

Self-Limiting Organizations and Codependent State–Society Relations

Environmental, HIV/AIDS, and Gay and Lesbian NGOs in China

In the past decade, social organizations have quickly sprouted in China, as one observer notes, like “bamboo shoots after a rainstorm” (Lu 2003: 55). The growth of the country’s nongovernmental organization (NGO) sector has puzzled many observers, due in part to expectations that the emergence of civil society groups will – sooner or later – hasten political reform and perhaps even lead to regime change.¹ Yet, despite the emergence and development of these groups, the broader political status quo has not changed: the one-party state remains, further proof of its resiliency. To explain the gap between prior assumptions and the present reality, some China scholars have called for more patience, suggesting that these groups will play the role of change agent in due time. They argue that social organizations have helped reduce the influence of the state on society and still represent an important antecedent to democratization (Ma 2005; Saich 2000; White 1993; Yang 2005). However, others explain the current situation as evidence that Chinese NGOs lack autonomy, serve as simply another arm of the government, and are unable to challenge the authority of the state as similar organizations in other polities do (Alagappa 2004; Unger and Chan 1995; Wu 2004).

Although both positions have merit, the existing state of the conversation about social organizations in China leads us to miss an important dynamic: debates over the effect of NGOs on political change do not adequately capture the complex relationship between the state and society, nor do they account for the complicated political and economic environment within which these groups operate. Chinese social organizations are neither wholly autonomous nor completely bound by state control. They are granted enough space to meet their own, often narrowly defined goals, but not so much autonomy that they

¹ In this book, I use the term social organization, group, and NGO interchangeably.

might challenge the government or otherwise undercut state interests. Social organizations work to further their own goals; at the same time, they often work to assist the government in implementing its policies. In this respect, the relationship between the authoritarian state and society might be less zero-sum than previously suggested (e.g., Stepan 1990); it might be best described as codependent.

The literature covering the main debates on NGOs in China, and in other authoritarian polities, undersell the actions of these organizations and treat their very existence as little more than an axiomatic means to another end (e.g., political change). *Social Organizations and the Authoritarian State in China* is different. It is less interested in the potential far-reaching political outcomes of the existence of these groups (reform or regime change). It is neither a descriptive study of the activities of Chinese NGOs nor an analysis of these groups' abilities to meet larger goals, which for the issue areas in this study might include protecting the environment, stopping the spread of HIV/AIDS, or extending more rights to lesbians and gays. Rather, it is a study of survival, a sort of playbook for how social organizations forge their existence, an issue that has only recently begun to be explored by China scholars (Ho and Edmonds 2008: 5).

Questions about the larger and lasting effect of social organizations are both interesting and important. However, this book begins from the belief that answers to such questions must be informed by a more complete understanding of the context within which social organizations have formed in China. To do so, it is necessary to examine how these organizations adapt to complex and dynamic political and economic environments. Recognizing that past studies of social organizations lack theories to explain the adaptive nature of these groups in an authoritarian context, this book explores several key questions: How do Chinese social organizations deal with the state? How do they adapt to narrow opportunity structures? How strong are they, and what is the likelihood that they will survive over the long term? Finally, what do these organizations mean for broader political outcomes in China?

To answer these questions, I compare social organizations in three issue areas, across diverse geographic regions: groups engaged in environmental protection-related activities, those devoted to addressing the growing problem of HIV/AIDS, and organizations that work to improve the lives of gays and lesbians. This multicase study enables me to explain variations in how organizations adapt to the overall opportunity structure in order to emerge and thrive. The central argument of this book is that Chinese NGOs have made a series of strategic adaptations in order to take advantage of the limited opportunities presented to them. But the adaptations each organization makes are also dependent on local conditions, which differ by issue area, administrative region, and even time. Although these adaptations afford groups important benefits necessary for success in the short term, they also carry with them costs that can make longer-term sustainability difficult.

Given the political environment in China, this book understands and appreciates the impact that the state has on society; actual state policies are an important factor to bring into the analysis. However, as the perspective here is that of social organizations, I devote considerable attention to social actors' perceptions and understanding of the state and its policies. Furthermore, because social organizations interact with the state at various levels, this study does not conceive of the state as a unitary actor: as implementation of state policies varies across areas and levels of government, I capture perceptions on various levels. Two related hypotheses, formulated from preliminary research on environmental groups in China, guided my investigation. First, groups are allowed to emerge and exist to the extent that they adapt to state policy. In other words, groups are given most latitude when they are engaged in work that conforms to the expressed needs and interests of the state. Second, to pursue their respective interests, social organizations display self-limiting behavior, focusing on narrow goals; they are reform-minded but avoid actions that might be seen as threatening to the state.

The research for this book was designed to explain the relationship of social organizations and the state; the dependent variable of primary interest is measured by an NGO's interpretation of state reaction, inferring success or failure to adapt based on the reaction. I observed group behavior by examining several different variables: motivations, strategies, goals, and other organizational features. Given the hypotheses guiding this research, the key independent variable, however, is how well the groups' work fits into the state's goals. I expected variation within cases – that is, within the same issue area – and across them, depending on the degree to which the groups adapt to perceived state goals and policies. For example, the Chinese government has been vocal about its desire to resolve the country's environmental problems. We might, therefore, expect environmental groups to be given relatively more autonomy to do their work. HIV/AIDS groups (along with lesbian and gay organizations), at first glance, face a less hospitable political environment. Although the central government has begun to address the growing health problem of HIV/AIDS, some officials at some local and provincial levels have been less willing to implement policy changes and allow social organizations to tackle the issue. Such variation may not exist simply across issue areas. Even within the issue areas under examination, not all groups are given the same autonomy or latitude to do their work. In the environmental sector, activists in certain geographic areas still encounter occasional – and sometimes brutal – government repression.

