From Adapting to Political Constraints to Influencing Government Policy: A Study of the Strategies of Chinese NGOs in NGO-State Interaction

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Since the late 1990s, China has witnessed a rapid growth of NGOs, which are actively seeking interactions with the state in various arenas and on different levels. This paper examines NGO-state interactions, focusing on how NGOs struggle to reconfigure their relationship with the state in a way more beneficial to their development. The paper first discusses the emergence and growth of Chinese NGOs. This is followed by examination of Chinese NGOs’ strategies directed toward three aspects: struggling for organizational legitimacy, using government networks to achieve organizational goals, and attempting to enter the decision-making process. The paper finds that Chinese NGOs have developed a wide range of strategies in their interactions with government, from adapting to state control to actively influencing government policy, and NGO-state interactions mainly depend on ‘un-institutional’ channels to operate.

Key words: NGO, NGO’s strategy, State-society relations, Guanxi

1. Introduction

Since the Reform, China has witnessed a rapid growth of associations. Many scholars regard associations as a valuable perspective to observe the state-society relations in contemporary China. Two theoretical models, Civil Society model (White 1993, White et al. 1996, He 1997, Frolic 1997) and Corporatist model (Chan 1993, Pearson 1994, Unger and Chan 1995, Kang 1999), are mainly employed. Civil Society model emphasizes the autonomy of society and its independence from the state, while Corporatist model emphasizes the dependency of society on the state.

The two models have been challenged implicitly or explicitly by some others who, though recognizing some characteristics of civil society or/and corporatist structure, pay more attention to the complex ways that the state and society interact with and interpenetrate each other in China (Migdal et al. 1994, Flower and Leonard 1996, Saich 2000, Foster 2001, Ru and Ortolano 2004). They argue that the Western social science habit to view state-society relationship as a zero-sum game, which society’s gain is the state’s loss, does not shed much light on China where private ties, public associations, and state agents are so thoroughly interviewed. The state-society relationship is not a static structure of power distribution, but a dynamic process full of conflicts and compromises. Therefore, we should pay greater attention to the process of how the society and state interact with each other, rather than the state of what kind of state-society relationship it is (Oi 1989, Migdal et al. 1994).

Flower and Leonard (1996) present a ‘messy’ layer of interactions between China’s state and society, in which a moral order (local identity, sense of community and something others) derived from the historical memory plays a crucial role. They select an international NGO that conduct activities of poverty alleviation in rural areas of Sichuan province as a study case. Foster (2001) selects those incorporated associations closely linked to the government as research object to examine the state-association engagement in China on local and micro-levels. Ru and Ortolano (2004) investigate interactions between Chinese government and associations by examining measures the state has developed to control the registration and activities of social groups in China, and the extent to which these control measures have been implemented by involved government agencies.

This paper attempts to provide an understanding of state-society relations in current China by examining how Chinese NGOs interact with the state. Since 1990s, some Western style NGOs have emerged and gained rapid growth in China. Essentially different from those official and semi-official associations, these NGOs are independent from the government and can negotiate with the government on behalf of the society. As a new element of social structure, they
are outcome of the current state-society interactions, and potential force of influencing the future state-society relationship. They can provide a new and significant perspective to view the state-society relations in contemporary China.

The paper selects NGOs in social development area (e.g. environment, poverty alleviation, legal aid, etc.) as study cases. One reason for such a selection is that NGOs in the development area are the most active and influential ones in China. Another reason is that NGOs in this area are public organizations, presenting public interest and involving public debate, and thus can directly reveal interactions between the state and society.

The paper focuses on Chinese NGOs’ strategies towards the government. It examines how NGOs struggle for negotiation with the state to minimize the state’s control and allow for policy input or pursuit of members’ interests and organizational goals, and how the state responds to NGOs’ strategies. Through this, the paper attempts to disclose the dynamic process of how Chinese NGOs form an independent social sphere and how they enlarge the border of this social sphere under such background that the state still holds dominant power over the society.

