

Fostering Civil Society Through Community Empowerment: An Extended Case of the Sichuan Earthquake in China

Administration & Society

1–23

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DOI: 10.1177/0095399720910508

journals.sagepub.com/home/aas

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Abstract

How nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) enhance civil society development in China is underresearched while the extant literature centers on the government–NGO relationship. Applying the extended case method, this study explores how an NGO-facilitated community reconstruction program followed the community empowerment approach to foster local civil society in the wake of the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake. We argue that community reconstruction opened space for NGOs to nurture public spheres and residents' civic engagement, foster community organizing, and support community participation in local governance. The dynamics reveals the functioning and limitations of the community empowerment approach for civil society development in contemporary China.

Keywords

civil society, community empowerment, community reconstruction, nongovernmental organization, Sichuan Earthquake

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When the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake devastated West China, some nonprofit researchers (e.g., Gao & Yuan, 2008; Shieh & Deng, 2011; Zhu & Chen, 2009) optimistically expected a rise of civil society in China, claiming that the huge disaster would expand space for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to improve their capacity and legitimacy and even prompt the government to lift institutional restrictions on NGO development. Despite the striking participation of NGOs and other voluntary actions in response to the earthquake emergency relief, however, the pendulum of NGO development seemed to have soon swung to the other end in the following years. The state has gradually established a “social management” regime characteristic of state-controlled public participation and ideological disciplining, where service-oriented NGOs have been incorporated into the government-funded social service system and politically bridled while rights-based NGOs and campaigns have suffered harsh crackdowns (C. Hsu & Teets, 2016; Kang, 2018; Teets, 2015; Zhao et al., 2016). The promulgation of the 2016 Charity Law, the 2017 Overseas NGO Management Law, and a series of other NGO regulation policies concerning political disciplining and resource distribution has made the civil society environment so chilling in recent years that Kang (2018) warns of an approaching “neo-totalitarianism” in China when the state places the society under comprehensive yet adaptable control. So, is it still possible to build a healthy civil society in China? If yes, how could NGOs contribute to it in the current sociopolitical environment?

The concept of civil society has since the late 1980s caught Chinese intellectuals’ imagination about how to build an ideal state–society relationship, though its meaning is never clear-cut and has remained fluid (Béja, 2006; Deng & Alexander, 2006; Yu, 2006). The striking rise of NGOs in China after the mid-1990s has vitalized this imagination: The upsurge of autonomous and for-public-interest organizations should be able to reorganize the atomized society left by the collapse of totalitarian politics and thus help create a more capable, civilized, and democratic China. The ensuing emphasis on NGOs has resulted in a tendency in scholarly work that treats NGOs highly representative of, if not exactly the same as, the whole civil society (Ho, 2001; J. Y. Hsu, 2014; Spires, 2011; White, 1993; Zhang & Baum, 2004). But how NGOs contribute to the development of Chinese civil society has yet to be scrutinized, given that (a) NGOs are merely one, though critical, part of civil society (Anheier, 2004) and (b) not all NGOs are conducive to civil society (Foley & Edwards, 1996; Tvedt, 1998).

Through 4 years of community-based research within an NGO-led community reconstruction program after the Sichuan Earthquake, this extended case study explores how NGOs may foster civil society by applying a community empowerment approach in an authoritarian state context and examines

the boundaries of the approach. We argue that community reconstruction opened space for NGOs to nurture public spheres and residents' civic engagement, foster community organizing, and support community participation in local governance. The dynamics reveals the functioning and limits of the community empowerment approach for civil society development in China. But NGOs may risk the loss of organizational independence and the maintenance of unequal power relations due to its embeddedness in the state-dominated community settings, which in turn can cripple the growth of civil society.

Literature Review

NGOs and Civil Society Development

Civil society is "the sphere of institutions, organizations, and individuals located between the family, the state, and the market in which people associate voluntarily to advance common interests" (Anheier, 2004, p. 22). In the past century, the concept of civil society has been adopted across societies to reflect and support the pursuit of liberal democracy and sociocultural prosperity from a social reform perspective (Anheier, 2004; Diamond, 1994; Foley & Edwards, 1996). The concept was introduced into China in the early 1990s when the nation was at the juncture of post-communist social transition and has since been enthusiastically espoused by Chinese intellectuals (Deng & Alexander, 2006; J. Y. Hsu, 2014; Ma, 2005). Thus, the upsurge of NGOs after the mid-1990s soon preoccupied scholarly attentions as NGOs seem to perfectly represent the emergence of civil society: supposedly they are formally organized and thus competent actors for social change, institutionally separate from the government, self-governing, supportive of collective or public interests, and voluntary and free from coercion (Anheier, 2004; Martens, 2002). Consequently, research on NGOs, especially the state-NGO relationship, has been central in China's civil society studies in the past decades (J. Y. Hsu, 2014; Ma, 2005; Saich, 2000; Whiting, 1991), echoing the rise of an "inadequate, explicitly normative interpretation of NGO ideology" (Clarke, 1998, p. 40) for good governance and democracy development in the developing world. However, the mechanisms of NGOs nurturing civil society development are paid much less attention in the extant literature, though NGOs have increasingly been cast doubt on concerning their hypothesized association with civil society and democracy development (Edwards & Hulme, 1996; J. Y. Hsu et al., 2017; Mercer, 2002).