Borrowing insights from social movement literatures, I argue that social organizations are affected most by the opportunity structure. To gain more analytical leverage to explain the strength and long-term viability of social organizations, I disaggregate the opportunity structure into three distinct but complementary parts: *political opportunities*, government policies that directly (or indirectly) open or close space for organizations; *economic opportunities*, funding sources that flow from domestic or international donors, whether

governmental or nongovernmental; and *personal opportunities*, the importance of individual organization leaders in groups' growth and the ties they maintain with individual government officials. This three-part articulation of the opportunity structure represents the context within which Chinese social organizations must operate. By better defining this context, I can also better explain how leaders adapt to these opportunities. Understanding the actions that NGO leaders take to adapt to the opportunity structure is crucial to explain the role they play in governance and, as I ultimately argue, the dismal prospects for their long-term viability, as well as the resilience of the authoritarian regime. I find that, on the whole, groups are not circumscribed directly by the state through repression. Rather, it is the adaptations of the social organization leaders to the opportunity structure that impede their progress and threaten their long-term viability.

Although drawing primary attention to NGOs (and their leaders) is important to fully understand societal agency in state–society relations, I also am mindful to avoid some potential pitfalls associated with doing so. For instance, many studies of NGOs contain a strong normative bias, which often makes analyses of them misleading and inaccurate. Social organization leaders are commonly assumed to be altruistic, high-minded, enlightened, and idealistic. To understand how they navigate political space – and to appreciate the role that political, economic, and personal factors play – I avoid romanticizing NGOs and those who lead them. Leaders of NGOs in China, as elsewhere, are understood here as strategic, opportunity-driven actors. Nongovernmental organizations are made up of *real*, fallible people, who have unique problems and individual, selfish interests.² This book attempts neither to sanctify nor demonize NGOs, but to normalize them.

Furthermore, this book is more about the frequent *routine* relationships between state and society and less interested in the rare instances of repression. In this, the research deviates from many other studies of Chinese social organizations. Previous attention to NGOs in China, vignette-driven popular media accounts in particular, have paid closest attention to the most extreme cases, in which activists face the kind of brutal repression that one might expect in the Chinese authoritarian polity. In offering a more systematic, multicase, larger *N* study, this book intends to correct inaccurate understandings of how the entirety of civil society operates in China, a misunderstanding that comes from focusing only on repressed groups. This book is, in essence, a profile in success. It analyzes organizations that, by virtue of their specific issue areas, have the potential to provide benefit to the state and have been able to effectively adapt to the opportunity structure and avoid many forms of negative state response.

Nonetheless, this book still captures a sense of real political struggle, though not a struggle in the sense that social actors are pitted against the state and

² The romanticization of NGOs is pervasive throughout academic and policymaking communities such that some scholars have faced push-back from attempts to use social movement and NGO theoretical frameworks to explain groups not as broadly social-minded, such as Al Qaeda.

vice-versa. Instead, it sheds light on how social actors struggle to make sense of the state and the adaptations necessary to deal with government and the opportunity structures it has created. It shows how these structures often change and, thus, that strategic limitation itself is in flux. Understanding the complexity of this state–society interaction puts me in a better place to speculate about the future of social organizations and, ultimately, of civil society in China.

Through my investigation, I conclude that whereas increasing in number and widening in focus, Chinese social organizations are not well institutionalized. These organizations and the people who lead them are motivated and impacted by economic factors, as well as by political ones. Despite the lack of wide-ranging repression, I cannot offer a sanguine outlook for NGOs in particular or civil society in general. The very nature of the opportunity structures can provide the space to allow for initial emergence and short-term success, but the adaptations necessary for leaders to take advantage of these opportunities create weak organizations ill-suited to continue over the long term. Even though the state has not purposely created the structure in order to constrain groups through coercive means, the result might well be just as effective. I also find evidence of a chilling effect among NGO leaders: even if we could objectively fault the government for failures of some social organizations, the leaders of NGOs in China do not always see it that way. Rather, they tend to blame other civil society group leaders (and sometimes international NGOs) as the primary reason for their plight. Furthermore, because these organizations have usually forged a “harmonious” existence by acting in the service of the state, their emergence does not herald the birth of a strong, independent civil society that could challenge the authoritarian regime. In fact, the better they do their work, the more likely they are to eliminate problems that, if unresolved, could undermine the regime. In this way, the emergence of Chinese social organizations has the more likely (and surprising) effect of helping the authoritarian state persist.

The remainder of this introduction discusses the literatures from which this book draws and contributes. After exploring the dominant theoretical paradigm in which most studies of NGOs are conducted – civil society literatures – it engages the corporatist literature and then social movement literatures. In the end, I suggest a more unified theoretical approach to explain social organizations and the state in China. Next, I propose a new conceptual framework of state–society interaction in authoritarian polities through which I define the kinds of groups studied in this book and toward which I intend to generalize; I also introduce the primary analytical framework through which I examine these organizations. Finally, the introduction offers an overview of case selection and research design and previews the book’s chapters.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

Current understandings of NGOs in China have been strongly shaped by studies of environmental organizations, one of the three issue areas featured in this

book (Cooper 2006; Ewoh and Rollins 2011; Hildebrandt and Turner 2009; Ho 2001; Mertha 2008; Ru and Ortolano 2009; Schwartz 2004; Tang and Zhan 2008; Teets 2009; Xie 2009; Yang 2005). The dominance of these “green groups” in the literature on NGOs in China is not surprising, given that these organizations are the oldest, thought to be the most successful, and are usually the most accessible to researchers.³ As with the work on environmental NGOs in other parts of the world (Dalton 1994; Princen and Finger 1994; Wapner 1995), most of these studies have been focused on whether these organizations will be able to affect political change.⁴ The question of primary interest for most studies of NGOs in China has driven (or, alternatively, been driven by) the choice of theoretical frame.

