Post-Earthquake Relief and Reconstruction Efforts: The Emergence of Civil Society in China?

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Abstract

Many analysts contend that participation in the Sichuan earthquake relief efforts strengthened Chinese civil society. I examine these claims based on interviews with civil society organizations, academics and local officials in Sichuan, and argue that participation in relief efforts has strengthened civil society through increased capacity, publicity, and interaction with local government. Conversely, relief efforts also reveal weaknesses in civil society and their governing institutions which inhibit further development, such as the trust and capacity deficit of these organizations. Participation in relief efforts served as a learning process whereby government, society and civil society groups learned how to effectively work together. However, in order to consolidate these gains and further strengthen civil society, there must be greater institutionalization of these groups' roles, increased capacity building, and greater trust between society, groups and the local state.

On May 12, 2008, a massive earthquake struck Sichuan Province (汶川大地震 *Wenchuan dadizhen*). According to the State Council Information Office, the death toll from the earthquake is approximately 70,000, with a total of 7,000 collapsed classrooms and approximately 10,000 of the nearly 70,000 confirmed deaths were of schoolchildren.[1] Accompanying this tragedy was a significant outpouring of donations and volunteers, leading many analysts to speculate that similar to the SARS crisis in 2003, relief and reconstruction efforts will strengthen civil society in China.[2] According to these arguments, participation in relief efforts increases civil society groups' capacity through an expanded volunteer and donor base, improves experience in project management, and demonstrates to the government the potentially positive role played by civil society. Additionally, group relief efforts create habits of trust and participation on behalf of the government, potential volunteers, and donors.

In this research report, I analyze these arguments through interviews with civil society groups, academics, journalists, and local government actors in Sichuan province conducted in June and July 2008, supplemented by a review of published articles. These interviewees were selected based on their role in relief efforts—those groups and government agencies participating in relief efforts. The interviewed groups consist of both domestic and international groups, with issue areas ranging from poverty alleviation to environmental concerns. This analysis is vital given the explosion of civil society activity in China in the last few years, albeit many groups with low capacity and effectiveness.[3] Based on my interviews, I argue that participation in relief efforts advanced civil society but also revealed remaining weaknesses that must be resolved for

civil society to consolidate these gains. In three areas of civil society capacity, mobilization ability, and relationship with local government, the initial outcomes of participation in relief efforts are janus-faced. Earthquake relief efforts illustrated the increasing project abilities and sources of funding available to civil society organizations, both important indicators of capacity. Additionally, groups demonstrated the ability to quickly mobilize a large volunteer base. While it is too early to tell if habits of volunteering and donating have been inculcated in society, relief efforts have allowed groups to begin to build trust with local government and citizens, many of whom are distrustful or ignorant of civil society. Furthermore, despite initial government mistrust and uncertainty, these groups demonstrated to local government that they do not wish to serve as a substitute for government, but as a complement. Partnering with local government created a potential model for local state-civil society cooperation that can be used in other provinces.

However, the prevalence of citizens and corporations contributing to relief efforts in an unorganized way, meaning individual participation instead of through civil society groups, illustrated the continuing trust and capacity deficit of these groups. Due to distrust of civil society groups or doubts as to their capacity, many Chinese citizens chose to bypass organized civil society and directly participate in relief efforts, or donate to the local government. In addition to this trust deficit, a number of problems emerged during initial relief efforts relating to group capacity, such as a lack of project management experience, adequate auditing processes, and professional or trained volunteers.

By clearly revealing civil society's strengths and weaknesses, relief efforts served as a learning process for both groups and government. Civil society groups learned how to work in a complementary fashion within government processes, coordinate activities among different civil society groups, and transmit information about their activities and needs to a wider audience through extensive use of the internet and media. Local government officials learned how quickly civil society groups could mobilize resources and how these groups could play a complementary role to government efforts that increased effectiveness and the reach of government resources. Through this learning process, remaining obstacles to the further strengthening of civil society were highlighted, namely trust and capacity weaknesses in civil society and their governing institutions which inhibit further development.

As I discuss in the concluding section of this research report, reforms institutionalizing groups' roles, increasing capacity, and improving trust between society, groups and the local state must be undertaken to consolidate gains and further strengthen civil society. The pressure for civil society to perform well is high, as poor performance could reverse these gains. First, civil society groups—both international and domestic—and other capacity-building organizations must focus on building human resources and professional skill levels. Second, local groups must also improve their ability to use internet technology and traditional media to increase information about their activities, funding and needs to a broader public, which also improves trust and awareness. And finally, the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA) must create new laws to govern civil society. Civil society groups need a formal, legal status in the political system, channels to access the

policy process, and ability to fundraise domestically. This process of institutionalization, while empowering civil society groups, also allows MOCA to more effectively regulate these groups and normalize their existing place in the Chinese social and political arenas.[4]

While these are only initial outcomes, it is clear that the cooperation between civil society groups, society and local government initiated a learning process allowing all actors to learn the strengths and weaknesses of the others, and to create a model of local state-civil society cooperation that can be followed again in the future. Civil society is more widely viewed as legitimate in Chinese society which is an important step forward, but these gains must be consolidated through group and institutional reform.

