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A maturing civil society in China? The role of knowledge and professionalization in the development of NGOs

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Abstract
This article suggests that Chinese NGOs do not have the conviction that they are part of an epistemic community in mainland China. Interviews conducted in four cities, Chongqing, Kunming, Nanjing and Shanghai, suggest that this can be attributed to a lack of set standards and professionalization governing their sector of operation. Further, the study finds that Chinese NGOs do not see knowledge production as their primary role within their organizational development life cycle. This may indicate a varying path towards the maturation of civil society in China, whereby Chinese NGOs do not conform to the organizational development process as outlined in extant NGO literature.

Keywords
Chinese NGO, civil society, non-profit, epistemic community, knowledge, professionalization

The last two decades have seen an upsurge of Chinese non-governmental organizations (NGO) in terms of scale and scope. Chinese NGOs now populate major cities in China, and have developed more amicable relations with various central and local governments.[1] They now operate in a spectrum of activities including education, poverty alleviation,

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community development, the environment, and health, and offer a variety of services and support for marginalized groups in Chinese society.

The NGO literature predicts that as NGOs mature and 'grow up', they should begin to develop an appetite for different roles and functions. Foremost, they will seek to become part of the policymaking process, or to focus on establishing transnational linkages to heighten the importance of certain issues.[2] A significant part of this maturation process is the movement to establish or become part of an epistemic community – a community of experts seeking to exert influence in the policy realm – where shared normative and causal beliefs are displayed.[3] In this transition to be part of an epistemic community, an organization develops the expertise to inform on evidence-based policy.[4] Such developments are yet to take shape in the Chinese NGO sector, in part due to the nascent nature of the NGO sector, but also the political context which shapes their development.

The overwhelming majority of NGO representatives interviewed for this study, a total of 102 interviews, across four major cities in China, Chongqing, Kunming, Nanjing, and Shanghai, indicate that they are hesitant to regard themselves and their organizations as part of an epistemic community. Moreover, respondents indicated that they do not believe NGOs have either a primary or secondary role to produce and develop new knowledge. This is perplexing given that studies looking at the organizational life cycle of NGOs predict otherwise, begging the analytical query of this article: why are Chinese NGO representatives not actively seeking to establish, and be part of, an epistemic community? Conversely, what role do knowledge and professionalization play in the current Chinese NGO development trajectory?

In this article, we argue that the confluence of the political environment and the immaturity of the NGO sector (as noted by many of our respondents) serve to place Chinese NGOs at odds with their counterparts elsewhere in the world. While it may seem obvious that the Chinese political and institutional context may serve to inhibit such NGO developments, we believe that the state management of Chinese NGOs through various regulations may actually provide an opportunity for NGOs to be part of the policy making process. This is evident by the increasing number of pilot projects and methods for social service delivery by central and local government agencies.[5] In fact, recent scholarship has argued that despite the new regulations pertaining to overseas NGOs with substantial impact on the domestic sector, state regulations can indeed open space for Chinese NGOs to be innovative and adaptive.[6] In short, under such circumstance there is indeed the possibility for Chinese NGOs to form epistemic communities.

Suffice it to say, the relationship with the state is a critical factor in the work and development of Chinese NGOs.[7] We argue that while the notion of an epistemic community is new for many Chinese NGOs, the political and institutional environment dictates to a large extent how Chinese NGOs perceive themselves within the broader landscape of social issues and policies. Put differently, building trust with government authorities is a crucial aspect in the trajectory of an NGO's existence. While professionalization and trust building are not unique to Chinese NGOs, in a landscape where many NGOs have grown up outside the context of the party-state, trust building is critical. This is reinforced by our interviews, which suggest that building trust with the government

and lack of professionalization are two current factors challenging the fostering and strengthening of a fully fledged epistemic community in China's NGO sector.

Framework

Epistemic communities

Epistemic communities form around a particular issue, and one of its central tenets is its ability to influence policy.[8] The ability to impact policy formulation comes from the community's established expertise and impartiality. The production of knowledge based on evidence is therefore critical to the broader aims of an epistemic community. As Clair Gough and Simon Shackley write: 'Scientific knowledge is the "glue" that helps to keep policy actors committed and can be used as a trump card against opponents to the epistemic coalition.'[9] In other words, the transfer of knowledge to the policy realm and the ability to affect policy is one key way to measure the effectiveness of epistemic communities. As Claire Dunlop suggests, one of the mechanisms that underpin an epistemic community's influence is 'the ability to transfer policy by assuming control over knowledge production and in doing so guiding decision-maker learning'.[10] For example, the global tobacco control epistemic community established in 1967, through the World Conference on Tobacco or Health, has increased its authority and impact on the control of tobacco use. Hadii Mamudu et al.[11] illustrate that tobacco control professionals can be divided into four categories: scientists, advocates, expert government officials, and pure scientists; and their shared goal of tobacco control and their common adversary (the tobacco industry) provide the 'glue' that unites these four categories of professionals.