2. Emergence and Growth of Chinese NGOs

The Reform started in 1978 created new sources of wealth and alternative avenues of personal opportunity, as well as space for free activities. These have created social soil, which is potentially fertile for the growth of new forms of social associations (White et al. 1996: 25). Simultaneously, social issues (e.g. environmental pollution, heavy unemployment, etc.) are increasingly obvious, and demands for many kinds of services are set to grow steeply as the Reform goes deeply. These have created social needs for emergency of NGOs.

In such a background, bottom-up initiated associations started to emerge and develop in 1990s’ China. Compared with those official and semi-official associations initiated by the government directly or indirectly, these bottom-up initiated associations fully embody the principles of voluntary participation and self-regulation, autonomy and separation from the state. They are organizations most analogous to Western-style NGOs among all Chinese associations, generally consistent with the five criteria of NGO (NPO) defined by the John Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project.1 The paper uses ‘NGO’ to refer to them.

In general, the state adopts a rigid policy towards NGOs, which can be reflected by the two Regulations.2 The core of the two Regulations is the ‘dual-administration system’, which can be explained simply as ‘associations are administered by two governmental agencies or two ‘mothers-in-law’. The two ‘mothers-in-law’ are the ‘registration and administration agency’ and the ‘professional supervisory agency’. Before applying for registration with Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) or its local agency, the applicant must be examined and approved by its professional supervisory agency. This sets a too high hurdle for the ordinary individual-organized associations to pass. Organizations without close ties to the government experience desperate difficulties in gaining approval of a government department to be the ‘professional supervisory agency’.

Just because of the state’s rigid policy, many Chinese NGOs are not registered with the department of civil affairs, and thus are not officially recognized and legally protected. They have to exist and operate as organizations unregistered with any governmental agencies, or in other registration types, such as branch of officially registered associations, internal group of governmental agencies or state-owned enterprises, commercial registration as business groups, and etc. (Zhao 2001).

However, it can be found that the state does not treat NGOs so strictly as the Regulations require. Instead, it leaves them certain living space and freedom to develop. The following reasons may explain the state’s behavior.

1) Chinese NGOs in the social development area seldom challenge the state’s authority. They are issue-oriented organizations. In order to escape from the government suspect, NGOs seldom address politically sensitive issues, and even take self-limited strategy. This may be the most important reason for the state to tolerate them.

2) Since the Reform, the Chinese government started to face a daunting combination of existing service gaps, expanding demand for services, and severe fiscal constraints. In this sense, NGOs can serve as a supplement to the failure of government function. Just as Lu (2000:124) wrote, they ‘do what the government wants exactly in the way that the government expects’.

1 The five criteria are ‘organized, private, non-profit-distributing, self-governing, and voluntary’.
2 China has no laws on NGOs, but two related regulations, the Regulation on Registration and Administration of Social Organizations, which was issued in October 1989 and amended in October 1998, and the Interim Regulation on Registration and Administration of People-Run Non-Enterprise Units, which is issued in October 1998.
3) Since the Reform, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) system and the government system are not consistent as before due to more and more sectional interests and local interests, which, together with the poly-administration, cause the government and its governing organs to be in an ‘organized’ but ‘anarchy’ state (Deng 2000). The command given by the central party and central government can no longer be executed completely and invariably as before, which creates interstice for NGOs to develop.

4) International values and norms bring Chinese NGOs political opportunities. The process of socialization of international norms is possible because states feel a necessity to be validated as a full member of international society (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). To be a member of international society, China has to obey international values and norms. Due to international pressures, the government cannot suppress NGOs arbitrarily. In additional, the government sometimes even co-opts NGOs into its programs to wash its behavior and improve its international legitimacy.

In a word, Chinese NGOs emerged in such a background that the state is gradually losing its monopoly over the society and but still holds absolute predominance, while the society is becoming stronger and but has no enough power to challenge the state yet. As Weber (1967: 11) argues that as long as several ambivalent orders exist at the same time, there must be a mechanism of general acquiescence functioning in the society. NGOs are the result of compromises between the state and society, a special outcome of transitional China.

