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NGO Community in China
Expanding Linkages with Transnational Civil Society

Working Paper No.128
December 2005

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A revised version of this paper is published in China Perspectives, 68, Nov-Dec 2006: 29-40

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INTRODUCTION
This paper discusses the expanding relations between the NGO community in China and transnational civil society (TCS). It first introduces TCS and global governance, providing an overarching framework of the China analysis. The second section presents a brief profile of the growing Chinese civil society. The third and fourth sections explore the increasing transnationalisation of China’s NGOs and its potential democratising impact.

By bringing in the transnational dimensions of civil society, I intend to provide new perspectives for our understanding of China’s international relations, Chinese civil society and its implications for pluralisation and democratisation. China has long been ignored by the literature on TCS, unlike some South American countries and India. Meanwhile, the expanding transnational linkages of Chinese NGOs have been neglected by mainstream China scholars studying its civil society and politics. Studies of China’s international relations are predominantly state-centric or business-centric, caring little about civil society’s solidarity across borders. While there is some new trend to generically discuss Chinese NGOs’ general foreign relations (with the UN, governments as well as TCS actors), as part of China’s globalisation, this study is focused on Chinese NGOs’ relations with TCS. It seeks to fill a major lacuna in both China and TCS research.

1. TCS AND GLOBAL GOVERNANCE
China faces a world witnessing a growing interconnectedness of TSC, multinational business, states and inter-state organisations, in an emerging and loosely structured framework of global governance. The post-Cold War world has seen a massive proliferation of NGOs. There has been a global associational revolution, meaning a striking upsurge around the world in organised voluntary activity and the creation of private, nonprofit or non-governmental organisations. Associations, foundations and similar institutions have formed in numerous countries to deliver human services, promote grass-roots economic development, prevent environmental degradation, protect civil rights, and champion gender equality (Salamon 1994).

Ghils (1992: 418) speaks of the dynamic cross-border activities or transnational networking of “non-state entities of a social, econological, technical and scientific, ideological, religious or other nature” as a defining stage in the evolution of world politics. Post-Cold War international relations have been characterised by a
rapid upsurge of regular interactions among NGOs from different countries. One result of these so-called transnational relations (as different from international relations, which usually imply inter-state relations) has been an unprecedented proliferation of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), including a wide variety of organisations with members from several countries. Members are typically national associations but often also include individuals. It is estimated that today there are 12,260 INGOs and 5807 internationally oriented national NGOs (Yearbook of International Organizations 2002-2003: 1607. Hereafter YIO). INGOs and numerous less formal transnational networks forged by INGOs, NGOs, foundations, activist research centers constitute a transnational civil society. The growing number of networks and collaborative arrangements among nonprofit and non-governmental organisations can be attributed to their common economic, social, cultural, environmental, political, and security concerns. Under the pressures of globalisation in a variety of issue areas, many similar challenges face human society, requiring transnational responses. Yet governments are increasingly limited in their ability to deal with those problems. Meanwhile, developments such as the dismantling of the Cold War ideological barrier and technological advances in communication and transportation have improved the conditions that make transnational actions possible.

NGO networks and their key members are playing an increasingly prominent role in world politics. Global governance refers to collective efforts by state, inter-state organisations and non-state actors at a global level to tackle issues and challenges of common concern to the international community. Despite their fragmentary and fluid nature, such collective efforts have become more institutionalised and operate with increasing use of international law, though the situation varies in different issue areas. Both formally and informally civil society activists take an active part in a host of key inter-governmental organisations (IGOs), particularly the UN and its specialised agencies, and many international treaty bodies focused on more specific issues. It has become a norm that the major international conferences organized by IGOs or state treaty bodies also hold parallel NGO forums, in order for non-state actors to take part in international policy discussions. Through such participation in policy debate, standards-setting and norm-making, non-state actors help reform policies of states and IGOs. Those arrangements, materialising partly under the pressure of transnational actors themselves, have provided a catalyst for the formation of many INGOs. A special institutionalised mechanism within the
UN is the so-called “consultative status”, designed to give citizen groups access to influencing policymaking at the global level. The UN Charter specifically says that the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) should take measures to consult non-state actors regarding affairs in its field. By 1992 more than 700 INGOs and internationally oriented NGOs had attained consultative status and the number has been steadily increasing ever since to more than 2,300 today (ECOSOC web site: http://www.un.org/docs/ecosoc/). In summary, Ghils (1992:421-7) maintains that INGOs exert influence in world politics in three ways: as shapers of opinion, as autonomous actors, and as competitors with states.

