



Going Global

The International Endeavours of Chinese NGOs

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In recent years, Chinese nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have been branching out of China with donations and projects mostly in the fields of humanitarian assistance, education, and healthcare. China's rapid economic development, increasing awareness among Chinese public opinion, policy support in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, growing demand for projects that alleviate the environmental and social concerns related to China's overseas investment, and increasing international exposure have all driven this phenomenon. However, there remain several key challenges.

On 4 August 2020, a large amount of improperly stored ammonium nitrate exploded at the Port of Beirut, killing at least 178 people, injuring more than 6,500, and leaving 300,000 homeless (WHO 2020). In response, the Beirut office of the Peaceland Foundation (平澜公益), a Chinese organisation founded in 2018 that already had a presence in more than 10 countries, purchased 600 sets of emergency food supplies and, within two days, delivered them to affected Lebanese citizens (Peaceland Foundation 2020). Meanwhile in Africa, Binbin Yin, a co-founder of the Dream Building Service Association (筑梦公益), a nongovernmental organisation (NGO) established by Chinese residents in Kenya, was busy preparing a project to deliver free meals to poor African students and their families affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The project was implemented in partnership with Free Lunch Interna-

Children who have received assistance from the Free Lunch International show support to Wuhan. PC: Free Lunch International official WeChat account.

tional (国际免费午餐), an international extension of the well-known Free Lunch for Children (免费午餐) project in China—an initiative dedicated to providing free lunches to schools in impoverished areas of the country.

Six years ago, when I was working for the Clinton Health Access Initiative (CHAI), an international nongovernmental organisation (INGO) operating in more than 30 countries with US\$192 million of revenue in 2019 (CHAI 2020), I was just starting to follow the global expansion of Chinese NGOs. At that time, I wondered whether I would ever see a Chinese INGO of a similar size to CHAI in the future. Even though they are still quite small compared with my then employer, CHAI, the organisations in the snapshots above are already of a variety and scale that I could not have imagined back then.

The Emergence of Chinese NGOs as Global Actors

The international exposure of Chinese NGOs is not a recent phenomenon. Starting in the late 1970s, China reopened its doors to INGOs and other international organisations, which have since supported the development of a large number of Chinese NGOs. What is new today is that we are starting to see Chinese NGOs branching out of China and acting as donors and partners to organisations in developing countries. The first substantial international humanitarian activity by Chinese NGOs was in response to the 2004 earthquake and tsunami in the Indian Ocean. Back then, the Red Cross Society of China (中国红十字会) and the China Charity Federation (中华慈善总会) donated US\$90 million for assistance to the victims (Xinhua 2007). At the same time, the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation (中国扶贫基金会, CFPA)—today China's most internationally active foundation—made its first major international donations (Deng 2019). Another natural disaster in Asia, the 2015 earthquake in Nepal, stimulated a new round of international

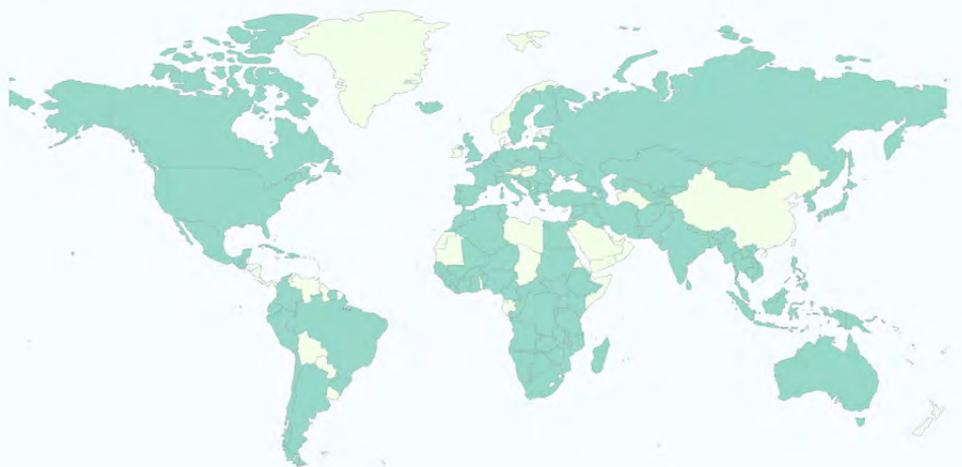
engagement by Chinese NGOs. Many Chinese foundations made their first international forays in response to this tragedy, as did many volunteer rescue groups, and a few Chinese NGOs stayed on in Nepal, providing post-earthquake reconstruction support and other services. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese NGOs, especially large corporate foundations, are actively making international donations. For instance, the Alibaba Foundation, together with the Jack Ma Foundation, has donated more than 100 million medical masks and millions of COVID-19 polymerase chain reaction tests to 150 countries, as well as to the World Health Organization (WHO) (Ma 2020).

