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Version: Accepted Version

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### Article:

Hasmath, Reza, Hildebrandt, Timothy and Hsu, Jennifer (2019) Conceptualizing government-organized non-governmental organizations. *Journal of Civil Society*, 15 (3). pp. 267-284. ISSN 1744-8689

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2019.1632549>

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## Conceptualizing Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organizations\*

Reza Hasmath, University of Alberta

Timothy Hildebrandt, London School of Economics and Political Science

Jennifer Y.J. Hsu, University of New South Wales

**ABSTRACT:** This article offers a conceptual framework to identify and analyze the contemporary behavior of the paradoxical government-organized, non-governmental organization (GONGO). We discuss how GONGOs’ activities fit within mainstream civil society theories and traditions. Furthermore, we compare and analyze GONGOs and NGOs in terms of their sources of power, main activities and functions, and dilemmas. Finally, we theorize the effects, and implications, the growth of GONGOs has on state and society relations globally.

**KEYWORDS:** Government-organized non-governmental organization (GONGO); NGO functions and activities; civil society theory; state-society relations

### Introduction

The concept of a government-organized, non-governmental organization (GONGO) is both perplexing and oxymoronic: how can an organization be simultaneously government-organized and *non*-governmental in the same breath? The paradoxical nature of this organizational form has meant that scholars and practitioners alike often disagree on what a GONGO is and how they fit within the realm of civil society. In many respects, GONGOs are the unwanted black sheep of civil society literature, too government-oriented by society-centric scholars, and not government-oriented enough by statist. But far too frequently discussions center on organizational authenticity; neither GONGOs specifically, nor NGOs in authoritarian contexts, are believed to be ‘real’ NGOs (e.g. Handrahan, 2002; Walker, 2016). We believe that this ‘is it or isn’t it’ debate is unhelpful. Moreover, extant literature has failed to provide a sufficient framework to fully understand the evolving behaviour of GONGOs globally (e.g., Greve et al., 1999; Carapico, 2000; Wettenhall, 2001) and observers are given few tools to identify and examine GONGOs carefully.

This article aims to conceptualize GONGOs as an ideal type, posing the question: to what extent are GONGOs analytically distinct from NGOs? We analyze GONGOs’ behaviour across a number of different contexts, using China as a primary reference point due to the rapid emergence of Chinese GONGOs in domestic and international realms. To wit, Chinese GONGOs have received a significant amount of funding in the past decade (see Spires et al. 2012), and continue to increase their financial scale and operational reach (see Hsu et al. 2016;

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\* The authors are grateful for the valuable feedback received at seminar presentations and talks at the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action 2016 Annual Conference (Washington D.C., USA); Center for Asian Democracy, University of Louisville; Centre on China in the World, Australian National University; Center on Contemporary China, Princeton University; Development Studies Association 2016 Annual Meeting (Oxford, UK); Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China; Global Affairs Canada; School of Political Studies, University of Ottawa; and the University Service Center for China Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Hasmath & Hsu 2018). It is thus important for us to conceptually unpack these organizations, their role and impact. In the first sections, we examine GONGOs positioning within mainstream civil society theories and posit the emergence of a ‘Xi-ist’ tradition, rivalling the religious, Duntatist and Wilsonian traditions dominant in the literature. Furthermore, we delineate the similarities and differences between GONGOs and traditional NGOs in terms of sources of power, main activities and functions, and dilemmas. Finally, we theorize the effects GONGOs have on state-society relations. Ultimately, we argue that the growth of GONGOs reflect a changing role of state-society relations, not just in authoritarian contexts such as China, but across varying political contexts.

This is a timely exercise as there are increasingly blurred lines between state and civil society sectors in developing and developed contexts globally. As NGOs have grown in number and scope, and with an expansion of their role in local and global governance this century, the character and function of NGOs have diversified, permeating a multitude of political, economic and socio-cultural contexts. So, too, has their relationship with states, where collaboration between both actors are expected more than ever to deliver a range of services, partially due to decentralization and cuts in state budgets (see Rich 2013; Nelson-Nunez and Cartwright 2018).

### **A Working Definition of a GONGO**

The definitional morass of GONGOs is not surprising given that even scholars looking at more traditional NGOs struggle to arrive at a precise definition (Martens, 2002; Heiss & Johnson, 2016). Still, part of the distinct ‘non-government-ness’ central to understanding traditional NGOs is the assumption that they are not highly dependent upon governments for financial support (Rosenau, 1998). However, as Martens (2002) recognizes, this has changed—even grassroots NGOs are increasingly reliant upon government support. The blurring lines between NGOs and governments was briefly foreshadowed by Skjelsbaek (1971, p. 436), who suggested that organizations were independent actors in international affairs only when they are not deeply reliant upon the ‘consensus of governments’. Amidst these blurred lines, what then comes of the definition of NGO? At what financial or operational threshold does an organization cease to be an NGO and become another kind of organization, altogether? While scholars have noted these analytical and definitional problems decades ago, little has been done to resolve them.