The Development of Civil Society in China

Since the 1980s, many organizations broadly called non-governmental or non-profit organizations (*minjianzuzhi* 民间组织; *shehuituanti* 社会团体;*feizhengfuzuzhi* 非政府组织; *feiyinglizuzhi* 非营利组织) formed to deliver services and advocate for certain groups in society. These organizations seek to address the concerns of the rural poor, migrants, rural women and other vulnerable groups through service delivery, local capacity building, legal advocacy and policy advocacy. Chinese civil society (公民社会 *gongmin shehui*) has dramatically increased since the mid 1990s in both the amount of registered groups and in participation numbers. As illustrated below, this associational revolution in China peaked first in 1996. Most of the literature examined below on Chinese civil society was written during this peak period from 1993 until 1996; however, since 1998, civil society has grown even more dramatically. While these statistics do not

capture death rates and only measure registered groups, most scholars believe the number

of active groups to far exceed the numbers reported by MOCA.[5]

Tables One and Two: Registered Civil Society Organizations in China[6]

Year	NGO	Social Group	NPO	Foundation
1988	4446	4446		
1989	4544	4544		
1990	10855	10855		
1991	82814	82814		
1992	154502	154502		
1993	167506	167506		
1994	174060	174060		
1995	180583	180583		
1996	184821	184821		
1997	181318	181318		
1998	165600	165600		
1999	142665	136764	5901	
2000	153322	130668	22654	
2001	210939	128805	82134	
2002	244509	133297	111212	
2003	266612	141167	124491	954
2004	289432	153359	135181	892

Number of Groups

■ NGO ☐ Social Group ☒ NPO
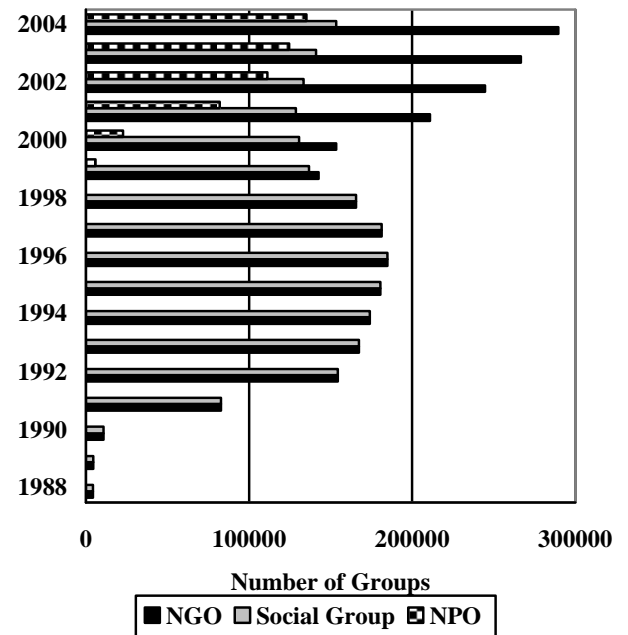
Due to space limitations, I only briefly outline the past debates on civil society in China.

Increasing participation in social groups in China and the success attributed to civil

society movements in the collapse of communism in Eastern and Central Europe led many

China scholars to investigate civil society's emergence in the early 1990s.[7] These

examinations were based on a model of civil society developed by Jürgen Habermas,

positing a public sphere autonomous from the state and composed of groups of voluntary

association. Habermas contends that establishing this ideal-type of civil society based on

the historical experiences of Western Europe is important as a heuristic for understanding

state-society relations.[8] The key criterion for this idealized civil society, one that plays an

oppositional role to the state and fosters democracy, is that the associations composing

civil society must be autonomous from the state. If civil society is not autonomous, it cannot allow the democratic will-formation for legitimizing or opposing state action. A public sphere of un-coerced action is necessary for the development of social trust upon which collective action rests.[9] The majority of scholars studying civil society concluded that associations did exist in China that sometimes served to oppose the state, but these associations did not fit Habermas' model in that they were not fully autonomous.[10] In fact, in 1996, a high official in MOCA estimated that less than 50 percent of groups were self-organized, self-supported, and self-governed.[11] Similarly, Chinese and Western analysis of the late 1990s based on autonomy from the state suggested that the majority of groups are semi-governmental.[12] Many scholars critiqued the search for civil society in China as impossible by either imposing a Western state-society model or as attempting to find an autonomous civil society that does not exist.[13]