3. Organizational Legitimation

As discussed above, many NGOs do not own the legal status granted by the department of civil affairs due to the rigid Regulations. However, they do not exist as underground organizations. Instead, they openly conduct activities and actively interact with the state, and, in some cases, are co-opted into the government-led programs. It raises the problem of legitimacy of Chinese NGOs. Legitimacy here refers to the state with which a NGO is recognized and accepted as an organization that enables it to operate with the recognition of people, organizations, and governmental departments, because of its behavioral conformity to laws, norms or standards by authorities or institutional gatekeepers (Slim 2002).

3.1. To be politically correct

In the public space of current China, anything should meet the political requirement first and foremost (Gao 2000: 106). Not only the state always inspects the political legitimacy of NGOs, but NGOs are also examined by other organizations on its political legitimacy when being selected as cooperation partners. If they are regarded politically dangerous, other organizations will stop the cooperation without the least hesitation, because cooperation with a politically dangerous organization will unavoidably impair their own legitimacy.

A NGO is politically accepted since it conforms to the political norms, namely ‘politically correct’ (Gao 2000: 106). As Saward (1992: 33) says, there are no regular criteria for being politically correct. The key is what it says, but not what it does. The bottom-line of being ‘politically correct’ is ‘not to violate the political order’. However, the criterion of the bottom-line is vague, and, in most cases, the judgment on whether a NGO or its activity violates the bottom-line is subjective. This is the reason why most NGOs do not conduct politically sensitive activities.

Gao (2000: 107) finds that almost all of Chinese associations express positive political attitudes, much higher than what the bottom-line of ‘politically correct’ requires, and they usually show they are in accord with the political orders by declaring that they accord with: 1) the ideology and value of the state, such as the spirit civilization of socialism; 2) the goal, or center task of the state, such as the economic development; and 3) the state policy such as maintaining stability and unification. These tactics can be observed clearly from Chinese NGOs. For example, Friend of Nature (FON) aims to ‘promote the mass environmental education, improve the public’s environmental awareness, stand for green civilization, and advance sustainable development in China.’ The aim of Global Village of Beijing (GVB) is, ‘to assist the government to promote and actualize the sustainable strategy and police by improving awareness and participation of the public.’

3.2. Seeking connections with the state

Although the Chinese Constitution guarantees its citizens freedom of association and assembly, both association and assembly must win approvals of the government before they are put in practice. Otherwise, they are illegal. The essence of the current Regulations is ‘approval system’, rather than ‘authenticating system’. Dual-administration system stresses the importance of governmental approvals in the
process of legalizing a NGO. Thus, whether a NGO can be legally recognized becomes a privilege to be bestowed or withheld by governmental authorities, rather than a right inherently available to any organizations. Compared with the state authority, social recognition and acceptance has been declined to a secondary position. For Chinese NGOs, it is the state authority rather than the society that plays more crucial roles in the process of organizational legitimation. Therefore, Chinese NGOs usually seek connections with the state authority to make up for their incomplete legitimacy.

3.2.1. Connections with the administration system

One strategy Chinese NGOs usually employ is to associate themselves with the administration system. In such circumstance, legitimacy may be ascribed to a NGO in the following ways: the governmental agency (it can be an administrative bureau, a state-owned non-profit institution, and other governmental organizations) transfers its legitimacy to the NGO in some way (e.g. permission, agreement, support, or help) (Gao 2000: 105).

NGOs existing as branch organizations and internal groups can get legitimacy to a certain degree through their parent units. For example, FON is registered as a branch of Chinese Culture Academy (CCA), a national social organization that is officially sanctioned and registered with the MCA. CCA is connected with the administration system through its professional supervisory agency. Affiliated to CCA, FON has certain relations with the administration system.

For those informal organizations that are not registered with any government agencies, it is difficult to establish links with the administration system, but not absolutely impossible. Some achieve it by internal contact with officially recognized associations. For example, Green Earth Volunteer (GEV) declares that it is affiliated to Chinese Environmental Protection Foundation (CEPF), a national social organization, as a second-level organization. Although the contact is only an oral ‘permission’, and no formal procedure is implemented (Lu 2000: 122), it works.

