
Lessons from Abroad: Foreign Influences on China's Emerging Civil Society

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, a number of foreign grantmakers and international NGOs have funded, initiated and/or designed training programs that introduce their Chinese grantees to “best practices” in “NGO management”. Drawing on several years of fieldwork, this article sheds light on the origins and lessons conveyed by two such “capacity-building” programs. Rather than being grounded in the actual, lived experience of Chinese civil society organizations and emerging organically from the bottom up, these programs are shown to reflect more accurately the concerns of foreign donors and the professionalized segment of the North American nonprofit world. The article concludes by suggesting that, despite recurring Chinese suspicions of civil society as a new weapon of foreign imperialism, the structures and practices promoted by donors mesh well with state efforts to channel new social energies into predictable and governable organizational forms.

Foreign influences in China's civil society sector today are almost impossible to ignore. Since the turn of the millennium, foreign foundations and governments have contributed millions of dollars each year to support a range of causes in China, from building civil society (broadly construed) to HIV-AIDS education programs that explicitly seek to employ NGOs as partners. Between 2002 and 2009, US foundations made grants to China of over US\$442 million.¹ In 2005, Germany's Protestant Church Development Service (EED) dedicated €4.2 million to China for 32 ongoing projects and two scholarships.² In the same year, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), a government-supported agency, committed CA\$249,350,000 to new and continuing projects in China, including CA\$2.1 million for direct support of Chinese NGOs from 2002

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1. Data from The Foundation Center online database, <http://foundationcenter.org> (accessed 2 May 2011 for 2003–09 data, and 19 November 2006 for 2002 data).

2. Data from EED, <http://www.eed.de/en/en.eed/en.eed.eed/en.eed.eed.finanze.2006/index.html#HL0> (accessed 19 September 2006). In 2005, EED received 65.7 per cent of its income from the German government.

to 2006.³ Hong Kong is also a regular source of funding for numerous programs in mainland China, through organizations such as Greenpeace, Oxfam Hong Kong and Partnerships for Community Development.

Within this broader world of funding priorities, a number of grantmakers and international NGOs have funded, initiated and/or designed training programs that introduce Chinese grantees and NGOs to “best practices” in “NGO management”. Their efforts have given birth to a small side industry of Chinese-run organizations that help design or implement “capacity-building” programs. Many of these organizations function as NGOs, with funding and content ideas coming from foreign donors.

To date, most scholarly treatments of the growth of civil society in China have had little to say about these international influences, opting instead to investigate the explosive expansion in officially registered NGOs (mostly GONGOs [Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organizations]) since the early 1990s.⁴ This article draws explicit attention to external influences, focusing on “model” practices and structures that have been promulgated by foreign grantmakers, and discussing their reception by Chinese grantees and implications for civil society development in China.

Depending on their political stances and myriad other considerations, donors’ goals and the impact which they hope to have in China vary a great deal. However, if their common desire—as stated on many donor websites and in much public literature—is the promotion of human rights, basic freedoms and democracy, we might expect certain things to feature prominently. For example, we could expect donor-driven training programs to focus on teaching the skills and habits of democracy (clear self-expression, compromise, consensus-building and so on) emphasized by political theorists and social scientists stretching back to de Tocqueville. Alternatively, if foreign donors in China see NGOs as vehicles for interest group representation working to advance causes like universal education, gender equality or the rights of people with HIV-AIDS, we might expect training programs to nurture communication skills and provide advocacy tools that NGOs could then use to engage government officials and affect government policy.

Neither of these foci is evident, however, in the design and implementation of influential donor-driven training programs in China. Rather, most prominent

3. Data from CIDA, <http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/CIDAWEB/acdicida.nsf/En/JUD-31112026-M6U#intro> (accessed 19 September 2006).

4. A few examples include: Timothy Brook and B. Michael Frolic, *Civil Society in China* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1997); Elizabeth C. Economy, *The River Runs Black: The Environmental Challenge to China's Future* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); Kenneth W. Foster, “Embedded Within State Agencies: Business Associations in Yantai”, *The China Journal*, No. 47 (January 2002), pp. 41–65; Jonathan Unger and Anita Chan, “Associations in a Bind: The Emergence of Political Corporatism”, in Jonathan Unger (ed.), *Associations and the Chinese State: Contested Spaces* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2008), pp. 48–68; Fengshi Wu, “New Partners or Old Brothers? GONGOs in Transnational Environmental Advocacy in China” (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2002).

are ideas and practices designed to create “professionalized” NGOs structurally and operationally similar to those in North America and thus more in line with donors’ expectations. Chinese grantees often resist these agendas, arguing that some imported structures are impractical in China’s current context or inappropriate for newly emergent Chinese NGOs. Such lessons are far from the blueprints for radical democratization or regime change feared by some in the Party and government.⁵ Rather, they are well in tune with ascendant business management models and a government interest in regulating (*guifan* 规范) Chinese NGOs.⁶

I focus on two popular “capacity-building” programs—one influenced mostly by US-based organizations and the other by Canada-based organizations. During my fieldwork in 2005–06, these two training programs were widely considered to be the most influential for Chinese NGOs.⁷ Each program trained hundreds of participants within this period. In addition, many of the Chinese NGO practitioners and academics trained to implement these programs went on to found their own “capacity-building” NGOs and/or to serve as trainers in other programs.

I participated as a trainee in two multi-day capacity-building workshops, interviewed funders, trainers, course developers and participants, undertook content analysis of training program brochures, texts, lesson plans and workbooks, and reviewed annual reports and other publications produced by funders and training organizations.⁸ From 2005 to 2007, I also volunteered with two health-focused grass-roots NGOs in Guangdong, and served as an occasional volunteer for NGOs working on other issues, including labor rights and education. During this period, I also served as interpreter and facilitator at an international conference of “experts” on nonprofit law organized by the Ministry of Civil Affairs. I served in the same roles for two groups of Chinese government officials and NGO leaders on 10-day study tours of civil society institutions and government regulatory agencies in the US.