Whereas past research largely found little autonomy from the state, recent research emphasizes the variation in autonomy in both mass and grass-roots organizations. Several scholars find that as the market transitions from centrally planned to market-based, workers in mass organizations like the Labor Federation have begun to not only "articulate its interests vis-à-vis the state, but their individual rights vis-à-vis the group."[14] The mass organizations have gradually begun to shift from state corporatism to a role of social representation, leading many to the conclusion that this is an area of emerging civil society in China.[15] Mass organizations are legally dependent on the state, while funding and issue/project decisions are increasingly more independent, leading to a more dynamic role for these organization than imagined under the state corporatism model. In addition

to the mass organizations structured by the government, many self-organized or grass-roots associations exist to promote members' interests in business, professional and social realms. There is great variation in the legal status of these associations, many of them are registered as social organizations (*minjian zuzhi* 民间组织), but many are unofficially associated with a university or operate informally. Howell contends that since the early 1990s, the creation of new forms of associations such as networks, centers, user groups, and projects can bypass the need for registration; however, the group's intentions still matter—if the group appears to have political goals the state will repress the group, but if the group appears beneficial local officials especially will cast a blind eye towards registration.[16]

Besides variation in legal autonomy, many groups rely on a diversity of funding, such as grants from INGOs (international non-governmental organizations), foundations, international organizations, foreign governments and businesses, and the Chinese government. This diversity of funding suggests that civil society organizations have some autonomy from the state. For example, recent research highlights that private business associations (*shanghui* 商会) are funded through membership dues and independently select issues to advance. Despite past analyses which questioned the ability of these groups to sustain collective action due to the lack of common identity among entrepreneurs, recently Scott Kennedy finds that membership in these groups is increasingly creating a common identity.[17] Kennedy argues that economic reforms created incentives for businesspeople to defend their interests, often by joining associations, but also by direct lobbying. Kennedy finds that these associations are

primarily voluntary, increasingly financially independent, not ordered hierarchically, and not unchallenged representatives of certain interests.[18] While Kennedy finds that these groups secure their own funding and develop their own issue agendas, he argues that a focus on civil society as autonomous from the state privileges separation as being more important than access to challenge the state, as well as privileging organized political action.

Similarly cultural organizations in China, one of the largest growing group categories, are composed of voluntary membership depending in large part on dues or donations. This category consists of groups organized to protect and promote cultural practices such as ethnic music, ethnic history/tradition, religion, traditional music or literature, and martial arts. These groups are increasingly popular, and are autonomous from the government although in some instances they might receive funding for a particular project from the local government. Lily Tsai recently explored how these groups actively seek to provide public goods and services to community members, using embedded relationships such as kinship ties.[19] As recent research illustrates, civil society in China—NGOs, private business associations and cultural groups—exercise varying degrees of autonomy through registration status, funding sources and in project decisions.[20]

In the past, analyses of civil society in China often relied on this dichotomous understanding of societal autonomy—civil society must either be completely autonomous similar to the Habermasian model, or completely co-opted similar to the state corporatism model. While many scholars contend that state corporatism no longer best describes

Chinese state-society relationship, many also contend that Chinese state-society

relationships also do not fit into a Habermasian model.[21] This leaves us with an obvious

dilemma which is that using group autonomy to define the model of state-society

relationships is inconclusive when group autonomy varies greatly. As described in the

preceding section, both mass organizations and grass-roots organizations vary on their

level of autonomy from the state, whether measured legally, by funding or by project

decisions/issue positions. This variance is not just seen in China, but also around the

world. In fact, Lester Saloman finds most Western governments fund NGOs at high

levels—Western European NGOs receive 56 percent of their funding from the state.[22]

Other scholars also have reservations about the use of autonomy to delineate state-society

relationships. For example, many question the notion that there exists a "bright line"

dividing state and society; in fact, as Neera Chandhoke argues, this line is blurred and

dynamic.[23] Thus the dichotomy between state and society is over idealized and in reality

a bright line separating state from society does not exist, instead state and society overlap.

For example, Timothy Brook argues that civil society in China should be thought of as a

spatial interaction between state and society, not as something between or autonomous

from either.[24] Alison Jaggar agrees with this conception, and argues that civil society is

"enmeshed with the state…in a complex, changing and co-dependent web of

relationships that are both oppositional and symbiotic."[25] Michael Walzer goes as far as

to reject the idea that civil society can exist without the state, saying "the state frames

civil society and occupies space within it. It fixes the boundary conditions and the basic

rules of all associational activity. It compels association members to think about a

common good beyond their own conceptions of the good life."[26] Given the necessity of

an interacting and overlapping state-society relationship, Gordon White argues "in brief,

the extent to which a specific social organization embodies the defining qualities of 'civil

society'—autonomy, separation and voluntariness—is a question of degree rather than

either/or."[27] This overlap implies the need for a more interactive approach to

understanding state-civil society relationships. Additionally, the use of an oppositional

model for state-society relationship overlooks the positive interaction potentially found in

more dynamic model. Using this conception, the relationship is one that is shifting,

contested and periodically accommodating or oppositional depending on the issue. For

example, Philip Huang envisions a "third realm" between state and society where a civil

society exists that is born of the interaction of the two.[28] In fact, full autonomy might not

be necessary for associations to play an oppositional role, simply 'relative autonomy.'[29]

A focus on state-civil society autonomy disregards that this is a dynamic space where

boundaries might shift, and both society and the state have influence.

