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Contingent Symbiosis and Civil Society in an Authoritarian State: Understanding the Survival of China's Grassroots NGOs¹

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In the study of civil society, Tocqueville-inspired research has helped illuminate important connections between associations and democracy, while corporatism has provided a robust framework for understanding officially approved civil society organizations in authoritarian regimes. Yet neither approach accounts for the experiences of ostensibly illegal grassroots nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in an authoritarian state. Drawing on fieldwork in China, I argue that grassroots NGOs can survive in an authoritarian regime when the state is fragmented and when censorship keeps information local. Moreover, grassroots NGOs survive only insofar as they refrain from democratic claims-making and address social needs that might fuel grievances against the state. For its part, the state tolerates such groups as long as particular state agents can claim credit for any good works while avoiding blame for any problems. Grassroots NGOs and an authoritarian state can thus coexist in a “contingent symbiosis” that—far from pointing to an inevitable democratization—allows ostensibly illegal groups to operate openly while relieving the state of some of its social welfare obligations.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

In a one-party authoritarian state that maintains a strong public security apparatus and bans all associations operating without official supervision, how do some ostensibly illegal organizations survive? This article ad-

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dresses this question and aims to explain how unauthorized grassroots NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) maintain their existence in what most observers consider a politically hostile environment. I begin by considering two related literatures. First, I discuss neo-Tocquevillean theories of the relationship between associations and democracy, particularly regarding the ways the state can become vulnerable to citizen control through civil society organizations. I then consider theories of state corporatism that emphasize how authoritarian states attempt to fend off political challenges and control society through restrictions on and oversight of citizens' associations. While these two literatures offer insight into democratic societies and government-approved associations in authoritarian regimes, they are both inadequate for understanding the existence and experiences of grassroots civil society organizations that are neither pressing for radical democratic transformation nor serving as approved arms of an authoritarian state. Instead, I argue, ground-level observations reveal a situation best characterized as "contingent symbiosis," a concept that captures the fragility and mutual benefits that characterize the NGO-government relationship.

I begin by considering the contributions of Tocquevillean and corporatist perspectives on civil society in authoritarian regimes. I then introduce the specific case of China, discussing the definition of "grassroots groups" as used here and giving a fuller introduction to the phenomenon of contingent symbiosis.² From there, I turn to the empirical data, focusing on the implications of fragmented governance, information restrictions, and the practice of giving "political face" to government officials. Next, I discuss the mutual suspicion and mutual need that permeates the NGO-government relationship. By way of conclusion, I revisit the literatures on civil society, democracy, and corporatism and consider the implications of this study for future research on NGOs in China and in other authoritarian states.

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² Appendix A describes the methodology and data used in this study. In order to protect the identities of the government officials and the grassroots NGO participants who shared their experiences with me, in this article I do not use any identifiers, including dates. However, a descriptive overview of these groups and individuals is provided in appendix B.

INTERROGATING THE DEMOCRACY–CIVIL SOCIETY CONNECTION

Since the publication of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, the connections between civic associations and democratic political life have commanded the attention of several generations of social scientists.³ As an early scholar of the American experiment in democracy, Tocqueville was particularly impressed by what he saw as the self-governing character of American society. "Americans combine," he wrote, "to give fetes, build churches, distribute books, and send missionaries to the antipodes. Hospitals, prisons, and schools take shape in that way. . . . In every case, at the head of any new undertaking, where in France you would find the government or in England some territorial magnate, in the United States you are sure to find an association" (Tocqueville 1988, p. 513). When confronted with communal problems, he believed, Americans' first instinct was to handle them through local collective action, rather than look to government to devise solutions. In the United States, he observed, "if some obstacle blocks the public road halting the circulation of traffic, the neighbors at once form a deliberative body; this improvised assembly produces an executive authority which remedies the trouble before anyone has thought of the possibility of some previously constituted authority beyond that of those concerned" (p. 189).

Free and voluntary association, Tocqueville ultimately concluded, was the bedrock on which American democracy was built.⁴ But what are the implications of associational life in authoritarian regimes? As Fung notes in a sweeping review essay of recent literature, there is a commonly held view that "especially in political contexts of tyranny or deep injustice, the central contributions of associations have been to check illegitimate political power, to offer resistance, and to check official power" (2003, p. 516).⁵ Similarly, Foley and Edwards, in their critical review of the broader civil society literature, have identified a version of civil society theory,

³ Berman (1997), e.g., distinguishes two influential "waves" of interest in Tocqueville during the 20th century, from the mass society theorists of the 1950s and '60s (including Kornhauser 1959 and Arendt 1973) to the more recent revival by Fukuyama (1995), Putnam (1996), and others concerned about issues such as social trust and social capital.

⁴ This powerful analysis of the dynamics and implications of a self-organized civil society has in recent years given birth to a voluminous body of research addressing the contemporary United States (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Putnam 2000; Andrews et al. 2009) as well as other developed democracies (e.g., Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1993). Warren (2001) has crafted a broad theoretical treatment of the various connections between associations and democracy.

⁵ Gramscian conceptions of hegemony and counterhegemony abound in this literature, although sometimes not explicitly acknowledged. To be sure, while I believe applying a Gramscian analytic to China's NGO development would prove revealing, such an undertaking is beyond the scope of this current article.

developed in studies of Poland in the 1980s and Latin America, that “lays special emphasis on civil society as a sphere of action that is independent of the state and that is capable—precisely for this reason—of energizing resistance to a tyrannical regime” (Foley and Edwards 1996, p. 39). These studies suggest that in “contexts of democratic transition . . . autonomy from traditional politics seems to be a prerequisite for oppositional advocacy. In such contexts, civil society is treated as an autonomous sphere of social power within which citizens can pressure authoritarians for change, protect themselves from tyranny, and democratize from below” (p. 46).

The perspective Foley and Edwards summarize is rooted in Tocqueville’s analysis of civil society and democracy in the United States. Such extensions of Tocqueville’s theses have led some to posit a “natural” or inevitable connection between civil society and transitions to democracy. Indeed, Alagappa (2004) points out that in much neo-Tocquevillean literature, for countries with democratic aspirations, the promise of civil society is almost boundless: “Civil society is viewed as a supporting structure to democratize the state. Associational life is thought to provide the social infrastructure for liberal democracy, supply the means to limit, resist, and curb the excesses of the state and market, present alternatives when they fail, facilitate service delivery at the local level, assist in conflict management, deepen democracy (by cultivating civic virtues, establishing democratic norms, and spreading democracy to more domains of life), offer a voice to disadvantaged groups, and promote economic development” (p. 41). In recent years, these myriad expectations of civil society and NGOs have motivated research agendas on popular associations in sharply differing contexts, from Algeria and Saudi Arabia (Elbayar 2005) to China (Hsu 2008), Iran (Katirai 2005), and Korea (Kim 2004). To be sure, some scholars have convincingly argued that civil society organizations have played a key role in the democratic transitions of some authoritarian states. Fan’s (2000, 2004) observations of Taiwan and Kim’s (2004) analysis of political change in South Korea offer compelling cases for the role of civil society in transitions from authoritarianism in Asia.

Others, however, have argued that despite the power of Tocquevillean insights, civil society organizations need not necessarily foster democracy and may, under certain conditions, support the survival of authoritarian regimes. “Civil society,” Alagappa reminds us, “is an arena of power, inequality, struggle, conflict, and cooperation among competing identities and interests. It is populated by diverse formal and informal organizations with widely varying structures, resources, purposes, and methods” (2004, p. 46).

Indeed, an active and “strong” civil society does not always lead to a strong democracy. Groups that are founded on particularistic identities,

for example, can exacerbate social divisions. In Berman's (1997) study of Weimar Germany, she found that "Germany was cleaved increasingly into distinct subcultures or communities, each of which had its own, separate associational life" (p. 426). Such cleavages, she argues, undermined the country's fledgling party system, with dire consequences for democratic development. Similarly, Aspinall (2004) found that a fractious Indonesian civil society in the 1950s and 1960s, far from having a democratizing effect on society, helped usher in the authoritarian regime of Suharto in 1965. "In the 1950s and 1960s," he explains, "most large civil society organizations were affiliated to political parties that aimed to hold or seize political power. Civil society became a mechanism, not for generating civility and 'social capital,' but rather for magnifying sociopolitical conflict and transmitting it to the very bases of society" (p. 62). In concert with these analyses, Riley's (2005) study of the origins of fascism in Italy and Spain shows how dynamic civil societies, rather than pushing a society toward democracy, can set the stage for authoritarianism. Taken as a whole, notes Gallagher (2004, p. 421), studies such as these suggest that "civil society's relationship to democratization is highly contingent."

In this article, I use data from China to ground this notion of contingency in empirical reality and further challenge the assumed linkages between independent associations and democracy. In doing so, I contend that, especially for bottom-up grassroots organizations, a single-minded focus on such groups' potential ability to promote democracy obscures the first-order question of their precarious existence. Rather than look for the immediate democratic implications of associational growth, then, the central puzzle driving this study is as follows: In a repressive authoritarian political context where, by very definition, unauthorized organizations are potential threats to the ruling power, how do such groups survive? Only by first addressing this question and understanding the context and conditions of their existence can we begin to consider grassroots groups' potential to help democratize an unwilling state.

CORPORATIST THEORY AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN AUTHORITARIAN STATES

Corporatism has been applied to understand variation in associational life in many different eras, and in the hands of different scholars, the analytic lens and causal arguments have varied. One group of scholars (Malloy 1974; Newton 1974; Wiarda 1974; Lehmbuch 1977) approached corporatism primarily through the lens of political economy, trying to understand how capitalism and modern nation-state consolidation challenged traditionally powerful corporate identities and organizations. A

second group asked under what conditions do powerful states create or incorporate organizations to direct citizen energies and then use such organizations to solidify their political power. Schmitter (1974) applied such an understanding to the fascist governments of Mussolini and Franco, autocrats who saw corporatism as “providing for superior governability in the national interest” (Streeck and Kenworthy 2005, p. 444). Building on Manoilesco’s (1936) thinking, Schmitter developed the concept of “state corporatism” as a system in which “singular, noncompetitive, hierarchically ordered representative ‘corporations’ . . . were created by and kept as auxiliary and dependent organs of the state” (Schmitter 1974, pp. 102–3).⁶

As Unger and Chan (1995) point out, “corporatist mechanisms . . . do not define a political system: a polity can contain corporatist elements and at the same time be a dictatorial Communist Party regime, or an authoritarian Third World government, or a liberal parliamentary state” (p. 31). Western European democracies and Australia have relied on “peak associations” to allow the government to deal with one representative voice of particular societal interests (most commonly labor). Whereas the leadership of associations in democratic countries is seen as first and foremost accountable to its members, through the late 1980s authoritarian regimes like those in Taiwan (Tien 1989), Poland (Ost 1989), and Romania (Chirot 1980) preempted the rise of autonomous organizations by either incorporating preexisting groups or establishing new ones under state control and banning all others.

