubt that there are some immutable “clear forbidden zones” in China under any administration, and Xi Jinping is not an exception. In case activists raise issues regarding Taiwanese or Tibetan independence or the right to practice Falun Gong, no one expects them to get away with it [Stern, O’Brien, 2012, p. 176]. The current administration also became much more unambiguous with any human rights practitioners.

Consequently, if we looked at any sphere that is located on these two poles “favored — suppressed”, we would know the result already before the research itself. Therefore, spheres located in the grey area of sensitivity, such as labor- and gender-related issues say more about the actual setting in China. Among such areas, I chose those where personal connections could facilitate my inquiry.

The next important question is what can be defined by the term NGO in the Chinese context. The legal framework of operation social organizations in China is usually referred to as social organizations that distinguish themselves from government agencies and commercial organizations [Sheng, 2014, p. 99]. However, despite the extensive literature on the issue, some authors still note existing disagreements concerning the definition of an NGO in China [Kang, 2019, p. 3]. Even while talking about legal terms for NGOs in China, the discussion can be misleading. Several scholars [Hsu, Hsu, Hasmath, 2017; Sheng, 2014] claim that the term NGO in China (fei zhengfu zuzhi, 非政府组织) does not have a certain and consistent definition, neither legally nor generally. The very term “non-governmental organization” sounds in Chinese awkward because the prefix “non” (fei, 非) in fei zhengfu zuzhi can be interpreted in Chinese as “anti” (fan, 反). Therefore, the Chinese government has chosen to replace the English term with the Chinese equivalents, rather than translate the word NGO to allude anti-government context [Spires,
Social organizations, in their turn, also rarely call themselves *fei zhengfu zuzhi*. Because NGOs in China try to avoid government suspicion, they refrain using words for self-description that can be associated with activities antagonistic to the party state agenda. Therefore, NGOs prefer to use “officially-sanctioned terminology” such as “philanthropy” (*gongyi*, 公益), “charity” (*cishan*, 慈善) or “service” (*fuwu*, 服务), rather than “civil society” (*gongmin shehui*, 公民社会) or “grassroots NGO” (*caogen zuzhi*, 草根组织) that can cause some unwanted connotations [Yuen, 2018, p. 407].

Scholars and practitioners tend to commonly distinguish advocacy NGOs and service NGOs as two types according to the aims of their activity [Wu, Chan, 2012, p. 11]. The first ones are organizations exercising activities to effect policies using governing tools. In the Chinese context, advocacy NGOs are also called rights protection-oriented (*weiquanxing*, 维权行). Service-oriented (*fuwuxing*, 服务性) NGOs are social organizations that provide services in the spheres of education, health, environment, food/water safety, or disaster relief. Thus, the work of service NGOs is seen as more operational. Due to this reason, a lot of scholars concluded that they are often beyond extremely restrictive measures of the Chinese government [Wu, Chan, 2012, p. 11–12].

However, in reality, the distinction between the role of NGOs is often not so clear. First, many NGOs connect advocacy functions to operational ones, thus, act as both advocates and practitioners [Farid, 2019, p. 542]. Second, not all state-funded service NGOs behave as compliant service providers [Yuen, 2018, p. 407]. Third, with the restrictions imposed under Xi Jinping’s government, a lot of NGOs started to incline their activity to more service-oriented. Nevertheless, their agenda has not changed completely. Moreover, it is questioning how deep a social organization can provide services to people in need, while not stumbling on politically sensitive topics.

Here, I would try to analyze the fragile position of five gender-related NGOs, truly located in the grey area of sensitivity in China, from the perspective of their activities, legal status, and surviving strategies [Table 1.]

| Interviewee’s Name | Position in the NGO          |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| Interviewee A1     | Director of the NGO A       |
| Interviewee A2     | Activist of the NGO A       |
| Interviewee B      | Co-founder of the NGO B     |
| Interviewee C      | Founder of the NGO C        |
| Interviewee D      | Employee of the NGO D       |
| Interviewee E      | Founder of the NGO E        |

Table 1. List of the Interviewees

NGO A

The NGO A is a feminist grass-roots group that was founded in early 2013, starting their activity from the performance based on the American play “The Vagina Monologues” (*Fig. 2*) together with several students of Beijing Foreign Studies University (北京外国语大学). Due to the successful advertising campaign, it attracted a lot of attention in China. However, the news about provocative play brought the NGO not only popularity those days. After the performance, university students were exposed to severe internet violence and assaults [Interviewee A1].
The NGO is located in Beijing but also has branches in New-York and London. There are around 50 NGO members, among those 20 are based in Beijing. The team members are mainly college students and some young people working in Beijing and participating in the activities of the group during their spare time. The work in the NGO is done voluntarily, no one receives remuneration. The overseas branches are supported by Chinese people who work or study abroad. Since 2013, the NGO has held more than 30 performances, mainly in Beijing but also in ten other Chinese cities, including Xi’an, Kunming, Shanghai. The organization gives copyright to some NGOs in Shanghai so they can organize performances independently [Interviewee A1].