5. See Pan Rulong and Dai Zhengqin, “‘Yanse geming’ yu guoji fei zhengfu zuzhi” (Color Revolutions and International Nongovernmental Organizations), *Dianzi keji daxue xuebao shekeban* (Journal of UESTC [Social Sciences Edition]), Vol. 7, No. 4 (December 2005), pp. 77–79; Jeanne L. Wilson, “Coloured Revolutions: The View from Moscow and Beijing”, *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2009), pp. 369–95; and Zhao Liqing, “Ruhe kandai zai Zhongguo de waiguo geizhengfuzuzhi” (How to View Foreign Nongovernmental Organizations in China), *Study Times*, 21 August 2006, http://www.studytimes.com.cn/txt/2006-08/21/content_7094045.htm (accessed 1 November 2006).

6. Space constraints prevent a much-deserved fuller treatment of the foreign influences on Chinese NGO regulations.

7. By “NGO”, in this article I refer both to bottom-up, grass-roots organizations that may be unregistered or commercially registered, and to those groups registered as proper *minjian zuzhi*, be they social organizations (*shehui tuanti*), foundations (*jijinhui*) or private non-commercial enterprises (*minban fei qiye danwei*).

8. To ensure confidentiality, I use pseudonyms throughout this article for both people and organizations.

THE FOREIGN ORIGINS OF TRAINING PROGRAMS

Generally framed under the term “capacity-building” (*nengli jianshe* 能力建设), the training programs described here are purported to improve the “management” (*guanli* 管理) of Chinese NGOs. Capacity-building is an ongoing concern of donors, government regulators and some NGOs; it was, for example, the topic of 14 of the 49 papers published in a compilation after “The International Conference on the Non-Profit Sector and Development”, organized in 1999 by Tsinghua University.⁹ More broadly, such programs can be seen as an effort to “professionalize” China’s nascent NGO community and to socialize them into the donors’ worldview, much as Sada Aksartova has found to be the case with Western donors in post-Soviet Russia and Kyrgyzstan.¹⁰

Both Training Program A (TP-A) and Training Program B (TP-B) are comprised of a series of sequential, multi-day modules, as outlined in Table 1. I conducted in-depth interviews with designers, funders and trainees of Training Program A, and participated directly (as a trainee) in several modules of Training Program B.

Training Program A

TP-A was initiated by GreenTree, a large US-based grantmaker which has supported development projects in China financially since the late 1980s. The organizations and individuals supported by GreenTree work in a variety of fields, including health, education, civil society development and poverty alleviation.

TP-A was envisaged as a multi-year capacity-building project to offer theoretical and practical managerial advice to 30 of GreenTree’s grantees. Rather than design the program itself, GreenTree provided another US-based organization, ProManager, with almost US\$1 million to develop and implement the curriculum. ProManager does not specialize in training *per se*, but it has experience operating and supporting social and economic development programs in over 100 countries, including more than 30 development projects in China.

The donor’s interest in the professionalization of grantees was manifest in the earliest stages of the program. In preparation for an initial self-assessment and to set the stage for more hands-on training, ProManager provided its trainees with a glossary of terms related to “nonprofit organization management” that included Chinese translations and explanations of over 60 English-language words,

9. See Liqing Zhao and Carolyn Iyoya Irving (eds), *The Non-Profit Sector and Development: The Proceedings of the International Conference in Beijing in July 1999* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Press for Social Sciences Limited, 2001), pp. 234–320.

10. Sada Aksartova, “Promoting Civil Society or Diffusing NGOs? U.S. Donors in the Former Soviet Union”, in D. C. Hammack and S. Heydemann (eds), *Globalization, Philanthropy, and Civil Society: Projecting Institutional Logics Abroad* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), pp. 160–91.

Table 1. Content of two foreign-supported capacity-building programs

	Training Program A (TP-A)	Training Program B (TP-B)
Module 1	Role of Board of Directors	Accountability
Module 2	Leadership	Leadership
Module 3	Human Resource Management	Governance
Module 4	Volunteer Management	Fundraising
Module 5	Financial Management	
Module 6	Fundraising	

including many technical terms related to nonprofit missions, financial and human resource management, and organizational structures. These terms included: mission statement, vision statement, strategic plan, charter, policy manual, stakeholders, board of directors, secretary of the board, executive committee, accountability, sustainability, transparency, credibility, risk management and governing instrument. This glossary was provided at the initial stage of the capacity-building effort, when ProManager asked the trainee organizations to undertake a self-evaluation. The criteria for the self-evaluation drew from the terms explained in the glossary, so mastery of the terms by the trainees was seen as essential.

Donor-driven training programs in general, and TP-A in particular, do not create these terms in a vacuum. As Terje Tvedt has noted, they are constitutive of global “‘NGO-speak’ (employed both by NGO people, donor bureaucrats, and NGO consultants)” that is produced and reproduced in “local and global gatherings and conferences where NGO leaders, from both the ‘North’ and the ‘South,’ meet donors and consultants”.¹¹ The definitions and practical implications of these terms, however, are often unclear and contested in both the funder community and the NGOs that are urged to embrace them.

In the case of TP-A, the overall assessment process itself and the training guide developed for the program borrowed heavily from a Canadian publication, *Benchmarks of Excellence for the Voluntary Sector* by Linda Mollenhauer.¹² These

11. Terje Tvedt, “Development NGOs: Actors in a Global Civil Society or in a New International Social System?,” *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (2002), pp. 369–70.

12. Linda Mollenhauer, *Benchmarks of Excellence for the Voluntary Sector* (Ottawa: ALS Society of Canada and Health Canada, 1999).

benchmarks emerged from the study of six “excellent” Canadian NGOs. The standards to qualify as “excellent” were first developed based on “a comprehensive review of literature and discussions with key opinion leaders about the challenges facing the sector” and were ultimately vetted by a panel of funders from government, the corporate sector and foundations.¹³

Seemingly in anticipation of criticism that nonprofit organizations in North America have become overly influenced by “the corporate mentality” and professionalized managers, Mollenhauer writes that the “list of organizations was developed through consultation with funders and community leaders. Therefore, the Benchmarks of Excellence provide a model that is *practical* and unique to the sector and is *not simply adapted from the business sector*”.¹⁴

To gain a better understanding of the backgrounds of people directing the six organizations that influenced the “Benchmarks” publication, I reviewed the tax forms filed by each organization with the Canada Revenue Agency in 2000. I coded the board members’ occupations into the following categories: business, professional, education, government, volunteer and other. For five of the six groups, at least 75 per cent of board members were in the business or professional fields. The overwhelming representation of the business and professional sectors on these organizations’ boards of directors testifies to the strong influence of elite and corporate interests in the management of these NGOs, an issue to which I return later in this article.