In the 1990s, as the Cold War seemed to end with a decisive victory for capitalism in the economic realm and for democracy in the political, scholars turned to the corporatist framework again to help make sense of the seemingly tremendous changes taking place in post-Soviet Eastern Europe (Ost 2000) and—in a very different way—in China, the world’s largest remaining authoritarian country. The idea of corporatist organization as an “instrument of state rule” (Streeck and Kenworthy 2005, p. 444) has since motivated much inquiry into associational life in China, beginning first with industrial associations organized by the state to ensure Communist Party control even under economic decentralization, then turning to the state’s efforts to create and control charitable organizations, sporting groups, collectors’ associations, and other groups not directly tied

⁶ Schmitter’s own definition of corporatism describes “a system of interest representation in which the constituent units are organized into a limited number of singular, compulsory, noncompetitive, hierarchically ordered and functionally differentiated categories, recognized or licensed (if not created) by the state and granted a deliberate representational monopoly within their respective categories in exchange for observing certain controls on their selection of leaders and articulation of demands and support” (1974, pp. 93–94).

to economic interests. As I shall show below, studies of both economic and noneconomic organizations in China also find inspiration in Tocquevillean analyses of the democratic potential of civic associations. Paradoxically, however, this literature's emphasis on state-created, state-controlled organizations has obscured from view the existence and political significance of grassroots organizations.

In the pages that follow, I contend that neither Tocquevillean nor corporatist analyses can adequately address the situation of ostensibly illegal grassroots organizations in an authoritarian state. Before focusing my attention on these groups, though, I first consider the contributions of extant studies of associational life in China.

Corporatist Theory and the Search for an Autonomous Civil Society in China

The scholarly search for civil society in China began in earnest in the immediate aftermath of the violent suppression of protests in Tiananmen Square in June 1989. Motivated by the explosive social unrest made visible by the demonstrations, in 1993 the journal *Modern China* brought together historians and social scientists to explore the applicability of the civil society concept and the significance of emergent nongovernmental organizations in China (e.g., Chamberlain 1993; Huang 1993; Madsen 1993; Rankin 1993; Rowe 1993; Wakeman 1993).⁷ Since then, others have continued the effort to assess the potential of what appears to be a rapidly growing Chinese civil society (e.g., Unger and Chan 1995; Unger 1996; White, Howell, and Shang 1996; Brook and Frolic 1997; Saich 2000; Zhang 2001; Ma 2002, 2006; Wu 2002; Economy 2004; Gallagher 2004; Wang and He 2004; Zhang and Baum 2004; Chan 2005; Stalley and Yang 2006).

Given the violent suppression of a (potentially) nascent civil society that initially created so much interest in the topic, it is somewhat surprising that published studies of associations in contemporary China have focused predominantly on GONGOs, those oxymoronic "government-organized nongovernmental organizations" the Chinese government began to create

⁷ Calhoun, a witness to the Tiananmen Square events, also wrote in 1993 that discussions of civil society's history and potential rise in China "commonly focus on the mere presence of institutions outside the realm of the state rather than on the question of how social integration is accomplished and whether those extrastate institutions have substantial capacity to alter patterns of integration or the overall exercise of power" (1993, p. 278). Although subsequent studies began to focus on issues of autonomy and influence, most of these did so within the framework of corporatism, generally assuming that the authoritarian state was cohesive enough to effectively eliminate the space for viable autonomous organizations.

in the late 1980s (see, e.g., Pearson 1994; Unger and Chan 1995; Unger 1996; Chan and Qiu 1999; Saich 2000; Foster 2001, 2002; Wu 2002; Ma 2006).⁸ Over the past two decades, China has established a panoply of GONGOs, including sports associations, business associations, academic associations, and groups dedicated (at least in name) to other fields of activity.⁹ According to official statistics, at the end of 2007 there were a total of 386,916 registered “NGOs” in China (Ministry of Civil Affairs 2008)—most of which are widely assumed to be GONGOs.¹⁰ The Chinese government has been quite happy to present these organizations as NGOs to foreigners, in order to attract foreign funding and boost the legitimacy of its GONGOs in the eyes of the world (Zhang 2001; Economy 2004; Zhao 2006). But within China, the government has chosen to equate the English term “NGO” with the Chinese term *minjian zuzhi* (roughly, “people’s sphere organization”), a rendering that it finds preferable to the literal translation of “nongovernmental organization” (*feizhengfu zuzhi*), as the prefix “non” (*fei*) can be interpreted in Chinese as “anti” (*fan*).

Given the rapid increase in registered NGO numbers over the past two decades, one might be tempted to conclude that China has experienced an “associational revolution” akin to that identified by Salamon and Anheier (1997) in other areas of the world. However, government regulations require that all NGOs, in order to be registered, must first find a supervisory agency (*zhuguan danwei*) within the government—an arrangement designed to allow the government to regulate, organize, and monitor NGOs better. This requirement is widely seen as the biggest legal obstacle to grassroots groups that wish to become properly registered NGOs.¹¹ Consistent with the analysis of authoritarianism put forth by Schmitter (1974) and affirmed by Streeck and Kenworthy (2005), scholars have iden-

⁸ I note this more as an observation than a criticism. Conducting research in an authoritarian state on potentially destabilizing independent organizations is obviously no simple matter. However, for one of the few contrarian views against the consensus depictions of Chinese NGOs as “bridges” to the state (Unger 1996) or of GONGOs that are embedded within government agencies (Wu 2002), see Zhang and Baum (2004).

⁹ Economy (2004) points to various motives for this phenomenon, including finding resting spots for retired cadres and redundant staff whose jobs were cut during government downsizings in 1998 and 2003.

¹⁰ The regulations set out by China’s Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA) establish three categories of *minjian zuzhi*: social organizations (*shehui tuanti*), which are supposed to be membership based; private noncommercial enterprises (*minban feiqiye danwei*), or simply nonprofit organizations that are allowed to conduct business; and foundations (*jijinhui*). Adding some confusion to the terminology, in late 2007 MOCA’s Bureau of NGO Management began referring to all these organizations as *shehui zuzhi* (also rendered in English as “social organization”), not as *minjian zuzhi*.

¹¹ There are also financial requirements, membership requirements, and a limit on the geographic area within which the NGO is permitted to operate.

tified China's GONGO establishments as an example of "state-led corporatism" in which the state recognizes only one sectoral organization and aims to use that organization to maintain communication with that sector of society (e.g., Chan 1993; Pearson 1994; Unger and Chan 1995, 2008; Wu 2002; Economy 2004; Yu 2007).¹²

Although the corporatist nature of official civil society growth in China seems to have led to a consensus that autonomy is limited, many studies are rooted in a Tocquevillean tradition that expects associations to have a democratizing effect on the state (Foster 2001). Such democratic hopes are evident in the growing chorus of scholars who have suggested that groups closely aligned to the government may also push forward the development of civil society and open the political system to more voices (see, e.g., Saich 2000; Ma 2002; Wu 2002).¹³ Rather than view the requirement to have a supervisory agency as an enervating control mechanism, for example, the former head of the Ford Foundation's Beijing office (and political scientist) Tony Saich (2000) suggests that registered NGOs can operate within the constraints of the regulations in a fairly efficacious, albeit not completely independent, manner. Saich, as others, argues that such organizations benefit from the legitimacy and protection extended by their sponsoring agency and may also be granted greater access to decision makers as new policies relevant to the field of their activities are formulated.

Although the autonomy of GONGOs remains a subject of debate, the corporatist framework clearly works well to describe much of modern China's experience with associational life. After the collapse of the Qing Empire in 1911, reformers on the left and the right turned to corporatist-style unions, youth groups, and professional associations as "transmission belts" between national leaders and local bodies. Both the Nationalists, who lost the civil war in 1949, and the Communists, who won, adopted a Leninist party structure in which mass organizations were central. Years before China's economic reforms began taking shape in the early 1980s, the Chinese government had established several "mass organizations" that it would later claim to be the equivalent of the civil society associations so socially and politically important in the United States and other devel-

¹² Kang and Han (2008) have called for a modification of this general understanding, arguing that the government's official approach has been one of "graduated controls" in which different types of organizations are subject to varying degrees of governmental supervision.

¹³ Due to the general restrictions on survey research and the political sensitivity of this particular topic, to date there has been no comprehensive survey of registered organizations, but it is a common consensus among Chinese government officials, academics, and NGO participants that GONGOs comprise the overwhelming majority of registered groups.

oped democracies. The All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), the All-China Women's Federation, the Communist Youth League, and other mass organizations were established under the strict control of the Maoist party-state. Although in practice these were one-way conduits for instructions from the top to the bottom, rhetorically such groups were to be the special representatives of their various constituencies, bringing the needs of society up to the attention of the leadership while conveying policies and ideology downward to the masses. Detailed studies of these organizations and their successors allow Unger (2008) to conclude that "China's major associations were in fact founded by the state and today remain firmly under the control of a state or Party agency. In short, they are state corporatist" (p. 9).

Yet over the past decade we can also observe the emergence of real grassroots NGOs that do not fit within the corporatist framework, groups that have been neither created by nor officially incorporated into the party-state. In the remainder of this article, I depart from current practice to focus attention not on corporatist GONGOs but rather on these unofficial, "bottom-up" grassroots NGOs (*caogen zuzhi*). Located outside the vertical control mechanisms the party has tried to impose, grassroots groups are formed by Chinese citizens without the government's initiative or approval, congealing in the social spaces where the government is absent, impotent, or unwilling to act. Of course, despite the opening (and filling) of these spaces, the extreme political sensitivity of true civil society associations in China and in any authoritarian state should not be underestimated. Because NGOs potentially provide alternative spaces for political organizing and mobilization, they are viewed by some in the Chinese party state as a serious threat.

