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978-1-107-02131-0 - Social Organizations and the Authoritarian State in China

Timothy Hildebrandt

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Social Organizations and the Authoritarian State in China

Received wisdom suggests that social organizations (such as nongovernmental organizations, NGOs) have the power to upend the political status quo. However, in many authoritarian contexts, such as China, NGO emergence has not resulted in this expected regime change. In this book, Timothy Hildebrandt shows how NGOs adapt to the changing interests of central and local governments, working in service of the state to address social problems. In doing so, the nature of NGO emergence in China effectively strengthens the state, rather than weakens it.

This book offers a groundbreaking comparative analysis of Chinese social organizations across the country in three different issue areas: environmental protection, HIV/AIDS prevention, and gay and lesbian rights. It suggests a new way of thinking about state-society relations in authoritarian countries, one that is distinctly co-dependent in nature: governments require the assistance of NGOs to govern, whereas NGOs need governments to extend political, economic, and personal opportunities to exist.

Timothy Hildebrandt is Lecturer in Chinese Politics at King's College London. His research has been published in numerous journals, including *The China Quarterly*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, *Review of International Studies*, and *Foreign Policy Analysis*. He has also adapted his work for more general audiences, in forums such as *South China Morning Post*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and *Chicago Tribune*, and in several policy-oriented publications. He previously taught at the University of Southern California (USC) and held postdoctoral fellowships at USC's U.S.-China Institute and the Center for Asian Democracy at the University of Louisville. Prior to receiving his Ph.D. in political science at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, he was on staff at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC, serving as managing editor of the Center's annual policy journal *China Environment Series*.

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Preface and Acknowledgments

For all of the attention that has been paid to social organizations – and the research conducted on them – our understanding has still been significantly limited by the persistent assumptions surrounding the effect of nongovernmental organization (NGO) emergence, the internal orientation of the organizations, and the relations they have with states. In the West, we have been conditioned to see the rise of NGOs in fairly stark, axiomatic terms. The presence of NGOs is thought to be an important indicator of civil society development. And, with a robust civil society, political change is thought to soon follow. Part of the logic at work is that NGOs and civil society are frequently seen to hold governments accountable.

In authoritarian contexts, in which the government is *not* accountable to its citizenry (at least in an electoral sense), we presume these accountability-seeking organizations to be oppositional to the state. Any reasonable observer would then assume that, given their druthers, an authoritarian government would not allow such oppositional groups to exist at all. Perhaps, then, it makes sense to first assume that NGOs would not exist in a place like China. And, to the extent that they do appear in the country, we might best assume these organizations to not be authentic, “real” NGOs. This would, of course, be one way of explaining why the political change that many expect to come from the emergence of NGOs has not occurred in China. But it would not be a satisfying explanation.

Along with these assumed effects of social organization emergence, NGOs themselves are frequently painted with a crude, broad brush. They are, in many senses, presented as a caricature: these organizations are presumed to be led by idealistic individuals who are singular in their focus; they will stop at nothing to do their activities, even if it means putting their organizational health and personal safety at risk; NGO leaders are, perhaps, crazy with passion. Indeed, there is a persistent romanticizing of civil society in both academic

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literature and the popular imagination. But casting such a romantic spotlight on these organizations often occurs at the cost of putting them, and the nature of their emergence, under a microscope.

Much of what we understand about NGOs is built on a deep bed of often misleading assumptions, which, when questioned, should make us revisit many of the beliefs and expectations that we have about the relationship of NGOs and governments. The goal of this book is to challenge these assumptions and, in doing so, to uncover new truths and understandings of social organizations and the state. To be clear, deromanticizing NGOs is not akin to denigrating them or the work they do. Quite the contrary. I was motivated to write this book in part because I stand in awe of Chinese social organizations that have continued to persist despite the difficulties they face. I wanted to learn *how* they negotiate narrow political, economic, and personal opportunities. I wanted to understand the effect that their adaptations and actions might have on their organizational future, and that of the regime.