2. A PROFILE OF CHINA’S NGO COMMUNITY

Since the 1980s, there have been mounting issues and challenges prompting citizens in China to organise in order to articulate and pursue shared interests. Competing interests and constituencies within Chinese society have emerged as a result of economic reform and the modernisation drive. Growing numbers of activists have thus established organisations, and they keep expanding and networking. However, although generally there is more space for an autonomous NGO sector to develop, the government harbours anxieties about social “instability”, imposes severe restrictions on NGOs’ activities and bans the formation of any autonomous organisations in politically sensitive issue areas such as human rights and free labour movement. Thus autonomous citizen groups are predominantly concentrated in what the authorities deem as less threatening areas of service provision, women (gender equality and domestic violence), (inter-provincial) migrant workers, children, the disabled, and the environment. Beijing knows that administrative structures alone are unable to manage all those issues, particularly considering its acute budgetary pressures and desire to streamline administration (Young 2002; Far Eastern Economic Review, Hong Kong, hereafter FEER, 7 May 1998: 10-15). Some international events, such as the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade (1999), the invasion of Iraq, and particularly the Japanese government’s provocative acts signifying a lack of remorse over Tokyo’s wartime atrocities, have also led to the networking and organising of agitated Chinese citizens. However, fearing the scenes of voluntary protests, these activities have been suppressed as soon as their politico-diplomatic value was exhausted.
The fear of bottom-up social mobilisation as well as practical needs have led the Chinese government to create a semi-official NGO sector, a policy practiced with increasing enthusiasm from the 1990s. Government and Communist Party departments at various levels have been setting up foundations and other organisations to advance charitable, research, information and policy objectives. These creatures are commonly called GONGOs (Government Organised NGOs). One major category of GONGOs was born out of traditional Leninist mass organisations (renmin tuanti) - there are eight of them, including All China Youth League, All China Women’s Federation and the All China Federation of Trade Unions. The government tries to gradually restructure the function of these mass organisations away from their original role as Communist Party overseers of particular constituencies, towards a more service facilitation and provision role. As a result, satellite agencies (associations and foundations) have been created. The GONGO sector has two major purposes. One is to receive expertise and philanthropic funding that the government finds hard to access, particularly from international sources including INGOs. Some government departments establish organisations in their professional field with the apparent purpose of making it possible to conduct exchanges with international organisations and to participate in overseas study tour programmes in an unofficial capacity. Another consideration is that some distance from mainstream government agencies makes it easier for government-initiated organisations to explore new areas of work, such as providing contraceptive advice for unmarried people, or HIV/AIDS prevention programmes for sex workers and drug addicts (Young 2002). With few exceptions such as China Society for Human Rights Studies, established to serve the authorities’ rights diplomacy as well as study international standards, GONGOs’ areas of interest are similar to those of the more autonomous groups.

Statistics from the Ministry of Civil Affairs (its website: http://www.mca.gov.cn/) suggest that by 2003, officially registered NGOs including GONGOs in China amounted to 244,000. The total number of bottom-up autonomous NGOs is unknown, but Chan (2002) estimates that in 2000, around 26,000 registered social organisations in China could have been classified as “NGOs in a western sense”. The examples best known in transnational campaign networks include Friends of Nature, Global Village of Beijing, Green Earth Volunteers, Maple Women's Counseling Center, Village Women Know It All, and The Aizhi Action.
3. TRANSNATIONALISATION OF CHINA’S NGO COMMUNITY

Autonomous NGOs and GONGOs together constitute China’s NGO community. Over the recent years it has become more active and effective in mobilising public opinion, shaping and re-shaping people’s ways of life, challenging local authorities’ policies, combating corruption, and promoting the rule of law. More importantly, Chinese NGOs’ connections to TCS have expanded dramatically over the past decade, which is a major causal factor for the recent growth of Chinese civil society and its accomplishments.