Identifying Grassroots Groups

One may reasonably ask, what exactly is meant by "grassroots"? As one sociologist writing about the United States noted recently, "few words in the English language conjure up such dramatic images of populism and authenticity as 'grassroots'" (Walker 2009, p. 85). In this study, grassroots organizations are defined by the characteristics attributed to them by my informants. They are not government creations or spin-offs of some government agency looking to push cadres into early retirement or to create an NGO "hat" for officials to wear when traveling overseas. By and large, they receive neither funding nor tangible assets (like free office space) from government agencies. They are run by local Chinese people and do not answer to headquarters in some other country. They may receive funding from foreign governments or foundations or locally from their founders, volunteers, or members. They may be organized by social elites

or by people without a high-school education. They may operate under top-down power structures and clear hierarchies, or they may show a higher degree of internal democracy. They may be composed of staff, of volunteers, of members, or of some combination of the three. Finally, they may be registered with the government as legal NGOs (*minjian zuzhi*) or as businesses, or they may not register with the government at all, in any form.¹⁴

In the words of one labor NGO leader, “Very grassroots groups are groups of people without any money trying to help other people without any money!” More commonly, people in grassroots NGOs characterize themselves and their groups as distinct from “those government-run groups” (*guan ban de neizhong*) or groups “with a government background” (*you guanfang beijing de*). The English-language term “NGO” holds currency as well for grassroots groups who know it. Until coming into contact with similar organizations, however, some NGO participants are not sure what to call themselves. They only know that they are providing a much-needed service to people like themselves or to others.¹⁵ “Before I met [another NGO leader],” explains one labor group leader, “I didn’t know what an NGO was. It’s English, so I didn’t understand what it meant at first.” With time, however, he, like many grassroots NGO leaders, has come to use the term to identify his work to himself and to others.

In sharp contrast to corporatist analyses, the defining characteristic of China’s grassroots NGOs, as understood by people who use the term *caogen zuzhi*, is that to be grassroots means to have neither official government ties nor official government support—to have no choice other than “to live or die on one’s own” (*zisheng zimie*). This lack of official sponsorship and approval constitutes the puzzle at the heart of this article—How do ostensibly illegal grassroots organizations survive in an authoritarian state?

CONTINGENT SYMBIOSIS AND THE LOGIC OF SOCIAL LIFE IN AN AUTHORITARIAN STATE

To summarize the theoretical discussion with which this article opens, extensions of Tocquevillean theory suggest that autonomous NGOs can

¹⁴ Unregistered groups run the political risk of being branded “illegal organizations,” while those registered as businesses risk being shut down for fraudulently presenting themselves as nonprofits to their funders and the public.

¹⁵ The groups in my study, and indeed the groups that people in China refer to most commonly as grassroots NGOs, generally provide some sort of social service in fields including health and disease, labor rights, environment, education, and others. Some also engage in advocacy or, oftentimes, blur the distinction between advocacy and social service delivery.

pressure the state in a way that enhances democracy and accountability or, in the case of authoritarian regimes, in a way that pushes the state to democratize. Corporatism, however, leads us to expect a strong authoritarian state to restrict freedom of association and channel citizen energies into officially approved organizations and toward official goals. Yet both of these theories fall short in helping us explain the survival of grassroots organizations in an authoritarian state.

In the following sections, I develop a concept of “contingent symbiosis” to explain the relationship between ostensibly illegal grassroots NGOs and the government in an authoritarian state. This concept is constructed around the logic of social life in an authoritarian regime and emerges from two main sets of observations. The first set concerns the reality and implications of fragmented governance and policy enforcement. The second set centers on the mutual suspicion and mutual need that permeates the NGO-government relationship.

These ground-level realities construct a relationship that is symbiotic in that NGOs are looking to meet social needs, while government officials, especially at the local level, seek to make sure all “problems” in their jurisdictions are dealt with in ways that do not attract unfavorable attention from their higher-ups. When cooperation on mutual goals is achieved, NGOs can continue their work, and local government officials will ignore their illegality. Yet clearly such a relationship is both fragile and contingent. If NGOs keep their operations small and make no calls for political representation or democratic reform, officials can turn a blind eye and claim credit for any good works the NGO does. But if an NGO’s work draws too much attention to the failings of local officials or if it oversteps a fuzzy and frequently shifting political line, the organization can be disciplined or even closed down. As the data presented below make clear, although the relationship can be mutually beneficial (and thus symbiotic), it is also unequal. The government always holds the upper hand because of its constant threat of repression.

Although the evidence presented here is drawn only from China, other modern repressive regimes share with China core political features such as official censorship, criminalization of public protest, and repression of independent civic associations. These similarities would suggest that when government agents in any such regime are charged with meeting social welfare needs (whether to maintain social stability or to shore up the regime’s legitimacy) yet denied sufficient resources, entering into a relationship of contingent symbiosis with unofficial NGOs is a potentially reasonable course of action. At the same time, for NGOs in any authoritarian regime, the line between addressing social needs unmet by the government and criticizing or challenging the state is likely to be as blurry—and as dangerous to cross—as it is in China.

FRAGMENTED GOVERNANCE AND ENFORCEMENT

Corporatist analyses assume that governments in authoritarian states are able to act uniformly to ensure control over civil society. Yet it is important to recognize that despite the persistence of single-party rule, there is no single government in China today. Unlike the Maoist years, where national-level politics and party concerns permeated down into virtually every level of society, in today's China the central government in Beijing enjoys much less control over the provinces. Each level of government—central, provincial, local (and there are various levels within “local”)—has its own set of concerns. Sometimes these concerns match those of other levels; sometimes they are in conflict.¹⁶

Differences between higher and lower levels of government exist in terms of both policy and implementation. When the central government proclaims policies that are more liberal than local officials are willing to implement, some Chinese NGOs actively seek to make allies out of enlightened higher-ups. As one NGO activist put it, in a somewhat public forum, “People need to understand that the government is not one [single] thing!”¹⁷ The leader of one grassroots environmental NGO in southwest China exploits the power of the central government to his advantage as much as possible. Having studied the displacement of people caused by one of China's major dam-building projects, he explains, “We issued a report and sent it up to the central government. . . . They were very concerned and got [the] provincial government to give another [US\$9 million] for placement of displaced persons.” The process by which this is done, however, is not by walking in “the front gate” of central government offices but by enlisting the support of well-placed individuals at Beijing-based NGOs. In his assessment, “environmental NGOs in Beijing can't do much, but because of their backgrounds they can talk to their friends and classmates in the central government.” When he encounters

¹⁶ The literature on “fragmented authoritarianism” in China (Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988; Lieberthal and Lampton 1992) is in part the inspiration for this concept of fragmented governance, although that earlier literature focuses on cleavages in institutional authority structures and bargaining between different government agencies as a key feature of policy making. This fragmentation, however, does not imply a weakening of the party's political monopoly. Landry (2008) has shown that while fiscal decentralization is comparatively high in China, it has not led to political liberalization because party control over the appointment and promotion of officials constrains local officials to upholding the broader goals of the central leadership.

¹⁷ The speaker was trying to make the point that NGOs should not be afraid of the government but rather try to identify sympathetic officials who would act as allies in their efforts to improve society. In Chinese, however, to say a person is “not a thing” is an insult, so when this speaker said “the government is not a thing” (*zhengfu bu shi yige dongxi*), the room of mostly NGO activists took it as a double entendre and erupted in laughter.

resistance at the provincial government level, "I contact them and explain the situation, and they help me by telling their friends in the central government, who in turn put pressure on the provincial government." In this way, he explains, "we have a division of labor. NGOs in Beijing can do the advocacy, and we here in [the province] can do the actual work. We use each other's strengths."

Yet the central government, or indeed any higher level of government, is not always successful at asserting its authority locally. A labor NGO leader explains that he has found allies within the official ACFTU but that hierarchical divisions of authority within the administrative structure limit their power: "Provincial and city-level unions are directly appointed by the union authorities one level above them. Many people in these levels want to do good work for laborers. They often have annual quotas, with a goal of say establishing 100 new unions in a given year. But they can't tell the local-level union chiefs what to do." While O'Brien (1996), Straughn (2005), O'Brien and Li (2006), and others concerned with contention under repressive regimes have mostly focused on particular instances or acts by individuals, one would reasonably expect that more formalized organizations could also use both legal and moral (legitimacy) arguments to press their case with higher levels of government when facing opposition at the local level. What the two examples above show is that this is indeed done, although without a guarantee of efficacy. These divisions along vertical lines are not unexpected. What Chinese NGO experiences also point to, however, is that a key survival tactic is to identify and exploit differences of opinion both between different levels of government and within any given level.

Successful alliances are possible, but they are also contingent on each side's calculation of need, risk, and benefit. Unlike the environmentalist and labor activists cited above, one HIV-AIDS group found that village-level officials, because of their close ties to the community, can sometimes be more helpful than county- or provincial-level officials who would rather keep news of the problem from spreading to Beijing: "What many people don't realize is that at the lowest levels of government, where people are actually doing real work, you can find officials who want to cooperate [with NGOs]. They welcome us in, because they want to deal with some of the problems they face, and they need our help. . . . But at the higher levels they're more eager to cover up problems and suppress the news, not to let outsiders know what's happening." At any and all levels, grassroots NGOs, registered or not, may be able to find individual government officials who support them. Conversely, where others expect them to find help, some may meet with resistance. What is clear, though, is that understanding and support come from individuals within the government, not "the government" more generally. Moreover, within the same level of

government, there can be differences in support, although, again, these are often only single individuals, not even a particular office within a particular level of government.

One NGO leader from Shanghai posited that the complexity of government-NGO relations may vary by region, while acknowledging that even within the one city, there are differences: “I think NGOs in Shanghai are in a better position all-around than NGOs in other places like Guangdong and Beijing. Even grassroots NGOs like ours can find both more money and more government support than in other places. Many people in the government here are sympathetic to what we want to do. It’s not ideal, though. Individuals in the government can be very supportive, but the government policies themselves prevent them from taking action to support us sometimes. The law just doesn’t allow much support yet.” While some NGOs have discovered these distinctions and work them to their advantage, because of the many other obstacles in NGO-government relations, some purposely avoid government contact. One sympathetic government official sees himself playing an educational role for the NGOs he champions: “The one thing most NGOs don’t understand is that ‘the government’ is not monolithic. There are many different branches to the government, and people within government agencies that have different agendas. NGOs often don’t understand the role of the party in the government, either. So I try to help them see the government more clearly—as a complicated thing, not as one simple thing.” One activist media organization of elites met with mixed results when it tried to register as an NGO. When they met with lower-level government officials from the provincial MOCA office, the group’s leader told me, “They thought it was a good idea and supported it. But when it got to the head of the office, he stopped it. He said, ‘Oh? What’s this?’ He has to put his seal on it, you know, but he wasn’t supportive.” It took them two years to find an organization they could affiliate with, and even then “we were able to register only because we had the support of a former [high-level MOCA official]. He made a phone call to the current head, and that was that. In China that’s the only way you can get anything done.”