The legitimacy of epistemic communities is derived from their collective expertise, control over the production of knowledge, and the influence they can exert in the policy arena. While epistemic communities can exert policy influence in two ways – capitalizing on decision-makers' technical uncertainty or legitimizing the decisions made by policy makers – Dunlop argues that we must focus on differentiated conceptualizations of learning. Although we do not go as far as Dunlop with a typology of learning (self-directed, informal learning, formal learning and non-formal learning), we do agree with the emphasis on learning. Namely, we believe that for an epistemic community to be effective it has to provide opportunities for decision-makers to engage, learn, and find ways to institutionalize new knowledge.

According to Gough and Shackley,[12] NGOs are engaged in three broad activities: (1) developing creative policy solutions, (2) knowledge construction/coalition building, and (3) pressure/lobbying. Creative policy solutions involve the introduction of new concepts, approaches or interpretations around a policy. Knowledge construction includes writing and producing research reports to shed light on new evidence. And finally, lobbying and campaigning are areas in which NGOs have traditionally engaged. NGOs also have the ability to bridge the 'lay–expert, activist–professional and local–global divides'[13] and articulate scientific knowledge in a comprehensible manner. Suffice it to say that, given the stakes involved in highly contentious issues, there is no reason to

assume that Chinese NGOs cannot adapt their organizational focus to be part of an epistemic community where emphasis is on the production of knowledge.[14]

Relatedly, the epistemic community literature has focused on the conditions in which epistemic communities matter and are more likely to be persuasive. According to Anthony Zito,[15] epistemic communities are most likely to be effective when there is a complex set of issues involving uncertainty, particularly at the early stages of policy formulation. Moreover, when there is compatibility between the ideas advocated by the epistemic community and institutional norms, epistemic communities are more likely to achieve success in policy advocacy.[16] Scholars also note the importance of an epistemic community's relationship and access to decision-makers.[17] Moving forward with the concept of epistemic community and to enhance its explanatory power, Mai'a Cross[18] observes that epistemic communities do not simply exist or not exist, rather they are weak or strong in their persuasive abilities depending on their internal cohesion. While Cross acknowledges the need to account for the domestic political context for the success of epistemic communities, we believe that such a context is the key to understanding why Chinese NGO representatives have yet to actively establish and participate in an epistemic community. Internal cohesion and domestic politics are two different factors impacting the effectiveness of an epistemic community. In the case of China, domestic politics and the regulatory regime governing NGOs may affect the cohesiveness of the community and, in turn, offer important insights to understand why Chinese NGOs have yet to follow the organizational life-cycle development outlined in the NGO literature.

Chinese NGOs

The emergence of Chinese NGOs has captured the attention of the party-state, particularly with regard to their management. Despite stringent regulations and formal barriers to entry, over 500,000 NGOs are registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs while approximately 1.5 million NGOs are unregistered.[19] To officially register as an NGO, organizations must find a willing government department to sponsor their application. Given that NGOs are in many ways an unknown element that is emerging outside of the state institutional construct, sponsoring such an application may jeopardize the respective government department, and thus few incentives are provided to undertake such a task. As a result, many NGOs seek alternative ways to register and become a legal entity. For example, they may register with the State Administration for Industry and Commerce as a for-profit entity, but continue to operate as an NGO. Although there have been various local experiments to abolish the dual registration system,[20] there are still various hurdles such as the type of NGO permitted to register without a sponsor.