Habermas' model concentrates on two aspects of civil society—state-society relationship

and the role of civil society. As explained above, this model as it has been elaborated by

other Western theorists posits an oppositional relationship between state and society, and

the role of civil society in acting in the public sphere to generate a democratic will and, if

necessary, to oppose the state to attain this will. Chinese civil society does not fit this

model well, but rather than debating the usefulness of imposing a model from one

historical context on another or categorizing all civil society in China as not in fact being

a civil society, I use the empirical richness of past research and my field research in

China to re-envision civil society as an action-based category.[30] The primary differences between an action-based definition of civil society and a Habermasian conception is first that the state-society relationship is theorized to be dynamic and contested, thus not dependent on autonomy as the primary determinant of this relationship but rather allowing for a relational view that includes varying degrees of partnership and collaboration. Second, an action-based definition of civil society focuses on the ability of civil society organizations to create social trust, collective action and civic participation. This definition allows us to move away from a model of autonomous and contentious state-society relationships that does not fit either the developed or developing world well, and toward a model of state-society collaboration that enables civil society to generate better governance and welfare outcomes.

Analyzing the role played by civil society in post-earthquake relief efforts allows us to trace this gradual development of civil society in China. As I discuss below, I first examine how relief efforts serve as a learning process for both civil society and local government, and then outline how civil society uses a strategy of cooperation with the local state to meet its service dfelivery and advocacy goals.

Participation without Formal Institutions

Immediately after the extent of earthquake devastation became clear, the Chinese Red Cross was able to quickly organize an action plan and receive government approval, but many local NGOs and INGOs (international non-governmental organizations) were not sure how best to deliver assistance or how to coordinate their activities with each other

and the local government. Thus groups were unable to coherently assist the relief efforts, had difficulty in gaining access to disaster areas, and duplicated other groups' efforts. While many groups, such as the Western Volunteers Association (西部志愿者 *Xibu Zhiyuanzhe*), have extensive networks of volunteers, they did not have the organizational capacity to mobilize and conduct relief efforts.[31]

To resolve these problems, the founders of the Chengdu Urban Rivers Research Group (成都城市河流研究会 *Chengdu Chengshi Heliu Yanjiuhui*) used personal connections in the government to meet with officials in charge of relief efforts to assess how they might effectively partner with the government. Through this meeting they convinced the government that they could coordinate the civil society community's activities through organizing a command structure called the Non-Governmental Relief Services Center with approximately 30 groups ranging from environmental to poverty alleviation to rural education groups ("5.12"民间救助服务中心 *5.12 Minjian Jiuzhu Fuwu Zhongxin*).[32] In addition to coordinating relief efforts and communication among civil society groups, this umbrella group served as the bridge between civil society and the local government by providing information, mediation, coordination, and securing access.[33]

The group used two methods to mobilize groups, resources and volunteers. First, the Chengdu Urban Rivers Research Group used their online platform (平台 - *pingtai*) to provide real-time information about relief needs and coordinate information and efforts between government, local NGOs, INGOs, volunteers and donors. Additionally, the group convened a meeting on May 15, 2008, to plan coordinated relief efforts with other

members of the umbrella group, and resolved issues such as creating a volunteer

database, training program and insurance plan. At the end of this meeting, the members

of the umbrella group met with the government to establish relief plans and tour the

disaster area together. Through this process, civil society groups organized themselves to

participate in relief efforts. The Center trained and provided volunteers to government

agencies or other groups' relief projects, collected financial and material resources from

society and delivered these to the disaster sites, and supported the troops with food,

medicine, and water. This assistance greatly supported the government's relief efforts,

and organized the large amounts of donations and volunteers that were quickly

overwhelming the local government.[34] In the following section, I examine how relief

efforts revealed increasing group capacity in terms of human and financial resources, as

well as continuing problems with professional project management and auditing skills.

The Capacity Deficit of Chinese Civil Society: Human and Financial Resources

Initial reports of civil society's role in relief efforts emphasized how the flows of

financial donations and materials strengthen civil society. By May 16, MOCA stated that

a total of 3.2 billion Chinese yuan of donations in cash and relief materials had been

received. The donations were roughly divided into 81.7 percent from domestic sources

and 18.3 percent from international sources, including foreign governments and

international organizations.

Despite this influx of aid, many of these domestic donations were not completely

voluntary. Lists of how much each company, agency, and famous individual donated

were publicly available on television and in most major newspapers. For example, basketball star Yao Ming was criticized in the media and online forums for offering half a million yuan donation which was not viewed as sufficient; in response, he quadrupled his donation.[35] At some companies, bosses also publicized names of employees who donated along with the amount donated.[36] The public pressure to donate large amounts was high, and many companies feared boycotts if not seen as generous in their giving. Additionally, most donations go directly to the local government or the Chinese Red Cross, and not to local civil society organizations. Although civil society groups have captured additional financial resources with which to assist in relief efforts, the majority of these resources is not voluntary and is not flowing through these groups, meaning that these lines of financing will not remain open in the future. Both of these factors raise serious questions as to the creation of a philanthropic corporate or social base that will increase future civil society capacity.