For grassroots NGOs that are registered as businesses, the tax implications of their registration status can be particularly worrisome. Since they generally have no product and no revenue, per se, they also have no money to pay government licensing fees or taxes normally levied on businesses. The solution to this problem, for some such groups, is finding a sympathetic ally in the taxation office: “There aren’t laws and regulations for us to register as a nonprofit company, so we’re using the traditional Chinese method of finding a person we know. . . . The tax rate is 5.3%–9.1%. Everybody’s trying to find some way to avoid taxes. The national and local tax offices are in the same building. Although in name

they're separate, the people are the same!" By using contacts they have, or sometimes even by describing their work and pleading their case to a receptive tax officer, some groups are able to have their tax forms stamped "tax exempt," even though in reality they are not registered as nonprofit entities. As one NGO leader explains, whether an organization is properly registered or not sometimes does not matter. "It's not about policies, it's about relationships."

Many Chinese people and other more casual observers are inclined to attribute such success stories to China's rich history of using interpersonal connections (*guanxi*) for personal gain, on which there is an extensive literature (e.g., Bian 1994; Yang 1994, 2002; Gold, Guthrie, and Wank 2002). Yet resorting to *guanxi* as the explanation for cooperative outcomes is not sufficient. Indeed, perhaps what is most surprising is that new relationships are being forged between NGO activists and government officials who have no prior contact with or commitments to one another. This often takes place in the context of mutual need, a key aspect of contingent symbiosis.

An unregistered *tongzhi* (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people) organization in Guangdong, for example, has done some educational work on HIV-AIDS with two neighboring city governments. In "City A," they were invited by the city's Center for Disease Control (CDC) to run a training program for volunteers. "We also took this as an opportunity to educate the media about *tongzhi* issues as well as HIV-AIDS." I asked how they got that opportunity. "They sought us out. The government's CDC in City A is under a lot of pressure to deal with HIV-AIDS issues, but they need volunteers to help out. Yet they don't know where to find volunteers. So they invited us to help bring volunteers and train people." I asked whether the government in "City B" was willing to do something similar with his organization:

Well, it really varies according to the individual in control of the office. Some people are more serious about their work, some are more open-minded, some are less afraid to reach out for help from others outside their office. Actually, the CDC in City B has approached us about working together on an HIV testing center for *tongzhi*. Because some people will feel more comfortable going to get tested with people like themselves. . . . So we're looking into setting that up. . . . We might do it at the CDC itself, actually. They have a space there that I think is pretty good.

This organization is not alone in its experience. Another recently established organization focusing on sex worker health and welfare has also met with great success. Despite moving into an area where the group's leaders and staff had no prior contacts, in just one year's time they were able to be up and running in cooperation with local health authorities. Local doctors and even the main hospital administration have been re-

ceptive to the NGO's "cold call" method. Once they understood the group's goals and its proposed activities, they offered a variety of support to the fledgling organization.

Information Restrictions and Risk Assessment

The Chinese government's restrictions on media also effect contingent symbiosis between NGOs and the state. At one semipublic salon in 2006, the leader of an unregistered group was reluctant to give some specific details of his work to the assembled audience (numbering about 25 people). The exchange below highlights his concern about exposure as well as the reality of media restrictions. But as I will next illustrate, the absence of media coverage can also work the advantage of grassroots NGOs.

NGO Leader: I don't want to share that information with you here. I'm not sure who all is in this audience. There may be government people here, and I don't want to say anything to get anyone in trouble.

A Local Reporter: I'm a reporter. I'm not here representing a government.

NGO Leader: I'd just rather not have this reported on.

NGO Staff Member in the Audience: Even if she wanted to report on this, it would never see the light of day (*ta zheige yao bao ye bao buliao!*)

Audience: (Erupts in laughter.)

In the end, what was becoming an uncomfortable exchange played out like an interactive comedy sketch, with the audience member delivering the punch line. The laughter was entirely cathartic, but the need for that release of tension made the problem of media and control seem even more poignant. (After this salon officially ended, many people stayed around and continued to discuss the problems of media and government control of NGOs.)

The lack of media freedom in China is well documented and, as many scholars have shown (e.g., Lee 2000), entails an evolving set of complex dynamics. My observations, however, suggest that for a government interested in restricting freedom of association, the lack of open information channels can be a double-edged sword.¹⁸ With a ban on "illegal organizations" issued by the central government's media authorities in late 2005, government agencies at all levels were further cut off from information

¹⁸ In the late 1950s, the Chinese Communist Party and government in Beijing also suffered the negative effects of its media policy and the tight control over the social system it instituted. During the Mao-inspired drive to industrialization known as the Great Leap Forward, famine began to envelop great swaths of China, yet lower-level officials, fearful of failure, continued to report bumper harvests to their higher-ups. Had the reality of the situation been acknowledged sooner, the central government may have been able to shift its policy focus back to agriculture and prevent the deaths by starvation of approximately 30 million people.

about grassroots groups. Many media outlets are quite eager to report on social service activities of grassroots groups, even unregistered ones. In separate informal conversations with me, journalists from national, provincial, and local media outlets expressed a great interest in learning about and reporting on the work of grassroots groups. But the apparent sensitivity of such activities means that editors who want to keep their jobs will most frequently “kill” all such stories.

Contrary to many popular understandings, however, I suggest that in China today the very definition of “sensitive” activity is elusive and frequently locale specific. In Guangdong’s NGO community, for example, it is common to hear that labor issues are the most sensitive area of NGO work. The reasoning is quite simple. There are tens of millions of migrant workers concentrated in a string of factory areas located between Guangzhou and Shenzhen, a distance of only about 70 miles (110 km). With so many people in such densely packed environments, and with labor conditions often truly intolerable, it is easy to imagine workers banding together to make demands of the government. Such a force, it is said, could challenge not only the government but also the Communist Party itself, comprising a “true” labor party. Cast against this reality, many people say, labor issues are the most sensitive (*min’gan*) of all possible NGO fields.

However, in other areas of China, the most sensitive issue for NGOs may be something else. For example, in the areas surrounding the Three Gorges Dam and in villages located along many of China’s terribly polluted rivers, activism based on environmental concerns has led to violent clashes between local residents and business and government leaders. In still other places, the issue may be something entirely different, like HIV-AIDS in Henan province’s AIDS villages, which have also seen government-organized violence against NGOs doing social service delivery and advocacy work on behalf of orphaned children and the dying elderly.

The absence of free information flows directly affects people’s perception of what is considered risky and sensitive NGO activity. If one does not know that the authorities or major employers in a neighboring city or town have forcibly suppressed an organization and imprisoned its leaders, one may not perceive a great risk in engaging in similar activities in one’s own hometown. The violent suppression of villager activism in Guangdong’s Taishi Village and Dongzhou Village in the autumn of 2005 was unknown to many NGO participants in other Guangdong cities when I returned to continue my fieldwork in early 2006. Although I had seen reports of both incidents in the U.S., Hong Kong, and UK press, the news had been suppressed by Chinese authorities. When a U.S.-based funder learned that many in the NGO community had not heard of these events until I told them, her reaction was condescending—“Well, they must not

be very hard-working NGOs.” But her comment more accurately revealed her failure to see the actual context of NGO work in China. People are not as connected as outsiders might imagine, in part because of media restrictions, in part because of trust issues, and in part because of financial and workload considerations that make it difficult for people to travel.

In short, the nature of political sensitivity and risk is not as clearly defined as people with one geographic or issue-based perspective may imagine. Rather, diversity of accommodation and conflict in government-NGO relations suggests that the potential for repression by authorities is set by whether or to what degree local NGO activities clash with local political and economic interests.

Media controls act as a double-edged sword for authoritarian regimes. While they help prevent radical forces from “linking up,” they also keep segments of the ruling elite ignorant of ground-level dynamics and realities. Gross’s (1979) study of Poland under German occupation offers an insight into the predicament of authoritarian regimes that is well suited to China:

Authoritarian governments, particularly those that were introduced by a totalitarian revolution, find themselves in a serious predicament. For they are, figuratively speaking, cut off from their own societies. Insulated by powerful bureaucracies that are interested primarily in self-perpetuation, they know less and less about the true nature of the interests, aspirations, fears, and preferences of the existing and newly forming social forces in the complex modern societies over which they rule. . . . Consequently, with the passage of time, the authorities have a completely distorted representation of reality, and . . . they cannot do anything about it because accurate information regarding important resources in such a society is simply *not available*. (Gross 1979, pp. 305–6)

In China, the lack of a free media means that the higher levels of government must rely on nonmedia sources of information about grassroots organizations. That is, they must rely on reports from local-level officials. However, as was the case with the HIV-AIDS NGO leader quoted earlier, oftentimes local-level officials are more concerned with protecting their positions and advancement opportunities than telling their superiors about problems occurring on their watch.

This feature of authoritarianism creates a peculiar sort of microlevel “political opportunity” that allows grassroots groups to conduct their work in relative security. As many NGO activists suggested, in almost identical terms, “as long as you don’t get too big, you can do anything. But once you get big [and attract attention], you’ll run into trouble.” In a regime where politics is a process decidedly not open to newcomers, this conventional wisdom—founded in lived experience, to be sure—serves as a common constraint on large-scale action. Indeed, as the following section

argues, the state's tolerance for illegal NGOs is intimately linked to local-level politics.

Political Credit (*Zhengji*) and Giving Face to Government Officials

In the absence of democratic oversight mechanisms like regular elections, government officials in authoritarian states are accountable only to their superiors. Their personal and political fortunes are determined by how "those above" judge their accomplishments and their failures. The dependency of lower officials on their own superiors also contributes to a symbiotic relationship with local NGOs. In today's China, most government officials are charged primarily with meeting economic growth rate targets and ensuring "social stability." It is here that they find some NGOs useful to their own survival.

Especially at lower levels, there is a great need for government agencies and individual officials to earn political credit (*zhengji*) in order to be judged favorably by their superiors. For an individual, to work for the public good without thought for political credit (or recognition) is considered a high virtue. On the face of it, "political credit" is quite ambiguous in its moral implications, but in common usage it frequently has negative connotations. For many grassroots NGOs, successful relations with the government depend on how or whether the particular government officials or agencies concerned are able to claim political credit for any good works the NGO performs in their jurisdiction. Conversely, officials are also concerned about any negative news that NGOs might expose about government performance failures.

One activist working in the HIV-AIDS field explains how political credit functions as a core dynamic in his rocky relations with the local government:

We have some allies in the government, especially in Beijing, who support us. . . . But the government at the local level in [his province], they're totally different. Even if you find people there who support you, everyone has to consider their political credit [*zhengji*]. And there's no need to even mention the bad ones. They're all concerned about *zhengji*—they would much rather suppress any and all news of the problems with AIDS orphans and education than work with an NGO to resolve the problem. Because once they admit the problem, if they handle it badly, they'll lose political favor and maybe lose their job. They all want to seek promotions, to take care of their own self-interests and their family.