In studying social organizations, political scientists frequently rely on insights from civil society literatures, which usually assume that social actors have a contentious or counterbalancing relationship with the state (Cohen and Arato 1992; Gellner 1984) and that the societal activity it explains will lead to political change (e.g., Bermeo and Nord 2000; Keane 1998; Putnam 1993). The most dominant literatures maintain that social organizations are a challenge to authoritarianism by increasing political participation (especially among marginalized populations) (Silliman and Nobel 1998) and keeping state power in check (Clarke 1998), and are thus a fundamental source of democratization (Diamond 1994). Most civil society scholars see social organizations – and NGOs in particular – from a decidedly liberal perspective, maintaining that democracy requires this autonomous civil society to balance a strong state and represent the myriad interests within society. But although civil society literatures of today are well suited to explaining change, they are less adept at describing stability. This might explain why studies of social movements in strong and *persistent* authoritarian regimes (like China’s) are scarce.

Although research on social organizations in China is also centered on the concept of civil society, there is widespread recognition that civil society may be different in this political context. China’s civil society is described as highly regulated (Baum and Shevchenko 1999), limited by “Asian characteristics” (Madsen 1993), and usually less confrontational than in other contexts (Liu 1996; Ogden 2002). Many note that the state must be taken into consideration when using the concept of civil society (Chamberlain 1993; Nevitt 1996;

³ Because HIV/AIDS groups are considerably newer than environmental NGOs, far fewer studies have focused on this issue area. Still, notable exceptions include Kaufman (2009) and Wu (2011). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) activism has been virtually ignored by political scientists; there are apparently no studies yet published on NGOs in this sector.

⁴ It is important to note that much of this early work on environmental NGOs in China was primarily descriptive in nature. To the extent that research has been more analytical, most has focused only on environmental NGOs, sometimes featuring case studies of individual groups; systematic, large-scale studies of multiple issue areas have not been completed. Thus, the generalizations about Chinese NGOs that do exist have been drawn from understandings of organizations in this one issue area rather than several.

Zhou 1993); for some it is a mix of purposeful state sponsorship and grassroots activities (Morton 2005). But Saich (2000) warns that too much attention on the state ignores the mechanisms through which groups work around it. Despite broadened definitions, many of these scholars still conclude that civil society will eventually lead to political transition (Cooper 2006). And, although civil society might not bring democracy to China, civil liberties are sure to increase because of the very existence of these social organizations (Morton 2005).

Work in other political contexts problematized the link between civil society and political change. The way social organizations affect change differs across context and time; the development of a civil society does not always lead to democratization or some other marked political change. Civil society groups are not always “civil” (Payne 2000), nor are they always independent enough from the political regime to be a force for political change (Ottaway and Carothers 2000). Nongovernmental organizations can legitimize the status quo and not always challenge it (Mercer 2002). Groups that attempt to exist in an authoritarian regime moderate their activities lest they be repressed (Gershman and Allen 2006; Ottaway and Carothers 2000). In Vietnam, for example, the growth of social organizations has not resulted in a mobilization of broad-based civil society, largely because these groups continue to be urban and elite-based, with strong connections to the state (Gray 1999). To account for this variation, Foley and Edwards (1996) offer a modified conceptualization of civil society. They suggest that certain types of groups can actually stabilize and sustain nondemocratic regimes; they call this Civil Society I and juxtapose it with Civil Society II, which operates more in opposition and less in concert with the state.

Recent studies on China point to similar fundamental problems with traditional assumptions of civil society and political change. An increase in the number of interest groups could weaken the state, but it does not necessarily benefit society as a whole (Ogden 2002). Alternatively, single-issue NGOs might marginalize the political intervention of social organizations (Beja 2006) and meet the specific needs of the state, such that it can maintain its monopoly of power (Ding 2001). These perspectives are consistent with Marxist theories that suggest states permeate civil society in order to consolidate power, thus making the two indistinguishable (Gramsci 1971: 238). Discontent with the civil society literatures has led some scholars to simply abandon it altogether. Zhou argues that the common strategy of “identifying discrete elements of civil society and then simply adding them up” does not adequately capture the existence or nature of civil society (Zhou 1999: 7).

As this discussion suggests, civil society literatures remain diverse. Multiple civil society perspectives exist, each having emerged from unique historical and political contexts: the dominant literature today, one that is interested primarily in the democratizing effect of civil society, has been shaped by the role of civil society organizations in democratizing movements throughout

Latin America and Eastern Europe.⁵ Still, civil society literatures, and the popularity of them in explaining NGOs, cast a long shadow; conventional wisdom on social organizations has been driven by some of the same key questions, even with modifications made to the framework. Perhaps most problematic for this book, civil society literatures make assumptions about what society wants and what its goals are: actors seek to simultaneously engage in their activities, exist indefinitely, and, in the long term, serve as a force for political reform and change. However, these goals are rarely complementary in China.

It is not that civil society literatures are completely ill-suited to the study of state–society relations. Rather, they are interested in a different research question, namely: how does society affect political change? In this respect, civil society literature has done us a great service by making us account for the role of society. I, too, focus my research on society, but my question is different. Whereas most civil society literatures are interested in the prospect of change in the future, I seek to explain the status quo.

To understand social organizations in an authoritarian context, corporatism literature provides a better theoretical starting point in that it offers a descriptive model of the state–society interaction, paying particular attention to the state’s role in creating and managing the relationship. Schmitter (1974: 93–4) calls corporatism “a system of interest representation” wherein organizations are given “representational monopoly within their respective categories in exchange for observing certain controls on their selection of leaders and articulation of demands and supports.” Corporatist insights have been increasingly adopted to explain the negotiated, highly structured relationship between the state and society in China. Unger and Chan (1995, 2008) argue that, under Chinese corporatism, the state grants some autonomy to social organizations with the understanding that they will moderate their demands and activities in accordance with government wishes. Gallagher (2004: 421) more recently employed the concept in explaining how the state controls groups through “mutual penetration, converging interests, and co-optation” rather than repression of coercive methods. For politics like China, the establishment of such corporatist arrangements should not be entirely surprising: Leninist parties often adopt more inclusive practices in relation to society as they move from revolutionary to developmental goals (Jowitt 1992).