In addition to humanitarian donations and assistance, Chinese NGOs are quickly making their mark in providing development aid. The *Chinese NGO Internationalization Database* I have developed for the Leiden Asia Centre includes (as of March 2021) more than 700 items of international donations and projects from 130 Chinese NGOs across more than 100 countries (Wang 2021). Of 294 development projects noted, 70 per cent are in the education and healthcare fields, followed by the environment and sustainability, sanitation, and livelihoods. Most projects involve traditional charitable activities—that is: donating money and goods, such as school supplies, scholarships, free lunches, and medical supplies (39 per cent); building infrastructure, such as hospitals and schools (26 per cent); providing medical assistance, such as free cataract surgery (17 per cent); volunteering (5 per cent); and training (5 per cent). The remaining areas of action, which are mainly in the environment and sustainability field, include policy advocacy and wildlife preservation. Some of the most sizeable overseas projects are extensions of initiatives that already existed in China, such as the 'Fraternity Home' (博爱家园), a project of the Chinese Red Cross Foundation (中国红十字基金会, CRCF) promoting community governance and disaster prevention in urban and rural communities, and the 'Panda Pack Project' (爱心包裹), a project of the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation that donates schoolbags and stationery to children in underdeveloped areas in China. Such initiatives are especially prevalent among government-organised NGOs (GONGOs).

In comparison, the projects of independent NGOs are more diverse—for example, the Peaceland Foundation has participated in patrolling a wildlife reserve in Zimbabwe, as well as in a landmine detection project in Cambodia. The Global Environment Institute (永续全球环境研究所, GEI) has advocated for better forest conservation and sustainable investments in Africa and Southeast Asia. The Paradise International Foundation (桃花源生态保护基金会) has participated in a campaign in the Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo to encourage the planting of bamboo to combat deforestation and set up a 10-year African Ranger Awards program with the Alibaba Foundation to honour wildlife rangers in Africa. These independent NGOs have contributed significantly to the diversity of Chinese NGOs,

although they are usually smaller entities than GONGOs such as the CFPA, with only short-term or sporadic activities. Overall, based on Korten's (1990) categorisation of NGO development, most Chinese NGOs are considered to be in the first (relief and welfare) and second (community development) generations of development, with a few operating in the more 'developed' third generation (sustainable systems development). So far, none has reached the fourth generation—that is, people's movements.

It is hard to estimate total donations or revenue, but we can get a sense of scale from some of the largest Chinese NGO projects. CFPA spent RMB40 million (about US\$6.2 million) on its overseas Panda Pack project (爱心包裹), delivering school supplies to children in more than 10 countries in



The *Chinese NGO Internationalization Database* relies on a systematic and intensive search through various online sources, including the China Foundation Centre database, official sources such as NGOs' websites, WeChat accounts, annual reports, and media articles, to geolocate Chinese NGOs' international humanitarian and development assistance projects or donations implemented between 2005 and 2020. It captures donations/projects from 130 Chinese NGOs across more than 100 countries globally. More information can be found at: www.beltroadresearch.com/ngo-map.