The main goal of the NGO A is to promote women’s sexual rights and sexual autonomy. The NGO sees its mission in the popularization of sexual knowledge and concepts. The activists hope that they could teach women how to deal with discrimination and violence and help them to accept their bodies, sexual needs, and sexual behavior. The activists were inspired by the professor of Sun Yat-sen University (中山大学) Ai Xiaoming (艾晓明) (Fig. 3) who initiated the translation of the play “The Vagina Monologues” into Chinese and its performances in Chinese universities from 2007 [Interviewee A1].

Although the NGO A organizes other activities, such as gender advocacy workshops, lectures, and action art performances (xingwei yishu, 行为艺术) in the public places, the play stays its main voice. Using the main topic and the frame mode of the “The Vagina Monologues” original version, the founders of the NGO re-wrote some chapters by adding real stories of Chinese women to highlight issues typical for Chinese society as they are eager to enrich the play with Chinese characteristics. For example, activists raise such controversial topics in China as the maiden complex (chunqingjie, 处女情结) and sexuality stigma (xing wuming, 性污名), putting them in the context of homosexuals and transgender rights. Moreover, the NGO creates performances in a new form implementing elements of the traditional crosstalks genre (xiangsheng, 相声) and interactive classrooms [Interviewee A1].

NGO B

The NGO B was started at the beginning of 2018 with two students of one university in Beijing who did anti-sexual harassment workshops. In 2019, they were seeking to expand but none of those two has received any professional knowledge in gender theories or experience in handling actual sexual harassment cases. Therefore, a community of social entrepreneurs called Yiqiao huoban (益桥伙伴) recommended them a partner who was specializing in gender issues. The NGO
where he/she was a board member was amid the shut-down process [Interviewee B].

By now, the NGO B has a core team of three people and a volunteer team of 14. The organization has three groups of employees, the first deals with the content. Most of its volunteers are master students who are specializing in gender issues. Another team is focused on branding, where there are smaller teams responsible for WeChat, Weibo, and podcasts. The leader of those teams are professionals in the respective fields. The third branch of the infrastructure is a strategy band that is responsible for doing market research for the NGO, survival strategies, and help with competitions. According to activists, this professional division is highly important for their NGO:

In the US or the UK, a full-grounded NGO would definitely have a person who would know about business development or surviving strategies [...]. In 2017, [in my previous] NGO it was not the case. When I was first introduced to my current team, I felt it could be something new because the two partners have expertise in their respective fields and have a motivation to promote gender equality [Interviewee B].

The NGO is mainly known for its interactive workshops that are focused on education to prevent and control sexual harassment. Its main goal is by using discussions, board games, and VR (virtual reality) technology to make participants feel different social boundaries between individuals, express empathy to victims of sexual harassment, learn rejection strategies, and relevant legal knowledge on the topic. Volunteers organize workshops on the university campuses in Shanghai, Beijing, Chengdu, Wuhan, and in the office of Women’s Federation (fulian, 妇联) in China. The NGO’s workshops won some awards in social innovation competitions. Moreover, the NGO activists see their mission broader than just gender issues advocacy:

I would like to achieve a new way of surviving for the NGO. Because in general gender NGOs in China are retreating because of political and financial limitations. I think with China’s complexity of gender issues, we deserve an NGO, professional organization designated to promote gender equality [Interviewee B].

NGO C

NGO C was founded in August 2018. Since 2015, its founder was working for the NGO called Rainbow Law Group (caihong lüshituan, 彩虹律师团) that dealt with the reproductive rights of single women and lesbians in China. Three years later, the NGO C started to operate in a similar sphere independently.

Originally, it was established in Beijing, but now the scope of the NGO’s activities covers the whole country, according to the activists. The main team includes three people, two of them live in Guangzhou and one in Beijing. In addition, it has six volunteers who participate in the activities every month helping with blogging and editing on Weibo. There are also around 70 temporary volunteers who edit and translate articles. NGO members mostly cooperate online and meet during offline activities.