In working to adapt the Canadian experience to China, ProManager also hired two full-time staff, one Canadian and one Chinese, to develop and manage the program. Both also contributed to drafting the training program. Additionally, ProManager hired several other Chinese consultants based in Beijing to compile case studies: an NGO leader, a professor, a staff member of a foreign-led NGO, a staff member of a Hong Kong funder, a business student, a former staff member of a foreign-led NGO, a journalist, a GONGO staff member and a translator. All were elites with foreign ties, all were located in Beijing, the country’s political center, and no leader of grass-roots NGOs or longer-term volunteer was included.

After the glossary-based self-assessment described above, ProManager held a series of coaching sessions focused on international standards for nonprofit boards of directors, human resource management, volunteer management, financial management, fundraising and strategic planning. Each grantee was treated to the same set of lessons and learning themes, independent of the problem areas identified in the self-evaluation.

The prominence of these themes suggests that the power relations between donor and grantee in China are such that “what Chinese NGOs need” is heavily determined by the concerns of foreign donors and their peers at professionalized

13. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 4 (emphasis added).

North American NGOs. As one NGO leader put it, “We discovered that whoever has money rules. If they want to give you some training, you take it, no matter if you want it or not.”

Comments by the author of TP-A’s financial management training module illustrate the perceived problems in Chinese NGOs:

Many nonprofit organizations lack a formal decision-making structure—a board of directors—and lack democratic decision-making institutions and institutional guarantees. GONGOs, for the most part, have established boards of directors, but in reality these boards are unable to fulfill their roles and responsibilities. Few grass-roots nonprofits have established boards of directors, but there is a growing awareness of this [necessity] and a trend towards establishing boards. In general, the level of transparency and openness of nonprofits is not high, and they lack accountability mechanisms (*zeren jizhi* 责任机制) . . . Management (*guanli*) is loose and stuck in the past. In general, few organizations make important decisions through the board of directors. It’s quite common for the leader of the organization to make decisions by him/herself. Many organizations either have not established their own governance system or have established one but use it poorly.

Here we see how key concerns common to foreign donors—good governance, accountability and transparency—are activated in pre-training critiques of Chinese grantees. A board of directors, for example, is deemed necessary as a formal “democratic decision-making structure”. Indeed, the lack of a board is a direct cause of a low level of “transparency and openness”, while management is “loose”. Later in the same document, the author writes that the cumulative effects of these problems are “unsound” (*bujianquan* 不健全) organizational structures and poor financial management.

Training Program B

The origins and features of TP-B are strikingly similar to those of TP-A. AmeriFund, the donor supporting TP-B, is a family foundation based in the southern USA. TP-B’s four main modules are almost identical to TP-A’s. There is an emphasis on accountability, transparency and good governance throughout each module, and the program’s last module focuses on how to raise funds and maintain good relations with donors. Whereas the development process of TP-A was well documented and publicized by ProManager, the creation of TP-B was less public and its content was deemed proprietary.

The implementer of TP-B, Sinoprofit, is a Beijing-based organization created by former government officials and several GONGOs in 1998. In 2001, Mr Qiang, a prominent government official, joined with the head of Sinoprofit to ask AmeriFund for help in creating a capacity-building program that would transform

Chinese NGOs into “world-class” NGOs. At one of the training workshops which I attended, the head of Sinoprofit explained to the assembled trainees why his organization had sought to work in partnership with AmeriFund:

We started talking three or four years ago with [AmeriFund]. We thought that “accountability” was a key concept. In Beijing, we all talked about the legal environment not being supportive enough . . . Our nonprofit organizations are not sufficiently well developed, and corruption is a problem as well. We wanted to develop the capacity to evaluate nonprofit organizations ourselves.

After agreeing to provide the necessary financial support, the head of AmeriFund enlisted Consultus, a US-based consultancy with which AmeriFund had close ties. Consultus’s client list includes both Fortune 500 companies and well-known religious nonprofit organizations. Consultus’s head sits on the board of AmeriFund, and Consultus’s nonprofit client base also includes some of AmeriFund’s grantees.

In 2003 Consultus arranged a meeting in Beijing with the staff of Sinoprofit and a few others. The agenda was set beforehand, so this was supposed to be a straightforward planning meeting, but the Consultus staff gradually realized that nothing was going to be accomplished. A staffer commented that one of the participants, a Chinese academic, “sat there with his arms crossed and said, ‘What can we learn from America? What about Confucius?’” Even at this early stage, there was clear resistance to Consultus’s approach.

When I met the head of Sinoprofit in mid-2005, he emphasized “accountability” as one of his primary concerns, but AmeriFund’s head says that originally Sinoprofit did not fully grasp the importance of accountability to nonprofit management. “They said they wanted accountability and fundraising”, AmeriFund’s head explained to me, “but what they *really* wanted was for us to tell them about fundraising. We suggested that it wasn’t simply about fundraising and that we needed to add leadership and governance.” A key staff member of Consultus related a similar story: “They really wanted fundraising, and we told them money’s the caboose, but accountability, leadership and good governance are critical to their ability to raise money”.

After six months of discussions, multiple “suggestions” from the donor and input from the foreign experts at Consultus, there was what a Consultus staff member called “a world of difference”. That is, the two sides *seemingly* came to an agreement on what the program should emphasize. In actuality, however, the American side won this tug-of-war. Training Program B was developed almost wholly by Consultus with input from AmeriFund. Representatives from both US-based organizations agreed, contrary to the wishes of their Chinese partners, that fundraising should not be the main focus of their capacity-building program.