Analysts argue that relief efforts dramatically increased the human and financial resources of these groups, allowing them to play a larger role than many expected.[37] The volunteer base has significantly increased post-earthquake; however, most of these volunteers are student volunteers with little training and a lack of professional experience. Another common criticism is that these groups have little experience with relief efforts and do not have professionally trained project managers, which led to poorly coordinated initial relief efforts.[38] For example, many groups were not accustomed to cooperating with other groups or local government, and had conflicts with service-delivery methods and the government decision-making process.[39] Many civil society

professionals and academics recounted stories of groups that would turn away volunteers and donations simply because the group did not have the trained staff or work processes to handle them: "A local doctor called a civil society group he had heard was participating in relief efforts and offered to volunteer, but the group did not know how to deploy his skills so asked him to buy some water instead. Even though a doctor would have been useful, they couldn't make use of him."[40] The inability of civil society groups to manage the financial and human resources available illustrates the lack of skilled project managers and institutionalized processes of auditing, project management, and volunteer training. Additionally, as I discuss below, prospective volunteers and donors often bypassed civil society groups, reflecting a lack of trust and doubts of group capacity on the part of citizens and corporations.

In summary, participation in relief efforts highlighted both the improved capacity of groups as well as remaining capacity problems faced by these groups. For example, groups demonstrated their ability to respond quickly to crisis situations in moving funding and staff to the disaster site, even though their domestic fundraising activities were technically illegal at the time. Groups also dramatically expanded their ability to transmit real-time information by linking with online communities of volunteers and donors to spread information about their view of relief efforts and to commission donations. This increased ability to manage complex projects and to use the media to transmit information about their projects and their needs expands the capacity of groups. However, it is unclear that habits of donations were inculcated that would continue to fund these groups after reconstruction efforts. Additionally, there remain many questions

as to the capacity of these groups to effectively manage projects, especially regarding auditing and staffing practices. Therefore, while participation in relief efforts advanced group capacity in identifying funding sources and providing on-the-job training for staff in project management and accounting, significant capacity weaknesses remain in these areas that must be addressed in order for civil society to progress.

The Trust Deficit of Chinese Civil Society: Mobilizing Society

The presence of what many analysts are calling "informal civil society," meaning spontaneous unorganized social action, illustrates the difficulty for many groups in mobilizing society outside of existing networks.[41] A common explanation for why so many donors and volunteers bypassed existing civil society organizations is that these groups are seen as ineffective: "This kind of civil society, based not around formal organisations but around issues, can mobilise more people."[42] Another explanation is that corporations and citizens do not trust these groups, as evidenced by low trust levels in the World Values Surveys in China.[43] As one interviewee noted, "If an ordinary (老百姓 *laobaixing*) Chinese gives 100 kuai to a group, he wants to see that group spend 100 kuai on the activity. If the group uses any of that money for administrative costs, the ordinary Chinese thinks that is corruption."[44] Because trust for civil society is low and many doubt groups' capacity to undertake this work, a great deal of the donations and volunteers were not an organized response, but rather a spontaneous one to the tragedy.[45] While many older Chinese embrace what they see as the younger generation's return to traditions of community assistance from the materialism of the last two decades, this type of social action does not strengthen but rather undermines civil society.[46] If social action

takes place outside of organized civil society, these groups will find it difficult to increase their capacity or social trust levels.

Despite the presence of unorganized participation, many analysts argue that relief efforts created a strong volunteer base for civil society through feelings of social responsibility and habits of volunteering. As Jia Xijin, a scholar at the school of public policy and management at Tsinghua University explains, "It's good news for civil society. People are aware of their social responsibility."[47] Reporters described the outpouring of volunteer efforts as "the whole country seemed to mobilize for relief work, showing the generosity and sense of duty expected in a civil society. Thousands of volunteers went to the quake zone, and tens of billions in cash has poured into Sichuan Province. People queued at blood donation vehicles, and many are seeking to adopt quake orphans."[48]

Civil society groups actively worked to mobilize volunteers and donors, and while many participated through informal civil society, the unorganized volunteers and donations once arriving in Sichuan, were managed and coordinated by groups. As one government official observed, "All of these volunteers, money and materials flooded into the disaster zones. Anyone who had a van was trying to deliver materials to these places. It got very chaotic as the troops who were supposed to be doing relief efforts ended up taking care of the unorganized volunteers. Finally we asked the Red Cross and the NGO Relief Center to supervise these spontaneous volunteers and donations."[49] Groups trained and coordinated these volunteers, and developed a strong volunteer base for the future.[50] Many of these volunteers were college students; however, there were also a number of

young professionals who had never volunteered or interacted with civil society. While it is too early to tell if habits of volunteering and donating were internalized, participation in relief efforts (and perhaps also with the Olympics) created a more trained, diverse and socially responsible potential volunteer base.[51]