In line with new developments at the central government level to encourage greater societal involvement in the delivery of social welfare, different types of NGOs have varying relationships with the authorities. With pilot projects dotted across the nation, social service delivery NGOs have experienced more amicable relations with the government, some even obtaining contracts to deliver welfare services. This has had a notable impact on some NGOs in terms of greater financial stability. For instance, the Global Fund's financial resources for NGOs working on HIV/AIDS issues have meant a modicum of stability for smaller NGOs in China, but its withdrawal in 2013 has spurred the

central government to announce domestic support for HIV/AIDS NGOs, although whether this commitment is ongoing remains to be seen. It must be noted, however, that NGOs that have obtained government funding usually do so on a short-term basis (e.g. one year or less). Further, examples such as Foshan in Guangdong – where officials reported that only 3.9 per cent of registered social organizations qualified for government funding[21] – suggest that social service contracting does not guarantee organizational or financial stability for the NGO sector. NGOs representing migrant workers, on the other hand, have experienced government harassment and inspection, notably in Guangdong,[22] whereas those based elsewhere, for example in Beijing, have not faced similar antagonism. Notions such as graduated controls, where the state exerts different control strategies depending on the capacity of the social organization[23] (or its variations, determined by NGOs' reactions to state actions[24]), or consultative authoritarianism, where the state permits the expansion of social organizations but at the same time maintains and develops indirect tools of control,[25] suggest that there may well be variations across NGO sectors with regard to the formation of epistemic communities.

Suffice it to say, depending on the issue of focus for NGOs and the location, NGOs across China will have varying relationships with central and local authorities. The differences across subsectors and location will have important consequences for the activities they are engaged in, time and resources dedicated to building good rapport with the government, and their outlook on organizational development. The notion of a singular NGO sector in China is therefore subject to question, particularly when such variations have an impact on the organization in its work and development.[26]

Methodology and sample

In line with the heterogeneity of the NGO sector in China, there is great variability in our sample in terms of location and scope of activities. In Kunming, environmental NGOs are more prevalent compared to the other three cities due to salient issues such as contention over the building of dams. The province of Yunnan (Kunming is its capital) has the highest density of environmental NGOs, and was the first province to allow foreign NGOs to enter, thus providing a backdrop for local NGOs to emerge with the support of their foreign counterparts. For Chongqing, the history of NGOs is much shorter and the range of NGOs much narrower. However, with the likes of the Green Volunteer League (重庆市绿色志愿者联合会) of Chongqing, one of the oldest NGOs in the city and in China (established in 1995), this NGO has paved the way for NGOs focused on environmental issues, from fighting industrial pollution to organic farming. Various Chongqing NGOs have partnered with the local government to address strontium salt chemical pollution in West Chongqing.[27] Nanjing and Shanghai have a robust social service delivery NGO sector. Shawn Shieh notes that Nanjing,[28] once a laggard in NGO development, has recently seen an infusion of NGO support through the likes of incubators, where NGO start-ups are provided with resources at little or no cost to nurture their development.[29] Shanghai is experimenting and piloting various services delivered by NGOs, from migrant children's education to care for the elderly. The activities of the social welfare sector with NGO participation is largely spearheaded by the Shanghai municipal and district authorities. Shanghai is one of the first large cities in China to undertake government contracting of

social services on a large scale.[30] The focus on welfare delivery has, in part, shifted the orientation of NGOs in Shanghai. Over the last decade, Shanghai's NGOs have targeted community development rather than specific issues.[31] With the latest trend in welfare contracting, NGOs in Shanghai are now focusing on working with the government to obtain contracts. The four case study cities were selected based on the assumption that the scope of organizational activities and development can be influenced by the local institutional environment. Thus, the cities matter insofar as we can ascertain the type of NGOs that are prevalent and, related to this, the type of relationship they may have with state authorities and trust-building opportunities, all affecting the likelihood of epistemic communities developing.

A total of 102 NGO face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted across the four cities, from mid-2013 to mid-2014, focusing on the organization's relationship with the central and/or local government, personnel in the organization, participation in the contracting of welfare delivery and the production of knowledge vis-a-vis epistemic communities. Interviews generally lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. Respondents were asked to complete an initial questionnaire with basic details of their organization prior to the semi-structured interviews. Given the focus of the study, we utilize interview responses pertaining to the latter aspect. NGOs were selected based on a snowballing technique. Although snowballing techniques may lead to selection and/or gatekeeper bias, this was the most effective way to obtain information on the above topics, particularly as many NGOs do not seek overt attention (scholarly or otherwise), and operate at the grass-roots level. In other words, the snowballing technique was appropriate in this situation as it allowed us to identify and analyse a relatively hard-to-reach population.[32] Of the 102 NGOs interviewed, 16 were from Chongqing, 40 from Kunming, 27 from Nanjing and 19 from Shanghai. Interviewees were representatives of NGOs, either the founding member or project officer of the organization. The average organizational age of the NGOs across the four cities is 9.4 years, with Chongqing's average at 6.1, Kunming at 12.6, Nanjing at 8.4 and Shanghai at 10.3.