“I’m not sure what kinds of concessions they [the Chinese] made, if any at all”, admitted a key Consultus staff member.

When asked how the ideas and concepts underpinning TP-B were chosen, a Consultus consultant said that they had “made an effort” to collect the best ideas from around the world: “We did a scan of 35 organizations and narrowed it down to 15 organizations in different countries”. They “surfed the internet” to identify some common themes in nonprofit regulation and accountability. “Sinoprofit . . . wanted to see what other countries are doing. They didn’t want it to be only an American model. But, honestly, we saw that, while some countries were doing great things with nonprofit issues, the US is really setting the benchmarks on most of these things.” Ultimately, it seems, the model of “nonprofit management” that forms the core of TP-B originates in the US and reflects the current concerns of donors and of the professionalized segment of US civil society.

FROM NORTH AMERICA TO CHINA’S GRASS ROOTS: EXPERIENCES OF FOREIGN-ORIGINATED PROGRAMS

While the concepts and concerns presented in training programs may be “foreign” in origin, that does not necessarily mean they are inapplicable to China. Yet, in the experience of many grass-roots NGO leaders and staff, they are often not entirely appropriate to the local context. Participants in the training programs grappled with four main issues: accountability, governance, participation and local experience.

Accountability

In China, when AmeriFund and Consultus first began developing their program they invited a group of academics and GONGO leaders in Beijing to help come up with an appropriate translation of the term “accountability”. While “self-regulation” (*zili* 自律) was one of the first popular choices, representatives from AmeriFund and Consultus—who do not speak Chinese—argued that accountability is broader than self-regulation, that it includes an inward-focused dimension but also an outward-focused orientation. Although accountability requires internal controls, they argued, it is ultimately most related to issues of financial openness, trust and reputation. One translation common in Hong Kong has been *wenzhezhi* (问责制, literally, “ask”, “responsibility”, “system”), and the verb *wenze* (问责) has been used in mainland Chinese media to mean “to be held accountable” when referring to the actions of government officials. Yet this expression was not adopted. During the ensuing debates and discussion over the best term for what AmeriFund and Consultus meant, one of the Chinese participants proposed the term *gongxinli* (公信力, literally, “public”, “trust”, “strength”). After

more discussion, it was decided that *gongxinli* would be the term used in all of their Chinese-language training materials as the best equivalent of the English “accountability”.

In the training sessions that I attended, the term *gongxinli* was new to many people’s ears. Although the written characters helped to clarify the meaning, the training materials devote much space to explaining, with examples, what accountability is and why it matters.¹⁵ The first of the program’s four training modules—each lasting three to four days—was dedicated completely to the issue of accountability, and it is referred to repeatedly throughout the entire program.

While its definition may be elusive, the *importance* of accountability—and its concomitant, transparency—is easily understood by people in China, where corruption is rampant. For many people who are drawn to NGO work (as volunteers or staff), the ideals that motivate them include a strong distaste for corruption and abuses of power or position.¹⁶ In 2006 I found that even some grass-roots groups in Guangdong were emphasizing the importance of financial accountability. Not long after news spread that one labor rights group had run into trouble after being accused of misusing foreign funds, I spoke with a Shenzhen-based NGO leader who was applying for a small grant through the US Consulate in Guangzhou. Since he was obviously not overly worried about taking money from a foreign government source, I mentioned funding available from the US State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, and asked if he had considered applying there, too. He replied:

That was last August or September, right? [I assume he meant the most recent application deadlines.] We were told that to get money from them you need an American NGO as the main partner. We couldn’t do that then. Besides, those grants are really large. We wouldn’t be able to take in that much money at one time. I want us to start smaller and take it step by step. Nothing would be worse than getting a lot of money in and not knowing how to spend it. Once you screw up, you’ll have a lot of trouble doing anything. So the US Consulate’s grant is enough for us right now—if we get it, that is.

Keeping things small—and therefore manageable—is also the ambition of some other NGO activists. One leader of a GONGO which gets no government funding but attracts a lot of individual volunteers explained:

15. In Taiwan, by comparison, *gongxinli* is commonly used to describe the reputability of media organizations, commercial brands and even the annual Golden Horse Film Awards.

16. The 2011 scandals involving the Red Cross and the Song Qingling Foundation’s Henan branch are only the latest reminders of how easily public trust can be lost.

We can't handle big contributions. We have a bank account for our homeless program, so that people can contribute money if they want . . . If we can establish our accountability, we can do everything better, but I estimate that it will take a few years. This is [a period of] accumulating experience.

Still, openness about one's funding sources is not always a good thing for an NGO. One grass-roots environmental organization was shut down in 2005 due to political infighting amongst conservatives and liberals in the CCP. Attempting to adhere to the standards of accountability and transparency emphasized by its foreign donors, the organization published an annual report detailing the sources of its financial support. When a wave of concern about the "color revolutions" in Ukraine and elsewhere hit Beijing,¹⁷ this group came under attack. "A terrible academic in Beijing did them in," said another environmental activist. "He used their annual report to attack the other faction in the Party, saying, 'Look, you're letting all these illegal organizations take money from foreigners who just want to promote the overthrow of the Party!' So they were shut down." Unfortunately, advice received from foreign funders landed this group in trouble, and led eventually to its demise.

However accountability is discussed, though, whether in training programs or in real-life situations, it is often understood in practice as accountability to donors. Indeed, despite rhetoric about accountability to multiple stakeholders, seldom are organizations requested to participate in reviews or evaluations where the experience and views of their "service targets" (*fuwu duixiang* 服务对象) are solicited.

Governance and Boards of Directors

As with accountability and transparency, what exactly is meant by "good governance" is unclear. Immanuel Wallerstein has described governance as "a new word, splendidly erudite and quite inscrutable, if not meaningless".¹⁸ Uncertainty about the definition of governance is perhaps even more pronounced in China's civil society sector, with many people assuming that it must have a specific meaning uniquely applicable to NGOs. Moreover, the common awareness that the implications and practices of "good governance" were developed in a particular (foreign) social context makes it all the more "erudite and inscrutable".