In addition to expanding their volunteer base, many groups who previously had not mobilized their networks of members—such as online clubs—learned how to mobilize members across great distances. For example, the Mothers Network (妈妈论坛 *mama luntan*), an online group of mothers who routinely discuss issues concerning children, mobilized in response to the earthquake and quickly gathered money and supplies from members.[52] One example of their relief efforts was to collect donated books and deliver them to the temporary schools established in the disaster areas. This case is particularly interesting given the explosion of online communities in China. Most analyses of civil society in political science ignore these groups or online clubs because they are formed for purely social reasons, not political ones, and do not occupy space in the physical world. However, in China these networks which form for social reasons can become politically relevant when a particular issue catches the membership's attention. The earthquake caused the members of the Mothers Network to provide relief efforts and discuss the issues facing the orphans and school children, as well as motivating the members to meet in person for the first time. The use of information technology dramatically increases the capacity of these groups, and shows the strong potential mobilization power of these organizations, even online clubs, especially over different regions.[53] This example illustrates the growth and potential strength of civil society;

however, this type of mobilization plays on government fears of spontaneous social mobilization not directed by the party. Although civil society, including online clubs, demonstrated the ability to mobilize new volunteers, the presence of unorganized participation illustrates the remaining trust and capacity deficit of these groups.

The Trust Deficit of Chinese Civil Society: Local Government Interaction

In addition to low levels of trust for civil society among the general population, local government in Sichuan also revealed distrust for these groups' intentions. The key doubt that many local officials possessed was succinctly summarized by one cadre: "if their funding is from overseas, what are the true motives of this group?" While one fear is that these groups intend to oppose the government, the more immediate fear is that groups want to substitute for government, and through this substitution reduce local government power and authority. Local officials feel threatened that the strengthening of civil society might create social disorder and erode their own power and authority, but also that many in the international community and at the central government view these groups as a substitute to local government. They feel threatened that people outside their province view their work as of poor quality and believe that civil society groups could do this work better. As one cadre explained, "Why would people say that local government has low capacity or doesn't understand the needs of our people? We are very professional and are able to accomplish most of our goals. I have worked and lived in this area all of my life, and no one [civil society groups] can do my job better than me or know better than me what the people need."[54]

However, there was tremendous pressure from the public, central government, and foreign governments to allow civil society groups to participate in relief efforts. This led to conflicting attempts to support groups which were deemed politically safe and to control groups which were not well known by the government. Compounding this distrust was the lack of understanding by local government of the role, capacity and work processes of civil society groups.[55] Additionally, the legal status and official role of civil society in China is unclear.[56] Uncertainty over which groups were appropriate to cooperate with delayed the participation of many groups until "bridge" groups such as the Non-Governmental Relief Services Center were established, with local government unwilling to grant permission to enter disaster sites, share information, or partner on relief efforts.

Despite initial mutual mistrust, relief efforts allowed both actors to understand more about how to work together in a complementary fashion to secure mutual goals (配合政府 *peihe zhengfu*). For example, civil society organizations supported the troops with water, medicine, and food, while the troops engaged in the more physical efforts of relief work.[57] Through cooperation the government recognized the need for group capacity building, and groups acknowledged the need for cooperation with the government and to increase their capacity, especially in managing funding and training staff.[58] Both sides realized that cooperation leads to amplification of efforts, money, resources, reach and legitimacy.[59] Partnering to deliver relief efforts helped build a more trusting relationship that can be used in the future between government and groups, and constructed a potential model of cooperation between groups and government. For

example, a Hong Kong-based relief organization first partnered with the government to deliver aid, and then partnered with a local NGO, bringing three actors together in one project.[60]

In addition to creating a potential model for local state-civil society cooperation, relief efforts constructed a model for the central government to better supervise groups.[61] In response to the large amounts of donations and public fears of corruption, the central government created new channels for supervising both the projects and funding of groups. The government increased information transparency about relief spending and death counts, and piloted a new supervision model that includes local government, MOCA and group representatives in a form of "mutual supervision."[62] For example, The National Audit Office, MOCA and State Council are supervising both local government and charities' use of relief funds and materials.[63]

Therefore, local state-civil society partnership during relief efforts served as a learning process for both sides creating models to deliver services and create accountability. To develop and deliver services, the local state-civil society cooperation model is characterized by the responsible government agency partnering with a high capacity group—usually an INGO or large domestic group often founded by a cadre—which then supervises smaller local groups. Additionally, this cooperation model also contains a mutual supervision system where civil society plays an active role in helping the central and provincial government supervise lower levels of government and civil society groups.

However, it is uncertain if these models will be extended to the rest of China due to fears of social disorder in the current political context. After the Tibetan protests in March 2008, MOCA worried about groups using international funding to oppose certain government policies and create social unrest. This worry was further heightened by angry parents protesting over school collapses after the earthquake.[64] As social unrest increased, local government pressured civil society organizations to not interact with parents.[65] MOCA is uncertain if groups would continue to play a social mediation role similar to the one during relief efforts, or a social mobilization role in opposition of government goals.