Participation in four fronts is essential to NGOs in any country if they are interested in TCS and global governance. First is participating as observers in the forums of the UN, its specialised agencies, and various international treaty bodies, in order to take part in international policy discussions. The most important form of such participation is to enjoy a UN consultative status. The All China Women's Federation, China Society for Human Rights Studies and China Disabled Persons' Federation (the latter two are major GONGOs) enjoy such status. The second front of participation is the NGO forums which are fully for civil society but are nonetheless organised by the UN system. For example, Friends of Nature attended the NGO forum of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg August 2002), and numerous Chinese women groups participated in the NGO forum in parallel to The Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995). The third front is membership in major INGOs (statistics below) and the fourth is the more loosely structured transnational forums which are organised by different countries’ NGOs themselves, with both hosts and participants being exclusively NGOs. For example, Chinese women NGOs have been participating in the East Asian Women's Forum, a biennial event organised by Asian women NGOs since 1994.

The above general model is useful for examining Chinese NGOs’ interaction with foreign NGOs, and particularly INGOs, since such interaction occurs on all four fronts. However, empirical indications suggest that the most important site of interaction is the home turf of Chinese groups, in addition to membership in INGOs. A more helpful way to draw a big picture of Chinese NGOs’ transnational relations is to discern two kinds of relationship – or two parallel relations - between Chinese NGOs and TCS; in the eyes of the government, one is illegitimate and another is legitimate and often encouraged.
The first kind of relationship is part and parcel of TCS campaigns against the Chinese state on human rights, labour, Tibet and other major political concerns. This usually involves INGOs like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Reporters Without Borders, Pen International, Transnational Radical Party, etc. They rely on key information provided by those banned or underground groups inside China such as The Tiananmen Mothers, formed by parents campaigning to hold the government accountable for their student children missing in the 1989 killing, and Independent Chinese Pen Center, a forum of dissident writers championing freedom of expression. On the other hand, the most active Chinese sections of these coordinated transnational campaigns are the Chinese dissident groups in exile. The main ones would include Human Rights in China, specialising in research, documentation and lobbying; the Overseas Chinese Democracy Coalition, an umbrella for many hard-core activist groups based in the west; and the various campaign networks fostered by the Falun Gong religious movement, shifted abroad since it was banned in China in 1999. With crucial information provided by domestic groups, those INGOs and particularly the leading dissident groups expose the Chinese government at the annual sessions of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, influence various governments’ opinions at such forums, and lobby the United States Administration and Congress. Such advocacy networks do protect some domestic activists by giving them much international limelight, financial and moral support, prizes, and occasionally even helping the release of some jailed activists and writers. On the other hand, transnational rights campaigns’ impact on China’s political development is debatable.

In the above kind of relationship the most important NGO parties (namely INGOs and groups in exile) have to stay out of China while working on China. Yet under the second kind of relationship, which is my focus in this paper, members of China’s domestic NGO community cooperate with international groups in ways and areas permitted and even encouraged by the Chinese government. This usually means that the interested INGOs can operate within China if they wish. Conservative estimates by China Development Brief suggest that more than 490 INGOs (such as WWF, Friends of Earth, Save the Children, Oxfam, and the Lions) and major international foundations (including Ford Foundation, the Asia Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation) have set up projects and opened offices in China.¹ It is impossible to calculate the exact number of international groups operating in China because many do not have offices or staff permanently based in China. According to
Wang Ming, Director of NGO Research Center, Tsinghua University, there are between 3000 to 6000 foreign NGOs based in China, including about 2000 foundations, 1000 implementing groups, 2500 chambers of commerce, and 1000 religions-based organisations. He claims that most of them are not registered, but operate under silent endorsement from the authorities (*Nanfang Zhoumo*, Southern Weekend, Guangzhou, 19 May 2005). On another front, according to *Yearbook of International Organizations*, China’s membership in INGOs has increased steadily in the reform era, from 71 INGOs in 1977, to 484 in 1986, and 2297 in 2002 (*YIO 2002-2003*: 1611; Chan 1989).

INGOs operating in China appear to mostly base their programs in the poor southwestern China (particularly Yunnan Province), while also maintaining representation in Beijing. A Beijing office helps in getting connected to the central political system, considering the uncertainties of the existing regulatory framework in which civil society actors operate. Concentration in places like Yunnan reflects China’s overall restrictive policy towards civil society as introduced earlier. Such restrictions on the nature and scope of domestic NGOs naturally translate into the sort of transnational relations between Chinese and international groups. Thus transnational projects of Chinese NGOs cannot occur in any politically sensitive issue areas and cannot involve any political or militant INGOs. Under this policy, INGOs which are allowed to work within China are mostly humanitarian and development groups which naturally avoid rich provinces and set their eyes on the poor Yunnan and Tibet instead. If human rights and labour INGOs could freely set up in China, their priorities might well have been Shanghai, Guangzhou and Beijing. That transnational participation is largely limited to the non-political or de-politicised layer of TCS is also reflected in the membership in INGOs. An overwhelming majority of China’s memberships are in the social/health, scientific/technical, sport/recreational, academic/professional, economic, and welfare areas. However, the non-political or de-politicised nature of TCS’s penetration in China does not mean that it has no political implication, as discussed in the following section.