Mercer (2002) proposes that NGOs enhance civil society in three fashions, which sheds lights on the exploration of Chinese NGOs for building civil society. First, the growth of NGOs, by virtue of their existence as autonomous

organizations, can pluralize and strengthen the institutional arena. As Mercer (2002) claims,

More civic actors means more opportunities for a wider range of interest groups to have a “voice,” more autonomous organizations to act in a “watchdog” role vis-à-vis the state, and more opportunities for networking and creating alliances of civic actors to place pressure on the state. (p. 8)

Second, NGOs organize issue-based (and usually rights-oriented) advocacies, litigations, and social movements to check state power and improve the institutional environment. In the vanguard of civil society, NGOs are expected to “check state power by challenging its autonomy at both national and local scales, pressing for change and developing an alternative set of perspectives and policies” (Mercer, 2002, p. 9). Third, by basing their work in the communities, NGOs empower disadvantaged groups and represent their interests, improve citizen participation, and transform power structure at the local level so as to make social and political changes (Atack, 1999; Zimmerman, 2000).

However, in China the state’s differentiated control on NGOs based on their capacity of challenging the state and the type of public goods they provide (Kang & Han, 2008) has largely compromised the pluralization effect of NGO growth (e.g., C. Hsu & Teets, 2016; Teets, 2013; Zhao et al., 2016) and made almost impossible any NGO efforts of holding the state accountable, as often seen in the raids on rights-based organizations and activists in recent years (e.g., Teets, 2015; Yuen, 2015). Consequently, researchers see the community as the very place of hope for building a healthy civil society in China (He, 2009; Li, 2007), whereby NGOs supposedly can nurture residents’ civic spirits and engagement, foster grassroots organizations, and create public sphere for various social forces to participate in local governance. But few previous China studies empirically examined how NGOs may practice the community empowerment approach, which this study will address.

The Sichuan Earthquake and Civil Society Development

A primary challenge to community empowerment is to address the existing power relations within and beyond the community (Fisher, 1997; Williams, 2004). A failure often resulted in the emphasis on technical issues and the rhetoric of community participation, which have brought the crisis of NGO accountability into prominence in the past decades (Atack, 1999; Bendell, 2006).

However, community empowerment is a dynamic political process which involves multiple civil society stakeholders such as the state, community organizations, NGOs, and even local businesses, and the process is relative and reversible (Bebbington, 1997). Public crises or new policy initiatives

often serve to open a policy window (Kingdon, 1995) to engage these stakeholders in their collaborative response to community needs, empower community, enhance institutional arrangements, and foster local civil society (Gaventa, 2004). For example, Oliver-Smith (1996) argues that “disasters create contexts in which power relations and arrangements can be more clearly perceived and confronted, which transforms political consciousness, shapes individual actions, and strengthens or dissolves institutional power arrangements” (p. 309).

Therefore, the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake, while devastating West China, was expected to bring up opportunities favorable for NGO participation, community empowerment, and civil society development. Shieh and Deng (2011) argue that NGOs’ participation in emergency relief opened space for improving their capacity and legitimacy and might stimulate policy change concerning NGOs’ registration, fundraising, and operations. Xu (2014) claims that the earthquake created a situational opening for civic engagement, which is “characterized by challenges to the state’s managerial capacity, a critical need for civil society’s services, a general agreement on priorities and goals, and the state’s efforts to construct a morally respectable image” (p. 91). However, Xu also noticed the inertia of the institutional environment and foresaw the marginalization of NGOs in post-disaster community reconstruction, which was confirmed in Sorace’s (2014) study. Teets (2009) likewise warns that NGOs still suffer from the deficit of capacity, the deficit of trust from the public, and the deficit of interaction with local governments. Zhu and Hu’s (2011) study exceptionally explored NGOs’ engagement in community reconstruction in pursuit of participatory governance but just unveiled the state’s manipulation of NGOs and survivors for state-controlled reconstruction. In general, while most studies focused on NGO participation in emergency relief and its implications for civil society development, few examined how NGOs were engaged in community reconstruction and might enhance civil society in the community settings.

To bridge the research gap of community empowerment in Chinese civil society studies, this study examines how NGOs took the community empowerment approach to foster local civil society by situating an NGO-led community reconstruction program within the post-disaster settings in the wake of the Sichuan Earthquake.