As an example of how local officials behave, the activist then explained to a skeptical (and somewhat naive) student with whom we were talking, "Like in [a southern Chinese province], the head of the provincial party committee told hospital administrators in [a particular] county that if they

reported one case of avian flu they would be fired. What does that mean? It's quite clear. If you report any cases—not if you *have* any cases, but if you *report* any cases—you'll lose your job. That's how they try to protect themselves, by suppressing information. Anything that will reflect badly on them never gets out." Political credit can, however, also act as an incentive to governmental cooperation with NGOs. When another young activist scholar was trying to convince a local government authority to allow his group to run a program for the children of migrant workers, he initially met with a great deal of resistance. After much cajoling and assurances that the program would cost the local officials nothing, "the deal clincher, the most important thing was that we said our goal was to provide support for 400 people. . . . That gave them something to report that they had accomplished" as a part of their *zhengji*.

The idea of political credit is closely akin to the idea of "face" (*mianzi*), which is perhaps more familiar to many outside China than *zhengji*. One might understand *zhengji* as "political face." For example, when one registered NGO attempted to run a training program, an activity deemed "outside your area of operations" by provincial MOCA officials, the NGO's head was threatened with sanctions. However, when the NGO submitted to the government's demands and cancelled the training, explained the NGO leader, "they got a lot of face from us and totally changed their tune. Now it became 'Oh, the next time you want to do a training like this, just let us know ahead of time [*gen women shuo yisheng*]. There will be no problem! This is good work you're doing, after all!' They were thrilled."

The case of one education NGO is also instructive in this regard. This volunteer-based group organizes trips during university holidays and summer to poor villages in rural parts of the province. Camping in the village for three or four weeks at a time, among other activities, they offer special education programs for children in art or music, as well as help rural teachers update their own teaching skills and knowledge. Involving large numbers of youth, the group has been both welcomed and rejected by local village officials. Where they are welcomed, one of the leaders explained to me, local government officials have seen them as useful. On these officials' annual reports to their superiors, they can write, "I mobilized 30 volunteers from XYZ University to come to my village and improve the quality of our education," taking credit for the good deeds of the NGO. In the villages where they are denied entry, however, a local official may be worried that such "outsiders" will only bring attention to the fact that education in his village is being handled poorly or that portions of his annual budget seem to have disappeared.

Theoretically, corporatism should institutionalize and routinize the generation of political face/credit. For grassroots groups, however, political

face arrangements are always tenuous, contingent on a continuing perception of mutual benefit. In the example cited just above, for any future training programs, by knowing about them in advance, the MOCA officials could count them in their reports to “those above” (*shangmian*) as part of “their” effort to nurture local NGOs, thereby bringing more political credit to themselves.¹⁹ In short, to minimize conflict with government agents, many experienced NGO leaders have learned they must manage the dynamics of political face. The better they are at giving political face to government officials, the better their chances for survival.

“Lawlessness” Can Mean Opportunity

By law, all NGOs must register with MOCA and accept “supervision” by a government agency related to its field of work (e.g., an education NGO should be supervised by some office of the Ministry of Education). But, as shown above, the Chinese government has not succeeded in incorporating all grassroots energies into properly registered NGOs. Some NGOs thrive even though they are completely unregistered or registered as businesses, all the while presenting themselves as NGOs to the broader community and operating, for all intents and purposes, as legitimate non-profit organizations. How do organizations like these and others operating on the edge of the law manage to survive and even grow in a political context that, by most outside accounts, would seem to preclude their very existence?

To be sure, government repression of NGOs does occur. In the lead-up to the Beijing Olympics, organizations of all stripes came under the gun and were either shut down or warned to cease or curtail their activities. Two publications, the Beijing-based *China Development Brief* and the Guangzhou-based *Minjian*, were forced to close in late summer 2007. Also in 2007, an AIDS group working with children in Henan’s AIDS villages was told it must cease operations. According to many sources, the repression of these and other NGO activities was conducted at the behest of central government authorities in Beijing. Foreign media like the *New York Times* or the *Guardian* regularly report on NGOs and activists who have been shut down or convicted of “revealing state secrets” or “subversion” by a frequently opaque Chinese legal system.

While repression is a fact of life, people unaware of the NGO-govern-

¹⁹ The irony of it all was not lost on the NGO leader, who related the story with more than a little bitterness in his voice. “Through the whole thing I was thinking, ‘the work we do—this stuff—this is what you’re supposed to be doing! But since you aren’t doing it, we have to do it.’ And then they have to go and make it as difficult as possible for us to work.”

ment dynamic in China sometimes fail to appreciate the opportunity China's relative lawlessness creates for socially progressive activities. For scholars and observers in the United States, there is a great deal of concern about improving "the rule of law" in China (China Rights Forum 2003). At Yale University, for example, since 1999 the China Law Center has supported exchanges of legal scholars and a wide variety of programs and initiatives aimed at changing China's legal system. Newspaper reports and scholarly accounts of contemporary China point to a weak rule of law as a hindrance to social justice and a range of social ills, even economic growth. Of course, better rule of law—depending on how the law is structured—could expand space for all NGOs to operate. And, in some fields, stronger legal structures would help address some of the issues NGOs currently work on. On paper, for example, China's labor law offers great protection against some common forms of abuse and exploitation. Likewise, environmental protection rules, if enforced, could help curb pollution.

For grassroots NGOs, however, the relatively lax enforcement of law actually helps keep them running. As one activist explains, even at her properly registered organization they push the limit where possible: "In China, if the government doesn't say 'no,' you can experiment and understand their failure to say 'no' to mean 'yes,' or you can say 'I thought since you didn't say no, I could do this.' That's the way things work here. So we do take some risks here in our work."

The leader of a labor group in Shenzhen echoes that view, explaining that they have taken advantage of the situation to conduct their work:

The way our legal system is set up, as long as the government law doesn't prohibit it, we can do it. . . . The government isn't involved at all in what we do, and the government doesn't interfere with anything we do. . . . We don't work with the ACFTU on anything. They don't interfere with us, either. Why should they? We're not organizing workers into unions. The law only allows one union, as you know. But you can bring workers together in other ways to accomplish similar functions to a union. You just can't call it a union, because that would be illegal.

Enforcement requires both will and capacity. According to one Chinese scholar of NGOs, "at the provincial level, some MOCA staff are tiny—ten or less, or 20 or less." The head of one registered NGO was emphatic about her provincial MOCA office's inability to manage the supervision workload:

The MOCA at the provincial level has one deputy head who's responsible for NGOs. But this doesn't mean anything. How can one person take care of these things? Ha! So I guess this is why the government and the China Charity Federation want us to self-regulate. They can't do it. . . . There are only three people in the provincial government's MOCA office responsible

for registering NGOs—one for social organizations, one for foundations, and one for private non-commercial enterprises. It would only seem reasonable that if they're responsible for registering organizations, they should visit those organizations. But with over 9,000 organizations registered at that level, how could they ever do that?

As with virtually all the registered grassroots NGOs I spoke with, this group had very little contact with its designated supervisory agency: "Once a year I give them a report on what we've done, and that's it! They don't bother us at all. We never see them. . . . We have another government relationship—the director of [a government office] is our honorary legal representative, but if I seem him more than once a year it's a rare thing. The [supervisory agency] head never sends anyone to our activities or events, and he never comes around, either." To be sure, the lack of enforcement is visible in many fields and at many levels. One grassroots NGO registered at the provincial level, for example, is restricted by the official regulations to working in that particular province only. Yet in actuality it has established offices in two other provinces where it carries on regular work. "We haven't been able to register [in the other two provinces] yet," explains the NGO's leader. "Of course, what we're doing, by going out of the province, is illegal. The governments there won't let us register—no one is willing to be our supervisory agency. But they don't oppose our working there, either. They actually need us, and we've cooperated with them on several public activities before."

A broader indication of lax enforcement is found in the requirement that all registered NGOs with three or more Communist Party members on staff must form a party cell within the organization. Nationally, in 2007, about one-fourth (26%) of all NGOs were required to establish internal party cells. However, in practice not even half of those (44%) were in actual compliance with this requirement. NGOs registered directly under MOCA—those with national-level operations—faced the highest requirement for party control; 96% of them were expected to establish party offices. Yet even at this level, there was some noncompliance; only 81% of those had in fact established such offices by the end of 2007 (Ministry of Civil Affairs 2008). One high-ranking MOCA official acknowledged this as a problem, saying, "Well, they really should establish party cells so that their staff can know what the party's latest directives are. But sometimes there's no one there to make sure it actually happens. It's an enforcement problem."

Even at the highest levels, oversight and "management" of NGOs is hampered by a lack of capacity. The central government's NGO Management Office is charged with overseeing the 1,800 NGOs registered directly under the MOCA. Each of these 1,800 is authorized to operate across the entire country, but with a staff of fewer than 50 people, the

government has difficulty overseeing them. Complicating their task, as one official explained, is that “all those organizations have branches and sub-branches around the country. We totaled it up and it came to between 9,000 and 10,000 organizations. How can we manage [*guan*] all those? We don’t have enough people on our staff to do it.” Moreover, because the NGO Management Office is not organized in a vertical chain of authority, provincial and lower-level offices report not to the ministry in Beijing but rather to the MOCA office at their own administrative level, which, in turn, often fails to “report up” information to Beijing. The result of such a system is that there is no centralized clearinghouse of information about even registered organizations, much less commercially registered or unregistered NGOs.

Aside from the well-funded Ministry of State Security, perhaps no other organization in China has very detailed knowledge on either GONGOs or grassroots NGOs. MOCA officials are subject to the same political pressures and constraints as officials in other branches. Policy makers and policy implementers at the highest level are generally unaware of the ground-level realities experienced by NGOs. In late 2008, for example, one lawmaker indicated a total lack of knowledge about China’s first officially registered environmental NGO, Friends of Nature (FON). FON was founded by a prominent intellectual, is based in Beijing, has been registered since the early 1990s, and has won recognition both domestically and internationally for its contributions to environmental protection issues. Yet this official had never heard of the group, even though he represents the agency responsible for NGO regulations and laws.

Another official responsible for implementation, in a more candid moment, emphatically acknowledged that she had little to no knowledge of grassroots groups. “Do you mean those NGOs that weren’t created by the government, that don’t get any government money or support, those self-started NGOs?” I was asked. “Yes, those are what I mean by grassroots groups,” I replied. “You know, that research you’re doing is extremely important. Chinese scholars don’t look into those much, I think. They always just tell us about these big GONGOs, and they always tell us how great they are. But I’m skeptical, and I don’t find that research very useful for policy purposes. There are lots of grassroots groups, I think. Isn’t it funny that we’re responsible for making and implementing policy for NGOs, but even we don’t know much about them?”

