

**Submission to Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee inquiry
into Australia's relations with China.**

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(b) ii - opportunities for strengthening the deepening political, social and cultural links between Australia and China

**Transnational participation by the Chinese NGO community:
implications for Socio-political pluralization**

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1. Introduction

Having been involved in a range of civil society NGOs in Australia, I have increasingly felt that there is an urge among the Australian activists and campaigners to know the situation in China and their Chinese counterparts. I have frequently heard about exchanges between the Australian groups and Chinese NGOs. In June 2001, Liao Xiaoyi, an activist from The Global Village of Beijing (one of the leading environmental NGOs in China), visited Canberra and received the International Banksia Award for environment protection from Banksia Environmental Foundation. Meanwhile, I have come to know that Animals Asia Foundation, a leading international animal rights NGO, involves Australian activists in its projects in China (operation of bear sanctuaries and community education campaigns), and that the Foundation's Australian chapters are among the world's most enthusiastic in China-related projects and exchanges.

All this – NGOs' networking and cooperation on issues such as environment, conservation, gender, children, health, aboriginal affairs – points to a burgeoning layer of Australia-China relations which is rarely captured by the public attention and mass media. These are non-state relations, but they are not business relations, nor the usual cultural and educational exchanges, or tourism. Instead, they mirror an exponential proliferation of organized participation (or a strong urge for such participation) in world affairs by civil society groups all over the world. They are about organized citizens' cross-border solidarity and joint advocacy on the shared issues and values in an era of globalization. Broadly speaking, we are witnessing the emerging of transnational civil society, a major phenomenon in the post-Cold War world politics, referring to cross-border cooperation and networking among social and/or grassroots NGOs from different countries. Such transnational collaboration in shared ideas, funding, advocacy and campaign seeks to challenge the status quo or provide services in the issue areas of human rights, labor, women, environment, indigenous affairs, humanitarian relief, human trafficking, child prostitution, animal protection, corporate globalization, poverty alleviation, and health epidemics, peace,

etc. Apart from transnational advocacy networks such as anti-sweatshops coalition and East Asian Women's Forum, the most important single actors in this issue-oriented movement of "globalization from below" are the sort of NGOs which are by definition transnational – namely those NGOs which maintain their own branches in numerous countries. These so-called INGOs (International NGOs) include Care International, Oxfam, Save the Children International, Consumer International, World Vision, Amnesty International, Transparency International, Greenpeace International, World Society for Protection of Animals, End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism, and World Wildlife Fund, etc.

Transnational participation by Chinese NGO community is very important to the country. Quite apart from the transfer of issue-specific skills, these transnational exchanges have stimulated interest among the Chinese population in volunteering, activism and empowerment as argued later. This helps the trend of socio-political pluralization in China despite a concentration of transnational cooperation on “non-political” issues at this stage. For example, projects from Animals Asia Foundation have not just educated the community in China on international standards on endangered species, but have also spawned local activist NGOs and promoted a sense of citizen's volunteerism and civic consciousness at large. This positive and broader socio-political implications of transnational relations of the Chinese NGO community is the main theme of this submission. Unfortunately, since it is impossible at this stage to gather firm statistics regarding Australian NGOs' specific role in these relations, such role will have to be implied in the general remarks regarding western NGOs or transnational civil society's contributions to China. Hopefully, officials, scholars and civil society operators in this country who do know about civil society networking and cooperation can see the general utility of the perspectives used in this submission. I am willing to appear as a witness for the inquiry.

The structure of the submission follows a step-by-step approach, as follows:

- The Emerging Transnational Civil Society (this is to put Chinese NGOs' growth and their relations with western groups into a global context)
- Growth of the Chinese NGO community
- Transnationalisation of the Chinese NGO community
- Democratic Implications of Transnational Participation by Chinese NGOs
- Conclusion

2. The Emerging Transnational Civil Society

The end of the Cold War witnessed a massive proliferation of NGOs across the world. There was a “global associational revolution”, meaning a striking upsurge around the world in organized voluntary activity and the creation of private, nonprofit or non-governmental organizations, from the developed countries of North America, Europe and Asia to the developing nations of Africa, Latin America, and the former Soviet bloc. Associations, foundations and similar institutions were formed to deliver human services, promote grass-roots economic development, prevent environmental degradation, protect civil rights and pursue “a thousand other objectives”¹ One of the

¹ Lester M. Salamon, ‘The Rise of the Nonprofit Sector’, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 73, No. 4, July/August 1994, pp. 109–118.

most discussed type of organizations is the assertive social movement NGOs, namely the grass-roots advocacy groups or cause-oriented groups working to “change some elements of the social structure”, particularly in the areas of environment, human rights, women, and development.²