Implications for Strengthening Chinese Civil Society

Although earthquake relief efforts strengthened civil society in many ways, it also revealed problematic institutional and group weaknesses that must be remedied before civil society is truly strengthened.[66] Necessary reforms to improve the trust and capacity deficit of civil society organizations are increasing the trust of both government and society, strengthening auditing procedures, improving human resource capacity, and reforming laws about social group status, role in the policy process, donations, and registration.

First, civil society groups and international capacity-building organizations must focus on building human resources and professional skill levels. Groups need to build capacity specifically in transparent auditing processes and in professional NPO management

skills, especially project management. While many capacity building projects are

currently underway in China, this area must receive more funding and attention. Second,

in order to increase trust levels of civil society, groups must publicize their activities and

work processes. Many people in society and government do not understand how these

groups conduct projects or what their goals are in society. In addition to this ignorance,

many also distrust groups that are viewed as foreign proxies. Groups need to learn how

to use online platforms and media to broadcast their existence and activities in order to

increase the knowledge of and trust in these organizations, similar to the platforms

maintained by environmental groups.[67] Groups often do not advertise their activities for

fear of the government increasing monitoring; however, this publicity is necessary to

increase exposure, legitimacy and trust.

Third, MOCA must reform laws about social group status, role in the policy process,

donations, and registration. Current regulations maintain costly and difficult registration

procedures that most civil society groups do not understand, do not allow domestic

fundraising except for certain registered charities, and also do not legitimize a role for

these groups in either the social or political life of China.[68] The government needs to

alter rules on registration and fundraising to match the reality on the ground witnessed

during earthquake relief efforts.[69] One way to reform current laws about domestic

fundraising is to develop an independent "social auditing agency" to ensure that groups

handle donations properly. However, many experts argue that MOCA is wary of

institutionalizing the role of nongovernmental organizations, giving them a role that

could grow and provide a counterweight to the one-party state, especially since the color

revolutions: "The government is a little worried. The traditional way people participated in the past is through their work unit or through the party system. Now, other groups are arising to fulfill a social need."[70] However, in response to the development of civil society MOCA has created a new NGO management office, headed by a PhD who studied civil society at Tsinghua University, which is considering how best to reform the current laws.[71] Additionally, an even more difficult reform is how to institutionalize a role for these groups that allows these groups to play a beneficial role in society while establishing effective government supervision. One reform that is being piloted is a participatory budgeting process at the local level, which allows civil society groups to play an advocacy or voice role in the policy process.[72]

By clearly revealing civil society's strengths and weaknesses, relief efforts served as a learning process which highlighted obstacles to the further strengthening of civil society, namely trust and capacity weaknesses in civil society and their governing institutions which inhibit further development. Thus reforms institutionalizing groups' roles, increasing capacity, and improving trust between society, groups and the local state must be undertaken to consolidate gains and further strengthen civil society. However, participation in relief efforts strengthened civil society by increasing cooperation between civil society groups, society and local government creating a model of local state-civil society cooperation that can be used in the future.

Civil society in China is clearly playing an increasingly independent and important role in both service delivery and policy advocacy. The case of post-earthquake relief efforts

illustrates that civil society in China acts like civil society in many democracies, by identifying social needs, developing projects to address these unmet needs, and mobilizing resources from state, society and market. Despite using a local state-civil society cooperation model, civil society is acting independently and is not simply being coopted by the state. In fact, much of the cooperation was designed by civil society groups and imposed on the local government through international and domestic pressure. I find that this cooperation model is similar to the strategies used by many other civil society groups in China.[73] While this case illustrates the significant independent role of civil society in China, it also reveals the remaining obstacles to further development.

Interview Appendix

Identifying Code	Interview Date	Interview Location	Organization Description
SN1	July 16, 2008	Sichuan	Local NGO
SG2	July 16, 2008	Sichuan	Local government office
SI3	July 4, 2008	Sichuan	Local INGO
SR4	July 10, 2008	Sichuan	Journalist
SN5	July2, 2008	Sichuan	Online club
SN6	July 12, 2008	Sichuan	Local NGO
SG7	June 23, 2008	Sichuan	Central government office
SR8	July 11, 2008	Sichuan	Local NGO
NN1	June 11, 2008	Nanjing	Local NGO
BI1	June 19, 2008	Beijing	INGO
BR2	June 6, 2008	Beijing	Academic
BR3	June 2, 2008	Beijing	Academic
BR4	June 2, 2008	Beijing	Academic
BG5	July 21, 2008	Beijing	NGO
BG6	July 22, 2008	Beijing	INGO

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²   I use the common sociological definition of civil society in this report, whereby civil society is an aggregation of many different types of social organizations, all of whom have voluntary memberships.

³   Gordon White, "Prospects for Civil Society in China: A Case Study of Xiaoshan City," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, 1993.

⁴   According to interviews BR3 and BR4, this debate is already occurring in MOCA although the outcome is unclear; many in MOCA worry about giving too much power to social groups too quickly.

⁵   Li Yong, "Chinese NGOs Struggle for Survival," *Caijing* [Finance and Economics Magazine] 5 July 2002: 24.

