



Oral History of NGOs in China, Volume 1 [中国NGO口述史, 第一辑].

Pioneers and Possibilities

Reflecting on Chinese NGO Development through Oral History

WANG Weinan
Holly SNAPE

As the context in which Chinese nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) operate evolves, and the challenges they face change, revisiting the early days of post-Mao era NGO development (often dated to the early 1990s) can help us reflect on this change in comparative perspective. During my doctoral studies, I had the great luck to be based as a visiting student at Tsinghua University's NGO Research Centre, founded in 1998, which was among the first in China to focus on the development of Chinese civil society. It was there that I met Wang Weinan, who was working as a research assistant to the director. Scholars and students at the centre were devoting much energy to empirical research all over the country, seeking to understand and engage in the development of all kinds of NGOs. They were particularly busy with a project capturing the oral histories of NGO leaders, founders, and activ-

ists. These people included some of the earliest pioneers, such as Liang Congjie, grandson of Liang Qichao, who in 1993 co-founded Friends of Nature (自然之友), one of China's earliest environmental protection NGOs; Liu Detian, who in 1991 set up an association for the protection of the Saunders's gull (盘锦市黑嘴鸥保护协会); and Meng Weina, who in 1990 established the Huiling Service Centre for People with Learning Difficulties (慧玲智障人士服务机构). The painstaking work of collating these oral histories has enabled us to revisit that period in recent Chinese history and view today's NGO sector considering those histories. Weinan, who was involved in that project and the centre's other work, agreed to help me reflect on those histories in this short conversation.

Holly Snape: You started working at Tsinghua University's NGO Research Centre in 2008 as a research assistant to the director, Professor Wang Ming. How did you first become interested in NGOs and what brought you to the centre?

Wang Weinan: It was during my bachelor [degree], in the mid 2000s, that I first became aware of the existence of NGOs. I got involved in a few environmental student associations, which often cooperated with other types of NGOs and other student associations.

I studied law, and we were required to do an internship. I chose a pro bono law firm involved in legal aid cases being brought by young people and migrant workers. Working on that kind of case, I developed a sense of just how worthwhile NGOs could be.

I started working at Tsinghua's NGO Research Centre after I graduated. Professor Wang had been leading the 'Oral History of NGOs in China Project' [中国NGO口述史] since 2005 and was looking for an assistant. To start with, my work involved handling reams of interview transcripts that had already been collected. But because Professor Wang kept the project going, treating it as a core part of the centre's work, the interviews were ongoing, and I was able to join in many more of them after that.

HS: I remember when I started studying with Professor Wang, I was blown away by this incredible 2012 book, *Oral History of NGOs in China, Volume 1* [中国NGO口述史, 第一辑]—the first the centre produced under the Oral History Project. I was struck by the rich detail and insight from people like Liang Congjie, Meng Weina, and Yang Maobin on their experiences of founding NGOs at a time when that was something quite new. Can you explain a bit about the Oral History Project? What was the thinking behind it?

WW: The project was designed by Professor Wang and funded by the Ford Foundation. I cannot speak for him but, as I understand it, the idea was to capture the experience of some of the earliest NGO founders in the People's Republic of China, to learn from

their histories, and the histories of their individual NGOs, to study general patterns and better understand the development of Chinese civil society.

Partly, the project was born of Professor Wang's real desire to understand how China's NGOs were developing back then. He once told me that he felt a sense of responsibility and mission. Although oral history is an important research method—one that other types, like quantitative methods, cannot replace—it is also hugely work-intensive and not always instantly convertible into something recognised within an intensely competitive academic environment. It takes a lot to be able to initiate this kind of project. Professor Wang was already highly regarded in the sector and its study, so he was well placed to take this on.

By the start of the project in 2005, the NGO sector had already undergone at least a decade of development; while some NGOs were launched in the early 1990s, in 1995, China's hosting of the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women and the required parallel NGO Forum inspired and enabled a great amount of NGO establishment and activity. That development really merited capturing. But another important reason for doing this when he did was a sense of urgency: he knew there would come a point when NGO practitioners and researchers would want to learn about the experiences of those early pioneers, but that if their histories were not captured in time, it could be too late. Sadly, a few of these people passed away not long after they were interviewed for the project.

HS: Through your experience of dealing with all the original NGO oral history transcripts, and being involved in the interviews, did you get a sense of what motivated those early pioneers to establish NGOs? How did they understand what they were doing and what were their hopes at that time?