4. TRANSNATIONAL CONNECTIONS: DEMOCRATIC IMPLICATIONS FOR CHINA

Studies of TCS and the issue of democratisation have usually concentrated on campaigns by transnational NGO coalitions to make inter-governmental organisations
more accountable and transparent (case studies involve World Bank, IMF, WTO, and the various organs of the UN) (Edwards and Gaventa 2001; Willetts 1996). More recently, the literature has moved beyond the theme of international policy-making and started to discuss TCS’ impact on national processes of democratisation. Kumar (2000) examines transnational campaigns to promote democratic governance in Mexico and in Haiti, while Chilton (1995) and Kaldor (2003) analyse how civil society coalitions between Eastern and Western Europe helped bringing about regime changes in some former Soviet bloc states. Klotz (1995) investigates transnational citizen campaigns against apartheid. On the other hand, more publications have discussed the ways in which transnational advocacy networks promote international human rights norms in many Third World countries. This includes an analysis of how transnational NGO coalitions have successfully contributed to improvements in human rights standards in Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, Tunisia, Morocco, Indonesia, the Philippines, Chile, Guatemala and Eastern Europe (Thomas et al 1999).

Little has been said about China in the literature on transnational civil society and democratisation. Kumar (2000) does mention – though in passing – transnational citizen campaigns and China’s democratisation. What he has said may represent the thoughts of other scholars and explain why China is left out in the discussions. Having examined the more successful cases of transnational democracy campaigns targeting Mexico and Haiti, Kumar (2000) points out:

The case of China shows just how difficult it can be to form effective transnational campaigns for democracy in other regions. There are many groups outside China pushing for democracy within the country. Most are based in the US, often supported by private American foundations, and many include prominent Chinese exiles. Yet their influence on US policy toward China has been limited, and their influence on China itself even less.

Thus transnational NGO coalitions’ ineffectiveness to achieve the expected results in China is due to such campaigns having to be waged outside China, unlike the other examined cases in which transnational and domestic NGOs coordinated their campaigns across porous national borders. This “domestic-transnational spiral model” is particularly emphasised in the theorising of the more successful transnational democracy and human rights campaigns (Thomas 2000).
It seems that the literature only takes seriously those transnational campaigns involving political and/or militant INGOs and their vigorous and fully mobilised national counterparts. As a result, the discourse of TCS and democratisation has avoided China since a bona fide civil society capable of engaging in full-blown transnational solidarity on political issues does not exist there, despite the activism of a handful of internationally known but domestically illegal and suppressed groups. This makes it impossible for TCS to successfully campaign for democracy and human rights in China by fully collaborating with Chinese rights NGOs. Nevertheless, I would argue that the theme of TCS and China’s democratisation is highly relevant and worthy. One needs to take a broader and longer-term perspective, looking beyond the usual models of transnational democracy/human rights campaigns involving high-profile political INGOs like Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch in close collaboration with fully mobilized domestic civil societies of political nature. My central argument is: though not involving any politically sensitive issue area and political or militant organisations (either Chinese or international), transnational linkages of Chinese NGOs have noticeably had a pluralising and democratising influence at the grassroots level. This is so despite the fact that both transnational and domestic activists do not view their operations in this light.