2019 (CFPA 2020). The Chinese Red Cross Foundation's Silk Road Fraternity Fund (丝路博爱基金), which is specifically dedicated to international development projects in countries that have joined China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—for instance, sending medical teams to Pakistan and providing free surgery for children with cataracts or congenital heart disease in Mongolia—recorded annual expenditure of RMB13 million (US\$2 million) in 2019 (CRCF 2020). While substantial for China, none of these projects even comes close in size to that of established INGOs, such as Save the Children or Plan International, which reported program expenditures of US\$704 million and €679 million, respectively, over the same period (Plan International 2020; Save the Children 2020).

Regardless, the international involvement of Chinese NGOs has evolved from pure donations into permanent overseas operations. Several established Chinese NGOs have registered and established offices overseas, such as the Yundi Behavior and Health Research Centre (云迪行为与健康研究中心) in Cambodia, the Ruili Women and Children Development Centre (瑞丽市妇女儿童发展中心) in Myanmar, and Ramunion (公羊会) in Ethiopia. CFPA, which has operations in Nepal, Myanmar, and Ethiopia, is a good example of how a Chinese NGO has developed internationally. The organisation started making international donations in 2005 and, after 2008, began to temporarily send its staff to recipient countries for project implementation—the second stage of development. Since 2012, CFPA has been operating at the third stage of long-term establishment in recipient countries, including establishing project offices and hiring local employees (Deng 2019). However, local registration and permanent establishment in a host country remain rare for Chinese NGOs. The involvement of most Chinese NGOs is still limited to making donations and working on a temporary basis.

In terms of geographical distribution, China's neighbours have benefited from approximately half of all projects (Wang 2021). According to various Chinese NGOs I have interviewed, convenience and cost-effectiveness are two key reasons for concentrating projects in nearby countries, given the resource constraints that NGOs usually face.

Addressing cross-border issues is also a priority for NGOs, such as wildlife protection along the border between China and Myanmar. According to my database, overall, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and East Africa are top regions for Chinese NGO assistance, comprising 34 per cent, 26 per cent, and 15 per cent, respectively, of total projects before the COVID-19 pandemic. Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Ethiopia top the list of recipient countries.

The Challenges to the Internationalisation of Chinese NGOs

Chinese NGOs face many challenges working internationally, such as inadequate regulatory and policy frameworks, insufficient funding, and limited management and operational capabilities (see, for instance, Deng 2013, 2019; Huang 2011; Li and Dong 2018; Yang 2013). All of these challenges are characteristic of an emerging field in which regulatory, financial, and human resource infrastructure are not yet fully developed (Wang 2020).

Lack of government support is often discussed among Chinese NGOs and scholars (Deng and Wang 2015; Li and Dong 2018), as there is no regulation specific to Chinese NGOs operating internationally. The concept of Chinese NGOs operating internationally is just as new for Chinese regulatory bodies as it is for the NGOs themselves. For example, several NGOs I interviewed mentioned that it took the Civil Affairs bureaucracy a long time and much explanation to accept foreign invoices during their annual checks on NGOs' accounts. In 2016, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the General Office of the State Council issued the joint 'Opinion on Reforming the NGO Management System to Promote Healthy and Orderly NGO Development' (关于改革社会组织管理制度促进社会组织健康有序发展的意见). The opinion—which, though important, is not a regulation—includes some regulatory guidance, such as 'if it is necessary to establish [representative]

offices outside China, approval must be obtained from the authority in charge or the administration in charge of foreign affairs'. This indicates that the Chinese state is aware of the challenges, and that it has been learning and gradually developing regulations for NGOs operating outside China, although most regulations and administrative guidance to date remain vague.

Limited financial resources are another major constraint on the international development of Chinese NGOs. Chinese NGOs fund their international projects through donations from diverse sources: corporations, international foundations and organisations, government, and the public. Corporations are an important financial source for Chinese NGOs' international projects, especially for large foundations, such as CRCF and CFPA. These corporations and foundations usually already have established sponsorships or partnerships for domestic projects. Lacking previous contacts and networks, it is much harder for independent and small Chinese NGOs to raise funds for international activities from large corporations. Similarly, international foundations and organisations prefer to fund Chinese NGOs which they have long supported in China. For example, Give2Asia, a long-term partner with CFPA in China, has supported CFPA's microfinance project in Nepal (Deng and Song 2019). Blue Moon Fund has sponsored GEI's projects both in China and abroad (GEI 2021). Currently, open government funding for Chinese NGOs is very limited. For instance, Yunnan Province has an official aid budget of less than RMB600,000 per project per year to allocate to a few local NGOs (mostly GONGOs) for international projects, but there is no such mechanism yet at the central level (Department of Commerce of Yunnan Province 2020). Public funds, raised mainly through the internet, are an important financial source for both GONGOs and independent NGOs. According to my calculations, based on publicly available information from Tencent and Alipay (the top-two internet platforms for charitable online fundraising in China), as of the end of 2020, the total funds raised for international humanitarian and development projects through these two channels was RMB45 million. This amount seems almost irrelevant if compared