WW: In the beginning, I did not recognise the importance of the oral history method. I only gradually came to fully appreciate why Professor Wang chose it; this is a method that can privilege the perspectives of individuals in a way that other methods cannot.

One impression I had was the sheer range of different sectors and fields and the diversity of the types of organisation and backgrounds of their founders. For example, we often talk about 'grassroots' [草根] NGOs. This type accounted for a large number of the NGOs we covered. But there were others, too. Among the interviewees were leaders of foreign NGOs in China and members of the political elite who had had careers inside the Party-State but who wanted to achieve something that was not possible from within that system so had set up NGOs. Some had academic backgrounds, others political or commercial, but they were all doing something related to NGOs within the spaces they could find or hammer out.

HS: Right, I remember the first volume of the *Oral History of NGOs in China* includes this fascinating, quite candid piece by two women from the All-China Women's Federation, who had important roles in organising the parallel NGO Forum for the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women—often regarded as a watershed moment for NGO development in China.

WW: The whole design of the project drew on Professor Wang's experience as a scholar embedded in the field. When choosing interviewees, he was drawing on this. The fact that all these people made themselves available and spoke candidly about their own histories was inseparable from Professor Wang's own accumulated experience and social capital. This helps to explain why the centre was able to capture what it did through this project: a glimpse of the incredible diversity and range—different types of organisations, people, aspirations, and ideals—and the extent of the vitality within China's burgeoning civil society at that time. It was a stark contrast with the 'philanthropic and charitable organisations' [公益慈善类组织] that the Party-State encourages and regards as legitimate 'social organisations' [社会组织] today.

For example, among our interviewees there were people from independent think tanks, NGOs with religious backgrounds, foundations, foreign organisations, and people who had worked in international organisations. Then there were those with other backgrounds, like a business association that started life as a government department but transformed into an association. The Oral History Project provided a glimpse into the hugely diverse, pluralistic patchwork of Chinese civil society developing at that time.

Aside from the diversity and plurality, I do think these people—first-generation NGO founders and pioneers—had something in common. I do not know whether this is something exclusive to this group, but through the course of these interviews it became clear that all these people had a sense of mission, and of possibility, even if what they aspired to differed. They had discovered something in society that needed doing and were determined to do something about it. Confronted with obstacles arising from the political system or social context, they would think up the best ways they could, looking for a space to achieve their aims.

Those aims were very different. For example, one NGO founder was the mother of a child with autism who had decided to set up her own organisation to address the stark lack of provision for children with certain needs. Then there was an interviewee who had learnt techniques he had found useful himself for helping drug users overcome addiction; he wanted to enable others to access this support. Another was a business owner who felt companies in his sector were getting a raw deal in international trade and wanted to set up an industry federation to give them a voice.

They all had their own different reasons and approaches but we, as observers or researchers, were referring to them all as ‘NGO founders’ [NGO创始人], or pioneers of civil society. Although their ideas, aims, and approaches all differed enormously, they seemed to share a sense of mission, and the aspiration to solve the problems they had discovered or encountered.

HS: You touched on working within the context shaped by the political system. I remember first reading Liang Congjie’s chapter in the first volume of the Oral History of NGOs in China and being struck by his own experience in this regard. After co-founding Friends of Nature in 1993, he had lived with the worry, every time he went anywhere on business, that someone would come along and close them down. In Mr Liang’s own words: ‘That’s really just how it was, no joke, as soon as I was away for any length of time, I’d worry that on my return I’d find that Friends of Nature had been shut down.’

He stressed Friends of Nature’s cautious attitude, saying they set out to start an NGO that could influence environmental policy but that kept a ‘low profile’ and strategically opted to be less confrontational vis-a-vis the government than some foreign NGOs working in China at the time. He spoke of being keenly aware of the NGOs that would come after them, and the sector that was developing. Friends of Nature intended to tread carefully with the future of the sector in mind, taking care not to do anything that would create barriers to its development.

You just spoke of the diversity of interviewees from different backgrounds and with a whole range of ideas and ideals; do you think it was common for them to feel they belonged to some larger community, aware of others, and seeing what they were doing as connected? Or do you think these were individuals focused on their respective causes?

WW: That is an interesting question. Like Liang Congjie said, they were thinking about how they could avoid blocking the path for future NGOs. This is something a lot of NGO founders in a context like China’s might think about, or be aware of, and they may have this in common.