Although popular, there are serious limitations to the corporatist paradigm in the China context. Gallagher (2004: 422) argues that the idea of corporatism is too static and does not account well for change. Because corporatism is state-centered, with a keen eye on “top-down control” (Unger and Chan 1995: 31), it undersells the actions of individuals and organizations, as well as downplays the likelihood and importance of variation among them. In addition, most corporatist literature fails to properly disaggregate the state enough to show

⁵ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this important point.

how state–society arrangements in China are not homogenous, but vary across specific issue areas and geographic regions.⁶ It tends to ignore the divisions that are common within any corporate entity, which can lead to competition for scarce resources (Oi 1992); this occurs both among individual leaders for economic resources and also government officials themselves. In one of the earliest efforts to use the term in explaining state–society relations in China, Oi (1992) was correct to disaggregate the state and accommodate for variation. Another significant deficiency is the literature’s inattention to the society side of the arrangement and an overall neglect of agency (however constraining the overall structure may be for social organizations). Although corporatism is well suited to explain the constraints of the political opportunity structure, it fails to show how society adapts to the opportunities offered by this corporatist relationship.

Social movement literatures may provide better leverage to analyze the interaction of the state and social organizations. Like corporatism, social movement literatures help us capture the environment within which the movements must operate, while also downplaying any assumed outcome, as is common in the civil society paradigm. However, unlike the more state-centric corporatist paradigm, social movement literatures place greater emphasis on how the motivations and actions of social actors help ensure success for organizations.

Although organizations in the issue areas featured in this book are commonly explored within the “new social movement” framework,⁷ I draw primarily on the rational school of political process literatures. This strand grew out of U.S.-based mobilizations in the 1960s and a subsequent acknowledgment that both societal and state actors are rational, reasonably trying to pursue their goals. Rational approaches also remind us that the presence of social problems does

⁶ Although I make explicit efforts to disaggregate the state in this book to account for important regional and issue area variation, I am also mindful of the warning that Perry (1994) offers in regards to studies of state–society relations in China, that too much disaggregation can run the risk of losing sight of larger patterns throughout the country.

⁷ These movements are said to transcend traditional class distinctions (Melucci 1980), often dealing with intensely personal and intimate aspects of human life (Larana, Johnston, and Gusfield 1994). Although other social movements in nondemocratic polities are seen as contentious and revolutionary (Goldstone 1998; Rucht 1996; Tarrow 1998), new social movements (NSMs) avoid advocating for the abolition of current political and economic systems and are thus more reformed (Cohen 1985; Melucci 1980). Although demands are fewer, these movements are less willing to compromise them (Calhoun 1993). Environmental movements are the prototypical example of post-material mobilization (Carlisle and Smith 2005); surveys of groups in Western Europe and developing countries suggest that groups in both contexts are post-materialist, concerned with quality-of-life issues above all else (Dalton 1994; Peritore 1999). However, organizations in the NSM paradigm also emerge in areas with decreasing levels of income, where material concerns still reign (Calhoun 1993; Cohen 1985; Drucker 1996; Goodin 1992; Hassler 2006; Pakulski and Crook 1998; Rootes 2004; Talshir 2004). Mobilization is not a response to rising demands, but due to an “urgency to defend existing needs” (Offe 1985: 843). Indeed, environmental degradation can have real material implications, with industrial pollution or inadequate water resources hurting livelihoods and impacting human health.

not automatically produce collective action.⁸ One major variant of the rationalist literature – resource mobilization – links social movement emergence and success to the presence of adequate financial and human resources. Resource mobilization has emphasized the variability of economic resources in the emergence. It contends that motivation to action is not enough for mobilization. Groups depend on outside, external resources to emerge and sustain themselves (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Grievances might be secondary to financial resources in describing why groups emerge and thrive (Jenkins and Perrow 1977; Oberschall 1978; Tilly 1978).

Another crucial ingredient in explaining mobilization – and the other major focus of these literatures – is the emergence of a more favorable political context, often conceived of as an expansion of political opportunities (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996). This political process approach traditionally assumes that opportunities arise when state repression declines, political access increases, and the political environment becomes friendlier (McAdam 1998). The approach has been used primarily to explain the situation in newly democratized or open political structures. To this extent, a traditional understanding of political opportunities may not be helpful for explaining social organizations in China, although the general insights are still applicable to even nondemocratic polities.

Because the state plays a key role in the story of Chinese social organizations, a more state-centric opportunity structure is necessary to understand the relationship of state and society. Political opportunities in the China case are best understood not as Goldstone's (1980) "big opportunity," in which an entire state system breaks down, but rather as Kingdon's (1984) "policy window." The state can narrow opportunities as a "control agent" or widen them as a "facilitator" (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1988). Tarrow's (1996) conceptualization of "cross-sectional statism" is particularly germane: concerned with maintaining the status quo and preserving power, states shape opportunities in the interest of their own survival. In China, political opportunities have not arisen as a result of a more inclusive state or in the wake of a failed one. Instead, they have emerged because the state has chosen to become more responsive to certain pressing social problems. As part of its broader effort to withdraw the state from its larger role in society – dubbed "small state, big society" – Beijing has decided that non-state actors are best suited to solve these problems,

⁸ Rationalist literature does, however, tend to assume that movements arise out of conflicts. An important clarification is needed here. Conflicts should not necessarily be equated with groups employing antagonistic postures or tactics. As I explain later, it is important to understand that antagonistic tactics generally are not presumed effective by the social actors in this study. As a result of this orientation, groups like those featured in this book that do not operate in opposition to the state are often excluded from discussions of social movements and civil society. However, I suggest that conflicts can be thought of differently: as the presence of problems that demand action. In these circumstances, social organizations can arise to help the state address pressing social problems.

provided they do not move beyond their particular issue area or deviate from an original set of narrow goals. To this end, Tarrow (1996) is correct in noting that neither full access nor absence of political opportunities results in the most successful (or greatest amount of) mobilization.