The long-term goal of the NGO is to ensure the law protection of reproductive rights for single women and gay families (Fig. 4). Activists try to fight against discrimination of these groups by Chinese politics. Their short-term goal is to work on the increasing possibilities for single women and lesbians to receive birth insurance from the state. The NGO C took a lot of experience from the Rainbow Law Group which arranged lawyer training during that it shared knowledge about LGBT and built an LGBT-friendly lawyer network. Now the NGO C provides LGBT groups in China with information, resources, and legal advice concerning a non-heterosexual family and covers the most prominent law cases on the internet attracting public attention [Interviewee C].
Fig. 4: The picture from the NGO C Weibo account ironically illustrating issues in non-traditional families. Text: “I am the child’s mother! — No, actually I am!” URL: >>>> Accessed 01.10.2020.

NGO D

The NGO D has the longest history among five researched NGOs: it was founded in 2006 as the first public welfare organization for protecting LGBT youth and creating a compassionate atmosphere for issues related to gender and sexuality in schools. In the beginning, it was a gender-interested club at the university in Guangzhou. That time the activists had no knowledge of NGOs and gathered together mostly to foster a supportive community for their friends. The group became more popular after the activists organized a screening of the film “Brokeback Mountain” in the university that caused excitement and controversy among students and university staff sparking the discussion about gender education in China. Good personal connections with teachers became the factor that influenced their campaign and enabled them to launch sex and gender-related optional courses in the university [Interviewee D].

The organization is located in Guangzhou but also conducts its work in Wuhan, Nanjing, and Nanchang. It has five people who work full-time and four who work part-time, five interns, and around 60 people of volunteers. The NGO has two programs: the teacher-training program and the leadership program for LGBT students. Both of them share one mission of promoting LGBT-
friendly school environments and equal rights for LGBT youth with the joint effort of both teachers and students. The NGO has three departments: the first is responsible for the promotion and fund-raising, the second is the administration, and the last one does translation and interpretation, most of its members are volunteers. The NGO’s ten-years goal is to implement a gender-equity education policy in China similar to Taiwan (Fig. 5):

42 In 2014, we started [to connect] with primary and middle-school teachers to improve their awareness towards LGBT students. By now we have trained 400 teachers [...]. I think in China we can change society when we can change the awareness of the next generation, so education is the basis of our movement [Interviewee D].

Fig. 5: The class session on gender education provided by the teachers who received training in the NGO D. URL: >>>> Accessed 01.10.2020.

NGO E

45 The NGO E is the only one not operating by the moment of the interview. It was founded in 2016 and was shut down on the 6th of December 2018, about that the organization announced on its official WeChat account. Its founder is an experienced activist in the sphere of gender issues who was arrested by the police in the Feminist Five case7 (wu jiemei shijian, 五姐妹事件) (Fig. 6). Regarding the detention, the activist explained that invitation to the police station can happen frequently and, therefore, was not taken seriously by many NGO employees:

7 I was sometimes invited to have a tea (he cha, 喝茶) with the policemen before, so I did not think it was a big issue (fang zai xin shang, 放在心上). For example, before some events, they want to have some information or to stop some activists, or they just want to warn you to not do something or not to make friends with some people [Interviewee E].
The NGO E was located in Guangzhou and had three full-stuff members, two interns, and no more than five to ten volunteers. The NGO saw its mission in fighting against sexual violence and sexual harassment and promoting gender equality. The goals of the organization that were written on social websites are to empower disadvantaged groups in the field of sexuality and to educate the society in the sphere of gender. For example, the organization helped the transgender person to correct the diploma gender mark that usually cannot be changed due to the regulations of the university. Regarding the reasons for the shut-down, the activist explains that the NGO “has got too much pressure from the outside”:

There were very serious threats and risks that happened to us, including me, our volunteers, and interns. [They] were sometimes even scary I would say. I did not want to cause any trouble in anyone’s life [Interviewee E].

At first, the NGO activists decided to stop their activity and close the WeChat account temporarily. But several months later activists realized that the NGO was listed along with Guangzhou Rainbow University Alliance (Guangzhou caihong gaoxiao lianmeng, 广州彩虹高校联盟) as the suspected illegal organization (shexian, 涉嫌) on the website of the Ministry of Civil Affairs. Then, they closed the NGO completely.