In the early days—the 1990s and early 2000s—the social and political context was very different from that of today. It might seem the space those first-generation NGO founders operated in was small, and they may have shared a fear about possible closure, making them conscious of ‘strategy’. Liang Congjie and others looked for common ground with government to find ways to prompt those in power to achieve what they were already meant to be doing. In the book you mentioned, Mr Liang put it this way:

We don’t point fingers at the central government itself. Instead, we say ‘look, such-and-such a place isn’t listening to your directions, they’re violating your principles.’ This way there’s nothing the central government can say—their environmental protection laws and policies are sitting right there. If I report back to you someone’s violating your own laws and policies, can you tell me you’re not going to do anything about it ... Even if it’s just about putting on appearances, they still have to support us. We’ve always adopted this approach.

Another thing that the interviewees would often point out is that the government itself is no monolith. It has different departments and individuals and, as an NGO, you have to figure out where and how to find space and opportunity to lobby them, to find common ground to influence them on. Those early NGO founders spoke of this a lot.

But while adopting such ‘strategies’ they were also affected by the strategies they chose. This was the unavoidable reality. When an NGO wants to advocate, it faces a range of options, and often chooses the one most likely to work in light of its environment. This in turn affects the organisation, becoming part of that NGO’s history, influencing its future development. Gradually a lot of NGOs will develop certain commonalities through this process as they adapt to and even develop a kind of complementary relationship with the Party-State.

But I should also point out that the books published through the Oral History Project (three to date), and the tremendous diversity and richness they show, still only capture a small part of the material collected. A lot of it we could not publish and, following the interviews, different people went in different directions. Some made it further than others; some chose different paths. The line not to be crossed is never clear and everyone’s judgement of it is different. Among those we interviewed, some are less influential in the NGO field in China today, others have found methods that have led to significant influence, and still others left their mark even though for some memory of that is fading. There were also those who chose to pursue their ideas and ideals overseas.

HS: I remember talking to an experienced NGO leader who had worked in a range of fields. He said they had often resorted to ‘ways you find when there *is* no way’ [没有办法的办法]. I asked if there was something positive about that—that even when there was no way they would still find a way. He disagreed, saying it was wholly negative—the result of having your hand forced by reality.

You have given a good sense of the diversity and plurality that come across in the Oral History volumes. I want to turn to the changes in the past few years, like the introduction of the Charity Law in 2016, and the increasingly institutionalised environment, with the government introducing categories for managing NGOs and the Chinese Communist Party developing a growing repertoire of strategies to permeate and grow inside them.

If we think back to those early NGOs, they may have been small, even weak, but they seemed to sometimes have choices when it came to finding a way to pursue their aims. Do you think it is the case to some extent that even ‘ways you resort to when there is no way’ have been closed off as an option? Do you think there were greater possibilities in the early days?

WW: ‘Possibility’ is an important idea. The scope of possibility has shrunk; a rich spectrum of possibilities has been whittled down and compressed into a small space; the room for choice has shrunk a lot. It is much more useful to think about changes in Chinese

civil society in terms of ‘possibility and change’ rather than ‘linear development and setbacks’.

The early NGOs may have been smaller, society’s awareness lower, and the volume of resources more limited, but even with its frailty, it was still richly diverse. There was a lot of dynamism there, a lot of possibilities and imaginable futures, even though there were always challenges. One of the most typical challenges was the one you mentioned that Liang Congjie spoke of: not knowing if one day your organisation would be shut down.

But now, particularly since Xi Jinping, there has been a comprehensive promotion of institutionalisation and what the Party-State calls ‘governance modernisation’, pushing for standards and relatively inflexible institutions. A lot of newer generation NGOs today have been produced or shaped through systems of incubation or tutelage. Many of the restrictions and funding priorities today are clear, more observable, so new-generation NGO founders can weigh up their choices, evaluate, and decide what kind of NGO they are going to establish. This includes things like the rules on registering NGOs, the conditions placed on those registering, and the criteria used in their evaluation. From the policies themselves it might seem restrictions have been conditionally relaxed, but when it comes to operating, the extent of enforcement is entirely different, the provisions and their implementation are guiding NGOs at every step.

NGOs today can consider with some clarity most of the restrictions and factors that may pressure them to develop in a certain way. This is different to the worries of those early NGOs and the grey space they faced where possibilities often involved tacitly accepted approaches.