Method and Data

The Research Site

The Bai neighborhood, with 1,500 registered residents, is located in Long Town, a rural part of the greater Chengdu. In the 1950s the central government

founded a state-owned mining firm in the town and recruited workers all around the country. In its peak days of the 1960s, the firm was staffed by about 3,000 workers, whose families constituted the neighborhood population. When the firm went bankrupt in 2002, all workers were laid off and fell into poverty. As young and middle-aged residents sought jobs outside the town, the elderly and children were regular residents who either spent their retirement days or went to nearby schools. About one fourth of residents sold their houses and moved to cities. After the firm's bankruptcy, disagreements over layoff benefits and distribution of the firm's residual assets led to conflict and distrust between residents and the township government. A declining community, Bai had no theater, no gym, no museum, and no philanthropic organization to provide public services. In short, there were few foundations on which to build a civil society.

The magnitude 8 Sichuan Earthquake of 2008 ruined Bai, killing 14 persons and destroying almost all residents' houses. Losing all their possessions during the earthquake, residents lived in crowded tents and received limited food, clothes, and other everyday provisions from governmental allotments. Without house insurance or employment opportunities, they were faced with a dim future in terms of community reconstruction.

Two months after the earthquake, the first two authors, who represented a nonprofit research institute, arrived in Bai where they were joined by a few professionals from other three NGOs. A community-based recovery program, New Hometown Plan (NHP), was launched jointly by four NGOs to help earthquake survivors recover from the disaster and pursue sustainable redevelopment by nurturing local civil society. The program office was located in the neighborhood and staffed by the NGOs' volunteers and employees who also lived in the neighborhood to closely work with earthquake survivors.

The Extended Case Method (ECM)

ECM originated from the Manchester School of social ethnography in the 1960s (Evans & Handelman, 2006) and has been greatly advanced by Michael Burawoy (1998; Burawoy et al., 1991). For Burawoy, the core of ECM is to "examine how the social situation is shaped by external forces" in a given case (such as organization, neighborhood, or social event) by adopting reflexive inquiry (Burawoy et al., 1991, p. 6). This method provides a prominent solution to the problem of generalization in case study research. Burawoy (1998) raises four phases of applying ECM: (a) *extending the observer to the participant* as "interventions create perturbations that are not noise to be expurgated but music to be appreciated, transmitting the hidden secrets of the participant's world" (p. 14)¹; (b) *extending observations over space and time*

to aggregate situational knowledge into social process; (c) *extending out from process to force* to examine the external field that conditions social process; and (d) *extending theory* to refine and reconstruct social theory. Following the ECM model, we started our research with empowering earthquake survivors in community recovery, examined our community empowerment by situating it into the community settings, analyzed the major social forces that shaped the community settings, and reflected upon the community empowerment approach for civil society development in contemporary China.

Participant observation was our primary method for data collection (Burawoy, 1998). As president of NHP's steering committee between 2008 and 2012, the second author initiated NHP with other NGO leaders and played important roles in program planning, partnership management, and fundraising. The first author served as NHP's on-site coordinator twice between August 2008 and July 2011 and as program consultant in the remaining period of time. Our long-term significant presence in the field enabled us to observe from the inside the interplay between local governments, NGOs, earthquake survivors, media, and the public.

Unstructured interviews were conducted between July 2008 and December 2012 with 85 interviewees, including 16 NGO professionals and volunteers, four government officials, five neighborhood cadres, and 58 residents. Some were interviewed multiple times. In addition, archival data were collected between July 2008 and December 2012, and included NHP's archives, government documents, neighborhood archives, and news coverage.

Given the high ethical requirements of disaster settings, during data collection the authors rigidly followed the five principles developed by O'Mathúna (2010): appreciating vulnerability among research participants, balancing benefit and burden, avoiding coercion, taking no rush to research, and protecting research participants as the priority. Also, measures (see Gelling & Munn-Giddings, 2011) were taken to enhance scientific validity such as strategically selecting research participants, including participants in data collection and analysis, triangulating data reliability with different stakeholders, and performing long-term observation in the affected region.

Results

In this section, we begin by introducing the case of NHP in community reconstruction (Zhu & Hu, 2011). Following that we extend the case to its community settings, the social processes in which NHP was embedded, and then identify the social forces and power relations that were woven into the social processes and shaped the state-civil society relationship at the community level.

NHP: A Case of Community Empowerment in Community Reconstruction

NHP lasted nearly 4 years from 2008 to 2012. The basic idea was to assist survivors in disaster recovery and empower them to build community capacity for sustainable redevelopment. These efforts could be divided into three phases as follows.

Phase 1: The volunteer station (July 2008–December 2008). The central government accepted and acknowledged the participation of volunteer groups and NGOs in rescue and emergency aid after the Sichuan Earthquake occurred (Xu, 2014). This laid a good foundation for the local government to continue receiving NGOs after emergency aid ended. In addition, when temporary resettlement began in Long Town, the local government found that NGOs' assistance was still very helpful due to a great deal of survivor needs.