Though many NGOs associate themselves with the administration system through different ways, they are different in nature from these semi-official associations. Semi-official associations have existed as the extension of the administration system since they are formed, and they implement the state tasks directly or indirectly. On the contrary, these NGOs are careful to keep autonomous and independent when they seek connections with the state system. For NGOs, seeking connections with the administration system is only a strategy to compensate for their incomplete legitimacy.

3.2.2. Seeking support from state authority and its symbols

In current China, the state authority is highly personalized as the personal authority of government officials. Opinion of government officials, especially that of high-position officials, have considerable influence on shaping opinions of ordinary people. Many NGOs invite current or former government officials to be organization advisors or other honor leaderships, or invite them to attend their activities. For example, Maple Women Psychological Counseling Center of Beijing engaged the former or current leaders of All-China Women’s Federation as consultants (e.g. Guan Tao, Kang Leng, and Wang Xiulan) (Liu 2000: 220). In the scenes of events organized by GVB, people can often find the figure of Qu Geping, the former president of the National Environmental Protection Agency, and also the former president of the Committee of Environment and Resource of the National People’s Congress. By this way, NGOs can show that they are recognized by the government, and their organizations or activities are colored with the image of ‘government participation, government permission’.

4. Organizational Operation

In current China, the powerful government network can reach every corner of the society, through which, the government can still monopolizes most of the social resources, and possess overwhelming influences on social affairs. By drawing support from the government network, NGOs can reduce their operational cost greatly. A leader of a NGO for legal aid said,

Many foreign journalists asked me, ‘how did you fight the government?’ I told them, ‘we never fight against the government’. If we do so, we will die at once. Our strategy is to lean on the government, and keep close to it as far as possible. We need let the government know that we are in consistent with them, and only by this way can we earn the governmental trust and support, and then achieve our goals. — In China, the administrative force is powerful, even more powerful than the law. If you attempt to open an activity channel, you must gain support from the government administration system.3

3 Interview in April 2002.
4.1. Using guanxi

Guanxi is the most salient characteristic of Chinese culture (Liang 2000). The Chinese word guanxi means literally 'a relationship' between objects, forces, or persons. When it is used to refer to relationships between people, not only can it be applied to husband-wife, kinship, and friendship relations, it can also have the sense of 'social connections'. Once guanxi is established between two people, each can ask a favor of the other with the expectation that the debt incurred will be repaid sometime in the future (Yang 1995). Guanxi is a highly effective means for Chinese NGOs to gain access to the government network. The following is a typical example.

Environmental NGO, EB, started its first program, garbage recycling, when it was formed in 1996. The key of the program was to find a partner organization that liked to practice this program. This is not an easy problem for NGOs to solve. EB used guanxi of one of its leaders, DH, and succeeded in getting a partner organization. DH's guanxi is that her mother worked at the highest position of a national mass organization. With the help of DH's mother, EB conducted its first garbage sorting and recycling project in the office building of the mass organization in Beijing, and planned to gradually extend it to the local branches of the mass organization through its highly hierarchical organizational structure. With the aid of guanxi, a project initiated by a NGO became a top-down governmental task. EB also got other support from this mass organization, such as extensive coverage on EB and its activities by the magazines and newspapers administrated by this mass organization. However, later when DH left EB, support from this mass organization to EB declined rapidly and then this project ended quietly.4

4.2. Borrowing government networks from semi-official associations

Borrowing government networks from semi-official associations is another often-used strategy of NGOs. Semi-official associations, especially some large national associations, can access to the government network in a specific domain, for example, administrative networks of their professional supervisory agency. It is not difficult for NGOs to cooperate with these semi-official associations. Through cooperating with semi-official associations, NGOs share some of the government network that these semi-official associations own. This virtually likes a reallocation of the administrative resources. Semi-official associations are the first receivers, while NGOs are the second receivers. The project Green Hope Action, jointly conducted by FON and Chinese Youth Development Foundation (CYDF), a national semi-official social organization, can serve as an example.