17. See Jeanne L. Wilson, "Coloured Revolutions".

18. Immanuel Wallerstein, "After Developmentalism and Globalization, What?", Keynote address at conference, "Development Challenges for the 21st Century", Cornell University (1 October 2004), p. 2, http://socialforces.unc.edu/epub/pub_soc/cornell.pdf (accessed 2 July 2007).

The term is rendered most commonly into Chinese as *zhili* (治理). The character *li* is perhaps most directly and broadly understood as “principle”, while the first character, *zhi*, can carry implications of managing *and* controlling, in the sense of “to give order to”. The term’s ambiguity lends it to multiple interpretations, many stretching far from the presumed emphasis of its American propagators on responsible democratic governance.

In a typical example of the confusion surrounding the term, at a Guangzhou-based GONGO one of the leaders of the group mentioned an upcoming training program on governance, asking me, “What they mean by *zhili* is probably *guanli* (management), right?” When I later asked another newly promoted leader who had been in charge of hiring the staff who work under her now, the two just looked at one another in an embarrassed way, obviously not wanting to speak openly in the presence of the new student intern. Then one said, “Well, it’s a problem that’s also been bothering me. I guess we really do need to attend next week’s training course on governance (*zhili*)! Ha ha!” In conversations with grass-roots NGOs, a similar confusion often emerged about how “governance” should be distinguished from top-down “management” (*guanli*).

Regardless of how people understand the intention of “governance”, for many grass-roots groups it boils down to the practice of having a board of directors (*lishihui* 理事会 or, less commonly, *jianshihui* 监事会). Mr P, the leader of an NGO in Shanghai, approached four foreign funders in 2005—two based in the US, one in Europe and one in Australia. Each of them warned him about the need for “good governance”.

They all have the same requirements about how we’re supposed to have a particular structure, how we’re supposed to handle our money in an accountable way, how we are supposed to report to them about what we’re doing, and what kind of board of directors we should have . . . You know, we want to do those things, to be accountable and all that. But how do we do that? The biggest difficulty that I face right now is the board—the *lishihui* or *jianshihui*, whatever you call it . . . I have two problems. First, how can I find people willing to be on my board? Those government officials or people with influence, they’re willing to help me; they tell me they can help with whatever I need, but they say they can’t serve on the board of directors . . . And you know why that is—what if something happens later and they’re accused of some political mistake? The second part of the problem is that when I talk about joining our board I am often asked, “Do you pay?” This is a natural question, but all I can say is, “Umm, based on our budget . . .”. Like that. So how can I have a board like those foreign funders want?

The general public’s knowledge about NGOs is quite limited in China, and—as the inquiry to Mr P about remuneration indicates—most people lack an understanding of what boards of directors in NGOs might actually do. As one activist

academic asked an American nonprofit leader visiting Beijing, “What is the use of a board of directors? In China, we have them, but they’re usually in name only, maybe because the government requires that we have one, so I want to know what they actually do in your country?”

In a rare acknowledgement that American NGOs often only *strive* for ideal governance, the response was: “Because of some very high-visibility organizations in the US that got into trouble for not being very ethical, there’s a lot more pressure on boards of directors to pay attention to what’s going on . . . But there’s a tendency for chief executives to keep boards at arm’s length, and a tendency for boards to be too polite . . . A good board is a bridge to the outside and . . . a witness to your good work.”

Many NGOs take a utilitarian view of boards of directors. For grass-roots groups—including unregistered and commercially registered NGOs—the belief that foreign funding is only available if they have a board often motivates them to establish one. As one grass-roots labor group leader explained, “We don’t have a board of directors. I know other NGOs do, but we don’t. If we register as a social organization we’ll have to create one. Or if someone else, like a foreign foundation, requires that we have one, then we’ll establish one.”

Even groups with boards are often unsure about their functions, and board members themselves may be uncertain of their role. “Uncle Chen” is a board member of Laifu, an NGO in Guangdong that works with leprosy-affected communities. One afternoon while I was visiting him in his village, he explained how his understanding of the board of directors has evolved:

I’m in the third year of my second [five-year] term, but it was only maybe last year that I really began to understand what a board of directors is supposed to do! When we started out in the board of directors, we just knew we needed to sign on to help Laifu, but nobody told us what we were supposed to do . . . Last year [Professor A] from [a local university] did an organizational evaluation for Laifu, and I read a little bit of the report that came out. It was only through reading that that I realized that a board of directors is supposed to be supervising the management of the NGO.

Uncle Chen went on to say that he feels frustrated about the contrast between the self-directed organization that Laifu’s charter claims it to be and the management-heavy organization he believes that it actually is.

Laifu is supposed to be an organization of leprosy-affected people, for us, but at times it looks like [the director and the office manager] are making all the decisions and then just telling us later. But now I think the board is supposed to come up with ideas for projects and then get the staff to implement them. That doesn’t happen, though . . . They hire people whenever they want—of course, they come to us and tell us beforehand, but the board always just says “OK” . . . So now there are lots of

staff there—someone here, someone there. I see them when I go in the office, but I don't actually understand what they're doing . . . If that's the case, then how can you oversee the organization? I think it's impossible for our board, the way it works right now, to serve any real function in the organization.

As a volunteer with Laifu myself, I came to understand that board members, Uncle Chen and the organization's professionalized staff all agree that Laifu's board members lack the education to be effective. Uncle Chen summed up the situation like this:

The other problem with our board of directors is that we're all pretty uneducated. We haven't studied much, and we've seen very little of the world. Many people haven't gone far from their villages in years, except to attend Laifu's events. How can people like that oversee such a complicated organization? At the same time, the board is supposed to be made up of leprosy-affected people . . . It's a problem, because how do you change this system? It's already in place, so it seems quite hard to change it.