Most contemporary attempts to understand GONGOs have come from studies of authoritarian contexts, where these organizations have proliferated as a deliberative strategy by the state to have a (corporatist) mechanism that feeds directly into a ‘grassroots civic space’ (see Hsu & Hasmath, 2013). It is thus unsurprising that the current (albeit limited) theorizing on the nature of GONGOs primarily highlights their role in undermining liberal democratic values. For example, Naim (2007, p. 96) sees GONGOs as ‘benign’ or ‘irrelevant’, and for the most part, strongly caution us that many are ‘dangerous ... [and] act as the thuggish arm of a repressive government’. In a study of royal NGOs in Jordan, Wiktorowicz (2002) describes these organizations as infiltrating and controlling the rest of civil society. Nevertheless, GONGOs should not only be seen in such stark, normative-laden terms. Mulligan’s (2007) account of Azam, a Malaysian development and environment GONGO, suggests that irrespective of its government connections and the fact that two of its three organizational objectives are government-oriented, the organization was capable of achieving sustainable development goals and environmental protection. Wu’s (2003) work on Chinese environmental GONGOs suggests a

‘state-led’ approach to understand them, whereby these organizations were ultimately created by the state as an ‘organic’ part of the state. That is, a low-cost, high-benefit means of meeting financial, personnel, and operational needs. Hsu et al.’s (2016, p. 426) research have reinforced this understanding, suggesting that in the Chinese context, GONGO’s act as ‘transmission belts’ between the state, party and citizenry. In terms of social development activities, GONGOs like the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation or the Soong Ching Ling Foundation, were initially led by individuals who had previously held Communist Party of China positions, and, personnel and finances were often not fully independent from their relevant government ministries at foundation.

Although recent literature on GONGOs and similar organizations have centered on non-democratic contexts, Alan Pifer (1967), then President of the Carnegie Corporation, wrote about the rise of a curious ‘quasi, non-governmental organization’ in the American context. He observed that these organizations looked like more traditional voluntary associations, but were financed largely by government sources and created at the behest of the state. Pifer did not see any particular nefarious motive behind their creation; he argued that they exist since they responded to new, vexing problems in society. The major purpose of these quasi-NGOs was to provide specialized services to the state, offer independent judgment, and flexibility. But, he also noted that these were not truly voluntary associations—in the sense of most other civil society organizations—as they remained dependent upon, and answerable to, the government. In this respect, GONGOs could be viewed as a social arm of the state, and taken further is their degree of *closeness to the state* (see also Skjelsbaek, 1971). Therefore, in arriving at a definition of GONGOs we can emphasize the ‘GO’ (government-organized) part of the GONGO. A GONGO can be thus distinguished by both how it began (organized at the government’s behest), and how it is lead (of the government’s choosing).

Yet, beyond piecemeal attempts to define GONGOs in particular sectors and country contexts, a key definitional problem remains: what makes a GONGO a *GONGO*? Is it the function they serve? Is it the fact that it is organized by government, and subsequently, closely linked to the government? While we have moved between examples from China and elsewhere in this section, the available literature makes evident that GONGOs are empirically diverse. That said, these organizations share similarities in that they initially having a mission set out by the government—whether they (d)evolve into some other organizational type depends on a variety of factors, as we discuss later.

### *Differentiation from Similar Organizational Types*

Differentiating a GONGO from other similar organizational types allows us the space to delineate the essential properties of a GONGO. In the past decade we have witnessed the rise of organizations that can be described not only as GONGOs, but also SONGOs (state-organized NGOs) or PONGOs (party-organized NGOs). In briefly distinguishing these sub-types, we can uncover key analytical differences between them which we then use to create a larger conceptual framework.

Insofar as government and state are functionally treated as the same entity, GONGOs and SONGOs (state-organized) are synonyms. However, the two are analytically distinct in an important respect: states are more static entities by nature, whereas governments can come and go. As such, the life-span of a GONGO should be more time-bound than a SONGO. To illustrate the point we can look at electoral democracies wherein governments change regularly: in the US,

the March of Dimes began as essentially a GONGO, operating out of President Franklin Roosevelt’s White House until it gained an operational life of its own after having successfully addressed polio and thus, moved to tackle birth defects and healthy pregnancies (Rose, 2010); the Points of Light Foundation is a faith-based organization that was founded under (and partially funded by) President George H.W. Bush Sr.’s administration (see Points of Light Foundation, 2016) in the 1990s. When Bush Sr.’s presidency came to an end after one term, the organization was ‘spun off’ to become an independent NGO, (still, the Foundation has maintained close relations with subsequent Republican presidential administrations, suggesting that it is in some respects as much of a SONGO as it is a GONGO). As the organization in question (d)evolves from the state or government over time, we see variables such as time, political environment and funding becoming important in considerations to understand the GONGO-ization of the third sector.

In traveling across the political spectrum, to an authoritarian context, we can distinguish between GONGOs and PONGOs (party-organized) wherein governments, states, and parties are less indistinguishable in practice. By mobilizing resources and citizens, the Chinese government has demonstrated in various situations that it is quite deft in energizing national sentiment against a perceived external threat (Chen Weiss, 2013). Notwithstanding, Thornton (2013) suggests that the growing distance between the Communist Party and the state, in post-1978 reform China, has required that the Party develop their own social organization wings in order to stay relevant in the civil society realm.