To understand this point, one needs to first examine more seriously the democratising implications of Chinese “semi-civil society” itself, which are often understated at a time when even a bowling club is supposed to have a democratic effect in the US. Though not all NGOs in China are democratically operated, the mere existence of an expanding autonomous social sector bodes well for the country’s political future, even though, again, none of their activities touch on politically sensitive issues. Nick Young (2002) rightly argues that these organisations’ interest in volunteerism helps create a more liberal political culture and independent citizenship. Much of this volunteering is essentially charitable in nature, described and prescribed by the Chinese groups in terms of “loving hearts”, “warm heartedness”, etc. This may not seem a particularly exciting manifestation of “civil society” to those who associate the term primarily with the citizens’ movements that shook Eastern Europe in the 1980s. But it may be a significant indicator of social capital, civic consciousness and reciprocity that help bind societies together. This is encouraging for a country where volunteering and charity were the exclusive domain of the state and social “participation” was synonymous with Leninist mass mobilisations in the not-too-
distant past. Meticulous field research coordinated by Young (2002) has found that even many of the GONGOs have been developing a more autonomous relationship with the government, acquiring a more independent identity, and gradually forming a sense of themselves as belonging to a distinctive, non-government community. Any associational experience focussed on issues and causes, and thus beyond family and friendship ties, is necessary for China’s democratisation. Particularly, in the case of a top-down democratisation move, the country can face grave risks if citizens as a whole have not even gained associational and campaign experience on basic social and environmental issues. As a result, the inherent fragility in social, ethnic and economic spheres may destroy the prospect of a China which is not just democratic and affluent, but also stands powerful and proud as one unified country.

According to Pye (1999:766-69), two major cultural obstacles to democracy in China are its rules of civility and traditional social capital. Pye points out that Chinese rules of civility have elaborate standards of personal civility, but they are strikingly weak in the areas of impersonal interaction; Chinese have vivid standards for superior-inferior relations, but few guidelines for the behaviour of equals; and they demonstrate over-sensitivity to any sign of antagonism, which is a serious obstacle to any legitimisation of political competition. In terms of social capital, which builds on the norms of civility and testifies to the critical level of trust among the members of a society that makes collective action possible, it has a different tradition in China. Pye (1999:771) criticises the Chinese brand of social capital as embodied in a system of *guanxi*, or institutionalised nepotistic personal connections among family members, friends, acquaintances with the same birthplace or from the same school. China’s NGO community as a whole, no matter how ineffective judged against the standards of an “authentic” civil society of a liberal democratic style, does in general have democratic implications in challenging those traditional rules of civility and non-liberal brand of social capital. NGOs tend to help create trust beyond family and friends, build equality and fairness in superior-subordinate relations, and encourage respect for differences in opinion and thereby allow constructive competition to take place. Operational concentration on non-political issue areas does not totally diminish such democratising influences.

If one takes the democratising implications of China’s NGO community more seriously, then logically one must also note the similar implications of the Chinese NGOs’ connections with TCS. There are two ways to read such implications. First,
transnational cooperation, by assisting the growth of Chinese NGO sector and making them more accountable to international partners, amplifies the democratizing effect of this sector, despite a concentration of cooperative efforts in functional areas or “low politics”.

There is a clear transnational dimension to the rise of the Chinese NGO community. As mentioned, GONGOs are created partly to receive international assistance. On the other hand, one investigation suggests that foreign NGOs’ maverick activism at the NGO forum of The Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) was a major catalyst for the strengthened dynamism of grassroots activist NGOs in China, and many large ones are financially sustained mainly by international sources such as the Ford Foundation (Deng 2002:29-31). In her detailed analysis, Howell (1997 and 2003) also argues that China’s hosting of that event resulted not only in the refashioning of the relationship of All China Women’s Federation (ACWF) with women and state, but also in the rapid proliferation of new and more autonomous women’s organisations across the country. The conference exposed participants from these organisations to a range of issues being discussed by women all over the world, to the key axes of tension on controversial topics such as abortion and to diverse styles of debating. By interacting with international feminists, Chinese activists were not only introduced to the diverse functions of NGOs, for example, as service agencies or advocates of change, but also to the plethora of imaginative ways of mobilising, communicating, organising and raising funds.

A great number of Chinese NGOs in multiple issue areas have benefited from international partners (foundations, INGOs, UN agencies and governments) in capacity-building, program planning, management and accountability (Deng 2002:37). In particular, significant assistance has been given by many INGOs who operate projects inside China with local partners, mainly in the areas of women, environment, public health, poverty and education (Young 2002). Aggregate social investments in China by (or through) TCS groups operating in the country, roughly estimated to be near US$200 million per year, is very small compared to the level of annual international commercial investment in China (roughly US$50 billion) (Young 2005). However, what matters more to the Chinese groups is that they learn from international activists new and advanced concepts originating from the expanding forums of global governance, such as international standards and a form of global rhetoric on sustainable development, endangered species, and gender-specific
violence, as contained in the various international treaties and UN conventions. These
are important to their own domestic campaigns, as leverage when lobbying the
government and as a foundation for community education. Compared to the Chinese
groups, INGOs have more access to and more first-hand experience in international
law-making in the UN’s specialised agencies, treaty bodies and programs, where key
concepts, norms and conventions are debated. Citizens in China have little idea about
what international treaties and conventions their government has signed and ratified.
This leaves TCS as a major transmission belt of international standards and norms.