Registration. “NGOs Are Constantly Perceived as Trouble-Makers”

Among all the investigated NGOs, no one has received an official registration in the Ministry of Civil Affairs in China. Some do not pursue official status on purpose because would like to escape redundant monitoring from the officials and the bureaucratic work they would be supposed to do to stay under-registered each year, i.e. to provide detailed information regarding events, activities, and funding:

Gender NGOs would be more commonly picked up on by the authorities to say “this is wrong, this is wrong, you cannot do that”. And at the end of the day, they block you with bureaucratic passes, with forms and applications to be refilled. And after you did all the paperwork, three months went by and you did nothing. So it is not an effective way to organize these times [Interviewee B].

People who were already registered told me that they had so much administrative work (xingzheng gongzuo, 行政工作), and the Ministry of Civil Affairs would examine, investigate and verify (shencha he shenhe, 审查和审核) you actions. Every one or two months you have to send
them your plan before you actually did something. I wanted to register but after I understood that I didn’t have money to hire a person to do all the paperwork [Interviewee E].

The NGO A is a volunteer group (minjian de zhiyuan xiaozu, 民间的志愿小组). They do not consider official registration due to the two reasons. First, they see the process as extremely difficult. Second, the activists are afraid that the control over their work would make most of their activities impossible to conduct, including the play. Without the existence of the play, the activists do not see any sense in maintaining the activity of the NGO. The NGO employees also value the freedom to perform the content they like without the necessity to change the plot.

The main difficulty that the status of the volunteer group brings them is that NGO A has to rely on itself in all fields of work. For example, no one can help with finding the place for the performance and other resources, organizing activities secretly from the authorities. There is also always a risk to be called into question [Interviewee A1].

A similar status has the NGO C, which calls itself a volunteer organization (zhiyuanzhe tuanti, 志愿者团体), it considers neither registration as an NGO nor as a commercial entity. Among reasons why the NGO members prefer to stay not-registered, they name the increasing political control after the implementation of the Foreign NGO Law in China in 2015. Being a volunteer organization, NGO C claims to carry out their work in an unrestrained manner without unwanted monitoring. Concerning the disadvantages of this status, the activists indicate to the problems of getting funding and legitimacy issues:

If we were registered, we could apply for some domestic foundations. [Now] the legitimacy of our activities cannot be seen (bu na me bei kanjian, 不那么被看见). People need big brands. And if you don’t register and the police find you, it will bring you trouble because you’re not existing, right (ni dou shi bu shi, 你都不是嘛对吧) [Interviewee C]?  

The founder of the NGO E at the beginning had plans to get an official NGO registration but the friends from the social sector persuaded her not to do it because of the bureaucratic work and sensitivity of the topic. Therefore, NGO E got registered as a commercial entity. The activists also mentioned problems with the legitimacy of the organization and difficulties with funding as the main disadvantages of being registered as a company:

First, you are checked by the Industrial and Commercial Bureau (gongshangju, 工商局) anyway. And this status makes you literally illegal. If [authorities] do their work strictly in accordance with the law (yang de anzhao falu shencha lai jiang, 严格地按照法律审查来讲), you are really illegal. But hundreds of organizations did the same before us. I think if authorities want to make trouble for you, they will do it, they will find your vulnerable points (xiao bianzi, 小辫子) [Interviewee E].

Two of the studied organizations eager to receive some kind of registration as the civil society actors. One of the goals of the NGO B is to operate in the Chinese political and administrative climate as a registered entity. However, the activists would not choose the registration as an NGO because they do not have the required sum of money to start the process. The registration as a non-governmental nonprofit unit (minban feiqiye danwei, 民办非企业单位) seems to the NGO members hardly possible to get. In their opinion, the main difficulties are, first of all, the approval of the supervising authority because few of them would “put their signature for the rights-based organization”. Second of all, due to the location restrictions, the NGO can only operate within one district in the city. It is challenging to find the one with a “tolerant environment” where local authorities would allow an NGO to concentrate on online activism as well. The third disadvantage is the full accountability of NGO activities. Nevertheless, the NGO B members consider registering in the form of cooperation, beneficial cooperation, and social entrepreneur
cooperation but they have not started the process yet [Interviewee B].

The NGO D is registered as a special fund (zhuanxiang jijin, 专项基金). The activists would like to receive the registration as an NGO but think that they do not “have a chance”. Despite having good relationships with the local security offices at district and city levels, the NGO members cannot find administrative representatives (faren daibiao, 法人代表) necessary for the application. This situation contributes to the argument of scholars that for many grassroots organizations to find a supervisory agency seems the most challenging requirement [Spires, 2011, p. 8; Wu, Chan, 2012, p. 11; Spires, Tao, Chan, 2014, p. 76]:

We talk with [local authorities] every month, share our work, and let them know what happens right now. We told them that we wanted to register as an NGO and asked to recommend some representative to us. But every time they do not reply. For them, if a union managed to register as an NGO, they would have the responsibility and could get trouble [Interviewee D].

