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## **GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS IN CHINA: DEFINITIONS, CATEGORIES, AND SIGNIFICANCE IN THE EMERGENCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY**

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# **Grassroots Organizations in China: Definitions, Categories, and Significance in the Emergence of Civil Society**

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## **Resumen**

Las organizaciones y redes autónomas de base constituyen la parte más dinámica y con un crecimiento más rápido del sector no gubernamental en China. Sin embargo, pocos estudios se han centrado en definir, categorizar y determinar las funciones sociopolíticas de estas pequeñas organizaciones. El presente estudio comienza a llenar este vacío: primero define y divide la variedad de grupos en cuatro categorías basándose en sus características organizativas y, después, trata la importancia de las organizaciones de base en la aparición de la sociedad civil en China.

## **Palabras clave**

Sector no-gubernamental, organizaciones de base, sociedad civil, China.

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## **Abstract**

Grassroots and autonomous organizations and networks are the most vibrant and fastest growing part of China's nongovernmental sector. Yet, few studies have focused on defining, categorizing, and determining the socio-political functions of these small organizations. The current study begins to fill this gap. It first defines and divides the diverse array of groups into four categories based on their organizational features, and then discusses the significance of grassroots organizations in the emergence of civil society in China.

## **Keywords**

Non-governmental sector, grassroots organizations, civil society, China.



# **GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS IN CHINA: DEFINITIONS, CATEGORIES, AND SIGNIFICANCE IN THE EMERGENCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY<sup>1</sup>**

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Since the 1970s, the rise of civic organizations—the so-called associational revolution—has played a crucial role in the evolution of civil society around the world. Under strong international influence and in the aftermath of the 1978 reforms that created a market economy and diversified public/private interests and social life in China, new institutions and organizations outside the state system in China have blossomed and increased dramatically in number, size, and influence. These nongovernmental and nonprofit organizations (NGOs) have played an important role, especially since the mid-1990s, in the evolving civil society in China. Indeed, grassroots and autonomous organizations and networks are most vibrant and fastest growing part of China's nongovernmental sector.

The imperative change in China's political landscape has attracted the attention of China scholars as well as NGO scholars, and their publications have helped us in our understanding of NGOs and civil society in China. Many important aspects of such a development remain to be explored, however. The great majority of publications on NGOs worldwide concern formally established and registered NGOs;

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<sup>1</sup> Publication of this paper has been authorised by CIDOB-Barcelona Centre for International Affairs.

in China a large proportion of this type of organization is governmentally organized NGOs (GONGOs). The small nonprofit organizations are typically omitted from sector accounts. For example, in the United States, prevailing economic theories in the nonprofit field direct attention to larger and more formal service-providing organizations. From an economic point of view, very small and informal organizations are of lesser importance. However, social capital and civil society arguments have focused renewed attention on informal, voluntaristic groups, many of which are likely small in scale and thus absent from existing data sources (Toepler, 2003). Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam is the major scholar in this surge of interest in social capital and associational life. According to Putnam, informal associations alter people's associational behavior because "taking part in a choral society or a bird-watching club can teach self-discipline and an appreciation for the joys of successful collaboration" (Putnam, 1993). Putnam and Kenneth Newton both believe that informal or grassroots organizations in some respects may well be a great deal more important than formal organizations (Newton, 1999). The last years has witnessed the rapid growth of grassroots organizations (GOs) in China, and this phenomenon reflects profound changes in the Chinese people's social and associational behavior that make the study of GOs a meaningful topic.

Grassroots organizations –vast, diverse, and fluid– present a considerable challenge to scholars in collecting data, categorizing, and assessing. The great majority of grassroots organizations are not in the official statistics; moreover, the Chinese government does not easily permit large-scale independent surveys on the subject, especially by foreign researchers. To a large extent, the overall condition of GOs in China is still unknown. This study intends to shed light on these GOs, and it tries to provide basic information about the type,

mission, leadership, and attributes of those entities, and their roles in China's transformation. The paper discusses this topic from three aspects: 1) a practical definition of grassroots organizations "compatible" with China's current political situation and the organizations' development, compared to popular ideas of grassroots organizations in the West; 2) a description of grassroots organizations in China and their contexts, based on initiative, mission, and organizational features; 3) a view of grassroots organizations in terms of social capital and the value of GOs from the participants' point of view.

## **Chinese Definition of Grassroots Organizations**

The word "grassroots" has appeared in political terminology since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: grassroots movement, grassroots democracy, grassroots organizations, etc. Grassroots stands for the fundamental level of organization or community. In her study of grassroots movements and global civil society, Srilatha Batliwala explains that the concept of grassroots specifically means

"the basic building blocks of society –small rural communities or urban neighborhoods where the 'common men' (or women) lived–. In some contexts it was used to signify the poor, labor or working class, as opposed to dominant social elites; in others, it was usually applied to rural, village-based communities rather than urban" (Batliwala, 2002).