After its entry into the Bai neighborhood, NHP soon conducted a participatory needs assessment that engaged 100 or so residents and cadres to identify survivors' needs and available resources. That assessment identified short-term needs of child care, elderly health, public hygiene, and social life and long-term needs of elderly care, housing, and employment. Considering its limited fundraising capacity, NHP decided to focus on delivering services and fostering community participation rather than funding housing and public facilities in post-disaster reconstruction. A three-phase community empowerment strategy was then developed: (a) in Phase 1, NHP would lead community recovery initiatives; (b) in Phase 2, NHP would focus on strengthening community capacity and co-lead community initiatives with local residents; and (c) when the community was fully prepared in self-government, in Phase 3 NHP would transfer all leadership responsibilities and exit.

Following this strategy, NHP soon established a volunteer station to provide child care, public hygiene, and elderly care in the first months after the earthquake. We recruited about 10 volunteers from outside the neighborhood who would serve 3–6 months at the station. The major activities included summer classes in painting, English, and handcraft for children; a temporary community bookroom; a tea house that was equipped with TVs and DVD players to entertain residents and help their psychological recovery; and frequent visits to the elderly who had no offspring living nearby. NHP also raised relief materials such as bedclothes and food to assist survivors' daily life. These efforts directly benefited around 200 residents and meanwhile generated social space for residents' social life when they actively participated in our activities and communicated with and helped each other in terms of mental health, daily necessities, and post-disaster recovery. By responding

to residents' needs and interacting with them in these shared spaces, our work also enhanced trust from both residents and the town government whose officials often visited NHP's office and thanked for volunteers' efforts.

Phase 2: The Bai community service center (January–December 2009). Five months after the earthquake, survivors moved from tents to removable houses that were built and allocated by the government. They waited for specific reconstruction (especially house rebuilding) policies that were being developed by the government.

NHP also moved with them. We adjusted our intervention method, shifting from NGO-led public services to beneficiary participation in service provision. Specifically, we developed a plan that aimed to empower residents by improving their quality of life, abilities, and access to decision making for the forthcoming community reconstruction. This plan included the following: (a) Enhancing public services and public sphere. NHP helped establish a community service center which was run by a joint team of external volunteers and resident volunteers. It consisted of a small square, training classroom, public shower room, tea house, community library, and internet café. This center soon became a hub for residents' social life where they did exercises, reading, entertainment, making friends, and having meetings. With 20 to 40 visitors on an average day, the center's services reached an estimate of 80% of the neighborhood population during its period of existence. (b) Promoting community organizations and volunteerism. We encouraged and funded residents to meet their needs in arts, culture, and community services by volunteering and establishing self-help groups. With our financial support, some residents launched public projects such as repairing the drainage system, repaving a trail, building a public shower room, and establishing a dancing club, in which around 200 residents volunteered. (c) Improving resident participation in decision making. We helped the community to launch a regular assembly where all residents were encouraged to discuss public projects they needed, directly involving around 100 residents. Meanwhile, a special committee of 5 to 7 members composed of resident representatives, volunteer representatives, and neighborhood cadres was established to execute the assembly's decisions.

When residents' self-help and self-management abilities were well developed, NHP volunteers' primary work shifted from service delivery to giving advice on developing community agendas, mobilizing resources, organizing meetings, supervising finance management, and settling conflicts. The government continued their support for NHP. They even allocated several removable rooms for NHP's use in office and lodging. At this point it seemed that our community empowerment strategy was working well.

Phase 3: The center for social work development (January 2010–May 2012). Having succeeded in the first two steps of community empowerment, we began to experience difficulties on the way to the third one. First, residents' self-management capacity was still weak: In one attempt of transferring the leadership of the community service center to residents, we soon found that most community utilities were closed due to poor coordination among resident volunteers. Second, the principles of transparency and participation in decision making, which we had always exemplified and advocated, were not substantially adopted by the town government and neighborhood cadres. They were applied primarily in the projects and activities NHP managed or intervened in. Furthermore, with survivors' gradual return to their normal life from the disaster and with the start of government-sponsored reconstruction projects, our community work had become increasingly disconnected from residents' major concerns. We could not deal with their challenges in housing and employment due to political sensitiveness and limited resources. With a striking loss of participants, we soon found we could not effectively convene the assembly meeting that had been regarded as the stepping stone for community self-government.

All these obstacles made the third step of our strategy, community-led reconstruction and redevelopment, unfeasible. To adapt to the environment change, we adjusted this strategy in 2010 by reducing resident participation efforts but maintaining service provision. Our plan was to endure the house rebuilding period, a politically sensitive period, and restart our empowerment strategy in the rebuilt neighborhood in the future. The community assembly gradually dissolved. Nonetheless, NHP continued to work closely with residents in maintaining the community service center and even explored new projects concerning elderly care and women's employment readiness. In addition, we registered the program as an independent NGO, which continued NHP's work and provided legal support for our efforts in Bai.

