

# Then and Now

## Looking Back and Imagining the Future of Chinese Civil Society

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'Prairie fires can't consume them completely,  
a spring breeze blows and again they rise'  
*Grass*, Bai Juyi, c.787, cited by Ministry of Civil  
Affairs Comrade in Charge, 2021

In the spring of this year, China's central authorities issued a policy that seeks to change norms of China's civil society that have been established over the past thirty years. At a moment that portends a closing of space for unregistered NGOs and a possible shift in the ways NGOs can emerge, evolve, and cooperate with other social and state entities, we thought it important to look back to revisit the development of China's civil society over the past decades. Not only is this exercise important in enabling us to understand the shifts now taking place, but it also reminds us of the possibilities that once were, and the possible futures that may be. With this issue we wanted to bring together practitioners, whose experience of running or participating in organisations and initiatives is invaluable both in and of itself but also in helping us to reflect. We sought to bring their insights together with those of scholars who also have a deep interest, and often practical experience, in China's organised civil society, studying its different aspects and dynamics. We hoped, too, to capture something of the vibrant diversity of organised civil society during its early (re-)emergence in the 1990s and to remember, as best we could, some of the early pioneers and possibilities.

The special section of this issue includes eleven essays. **Holly Snape** opens the section with an analysis of the latest policies put forward by the Chinese Government with the declared aim of 'cleansing the social organisation ecological space'.

She then engages **Wang Weinan** in a conversation on the importance of adopting an oral history approach to track the development of nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) in China. **Kang Yi** reflects on the changes that have occurred within China's civil society since the Sichuan earthquake of 2008, a tragedy that triggered a massive societal mobilisation that was then hailed as a new dawn for Chinese NGOs. **Zhou Jian** and **Tian Hui** share their thoughts on the development of the 'public benefit' (公益) sector over the years as it has become increasingly focused on efficiency and competitiveness (市场化), and on scaling up (规模化), as well as their experiences in poverty alleviation and rural development. **Shixin Huang** traces the formation and evolution of the sector of Chinese civil society working on issues related to disability from the late 1980s to today, proposing a periodisation in three stages shaped by both domestic and transnational forces of sociopolitical change. **Stephanie Yingyi Wang** offers a feminist political economic analysis of the development of Chinese urban-based LGBT activism since the 1990s, meditating on the gendered politics within LGBT activism and exploring the tension between LGBT groups' NGO-isation process in the context of transnational movements and the Party-State's attempts to eliminate organisations linked to the 'imperial West'. **Lu Jun** looks back to his time at the helm of the Beijing Yirenping Centre, one of the most remarkable grassroots NGOs to emerge in China during the Hu and Wen era, active in the field of anti-discrimination through an innovative mix of strategies. **Jude Howell** charts the twists and turns of China's labour NGOs since the mid-1990s, identifying three key stages in their growth. **Eva Pils** reconstructs the history of China's human rights lawyers, highlighting how their divisions today reflect our era's global human rights backlash. **Ying Wang** looks into the internationalisation of Chinese NGOs today, exploring the roots of the phenomenon, its potential, and the constraints that these organisations face when they decide to operate abroad. Finally, **Lawrence Deane** concludes the section on a note of relative optimism, arguing that the new policies of the Chinese Government are unlikely to put an end to organised efforts to work for change.

With this issue, we inaugurate a new section called ‘Global China Pulse’. This section includes essays that examine various facets of China’s international engagements and is published in collaboration with the **People’s Map of Global China**, a new project aimed at tracking China’s global footprint that we recently launched (<https://thepeoplesmap.net>). Here, you will find an essay by **Kelly Wanjing Chen** in which she draws from her fieldwork on the construction sites of the trans-Laos railway to investigate China’s ‘labour puzzle’, that is the question of why China’s infrastructural expansion in some countries continues to demonstrate overwhelming reliance on labour sourced from home. **Mark Grimsditch** delves into Chinese investment in Cambodia’s energy sector, arguing the energy investment priorities of Chinese companies and banks, along with the development decisions of the Cambodian Government, in the long term could set back industrial upgrading, diversification, and job creation, ultimately harming Cambodia’s economy. Finally, **Edmund Downie** takes China’s opium replacement planting program in northern Myanmar as a case study to reflect on the challenges that Chinese small and medium enterprises face when they decide to operate abroad.

The issue opens with an op-ed by **Hong Zhang** that tackles the recent debates on whether China’s Belt and Road Initiative is slowing down. In the China Columns section, **Kailing Xie** and **Yunyun Zhou** looks into the recent proliferation in China’s mass media of state-sponsored TV series that promote the Communist Party’s image as a national saviour and citizens’ patriotic sentiment in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. **Jin Xianan** and **Ni Leiyun** reflect on their experiences as immigrant anti-racist activists in the United Kingdom during the pandemic. **Camille Boullenois** considers how, over the past four decades, relations between bosses and workers in private enterprises in rural China have become increasingly distant and impersonal, with stricter monitoring and control of the labour process, leading to a crystallisation of the identities of ‘bosses’ and ‘workers’ and supplanting the feelings of commonality and homogeneity

among villagers. Finally, **Ling Li** and **Teng Biao** discuss former US President Donald Trum’s appeal to Chinese liberals.

We conclude the issue with three conversations about recently published books. **Darren Byler** interviews **David Tobin** about his *Securing China’s Northwest Frontier*, **Andrea Enrico Pia** and **Harriet Evans** discuss her *Beijing from Below*, and **Zeng Jinyan** has a discussion with **Sebastian Veg** about his *Minjian: The Rise of China’s Grassroots Intellectuals*. These are followed by a heartfelt tribute by **Annie Luman Ren** to the late scholar **Daniel Kane**, who passed away in April 2021. ■

The Editors

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