Transnational connections play a special facilitating role in the growth of
some large and old Chinese NGOs which enjoyed special linkages with western
groups before the 1949 coming to power of the Communist Party and had their
activities frozen during Mao’s era. A prominent example is Shanghai YMCA, which
boasts 4,000 fee-paying members (the largest YMCA in China) and claims to have
become a role model for YMCAs in the developing world. When it was re-established
in 1984, the Shanghai YMCA was very small and weak, just an empty shell of its pre-
1949 self. Through exchanges with international YMCAs (first with those in Japan
and Hong Kong, then those in the US, Canada, South Korea, Singapore and
Malaysia), it started to develop and prosper. International YMCAs, particularly those
in Japan and the US, provided training in effective management and capacity
building, helped train volunteers, and provided funding. Support and new perspectives
from international sources contributed to Shanghai YMCA’s increased independence
since the mid 1990s with its new emphasis on “citizen’s self-management” (Wu
2005).

Second, quite apart from their expertise in specific issue areas, INGOs transfer
democratic perspectives and practices to their Chinese partners, including the ideas of
autonomous citizenship, grassroots activism, public participation, direct action, issue-
oriented advocacy, collective decision-making – and most importantly, a sense of
“third sector”. INGOs like Oxfam, Save the Children, Orbis, World Wide Fund for
Nature and Animals Asia Foundation may not be overtly political in their China
programs, and their operators and Chinese partners do not think in terms of how their
activities can be related to China’s democratisation. Yet they can have a
democratising effect on their Chinese partners and society at large. One example is
the experience of Lions’ Club International, which established branches in
Guangzhou and Shenzhen in 2002. Despite its expressly non-political nature (few in
the West would associate the Lions with democracy), the Lions has helped transform official and popular attitudes toward NGO activity by merely operating in China. First, there is the Lions’ own democratic structure, with the members from Shenzhen and Guangzhou branches reportedly inspired by its annual presidential elections, participatory mechanism, equality among leaders and members, dedication, and transparency. Second, such culture is also influencing the operations of the two branches themselves (FEER, August 22, 2002:24-27). One may extrapolate from the Lions model that those numerous Chinese groups who are members of INGOs must have gained extensive democratic excises by participating in the free deliberation and voting. Broad socio-political ramifications can also be seen with Animals Asia Foundation, which focuses on eliminating cruel bear farming in China and operates a bear sanctuary in Sichuan Province. Its public education and awareness programs and its success in negotiating with the local authorities have stimulated public interest in volunteering, spawned local NGOs, and encouraged local activists to see the worth of civil society (Robinson 2005). This cannot but have broad significance beyond bear-related issues. Again in her study of the influence of the Fourth World Conference on Women on women’s organisations in China, Howell (1997) argues that more important than learning from foreign NGOs’ issues-specific strategies, Chinese groups had the chance to broaden their image of what an NGO was, what it took and how it differed from a governmental agency. She rightly emphasises that these imaginations were particularly important in a society where civil society was weakly developed. Extensive case studies have also shown that GONGOs’ recent independence tendency has been mainly caused by increased access to international community (Wang et al 2001; Wu 2002). Interactions with INGOs have also made some mass organisations (such as ACWF) develop a new sense of autonomy (Deng 2002:33).

There certainly are serious limitations to what INGOs can achieve in their joint campaigns with local groups in the issue areas permitted by the government. The comparative power of Chinese civil society and authorities mean that high-profile campaigns against the government’s development priorities can fail. For example, Khagram (2000) refers to the failed campaigns by International Rivers Network and Friends of the Earth International in trying to halt the big dam projects in China, symbolised by the mammoth Three Gorges project. The Bush administration’s rhetoric of democracy export also made Beijing sensitive to INGOs’ connections with
their Chinese partners. However, with the country becoming more integrated with international regimes and with the government’s ever increasing need of NGOs to address immediate social and environmental tension, a “two steps forward, one step back” trajectory of China’s civil society growth will be maintained.