However, our newly born NGO could neither raise adequate funds (from foundations) nor obtain strong government support for the community. The town government was concerned that the survivors' distrust and grievance toward them, as accumulated during post-disaster reconstruction, might converge with our empowerment approach and produce resistance or even group protest in the future. At the same time, many charitable foundations shifted their grantmaking strategy to rural neighborhoods which were regarded more disadvantaged than town areas like Bai. After nearly 4 years of community reconstruction efforts, NHP finally left Bai in May 2012.

The Community Settings Beyond NHP

By situating NHP's community empowerment in the broad settings of community reconstruction, we find that NHP's work was embedded into and

shaped by a series of social processes within and beyond Bai, including centralized community reconstruction, planned urbanization, and reinforced social control.

Government-managed community reconstruction. The government-led post-disaster reconstruction emphasized centralized decision-making, intensive government investment, and quick solutions. Four months after the earthquake, the central government (PRC State Council, 2008) released a master plan about post-earthquake reconstruction and decided to invest ¥10 trillion in reconstruction issues. Furthermore, in 2010 the Sichuan Provincial Government compressed the original 3-year reconstruction plan into a 2-year one.

The government managed the construction of all infrastructure and public facilities and controlled the rebuilding of private houses. Under the arrangement of upper governments, a construction firm affiliated with the military began to help the Long Town government rebuild highways and public buildings, and another city launched its pairing-aid projects including roads, bridges, and a drinking water plant. Meanwhile, the town government decided that Bai should apply the “government-conducted redevelopment (*tonggui tongjian*)” approach to rebuild their house. Specifically, the town government would make all decisions on house rebuilding on behalf of survivors such as determining location, collecting funds, contracting construction firms, and supervising construction progress. But the government covered 30% to 50% of the construction expenses and required survivors to pay the remaining. All that survivors could do was to pay their portion and wait to move into their new homes.

To finish reconstruction within the time frame of 2 to 3 years, the local government placed the highest priority on physical reconstruction but ignored social and cultural restoration. The policy preference left little room for the participation of survivors and NGOs. Any collective action seen as unfavorable for reconstruction would be hindered or even harshly punished. With intense government investments and top-down coordination among government agencies, state-affiliated enterprises, and survivors, Long Town barely finished the restoring and rebuilding of public infrastructure, public facilities, and private houses by early 2012.

Combining urbanization with reconstruction. The government’s response to the earthquake occurred on a larger policy agenda. Specifically, since 2004 the greater Chengdu government had been implementing its urban–rural integration policy to accelerate the government-led urbanization (CCP Chengdu Committee, 2004). In line with this policy, the Long government had planned in 2006 to displace all Bai residents in order to use their location to develop a transportation center, a shopping mall, and hotels to boost the local tourist

economy. However, this plan was stalled due to residents' resistance and considerable development costs.

The Sichuan Earthquake broke this deadlock for the town government. As almost all houses were destroyed and uninhabitable after the disaster, the government did not incur costs of razing the houses and displacing residents. Thus, a post-earthquake reconstruction plan that was released by the Long government in July 2008 simply replaced the previous urbanization plan. According to this reconstruction plan, Bai residents would be displaced to a nearby government-owned riverbank to rebuild the neighborhood and their current downtown land would be sold to private developers for building a business district. But the government gave no consideration of paying homeowners any compensation for their loss in land value, arguing that the resettlement was due to post-disaster reconstruction instead of business development. Some residents voiced strong opposition to this proposal. However, most residents finally yielded given their high need of a new home. They accepted the government's plan and moved into the new neighborhood, and the government began working with potential real-estate developers to develop the planned business district. This situation of resident relocation and business development presented great challenges for the NHP's efforts. For one thing, the town government's actions stimulated a few residents to reflect and act to defend their propriety rights, one basic element of citizenship NGOs espoused and advocated. For another, the government-survivor tension made NGO intervention politically sensitive as the township government clearly warned NHP of assisting survivors in resettlement issues.

Social stability and social control. Social conflicts and group protests were prominent in the earthquake-hit regions due to controversies over the accountability for man-made losses during the catastrophe and disputes in the reconstruction process (Lin, 2012). In response to the unrests, local governments placed high priority on reinforcing social control.