From this understanding, the terms "grassroots movement" and "grassroots organization" naturally convey the connotation of local, small, bottom-up initiatives.

In his book *Grassroots Organizations*, David Smith defines these organizations as being

“locally based, significantly autonomous, volunteer-run, formal nonprofit groups that manifest substantial voluntary altruism as groups and use the associational form of organization and, thus, have official memberships of volunteers who perform most, and often all, of the work/activity done in and by these nonprofits” (Smith, 2000).

Among the characteristics he lists, Smith particularly emphasizes the local association form in labeling nonprofits as grassroots organizations (Smith, 2000). Smith describes the state of GOs as a “dark matter,” because they exist in great numbers yet we fail to discern so many of them. He attributes this consequence to a flat-earth paradigm, which accounts only for the most visible, typically formally organized, voluntary efforts.

The “grassroots organization” – *caogen zuzhi* (草根组织) – is an import concept in China, yet it has been adopted and interpreted by Chinese NGO activists and scholars in accord with the Chinese nonprofit sector’s specific situation. The earliest adoption of the term occurred in the late 1990s when China’s first group of independent nonprofit organizations emerged. Well aware of their autonomous nature in contrast to the GONGOs, these organizations gradually perceived the meaning and importance of “grassroots.” As the NGO activists started to call their entities “grassroots organizations,” reports on those organizations also began to use the term<sup>2</sup>. In their recent work, some Chinese scholars consider grassroots organizations to be bottom-up entities initiated and operated by

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<sup>2</sup> My interviews with many autonomous organizations in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The earliest reports using this term appeared in *China Development Brief*, a Kunming (later on Beijing) based weekly journal run by a US registered organization focusing on NGOs in China.



the people rather than the government (Xu Yushan, 2007; Xu Weihua 2007).

In contrast to the popular Western use of GO to suggest the organization's emergence as a "bottom up," local phenomenon, most Chinese organizations that claim themselves to be grassroots are neither locally based nor using an associational form. In fact, most high-profile grassroots organizations in China are either urban elite-organized advocacy organizations or professional service providers. Their programs or services often aim at national involvement and address a much larger region –if not the entire nation– than their registered levels. These organizations believe they are grassroots because they operate independently and without government funding. Thus it becomes clear that for both practitioners and scholars in China the most important element of "grassroots" is autonomy, and they equate this term with autonomous NGOs. "Grassroots organization" becomes an identity or even ideology for independent organizations to distinguish themselves from organizations that are either established or sponsored by the government. Because the word "autonomous" was, and to some extent still is, a politically sensitive word, it is easy to understand why the word "grassroots" has supplanted "independent" or "autonomous".

We should also note that the label "grassroots organization" brings practical benefits. Under China's official NGO policy, self-organized entities, regardless of their missions and forms, are not entitled to receive government funding. The Chinese business sector has not yet become a real resource for the nonprofit sector, let alone for grassroots organizations. Thus the entire or at least major portion of the grassroots organizations' income derives from foreign donations, foundations, or NGOs.

Although many credentials or criteria are involved in granting funds to Chinese NGO,<sup>3</sup> their autonomous nature is nonetheless an important factor. Increasingly, Chinese NGOs understand this condition in their applications for foreign private funds. Indeed, the financial incentive is an obvious motivation for Chinese organizations to highlight their “grassroots” nature.

Uniquely, some types of organizations that may be grassroots organizations under other circumstance are not grassroots organizations in China. For example, the workers’ unions or women’s associations at work units, communities, or villages are at the lowest level of their organizations, yet they are neither autonomous nor voluntary. Being the extended local “branches” of governmentally controlled national GONGOs such as the All-China Federation of Trade Unions and the All-China Women’s Federation, these local organizations do not play the roles that GOs do. The neighborhood community committees (*shequ jumin weiyuanhui* 社区居民委员会) in urban China are another interesting example. Although for a decade the government has been promoting self-elected and self-governing neighborhood committees as the major goal in rebuilding urban communities, the committees newly elected by the residents in fact have served as the lowest tier of the government. Elected members of the committees are on the government payroll, and they carry certain administrative responsibilities as well. Only in 2007 did some cities start to lift the administrative duties allocated by the government from the committees to allow them to become autonomous and work for the so-called democratic process (Wu, 2007).

Considering both the definition of the term “grassroots organization” worldwide and China’s specific practice, and

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<sup>3</sup> For an elaborate account on foreign aid to Chinese NGOs, see, Ma (2006).

especially bearing in mind the current development levels of Chinese NGOs, this study defines grassroots organizations in China as follows: All organizations –formally or informally formed, in associational form or otherwise, locally based or with national orientation, for public interests or self-interests– that are voluntarily and independently organized and operated by the members.