To conclude, all activists find that tax exemption, the possibility of getting funding inside China, greater legitimacy of conducted activities, and, as a result, their prominence, easier access to government resources are the main advantages of being officially registered as an NGO in PRC. However, four of five studied NGOs do not think these reasons justify the challenges, mainly ongoing accountability of their activities to authorities, that NGOs have to go through.

Funding. “Gender is Always a More Neglected Area of the Whole Map of Organizations”

The studied NGOs receive funding from several channels. First is crowd-funding (zhongchou, 众筹) which is widely used by all NGOs. Three NGOs of five claimed to use an open crowdfunding day hosted by Tencent on the 9th of September (jiujiu gongyiri, 九九公益日). It confirms the opinion that crowdfunding through social platforms is a highly valuable source of fundraising and the fact that the Chinese Charity law 2016 does not capture this channel is its big shortcoming.

The second funding channel comes from embassies and overseas donors, although two NGOs mentioned the influence of the Foreign NGO Law in this respect. The third is winning competitions, getting some resources from domestic partners or foundations [Interviewee E]. Activists claim that for gender NGOs to get funding from foundations in China is extremely difficult, mainly because Chinese society does not have enough “gender consciousness” to support organizations with such agenda [Interviewee A2]:

Not that many foundations have gender awareness to approach gender NGOs. If they want to do charity for tax purposes, they would approach environment NGOs, education NGOs, [...] that is better for their brand images [Interviewee B].

Nevertheless, one of the NGOs managed to get funding from Chinese foundations. The NGO E that, among crowd-funding and overseas sponsors, got money for the project related to domestic violence from the Chinese institution [Interviewee E]. It may be the case because, according to the activists from the NGO C, the issue of domestic violence has recently become a very important topic in China due to its widespread discussions. Therefore, state institutions and social organizations can have some common projects in this area, and the topic became a good angle of cooperation:

The issue of domestic violence is totally insensitive now. If I [worked in this sphere], I could register. The Women’s Federation has many projects and money [devoted to this agenda]. It needs NGOs to do it, so [government agencies] are willing to cooperate. It works for both parties [Interviewee C].
However, the topic of reproductive rights of single women is not in the focus of governmental politics, therefore, the NGO C did not receive any support from three domestic foundations it applied to. It mainly receives funding from foreign embassies in China and overseas organizations. Activists underlined that since the implementation of the Foreign NGO Law in 2015, the funding from international NGOs became harder to get, and they continued cooperation only those that are legally possible. Another significant part is from the domestic social community, for example, crowdfunding in WeChat for the egg freezing law case⁹.

The main source of funding for the NGO A is money received from selling tickets for their play. Additionally, the NGO members sell merchandising products such as bags, notebooks, and postcards with feminists slogan written on them. The activists find it a creative way to earn some money and express their ideas and opinions to a greater public. The NGO also applies for some projects of the foundations that can bring the donations. All of them are overseas, mostly from the USA and the UK. For example, the activists applied for the grant of Oxfam charitable organizations in Hong Kong (xianggang leshihui, 香港乐施会) [Interviewee A1].

NGO B did not have any specific ways of funding at the moment of the interview, but it rather was in the process of developing the funding strategy. Some money that the organization has on the bank account was won in the start-ups’ competitions, according to activists. The university where its office is located provides them with some resources, including a workspace. With time, between the NGO B and the university has been established a mutually beneficial way of cooperation:

I do not think [the university] really has a strong gender awareness per se. They are technician-minded in a way that when they see a good project, regardless of the idea or the initiative, [...] that is nicely branded, have good designing brochures and infrastructure, [...] they can give resources to them [Interviewee B].

For NGO D, the main part of the funding comes from the community of like-minded people. The activists have 300 donors who donate from 50 to 100 yuan RMB to the NGO each month. The organization actively participates in the online-fundraising event in China on WeChat and Alipay (zhifubao, 支付宝) platforms. Besides, NGO D sometimes receives NGO grants from foreign embassies but, according to the activists, they can get funding this way not very often. Since the implementation of the Foreign NGO Law, the NGO completely refused from the donations from international NGOs [Interviewee D].