First, the government improved the neighborhood administration system. It strengthened the *juweihui* (residents' committee), the neighborhood governing body, by better equipping their workplace and enhancing *juweihui* members' benefit packages on one hand and assigned them many new responsibilities such as monitoring residents' opinions, collecting information about disaster loss and survivors' needs, and assisting in executing reconstruction policies on the other. In addition, a new neighborhood governing body, *shequ yishihui* (standing committee of the neighborhood congress), was established and composed of residents-elected representatives so as to widely engage residents in neighborhood administration and check and balance the *juweihui*. But as the town government put the *juweihui* under its wing, the *shequ yishihui* proved to operate on paper till our departure from Bai.

Second, special measures were taken to improve government supervision of “social instability factors” in the earthquake-hit regions. To control potential unrest, the municipal government had since spring 2010 sent officials daily to every neighborhood (including Bai) to perform “on-the-spot-supervision” over any suspected events or figures. In addition, the government reinforced the monitoring of NGOs. Although having warmly welcomed NGOs’ participation in emergency relief, the government soon shifted to the concern on social instability in order to show a great nation to the globe when the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games took place. Local governments in quake-hit regions began to restrain volunteer groups and expel unregistered, distrusted organizations. We observed that the number of NGOs working in those regions reduced from 300 to 50 or so one year after the earthquake. After the Olympic Games, some local governments recognized the importance of volunteerism for affected communities and began to foster government-affiliated volunteer organizations. NGOs also gradually recovered prominence in the earthquake-affected areas.

The State, Survivors, and NGOs in the Community

This section presents how the work of government, residents and community organizations, and NGOs in the community settings together shaped civil society at the community level.

The state: Rebuilding legitimacy through domination and participation. Taking advantage of community reconstruction, the state attempted to rebuild its legitimacy by performing socioeconomic and political domination over the community. However, it had to allow limited community participation in order to win the public’s support and trust. This paradox left room for the limited participation of survivors and NGOs.

The state established a top-down, centralized planning system for post-disaster reconstruction. In the quake-hit regions, governments of different levels developed reconstruction plans that covered all important aspects of local society such as the development of land and natural resources, layout of housing and public facilities, business and manufacturing, public service delivery, and strengthening of government and community organizations. There was a clear rule that the plan of a lower government was made according to and subject to that of a higher government. On the contrary, the state made a great promise of helping survivors with livelihood recovery that in the affected region, “every family have a house, every household enjoy employment, and everyone is protected by social security” within 3 years after the Earthquake. It made great efforts to keep the promise and to demonstrate its power and superiority as a socialist regime in terms of protecting “the masses.”

However, realizing the impossibility of absolute control over the community, the state also turned to the power of law and market, and allowed survivors' limited participation. In fact, the reconstruction plans, though formulated by the government system, were given a quasi-law status according to the 2007 Urban and Rural Planning Law to justify its legitimacy. For example, when asked by survivors to allow rebuilding their homes on the downtown land, the mayor answered, "No, you cannot do that. The prerequisite of rebuilding homes is that you must observe the (reconstruction) plan." In addition, marketization was seen a basic principle in the earthquake reconstruction financing. The government employed various market-oriented measures such as encouraging private investment in redevelopment, offering interest subsidies and tax reduction for enterprises as well as advancing the trading of construction land ration.

The participation of NGOs and volunteers was necessary in the emergency relief phase because local governments were unprepared for the enormity of the task (Shieh & Deng, 2011; Xu, 2014). Given its importance, the central government claimed in the 2008 Regulations on Post-Wenchuan Earthquake Rehabilitation and Reconstruction that one principle of reconstruction would be "combining government leadership and public participation." However, it was the local government that decided how to apply this unspecified principle. For example, in Bai, the government bypassed survivors when developing reconstruction plans but had to ask for survivors' participation in the implementation of the plans such as dismantling endangered houses and enrolling survivors in the government's housing project. And it accepted NGOs' assistance in relieving survivors' suffering but only to the extent that NGOs' activities would not challenge the government's reconstruction work.

Survivors: Rising civic engagement. The state's dominance in emergency relief and post-disaster reconstruction aroused a complex feeling among survivors that mixed socialist beliefs and market values. In affected areas, almost all residential housing and ancillary properties were not insured for earthquakes, and the government's responsibility to aid was not specified in any law or public policy. So, while receiving aid, most survivors responded by saying "*ganxie guojia* (thank our government)!" Some former workers of the mining firm, however, requested that the state assume all reconstruction responsibilities because it is a socialist regime for which they had worked for many years.

Other survivors nevertheless appealed to their private property rights to resist the government's reconstruction plan and maximize their benefits. For example, a dozen households in Bai refused the government-planned relocation and painted on their damaged houses warning slogans like "No moving my private property without consent." Some residents demanded the right to

share future land appreciation and organized several collective negotiations with the town government, though to no avail.

On the contrary, participating in the dynamics created by voluntary association and mutual help greatly improved survivors' civic engagement in the community. First, survivors actively participated in decision making about public affairs rather than merely followed the *juweihui* as in the past. For example, after the public shower rooms were built in the community service center, with NHP's assistance the residents had a plenary meeting to decide how to manage them (e.g., charging users, cleaning the rooms, and maintaining the facilities). They selected one trustworthy resident as manager and made rules for all resident users to follow.