To understand how foreign influence contributed directly to this predicament, we must look beyond recent training programs to consider how Laifu was founded. In the early 1990s, an aging physician who specialized in the treatment of leprosy attended a conference in Brazil with a Chinese man who had once had (but was by that time cured of) leprosy. At this international conference for leprosy-affected people, they were inspired by the feats of personal achievement that they heard related by other attendees. Upon their return to China, they vowed to create an organization of leprosy-affected people with the goal of fighting discrimination and promoting the dignity of all people, regardless of their medical history or physical condition. Following the advice of a group of leprosy-affected people in the United States, they specified that they would establish a board of directors who, with the exception of the executive director, would be drawn entirely from China's leprosy-affected communities. As this self-initiated organization "of and for" leprosy-affected people grew from a small two-man operation into a favorite with foreign funders from many countries, the staff also grew by 2006 to a total of over 30 (in three provinces), and the scope and scale of their work expanded. In fact, Laifu grew so large that, less than 10 years after its founding, it employed two English-speaking staff members whose jobs consisted primarily of writing funding proposals and project reports to foreign funders.

As Uncle Chen and some members of Laifu's staff have come to see, there is tension between the ideals of the original founders and matters of practical governance that arise in such a large and complex organization. However, since Laifu is one of southern China's most successful grass-roots NGOs—at least, with regard to its reputation among foreign donors and its scale of operations—there

are few NGOs in China that can serve as role models for the organization. Even though they recognize the problem, both the staff and other directors who share Uncle Chen's concerns are at a loss as to how to address this tension.

Do As I Say, Not as I Do: "Participation" as a Slogan

As development scholars looking at other countries have discovered, the rhetoric of rich donor countries is not always consistent with the reality on the ground in poor recipient countries. In development practitioner circles there has recently been an emphasis on "participatory development" and "participation".¹⁹ These terms have made it into China as well, thanks to the combination of élites traveling abroad to attend academic workshops or study tours and the influx of foreign NGO "experts" who advise government policy-makers and design training programs. The Global Fund, for example, mandated as a condition of providing funding to China that two representatives of civil society be included in the decision-making body that runs its AIDS program.²⁰

Although not an explicit feature of TP-A and TP-B, the training programs did involve a rhetorical emphasis on "participation" (*canyu* 参与); some other training programs advertise participation as *the* main organizing theme of the program's content. Yet the meaning of the term itself is often not clear, and the lessons which trainees take away from the program are not always consistent with the meanings intended by program organizers or trainers. This lack of clarity is not surprising as, even for foreign development professionals, the precise meaning can vary widely. "[Participation] has been broadly conceived to embrace the idea that all 'stakeholders' should take part in decision making and it has been more narrowly described as the extraction of local knowledge to design programs off site."²¹

For Chinese grass-roots groups, the term "participation" appeals on a visceral level; they are enthused by the thought of participating in meaningful action that allows some element of self-actualization. Yet activists are often confused or

19. Blessings Chinsinga, "The Participatory Development Approach under a Microscope: The Case of the Poverty Alleviation Programme in Malawi", *Journal of Social Development in Africa*, No. 18, Vol. 1 (2003), pp. 129–44; Ray Jennings, "Participatory Development as New Paradigm: The Transition of Development Professionalism", paper prepared for the "Community Based Reintegration and Rehabilitation in Post-Conflict Settings" Conference, Washington (October 2000), http://www.usaid.gov/hum_response/oti/pubs/ptdv1000.pdf (accessed 11 July 2005); James Sheehan, "NGOs and Participatory Management Styles: A Case Study of CONCERN Worldwide, Mozambique", CVO International Working Paper Number 2 (undated), <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/pdf/int-work-paper2.pdf> (accessed 11 July 2005).

20. This has proven challenging, however. The election process for these representatives has been tangled in disputes, and in 2011 the Global Fund froze money transfers to China for a period of several months, due in part to China's failure to bring grass-roots NGOs fully to the table in its HIV-AIDS program. See Gillian Wong, "Global Fund Lifts China Grant Freeze", Associated Press, 23 August 2011, <http://news.yahoo.com/apnewsbreak-global-fund-lifts-china-grant-freeze-131838094.html> (accessed 7 October 2011).

21. Ray Jennings, "Participatory Development", p. 1.

disappointed by what they experience in training programs. One elite staff member of a grass-roots labor group in Guangdong has attended both the programs run by Sinoprofit in Beijing and Shanghai and two local programs developed by Chinese activist-oriented intellectuals. For her, the difference between the two groups is not so much in the content, but in the spirit of the training programs and the groups that they target:

Those training programs in Beijing, I feel, are useful for what they're teaching you, but they don't give us much opportunity to speak . . . I feel that the [locally run] training programs are better in that way, because the people who attend those are real grass-roots NGO people, people who are doing real work, not just talking. Lots of people at the Beijing and Shanghai trainings are GONGO people. And, like in Shanghai, they close the training sessions by talking about "Oh, the government is so supportive of us, we're all working together"—stuff like that! Ha! They sound just like government officials, far removed from reality! Talk like that is meaningless (*meiyou yiyi* 没有意义)!

At one training program that I attended, there was a special session on the "participatory development approach" (PDA), a concept that the university-educated Chinese instructor learned during his interactions with international NGO activists and on a short study tour to the US, where he spent some time with activist-oriented academics. During the session, the instructor emphasized that "in doing our NGO work, we must remember to bring in the ideas of the people we are serving" and "break down the barriers between us". Rather than "think that our views as outsiders are the only correct ones", we must "affirm local knowledge". Only by following these principles can NGOs "win people's cooperation and trust". The trainees were then introduced to a set of tools for conducting community surveys, including structured interviews, semi-structured interviews and community resource maps ("for those who may not be literate or able to express themselves well"). The goals of this particular training were to encourage trainees to consider the needs of their service targets and to equip trainees with tools for discovering those needs.

The foreign-ness of "participatory development" and "participation" is revealed through the ways in which it is interpreted by NGO practitioners on the ground. The attitude of "I'm here to serve you, whether you want me to or not" and "Trust me, I know what's best" were pervasive in comments from staff in many NGOs. Another NGO staffer offered this understanding:

I used to wonder, "What do they actually mean by participation?" You know, I've been to several trainings where they emphasize this. But after this last one, I became clear on its meaning—"participatory" means getting people to do what you want them to, making them come over to your way of thinking. Participation is a very useful thing!