**Strategies: Online Ideological Battlefield, Self-Media, and Useful Contacts**

The internet is a significant area of activity for all five NGOs. Each of them has Weibo and WeChat profiles where people interested in gender issues get to know about the NGOs themselves, their activities, recruiting campaign, and the last news in the sphere. People also can share their opinions and experiences on social platforms. NGO D and E are also oriented to Western social platforms and have Facebook accounts. NGO E has LinkedIn and YouTube profiles as well as a WeChat account translated into English.

Another important role of the internet for gender-related activism is making minorities visible in the Chinese social context. The NGO C, which mostly conducts activities online, pays great attention to story-telling on its Weibo account. The NGO frequently publish experiences and law cases of the people to “present the existence of marginalized groups” and raise controversial issues. In this regard, activists see their role as similar to the work of media [Interviewee C].

However, the activists pointed out the limitations of internet activism. Although it helps a lot to expand the community of like-minded people, it is much easier for people to get angry by some words and start a conflict online [Interviewee A2]. The importance degree of online activism
for the NGOs, compared to offline activities, vary as well. For example, the activists from the NGO A are convinced that in their case the offline activism is much more effective than online. In the WeChat account, the NGO mainly publish notifications about upcoming events and a few articles because they prefer direct communication with the community:

I think that not face-to-face communication [...] has little efficiency [...]. In the offline, we are at the same time and place. The collision of opinions makes the atmosphere on the spot very lively, and everybody can suggest different ideas. We can also convey our emotions directly to our audience. The effect of offline activities is better [Interviewee A1].

Self-censorship on the internet became for the activists a daily routine, all of them are aware of the methods to make their posts less politicized. Usually, it includes changing the words into other characters that have the same pronunciation. The activists also told that many in the community using VPN to post their articles on the social platform called “Matters” because it is not based on the mainland internet [Interviewee A2].

At the beginning of 2018, NGO E started a crowdfunding campaign to collect money for researching sexual harassment. The NGO changed headlines of the WeChat post several times to avoid sensitive connotations. First, it was written as a “Report about sexual harassment in universities. Building the network against sexual harassment”. After it was deleted the first time, the NGO transformed it into “Crowdfunding. Do not be indifferent, let’s oppose sexual harassment together” while the word “harassment” was written with the one character in pinyin (*SAO* 扰). The third attempt already misplaced sexual assault with “promoting gender equality” but it did not save the post. Finally, the NGO put a picture with the QR code for the article attached. As the result, the organization got a collective donation of 35,000 RMB and published a report that showed 75 % of surveyed current and former female college students in China were victims of sexual assault [Interviewee E].

The team of NGO B is very cautious about what can be said online: with partners, it uses WeChat only to discuss work-related issues, for more sensitive topics the activists prefer the messenger “Signal”. At the same time, the NGO sees it strategically important to operate both online and offline. Its content production relies to a very great extent on volunteers. With the anti-sexual harassment workshops, the NGO needs offline volunteers to organize the event. And to “maintaining presence”, they need people who would post articles on the internet regularly:

I think, all these different online platforms: Weibo, WeChat, Zhihu (知乎) are an ideological battlefield that we cannot just let go. Very often changes happen at the molecular level: I started writing online in 2015, I got a lot of messages saying that people read my stuff and they began to pay attention to the topic. So no matter how difficult the online environment is, there should always be some efforts to try to keep presence [online] [Interviewee B].

The NGOs mentioned in the discussion the #Metoo campaign, in which all of the activists actively took part. The NGO A, for example, suspended all activities not directly related to #Metoo, including the play, for the whole of 2018. Meanwhile, they organized series of anti-harassment workshops and simulation exercises that taught women how to deal with harassment in public places, at work, in schools, and how to react if you are an observer [Interviewee A1].

Regarding the media sphere, #Metoo exploded public attention to gender-related issues in China. Today people like discussing that makes this sphere attractive for reporters. Especially the topic of women’s rights became much more popular in the official discourse that made media a highly important angle of work for the NGOs [Interviewee B, Interviewee C]:

Sexual violence and harassment are topics that media like to report and in the past few years in China, there are a lot of cases that have been reported. It can create meaning in the future.
The topic looks like the elephant in the room (fangzi li de daxiang, 房子里的大象), we need to talk about it [Interviewee E].

All the NGOs cooperate with some traditional media. But at the same time, the activists admit downsides accompanying media attention to the sensitive and intimate gender-related issues, for example, the secondary harm for the survivors of sexual harassment or rape cases [Interviewee B]. This awareness motivates activists to improve the situation. For example, one of the interviewed NGO volunteers organized the project devoted to the reporting of the rape or sexual harassment cases in an appropriate manner. The activists had prepared lectures, asked the experts in the LGBT-related field to share experiences, and invited journalists from traditional media, gender activists, and students from journalism faculties [Interviewee A2]. The founder of the NGO E also considered cooperation with media as a part of the strategic planning. Previously she led the project called Rainbow Media Award. The NGO often invited media to its events and organized workshops for journalists [Interviewee E].