Although the majority of the NGOs work in the broad area of service delivery, we have further divided this category, to be more specific, into welfare, health, education and community development. While each of these four service delivery areas is equally broad, we have attempted to differentiate the type of work NGOs are engaged in. Under the category of welfare, NGOs may be engaged in the care of orphans, the elderly, and the disabled or engaged in poverty alleviation. The health category includes NGOs addressing HIV/AIDS and other diseases or illnesses. Education includes those delivering education materials to rural villages, developing the education curriculum, educating migrant children and other related activities. Community development includes organizations that work with local communities across different subgroups and addressing intersecting issues such as community participation of the elderly.

As Table 1 suggests, NGOs in our sample engage in a variety of areas, with the following being most common: welfare, health, environment and education. Also, there was some variability in each city sampled. In Chongqing, NGOs engaged primarily in the areas of education, environment and community development. In Kunming, 5 NGOs out of 40 engaged in the health sector. In Nanjing 13 out of 27 were in welfare. In Shanghai, among 19 NGOs, 5 engaged in welfare, and 6 in education. These sectoral differences, as we shall see, are noted by the respondents in reference to the sectors most likely to impact policymaking.

Table 1. Main organizational focus of surveyed NGOs* (percentage in parentheses).

	Chongqing	Kunming	Nanjing	Shanghai	Total
Welfare	1 (6.3)	4 (10.0)	13 (48.1)	5 (26.3)	23 (22.5)
Health	2 (12.5)	15 (37.5)	1 (3.7)	3 (15.8)	21 (20.5)
Environment	4 (25.0)	10 (25.0)	3 (11.1)	2 (10.5)	19 (18.6)
Education	4 (25.0)	4 (10.0)	1 (3.7)	6 (31.6)	15 (14.7)
Community Development	4 (25.0)	3 (7.5)	1 (3.7)	0 (0.0)	8 (7.8)
NGO Support	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	4 (14.8)	1 (5.3)	5 (4.9)
Cultural	0 (0.0)	2 (5.0)	1 (3.7)	1 (5.3)	4 (4.0)
Migrants	1 (6.3)	0 (0.0)	2 (7.4)	1 (5.3)	4 (4.0)
Gender	0 (0.0)	2 (5.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	2 (2.0)
Legal Support	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (3.7)	0 (0.0)	1 (1.0)
Total	16	40	27	19	102

*While an NGO may engage in various issue areas, we categorize each NGO according to its stated main area of work.

Table 2. Should NGOs in China be considered part of an epistemic community (percentage in parentheses)?

	Yes	No	Maybe	Don't Know	No Response	Total
Chongqing	1 (6.3)	11 (68.8)	4 (25.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	16
Kunming	18 (45.0)	17 (42.5)	4 (10.0)	1 (2.5)	0 (0.0)	40
Nanjing	5 (18.5)	13 (48.1)	5 (18.5)	0 (0.0)	4 (14.8)	27
Shanghai	5 (26.3)	11 (57.9)	3 (15.8)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	19
Total	29 (28.4)	52 (51.0)	16 (15.7)	1 (1.0)	4 (3.9)	102

Results

As Table 2 indicates, a total of 29 NGOs and their representatives (28.4 per cent) in our sample viewed Chinese NGOs as part of an epistemic community, whereas just over half (51 per cent) believed NGOs are not. Chongqing is the only city where the

Table 3. Should NGOs be responsible for the production and development of new knowledge (percentage in parentheses)?

	Yes	No	Maybe	Don't Know	No Answer	Total
Chongqing	10 (62.5)	0 (0.0)	5 (31.3)	0 (0.0)	1 (6.3)	16
Kunming	21 (52.5)	15 (37.5)	0 (0.0)	3 (7.5)	1 (2.5)	40
Nanjing	18 (66.7)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	9 (33.3)	27
Shanghai	7 (36.8)	8 (42.1)	4 (21.1)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	19
Total	56 (54.9)	23 (22.5)	9 (8.8)	3 (2.9)	11 (10.8)	102

overwhelming majority of respondents stated that NGOs cannot be considered an epistemic community (68.8 per cent), whereas the responses were split more evenly in Kunming (Yes: 45.0 per cent; No: 42.5 per cent).[33] Thus, it may be possible to infer that the development of and participation in an epistemic community is linked with the maturity of the sector and age of the NGO.