Ghils speaks of the dynamic cross-border activities or transnational networking of “non-state entities of a social, econological, technical and scientific, ideological, religious or other nature” as a defining stage in the evolution of world politics.³ Post-Cold War international relations witnessed a rapid upsurge of regular interactions among NGOs between different countries. These are usually defined as transnational relations, or transnational politics, to indicate a difference from “international” relations since this conventionally refers to inter-state interactions. One solid result of transnational relations has been an unprecedented proliferation of “international non-governmental organizations (INGOs)”, including a wide variety of organizations with members from several countries. Members are typically national associations but often also include individuals.⁴ It is estimated that today there are 12260 INGOs and 5807 internationally oriented national NGOs.⁵ INGOs and numerous less formal transnational networks forged by INGOs, NGOs, foundations, activist research centers constitute a transnational civil society. In general, the growing number of networks and collaborative arrangements among nonprofit and non-governmental organizations can be attributed to their common economic, social, cultural, environmental, political, and security concerns. Under the pressures of globalization in a variety of areas, many similar challenges face human society, requiring transnational responses. Yet governments are increasingly limited in their ability to deal with those problems. Meanwhile, developments such as the dismantling of the Cold War ideological barrier and technological advances in communication and transportation improved the conditions that make transnational actions possible.

NGO networks and their key members are playing an increasingly prominent role in world politics. Global governance refers to collective efforts by state, inter-state organisations and non-state actors at a global level to tackle issues and challenges of common concern to the international community. Despite their fragmentary and fluid nature, such collective efforts have become increasingly institutionalised and operate with increasing use of international law, though the situation varies in different issue areas. Both formally and informally civil society activists take an active part in a host of key inter-state international organizations including the UN and its specialized agencies, and of many international treaty bodies focused on more specific issues. It has become the norm that the major international conferences organized by inter-governmental organizations (IGOs) or state treaty bodies also hold parallel NGO forums, and numerous IGOs provide other mechanisms for non-state actors to take part in international policy discussions. Through such participation in policy debate, standards-setting and norm-making, non-state actors help reform policies of states and

² Louis Kriesberg, ‘Social Movements And Global Transformation’, in Jackie Smith, Charles Chatfield, and Ron Pagnucco, eds, *Transnational Social Movements and Global Politics: Solidarity Beyond the State* (Syracuse University Press: New York, 1997), p. 12.

³ Paul Ghils, ‘International civil society: International non-governmental organizations in the international system’, *International Social Science Journal* (Paris: UNESCO), Vol. XLIV, No. 133, August 1992, p. 418.

⁴ Louis Kriesberg, *op.cit.*, p. 12.

⁵ *Yearbook of International Organizations 2002-2003* (Munich: K. G. Saur, for the Union of International Associations, 2002), vol.2, p1607. Hereafter *YIO*.

IGOs. Those arrangements, materializing partly under the pressure of transnational actors themselves, have provided a catalyst for the formation of many INGOs. A special institutionalized mechanism within the UN is the so-called “consultative status”, designed to give citizen groups access to influencing policymaking at the global level. The UN Charter specifically says that the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) should take measures to consult non-state actors regarding affairs in its field. By 1992 more than 700 INGOs and internationally oriented NGOs had attained consultative status and the number has been steadily increasing ever since to more than 2,300 today.⁶ In summary, Ghils maintains that INGOs exert influence in world politics in three ways: as shapers of opinion, as autonomous actors, and as competitors with states.⁷

3. Growth of the Chinese NGO community

Since the 1980s, there have been mounting issues and challenges calling for citizens in China to organize in order to articulate and pursue shared interests. There have emerged competing interests and constituencies within Chinese society as it becomes more complicated by the freedoms, stratifications, rivalries and “imperfections” that market forces bring. As a result, growing numbers of activists have established organisations, and they keep expanding and networking. However, although generally there has been more space for an autonomous NGO sector to develop, the PRC government fears unleashing grassroots social forces that it cannot control. The stern response to the Falun Gong movement shows Beijing’s anxieties about “instability”. The government has imposed severe restrictions on NGOs’ activities and bans the formation of any autonomous organisation in politically sensitive issue areas. Thus citizen groups are predominantly concentrated in areas of service provision, women, (inter-provincial) migrant workers, children, disabled, and environment. The Chinese government knows that administrative structures alone are unable to manage all those issues, particularly considering its acute budgetary pressures and desire to streamline administration. Meanwhile, due to a growing recognition that associations of entrepreneurs, industrial and trade associations, and professional associations may have an important role to play in ensuring future economic vitality, the government tends to be lenient on those sorts of organisations.⁸

More significantly, the fear of bottom-up social mobilisation as well as practical social needs have led the Chinese government to create an official NGO sector, a policy practiced with increasing enthusiasm from the 1990s. Government and Party departments at various levels have been setting up foundations and other organisations to advance charitable, research, information and policy objectives. These creatures are commonly called “GONGOs” (Government Organised NGOs). One category of GONGOs are born out of traditional “mass organisations (*renmin tuanti*)” - there are eight of them, including All China Youth League, All China Women’s Federation, All China Federation of Trade Unions. The Chinese government tries to gradually restructure the function of these mass organizations

⁶ ECOSOC web site.