A common critique of the rationalist literature – and the notion of political opportunity structure, in particular – is that it discounts the importance of agency (Sell and Prakash 2004: 147). However, careful consideration of social actors' actions within the opportunity structure should help counter such criticism. Rather than ignoring agency, a more thorough political opportunities approach leads us to examine the ways in which actors navigate the political environment and deal with opportunities extended to them. Some work situated in the political opportunities paradigm has already gone in this direction. These studies have shown that, although the state is usually the primary broker of political opportunities, the social movement is in control of its destiny as well (McAdam 1996a). Movements can sometimes make their own opportunities (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). All social actors have to make choices given the political structure. In China, opportunities are few, and choices are more limited. Yet, the way in which these social actors adapt to the structure can mean wider or narrower opportunities. In other words, increased attention to individuals and examining individual agency does not require abandoning rationalist assumptions about social organizations in general or the political opportunity and resource mobilization literatures in particular.

The disaggregation of the overall opportunity structure into three distinct parts, as well as the systematic definition of each, is an attempt to answer other criticisms that political opportunity structures are underspecified, too broad, and all-consuming, as well as tautological (Goodwin and Jasper 1999). Political scientists should be particularly adept at responding to this line of critique. Our understanding of the political opportunity structure need not be *overly* structural. Moreover, what flows from the structure – success or failure of social organizations – need not be axiomatic or tautological. Along with corporatism, the notion of political opportunities helps us understand the context in which groups must operate. Given its attention to the actions taken by the state in creating opportunities for social movement emergence, the political opportunity literature may appear indistinguishable from corporatism. However, the political opportunity literature is more attentive to society: whereas corporatism is more interested in the benefits of these arrangements to the state, the political opportunities literature allows us to focus more on the benefits of these arrangements to society. Clearly, it is necessary to draw from and build on all of these literatures.

1.1.1 A Unified Theoretical Framework: Society-Sensitive, Disaggregated Corporatism

Different theoretical frames help answer different kinds of questions. Because this book seeks to answer many kinds of questions, it is necessary to draw on

many of the insights discussed earlier. The theoretical framework used in this book – *a society-sensitive, disaggregated corporatism* – represents a form of theoretical eclecticism. It underscores the value of arrangements between state and society, but disaggregates the state in order to properly understand differing arrangements (and interests) across various levels of government. Moreover, it draws a new focus on the importance of societal actors in these arrangements, mostly ignored by corporatist explanations. For this, the political opportunities literatures offer some help by showing us that opportunities are really only opportunities when they are properly taken advantage of by social actors. In other words, political opportunities are also of the social organizations' making, not just of the state's.

This framework, in response to common criticisms of most political opportunities literatures, offers a systematic definition of the opportunity structures. I also refine and contribute to both political opportunities and resource mobilization literatures by examining the long-term impacts of adaptations for short-term political opportunities. Finally, it helps understand the rational actions of gay and lesbian organizations previously assumed to be rare because of the identity-based nature of their mobilization and activities; contrary to the claims of some, the cost–benefit calculations of a rational actor are not only found “in the niches, even in niches within niches” (Eder 1985: 890) of this issue area.

When discussing personal opportunities (see Chapter 7), current corporatism perspectives are also less helpful, because an institutional bias is built into most understandings of corporatism, thereby giving scant attention to the decisions and actions of individual actors in both forging and sustaining these corporatist relationships (Molina and Rhodes 2002). Oi (1992: 110) reminds us that, even within a corporatist entity, diverse interests affect larger relationships and interactions within the structure. Therefore, I move the analysis down one level to the individual and draw on the concept of “embeddedness” (e.g., Granovetter 1985; Polanyi 1944) to show the costs and benefits of social organization leaders forging strong individual relationships with government officials. Just as the state is not a monolith, neither is society; this theoretical framework also effectively disaggregates society, as well. It is not intended to create an entirely new paradigm for studying *all* social organizations in *all* contexts. But it is well-suited for answering the questions of interest in this book and might very well appeal to those interested in similar questions in similar polities. It is also from this theoretical framework that my conceptual and analytical frameworks emerged.

1.2 Conceptual and Analytical Frameworks

This book focuses on some of the oldest, most successful, and fastest growing social organizations in China. These organizations operate in ways that conflict with dominant understandings of NGOs. Most notably, the social organizations in this study are engaged in a non–zero-sum relationship with the state;

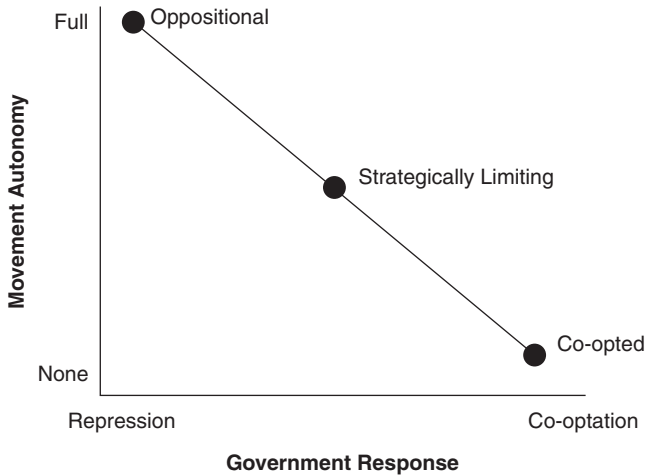


FIGURE 1.1. Conceptual framework of social organizations in authoritarian states

they often (although not in all cases or at all times) perform the role of social service provider. As a result, these groups do not properly fit within conceptualizations used by other scholars of social movements and NGOs, even those who devote considerable attention to the state in analyzing the state–society relationship. For instance, having concluded that the success of social movements is often determined by the state, Gamson (1998) describes success as the acceptance of groups as full participants in governance and the extension of new advantages and benefits to the group by the state. He further describes situations of “collapse” when neither are gained; “pre-emption” when benefits are extended, but groups are not accepted; and finally “co-optation,” when groups are accepted but are given no advantages. Although helpful, this framework does not properly account for situations in which groups are partially accepted by the state and given many, but not all, benefits. Moreover, like corporatism, in explaining success, this framework tends to place the onus almost solely on the state.