There are reasons for offering such a broad definition. First of all, one of the major concerns behind distinguishing a grassroots category within the nonprofit sector is to address the importance of small local associations in responding to the domination of well-established, professionalized and institutionalized organizations. In China, the nongovernmental sector is still nascent, and concern over the undue influence of professionalized and institutionalized organizations on civil society is not an issue and probably will not be one for a long time. Secondly, China's official NGO regulatory rules make establishing formal autonomous organizations very difficult. On the one hand, the grassroots organizations often do not meet the conditions required to become a legal, formal organization; on the other hand, community- or village-based organizations as well as university student organizations, among some others, do not need to register with the government and become formal. Thus the total number of legally formal grassroots organizations is proportionately small. Finally, as a later section of this paper will show, in recent years an enormous number of informally organized, unregistered, and unstable social groups and networks have emerged everywhere in China, including cyberspace. The majority of them exist locally, and they are engaging in a multitude of activities and missions. These entities have brought vitality to society and the nongovernmental sector and created an atmosphere of self-expression and participation in the public sphere. The pervasiveness and depth of their actions have demonstrated in

so many ways the potential of the nongovernmental sector in general and grassroots organizations in particular.

## **Categorizing Grassroots Organizations in China**

Based on the definition established above, this account considers the following organizations as grassroots, and based on their distinct initiative, missions, and organizational features it divides them into four categories: 1) well-organized associations that represent their members' specific economic or social interests; 2) groups organized by urban elites that advocate for public interests; 3) informally and loosely organized social/cultural networks based in urban communities and rural villages; and 4) student organizations, especially voluntary ones, on university campuses.

1). Special-interest Associations. Since the reforms, China's economy and society have become increasingly diverse, with new economic and social forces emerging with resources and self-interests. Among the urban population, private entrepreneurs and the white-collar middle class are the most eager to promote and protect their specific interests, and inevitably they seek associational and collective actions. The most rapidly growing and noticeable interests-oriented independent organizations are 1) the privately organized trade associations and chambers of commerce that represent various trades; and 2) the self-organized real estate owners' organizations in urban residential compounds. Following are some outstanding features of the A group.

Using A group as example. Among 82,047 officially registered trade associations, the privately initiated chambers of commerce are a minority; however, they represent the country's most vibrant and increasingly crucial economic force, and their political influence is growing rapidly. In coastal regions such as

Zhejiang and Fujian provinces, these organizations have started to play important roles in promoting and protecting their members' interests (Ma, 2006). In the early 1990s, for example, to best advance their economic interests and stifle suicidal competition and numerous unlawful business practices, Wenzhou private entrepreneurs felt a strong need to establish chambers of commerce, and they pressed the local government for permission. This was a groundbreaking action, as China had not had private business associations since the 1950s. To a certain degree, this was the earliest collective negotiation between private entrepreneurs and the government since the economic reforms in the 1980s. By 2004, over 110 private chambers of commerce had emerged in this region of 7,15 million people. Concurrently, about a hundred Wenzhou businessmen's associations were established in cities across China to provide members with important services, offer protection against abuse by official powers and lawsuits, and lend assistance in communication among members and with the government (Chen and Zhou, 2002; Yu and Xiao, 2004).

An obvious strength and advantage of private business associations is their financial resources. Due to the official government policy of not funding private organizations, most Chinese independent NGOs face serious revenue shortages, and many of them depend heavily if not totally on international support. In contrast, the private entrepreneurs are the most resourceful and self-motivated socioeconomic group in China, and the private chambers of commerce are financially independent and self-sufficient. Financial resources allow a great degree of freedom in decision-making and governance as well as a potential influence on policy-making. Although currently the great majority of these business associations are keeping in line with the official policies, independent voices are emerging. In recent years, for example, the associations of real estate business people have voiced loudly and clearly their

opinions on the government's housing and urban development policy, and some of their actions directly or indirectly challenged official housing policy.<sup>4</sup>

One rather dramatic action by the real estate associations represents an inevitable political consequence of the growth of the private economy and business associations. The episode occurred when the real estate associations expressed strong concern about the government's new housing policy. In an attempt to control overheated housing prices, in March 2005 the State Council issued its famous eight-point house construction policy (*guobadian* 国八点). Not long after its release, Ren Zhiqiang, the chair of Real Estate Chambers of Commerce and the CEO of a high-profile Beijing real estate company, wrote a long article that challenged the official estimation of China's urban housing market and strongly criticized the government's interference in the housing market. The article was in the name of the Chamber of Commerce and was delivered to the relevant government agency; very soon, it appeared online and was publicized widely among other media. This so-called "Ren's ten-thousand-words statement" (*wanyanshu* 万言书) provoked a heated debate among the public over the government's new policy (Ren, 2005).