Based on my experience of evaluating NGO projects, through which I come into close contact with a range of organisations in different fields, aside from the pressures of survival, more recently established NGOs spend a lot of energy on ‘competition for growth’. There are a lot of resources available today but how are you going to obtain them? How do you ensure your growth? A lot of energy is sucked up in this.

HS: Some might argue it was inevitable that after the 1990s, when the space was mostly unregulated, along with increasing institutionalisation, there would be a closing of the tacit space and that this would be true in any country or system. You have observed and engaged in the Chinese NGO sector a lot, at the NGO Research Centre, in startup NGOs, at an NGO set up to support other NGOs, and in NGO project evaluation and research. In your view, was the closing of space and flexibility that we have seen inevitable? If so, where does that inevitability come from: institutionalisation processes, the political system, both of these, or something else entirely? Or, on the flip side, could things have developed very differently?

In the heyday of research on China’s growing organised civil society in the 1990s and 2000s, some thought the developments you have described could carve out new political liberties or even lead to deeper political change. But since then, a sturdy consensus has

emerged among scholars like Anthony Spires, Jessica Teets, and Daniel Mattingly, who have developed sophisticated and convincing arguments that under the Chinese authoritarian regime, organised civil society works to strengthen the Party and the State. When we are theorising these things, it is important to remember that just because something *did not* happen does not mean it *could not have* happened, although that might sound naive in the context of the Party-State as it has developed under Xi, who has banned the very concept of civil society; you are not allowed to use it, print it, or debate it. Obviously, there is a lot of pessimism about Chinese civil society's development today. What is your view?

WW: The comparative perspective you touched on is important. Across different political systems you will find plenty in common. On the question of inevitability, in any sector, in its initial period of growth, there will be a lot that is unregulated, does not need to meet imposed standards, and might be characterised by vitality, flexibility, and possibilities. But we need to think about the role the Chinese system plays in the sector's growth process. I lean toward the view that particular elements of that system have been permeating deeply into the process of introducing standards, regulations, indicators, and the like. Views may differ as to the extent and nature of the influence, but that influence is there; scholars like Kang Xiaoguang and Zhu Jiangang have done a lot to explore this.

But if we change the timeframe in question then the notion of inevitability and possibility might seem very different. For example, if you take the start of Reform and Opening in the late 1970s through most of the 1980s, the possibility of a vibrant civil society was a whole different story. China found itself at a crossroads in the 1980s. After Tiananmen, the path-dependency of the direction of development became much clearer.

There is a lot we can observe in terms of how the political system has affected the development of organised civil society. This across-the-board institutionalisation might be described by the Party-State as the 'modernisation of the governance system and capacity' [国家治理体系和治理能力现代化]. We have to be careful not to simply conflate development with modernisation or institutionalisation with improvement.

In examining civil society's development in this context, it is important to try to observe developments comprehensively rather than thinking about only one subset of institutions. There are a lot of systems and institutions being built up, like everything that goes along with government contracting of NGO services, and regulating NGO registration, foreign NGOs, and charity, and then there are the major 'political drives' like the heavily politicised poverty alleviation campaign. If you take these together, you arrive at a very different impression to the one you would get if you were just looking at one subsector.

But at the same time, those involved in organised civil society's continued development—the individuals, the NGOs, and the different government departments and staff—are not part of some monolith, swept up together by the structures, and incapable of doing anything. To some degree, they all have agency and space to make choices.

On the question of optimism or pessimism, it depends on the ideal state in the observer's mind. For many, a pluralistic, democratising civil society is the ideal state. If we adopt this perspective, the answer to your question would be that I am pessimistic. But it is important to point out when saying this that we should never overlook agency.

Within an overall state of pessimism, it remains clear that there are still signs for optimism. Of course, the hope is that China can become more democratic, develop rule of law, and have less concentration of power, but even if fundamental change to this basic framework is incredibly difficult, at the level of individual humans and their wellbeing there is a huge difference between taking action and not; between trying and giving up. In this sense, there is still a lot that NGOs can do. As long as NGOs and individuals continue to seek those spaces that they can use then they can bring positive change even within the context of the present system.

It is important that we do not forget that this richness and possibility existed. As you said, just because something did not happen does not mean the possibility was not really there. Today it is easy to misinterpret the failure of those possibilities to generate deeper change as proof that the possibility itself was always a mirage. If anything, such a misinterpretation stifles imagination, does no justice to those pioneers, and reinforces an overestimation of the cohesion and continuity of the system itself. ■

Translated by Holly SNAPE.

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.06.01.2021.07