Rather than use participation as a method of getting one's "service targets" to express their actual needs, this NGO staff member had come to see it as a means for communicating their intentions to the service targets, as a legitimization process for pursuing pre-determined agendas.

An independent evaluation of TP-A commissioned by GreenTree illuminates the conflicting messages sent to Chinese NGOs by this rhetorical commitment to participation:

[C]onsultation and "buy-in" were probably hampered to some extent, at least initially, by the fact that "capacity building" was a novel concept to most of the participating organizations at the start of the program. Although several participating NGOs said that they were aware of problems in their organizations that they did not [know] how to resolve, the program itself does not appear to have originated in participant demand, so an underlying dynamic of contested ownership was perhaps inevitable. Initially somewhat uncertain what they were being offered (and in some cases suspicious that they had been diagnosed as lacking capacity), some of the participants appear to have found it difficult to grasp the intention of the program and actively shape it. This was perhaps exacerbated by the fact that certain services for which there was expressed demand—such as professional training opportunities for individual staff—were, for entirely understandable reasons, deemed outside the scope of the program . . . Underlying ambiguities over the nature and ownership of the program may well account for the (otherwise odd) fact that fulsome praise for [ProManager's] willingness to listen and respond to participants' suggestions was mixed, in participants' feedback, with criticism of the program for failing to take a more "participatory" approach.²²

One well-educated NGO staff member whose organization began joining training programs in late 2003 noted: "Before that, there weren't all these training programs. [Our group's leader] hadn't done any of them, either." Since then, she has attended more than ten training programs, all foreign-funded. The concept of participation stands out in her mind as one of their most "laughable" (*haoxiao* 好笑) features:

The participatory training programs that we've been to have all been very theoretical . . . We even went to one last year that was supposed to be on participation, but the trainer just read stuff out of the book and off the PowerPoint. There wasn't any real participation at all!

Clearly, the irony of programs that are "supposed to be on participation" but allow no room for "any real participation" is not lost on Chinese NGO staff.

22. Unpublished evaluation.

Bottom-Up Criticism, Learning from Local Experience and Networking

In a semi-public forum on NGO development, an outspoken and experienced Chinese NGO activist challenged the head of a US-based foundation on the issue of foreign *versus* local experience, saying, “Sometimes in capacity building we see that lots of international foundations want to express their own ideas, which are often not understandable to small grass-roots groups just getting started, and often not suitable to their needs and situation. Could you tell us what you think about these things?”

Unfortunately, the answer that came was polite but not productive, and the questioner later privately criticized it as “empty”. “On capacity building”, the funder head said, “we generally look to local leadership for ideas on what kinds of capacity are needed. We know conditions vary widely, and we have to understand those local circumstances, so we hope to find local leaders who understand capacity problems and to work with them.”

Another participant worried that the ideas conveyed in training programs were shifting the focus of his work to something unrecognizable: “I’m a grass-roots NGO guy working in the AIDS field. For many years, I’ve been subjected to training (*bei peixun le* 被培训了) on ideas like democracy, transparency and so on. These ideas are great. At the same time, though, we’re a very poor grass-roots NGO, and we’re moving further and further away from our first goal of serving people with AIDS—moving towards I don’t know what.”

Another critic stated, “I’ve been to many training programs, but more and more I feel they don’t fit my needs. It’s more like we’re helping people fulfill their training duties! . . . They might help us develop our passion and so on, but they don’t help us match what they offer with our needs. We are being developed (*bei kaifa* 被开发) by funders who don’t care about our situation.” In short, there is a sense that they are being exploited by funders who have set out to “train” as many NGOs as possible in China, regardless of what the NGOs have identified as their own priorities and needs.

Although during follow-up interviews in 2010 it was clear that “capacity-building” remains a priority for many funders, one Chinese program officer with more than a dozen years’ experience working with health-related NGOs acknowledged the resistance of grass-roots organizations to training programs and study tours: “They’re really unhappy with these training programs . . . because, they say, ‘You want to tell me this stuff, but it’s not what I need’. And study tours, which they’ve gone on to [the USA], too, are also not very satisfactory to them . . . They feel it’s all too conceptual, and not practical or useful for them in their actual work.”

With regard to ideas and practices, people working in Chinese grass-roots groups are often most eager to learn from other groups like themselves. In introducing myself and my research agenda to new NGO contacts, I was often asked for help along these lines: “If you go to another group and see something that

works, can you tell us about it? Or if you see someone else's failures, can you tell us about that, too?" Many grass-roots groups are quite impoverished financially and have little money to spend on transportation to visit other groups (plus food and accommodation in other locales). Learning how other groups overcome the challenges that they face—or fail to overcome those challenges—and discovering the secrets to other groups' success is thus often a priority, but an elusive one.²³

The independent evaluation commissioned by GreenTree of the training program that it funded similarly found "a clear and strong preference for peer exchange and learning" amongst grantee-trainees:

Many of the NGOs have a strong sense of their individuality and the specificity of their situation. They are resistant to "theoretical", conceptual or "off the shelf" training, much preferring "applied" approaches that concentrate on the nuts and bolts of translating new ideas into new practice; and they prefer trainers and facilitators who can draw on real-life experience in China, rather than on book-learning or on experience elsewhere. There was recurrent emphasis on the benefits of learning from each other, and recurrent demand for specific case studies that address organizational development in a highly practical way, providing directions that refer to the specific institutional terrain in China rather than being rooted in abstract ideas of good practice.²⁴

While almost no participants in foreign-originated training programs directly challenge the content or methods promoted in such programs, it is clear that many try to pick and choose what they can use, and that almost all see training programs (and academic conferences) primarily as opportunities for exchange (*jiaoliu* 交流). One labor NGO leader in Guangdong said:

I think the training programs are very useful for the most part, although there are some things that I feel I'll never understand, things that don't quite make sense for us to use. [He couldn't think of any specifics off the top of his head.] Those terms and concepts—like "civil society", "the third sector"—those sorts of things are useful to us . . . There are many things in the management of NGOs that I've been able to give a name to, thanks to the training programs—things that I was thinking already, like accountability and openness. So I think that proves that some of these things are not only American or British or something, but rather they're from people everywhere, from basic human nature.