Around the same time, Hu Baosin, the president of the Federation of China Cities (*Zhongcheng Liangmeng* 中城联盟), the biggest private association in the housing business, published an "open letter" (*gongkai xin* 公开信) expressing his opinion of the new policy (Ren, 2005). On other occasions Hu had stated clearly that "the mission of *Zhongcheng Liangmeng*

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<sup>4</sup> Interview Ren Zhiqiang, CEO of Huayuan Company and one of the most outspoken businessmen, Beijing, 2005. Interviews with Wang Haoli and Huang Jisu, senior editors of *China Social Science*, 2005.

was to influence the policy-making of housing business regulations and seek the maximum interests of its members”. According to China’s political vocabulary, the terms “open letter” and “ten-thousand-words statement” convey a strong political challenge, and consequently both Ren’s and Hu’s voices influenced public opinion and even official policy. To certain degree, they indeed accomplished their goal.<sup>5</sup>

2). Urban public-interest organizations. Residents of large cities have initiated autonomous organizations to support public interests such as the environment, education, human rights, public health, and poverty alleviation. In their operational orientation, they favor advocacy, research, or service. A noticeable feature of the leadership of these organizations is that they are overwhelmingly urban elites. In current Chinese political culture, urban elites include political elites, intellectual elites, and economic elites, and, among them, the intellectuals have been the first and most active in promoting nongovernmental organizations for public interests. For example, the first group of environmental NGOs was established by Liang Congjie (retired history professor at Beijing University, founder of Friends of Nature), Liao Xiaoyi (master’s degree from an American university, founder of Global Village Beijing), Wang Yongchen (journalist, founder of Green Home), and Xu Jianchu (Ph.D. in environmental management, founder of Center for Bio-diversity and Indigenous Knowledge). Likewise, in the forefront of the fight against AIDS, Wan Yanhai, the founder of a renowned NGO for AIDS education, graduated from the prestigious Fudan University Medical School with an M.D. in public health; and Zhang Konglai, founder of the China AIDS Network, is a senior doctor and researcher in China’s best medical institution:

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Ren Zhiqiang, 2005, and Wang Haoli and Huang Jisu, 2005.

Beijing Union Medical University. This list can go on, and one can also see intellectual leadership in grassroots organizations in the fields of women's rights, rural poverty alleviation, education, and many others.

It is not a coincidence that intellectuals have played such an important role in China's NGO development. China's deep-rooted tradition of intellectuals' social responsibility no doubt is a continuing moral value for many intellectuals, old generation or young. Yet, there is a particular reason that these individuals chose the NGO as the institutional form for their causes. As many of them recalled later, the knowledge of NGO theory and practice they obtained via different channels inspired them to organize their own NGOs.<sup>6</sup> Because of their educational background, foreign language skills, study or conference opportunities abroad, and their connections with the outside world, the intellectuals, more so than any other social or political group in China, were in the best position to reach out and seek support from international NGOs.

While intellectuals are pioneers in China's NGOs, economic elites have begun to turn to NGOs to advance public causes. Slowly and on a small scale, some business people have started to take part in social development initiatives.<sup>7</sup> Most such

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<sup>6</sup> In my interviews with many NGO leaders, it has been the case almost without exception. For similar expressions, also see, Li Xiaojiang ed. 《身临“奇境”》(Being in the wonderland), Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> The complaints about rich people in China are that they do not accept their social responsibility, nor do they return what they have received from society, see, “害怕露富，中美人均捐款相差 7300 倍”(Fear of uncovering their fortune, there is 7.300 times of difference in donation per capita between Chinese and Americans) 东方日报, March 10, 2006.



actions take the form of monetary donations to education and poverty alleviation, and yet the launching of China's first private entrepreneurs' environmental NGO –SEE– represented a new effort by business people towards direct involvement in public causes. The Society Entrepreneurs & Ecology (SEE, also called *Alasan* 阿拉善) was established by a hundred business men and women, most of them well-known in the mainland or Taiwan. Each pledged to donate ¥100,000 a year for the next ten years to fight the devastating expansion of the desert in *Alasan*, Inner Mongolia, one of the origins of dust storms.<sup>8</sup> The creation of SEE gives hope for further involvement by private economic forces in the development of the nonprofit sector in China. Can China's domestic private resources become an important, if not major, income source for the nonprofit sector? Two considerations make this question inevitably urgent. First, the Chinese government in general does not fund independent NGOs, and, second, international funding may be withdrawn from China as the country's economy continues to grow rapidly. The most significant result of the direct participation of business people in public causes, however, is the political rather than monetary contribution to the evolution of civil society. The assumption of social responsibility enables them to pursue their vision and exert influence on social reforms and the government's social policy-making.