In sum, inaction on the part of government agencies is matched by action on the part of grassroots groups. To borrow from social movement theory, this situation constitutes a kind of political opportunity that is sometimes skillfully exploited to the benefit of NGOs. One could, however, argue that rather than conceive of this as political openness—which Chinese leaders, on the whole, are still unready to offer—it is simply a vacuum

of engagement and enforcement created by a lack of resources and awareness, not by active intent. Nonetheless, many NGOs—whether registered or not—are able to operate far beyond what the letter of the law allows, by taking advantage of the often lax enforcement of NGO regulations. Although Yu (2007) seems to view GONGOs as the main instantiation of China's emergent civil society, his observation that “the space the system permits [for NGOs] is far smaller than the actual space that exists” (p. 21) is perhaps most relevant for China's grassroots organizations. As one government official summed it up for me, “Don't look at whether the government supports NGOs publicly, look at whether it opposes them.”

MUTUAL SUSPICION, MUTUAL NEED

As the above quote suggests, support and opposition are two sides of the same coin. The contingent symbiosis that characterizes grassroots groups' relations with government is built on a shifting sand of mutual need and mutual suspicion. In this section, I first highlight the ways in which mutual suspicion permeates the NGO-state relationship, even for registered NGOs. I then turn attention to how the state's retrenchment from welfare provision creates space for grassroots NGOs and bolsters the social legitimacy of their work.

Mistrust and Avoidance

In contrast to the findings of political scientists who have suggested that political trust in China, at least toward the central government, is quite high (Bernstein and Lü 2000; Shi 2001; Li 2004), my data point to a distinctive lack of social trust in China, not only toward government agents and agencies but also among citizens.²⁰ This mistrust can severely hinder cooperation between NGOs and government agents and lead to mutual avoidance. One NGO leader made the case for this most clearly:

The biggest problem is the lack of trust. It has been destroyed in China. We used to have it, with farmers' cooperatives in rural areas and other things in cities. You know, Chinese people talk about hospitality, and taking care of their bigger families, and things like that. Our history is not devoid of social trust. . . . But ever since 1949, from '49 to '89, you know . . . over and over again, the turmoil people faced, the government turning people against each other, and the government forcing people to turn against the government, everyone attacking each other and struggling against each other. That's what's led to this situation today where the government doesn't trust

²⁰ For an excellent discussion of issues of response bias in surveys on trust in China, as well as for insights into the linguistic and cultural difficulties of cross-national quantitative studies of trust, see Dalen (2005).

the people, the people don't trust each other, and the people don't trust the government, either.

My field notes are replete with examples of people describing their suspicions and mistrust of others, in matters both small and large.

Although it is beyond the scope of this study to conduct an in-depth exploration of these problems, I hypothesize that social trust is a particular problem for those generations who participated in or came of age during the multiple political campaigns that swept the nation between 1950 and 1976.²¹ While China's economic reforms have created new concerns about social stability, the younger generations have lived largely free of the sorts of mass political mobilizations that engulfed most of China in their parents' and grandparents' youth. As a result, younger NGO participants may be more successful at making change in the long run than those 10–20 years their senior.

For NGOs, then, especially those composed of people born before the 1980s, this generalized lack of social trust has direct implications for their willingness to even approach government officials and their ability to win support for their work. Its most frequent expression is found in the fear that NGOs—registered and unregistered—often have of any interaction with government agencies. Fear of “what they might do to you, no matter what the law says, or what they should do” to support a socially legitimate NGO is the underlying concern preventing many NGOs from reaching out to government. At the same time, the lack of trust and openness functions as a mechanism for plausible deniability for officials, who can claim no knowledge of a “problem” organization in their jurisdiction.

After one registered NGO ran afoul of MOCA officials unhappy with an event the NGO had planned, I spoke to the group's middle-aged leader to ask if he had encountered this type of problem with the government before. The short answer was no, but the long answer was much more revealing:

I've always tried to avoid the government altogether. Maybe this is my problem. But I think that the less you involve the government the better. If you don't tell them about something you're doing, and as long as in the process of doing it you don't create any trouble, you'll be fine. They don't care. But the moment you tell them about something, they feel they have to

²¹ These particular experiences reflect a general belief that trust bonds were decimated by political turmoil in the latter half of the 20th century. As Madsen (2000) has so succinctly described it, “During the Maoist era . . . successive political campaigns targeted an ever-wider array of victims. The bureaucratic apparatus expanded and ramified. Megalomaniacal mismanagement led to the Great Leap Forward, which led to a massive famine. Infighting at the top led to the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. By the end of the Maoist era, much of the Chinese population had experienced new forms of starvation and anarchic violence” (p. 313).

approve it. And then they'll usually want to reject it. If they approve it, they have to take responsibility for whatever happens with that activity. But if they don't approve it, they can be seen as actively doing their job. So my approach has always been to simply not tell them. That way, I can do what I want to do, and they don't have to absorb any risk. If something goes wrong with it [the clear implication here is politically wrong, not operationally wrong], they can say they didn't know about it and that therefore you were engaging in illegal activity. Then they can shut you down. But by operating in this way, I'm the one bearing all the risk. I'm willing to do this, though, I guess because I'm sort of a risk-taker. Besides, if I don't take risks, nothing will get done.

Not seeking out government officials and not bringing attention to oneself are strategies consistently preferred by many grassroots NGOs. "It's not because I don't want their support, but because I don't know what they'll do [to me]," explains another NGO leader. With the media, as well, many NGOs are extremely reserved because of fear of the government's reaction. Before opening a public exhibition about his NGO's work, another middle-aged NGO head explained it this way:

I recently had a reporter repeatedly pressing me for an interview and I kept telling him "No." At one point he said, "But you don't understand me, what I'm doing." And I replied, "I don't want to understand you. I haven't even held one [event] yet, and if I talk to you now, if you report on me, I may get closed down before we can even open." I don't want to take that kind of risk. . . . I would rather the media not report at all, and just have people walk by and find out about it, than have reports done that just bring trouble.

This fear of government suppression is substantiated by actual incidents in which NGOs are shut down or "asked to move" to another location. Conversely, government officials, even those who "in their hearts may be supportive," are still sometimes afraid of NGOs, worried that an NGO could cause a social disturbance or incite violence in their jurisdiction. One supportive government official explains the suspicion from the government's perspective as follows: "Not enough government officials know anything about civil society. Some of them are very afraid of it, wondering what it is and what political motives people have. . . . But I think that the government needs to understand that civil society in China today is not political. These NGOs, the grassroots NGOs who are mostly registered as businesses, they're outside of the civil affairs system, but they're not looking to do anything political. They're trying to help alleviate poverty or provide educational assistance or help people with diseases. . . . This is something the government needs to understand." Ironically, the occasion of my conversation with this official also offered a lesson in trust and suspicion. While we were talking in the coffee shop where we had met, a young man sitting very close to us, but with his back to us, turned around a few times and glanced back at us both. A couple of hours into

our conversation, the official said to me in English, “Just a moment, please.” He then took out a business card, flipped it over, and wrote in Chinese “This person may be listening in and monitoring our conversation.” I read it, and said, “I know.” His next question for me (in Chinese) was, “Who do you expect to be meeting with during the rest of your time here?” Noting the aforementioned concern to myself, I replied, “Oh, really no one, just the folks at the university. I don’t have anything special to do on this trip, but I would probably like to see some other old friends.”

Vagueness and generalities are always safest, it seems. By asking me whom else I intended to meet, he was doing his official duty of helping to “monitor” the foreigner asking about politically sensitive issues. And by replying in vague terms, I was offering him plausible deniability and assuring him (and our presumed listener-spy) that I had no ill intentions and was acting completely aboveboard. It was a dance I had performed multiple times already, and I felt it was quite well executed that day, whether or not there was really an audience.²²

Government Management (*Guanli*) of Properly Registered NGOs

Government fears of unofficial NGOs—and even registered NGOs—doing something “bad” create a subtle, sometimes overwhelming, constraint on NGO action. For the few grassroots groups who do manage to obtain proper NGO registration, they often play a sort of cat-and-mouse game to avoid being “managed” by their supervisory agencies. Due to the many restrictions placed on registered groups, ones that started out as a bottom-up effort to meet pressing needs often find themselves bumping up against official constraints if they do manage to register with a supervisory agency. More than a few of these groups insist on doing things their way to meet the needs of the population they are serving, even if that means going beyond their approved field of work or geographic location.

But with official recognition can come greater scrutiny, and thus begins NGOs’ efforts to avoid being managed. The Chinese term *guanli* is generally translated as “manage” (as in, the managing of a business). Yet, as one European corporate social responsibility (CSR) consultant noted at a gathering about labor issues, when she visits factories in China to talk about improving labor conditions, “it seems that when I say ‘manage,’ the factory owners and managers hear ‘rule over the workers and make

²² When we finished our conversation, the official left and I stayed on to type up some notes. From what I observed later of the man behind us, he was simply a university student borrowing the space to catch up on homework while waiting for his girlfriend, a waitress, to finish her morning shift. Perhaps it was unnecessary to end our conversation the way we had, but who knows?

them do what we want.’ I think we have a very different definition of management.”

Factory bosses’ definition of the word *guanli* (to manage) holds true for NGO-government relations, as well. The first character of the term, *guan*, is used as a verb in a variety of ways both alone and combined with other characters to mean to control, to take care of (children, housework, etc.), to administer, or to discipline. In short, it is a word with broad applications. The second character, *li*, has the connotation of “to put things in order” and presupposes a “correct” order or arrangement.

On the face of it, *guanli* need not be normative in intent. But in common usage, as the CSR consultant quoted above discovered, the word and its main verb, *guan*, imply strong, hierarchically structured power dynamics. In official government rhetoric, *guan* is used in discussions of the government’s “need” to “add and strengthen management” (*jiaqiang guanli*) over and of NGOs. “Supervisory,” in the official term for “supervisory agency” (*zhuguan danwei*), features the word *guan*, and the office within MOCA that is responsible for administering NGOs is a “management” office (*guanlijū*).

In short, in the formal language of government, the verb *guan* is ubiquitous and bureaucratically rational. But in the everyday language of society, “to *guan*” is to put your nose in matters that are not your concern or to attempt to exert power and control over others. When asked about government supervision, the head of one registered education-related NGO became downright indignant:

How can they *guan* us! These are things they should be providing themselves, as the government. If they haven’t provided these things themselves, how is possible for them to supervise us? On what basis could they judge our performance? . . . Of course, if I lose a kid on the street or something awful, that’s an obvious problem. But if we’re just going on with our work, on a daily basis, and nothing extreme happens, how can they say whether we’re doing a good job or not? Humph! . . . The government is used to being all-powerful. So even when they don’t know what they’re doing, some officials will still try to *guan* you. It’s a habit they can’t break!