with mature markets for international donations, such as that of the United Kingdom, where the public donated £10 billion over the past five years (Banks and Brockington 2020).

Human resource constraints and limited organisational capacities are internal bottlenecks for NGOs. In general, the salaries of Chinese NGO staff are very low. In 2018, in the 210 Chinese foundations that registered under the Ministry of Civil Affairs—either national public foundations or private foundations with initial capital beyond RMB20 million, including the largest and most important foundations in China—56 per cent of employees had an annual salary of less than RMB100,000 (US\$15,000) (Wang 2019). Taking CFPA as an example, the average annual salary of its staff in 2018 was RMB122,629 (US\$19,000) (CFPA 2019), which is less than half the average salary in large INGOs—for instance, US\$48,000 for Save the Children (Zippia 2020b) and US\$52,000 for Oxfam (Zippia 2020a). Such salary levels are not competitive internationally to attract talent in recipient countries who are familiar with Chinese, local, and global systems of operation. In addition to human resource shortages, Chinese NGOs face the complicated challenges of understanding the needs of local communities, designing and implementing sustainable projects, localising operations, and communicating with international partners using global development discourse. As one independent NGO leader told me in September 2020: 'Even if I was given a 100 million renminbi [to undertake a project], I wouldn't accept it because I wouldn't be able to implement it.'

The Driving Forces of Internationalisation

Internationally, the development of INGOs has gone through cycles, each driven by different political, economic, social, environmental, and technical factors (Davies 2014). Similarly, the growing presence of Chinese NGOs overseas is also driven by a set of external factors. First among them is the strong economic progress China has made over the past few decades, which has freed up resources



CFPA's Burmese version of Panda Pack to be delivered to children in Myanmar. Photo by the author.

that can now be allocated more flexibly for international causes. CFPA, the biggest foundation for poverty alleviation in China, made moving into the international realm an organisational strategy years ago, foreseeing its role in poverty reduction within China shrinking. Second, the country's national strategies related to the BRI have provided a supportive political environment for the internationalisation of Chinese NGOs. The Chinese Government referenced the strategic role of NGOs in building social connections in BRI countries at the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in 2017 and then again in the Action Plan for People-to-People Bonds in the Belt and Road Initiative for Chinese Social Organisations (2017–

20) (中国社会组织推动‘一带一路’民心相通行动计划 2017–20). Third, the Chinese public is now more accepting of making international donations. Chinese NGOs have become more optimistic about gaining public donations for international projects because they face less pushback from the public. Based on several of my NGO interviews, they are now less likely to hear complaints such as: ‘Why do you donate to Africa when there are still so many people in need at home?’ Fourth, increasing environmental and social concerns about China's overseas investments, especially in extractive industries, have prompted some Chinese NGOs working on the environment and sustainability, such as GEI, to develop projects abroad. Fifth, since China opened

its doors to the world and embraced social and economic globalisation, Chinese NGOs have gained greater international exposure by attending international conferences, participating in international exchange programs, and partnering with other international foundations and NGOs. As Deng (2019) has discovered, the frequency of exchanges between Chinese foundations and foreign NGOs is one of the most important factors impacting on whether those foundations make overseas donations, as well as the scale of such donations.