And yet, PONGOs are not unique to China, having also appeared in developing countries like Bulgaria (see Center for the Study of Democracy, 2010) and Zambia (see CIVICUS, n.d., p. 33), and alongside other organizations proliferate across the developed world (Fowler, 1997): in post-World War II Germany, for instance, political parties were rebuilt with the establishment of political foundations engaged in of political education, informing public debate, facilitating relations with other nations, forging an important aspect of German civil society. Currently, there are six German political foundations which can be characterized as PONGOs: Friederich-Ebert-Stiftung, closely aligned with the Social Democratic Party; Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, strongly allied with the Christian Democratic Union; Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, linked to The Greens; Friedrich Naumann-Stiftung for Freedom, closely related to the Free Democratic Party; Hans-Seidel-Stiftung, allied with the Christian Social Union; and, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, strongly linked to the Party of Democratic Socialism. Each of these political foundations are supported and received subsidies from the German state. Aside from their domestic work, these foundations now have international development projects and offices globally. In sum, the notion of political party-affiliated or influenced organizations is by no means unique to authoritarian systems, nor new to the social organizational landscape. The diverse examples presented above demonstrate that various organizational types abound, whether party- or state-related. Variables such as time, political institutional environment and, funding opportunities are critical factors in the establishment of PONGOs, GONGOs or SONGOs. Having shown this range, we can now move to define an ‘ideal’ type of GONGO. In the next section, we consider a definition based on GONGO’s functional and internal organizational characteristics.

### *Functional and Internal Organizational Characteristics*

Tackling the term most directly—how a GONGO begins, how it is *organized*—is the most obvious way of distinguishing these organizations from others. As scholars have begun to

account for this organizational form, the focus has remained squarely on where these organizations come from, what we might call the ‘origin story’. To put a finer point on it, they have been singularly focused on the ‘government-organized’ portion of the acronym (e.g. Seidman, 1988). These origin stories are often idealized, frequently inaccurate visions of what these organizations were created for in theory, rather than the functions they currently serve in practice. In so doing, these narratives ignore organizational change and thus, make analytical frameworks less able to capture the wide range and scope of these ‘non-NGOs’. We challenge this understanding, and suggest that an over-emphasis on where and how an organization began overshadows the more important matter of where it is now. While we accept that the origins of an organization do have power—it can imprint ideological baggage and continue to influence is—this is not necessarily always the case.

As such, we favor a *functional* dimension to construct a definition of a GONGO on the basis of its functions. GONGOs are usually founded and initially organized by the government to provide a service to society, one that the government is unable or unwilling to do (Stevens, 2010; Wells-Dang, 2012; Deng et al., 2016). It is important to remember that these organizations might be preferred over ‘fully autonomous’ NGOs as they are more easily integrated into a government’s corporatist structure, less likely to serve as a threat to government’s power, less prone to hurt their reputation, and more able to promote a certain agenda—as in the case of Mulligan’s (2007) study of Azam in Sarawak, Malaysia or Wu (2003) and Hsu et al.’s (2017) studies looking at China. In this respect, their function is multi-dimensional: it is not just a matter of offering state benefits, but also at lower political and economic costs and risks. In addition, these organizations might be well able to promote a particular and preferred ideology, whether it be a GONGO in China, a PONGO in Germany, or a faith-based G/SONGO in the US.

Relatedly, GONGOs can be created to shore up government legitimacy. Creating a GONGO in one’s own image—like PONGOs in China—can be part of a larger project to (re)create society in the interests of the government, one that is more legible and more easily governable (Scott, 1998). Beyond just being a conduit between state and society, they can be used as a proving ground wherein the state can test experimental policies. The *perceived* distance between the government and a GONGO can insulate the state from negative consequences when such policies go wrong. Similar to how NGOs behave in China, when GONGOs do well their ties to it can be used to credit the government; when they fail, their distance can be used to insulate the government from criticism. Put differently, GONGOs can be seen as a strategic tool of states. Cook and Vinogradova (2006, p. 34)—while essentially describing GONGOs (but not using the term)—refer to them as ‘marionette’ organizations that are artificial constructs. If we accept this assessment—where these organizations are created by politically well-connected representatives who use them to serve their own interests—then a GONGO’s origin story is not necessarily relevant or pertinent for their existence.

GONGOs might also be identified by their *internal organizational characteristics*. GONGOs, as Hasmath & Hsu (2014; 2016) and Hsu & Hasmath (2017) argue, have strong bureaucratic characteristics and similar organizational cultures due to their close proximity to one another. Moreover, as Liang (2003, p. 12) writes, these GONGOs will have certain advantages over grassroots NGOs in areas such as ease of registration, financial stability, and other such privileges. The manner in which organization leaders are chosen are one of the most popular ways of distinguishing GONGOs from traditional NGOs (Wu, 2003). But, if an NGO begins in a more traditional manner, and later the government adopts the organization and appoints leadership, is it then a GONGO? Strictly speaking, here the origin story is,

definitionally, misleading—but the function, and internal organizational character, is close to the government. GONGOs in this respect are understood in terms of both how they began (who organized them initially) and how they are led. But this also serves to narrowly restrict our understanding of the larger phenomenon of these ‘not-exactly NGOs’.

We have shown how too much attention to the origin story of GONGOs creates a more narrow, and superficial understanding of this organization type. In the next section we delineate how GONGOs fit into the civil society framework.