To better describe the relationship of Chinese NGOs with the state, and to draw attention to the actions social organizations take in carving out this political space, I offer a new way to conceptualize them (see Figure 1.1). This conceptual framework of social organizations in authoritarian states distinguishes “self-limiting” groups from “co-opted” ones (such as government-organized NGOs, which neither enjoy autonomy nor experience repression) and “oppositional” groups (such as Falun Gong and other illegal religious organizations, which may have full autonomy but also encounter routine state repression). In the self-limiting interaction, social organizations strategically modify their actions to ensure that they meet the organization’s goals but not go far beyond their original charge. These groups are more interested in maintaining the

status quo than in achieving new rights (Sewell 1980: 86). In response, the government rewards the organization with continued limited space in which it can continue to pursue its goals, granting it “semi-autonomy.”

Since this conceptualization explicitly accommodates group agency, it is not the case that once a group is situated on the continuum it cannot move. Through a combination of its adaptations and changing nature of the opportunity structure, social organizations could gravitate from self-limiting to co-opted and even back again.⁹ But it is important to remember that although movement is possible, the kinds of adaptations that are necessary for an organization to strategically limit its work (and thus take advantage of opportunities) are bound by space or time; what works for one organization in one place might not work for another (or even in the same place at a different time). Put differently, self-limiting organizations are not situated at one fixed point (as the figure might suggest); the space for this type of organization is dynamic and can, like opportunities, expand or contract.

This framework also accepts the presence of variation within issue area. For instance, some environmental organizations may have a relationship that is best characterized as co-opted, whereas others are more appropriately thought of as self-limiting.¹⁰ Moreover, it is not simply an organization’s issue area that determines its type of interaction. Gay men’s groups, for instance, could frame their actions in purely “human rights” terms and fight only against discrimination. However, this tactic would most likely result in a more oppositional orientation. Therefore, to ensure their continued existence, these organizations use a public health frame, avoiding discussions of human rights (that might be more oppositional).¹¹ In this manner, the NGO can be properly understood as self-limiting and strategic.¹²

⁹ Although both the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of this book recognize the importance of societal action, such a notion of agency does not mean organizations are able to overcome or drastically change the structure; the space for agency is still constrained and thus might appear to be a more passive, restrained form than we might otherwise expect.

¹⁰ To the extent that it is somewhat imprecise, this framework suffers from the same problems as any classification scheme. Gerring astutely notes, “The humanly created world does not always fit into pigeonholes. Yet, insofar as it *does* fit into pigeonholes, we will want to correctly identify and label the holes” (Gerring 2001: 121).

¹¹ Chinese gay and lesbian organizations are not entirely unique in this strategic adaptation to existing political conditions. Even in the United States, gay and lesbian groups during the 1960s and 1970s changed their tactics and interaction with government in the face of differing conditions. Bernstein argues that when leaders of the movement had “access to the polity” (e.g., gay businessmen with government contacts), they refrained from using more oppositional or “expressive action” (Bernstein 1997: 544). Strategic tactics among Chinese gay groups are not unlike what Rimmerman calls an “assimilationist” perspective of some American groups, which emphasizes similarities over differences (Rimmerman 2002; Seidman 1993).

¹² Strategically speaking, it is clear why an organization would avoid an oppositional interaction. The desire to resist co-optation, however, might be less obvious. In general, NGOs should be expected to resist co-optation because it affords leadership almost no independence in its operations and forces it to rely heavily on government agencies and officials for financial

Self-limiting organizations occupy a political space similar to what Wu (2004: 43) calls a “fuzzy middle ground” and Tilly (1978) describes as “toleration.” Goldstone alludes to this kind of interaction as well, noting that collective action in authoritarian contexts is usually focused on specific policy goals. The state may resist mildly, maintain a more neutral stance, or co-opt the organization, but not eliminate it (Goldstone 1998: 128). The concept highlights the fact that the state–society relationship can be mutually beneficial: a self-limiting social movement fulfills its own needs while also meeting the interests of the state. Thus, contrary to many assumptions of social movement–state interaction (e.g., Stepan 1990), the success of environmental organizations may actually serve to embolden the state, not undermine it. Moreover, the conceptual framework is helpful in that it accounts for societal agency. It suggests that organizations can achieve partial benefits and characterizes the relationship between state and society as non–zero-sum; each side can gain from this strategically limiting relationship.

The conceptual framework for organizations also allows us to understand that NGO–state relations in China are essentially *codependent*: social organizations need the state as it grants them political, personal, and even economic opportunities (if sometimes indirectly), but the state needs social organizations to plug gaps in governance and solve pressing problems. Codependent relationships almost always include power asymmetries. Within the codependent relationship between NGOs and the state in China, these asymmetries can be especially large. The rules of the game are made by the state, and it remains the dominant force in the relationship. And with limited leverage over the state, NGOs can make changes only at the margins. The notion of codependence also helps us understand the long-term future of the relationship and the actors within it: codependent relationships, by their very nature, preserve the status quo. Therefore, in the case of China, we should not be surprised that the existence of NGOs has contributed to the persistence of the authoritarian regime, not undermined it.

The analytical framework of this book is designed to disaggregate the opportunity structure into discrete although often complementary parts to better understand how much power it has over organizations and the extent to which it explains the strength and long-term viability of social organizations. It is along the lines of this analytical framework that the book is structured: (1) the various policy decisions and changing government interests, at central and local levels, are the *political opportunities*; (2) the ability to attract financial resources and mechanisms through which groups are funded are the *economic opportunities*; and (3) the individual relationships that leaders build with government officials are *personal opportunities*.¹³ I use the notion of opportunities rather

support. Moreover, a group’s future is very much dependent on the will of the state; a co-opted group is even easier to shutter than a self-limiting one.