While challenging the legitimacy of government’s impositions is one way NGOs may respond to top-down efforts to manage them, communicating one’s needs and circumstances to government officials is another. One registered NGO leader explained that his experience with the NGO Management Office was far from positive and that he wished the officials there would “come out of their offices” to learn more about what NGOs actually do.

It’s not that we’ve never wanted to talk to the government, but simply that we’ve never before had a way in. The conference [held recently] was a big help. . . . But other than [one government official], the only other government

person who attended was a [a lower-level official]. And he just came to make an appearance—he gave a talk and then left right afterwards. He didn't hear any of the voices he needed to for it to make a real difference for NGOs. . . . The people I wish would have attended are those people at the NGO Management Office. They're the ones who could make a difference for us. But, at this point in time, trying to talk with them as equals is impossible. They talk to us [NGOs] like "You can't do this. . . . You need to do this. . . . I'm warning you, be careful. . . ."—like they're up here [he holds his right hand up high in the air] and you're down here [moving his hand lower], like you're beneath them. It's that attitude that makes it impossible for us to have any real dialogue with them.

Even one sympathetic government official admitted: "People in the government are of the mentality that they're providing a service, not delivering what people have a right to obtain. At the extreme, this mentality shows itself in the expression 'I'm an official. You're a plebeian. I'm bigger than you!' [*wo shi guan, ni shi min. wo bi ni da*]. This problem is visible in virtually every government office." One former government official turned NGO activist insisted that by improving communications with government officials, NGOs could lessen the risk of being controlled (*guan*-ed) by them.

Some NGOs that are in a rush to "get things done" act without first thinking about how to handle the government. That can be bad for their organization. Once you start doing something on a large scale and get the government's attention, you risk having your organization "managed" [*guan*] tightly by the government or even completely shut down. Sometimes lots of people are doing things in small ways first, then the government notices it and asks, "Hey, what's this all about? What are you doing?" If you let the government know—for example, by bringing them in to participate in conferences like this, where you tell them about what you're doing and how you're doing it—your organization has a better chance of survival.

At a small gathering of academics, activists, and government officials, one scholar-activist worried that under the current system, the government risks "managing" NGOs "to death" (*guansi ta le*). Another injected some humor into a very serious discussion by summing up the situation this way: "I think there's a fundamental problem [in the government's approach to NGOs]. Although our government agencies all have a sign hanging up that says, 'Serving the People' [*wei renmin fuwu*], in reality it's more like the government is 'Managing the People' [*wei renmin guanli*]." Indeed, in an authoritarian state, pervasive restrictions on freedom easily give the lie to beneficent government slogans.

The Social Legitimacy of Grassroots NGOs

While the mutual suspicions described above highlight the many contingencies inherent to the NGO-government relationship, a focus on the

legitimacy of NGO work reveals the symbiotic nature of these ties. The onslaught of social changes brought about by China's economic reforms has been well documented. Whether in labor, health care, education, the environment, or many other fields, Chinese society underwent many dramatic changes in the last two decades of the 20th century and into the 2000s. Not only particular goods but whole areas of life once managed exclusively by the government have been subjected to privatization and market forces (see, e.g., Davis 2000). With these changes, new problems have arisen, some of which the government is either unwilling to address or incapable of resolving effectively. It is precisely these problems that grassroots NGOs strive to address, problems that emerge off the official media's radar screen or in the gaps between government rhetoric and people's lived realities.²³

Indeed, at all levels of society and in all walks of life, many Chinese people are aware and concerned about these new social problems. So while the technical legality of a commercially registered or unregistered grassroots organization may be questioned, the social legitimacy of NGO services goes virtually unchallenged. Reasonable people at all levels see the need for action and sympathize with the causes championed by grassroots groups. The lack of government approval and official sponsorship, although a reality about which many potential supporters are aware, is not necessarily a reason to withhold support from such groups. As one liberal-minded member of China's newly rich class put it, "They may not be legal [*hefa*], but they're entirely legitimate [*heli*]"²⁴

At a commercially registered international NGO focused on CSR in labor practices, the leadership walks a fine line but believes its function is complementary to the government's policies and China's social needs:

We're not giving out legal advice or anything. And we're not inciting any workers to riot. Of course, if we went to a factory to do a training, then the next day that factory's workers went out on the street protesting for something

²³ Democratic countries have, in recent decades, undergone a not too dissimilar restructuring of the state-society relationship but with differing impacts for NGOs. Ullman (1998) found that in France, "decentralization . . . brought the crisis of state capacity to local government. Newly burdened with responsibility for difficult social problems, these local governments often delegated their new tasks to nonprofit organizations" (p. 100). In a democratic state like France, such a delegation is politically possible (even though perhaps difficult). For an authoritarian state, however, widespread delegation to nongovernmental, non-party-controlled groups is a politically unacceptable solution to the problem of social service delivery. For this simple reason, if none other, experienced NGO participants often see keeping a low profile and not making political demands as crucial to their continued survival.

²⁴ I have considered carefully how to best translate the term *heli* into English. Typically, it is translated as "reasonable," but because of the way it is used in reference to the larger social context of NGO work, I believe "legitimate" is more appropriate.

or another, the government might come looking for us. But that's very unlikely. All we do is focus on communication-building. We give factory management and workers a new way to talk to one another. Typically if a worker has a complaint or a suggestion they write a letter or fill out a "comments" card. Or managers simply say, "Just come talk to me if you have anything to say." But this is very ineffective for really passing along problems and ideas. What we offer them is another option for transmitting different views.

Whether in health, labor, education, or another field, the legitimacy of grassroots work can be leveraged by both the government and NGOs themselves in a way that allows them both to achieve related goals. Some environmental NGOs, for example, are allowed to exist, even when technically illegal, because they help bolster the case of a local Environmental Protection Bureau (EPB). As one government official explains, "The EPB needs NGOs to voice their concerns. Without them, when the EPB tries to tell other government officials or units to take some action to protect the environment, the response is always 'But is there really a need for that?' So the EPB wants NGOs to speak loudly, because then it can say 'Well, of course. See, society is demanding it.' It's more persuasive when NGOs give voice to these problems, because many government agencies are extremely concerned about meeting demands voiced by society. If they don't respond to these needs, things might get out of control." The government, again, has multiple layers, divisions, and personalities. One labor NGO focusing on workplace injuries has met with both resistance and support from local government but no denial of the fundamental need for their work: "One time a factory owner who didn't like what we were doing complained to the local government. Then the local health department officials came to us and said we'd have to leave the area, but they offered to help us find another location close by. It's to their advantage, too, because if we can help lower the incidence of work injuries, local factories can keep more workers and the health department has fewer headaches. And we can help educate workers about what to do if they run into health problems, which helps the local offices, too."

The political scientist Mary Gallagher (2004) explains well why the state is unwilling to formally recognize the sorts of groups I describe here. As she notes, "Corporatist incorporation [would entail] the legitimation of these groups and at least some degree of recognition that their interests are justified and should be represented in policy debates. Such legitimation, however, remains anathema to the Chinese party-state" (p. 436). Yet while this assessment of the political threat is within all reason, it is difficult for individuals within the party-state to deny the social legitimacy of these groups. In offering to help "find another location close by," local officials such as those described above are recognizing the contributions of grassroots NGOs, although, as Gallagher correctly points out, they may

not be able (or willing) to grant such organizations formal recognition. In short, it is partially with these individual officials' support, or through their willingness to turn a blind eye to unauthorized activities, that grassroots groups are able to survive and even grow.

In addition to NGOs' ability to find allies within various government agencies who acknowledge the legitimacy of their work, it is also to the benefit of grassroots NGOs that many express no antistate, antiparty political agenda. This was the case with the groups I found in Guangdong. As patriotic progressives pushing to realize the egalitarian goals of the Chinese communist revolution, they present no explicit political threat to the established order. And unlike the Falungong, which was suppressed after being labeled an "evil cult" by the central government in 1999, grassroots NGOs in Guangdong displayed no ability or inclination to mobilize large numbers of people, nor were they linking up in any regular way. Moreover, some key staff and volunteers are themselves Communist Party members.

"I'm actually not an anti-party person," emphasized one non-party-member NGO leader in his mid-20s. He, like many others, can be very critical of the government and find fault with the party on many levels, but such criticism is often predicated on a belief that the current system cannot be changed radically to any good end. The fear of "chaos" often cited by Chinese leaders and scholars seems to be shared as well by participants in China's nascent civil society.

One recent university graduate who led an NGO as a student chose to take a job at a government agency. He wants to work within the system to promote a progressive social agenda and the stable development of NGO-government relations: "I try to tell people in NGOs to be calm and not too extreme. The kinds of protests and actions taken by NGOs overseas simply won't work in China. Because extreme groups who call people onto the streets or whatever will just be shut down by the government. But the government needs NGOs, so as long as an NGO doesn't incite people to illegal protests, the government won't oppose it." The image of patriotic progressives is actively cultivated by some NGOs. The leader of an education-related NGO in Beijing emphasized in a discussion of his work that "I prefer the NPO [nonprofit organization] term, because when you say 'NGO' people think of 'anti-government,' but NPO presents it in terms of 'compared to for-profit organizations.'" In Shanghai, the leader of a registered grassroots NGO voiced a similar concern: "In China, if you use 'NGO,' people think 'anti-government organization,' so we say 'public welfare organization' [*gongyi zuzhi*] instead. Even within our circle, we also introduce ourselves as a public welfare organization."

This type of framing, or self-presentation, is not uncommon with Chinese NGOs. Keech-Marx (2008) found in her study of three women's

organizations in Beijing that “by representing their activities as complementing existing government services, popular women’s organizations portray themselves as a useful component of Chinese society, rather than as a threat to the Chinese state” (p. 193). Although the groups she studied had much closer personal and official ties to the state, for grassroots groups, too, using the rhetoric of the state fits well with their own self-image. On the whole, virtually all of the people I talked with who were engaged in NGO work, however critical they may be of government inadequacies, corruption, or other problems, remained uninterested in political action that would destabilize the regime. “We just want to do some things, not oppose the government,” emphasized one of my closest NGO contacts. “I’m not fundamentally opposed to the party,” says another, “I just think the government needs to improve things in some crucial ways.” Indeed, in meetings with government officials, in private, and in public forums, a common refrain of NGO activists is that “we hope the government is clear that we’re not doing anything bad, we’re just trying to help people in need.” In more candid moments, many present themselves as critical thinkers, patriotic progressives who dare to pursue the promises of socialism that the government has seemingly abandoned in the name of economic reform.