### **How do GONGOs Fit into the Civil Society Framework?**

While theories of civil society have changed over time, a common theme pervades in the construction of a ‘negative’ definition, wherein organizations are defined less by what they *are*, and more by what they *are not*. As such, civil society organizations are understood as being neither part of the state nor the market (Kaldor, 2003). It is not hyperbolic to suggest that GONGOs do not neatly fit within the prevailing definition of civil society as being outside the state and market. While a GONGO that was initially organized by the government, and then later endowed with autonomy, could be considered outside the state, a normative judgement can be made that a GONGO will more often remain an extension of the government apparatus (see Hemment, 2012). A helpful differentiation could be made between a government-funded NGO that engages in partnership with the government, and yet, strictly speaking retains autonomy; and, a government-organized NGO that does not.

#### *Traditions of Contemporary NGOs*

There are three main traditions in the literature that have been important for understanding the evolution of the contemporary NGO: the religious, Dunantist, and Wilsonian. The religious tradition—the oldest of the three—has evolved out of overseas missionary work. But unlike evangelical organizations, most religious NGOs (RNGOs) do not proselytize in any overt and direct manner (Tam & Hasmath, 2015). Catholic organizations, such as Catholic Relief Services, Caritas and Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, represent some of the largest and most visible RNGOs. These organizations see their programming as negotiating between religious and secular worlds, combining social and faith-based goals. Dunantist NGOs—named in honour of Red Cross founder Henry Dunant—position themselves squarely outside of government interests. In general, Dunantist NGOs do not seek funding from governments, and have a tendency to be attracted to long-range projects and approaches. One of the oldest Dunantist NGOs is Save the Children, created at the end of the First World War. Others in this tradition include Oxfam and Médecins Sans Frontières. Wilsonian NGOs, named for U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, seek to project national norms and values globally in their activities. In this tradition, there is a strong principal-agent component. The government will act as a principal that provides a conditional transfer of authority to NGO as agents to deliver services and/or provisions (see Chauvet et al., 2015; Gent et al., 2015). Funders, or principals, can dictate where funds are used by the NGOs they support, or threaten to withhold funding from NGOs (by way of earmarking) that do not act in accordance with their expectations (see Barnett, 2005). This, in turn, has the effect of controlling NGOs’ programming and service delivery; or, differently, reduce NGOs autonomy by virtue of incentivizing them to act in a manner that may contrast to their core principles (see Dreher et al., 2007).

Wilsonian NGOs are pragmatic at their core, with a greater operational bent on technical tasks within a short time frame, attributed largely to being a recipient of short-term (or a series of), project-based government funding. Take for example, Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE), the largest and quintessentially typical NGO in the Wilsonian tradition, which came into being during the Marshall Plan after the Second World War, and began life delivering ‘CARE’ packages to war-affected Europeans.

The main difference between Dunantist and Wilsonian NGOs lies in their financial structures and varying philosophical histories. Largely owing to their lack of government reliance, Dunantist NGOs are more overtly adversarial in their approach, while Wilsonian NGOs prefer delivering policy advice in a quieter, behind the scenes manner.

### *The Xi-ist Tradition*

How do GONGOs fit within these three traditions? These organizations, at first glance, could be accurately captured by the Wilsonian tradition, which championed the relationship between funder and recipient. Yet, the GONGO does not fit entirely comfortably within this principle-agent setup. In such a conception, the NGO is *temporarily* contracted out by the state to act as their agent in a particular issue-domain and/or jurisdiction. A GONGO is not simply (or necessarily) a temporary agent of the government, influenced by short-term, government project-based funding. Rather, it should be viewed as a more direct extension of the government—that is, organized by the government—and thus, more acutely characterized within a principal-(quasi) principal relationship. We term this operational model the *Xi-ist* tradition, named after the current political leader of China. While the first incarnation of GONGOs predate his tenure (and, indeed, originated outside of China), Xi has overseen a significant increase in the number of GONGOs in China that have a large stake and importance in overseas development activities (see Hsu et al. 2016). Under this particular brand of state-society relations promoted by Xi—wherein the state creates greater but narrow opportunities for the emergence of a certain type of social organisation—GONGOs have become more fully realised as an organizational type, and *recognizable*, by domestic and international observers (Hildebrandt, 2013).

The control mechanisms of the Xi-ist tradition are not limited to funding (as seen with Wilsonian NGOs), but extend to the administrative aligning of interests by the government with the GONGO (to the extent that they can be virtually one and the same). Suffice to say, there is often direct coordination between the government and the GONGO, at the upper echelons of the GONGO’s managerial structure. This is particularly the case when GONGOs, who operate under the auspices of civil society agents domestically, echo a similar statement and tone as the government (see Hsu et al., 2016). In a principal-(quasi-)principal scheme—with the GONGO front and centre—the preferences of the government and the GONGO are more aligned, with the GONGO unlikely to pursue private interests, contra the Wilsonian NGO in a principal-agent setup. Yet, that is not to say, GONGOs cannot or do not promote civic forms of social activity, such as volunteering (see Hemment, 2012). Government alignment does not preclude the GONGO from promoting or contributing to civic engagement.