Established in 1989, CYDF is sponsored and supervised by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL). CYDF does not have any administrative authority or organization predominance, but its parent organization is one of the three biggest mass organizations in China. Like the CCP, CCYL is also hierarchically structured from the center to the local and has formed a large and effective vertical administrative network, namely gongqingtuan xitong (the CCYL system). The local branch of CCYL can be found everywhere in China, the factory, school, hospital, governmental agency, military, etc. Furthermore, as the ‘reserves’ of CCP, CCYL is closely tied to the branch of CCP at every administrative level. Therefore, CYDF can not only take advantage of the large and effective network of CCYL, but also access the branch of CCP at different levels through its parent organization. Based on the hierarchically organized structure of CCYL, CYDF also established its own ‘hierarchically organized structure’. The local office of CYDF at the provincial level or lower level is closely associated with CCYL at the corresponding level. The local branch of CCYL naturally takes charge of the local office of CYDF. Almost all the staff members of CYDF come from CCYL, and they are all state cadres.

Started in April 2000, the Green Hope Action was originally conducted only by FON. It is an environmental education project for children in rural areas. At the beginning, FON tried to seek cooperative schools by themselves. FON wrote lots of letters to the local educational agency, and but got only a few replies. The result is FON did not complete its plan in 2000.

FON started its collaboration with CYDF in 2001, after the leader of FON negotiated with the president of CYDF, and the president agreed to conduct the Green Hope Action with FON. CYDF is charge of providing a name list of possible schools, while FON is responsible for implementation, including project design, recruiting and training volunteers, and providing financial aid. Since 2001, the Green Hope Action has achieved its goal smoothly every year.

Actually, what CYDF provides is much more than a list of school’s name. Through collaborating with CYDF, FON gained access to the local government network surrounding these schools, and won support from the local educational

agency, local branch of the CCYL, and the local government. In fact, only after obtaining agreement from local governments, can volunteers of FON enter these schools. Moreover, cooperation with CYDF can help FON win support of local governments. In *Collection of Green Hope Action*, the internal material edited by the program group of FON, there are many such examples that volunteers were warmly treated by the local governments, such as providing free board and lodging, greeting them at the railway station, accompanying them to the school, etc. The government support directly improved both the efficiency and authority of the program.

4.3. Joining government-led programs

To join the government-sponsored project is another important strategy for NGOs to seek support from the government network. In such cases, NGOs acquire authorization to enter the administrative domain taken charge by the governmental agency that sponsors the project. Such cooperation usually occurs at the local level, and the cooperation is based on interest exchange. NGOs contribute achievements to local governments, while governments authorize NGOs to work freely in a certain administrative domain.

That GVB joined the garbage-recycling project of Xuanwu District of Beijing can serve as such an example. In May 1997, Hongsheng Zhang, the director of Environment Sanitation Bureau of Xuanwu District (ESBXD), visited GVB to seek advice on implementing garbage recycling. Zhang himself is an environmentalist and engaged in implementing garbage recycling in Xuanwu District. GVB was invited to conduct environmental education on garbage recycling in Xuanwu District. In April 1999, the first sorting and recycling system in China was set up in Xuanwu District, and then the garbage recycling project is formally started. GVB joined the project as a professional organization.

This authorized GVB to conduct activities in Xuanwu District in the name of cooperation with Xuanwu District government, and to use government networks to some degree. For example, when materials of environmental education need to be distributed, GVB did not do it by itself. Instead, *jiewelhui*, the quasi-governmental community organization, deliver the materials to residents through its own administrative network. This obviously decrease GVB’s operational cost and improve its efficiency.

5. Influencing the Government Policy

Out of the nature of civil society organization, Chinese NGOs also make great efforts to enter the decision-making process and influence the government policy by every possible means. The president of a NGO said,

> We adopt flexible tactics and try to keep on good terms with officials. But as an NGO, it’s also our mission to act as watchdog. The most important feature distinguishing an independent NGO from an affiliated or government-organized NGO is that whether the organization dares and is capable of supervising the government, and provides substantive criticism and suggestions. Since the organization was formed, we have attempted to explore an available channel (Liang, quoted in Gluckman 2000).