The urban elite organizations are the most representative civil society organizations in China. Their nature and operation reflect major features of an NGO as it is popularly conceived worldwide. Small in number and scale, especially in comparison with China's vast population and mounting needs,

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Yang Ping, the Secretary General of Society Entrepreneur & Ecology, 2005.

these organizations nevertheless have played a much larger role than their size and resources might suggest. They have had a significant effect on China's ongoing reforms, and their actions have inspired many to follow. In numerous fronts in the fight for social justice and improving human lives, these organizations have often been the first to uncover problems, initiate action, and run programs. Some nongovernmental think tanks and research institutes have become independent voices on reform policy and social issues, and they have earned the trust of the general public and even some decision-makers for their objective studies and professional ethics.<sup>9</sup> These operations have brought citizen participation, people's initiatives, nongovernmental approaches, and a volunteer spirit into China's public life. They have shown the Chinese public what NGOs are and what they can accomplish, and thus they are seen by many as the social and moral conscience in a material-driven China.

Although the great majority of these organizations are formally established and well qualified as nonprofit organizations, many of them cannot legally register as nonprofit organizations in China. None of these autonomous organizations have become national organizations registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and very few are registered at the provincial or municipal level. Most of these grassroots organizations have either registered at the county level even though their activities are nationwide or as the second-tier organizations (*erji shetuan* 二级社团) that do not carry corporative status.<sup>10</sup> In order to register so they can operate legally, quite a few NGOs have had

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<sup>9</sup> Interview of Mao Yushi, one of the founders of Tian Ze, a high reputable independent economic research institute, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> The Chinese government registers the civil society organizations at three levels: national, provincial/ municipal, and district.

to register with bureaus of industry and commerce as for-profit firms. Since the 2005 tightening of control over independent NGOs, even this door is now closing.

Understandably, under China's political situation, most NGOs, including elite NGOs, adopt a non-confrontational stance towards the government and official policy. The foremost priority of these organizations is to survive the political system so that they can carry out their missions.<sup>11</sup> This group of NGO leaders, activists and scholars alike, is well-educated and possesses sufficient understanding of China's political reality as well as the concepts of Western civil society. Unlike their counterparts in Western countries, many of these leaders do not see the role of Chinese NGOs as a safeguard against state interference in the private sector.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, for the organizations' and their own sake, they do not want to confront the state. Rather, they are willing to compromise both their ideas and programs if circumstances force them to do so.

The landscapes of Chinese NGOs and their leaderships have become increasingly diverse and complex, not only in organizational structure and mission but also in the motivations moving people to join NGOs. For many young people, running an NGO has become a new career option or even a business possibility. Well-educated people invest their time, expertise, and career prospects in the NGO field just as they do in the business world. Naturally they would like to stay in a politically "comfortable zone" and make a "comfortable life". Thus, mainstream, elite NGOs are primarily practical and pragmatic, and they are concerned foremost about the survival

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<sup>11</sup> Interviews with NGO leaders, 1996-2005.

<sup>12</sup> For Chinese scholars' arguments on this subject, see, Ma (2006), chapter 1.

of their organizations rather than any ideological issues involving NGO autonomy.

3). Loosely organized community and village groups. A vast and fluid flock of grassroots groups has emerged in urban communities and rural villages. They evince a wide array of purposes, organizational forms and conditions, operations, and financial conditions, from increasingly popular self-developing hobby and exercise groups in parks to Internet bulletin board systems (BBS) groups (over 100.000 in 2004) (Wang and He, 2004). Hardly any of these groups are registered with the civil affairs bureaus. In the 1980s, hobby clubs flourished in many cities, but in the 1990s the government shut down many while placing others under the bureaus of sports or culture (Wang and Sun, 2002). Nevertheless, many more have resurfaced since the late 1990s. Just in Beijing, for example, over 200 singing chorales and a similar number of Beijing Opera fan clubs meet regularly and have their own budgets and paid rehearsal places.<sup>13</sup> A large number of people participate in these activities faithfully, and their informal groups are open to everyone and yet are quite well-organized. With the agreement of the participants, the groups usually collect fees to pay for teachers/organizers or equipment.