Although just over half of the sample considered NGOs not to be part of an epistemic community, some respondents qualified their stance by noting two factors. First, domestic NGOs have not acquired sufficient expertise to form such a community. And second, Chinese NGOs cannot be considered an epistemic community since the sector as a whole has not professionalized: 'The percentage of professionals in NGOs is too low, especially for social service NGOs. There is a lack of expertise … not many NGOs know what they are doing.'[34]

Interestingly, the 15.7 per cent of NGOs that responded 'maybe' qualified their position by stating that this was in reference to NGOs working on particular issues. More acutely, the vast majority in this response cohort pointed to environmental NGOs, which they deemed to be part of an epistemic community.

We also asked whether NGOs should be responsible for the production and development of new knowledge (see Table 3). To our surprise – given the epistemic community responses – the majority of the representatives believed they should (54.9 per cent). NGO representatives who answered in the affirmative qualified their responses with general sentiments such as: 'Yes, they should. So it can facilitate the improvement of society in general'[35] and 'For the NGO to survive and prosper there must be new knowledge'.[36]

The different responses toward knowledge and the epistemic community may be attributed to the deployment of that knowledge, whether shared internally, with a specific government agency, or more broadly for public consumption. Those who believed that it is the responsibility of NGOs to produce and develop new knowledge suggested that it was not their organization's role or their focus, given their mandate is solely service delivery: 'The NGO just need to provide the service to society'[37] and 'The responsibility of NGOs is simply to carry out their mission'.[38]

Both Chongqing and Nanjing had zero responses in the 'no' category, whereas 'no' responses in Kunming (37.5 per cent) and Shanghai (42.1 per cent) indicated a more

even split. Again, those that answered 'maybe' were of the opinion that not all NGOs need to be producing and developing new knowledge.

Discussion

Professionalization and passion

What explains a lack of confidence amongst NGO representatives about the emergence or establishment of an epistemic community in China? The evidence we gathered suggests that subnational jurisdictions with a higher proportion of NGOs in social service delivery are more inclined to articulate a negative view about the existence of an epistemic community. For instance, Chongqing (68.8 per cent) and Shanghai (57.9 per cent) had the most respondents with a negative view of an epistemic community, and were the two jurisdictions with the highest proportion of social service delivery NGOs – in welfare, education, health and community development – comprising 68.8 per cent of the NGO sector sample in Chongqing, and 73.7 per cent in Shanghai.

These results parallel NGO respondents' conviction that the sector was not staffed by experts and/or NGO representatives were only conducting activities that they were passionate about. One respondent working in the health sector noted that NGO representatives lacked professional training and knowledge, moreover ('in my area, NGO workers were former patients themselves, which means they [are] rarely qualified as experts').[39] This notion of NGOs being staffed by those affected or marginalized by the issue at hand is a recurring theme. One respondent from a Nanjing NGO in the disability sector reinforced the notion that those affected and simultaneously working for the NGO cannot professionalize. Thus, it is not the professional knowledge or experience that holds the NGO together or defines the organization, rather it is the shared experience of being disabled:

> NGOs in support of disabled people right now haven't found a good path of development yet. Right now most NGOs are populated entirely by disabled people themselves, they get together to help each other, but there aren't that many professional staff members.[40]

Subsequently, it is the formation of a support network that characterizes an NGO. In this situation, we can suggest that the road to professionalization will be a difficult one for an NGO, whereby learning to professionalize is guided by 'doing things better' rather than strategically doing the right thing. This is a point that we will expand further in the section on producing knowledge and setting standards.

Professionalization and passion are therefore in some sense opposites. The former contributes to an epistemic community, and the latter does not. Perhaps there is some truth in this notion, where passion may obfuscate objectivity – what gives an epistemic community its authority is the development of expert knowledge based on a scientific and/or rigorous and consistent methodology. If professionalization and passion are in contradistinction to each other, it would suggest that NGOs that are driven by the founding leader's passion will find it difficult to reach a level where they would be sufficiently professionalized to participate in an epistemic community. Moreover, perhaps we can also suggest that the legitimacy of epistemic communities will be driven by their perceived objectivity and ability to deploy evidence-based research to engage with policymakers.