Second, volunteerism had caught on in the community. The community service center that was mainly staffed by resident volunteers played a critical role in delivering services regarding public health, culture and education, and elderly care. They also joined voluntary efforts to rebuild their community's infrastructure such as roads, public gardens, and public bathrooms. For example, they mobilized resident volunteers to repave the neighborhood roads 3 times. Each time about 30 residents participated.

Third, survivors established voluntary associations to produce collective goods within the community. For example, some proposed to build one more public shower unit, which was then funded by NHP. A special task force of three resident volunteers was formed to execute this project such as purchasing materials, installment, and everyday operations. This public shower unit ran well till its disclosure due to neighborhood relocation. Another community organization, the self-governed art club, played an active role in enriching survivors' cultural life. It remained active even after NHP's withdrawal from Bai, organizing regular performances (for free) by collaborating with the *juweihui* and the town government.

NGOs: Active yet weak. Despite a moderate increase in numbers, NGOs engaged in community reconstruction continued to face institutional obstacles including shortage of financial and human resources, registration difficulties, and political pressure, unlike what had been expected earlier in the emergency relief (e.g., Shieh & Deng, 2011).

NHP was established as a volunteer group, staffed by external volunteers and employees from the founding organizations. It was unable to hire full-time employees until 2 years later due to capacity deficit. The shortage of full-time employees negatively affected the stability of the work team and program performance. In its less than 4 years in Bai, NHP changed five CEOs, which led to significant discontinuity in program strategies and executions, as reflected in volunteers' work log and program evaluation reports.

Another difficulty involved legal status. The four founding NGOs first signed an agreement to entrust its legal affairs to a local registered partner when NHP was a volunteer group. Two years later, another partner mobilized its social network in the municipal government and managed to register NHP as a nonprofit organization. A board of directors consisting of representatives from the founding NGOs and the neighborhood was established, the management structure was adjusted, and a new work team was formed, staffed by three volunteer-turned employees. These measures effectively improved NHP's legal status.

However, political pressure, though sometimes invisible, was always present. In this situation NGOs became accustomed to self-monitoring. Shortly after entering Bai, NHP developed codes of conduct for staffers to avoid politically sensitive issues, including not using democratization-related expressions or criticizing the state in any activities, not getting involved in *juweihui* elections, and asking for the government's permission before receiving grants or visitors from outside China. NHP also decided to avoid intervening in the government-survivor conflict about housing and redevelopment. Such strategies were partially successful. NHP avoided being ostracized which occurred very often among NGOs in other earthquake-hit areas. Instead, town government officials often attended community activities organized by NHP. The positive relationship culminated when NHP and the township government signed an official partnership agreement in 2010 that stated the government's responsibility of supporting NHP in terms of legal and administrative issues.

However, the government's trust proved to be conditional and fluid. After Bai was relocated, the government became unwilling to have NHP move with the survivors out of fear that NHP's continuous engagement might further empower them to mobilize their grievances accumulated in the reconstruction and resettlement process. Instead, they invited NHP to relocate its projects to other Long Town neighborhoods. This largely contributed to NHP's decision to withdraw from Bai in May 2012, 4 years after the earthquake. The four founding NGOs consequently detached from NHP and left Long Town. Now an independent local NGO, NHP succeeded the government partnership and planned to work in other neighborhoods of the town.

On the other hand, NHP paid the price in a decline in residents' trust as a result of its cautious strategy. Its risk aversion undermined its capacity in community organizing, as an NHP employee commented at an internal meeting (Zhu & Hu, 2011, p. 18):

In the past, we did not face the tension between residents and the government. Residents were most concerned about their new home. When we avoided this

problem, or merely told them that we were unable to give help, they said they understood our situation. But when they had more complaints against government (and were going to resist), they excluded us from their plans.

Reflections on Community Empowerment and Civil Society

The Sichuan Earthquake opened transient space for NGOs to practice community empowerment in the affected neighborhoods. The government's unpreparedness for the huge disaster enabled NGOs which had been prohibited from disaster management to provide emergency aid to survivors. When the government was preoccupied with reconstruction planning, NGOs like NHP widened community participation by developing community service projects and even partially institutionalized such participation by organizing survivors to address community needs through collective action. But the space of community participation contracted as the government launched its comprehensive community reconstruction program and demanded compliance from both NGOs and survivors. Finally, only trusted NGOs were saved and supported to provide social services when community reconstruction was finished and the government strengthened its governing capacity in the rebuilt neighborhood. This study presents the resilience and dominance of state power in the community, which thus sets the boundaries of NGOs' community empowerment efforts. In this sense, it seems to echo the institutional determinism that social actors, with their interest and power being institutionally constructed, are merely the product of their environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991).