5.1. Using channels provided by the government

The Chinese People’s Congress (CPC) and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) are two open and institutional channels of public participation in China. The president of FON is a standing member of the Committee of CPPCC. Therefore, FON can submit proposals to CPPCC relatively easier. Through its president, FON has submitted many proposals, including proposals on protecting virgin forest, natural resources and wild animals, suggestions on controlling and solving urban pollution, etc.

However, for most NGOs, they do not own such a favorable factor. Additionally, there are no open and institutionalized channels for NGOs to vote their own representatives of CPC and CPPCC. As a result, most NGOs use *guanxi* as an alternative choice. For example, quite a few consultants of EC (a NGO of providing legal aid for women) are representatives of CPC and CPPCC at national or Beijing city level. Before the conference of CPC or CPPCC at national level or Beijing city level, is held, EC prepares proposals and submits them to the two systems through its consultants.

The two systems are not so effective and efficient because ‘few replies to numerous proposals’. However, NGOs do not give up submitting their proposals. They expect that their ‘proposals may take effects’ and ‘if there is a faint gleam of hope that our (NGOs) voice to be heard, we (NGOs) should not give up’.\(^5\)

\(^5\) Interview of the director in April 2002.

5.2. Calm movement

Chinese environmental NGOs have conducted some influential movements, which involved many organizations, individuals, and the mass media. These movements share the following characteristics: 1) NGOs are initiator and main force of the movement; 2) lots of people participate in the movement; 3) the mass media is motivated and plays a critical role; 4) the movement lasts long time; 5) the public requests the government to take action; and 6) they attempt to form popular pressure on the government, but the pressure is limited due to a politically restricted environment. The tactic that NGOs often adopt is to write open letters to certain state leaders, or transmitting their requests to the related government officials through guanxi. Those openly opposing strategies such as public assembly or demonstration are never used. In many cases, even if the government reacts slowly or shows no reactions, the public seldom openly criticizes the government or makes further public requests. In other words, the public does not make direct pressures on the government. The following is a case.

Everyday in Kekexili, a nature preserve in Tibet, plenty of Tibetan antelopes are poached and the number of the endangered species is in a sharp decline. There was an armed anti-poaching team — Wild Yak Brigade — that regularly patrolled Kekexili to protect Tibetan antelopes from being poached. However, the effect was very limited due to the poor equipment of Wild Yak Brigade.

Since 1995, a NGO named Green River has worked in Kekexili and built a station providing provisions for Wild Yak Brigade and other groups or individuals that engage in protecting Tibetan antelope. Since 1996, protecting Tibetan antelopes has become an important activity of FON. It sponsored some equipment to Wild Yak Brigade, and its members went to Kekexili for investigation. In early 1998, FON contacted several international NGOs, including World Wildlife Fund (WWF), International Fund of Animal Welfare (IFAW) and several organizations in Hong Kong, discussing how to rescue Tibetan antelopes. Due to lack of government support, no feasible plan is achieved.

In September 1998, FON and China Green Times, jointly invited Zhawa Dorje, the head of the Wild Yak Brigade to Beijing. With efforts of FON, Zhawa Dorje visited the National Environmental Protection Agency, the Ministry of Forestry, and Beijing office of WWF and IFAW, and he was interviewed by lots of mass media, and gave lectures in many universities. The serial activities aroused considerable concerns of the public. Many organizations and individuals started to join the movement of protecting Tibetan antelopes. Funds and goods started to be contributed to the Wild Yak Brigade.

At the same time, FON actively sought international support. In October 1998, the president of FON, Mr. Liang, wrote to British Prime Minister Tony Blair, appealing for British’s help in stopping the illegal trade shahtoosh in British market. Prime Minister Blair replied Liang expressing his sympathy and support, which commanded further wide coverage. The international mass media also began to cover the activities of protecting Tibetan antelopes. In December 1998, the Ministry of Forestry issued the White Book on Living State of Tibetan Antelopes.