¹³ As I make clear in the third section of this book, personal opportunities should not be confused with social capital. Whereas social capital is a key marker of civil society, personal opportunities

than resources to underscore the necessity of adaptation for organizations to properly take advantage of them. These opportunities, unlike resources, are often fleeting and rarely fungible. Both their availability and usefulness vary across space and time. As will become clear throughout the book, these three kinds of opportunities often bleed into each other; they are frequently interdependent and mutually constitutive. For instance, one of the key empirical puzzles in this book – the question of legal registration for social organizations – is best explained by political and economic opportunities, both of which vary in different ways for organizations across issue area and location. Despite frequent overlap, all three types of opportunity merit individual attention because the nature of each can significantly vary. Moreover, not all opportunities are compatible at all times. Although the most successful social organizations are able to adapt to and take advantage of all three opportunities, when this is not possible, deficiencies in one type might be made up for in another (e.g., a group that lacks strong political opportunities in a province could rely more heavily on its personal opportunities).

1.3 Case Selection and Research Design

The social organizations featured in this study engage in self-limiting, strategic calculation: because of the power asymmetries between the state and society, self-limiting social organizations calculate that the gains of limited co-optation and partial autonomy outstrip the costs of outright repression. This understanding of social organizations views the pursuit of limited goals as less a choice than a survival mechanism; social organizations cannot achieve any of their goals if they attempt to do too much. As a result, this book features those groups that do not regularly incur the wrath of the state. Rather, it focuses on organizations that have successfully adapted to the political opportunity structure, however narrow it may be. Therefore, although the conclusions drawn from this book might not to be generalizable for every kind of social organizations in China (e.g., oppositional groups), they are applicable to other NGOs, such as those focused on health issues, education, poverty alleviation, and volunteerism.¹⁴ These insights might also travel well to similar self-limiting NGOs in other authoritarian or semidemocratic polities (e.g., sub-Saharan Africa, Vietnam, Russia).

The three issue areas featured in this book – environmental, HIV/AIDS, and gay and lesbian – function as individual case studies. Although each issue area differs in area of interest and years in existence, each was chosen

represent a way for social organizations to make do in a system in which civil society is weak and the overall opportunity structure is narrow.

¹⁴ As explored in the conclusion, even some religious organizations previously assumed to be oppositional have made moves to be more strategically limiting in their relationship with the state and in their activities.

intentionally to reflect a most similar design. All three of these areas represent what have been previously characterized as new social movements. Because they operate to some extent outside the state (and are usually self-described “nongovernmental organizations”), the groups might be a threat to the state in that they advocate for the same kinds of issues that have challenged governments and sometimes upended the political status quo elsewhere in the world. The three issue areas are also comparable in that they boast shared strategies and repertoires, leaders, analogous origins, and similarly precarious financial situations.¹⁵ In this study, comparison helps me control for a number of similarities in order to explain variation (Sartori 1991). Moreover, the selection of similar groups establishes the universe of interest; the project seeks to generalize about social organizations similar to those explored in this study. Although the social group sectors have many common attributes, there is predicted variation on the key independent variable of theoretical interest: each sector fits with state policy and state interests differently.

The first case, environmental groups, is critical for understanding social organizations in China and is also the source of the hypotheses stated earlier,¹⁶ whereas the second and third cases have been chosen for variation on the key independent variable of interest, expected proximity to state policy goals. Environmental groups are the archetypal social organization in contemporary China and have come to exemplify domestic NGOs in the Chinese context.¹⁷ They are among the oldest and most successful NGOs in the country.

Environmental organizations tend to have more autonomy because their work meshes with state goals of improving the country’s ecological health. As Pan Yue, then vice-director of the State Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) declared on February 9, 2006, “environmental protection issues are of public interest and are the least politically sensitive. [It is] the best area for experiments in socialist democracy and rule of law.” These NGOs are engaged in a wide variety of activities and maintain different foci; for example, promoting minimized use and alternatives to pesticides in tea farming, protecting endangered species, creating a clearinghouse for information on industrial pollution, leading citizen-centered activities to clean up urban rivers, and opposing

¹⁵ In an attempt to examine these variables of interest, like most similar case design studies, the desire for comparability will come at the cost of some independence. That said, the three cases featured in this project are unique enough that we can be relatively sure that the exact same phenomenon is not being studied three times over.

¹⁶ Gerring (2001) argues that there are two different kinds of crucial cases. The first is a case that is particularly critical to a concept, theory, or hypothesis. The second crucial case reveals results that are unexpected or extreme. The latter definition is closer, although not exactly the same, as the explanation of the crucial case as a study based on a single observation (Eckstein 1975; King, Keohane, and Verba 1994). This project embodies Gerring’s first kind of crucial case and should not be confused with other understandings of crucial case studies.

¹⁷ These groups are said to be archetypal even outside China. Dalton (Dalton 1994) has argued that environmental groups in Western Europe have served as a “political reference point” in that they show other groups (e.g., health or identity organizations) what strategies work best.

dam construction. Although the particular activities of NGOs are not the focus of this book, I discuss them in so far as an organization will sometimes change its activities to better reflect state interests. In other words, changing what they do is just one type of the adaptations that Chinese social organizations make to ensure survival.

The second case features HIV/AIDS groups, devoted to solving a problem that is growing in both urban and rural areas throughout China. Although the government has begun to address the issue more publicly, devoting rhetorical and pecuniary support to its fight, many government officials are more uncomfortable confronting the realities of this problem than of environmental issues. HIV/AIDS NGOs are focused primarily on efforts at disease prevention, taking the form of sex education and condom distribution; many reach out to high-risk populations that are not easily accessible by government agencies and officials (e.g., commercial sex workers, intravenous drug users, gay men). Far fewer organizations work explicitly to promote the needs and interests of those already affected by the disease.

The final case highlights gay and lesbian groups, which are driven, in part, by the same issues of HIV/AIDS groups, but also represent a minority group that, in other political contexts, has fought for human rights issues that the state has long avoided.¹⁸ These NGOs have frequently created social spaces (both physical and virtual) that serve two main purposes. First, they engage in public health outreach, which can take the form of direct condom distribution, but sometimes includes actual instruction that might be interwoven into entertainment; in between drag show acts in one gay tea house in Yunnan, the NGO leader (dressed in drag) performed skits to underscore the importance of safe sex. Second, they provide a safe, welcoming area for gay men and lesbian women to interact and network. I expected groups in this issue area to offer relatively lower utility to the state and expected groups to enjoy fewer and narrower political opportunities.