Another example is the super-female-vocal (*chaoji nüsheng* 超级女声 or *chaonü* 超女) competitions organized by Hunan TV in the summer of 2005. The competition's slogan, "if you like to sing, you sing" (*xiang chang jiu chang* 想唱就唱), inspired countless young girls; its "everyone can become a star" message became the huge attraction of the show. Fans organized themselves into groups to follow the competitions

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<sup>13</sup> Interviews with participants of these cultural groups, 2002, 2004, 2005.

from one city to another and promote their stars. In the estimation of the event organizer, several million people voted via cell phones for their favorite performers. Undoubtedly, the call-in was a great boon to the TV station (at ¥1.00 per cell phone vote), yet it also provided a meaningful experience for both the competition's participants and the voters. For the great majority of the voters, this may have been the first time that their votes counted. Most interestingly, this so-called "*chaonü* phenomenon" led to a heated debate among intellectuals over whether the event could be seen as a sign of increasing citizen participation and democracy in China.<sup>14</sup> While some passionately called this the "thumb democracy" (*muzhi minzhu* 拇指民主, people use their thumbs to send the phone message), others ridiculed the intellectuals as desperate to detect any hint of democracy in China (Liu, 2005). Nonetheless, regarding people's associational behavior, we cannot ignore the *chaonü* competition's significance: people indeed organized themselves for their own purposes, and, thanks to modern technology, their actions quickly reached a large scale.

Without question, the growth of these social networks has substantial social and political implications. It is significant that these groups are extensive and inclusive. Compared to formally established organizations with defined criteria for membership, anyone can join the informal groups and networks. They attract people across professional, residential, and financial boundaries,

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<sup>14</sup> Zeng Jun (2006), "思想与学术在当代文化中合流" (The confluence of ideology and scholarship in contemporary culture), [www.chinesenewsnet.com](http://www.chinesenewsnet.com) (accessed in January 29).

and participation is truly voluntary.<sup>15</sup> Such an inclusiveness or openness is particularly meaningful to those excluded from the formally established organizations usually organized along political or professional lines. Thus it is understandable why the growth of these types of informal associations has been so rapid; in fact, these social groups outnumber the registered organizations.<sup>16</sup>

Many factors have contributed to the prosperity of informal gatherings and networks. Consequently, these associations have profoundly changed social behavior. People now are able to control their private time, space, and resources, and to various degrees they exercise their freedom of association and expression (Wang, 1995). Meanwhile, official control over public spaces and private lives has relaxed considerably. Non-official and often non-commercial cultural, entertainment, and educational programs have offered the public alternative choices and opportunities. At the same time, the enormous need by low income or marginalized people for information and services has prompted others to organize non-commercial services or self/mutual help networks.<sup>17</sup>

The rapid adoption of modern Technology –Internet, cell phones, and BP phones in particular– is another factor in the

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<sup>15</sup> Considering the fact that many so-called voluntary activities in China are officially organized, the voluntary nature of these gatherings is more meaningful.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with an official in the Bureau of Nongovernmental Organizations of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Interviews with a self-help organization for returned “educated-youth” (*zhishi qingnian*) from the Great Northern Wilderness, and community service organizations in Beijing, Shenyang, and Shanghai. 1996, 2001, and 2005.

development of informal social networks. Especially in cities and among young people, these technologies have become widespread and are essential to organizers who want to mobilize large-scale activities on short notice.<sup>18</sup> The number of Internet users exploded from 1.600 in 1994 to 103 million in 2005, as Web sites jumped from 1.500 in 1997 up to 677.500 in 2005 (Cai, 2006). The accelerating growth of cyberspace and its uncontrollable nature make it an ideal place for nourishing China's e-civil society. The energy, enthusiasm, and creativity of people determined to control and improve their own lives have broken free from long-time suppression, and indeed have become the dynamic force behind people's self-organizing.

4). University student organizations. Official regulations do not require campus student organizations to register, but approval and sponsorship from university authorities are necessary. Certain unique features distinguish this type of organization from others. For instance, unlike in other types of organization, members of student organizations are typically similar in age, education, residency, and daily engagements. Such similarities no doubt provide an advantage in organizing activities and achieving a high participation rate. Since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, China's universities have served as the cradle for all kinds of political and reform movements. This tradition has inspired generation after generation of students to devote themselves to political and social movements and organized actions. Because of this, a succession of governments, especially the Communist government, has always kept a close watch on university organizations. The continual change in student populations leads to a fluidity in the nature of campus organizations; membership turnover is high and changes in both leadership and mission are frequent.

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<sup>18</sup> Interviews with Chinese scholars on NGOs, 2005.