23. For at least one local activist exposed for over a decade to feminist ideas from overseas, "peer learning", rather than just the "typical" content provided in donor-driven programs, has become a focus and in large part a purpose of the training programs that she helps to implement. Such a perspective, however, seems quite unusual at present.

24. Unpublished evaluation.

I'd say there are two things we get out of training programs: the terms to name what we're doing, and the chance to meet other people . . . Until I went to that first training at the British consulate, I thought I was the only person doing this sort of thing! Then I discovered [another labor activist's group] and thought, "Wow! He's doing almost exactly the same thing I am!" . . . But how would I have known? I didn't know how to use the internet then, and even if there are lots of things like this going on, the media doesn't report it.

The general concepts of accountability, civil society and the like help to frame the experience of China's emerging social activists. Even though some of the ideas taught in training programs "don't quite make sense for us to use", it is extremely empowering to be "able to give a name to" these things and to see one's work as part of a shared social agenda. For grass-roots groups formed by people with little education and few financial resources, such as the man quoted above, discovering that they are not alone is a liberating realization in itself.

CONCLUSION

Chinese civil society in the post-Mao era has been subject to a host of foreign influences. When training programs such as the ones highlighted here are designed by and developed for foreign funders, they often reflect funders' own visions of what constitutes a "good" NGO or a "healthy" civil society. Rather than presenting their recommendations as historically determined and contextualized practices, however, foreign funders often offer Chinese grantees and regulators a body of practices purported to be globally legitimated and universally applicable.

The homogeneity of training program content evidenced in the outlines of TP-A and TP-B above—with their emphasis on transparency, accountability, good governance and participation—is due in large part to the institutional isomorphism²⁵ evident in the world of North American nonprofit organizations. These emphases reflect the concerns of the professionalized, hierarchically organized segment of that nonprofit world. As such, these emphases are the concerns of élites, people who are intimately connected to the economic interests of the wealthiest echelons of their societies.

China's experience in this sense is not unique. Townsend *et al.* argue that the requirements placed on nongovernmental development organizations (NGDOS) by donors constitute a new form of imperialism:

25. Institutional isomorphism refers to the theory that organizations inhabiting a certain "organizational field" will tend to look and act more alike due to the coercive, normative and mimetic pressures inherent in their environment. See Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields", *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (April 1983), pp. 147–60.

A managerial revolution through which specific governments sought to control costs in and increase governability through the public sector has been extended by metropolitan states to NGOs to form part of their discourses and practices, so that significant overlaps in meta-languages of management and implementation may be found in improbable places. NGOs have been expanded and reconstructed into a powerful transmission belt for managerialism as well as development fashions. The degree of imposition from the North despite all the talk of “listening to the poor” supports the view that the whole process is being directed in the interests of governability rather than of poverty reduction, within the latest form of imperialism.²⁶

The patterns of grantmaking and attempted indoctrination into the “best practices” of US nonprofit organizations would appear to position Chinese grantees in the same power relationship as grantees in other countries. Indeed, while community empowerment—“listening to the poor”—is also a professed goal of many US grantmakers active in China, it seems that the models which they promote in training programs are designed largely to serve “the interests of governability”. As one American funder put it, “in the last 15 years there have been some major changes in the way donors think—huge transformations. Many donors have begun to see charitable donations as charitable investments. They see themselves as ‘charitable venture capitalists’ to the point of saying ‘What’s the return on my investment?’” Ensuring that, at the very least, their Chinese grantees are producing polished financial reports and look and operate like a “healthy” nonprofit allows donors to feel confident about their grantmaking choices and to defend those choices before US government agencies like the Internal Revenue Service.²⁷

The programs described in this article contain a common kernel of failure: rather than being grounded in the actual, lived experience of Chinese civil society organizations and emerging organically from the bottom up, they have been imagined and developed in a decidedly top-down fashion. The common diagnosis that Chinese NGOs are lacking in “capacity” reveals a certain myopia on the part of donors and those with the power to produce and spread the seminars, workshops and training programs ostensibly intended to strengthen the sector. A more realistic and ultimately more worthwhile effort would require detailed study of the experiences of actual Chinese organizations, many of whom have acquired a great deal of wisdom and practical experience during the past 15 years or so and have much to share with their peer organizations. To do so, however,

26. P. 837 in Janet G. Townsend, Gina Porter and Emma Mawdsley, “The Role of the Transnational Community of NGOs: Governance or Poverty Reduction?”, *Journal of International Development*, Vol. 14 (2002), pp. 829–39.

27. For more on US foundations and their choices of grantees in China, see Anthony J. Spire, “Organizational Homophily in International Grantmaking: US-Based Foundations and their Grantees in China”, *Journal of Civil Society*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (2011), pp. 305–31.

would require an investment of time and resources that most foreign donors seem as yet unwilling to provide.

Viewed more broadly, the “nonprofit management” agendas promoted in foreign-originated training programs are politically and economically conservative. For funders who want to expand or simply continue their involvement in China, a rhetorical commitment to democracy and community empowerment, coupled with practical emphasis on professionalization and hierarchical management, is well-aligned with the interests and rhetoric of the Chinese Party-state. For Chinese leaders who do not want to lose control over civil society, the lessons flowing into China about NGO management are also not especially threatening. The structures and practices which they promote mesh well with popular business management principles embraced by the state, while also serving to channel potentially unruly social energies into predictable and governable organizational forms.

Ultimately, though, it is perhaps unrealistic to view the inroads that foreign donors have made into China as a new form of imperialism. Rather, it may be more appropriate to view the thrust of foreign ideas as well in tune with the Chinese Party-state’s own political and social agenda, one that gives lip-service to democratization and participation yet does little to challenge the status quo in any radical way.