Although the diplomatic factors mentioned in the second point play a role in the internationalisation of Chinese NGOs, especially for GONGOs, this does not necessarily mean these organisations are co-opted by the Chinese state. GONGOs have varying levels of autonomy and their ties with government should be viewed as ranging along a spectrum, rather than as absolutes (Hasmath et al. 2019). For example, the China NGO Network for International Exchanges (中国民间组织国际交流促进会, CNIE), founded by the International Department of the CCP's Central Committee to promote cooperation between Chinese and foreign NGOs, is solely financed by the Party-State. It is often considered an extension of the government, and some of its projects are directly related to promoting the BRI, as indicated by names such as 'The Silk Road Community Building Initiative' (丝路一家亲), The CRCF's 'Silk Road Fraternity Fund' (丝路博爱基金) and the China Foundation for Peace and Development's 'Friends on the Silk Road' (丝路之友) are two other examples of how the BRI influences the international projects of some GONGOs.

However, there are many other GONGO projects that are not driven by the BRI. The CFPA has developed a range of projects in Nepal since providing humanitarian assistance in the wake of the 2015 earthquake. Funding for these projects comes from a variety of sources—including corporations, international foundations, and the public—and the CFPA has decision-making autonomy over project initiation, location, and design. Independent NGOs usually do not link their projects to the BRI directly but may refer to it to gain political legitimacy when dealing with Chinese Government

officials. Overall, the BRI provides a favourable backdrop for Chinese NGOs moving into overseas operations, but it is definitely not the only driver.

Looking Ahead

Most of the facilitating factors for the internationalisation of Chinese NGOs cited above are unlikely to fade in the short to medium term. Especially during the current pandemic, the degree of international engagement by Chinese NGOs, which have been providing donations and participating in online conferences with both developing and developed countries, is quite unprecedented, further confirming the growing trend of internationalisation.

However, these dynamics might change once the Chinese state becomes more involved in the internationalisation of Chinese NGOs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, fundraising for donations to other countries has been controlled by the Chinese state apparatus, and only a few public foundations are authorised to fundraise publicly for international projects. This demonstrates the government's ability to interfere with international donations, even without establishing any formal regulation. As the size and scale of Chinese NGO engagement overseas develop, it is expected the Chinese Government will take measures to regulate the sector. It is also worth watching the development of the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund (南南合作援助基金), an initiative started by the Chinese Government to assist developing countries in implementing their post-2015 sustainable development agendas. The fund has made Chinese NGOs eligible to apply for funding and will likely start allocating funds to them for international projects in 2021. This will become the most important official channel of funding for Chinese NGOs working internationally. How will these new financial resources and incentives change the dynamics of Chinese NGO internationalisation in terms of geographical presence, areas of concern, and approach? Will these measures and resources lead to more support and healthy

competition or will they shackle the diversity of NGO behaviour? The answers to these questions will depend on how the Chinese state designs its regulations and manages funding to NGOs.

Aside from the direct government interference that affects NGOs within China, we should also pay attention to the development of NGOs themselves as this, by extension, will affect their ability to internationalise. China has no established Western-type INGOs with international development causes as their sole purpose; it is not even possible for a Chinese social entrepreneur to register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs as an NGO working solely for children in Africa. International projects are currently merely add-ons for Chinese NGOs, with domestic projects remaining the priority. The same factors that constrain or facilitate the development of NGOs in China will also affect their internationalisation. Chinese NGOs working internationally remain fundamentally Chinese, and their overseas behaviour does not go beyond the established boundaries of the domestic government-NGO relationship. The many organisational bottlenecks referenced above are caused by complex systemic problems that are unlikely to change in the near future.

Will the size and scale of Chinese NGOs' international presence eventually be comparable with medium-sized INGOs like the one I used to work with? Considering the rapid development of Chinese NGO internationalisation over the past five years, I am optimistic that a few might be able to reach such a scale in the medium to long term. However, what is more important to consider are the causes for which NGOs fight, the approaches they take, and the resources they can leverage. In the end, what matters is the real impact Chinese NGOs can make on global public welfare. Such influence can only be achieved if the domestic development of Chinese NGOs is more robust and autonomous. ■

This text is taken from *Made in China Journal: Volume 6, Issue 1, 2021*,
edited by Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere, published 2021 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/MIC.06.01.2021.15