In February 1999, FON submitted an open report to the Forestry Ministry for protecting Tibetan antelopes. In early 1999, many mass media reporters went to Kekexili for gathering information of the Wild Yak Brigade and the living state of Tibetan antelopes, which resulted in another climax of public concerns. It is obvious that public concerns on the Tibetan antelope exerted some pressures on the government. In April 1999, the Ministry of Forestry organized a large-scale anti-poaching action in Kekexili. However, the short-term activity cannot solve the problem basically. In August 1999, Liang and 17 journalists who once have been to Tibet plateau for covering Wild Yak Brigade submitted an open letter to the former Vice-Premier Jiabao Wen, who was charge of environmental protection at that time, requesting protecting Tibetan antelopes. The State Office replied the letter, but the government took no further action.

During the Beijing’s Olympic Bid from early 2000 to early 2001, the movement of protecting Tibetan antelopes further developed. ‘Green Olympic, Saving Tibetan Antelope’ became a popular slogan. In April 2000, the Website Alliance to Protect Tibetan Antelopes was jointly initiated by more than 10 websites, most of which are commercial website. By the end of 2000, more than 150 websites joined this Website Alliance. This Alliance played crucial roles to spread the information of protecting Tibetan Antelope and promote the movement. In December 2000, Green Beijing, together with 27 student environmental groups, held a traveling exhibition on protecting Tibetan Antelope in 25 universities in Beijing and several universities in Tianjin.

However, the government did not take effective measures to protect Tibetan antelopes. And Wild Yak Brigade was disbanded in late 2001 due to its conflicts with local government. Illegal poaching continues, and the movement of protecting Tibetan antelopes did not achieve the expected aim,
but the movement is still continuing. The case tells us that the government does not necessarily respond to the public’s request. In the relationship between the government and NGOs, it is the government that plays the decisive role.

5.3. Open dialogue with the government

There are some cases showing that Chinese NGOs are exploring the boundary of advocacy. The following is an typical example that three environmental NGOs, FON, GVB and Green Earth Volunteer (GEV), campaigned against the Beijing city government to reconstruct a channel bringing water from the Miyun Reservoir to Beijing, which culminated in a March 16, 2001 forum between Beijing city government and the three environmental NGOs. One leader of the three NGOs said, ‘the forum is a fight between we NGOs and the government’.\footnote{Interview in April 2002.}

A media campaign against the project was initiated in 2000 by Xiaoxi Li, a deputy of the People’s Congress of Haidian District of Beijing, and taken up by a senior journalist Yongchen Wang, who heads GEV, but it is obvious that the media campaign failed to produce influences on the government.

The three NGOs decided to organize a forum and invite the Beijing city government, who directly takes charge of this project. However, it is not easy to win approval of the government to attend the forum. Again, the personal guanxi works. Once being members of Beijing Green Olympic Bid Committee, both Liang, the leader of FON, and Liao, the leader of GVB, have established some guanxi with the Mayor of Beijing city government. With great efforts, the three NGOs persuaded the city government to attend the forum. Another important reason for the attendance of the government is this event happened in the period of Green Olympic Bid, and the government might try to show its support on public participation in environmental protection by attending the forum organized by famous environmental NGOs.

When the city government agreed to attend the forum, held in the Beijing Broadcasting Station, the three green groups also invited journalists, experts sympathetic to their case. It is said that the Vice Mayor Guangtao Wang and officials from the Beijing Water Conservation Bureau were visibly surprised on arriving at the meeting to find the array of opponents. Vice Mayor Wang complained that there were also many experts who favored the scheme, but who had not been invited. He defended the project on the grounds of water scarcity, stressing that it was important to view Beijing’s water resources as a whole. He said that the city had followed its own environment impact assessment procedure, and denied that the project would serve as a model of other Beijing waterways, which seems to be the main fear of the environmental NGOs, and to explain their convening the forum over this lost cause: they hope to prevent repetition of the same approach.