However, institutional change theory (Seo & Creed, 2002) argues for the agency of actor for changing institutions because institutions are not only constraints on action but also the objects of constant maintenance or modification through action (Giddens, 1984). Specifically, institutional entrepreneurs (in this study the NGOs) may exploit contextual characteristics and their own positions to seek for institutional change by building consciousness, developing a vision, mobilizing allies, and motivating them to achieve and sustain the vision (Battilana et al., 2009). From an institutional change perspective, the community empowerment approach still has strengths for NGOs to nurture local civil society in contemporary China, as revealed in the NHP case.

First, this approach can nurture civic engagement among residents by promoting civic values, training public participation skills, and facilitating residents' participation in neighborhood public affairs so as to develop their "habits of heart" and make them active citizens (Wang et al., 2017). For example, NHP promoted volunteerism and mutuality by encouraging Bai residents to volunteer to provide collective goods and help disadvantaged

people; improved community leaders' skills of communication, management, and accountability by engaging them in project management; and supported them to take collective actions to meet community needs.

Second, this approach allows legitimacy for NGOs to take advantage of state-supported neighborhood institutions to engage local people, build community capacity, and enhance community participation. Facing the growing dislocation, social ruptures and disparities in the Chinese society, and their challenges to state legitimacy, the state has increasingly stressed good neighborhood governance by supporting neighborhood organizations and encouraging residents' controllable participation in neighborhood public affairs to preserve social stability (Bray, 2006). This created institutional space for NGOs to foster autonomous grassroots associations and collective actions to practice self-governing, participate in state-led neighborhood governance, build social capital, and shape community power relations. Such institutional space partly explains why NHP managed to establish various resident organizations in Bai, register itself as a local NGO, and still was backed by the town government.

Third, this approach facilitates NGOs to build partnership with local government and engage in local governance. When focusing on local development issues, NGOs seek local resources to address community concerns instead of fulfilling a universal right claim to hold the state accountable. Local governments are often important resource providers and strategic partners (e.g., Teets, 2013; Zhao et al., 2016). And the partnership, albeit unguaranteed, can be institutionalized over time to improve local governance owing to mutual trust and path dependence (Alexander & Nank, 2009; Brinkerhoff, 1999).

Admittedly, using the community empowerment approach in an authoritarian state has its limitations, which in extreme cases can weaken or even backfire on NGOs' capacity in nurturing civil society. Specifically, the partnership with local government may have NGOs risk mission drift and loss of autonomy due to their dependence on the state on one hand and the loss of legitimacy of representing the interests of the disadvantaged on the other (Frolic, 1997; Gideon, 1998; Mercer, 2002), especially when there exist tensions between the local government and the community as shown in the NHP case. In addition, such crippled community empowerment may leave behind a weak civil society that is depolitized, state-dependent, and fragmented along geographic and socioeconomic divides.

Conclusion

This study explores the boundaries and dynamics of NGO-led community empowerment in a community reconstruction context in contemporary

China. We conclude that NGOs still have chance to foster civil society by applying this localized, bottom-up approach, given its strengths of nurturing civic engagement among residents, developing grassroots associations and collective action, improving institutional innovation, and enhancing local governance. This approach is not merely practical in China's rigorous political environment; it is also critical to fostering active citizenship and autonomous local governance which are fundamental for a healthy civil society but had long been absent in Chinese tradition (Qin, 1999). However, there exist risks for NGOs being manipulated for state goals or even absorbed into the state's ruling scheme as the "neo-totalitarian" social management program unfolds at the higher national level (J. Y. Hsu et al., 2017; Kang, 2018; Teets, 2015).

This study contributes to the scholarship on Chinese civil society in that it empirically examines the dynamics of community empowerment by moving from an NGO program to the community settings to local government policies and practice, and revealing how the local government, survivors, and NGOs interacted and affected each other around community reconstruction, all on the merit of ECM. It sheds light on NGOs' institutional entrepreneurship on enhancing civil society in contemporary China, the prospect of which otherwise seems dim in an institutionally deterministic view centering on the state-NGO relationship as presented in many previous studies. But given China's tradition of strong state control on neighborhoods (Qin, 1999) and the high diversity of neighborhood development across the country, the arena of community empowerment for civil society development warrants variation and calls for careful investigations in future research.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Note

1. Supporting the researcher's intervention in the life of research subjects on the basis of case study, the extended case method (ECM) is sometimes confused with

the action research paradigm. However, researcher participation in ECM generally following the ethnographic research tradition serves principally to better understand the relationship between research participants and their environment in social reality for the ultimate purpose of theoretical reconstruction (Burawoy, 1998). In contrast, researcher participation in action research aims to improve research participants' situation in a group, organization, or community setting and the knowledge production of change making as well (Greenwood & Levin, 2006).

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