Recent interviews I conducted with chief operators from six INGOs operating in China confirm the positive arguments made above. These interviews testify that together with their Chinese partners (both NGOs and government authorities), INGOs reinforce to society at large the concept of civil society and virtue of volunteering. Through public seminars, presentations and performance, INGOs demonstrate to the community the efficacy of NGOs. One consensus shared by the interviewees is that INGOs influence local NGOs considerably. First, some INGOs foster local groups, using projects to establish partner organisations. Second, INGOs cooperate with local NGOs in various ways, including providing funds and introducing international norms and standards. Third, INGOs assist local groups with their expertise in project management and assessment, financial auditing, grant application, thus help building their capacities. Very often INGOs function as role models for local groups. Furthermore, there are indications that, where the Chinese partners are GONGOs, cooperation with INGOs helped them become more transparent and flexible. My interviews meanwhile reveal that INGOs have also gone a long way to convince the government of the value of civil society. Generally many INGOs enjoy good relations with central, provincial/municipal, and local authorities, even signing formal agreements and running joint projects, and have contributed to the government’s own social and environmental priorities. They (particularly the large humanitarian groups like ORBIS) have impressed the officials at various levels with their dedication and effectiveness. This in turn may translate into these officials’ more liberal attitude towards civil society. One recent evidence is that despite the sensitivity caused by President Bush’s rhetoric on democracy promotion in his 2005 State of the Union speech, Chinese authorities did not crack down on a training workshop held in Kunming (Yunnan Province) in November of the year, which saw both domestic and international groups such as the US-based Sierra Club teaching university student group representatives from around China (there were 40 student organisations in attendance) how to become activists, set up an NGO, run effective campaigns, and organise protests (Harwood 2005).
The utility of transnational exchanges for China’s democratisation can also be argued from their role in diluting popular nationalistic sentiment in the country. Such sentiment is rising in recent years, targeted particularly at Japan and the US. Yet at the same time a growing number of Chinese NGO operators have become involved in issues-oriented exchanges with their Western counterparts. Nationalistic fever hinders democratisation, particularly if it is manipulated by the state, a stark lesson from the pre-1949 Chinese history. On the other hand, exchanges in issue areas of the environment, gender, the disabled, orphans and AIDS can make societies see common concerns and shared values, and learn from each other, cultivating a sense of “global village”. Chinese people who are interested in water pollution treatment in the US, waste processing in Japan and their NGOs’ roles in these fields are necessarily more detached from nationalistic hatred.

CONCLUSION
Chinese NGOs have expanded their connections with TCS, INGOs in particular. Cooperative projects are concentrated on issues relating to gender, the environment, public health, poverty reduction and education, where the government avidly seeks assistance to tackle a range of social, environmental and rural headaches. Chinese NGOs have benefited from transnational cooperation in capacity-building, program planning, management and accountability. More importantly, despite their apparent non-political nature, transnational linkages of Chinese NGOs nurture a more healthy and autonomous third sector, thus having potentials to facilitate socio-political pluralization. “Globalisation from below” helps China’s NGOs in gradually and peacefully chipping off the country’s traditional authoritarian and state/family-dependent political culture, preparing a more cohesive, civil and dynamic society for the ultimate tipping moment of democratisation. One may take comfort from China’s historical experience. When the prototype transnational social movements started to develop in the late nineteenth century, a handful of European women activists were able to found numerous Chinese NGOs in an anti-footbinding movement (a movement tolerated by the Qing dynasty government). These transnational advocacy campaigns, which involved both Western and Chinese activists, made considerable contributions to Chinese women’s political emancipation (Keck and Sikkink 1998). A “domestic-transnational spiral model”, with Tiananman Mothers acting with the sort of domestic legitimacy and transnational solidarity enjoyed by the strikingly similar
Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Argentina), cannot be indefinitely ruled out in today’s China.

NOTES

1 This is based on online database of China Development Brief (http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.org.cn/page.asp?sec=4&sub=4&pg=0), a Beijing-based magazine on NGO affairs which also functions as an international consultancy group providing information and services to facilitate international NGOs’ exchanges with Chinese groups.

2 On the other hand, of an estimated total of 12,260 INGOs today, China has merely joined 2297 – ranking China with much smaller countries: Thailand 1915, the Philippines 2036, South Korea 2241, and Israel 2966 (YIO 2002-2003: 1607, 1611-1612).

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