In determining whether NGOs consider themselves part of an epistemic community, another variable to factor in is the age of the organization. This becomes quite pronounced at the subnational level, where we observed a strong interaction between tenure of operation and a positive attitude with respect to the existence of an epistemic community. For instance, Kunming NGOs have the longest average age of operation, spanning 12.6 years, and the highest number of responses affirming the existence of an epistemic community (45.0 per cent). In contrast, Chongqing's NGOs have the shortest number of years in operation (6.1 years), with 6.3 per cent of respondents agreeing that NGOs should be part of an epistemic community. Furthermore, both Nanjing (8.4 years and 18.5 per cent) and Shanghai (10.3 years and 26.3 per cent) maintain this trend. Against this backdrop, we are inclined to support the supposition that NGOs that have more years of operation have higher odds of replacing (or supplementing) passion with expertise.[41] Interwoven into all of this is the need to build trust with government agencies, as we shall see in the final section, in order to transmit and transfer a repertoire of experiences and knowledge.

Differences across sectors and locations

While the majority of NGOs might not have had the conviction that they or their counterparts were part of an epistemic community, many qualified that certain sectors had greater expertise or were more professionalized than others. Our sample suggests there are sectoral variances where, foremost, the environmental NGO (ENGO) sector was singled out, followed by the health sector, as having a more developed epistemic community.

ENGOs have one of the longest histories among the grass-roots NGO sectors in China. It is also the sector which has substantial potential for Chinese NGOs to impact central and local state policies through information sharing, and to potentially mobilize collective action.[42] As proof, a good example is the recent central government decision to revive the Nu River hydroelectric project in Yunnan, which galvanized environmentalists to protect the last of China's major rivers that had not yet been dammed. Huge environmental costs of these dams and their impact on China's future development enabled ENGOs to emerge and operate with a certain degree of freedom. The public education campaigns ENGOs have engaged in since the mid-1980s, as a result of the Three Gorges Dam, created alliances between environmentalists, scientists and ENGOs, representing an important feature of the environmental movement.[43] Moreover, such an alliance suggests a growing and influential epistemic community.[44] While ENGOs may indicate initial success in affecting government decisions on the Nu River dam, such influence can just as easily be reversed. In 2013, the State Council in its 12th Five-Year Plan for Energy Development lifted the ban on the damming of the Nu River.[45] Such a reversal may well be attributable to the weakness in the ability of the ENGO sector, along with stakeholders such as the Ministry of Environmental Protection, to maintain and sustain their influence at the policy level when pitted against national-level development objectives.

Similarly in the health sector, notably in HIV/AIDS, NGOs have benefited from significant international financial support, including the Global Fund. Until its withdrawal in 2013, the Global Fund had disbursed over US$800 million since 2003 towards combatting HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria in China. With a mandate to increase NGO participation in the fight against HIV/AIDS, many NGOs emerged as a direct result of the funding available. However, many unintended consequences resulted from these opportunities,

such as poor coordination, poor accountability[46] and ineffective use of the money.[47] Nevertheless, NGOs and other experts working in the HIV/AIDS sector can be credited with having bridged the gap between action and practice, and as far as 'values and procedures are concerned, the past decade saw the increasing ideational convergence between China and the global health community toward HIV/AIDS prevention and control'.[48]

Thus, the environmental and health sectors have seen some successes in influencing policy, changing attitudes, and drawing greater public and government attention to attendant problems. These two sectors, as some of our respondents indicated, can be considered part of an epistemic community. For example, one NGO working in education plainly noted: 'Maybe in some environmental groups they tend to be more professional'.[49] The difference may be attributable to a number of factors as noted earlier: maturity of the sector and the NGOs within them, importance of the issue vis-a-vis government priorities, and transnational linkages, amongst other factors.

Interviews with Nanjing NGOs demonstrated that even within the broad category of welfare, which includes the care of the elderly and the disabled, there are significant differences in how representatives responded to the question of epistemic community. Respondents working with elderly care NGOs were generally positive and praised the level of expertise of staff working in this sector. As one respondent working in NGO support observed:

> In Nanjing, senior care service started early, with good government support and market competition, and there is evaluation of senior service, so this particular area is advanced and more professional. But other service areas like support for disabled people are weaker.[50]

The idea of time and government support plays an important role in influencing one's conviction in the establishment of an epistemic community in China. The involvement of the government may come in the form of setting regulations and standards in terms of professionalization of the sector. In contrast, as another NGO responded: 'NGOs in Nanjing in the area of disabled support are not professional at all. There is very little education material in special needs education. People aren't properly trained and most NGOs aren't very professional.'[51] As Jessica Teets and Marta Jagusztyn[52] observe in the contracting out of social services, the lack of government regulations in assessing the quality of NGO service delivery prevents local authorities from capturing lessons learnt that can feed into the professionalization of the sector.