The implications of a Xi-ist tradition suggest an emerging/hybrid meta-tradition in the evolution of contemporary NGOs: we can anticipate that in a GONGO-NGO relationship, such as the contracting out of a project, the GONGO will act as the government’s representative and the NGO will be the agent. In such a scenario, the GONGO is likely to organizationally assume the characteristics of the state and donor. As Heurlin (2011) suggests, the establishment of



GONGOs by the government can also be used as a pre-emptive measure against NGOs and their potential claims against the state. Consequently, the structure of a GONGO is not necessarily static and can alter depending on the relationship in question.

Furthermore, organizations within the Xi-ist tradition can exploit the often opaque distinction between GONGO and government in international affairs. This exploitation is perhaps most noted in GONGOs participation in the United Nations’ meetings, where they have received observer or consultative status. Such acts manipulate the system wherein the space ought to be greatly reserved for traditional (relatively independent) civil society groups. It is often the case that when a GONGO is invited to give evidence, advice, or testimony to international organizations, there is a potential hypocrisy that the GONGO is actually representing the national government’s view through the prism of its organization (see Walker, 2016, p. 225). Take for instance the example of a GONGO operating in a host jurisdiction under the auspices of a civil society actor, conducting development work with local beneficiaries (see Hsu et al., 2016). In this scenario, is state sovereignty infringed given the close links between the GONGO and an external state’s government? While organizations of the Wilsonian tradition side-step questions of sovereignty infringement, a GONGO of the Xi-ist tradition—which is operationally similar to the government—poses a closer degree of non-separation which can be exploited by a government to its global strategic advantage.

## **GONGOs versus NGOs**

The analytical differences between a GONGO and NGO require careful scrutiny. Thus, our task is to compare and contrast both organizations in terms of their sources of power (see Table One), main functions and strategies for execution (see Table Two) and potential dilemmas.

### *Sources of Power*

An NGO’s and GONGO’s material power—their size, budget, and ability to acquire more resources—is perhaps the most important power given its crucial role in organizational sustainability. How NGOs are financed reflects and reinforces their divergent perspectives. Dunantist NGOs receive the majority of their funding from private sources: 89 per cent of Médecins Sans Frontières International’s (MSF) revenues came from approximately 5.7 million private donors around the world (MSF, 2016). In contrast, the major (secular) Wilsonian NGOs could not operate at their current level without public funding. For example, CARE USA received just over 41 per cent of its 2014 fiscal year funding from the US government and host governments (CARE USA, 2015). The percentage is slightly higher at 46 per cent for CARE UK for the year ending in 30 June 2015 (CARE UK, 2015, p. 28). Likewise, Xi-ist GONGOs, such as the Chinese-Africa People’s Friendship Association (CAPFA) or the Beijing NGO Association for International Exchanges (BNAIE), rely exclusively on government funding for their operations and survival. Hsu et al.’s (2017) study on funding patterns of independent NGOs and GONGOs reinforce this pattern, further noting that GONGOs receive the majority of their funding from state grants and contracts, as well as ‘donations’ from government officials and offices pressured to exhibit their generosity by supervisors. Ironically, the intent of many Xi-ist GONGOs is to obtain funding from private, non-governmental sources. Spires (2012) suggests that GONGOs are significant beneficiaries of U.S. foundation funding. In this regard, there is an aspiration by CAPFA and BNAIE to improve private fundraising efforts, however, the lack of

expertise in this domain is a major deterrent. Greater availability of government funding for social organizations offers a plausible explanation as to the increasing GONGO-ization of the NGO sector, or at the very least, closer relationship between NGO and the state.

In global terms, more government funding is flowing bilaterally through NGOs, or more precisely through a handful of the largest NGOs, than ever before. For example, the US General Accounting Office (2002, p. 5) reported that USAID disbursed \$4 billion of \$7.2 billion foreign assistance funds to NGOs to implement assistance programs, ranging from education and training to democracy and governance projects. By way of another example, the share of bilateral aid has steadily increased from 2001 to 2011 among DAC nations (OECD, 2013). One implication of this trend is that many donor governments are channelling more aid through NGOs, resulting in closer relations between donors and NGOs, the introduction of new contractual and management tools designed to regularize and formalize relations, and greater pressure for accountability to donor-defined performance measures. This pressure has given space for the rise of GONGOs to operate internationally, as demonstrated by Chinese GONGOs expansionist behaviour in Africa and Southeast Asia (see Brenner, 2012; Hsu et al., 2016).

**Table One: Sources of Power of NGOs and GONGOs**

Sources of Power	NGO	GONGO
Material Power	Donors (public/private) Fundraising	Government sponsored
Symbolic Power Interpretive Power	Statements, actions and interpretations are seen as legitimate by the public (more acutely the case for Dunantist-oriented NGOs)	Statements, actions and interpretations can be viewed as compromised by the public given their closeness to government (notably the case in liberal democracies and to a lesser extent in authoritarian/corporatist regimes)
Geographical Power	Local, Regional, National and/or International Power	
Political Standpoints	Reflect individual NGO values and beliefs	Reflect government values and beliefs