A word on the layout of the book: consumers (and producers) of social science research familiar with the case study approach are usually accustomed to finding each of the cases treated separately in chapters. This book is different. Rather than examine each issue area in its own chapter, I offer a truly comparative study, presenting the three issue areas alongside each other throughout the book. I was purposeful in making this choice. This book is about more than just three different types of social organizations in China. It is about the complex environment within which NGOs must operate in China and the changing face of state–society relations in authoritarian contexts. As such, the book is organized along a new analytical framework that dissects the opportunity structure for social organizations into three discrete, but often mutually constitutive parts: political, economic, and personal opportunities.

No single-authored book is a truly independent exercise. I owe tremendous gratitude to many individuals at all stages throughout this long process. The origins of this book can be traced back to my time at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and the policy-oriented research I conducted while on staff at the Center's China Environment Forum and Asia Program. I am indebted to the wise counsel of my former colleagues at the Wilson Center, in particular, Geoffrey Dabelko, Robert Hathaway, Wilson Lee, and Phillipa Strum. Jennifer Turner is one of the trailblazers in the study of environmental issues in China. She was, and continues to be, a fantastic mentor, supporter, and friend. This research was also made possible by some key relationships built during my time in Washington, DC: Max Li, Lin Gu, Ma Jun, Wen Bo, and Humphrey Wou.

I could not have asked for a better advisor than Melanie Manion at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She has been patient and supportive throughout my career, offering invaluable insights at each stage of my research. In holding me to the highest of standards, she has effectively taught me to never accept anything less. Edward Friedman has always been one of my biggest advocates.

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He has long supported my goal of speaking to both academic and policy communities and encouraged me to continue my conversations with scholars in various fields of study. Leigh Payne introduced me to the study of social movements and contentious politics and has long encouraged my effort to draw from and speak to literatures in these areas. Aseema Sinha provided valuable assistance in making my research more applicable to contexts outside of China, whereas Yongming Zhou offered great advice for my research from a non-political science perspective. Other faculty members at Wisconsin offered helpful insights in the early stages of my graduate career: Paul Hutchcroft, Helen Kinsella, David Leheny, and Jon Pevehouse. I am grateful to several scholars at other institutions as well: Michael Chambers, Bruce Dickson, Ching Kwan Lee, Anthony Spires, Daniela Stockmann, Fengshi Wu, and Guobin Yang.

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In China, I am grateful to my official sponsors: the Kunming Institute of Botany, the Kunming Institute of Zoology, and the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Lengthy field research can often be a lonely experience. However, my research year was made far more pleasurable and my sanity was maintained by the support of old and new friends in China: Ben Blanchard, Eric Ho, Stephanie Jensen, Kaarin Lindsay-Dynon, and Michael Pignatello. The support and love of my oldest friends, Adam Davis and Rachel Scepanski, made China feel even more like a second home. I was fortunate to share my time in the field with other great China scholars as well, namely Jonathan Hassid and Rachel Stern.

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This book would not have been possible were it not for the many informants who agreed to share with me their experiences and insights into social organizations. Because of the sensitivity of the issues addressed in this book and to ensure that no harm comes to these informants for having spoken with me, their identities and those of their organizations remain confidential. Although I cannot list their names here, I owe them tremendous gratitude.

The preparation of this book benefited tremendously from support provided by two postdoctoral fellowships, first at the Center for Asian Democracy at the University of Louisville, and then at the U.S.-China Institute at the University of Southern California. I am very grateful for the support and encouragement of my colleagues at USC, including Linda Cole, Clay Dube, Robert English, Daniel Lynch, and Stanley Rosen. My time in Los Angeles was made more productive and enjoyable by the support and love of great friends: Henry Adams, Glen Lakin, Damien Lu, Duncan Millership, Simon Thomas, and Buckley White.

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Timothy Hildebrandt
London, September 2012

Abbreviations

AIDS	Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
CDC	Centers for Disease Control
EPB	Environmental Protection Bureau
GONGO	Government-organized nongovernmental organizations
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus
LGBT	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/sexual
MoCA	Ministry of Civil Affairs
MOH	Ministry of Health
MSM	Men who have sex with men
NGO	Nongovernmental organization
PRC	People’s Republic of China
PSB	Public Security Bureau
SARS	Severe acute respiratory syndrome
SEPA	State Environmental Protection Administration
USAID	United States Agency for International Development