All NGOs distinguished so-called self-media (zi meiti, 自媒体) from internet activism and found independently operated social media accounts, rather than traditional media, the main way of broadcasting ideas, recent news, and the way of getting public attention. Therefore, the NGOs told that all the times it was traditional media who approached them and not vice versa. The activists mainly rely on their partners and colleagues on social platforms with whom they systematically exchange information and resources:

If we are talking about media, that is us too because we officially started [our WeChat account] in March, our brand was launched this year [Interviewee B].

Most of the time when you see what media reported us it is WeChat official accounts. We have a list of LGBT self-media and we know each other. [With them] we do not have the “who approach who”. But some mainstream media [come to] us [Interviewee D].

The NGOs consider networking a substantial part of the successful strategy in the social sector and especially for the gender-related NGOs. In this regard, all NGOs pointed out partnerships with other Chinese NGOs as the priority in the networking process. As the number of gender-related NGOs in China is quite limited, all NGOs are familiar with the main domestic organizations and know colleagues personally. To a large extent, the mutual help consists of dissemination (xuanchuan, 宣传) of the articles and the information about each other online. The NGO partners support each other in recruiting volunteers and event organization [Interviewee B]:

I think it is more important to cooperate with domestic organizations because they are our most direct supporters. Our topics and the working methods are related [Interviewee C].

The NGOs mostly do not have solid partnerships with international NGOs because it is much harder to connect with them these days due to the implementation of the Foreign NGO Law. Besides, the levels of the LGBT sphere development are so different that make equal cooperation obstructing. According to the activists, international NGOs have the experience to share but “there is not much direct help” [Interviewee C, Interviewee E].

The establishment of beneficial relations with the government surprisingly appeared to be not in the strategy for the most studied NGOs. Authorities do not know about the existence of NGOs A, B, and C. The NGO E had not had any relations with the local government before it was closed. The activists do not pursue this cooperation due to the three reasons. The first is to avoid unwanted monitoring of their activities. Second, the benefit of such relations is not particularly obvious, therefore, in the eyes of the activists, it does not worth too much effort. Third, there is no institutionalized way of getting such connections:
I don’t think [relations with the government] is important now. They don’t have any advantages for us, they don’t have money, do they [Interviewee C]?

At different times you just bumped into some people inside the government who are willing to help you. But you can’t say then that becomes the situation that the government itself wants to help you. You get chances but it’s rare, it’s random, it’s arbitrary, it’s based on people relationships [Interviewee B].

Nevertheless, some activists admit that these relations can bring them legitimacy in the eyes of authorities, the possibility to avoid some troubles, and access to the resources. However, only the NGO D claimed to have good relationships with the local authorities who can warn them about some upcoming checkup from the higher-level officials [Interviewee D].

The NGO D and C were directly involved in some LGBT-related legislation processes. For NGO C, law consultations (zuo zixun, 做咨询) is the main area of activity. In 2014, the NGO D did the research revealing that when homosexuality is mentioned in Chinese textbooks, 40% of the references define it as a mental illness. It caused a public outcry, and the NGO D activists together with its partner LGBT advocacy sued the country’s major educational institutions demanding equal treatment of LGBT students [Interviewee D]. The NGO E and other activists wrote open letters to universities in the response to sexual harassment incidents.

Generally speaking, conducted interviews with the five NGOs revealed that to describe their activities, all of them use the word “rights advocacy” (quanli changdao, 权利倡导) presenting themselves as organizations contributing to some policy changes. Four NGOs had this agenda from the very beginning, and the NGO D has deliberately transformed its role as a service provider for LGBT people into an advocacy NGO. Besides, concerning gender advocacy within the NGOs, there can be seen a strong accent on the professional, expert-level growth. Two of the interviewed activists received degrees in gender politics, while others use their professional background to enrich the expertise of gender-related NGOs in China. Activists conduct researches and annual surveys to understand the latest developments in the sphere and use them to reinforce their ideas. This fact slightly contradicts findings of scholars who demonstrate that NGOs do not consider themselves part of an epistemic community yet, but rather see their role as bonding with the government to influence politics [Hsu, Hasmath, 2017].