Issue salience and its resonance with government authorities make a tremendous difference in the level of professionalization of NGOs working in these sectors. Interestingly, these responses suggest that a level of government involvement and assistance is necessary to professionalize the NGO sector, and likewise for the NGO community to forge an epistemic community to assist in the formation of informed/evidence-based government policies.

Producing knowledge and setting standards

Consulting government in setting standards is an important element of an epistemic community. To simultaneously convey the realities of local communities and affect the government's policymaking process, NGOs play a valuable role in social learning, raising awareness, monitoring and research to complement government policy deliberation and

action. Suffice it to say, NGOs have the capacity to identify issues, to increase their salience, and to monitor a policy's implementation. Yet this is difficult in an environment where NGOs lack standards and professionalization.

Notwithstanding, the process of establishing standards does require the input of those stakeholders working in the sector to produce and develop situated knowledge as a result of having worked with a particular population group. This knowledge ultimately feeds into the policymaking process. The essential role of NGOs in this process is reflected in the responses to the question of whether NGOs are responsible for the production and development of new knowledge, with 54.9 per cent of our sample responding in the affirmative (and 8.8 per cent responding 'maybe'). The linking of knowledge with the development of the NGO sector is one theme that was observed by an NGO representative:

> Production of new knowledge is important and it is necessary; only with innovation can NGOs be known and understood by public authorities and the public. Right now there are new social needs unique to each locality, so innovation is necessary and important to the growth of NGOs.[53]

Such sentiments were rare among our NGO sample. Those who did qualify their responses believed that the development of knowledge is to enhance the conditions of those they serve, or to improve efficiency within similar organizations, and not to strengthen the NGO's position within a greater epistemic community. According to another NGO representative working in education training:

> Yes, NGOs should be responsible for the production and development of new knowledge. When they carry out their project, they do come across a number of issues on inefficiency of library management. They have to come up with new ideas and new tech[nology] to manage development of the local library.[54]

Or relatedly, an NGO representative suggested that shared knowledge may be helpful to new NGOs.[55] This disconnect between a lack of standards and the process of influencing policy to set standards, through the production of knowledge, highlights how Chinese NGOs view their role in Chinese society vis-a-vis the state.

Since not all NGOs are in a position to be part of an epistemic community, not all NGOs have the capacity to produce new knowledge or conduct research. With 22.5 per cent of our sample suggesting it was not the NGO's role to produce or develop new knowledge, it leads us to ask: who is responsible for producing new knowledge in shaping and improving the sector they are working in? Some NGOs suggested that such a role may be better suited to the government: 'That is the job for the experts and government. We have our own purpose.'[56]

The notion that producing knowledge is not the organization's mission is a recurring theme across the cities. Respondents felt that to produce new knowledge is to deviate from the goals of their organization, that is, to serve their constituents. One NGO respondent was particularly critical:

> The NGO could be the servant of society, fix up what the government and society fail to do. We are the doers, not the so-called experts [who] just sit in a comfortable sofa and imagine what the world looks like.[57]

It is fascinating to observe that experts are equated with passivity. This is perhaps linked to the notion that there is a division of labour amongst NGOs, whereby there are three broad activities, introduced by Gough and Shackley earlier in this article. NGOs that are working on the frontline of the issues at hand may see themselves as 'doers' in the pressure and lobbying category.[58]

Yet Table 3 indicates that both Chongqing and Nanjing had over 60 per cent of respondents who replied that NGOs have a role in producing and developing new knowledge, with the corresponding figure for Kunming at 52.5 per cent, and Shanghai at 36.8 per cent. What accounts for the difference between Chongqing/Nanjing and Kunming/Shanghai on this particular issue? The average age of the NGOs in the four cities gives us some insight. Chongqing and Nanjing have the youngest sector, and their responses coincided with their understanding that the production of knowledge will help organizations like theirs grow and mature.