⁶   Statistics are drawn from the Ministry of Civil Affairs. Please note that NGO is the category under which all groups are registered, although there are subcategories of social group, non-profit organization and foundation. Also foundations and social groups were only separate categories after 2002.

⁷   Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics: Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel*, New York: Free Press, 1992; Vladimir Tismaneanu, ed., *Revolutions of 1989*, New York: Routledge. 1999.

⁸   Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989.

⁹   Putnam.

¹⁰   Timothy Brook and B. Michael Frolic, "The Ambiguous Challenge of Civil Society," *Civil Society in China*, Timothy Brook and B. Michael Frolic, eds, New York: ME Sharpe, 1997; Heath Chamberlain, "On the Search for Civil Society in China," *Modern China* 19, April 1993: 199-215.

¹¹   Qiusha Ma, "The Governance of NGOs in China since 1978: How Much Autonomy?" *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 31, 2002: 305-330.

¹²   F. Li, *Jinqiaoqiao de geming*, *Zhongguo dangdai shimin shehui* [A silent revolution: China's contemporary civil society], Hong Kong: Mirror Publishing House, 1998, and J. Fisher, *Nongovernment: NGOs and the Political Development of the Third World*, West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1998, both use autonomy as a key feature of the nongovernmental sector and believe China has only a handful of true NGOs.

¹³   Philip Huang, "'Public Sphere'/'Civil Society' in China?: The Third Realm Between State and Society," *Modern China* 19, April 1993: 216-240; Francis Fukuyama, "Social Capital and the Global Economy: A Redrawn Map of the World," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 1995.

¹⁴   Mayfair Yang, "Between State and Society: The Construction of Corporateness in a Chinese Socialist Factory," *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 22, 1989: 31-60; Elizabeth Perry, "Labor's Battle for Political Space: The Role of Worker Associations in Contemporary China," Deborah Davis, Richard Kraus, Barry Naughton, and Elizabeth Perry, eds., *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995: 302-25; and Jeffrey Wasserstrom and Liu Xinyong, "Student Associations and Mass Movements," Deborah Davis, Richard Kraus, Barry Naughton, and Elizabeth Perry, eds., *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China*, New York: Cambridge University Press: 362-93.

¹⁵   Yunqiu Zhang, "From State Corporatism to Social Representation: Local Trade Unions in the Reform Years," *Civil Society in China*, Timothy Brook and B. Michael Frolic, eds, New York: ME Sharpe, 1997.

¹⁶   Howell, 151.

¹⁷   Scott Kennedy, *The Business of Lobbying in China*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005; Margaret Pearson, *China's New Business Elite: The Political Consequences of Economic Reform*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997; David Wank, "Civil Society in Communist China?" John Hall, ed., *Civil Society: Theory, History, and Comparison*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995: 74.

¹⁸   Kennedy, 44.

¹⁹   Lily Tsai, *Accountability without Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

²⁰   Thomas Gold, "Bases for Civil Society in Reform China," Kjeld Erik Brodsgaard and David Strand, eds, *Reconstructing Twentieth-Century China: State Control, Civil Society, and National Identity*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998: 164.

²¹   Jude Howell, "New Directions in Civil Society: Organizing around Marginalized Interests," *Governance in China*, Jude Howell, ed., Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004: 156; see also Scott Kennedy; for analysis stating that 'civil society' does not exist, see Francis Fukuyama,

"Social Capital and the Global Economy: A Redrawn Map of the World," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 1995; and Peter Ho, "Greening Without Conflict? Environmentalism, NGOs and Civil Society in China," *Development and Change* 32, 2001: 893–921.

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[32] Interview SN1.

[33] Jim Yardley and David Barboza, "Many Hands, Not Held by China, Aid in Quake," *The New York Times*, 20 May 2008.

[34] Interview SR4.

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[37] Interview BR2.

[38] Interviews SG2 and BG5.

[39] Interview SN1.

[40] Interview BG5.

[41] Interview SI3.

[42] Emma Graham-Harrison and Lindsay Beck, "China Quake Could Speed Growth of Ad-Hoc Activism," *Reuters*, 7 Jun 2008.

[43] See 4-Wave World Values Survey available at www.worldvaluessurvey.org.

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[45] Interview SG2.

[46] Interview SI3.

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[48] "Quake Relief Helps Civil Society Grow in China," *Xinhua News Agency*, 15 June 2008.

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[50] Interview NN1.

[51] Interview BI1.

[52] Interview SN5.

[53]   Guobin Yang, "The Internet and Civil Society in China: a Preliminary Assessment," *Journal of Contemporary China* 12, August 2003: 453–475.

[54]   Interview SG2.

[55]   Interview SR4.

[56]   Interview SI3.

[57]   Interview SN1.

[58]   Interview SR8.

[59]   Interview SN6.

[60]   Interview SI3.

[61]   Interview SG2.

[62]   Interviews SI3 and SG7.

[63]   Interview SG7. These auditing teams have found few problems; one being the vice-mayor of one of the "sister cities" for reconstruction, Anyang in Henan, was found guilty of mismanaging the purchase and distribution of tents and was fired.

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[71]   Interview BR4.

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