NGOs and GONGOs also have symbolic power, a legitimacy to their public statements, as well as interpretive power, an ability to bring expertise to the forum and to create, interpret and assert meaning in relation to a set of social facts. For instance, Dunantist NGOs that maintain a high level of private funding (that is to say, little to no government financial support) such as MSF, are perceived to have greater legitimacy in their statements and actions, as well as unbiased expertise, given that they are not directly coerced by, or ‘puppets’ of, state-action. The intimacy of GONGOs to host governments can significantly reduce both their symbolic and interpretive capital, depending on the institutional environment. In Western liberal democracies, where there is a general social expectation that NGOs should be relatively independent actors, their symbolic and interpretive powers can be comprised given their closeness to the state. Whereas in authoritarian contexts—notably those with strong corporatist tendencies (see Kojima

et al., 2012; Hsu & Hasmath, 2013)—there is a social expectation that NGOs (or private actors) will have some meaningful form of interaction with the state either tacitly or overtly (see Hsu & Hasmath, 2014), and their symbolic and interpretive powers are generally not compromised. In fact, as Carolyn Hsu (2016) has noted in China, GONGOs can exploit their government relations for the benefit of the organization. For example, she observed that the China Youth Development Foundation—a GONGO with strong linkages with the Communist Youth League—have strategically exploited their government connections and resources to enhance their symbolic power with its constituents.

In terms of geographical power, both NGOs and GONGOs enjoy local, regional, national and/or international coverage. Their ambitions in this regard are generally tempered by the strength of their material power. In fact, the international coverage these organizations can be an asset, providing a mechanism for a nation-state, notably in the Wilsonian and Xi-ist traditions respectively, to circumvent the sovereign integrity of a nation by acting as ‘agents’ of a foreign state. Ironically, this is a charge that has led to many jurisdictions, such as Russia, Ethiopia or China, to pass restrictive laws prohibiting or carefully monitoring foreign NGOs or domestic NGOs that receive foreign funding.

Finally, NGOs and GONGOs have distinct political standpoints that can be used as capital. For instance, in disentangling Greenpeace or the World Wildlife Fund’s political standpoint most will correctly point out that both organizations are pro-environment, even if their tactics to achieve their meta-aims vary. This capital can increase (or decrease) the legitimacy of a NGO or GONGO in the public domain—save for one major caveat: for an NGO, the political standpoint will reflect the individual NGO’s values and beliefs; for a GONGO, it is difficult to disaggregate the organization’s values and beliefs from the host government. In fact, it may be prudent for the GONGO’s survival, from a funding and operational standpoint, to have a close alignment with the government’s values and beliefs.

### *Main Activities and Functions*

We posit that NGOs and GONGOs share similar activities and functions, but have mixed strategies in terms of execution. Both NGOs and GONGOs can set the agenda and put issues on the policy table. However, NGOs execute this function by applying external pressure on the political leadership, often by utilizing lobbying tactics. They may use the media to raise public consciousness about a particular issue or item of concern; and/or, mobilize public opinion in order to activate collective consciousness to action. On the other hand, the bulk of GONGOs execution is away from the public’s eye. They generally apply pressure and influence to the political leadership and policymaker internally (see Hasmath & Pomeroy 2017).

NGOs and GONGOs can also affect negotiations and assist in the creation of agreements. In terms of execution, they share important commonalities. Both NGOs and GONGOs utilize their interpretive power, or stated differently, their epistemic understanding, to provide specialize information to decision-makers (see Gough & Shackley, 2001; Hasmath & Hsu, 2014).

But NGOs and GONGOs can both confer differing kinds of legitimacy on issues by mobilizing all their powers in this effort. For both NGOs and GONGOs, their inherent legitimacy is derived from the fact they are often perceived by the public as being ‘noble’, ‘altruistic’, and progressive goals are pursued in contribution to the ‘common good’. For instance, Hasmath & Hsu (2008) show how many founders of NGOs and GONGOs were viewed through such rosy lens, whereby their activities were legitimate by virtue that they represented (civil) society’s

common good—this should be tempered by the fact the general public may not be able to distinguish between GONGOs and NGOs. When GONGOs may have additional legitimacy (notably for the public in an authoritarian environment), it is due to their closeness to the host government, and more poignantly, because they have intimate awareness of government’s internal thinking in terms of goal orientation, and organizational behaviour.

**Table Two: Main Functions and Strategies of Execution of NGOs and GONGOs**

Main Functions	Strategies for Execution	
	NGO	GONGO
Setting the Agenda / Putting Issue on the Policy Table	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apply pressure externally on political leadership (e.g., lobbying)</li> <li>• Use media to raise awareness</li> <li>• Mobilize public opinion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apply pressure internally on political leadership</li> </ul>
Affect Negotiations / Assist in the Creation of Agreements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Epistemic understanding allows room to provide specialize information to decision-makers</li> </ul>	
Confer Legitimacy on Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Legitimacy derived from ‘noble’, ‘altruistic’ and progressive goals pursued in contribution to the common good</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Similar to NGO, with added legitimacy provided by their closeness to the government</li> </ul>
Make solutions and agreements work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assist in implementing decisions by acting as an external monitoring agency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Act as an internal monitoring agency; but, efforts may be hampered given they are cognizant of government goals that may be conflictual</li> </ul>

Finally, NGOs and GONGOs can make solutions and agreements work by acting as a monitoring agency. The strategies for execution, again, differ due to their positioning relative to government. NGOs on the one hand, can assist in implementing decisions by acting as an external monitoring agency. Whereby, GONGOs can monitor internally. Their efforts, however, can be hampered given they are cognizant of government goals that may be conflictual. As such, they may yield their potential pressure to make a solution or agreement with respect to one goal/issue in order to advance another government’ goal/issue.