The conviction that not all NGOs should be producers of knowledge or that knowledge is not a necessity for the establishment of an epistemic community to impact on policy suggests that Chinese NGOs do not fit neatly into the assumption that the maturation of NGOs equates with the progression into an epistemic community. Our study resonates with some of the findings of Willemjin Verkoren's research on NGOs in the Global South focusing on peace, where she notes that strategic learning amongst NGOs is limited.[59] Tactical learning – that is, 'how can we better do what we do?' – trumps strategic learning as reflected in 'are we doing the right thing?' due to factors such as funding requirements and distrust amongst NGOs.[60] Thus, the institutional environment dictates the manner of learning and, subsequently, how and what type of knowledge is produced, if at all, by the NGO. Consequently, the production of knowledge is not only shaped by divisions of labour within the NGO sector, as noted by Gough and Shackley, but Chinese NGOs are to a large extent shaped by their institutional environment[61] and, depending on their engagement with government officials, it will to an extent determine their learning tactical strategies. The space available to NGOs to conduct their work and the type of work are conditioned by both formal and informal rules.[62] In the next section we shall see that these rules, ultimately pertaining to building state–NGO trust, may subvert attempts to build an epistemic community.

Building state–NGO trust

Previous research into Chinese state–NGO relations shows the importance of establishing guanxi or relations with government officials for NGOs.[63] Guanxi by itself is insufficient for NGOs to completely fulfil their organizational goals, but more often than not it is a significant factor for many NGOs in smoothing out their day-to-day functions. The majority of the NGOs reported having some sort of relationship with the state, especially at the local level. In addition, over 45 per cent of respondents believed that NGOs must bear the burden of building trust between the state and the NGO.

As Chinese NGOs seek to engage with government partners at the local level, it may foster greater trust between the two parties.[64] Moreover, it allows the NGOs to overcome some of the institutional barriers such as registration difficulties, and it also accords the NGO with some legitimacy. Recent developments in the contracting out of

social services to NGOs have also meant that NGOs are seeking to further or to establish relations with local authorities in an effort to win contracts. However, others have noted that the bidding process is not always transparent, and there is high likelihood of many contracts going to NGOs that have pre-existing relationships with the government, thus bypassing the bidding process altogether.[65]

Although our findings suggest that establishing or having guanxi may influence the formation of an epistemic community – and signal a higher level of trust between both parties – we do wish to highlight two possible scenarios that require further analytical exploration. In the first scenario we can extrapolate that once NGOs have established an amicable relationship with the state, there is little incentive to foster, grow and strengthen an epistemic community with the goal of influencing government policy. In such a scenario, NGOs will have achieved, or are on their path to achieving, their organizational goal without having to coordinate with a multitude of stakeholders. Namely, by virtue of NGOs interacting with state authorities, this will inevitably lead to some changes in the behaviour of the state in policymaking, albeit gradually and no doubt with frustration. In the process of building trust through greater engagement with the state, it is highly plausible that the notion of an epistemic community that is separate from the state can become moot. That is, NGOs' direct access to the state may be viewed as a more efficient means to influence state behaviour, and to reach the NGOs' objectives. This scenario may apply to organizations with a domestic focus.

The second scenario is that guanxi does not preclude the establishment of an epistemic community. The partnership or the trust-building activities with local officials may provide NGOs with more resources to acquire expertise and knowledge in their area of work. In this scenario, NGOs may be prompted to develop greater expertise after establishing trust with local authorities to further the impact of their organization's work. Such a scenario may be applicable to NGOs that are well established with a lengthy organizational history and have good relations with the government, and are perhaps seeking the next stage of their development, for example, expanding their operations abroad.

Conclusion

Chinese NGOs, by and large, do not yet consider themselves part of an epistemic community. The lack of standards governing their sector of operation may in part explain why NGO representatives have expressed their hesitancy with regard to their readiness and participation in an epistemic community. Our study suggests that the lack of professionalization can hamper the formation of an epistemic community. Moreover, respondents suggested that it is not the role of NGOs to produce knowledge. This, in turn, explains why the majority of NGOs – notably in the social service delivery sector – had the conviction that an epistemic community is of limited value at the current stage of their organizational development.

This is not to say that some of our respondents did not believe that NGOs may professionalize and develop expertise in the future to forge a mature epistemic community. Rather, we are suggesting that, within the institutional context of China, Chinese NGOs place greater emphasis on developing relations with the government than on strengthening the NGO sector through the sharing of knowledge and information. Under such

parameters, we believe Chinese NGOs are yet to mature and thus are currently unlikely to make any significant impact on policy which will shape their sector of work in any substantial way in the near future.

Notes

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