Interestingly, each of the studied NGO takes on the role of the educational resource that spreads knowledge in this sphere of sex and gender awareness. The NGOs see the importance of sex education for Chinese society and pay great attention to it in their activities. The NGO E devotes all the time to create the gender equality lessons for the primary and middle schools, gender-friendly teaching training, online and university gender courses, and similar educational activities. At the same time, all NGOs organize workshops and lectures on a series of topics including sexual harassment, sexual violence, and LGBT-related issues. Moreover, activists provide this information not only to amateurs interested in gender but also to professionals in other spheres, for example, journalists, lawyers, teachers.

While most activists seek neither for legal registration as an NGO nor connections with the government because of the regular investigations from authorities, all of them do not perceive their activity as something highly sensitive in the Chinese context. According to them, gender-NGOs are “the neglected area of the whole map of the organizations”. The activists also warn that it is better to be careful because authorities, in general, think that NGOs are “trouble-makers”. At the same time, activists do not see their agenda per se as politically sensitive:

Our activities are not sensitive at all, it’s not like religious organizations [Interviewee C].

If you are registered as a gender NGO and your tactic is more rights-focused, you don’t
have a very strong cooperation relationship with the government. It’s not that you have a bad relationship with them, it’s just you do your work, and they do their work [Interviewee B].

Results. “We Are Optimistic. If We Are Not, Why Would We Hire More People?”

Although the small sample of the research does not allow to make any generalizations related to China as a whole, the interviews with activists contributed to the argument that it is at least “premature” to argue about NGOs’ incapacity to organize with a certain level of success [Hsu, 2020, p. 2]. A lot of NGOs are very skillful in exercising their activity while not crossing the border of politically sensitive issues. They come up with feasible solutions that do not challenge the state agenda.

For example, feminist leaders in China try not to mobilize crowds, they rather use social media, propose anti-sexual harassment legislation, and on-campus prevention mechanisms. In the given cases we can also see that to make the issue tangible for the public is one of the functioning tools of activists. Furthermore, the interviewed organizations mostly have ambitions to be active actors of civic activism and share their knowledge with professionals in other spheres. Notably, to do so most of them do not seek useful guanxi (connections) with the governmental agencies.

Remarks:

1. Centralization is not equal to defragmentation of the political system though [Qiaoan, 2020, p. 14].

2. 2018年民政事业发展统计公报 (Statistical Bulletin regarding the Professional Development of Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People’s Republic of China). URL: >>>>. Accessed 23.06.2020.

3. “The New Normal” for Foreign NGOs in 2020.ChinaFile. URL: >>>>. Accessed 13.05.2020.

4. The name of the city is changed by request of the interviewee.

5. The organization was suspected by the police of investigating #MeToo events.

6. Chinese social websites.

7. In March 2015, a group of women activists was detained before a planned rally, during which women were supposed to distribute anti-sexual harassment stickers on the Beijing subway. Their detention lasted for 37 days and lead to the international social protest.

8. Chinese Civil Society in 2018: What’s Ahead? Transcript of the Panel Discussion.ChinaFile. URL: >>>> opinion/media/chinese-civil-society-2018-whats-ahead. Accessed 13.05.2020.

9. The Chinese law prohibits unmarried women to freeze their eggs. At the moment of the interview, the NGOC took part in the lawsuit related to the egg freezing that caused a lively debate among Chinese netizens. A single woman sued the hospital because it refused to do the procedure.

10. China’s #MeToo Activists Have Transformed a Generation.Foreign Policy. URL: >>>>. Accessed 28.05.2020.

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Гражданское общество в Китае при Си Цзиньпине: кейс негосударственных организаций, занимающихся вопросами гендера

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Аннотация
Статья стремится внести вклад в понимание современного гражданского общества в Китае, используя качественный анализ пяти негосударственных организаций, связанных с гендерной тематикой. В фокусе исследования были правовой статус, виды деятельности, финансирование и стратегии выживания организаций. Серия полуструктурированных интервью показала, что все изучаемые организации позиционируют себя как проактивные правозащитники, чья повестка, тем не менее, не противоречит государственной политике. Более того, общественные объединения берут на себя роль образовательного ресурса, распространяющего знания о поле и гендере. Хотя небольшая выборка исследования не позволяет делать обобщения о Китае целом, статья демонстрирует, что китайское гражданское общество при Си Цзиньпине не полностью подавлено.

Ключевые слова: гражданское общество в авторитарных государствах, негосударственные организации в Китае, вопросы гендера в Китае, регистрация негосударственных организаций, стратегии негосударственных организаций, политика Си Цзиньпина

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