### *Dilemmas*

Interestingly, NGOs and GONGOs share a number of common dilemmas to their existence and activities. For instance, both have difficulty maintaining innovation. GONGOs perhaps take a larger burden in this regard. Due to their intimacy with their host government—when they have innovation in their programming—they can face the threat of being absorbed further into the government’s fold, crowded out, or abandoned outright, with the innovative programming taken over by the relevant government agency. This is what we have witnessed in the context of China (see Hasmath & Hsu, 2014).

From another angle, to whom are NGOs and GONGOs accountable? Herein, there are diverging perspectives between both entities: GONGOs are foremost accountable to their host government, and are able to point to this as a capital (and a dilemma) due to the fact they may represent government’s interests; NGOs, on the other hand, have varying issues when it comes to public accountability. Most arguments highlight one main attribute—their viewpoints and mandate are not necessarily representative of the general or majority public’s will (see Keating & Thrandardottir, 2017). Furthermore, NGOs may be viewed as socially irresponsible and politically naive due to their less-than-stellar link to direct (representative) public accountability mechanisms, irrespective of political regime type.

Both NGOs and GONGOs share similar concerns regarding the quality of advice offered. One ontological onus behind conceiving civil society as an operationally distinct sector from the state or market, is that it could provide a check and balance for state (or market) activities. Or expressed more acutely in present-day terms, it can be a check for the collection, interpretation and subsequent, implementation of epistemic knowledge that leads to evidence-based policymaking. When GONGOs are intimately linked to the host government, the absence of this separateness removes an extra layer of checks and balances. For NGOs, a different dilemma is posed: who is checking the NGOs’ evidence which forges their epistemic capital for their programming? In theory, the onus is on other sectoral actors such as the state or market to critically examine and ‘check’ NGOs’ information and evidence.

Another consideration is NGOs’ and GONGOs’ scale and efficiency. The underlying notion here is to critically ascertain whether NGOs or GONGOs are the most efficient organizational type in terms of using limited resources (often financial) to foster, maintain or create a public service or good. This is not a question that can be answered to a satisfactory extent in this article. Nevertheless, the inherent dilemma is a matter that should be acknowledged.

Finally, NGOs’ and GONGOs’ activities can undermine national and international channels. NGOs and GONGOs, as discussed earlier in light of the Wilsonian and Xi-ist traditions, can act as track-two actors in international relations, with accompanying issues of circumventing state sovereignty and action. NGOs, and not necessarily GONGOs, have the further distinction of potentially undermining national channels through their programming and lobbying efforts.

## **Effects on State and Society Relations**

In the simplest conception, we might place ‘GONGO-ness’ on a broader spectrum between state and society. Whereas grassroots activists would be situated closer to society, GONGOs would be closer to the state, while more ‘traditional’ NGOs would occupy the space between. This is admittedly overly simplistic, and potentially misleading in authoritarian contexts where the state and society do not necessarily occupy separate or autonomous spaces. As such, in our typology of NGOs and GONGOs (Table Three) we have carefully distinguished a multitude of organizations and allow for different conceptions of GONGOs themselves.

As we have suggested above, a great deal of attention is placed on the origin stories of these organizations. While we maintain this has occupied too much attention thus far, we also accept that it remains an important distinguishing feature of these organizations. As such, we highlight the origin (government or non-government) on one axis.

Recognizing that ties to the government can exist even amongst organizations that were not originally organized by the state, we place the strength of government ties on the other axis. In doing so, we suggest that there is a qualitative difference in the character between strong and

weak government ties (a precise measurement of the strength of a strong/weak ties is a necessary future project). We acknowledge that these ties can come in several different forms, but focus on two in particular: economic and political ties. Economic ties can be when the state provides direct funding to organizations either in the form of grants, or as payment for service provision. Political ties can most easily be seen in the form of regulatory frameworks that are necessary for organizations to operate; at one extreme, an organization requires registration to operate legally. In authoritarian China for example, this has generally meant that organizations need to secure a government sponsor, which effectively creates a strong formal bond between the state and social organization (Hildebrandt, 2012). But even outside the authoritarian context, obtaining non-profit status can create a political tie, albeit weaker one. Finally, the two are frequently interwoven, with political and economic ties working with each other to bind the organization to the state. Consequently, the notion of an organization’s ties with the government should be seen across a spectrum, rather than as absolutes, either having ties with the government or not.

**Table Three: A Typology of NGOs and GONGOs**

	<b>Government Origin</b>	<b>Non-Government Origin</b>
<b>Strong Government Ties</b>	Prototypical GONGOs	Government- <i>influenced</i> NGOs (GiNGOs)
<b>Weak Government Ties</b>	Spun-Off GONGOs	Grassroots NGOs (traditional NGOs)

In this typology, we are also able to show how organizations can have different origins and ties with the government, but that most importantly these can change over time. In accommodating for such change, this typology recognizes how the relationship between state and social actors in all polities is frequently in flux. While an organization cannot change its ‘origin story’ (and thus horizontal movement in the 2x2 is not possible), vertical movement is both possible and common. Salmenkari (2014) emphasizes that the ‘distance’ from the state is not fixed, but rather it changes based upon government needs, organizational capabilities and behaviour. Wu and Chan (2012), too, suggest there can be some movement, often in response to the state’s ‘graduated control’ mechanisms. Therefore, we emphasise the need not to consider these categories as fixed. Organization can rather move in an out of categories over time, depending on their political and economic ties.