The majority of student groups focus on academic interests and campus lives, so their activities and influence are basically restrained within the campus. Participation rates are generally high, and very few students do not participate in some sort of student organization. A prestigious university in Beijing can serve as an example. This university has around 8,000 undergraduate students and a similar number of graduate students. It has over seventy formally established student organizations registered with the university, with over 2,500 members. At the same time, additional organizations exist at school and departmental levels. The school's annual budget for all kinds of student organizations is ¥ 500,000, and the average grant for each organization is ¥500. Obtaining sponsors and approval is not difficult as long as the organization's mission does not conflict with the official political ideology. The organizations are self-run, but the university employs seven full-time and twelve half-time staff as supervisors. Most of the leaders of such organizations are members of either the Communist Party or China's Youth League.<sup>19</sup>

Since the 1989 Tian'anmen student movements, the government and university authorities have been highly alert to campus gatherings. They keep a short leash on student campus activities and do not hesitate to crush any organizations or activities that fall out of line with the Communist Party.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, the strong influence of current commercial trends in Chinese culture since 1989 has drawn students' interests away from political issues and democracy. Thus, to a large degree, the political salons or forums that once were so

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with the director of the Student Organizations Office of that university, 2005, Beijing.

<sup>20</sup> Interviews with students at Beijing University, 2001.



popular on campuses in the late 1980s have lost their attraction. In contrast with the stagnation of political organizations, in recent years the number of student voluntary organizations engaging in environmental protection, rural education, poverty alleviation, and AIDS/HIV prevention has increased impressively. For example, there were only eight student environmental groups in 1995. The number started to climb in 1999. By 2001, most major universities had environmental organizations with at least 184 college environmental associations operating in China (Yang, 2005). “Environmental protection gives college students a legitimate reason to organize activities beyond academic matters and campus walls” (Ma, 2006). The experience of volunteer work and organizing grassroots NGOs has had a lasting impact on these participants even after their graduation. I interviewed a mainstay leader of the Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge (CBIK), a well-known grassroots NGO in Yunnan Province. When she was a student, Ms. Wang was an organizer of an environmental organization at Yunnan University, and this experience led her to CBIK and the environmental cause.<sup>21</sup> In short, these organizations provide students with opportunities not only to understand problems in real society but also to help solve those problems.

## **Grassroots Organizations and Social Capital**

Deeply impressed by how democratic governance in the United States differed strikingly from the centralized French state, Alexander de Tocqueville in his *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840) came to see associations as performing several key functions: answering unmet social needs, mediating between personal or local interests and the national common good,

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<sup>21</sup> Interviews with Wang Yu, 2002, 2004, Kunming.

preventing the tyranny of the majority, limiting state power, and preventing abuse by the state (Alagappa, 2004). To neo-Tocquevilleans, healthy associational life is crucial to civil society and democracy. Robert Putnam has rejuvenated the concept of social capital and articulated such a relationship explicitly. According to Putnam, a dense and elaborate network of voluntary or informal organizations generates social capital by promoting social trust, norms of reciprocity, networks of civic engagement, and successful cooperation (Putnam, 1993). Putnam argues that

“networks of civic engagement, like the neighborhood associations, choral societies, cooperatives, sports clubs, mass-based parties, and the like..., represent intense horizontal interaction. Networks of civic engagement are an essential form of social capital: The denser such networks in a community, the more likely that its citizens will be able to cooperate for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 1993).

Based on this conviction, his controversial conclusion: “American social capital in the form of civic associations has significantly eroded over the last generation” (Putnam, 1995), represents Putnam’s deep concern for the future of democracy.

Following Putnam’s definition, Kenneth Newton highlights three important facets of the concept of social capital. First, he argues that with reciprocity and trust, social capital can turn individuals “with little social conscience and little sense of social obligation into members of a community with shared interests, shared assumptions about social relations and a sense of common good”. Thus, it becomes the social cement that binds society together. Second, the main features of social capital can be found in formal or informal networks, “which link friends, family, community, work, and both public and private life.” Last, the function of social capital is productive and can be defined in terms of “collective goods, facilities, and

services which are produced in the voluntary sector, as opposed to being produced by families, markets, or government” (Newton, 1999). As later sections will illustrate, these features all appear in China’s recent associational revolution.

It is true that many associations are motivated by self-interest; nonetheless, as some scholars point out, they bring a positive influence to society. Nan Lin argues that “institutionalized social relations with embedded resources are expected to benefit both the collective and the individuals in the collective” (Lin, 2001). According to Putnam, “One special feature of social capital, like trust, norms, and networks, is that it is ordinarily a public good”. He points out that though often a byproduct of other social activities, social capital helps to overcome dilemmas of collective action by inducing reciprocity and social networks, thereby creating opportunities for new action (Putnam, 1993). Thus, associational life breeds trust, cooperation, and self-discipline; in turn, civic engagement stimulates political involvement, citizenry, and general interest in the public good. In their study of American civil volunteerism, Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady argue that “both the motivation and the capacity to take part in politics have their roots in the fundamental non-political institutions” (Verba, *et al*, 1995). Coming full circle, Putnam underscores the value of social capital to democracy when he concludes that, “social capital, as embodied in horizontal networks of civic engagement, bolsters the performance of the polity and the economy, rather than the reverse: strong society, strong economy; strong society, strong state” (Putnam, 1993).