CONCLUSION

Tocqueville-inspired work on the connections between associations and democracy suggest, on the whole, that civil society organizations play key roles in supporting democratization processes and in maintaining democratic regimes. In line with recent analyses of other authoritarian states, the evidence presented in this article acts as a corrective to these views, cautioning that we should not assume that NGOs in an authoritarian state, even independent grassroots organizations, are working toward democratic purposes. While NGOs’ individual or collective impact may certainly lead to democratic pressures, this is far from guaranteed.

Other scholars have described how authoritarian states may pursue a corporatist strategy in hopes of fending off democratic demands and ensuring tight control over newly emergent social issues and interest groups. While this may reflect the relationship between government and official NGOs—GONGOs, to be more accurate—corporatism cannot be suitably applied to understand the existence and survival of ostensibly illegal grassroots organizations.

As my data show, in an authoritarian state where independent organizations are a potential threat to official power holders, grassroots groups can survive, but they exist only under a constant threat of suppression.

Within such a precarious existence, these groups are far too weak to be the natural agents of democratization that casual observers might presume them to be. Indeed, grassroots NGOs survive only insofar as they limit any democratic claims making and help promote the social welfare goals of the state. Broader contextual factors such as the weak rule of law, the social legitimacy of NGO goals, the lack of media reporting on NGO activity, and a general fragmentation of governance and enforcement allow NGOs to operate and relationships to develop between NGOs and particular government officials. Despite widespread mistrust between government and "illegal" organizations and a tendency to mutual avoidance, local government officials are willing to turn a blind eye to ostensibly illegal organizations as long as those organizations' good works can be appropriated by officials and contribute positively to their annual performance reports. The symbiosis that characterizes these relationships, however, remains contingent on the political calculations of government officials. Suppression always remains an option (and an official obligation) for officials who deem it prudent. Keeping this in mind highlights the fragility, and the unequal power balance, inherent in the NGO-government relationship. In sum, the contingent symbiosis that characterizes relations between grassroots NGOs and the authoritarian state suggests that NGO development in such environments takes on a self-limiting character. Unless there is a fundamental shift in broader political arrangements, the threat and reality of repression will remain a key constraint on the development of grassroots associations.

Further empirical research is essential to deepen our understanding of the phenomenon of contingent symbiosis. Yet there are tremendous difficulties to studying associations in any authoritarian regime, and there are many additional questions that I am unable to answer with my current data. Is there a particular combination of strategies, for example, that might account for the long-term survival of particular NGOs or success in particular realms of activity? Given the fragmentation of governance, are there particular institutional circumstances in some cities or provinces that permit greater or less NGO freedom than in others? Do small communities promote NGO growth because of the (presumably) stronger levels of social trust in those communities? Are GONGOS less or more successful than grassroots groups at negotiating with the state for autonomy? Future research that takes any of these issues and compares strategies and outcomes across a sample of organizations would provide a wealth of insight relevant to not only the civil society debates but social movements and other literatures concerned with state-society relations.

Additional research is needed to determine how the performance of contingent symbiosis might vary, but given similar political arrangements and concerns, one would expect the core logic of contingent symbiosis to

hold true across a variety of authoritarian regimes. Government agents in North Korea, Cuba, and Burma, for example, may grant some degree of tolerance to unauthorized organizations that contribute to the social welfare goals of the state. Such toleration would likely vary according to the size and complexities of the society in question, its historical experience of unofficial associational life, and the presence or absence of other large institutions that might compete with the state as an organizing force (e.g., the Catholic Church in Cuba or Buddhism in Burma).

Regardless of where in the world we look, those interested in civil society in authoritarian states would do well to move beyond the conventional corporatist model and toward the concept of contingent symbiosis, a concept that acknowledges the real-life microlevel negotiations that take place between the state and bottom-up associations. It is in these details that we can start to understand both the possibilities and the limits of political life in an authoritarian regime.

APPENDIX A

Methodology and Data

Selecting a site in China for this research was not a smooth process. Contacts in Beijing and Shanghai were understandably reluctant to officially vouch for an American conducting research on a topic they themselves had been warned to avoid. Eventually, however, I was granted access and an affiliation with a university in Guangzhou, the capital of southern China's Guangdong province. Between 2005 and 2008, I interviewed and conducted participant observation alongside a varied group of Chinese government officials and leaders, staff, and volunteers in Chinese GONGOs and grassroots NGOs. These comprise the research data on which this article is based. The data presented here are drawn primarily from intensive fieldwork conducted over a 15-month period between 2005 and 2007, with some follow-up work continuing into 2009. In total, over 120 people assisted in this research by sharing their thoughts and experiences in interviews, informal conversations, and numerous NGO gatherings and activities. The organizations on which my analysis is based include 31 grassroots NGOs, mostly located in Guangdong but also including some in other regions. By simple virtue of the fact that I found them, these organizations are "successful" organizations.²⁵

²⁵ For some scholars of organizational growth, this study, which focuses on survival strategies, may naturally raise the question of organizational death. My data reflect the fluid situation in China today. Rather than organizational death, NGOs frequently experience a process of birth, death (e.g., being shut down by authorities), and rebirth under a different name. This process, however, is a topic for future study.

While space constraints prevent a detailed discussion of the difficulties of conducting research in an authoritarian state, a brief note is in order. In most societies, the study of illicit activity is rife with methodological and ethical difficulties. In an authoritarian state like China, restrictions on freedom of association and freedom of speech make such a study all the more challenging. Ensuring the safety and confidentiality of my informants and managing my own personal and political risks were ever-present concerns that undeniably shaped the research process itself and my perspectives on the data I collected. Virtually all the interviews and conversations described here were held in Chinese, and all translations are my own.

Despite the dearth of generalized social trust that I found in my research, building relationships with NGO participants, although not immediate, took surprisingly little effort. People were eager to tell their stories, to express their frustrations and anxieties, and to encourage others to take up similar efforts. Being non-Chinese, moreover, I was not suspected as an internal Chinese spy or security official come to check up on them. Yet as a U.S. citizen, I walked a political tightrope between Chinese government authorities afraid of grassroots groups and on the lookout for American spies and U.S. government officials seeking to encourage and support NGO expansion. Ultimately, several key Chinese government officials came to see my research as nonthreatening, a judgment that allowed me to continue my inquiries and activities and provided me access to higher-level government offices. Nonetheless, trust building sometimes requires a multilayered unfolding of relationships. I frequently treated initial conversations and meetings with new people as only hints into their experience and views, data that were then confirmed or modified through subsequent interactions.

APPENDIX B

Profiles of Grassroots Organizations and Individuals Included in This Research

Participants from a total of 31 different grassroots NGOs were interviewed as a part of this research. These NGOs' fields of activity are roughly categorized in table B1.

Supplementary Notes on NGO Categorization

Many of the organizations involved in this research engage in multiple activities. Due to the dynamic nature of Chinese society in this current period, some groups shifted their focus frequently, depending on their

organizational resources, their perceptions of local need, and their own ambitions. As an example, one group working with female sex workers shifted from providing psychological counseling to focusing on education about sexually transmitted diseases and then later yet to education about protecting against violent clients and police exploitation. Another group working mostly with people affected by leprosy also began to shift part of its focus to supplementary education for children in impoverished rural villages. Despite the difficulties such changes pose to easy categorization, in describing the grassroots NGOs listed above I have tried to capture what I believe to be the main focus of their activity during the time covered in the fieldwork. Given the small numbers of NGOs that were active during this period, to be more specific about the individual groups' activities would put them at risk of being identified and subjected to official harassment, investigation, or suppression.

Supplementary Notes on NGO Participants

During the course of fieldwork, paid staff sizes changed according to the resources and circumstances of the organization. At one point in the study, three organizations had no paid staff, while one (of exceptionally large size) had over 30. Throughout the study, however, most organizations had fewer than four full-time paid staff. In addition, some NGOs had “volunteers” and “members,” although due to a lack of consensus over the meaning of “volunteer” (How frequently do they lend a hand? Are they financially compensated or not?) and “membership” (Are they dues paying or just frequent joiners?), staff within the same NGO often offered different estimates. Popular understandings of the term “volunteer,” for example, were affected by previous government-led campaigns to force “volunteers” into public action and by workshops organized by local and foreign elites that brought NGO leaders together and in contact with academic and overseas understandings of these terms.

Supplementary Notes on NGO Financial Resources

As with the actual programs of the grassroots NGOs that inform this research, the financial resources of these groups were ever shifting. Funding models included membership fees, fees for services, gifts from individuals (both Chinese and foreign), grants from international NGOs (in rare cases), self-funding by NGO founders (through savings, earnings, or some other means), and self-funding by volunteers. For the few organizations that had regular sources of income, of the budget numbers I was able to obtain, the wealthiest organization had an income of about 3 million yuan (approximately US\$440,000) in one year. On the lowest end,

the groups without paid staff were entirely self-funded, whereas at least three organizations with paid staff survived on meager resources of less than 100,000 yuan per year (approximately US\$14,000). Again, however, as resources shifted every few months for many of the groups, I did not keep a running tally of their budgets. In retrospect, taking a periodic “snapshot” of financial resources may have been a more prudent approach.

Supplementary Descriptive Information on Interviewees and Participant Observation Cojoiners

During the main part of the fieldwork, between 2005 and 2007, interviews were conducted with 101 people, 43 of whom were interviewed more than twice, nine of whom were interviewed twice, and 49 of whom were interviewed once. These include NGO participants, GONGO staff, government officials, and a handful of representatives of foreign-based NGOs or foundations with programs operating in mainland China. Another 20 people were also regular joiners in the participant-observation activities I took part in. Although I did not formally interview them, informal chats with these people were frequently illuminating and informed my understandings of the dynamics at play.

Of this 121-person total, 69 were male, and 52 were female. The age distribution of all 121 is given in table B2. As most of my interviewees were found through introductions by others, these descriptive statistics should by no means be understood as a representative sample of China’s civil society participants. However, for reasons that cannot be elaborated here due to space constraints, it does seem likely that participation in China’s NGOs would skew to younger generations, if a broader survey were to be conducted.

TABLE B1
NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS BY ACTIVITY

Field of Activity	No. of NGOs
Capacity building ...	2
Education	8
Elderly	1
Environment	1
Health	9
Homeless	1
Labor	7
Media	1
Other	1
Total	31

TABLE B2
INTERVIEW SUBJECTS BY AGE COHORT

No. of Respondents	Age Range (2005–7)
50	In their 20s
34	In their 30s
27	In their 40s
6	In their 50s
2	In their 60s
2	In their 70s

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