In the upper left (Table Three) are ‘prototypical GONGOs’ identified by their government origin and their strong government ties—the Chinese-Africa People’s Friendship Association or the Beijing NGO Association for International Exchanges, for example. Its opposite, in the lower right cell are ‘grassroots NGOs’ that have no government origins, and decidedly weak government ties—such as Oxfam, organizations that for many observers represent ‘traditional NGOs.’

It is in the other two cells where we highlight the more interesting—and most often ignored—types: in the lower left cell are organizations that have clear government-led origin stories, but weak government ties, which we call ‘spun off GONGOs’. Akin to the example of the March of Dimes in the US, due to funding problems, or attempts to resolve a societal challenge, such organizations once started by government have been made more independent;

Wu (2003) has previously identified such ‘spinning off’ in China’s environmental sector. While origins might be important in these cases, their ties to the state have weakened over time.

Finally, in the top right cell are those organizations that were not organized or started by the state, but currently have strong government ties, for example the Amity Foundation in China, and CARE in the UK. This cell, in many political contexts, represent the most plentiful (and often newest) organizational type. We call these ‘GiNGOs’, or government-*influenced* NGOs. The term ‘influence’ is purposely broad to accommodate for the myriad ways in which the state might have an effect on the NGO. Unlike grassroots NGOs, GiNGOs have emerged outside the constructs of the state but have worked closely with government partners and perhaps even have government representatives on their boards of directors. In such situations, GiNGOs are more likely than their NGO counterparts to use their resources more efficiently to achieve similar aims, for example, policy change, as GiNGOs (and GONGOs, for that matter) will already have existing channels to the state.

There are profound implications when grassroots NGOs become more like GiNGOs as part of its organizational maturation. If we presume broad government change occurs—perhaps due to exogenous shock to the political system (such as a political revolution)—might this mean that the NGO will mould itself in the image of a GINGO to achieve short to medium term survival? Additional questions remain, whether such a strategy will prove beneficial for the organization in the long term? While theoretically arresting—the evolution of NGOs into GiNGOs—we concede that there are a range of other stakeholders at play, particularly when considering the rise of corporate and individual philanthropy as noted by an UNDP commissioned report (Grady, 2014). Yet, from the perspective of civil society, what remains to be seen is whether the increased influence and presence of GiNGOs and GONGOs in development will push out grassroots, independent NGOs, and whether these government-affiliated organizations will be more effective in addressing the long term needs of the marginalized and voiceless.

## **Conclusion**

GONGOs are growing in number and influence primarily because of the context in which NGOs, more broadly, are needed. This is notably the case where the government lacks specialization and capacity to do the work themselves, where it is hesitant to allow for the flourishing of a truly independent NGO sector, but also where these organizations themselves have limited options other than the government for financial support and general patron.

Therefore, our inclination is to suggest that in many political institutional environments strong evolutionary pressures urge organizations to become closer to the government. China is an apt example, where US foundation funding aptly characterized by The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria disbursed some 40 per cent of its US \$800 million (until its departure from China in 2013) to Chinese GONGOs (Wilson, 2015, p. 44). From a funding standpoint, international funders have, whether by design or by preference, channelled much of their funds to Chinese GONGOs. There is an organizational ecology in the civil society sector for the survival of the fittest, wherein those organizations that do already have a ‘GO-ish’ character are more likely to be those that thrive. This is particularly visible and demonstrable in corporatist and/or (semi-) authoritarian regimes such as a China. However, we can take a step further, and suggest that the conditions that lead to the GONGO-ization of the NGO sector are not limited to corporatist/authoritarian states. The difference lies in the limited range of choices.

Social organizations operating in these environments, in particular, have fewer better options and are coiled in the depths of government influence, tacitly or overtly, in every action they take.

In Western liberal democratic contexts, NGOs in the Dunantist tradition remain steadfast in their desire to be independent from the government, especially from a funding standpoint. Yet, despite this intention, being intimate with the government is becoming a necessity in order to effectively accomplish their operational mandate – a notion that Wilsonian and Xi-ist NGOs have understood. In other words, the path to efficiently executing their main functions, and reducing their potential dilemmas, inevitably require working closely with the government who wields greater power and legitimacy.

The increased presence of GONGOs across the development sector and their greater participation in multilateral forums (see McKenize et al., 2018), where NGOs once dominated, demands more critical analysis and theorization of these entities. Through our looking glass, we can hypothesize that GONGOs, especially those originating from an authoritarian context, are quite likely to reconfigure global civil society – whether that means squeezing out NGOs or pluralizing the space remains to be seen. Consequently, our study is a first step to providing the analytical tools to begin a systematic assessment of GONGOs on the global stage.

The analogy of influencing state action from ‘inside-’ rather than ‘outside looking in’ is an apt one here. GONGOs work from the inside to afford change and/or to execute their mandate. In contrast, traditional NGOs working from the ‘outside’ inefficiently expensing their various powers and capital, to get to the organizational positioning that GONGOs have at the onset. Simply put, becoming closer to the government can be desirable from an organizational evolutionary standpoint, and can operationally places an organization at a comparative advantage.



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