Thus, participating in social networks, formal or informal, increases people’s social capital and ultimately benefits society and promotes a democratic system. Is this theory applicable to China’s case? Theoretically it is very difficult to establish a quantitative analysis of how associational life increases the

Chinese people's social capital. Nonetheless, case studies on grassroots organizations show positive signs for such an assumption. From my interviews of participants in social networks/organizations, it becomes clear that people gain self-confidence, self-esteem, sociability, civility, and citizen responsibility in civic engagements. People initiate or join in associations or collective activities either for personal reasons—such as to make friends, gather information, or develop a personal hobby— or for public causes. In either case, organization and governance are keys to achieving their goals. To a large degree, a healthy grassroots organization requires that everyone become involved in making decisions and running activities.

For example, a women's singing group of 30 regular members in Beijing elects a treasury committee, skill-training committee, and membership committee to run practices, rehearsals and performances. The committee members learn to lead, while others learn to respect the elected committees and cooperate with the leaders and peers.<sup>22</sup> A meaningful point here is that all these activities rely on voluntary participation. One Beijing Opera Fan Club member told me her story of how the club helped her fulfill her childhood dream and how it made her happy and proud of herself as never before.<sup>23</sup> Another example concerns a neighborhood senior center in Ningbo, Zhejiang province. When some retired residents decided to organize this center to enrich their lives, they had to learn many skills that they had never attempted before. With help from the Can Yu Shi Community Development Center, a Beijing-based grassroots NGO, these seniors finally got all they needed: a

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with a member of this singing group, 2005.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with this woman, 2004.

large room, some furniture and facilities, and a charter. Friction and minor conflict among the members arose over what to do and how to do it, understandably; yet, they eventually learned how to interact well with each other. The following anecdote is an interesting example of how they run the center. During the hot summer, the members decided to buy an air conditioner, a major investment by the center. Not only did they successfully raise enough money, but to avoid spending too much on electricity, they also established rules, which everyone followed, on when to turn on the AC and who takes responsibility.<sup>24</sup>

Under China's current political and social culture, AIDS/HIV victims, drug abusers, and the homosexual population live on the periphery of society and suffer from blatant discrimination. They could not –and the great majority of them still cannot– find adequate medical treatment. My interviewees told me their tragic experiences in struggling for dignity, self-esteem, family love, and hope. Job discrimination, family abandonment, and social prejudice have pushed many of them toward suicide. The sudden surge of an impressive number of centers, hotlines, drug rehabilitation clinics, magazines and various educational and social networks for these populations indeed have created a certain degree of hope and real life. The entertainment organized by the centers for homosexuals provides educational and medical information about AIDS and drug abuse prevention. All these activities are organized and performed by the members. In return, this voluntary work instills the participants with pride and confidence. These places can

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with Song Qinghua, the director of this Center, 2005.

become a sort of home, in some cases the only social place the members have.<sup>25</sup>

These stories echo Putnam's assertion that networks of civic engagement foster sturdy norms of generalized reciprocity and encourage the emergence of social trust. Such networks facilitate coordination and communication, amplify reputations, and thus allow dilemmas of collective action to be resolved (Putnam, 1995). In civic engagements, members of grassroots groups deal with "insignificant" matters daily, and yet these activities carry significant meanings for them. In China, the freedom of association had been absent for several decades since 1949, and ordinary people, especially those marginalized by political and economic conditions, did not have a chance to take part in decision-making on public or collective matters. Launching their own organizations or networks, raising funds and making decisions are exciting and challenging, giving people self-confidence and a sense of responsibility to their members and to society as a whole. In my interviews, I saw firsthand how these engagements have changed participants' lives. It is true that not every organization succeeded. Indeed, the successful ones have coped with many difficulties, and many organizations failed to survive for all kinds of reasons. Nevertheless, people learned from both successful and failed experiences.

In summary, regardless of the shifts in official NGO policies between loosening or tightening government control, the last decade has witnessed the substantial progress of grassroots organizations. The upsurge of grassroots organizations is the direct outcome of a pluralistic economy and diversified society.

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<sup>25</sup> My interviews with AIDS/HIV patients, homosexuals, and drug abusers in Kunming and Beijing, 2007.

The uneven yet steady growth of grassroots organizations in various categories indicates that civic association and social networking have become meaningful mechanisms for Chinese of various social backgrounds and for various purposes. The widespread emergence and progressive actions of grassroots organizations have become an important factor in China's social and political transformation, and it gives us hope for a stronger civil society in China.

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