The five-hour meeting developed into a widely ranging discussion. However, something unpleasant happened during the dialogue. When Liang criticized Beijing city government for destroying the cultural relics in Beijing, the Vice Mayor denied it. Liang gave convincing evidence, some photos, which embarrassed the Vice Mayor. Another unpleasantness is that when a journalist of China Daily queried the mayor’s words about environmental protection in Beijing, the Vice Mayor became very angry. He cautioned that all the journalists to be careful in their coverage of the event, and to make sure their reports were authorized before publication. Later, national and local media received an official circular forbidding any mention of the event, which the circular described as an attempt to ‘surround and attack’ the Vice Mayor (Young 2001:10).

It is said that the vice mayor also lodged complaints against two organizers of the forum, who work in the governmental agency or state-owned institutions, to their working units. Because these working units are not administrated directly by the Beijing city government and soon after the dialogue the vice mayor was transferred to another post of a ministry, the two organizers got few negative influences.\footnote{Interview in June 2002.}

This case shows that the state still holds overwhelming superiority over the society. When facing popular pressures, the government tends not to come to terms with the public. This is not a successful dialogue, however, it shows clearly that Chinese NGOs never forget to influence the state, though a favorable political environment does not exist.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

Through analyzing NGOs’ strategies towards the state, it can be found that Chinese NGOs have developed a wide range of strategies to interact with the state. Among them, guanxi is a cost-effective and usually used strategy.

Organizations are open systems — strongly influenced by their environments. Their behaviors are choice functions of
they can't obtain by the institutional channel. China is a guanxi-based society. With guanxi, people can solve problems that cannot be solved by the formal rules and regulations, and obtain resources that they can't obtain by the institutional channel. Guanxi has become a tool of solving problems parallel to the formal rules and regulations.

Guanxi becomes an indispensable means for Chinese NGOs to approach the state because of their loose relationship with the state and lack of institutional channels to gain access to the state. Through guanxi, Chinese NGOs associate themselves with governmental agents or state-owned units to legitimate themselves to some degree, obtain support from the governments to achieve their organizational goals, and attempts to influence the government policy. It can be said that guanxi help Chinese NGOs reconfigure their relationship with the state.

However, such NGO-state interactions are unstable and unforeseeable, different from the legally protected and institutionalized interactions between Western NGOs and the state. In China, whether or to what extent a NGO can access to the state depend largely on guanxi the NGO owns.

All Chinese NGOs realizes clearly that the essential prerequisite of their open activities is to obtain acquiescence of the state first. They seldom oppose the government or adopt radical approaches, such as public assembly. When interacting with the government, they first pursue the government's trust and recognition, and then attempts to achieve their goals. They seldom address politically sensitive issues, and they even employ self-limited strategies. This also shows a different road along which Western NGOs have walked. In a Western context, NGOs can knock loudly on government doors and demands a hearing. Western NGOs usually achieve their goal to negotiate with the government by mobilizing mass movement and forming popular pressure. But if a Chinese group chose to do so, this would, of course, place the organization in a very different and a very much more challenging relationship to government (Young 2001:10). Even if the NGO is not disbanded, intensions between it and the government will lead it to a disadvantageous situation. It will lose chances to pool state-owned resources and the possibilities of cooperation with other social organizations will be reduced because it may be regarded politically dangerous.

However, acting with caution does not mean Chinese NGOs isolate themselves from the state or lose their independence and autonomy. Out of the nature of civil society organizations, they endeavor to influence the government policy and check the state power, though the rigid institutional environment limits the activity effect.

Most importantly, NGOs try to use their ties to governments to do more than adaptation to political constraints. They are likely to help redefine policies shaped by the political contexts and created new political spaces and opportunities through government contacts. These organizations are playing an increasing role in policy and public debate. In different ways, these groups are therefore exploring, and perhaps, extending the boundaries of advocacy in China. The capacity for Chinese NGOs to advocate, criticize the state, and check the state power is changing quietly, especially in social development area.

***Reference***