The primary level of analysis is situated at the organization, studied through the eyes of its leader. Individual leaders are an appropriate informant for the larger organization because these groups are personalistic and the organization is often little more than the leader. However, in Chapter 7, the level of analysis is moved down to the leader to explain the importance of personal opportunities. Moreover, when I examine the broad effect of social organization adaptations

¹⁸ Because gay groups in particular devote time and energy to addressing HIV/AIDS issues, there might be reason to assume that this third case is not altogether different from the second. However, preliminary research suggested that there is a great deal of tension between HIV/AIDS groups and gay and lesbian groups. Both have gone to great lengths to display their independence from each other: some gay and lesbian groups have often distanced themselves from HIV/AIDS issues in hopes of convincing the general public that there is more to gay men than HIV/AIDS; likewise, HIV/AIDS groups have often kept their distance from gay and lesbian groups in order to assure other risk groups that HIV/AIDS is not simply a “gay disease.”

to the opportunity structure on civil society, I move the level of analysis up beyond the organization, to society and the state at large.

The book includes comparison across and within issue areas. Although the study is small in that it includes only three cases, observations have been increased with in-depth within-case analysis. Social organizations within each case serve as embedded units that make observations more plentiful (Gerring 2004: 344; Rueschemeyer 2003). The study also captures continuity and change of the social group–state interaction (e.g., do groups become more adaptive over time?). Because NGOs in each issue area are at a different time in their organizational ages (environmental groups being the oldest, gay and lesbian groups the youngest), this research design allows me to indirectly examine how groups differ at different times. In other words, the intentional selection of similar cases offers me an opportunity to understand how groups progress by looking at similar groups at different points in their organizational evolution. It also helps us understand how NGOs are affected by the opening of political space at critical junctures.

Although I mention the number of groups to the extent that NGO actors themselves observe significant growth or contraction in their issue area and/or locale, this book does not rely on official government or unofficial independent counts of social organizations. Research from other contexts, even as politically open as the United States, suggests that those groups that are most difficult to count – more informal organizations – might well be the most important for civil society (Ladd 1999). Not only are these figures unreliable and outdated, but a study that relied on these numbers – and constructed a random population sample based on them – would invariably miss one of the most interesting issues facing Chinese social organizations: legal registration. A large proportion of survey respondents are leaders of groups that are not legally registered. As I discuss throughout the book, registration is difficult for many groups. But, more importantly, there are conflicting incentives and different barriers to legal registration for NGOs, which is closely related to the complex relationship of social organizations and local governments. In other words, relying on a set of numbers and the kind of probability sample that might come with it would have caused me to miss a crucial story about how groups use different methods – formal and informal – to adapt to the opportunity structure.

This book draws on qualitative and quantitative data collected through in-depth interviews and a nationwide Internet survey of social organization leaders. The fieldwork, conducted over an 11-month period from May 2007 to April 2008, primarily focused on two sites: Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province, historically more open to social organizations, and Beijing, the usually more politically closed capital city. Additional attention was paid to organizations in Sichuan and Henan, two provinces that informants described as more politically open and closed, respectively. An extended discussion of

research methods, case selection, and data collection can be found in Appendix A; the questionnaire can be found in Appendix B.

1.4 Outline of the Book

The book is divided into three parts. Part I begins with Chapter 2, which presents a systematic definition of the political opportunity structure for social organizations in China, devoting attention to the ways in which the state has created this structure. However, the chapter also shows that this opportunity structure has not been the result of deliberate or careful design. Rather, it is the outgrowth of several different key policy decisions that are not necessarily intended to oversee the state–society arrangement and the lives of social organizations. Next, Chapter 3 presents survey and interview data that show how leaders of social organizations have a relatively positive perception of the state, at both central and local levels. Through two short case studies, it illustrates how regional variation affects political opportunities differently. The chapter then offers survey and interview data confirming that the vast majority of Chinese social organizations of the “self-limiting” type do not experience serious negative state response; it also posits a typology of negative state response in China. This chapter offers support for the first hypothesis that groups enjoy most political space when their activities match the interests of government, particularly at the local level.

Chapter 4 explores the dominant tactics that leaders use to successfully avoid a negative state response and take full advantage of the narrow political opportunity structure. Groups sometimes, but not always, seek to become legally registered, are proactively transparent in their activities, steer clear of behavior that could be seen as antagonistic toward the state, avoid extensive networking with other organizations, and indulge the reputational concerns of local government officials.

Part II defines and explores the economic opportunity structure for social organizations in China. Unlike political opportunities, economic opportunities are not always the direct outgrowth of government policies. However, a number of key state positions have had the effect of narrowing the number and extent of economic opportunities for organizations: fundraising is difficult when groups are not legally registered, the country lacks a strong philanthropic tradition and the tax incentives that might encourage the emergence of one, and sometimes government involvement in the disruption of funds constrains the overall opportunity structure for some groups. These chapters profile a number of tactics and the implications of these decisions.

Part III introduces personal opportunities, discussing the prevalence and perceived importance of building strong relationships with individual government officials. Chapter 7 differs from the previous chapters in that it brings the level of analysis down from the social organization to individual. It shows how individual relations are often a crucial antecedent condition to effectively

adapting to the rest of the opportunity structure. Leaders in all three issue areas pursue informal relations with individuals within the government rather than formal institutional ties that are more sustainable. In times of strife or success, leaders blame or credit the personal relationship, not the institution. The chapter shows how this orientation has made organizations reluctant to push for institutional change and has placed their future in the hands of a few government officials.

The conclusion (Chapter 8) outlines how adaptations to the opportunity structure carry with them serious implications for the long-term viability of Chinese social organizations. In doing so, it moves the level of analysis up to civil society, to explore how the uncertain futures of these groups might affect development of China's "third sector" and the prospects for political reform and regime change. Finally, to more fully understand the link between social organizations and political reform, it explores the conditions under which organizations might move away from their strategic, self-limiting orientation and toward a more conventionally activist alignment.