⁷ Ghils, op.cit., pp. 421–7.

⁸ Nick Young, “Searching for Civil Society”, in *250 Chinese NGOs: Civil Society in the Making* (Beijing: China Development Brief, 2002), Internet edition. See also *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 7 May 1998, pp10-15; 10 April 2003, pp28-31.

away from their original role as Communist Party overseers of particular constituencies, towards a more service facilitation and provision role. As a result, satellite agencies (associations and foundations) have been created. There are two major purposes of the GONGO sector. One is to receive expertise and philanthropic funding that the government itself finds it hard to access, particularly from international sources including western NGOs including INGOs. Some government departments establish organisations in their professional field with the apparent purpose of making it possible to conduct exchanges with international organisations and to participate in overseas study tour programmes in an unofficial capacity. Another consideration is that some distance from mainstream government agencies makes it easier for government-initiated organisations to explore new areas of work, such as providing contraceptive advice for unmarried people, or HIV/AIDS prevention programmes for sex workers and drug addicts.⁹

One authoritative estimate suggests that by the early twenty-first century, officially registered NGOs in China amounted to 230,000.¹⁰ The total number of bottom-up NGOs is unknown. But Chan estimates that in 2000, around 26,000 registered social organizations in China could be classified as “NGOs in a western sense”.¹¹ The number of nationally well-known bottom-up advocacy NGOs was about 300 by 2001,¹² and those internationally known include Friends of Nature, Global Village of Beijing, Green Earth Volunteers, Maple Women's Counseling Center, and Village Women Know It All.

Though not all bottom-up NGOs are democratically operated, the existence of an expanding autonomous and increasingly autonomous social sector bodes well for the country's political future, even though permissible activities are yet to encompass politically sensitive issues. Also, as Young has argued, their interest in volunteer effort helps create a more liberal culture. Much of this volunteering is essentially charitable in nature, described and prescribed by the Chinese groups in terms of “loving hearts”, “warm heartedness” etc. This may not seem a particularly exciting manifestation of “civil society” to those who associate the term primarily with citizens' movements that shook Eastern Europe in the 1980s. But it may be a significant indicator of social capital, civic consciousness and reciprocity that help bind societies together. In a country where volunteering and charity were strictly

⁹ Nick Young, op.cit. For a comprehensive study of mass organisations, see Wang Ming, Liu Guohan and He Jianyu, *Zhongguo Shetuan gaige: cong zhengfu xuanze dao shehui xuanze* (Reform of China's Social Organisations: from governmental preference to social preference) (Beijing: Social Science Works Publishing Agency, December 2001), pp167-183. The following titles all discuss the development of Chinese NGOs since 1949, their typology, and the key facilitating role played by transnational dimensions: Wang Ming, “Zhongguo NGO de fazhan fenxi (An analysis of Chinese NGOs' development)”, presented at the conference “Cross-Strait Symposium on NGOs – Transformation and Development of NGOs”, hosted by Himalaya Foundation, Taipei, 31 July 2002; Deng Guosheng, “1995 nian yilai dalu NGO de bianhua yu fazhan qushi (Changes and development in mainland China's NGOs since 1995)”, presented at the conference “Cross-Strait Symposium on NGOs”; and Wang Ming, Liu Guohan and He Jianyu, op.cit; and Chan Kin-man, “Development of NGOs under a Post-Totalitarian Regime: The Case of China”, presented at the International Conference on NGOs and the Nation in a Globalizing World: Asia-Pacific Views, APARP, Academia Sinica, and Institute for the Study of Economic Culture, Boston University, June 21-22, 2002. Electronic version.

¹⁰ Wang Ming, op.cit., p.16.

¹¹ Chan Kin-man, op.cit., p9.

¹² Deng Guosheng, op.cit., p30.

associated with Leninist mass mobilisations in the not-too-distant past, for such activities to move into the realm of private good will is no small change.¹³ Young also argues that there is even a latent potential for GONGOs to evolve into a semi-independent relationship with the government. His meticulous field research has found that many of these organisations are acquiring a more independent identity, and gradually developing a sense of themselves as belonging to a distinctive, non-government community.¹⁴ Chinese activist NGOs and GONGOs together form China's NGO community.

4. Transnationalisation of the Chinese NGO community

There is a clear transnational dimension to the rise of the Chinese NGO community, GONGOs or not. As already specified, GONGOs are created partly to receive international assistance. On the other hand, one in-depth investigation suggests that western NGOs' maverick activism at the UN-hosted NGO forum on women in Beijing 1995 was a major catalyst for the strengthened dynamism of grassroots activist NGOs in China, and many large ones are financially sustained mainly by international sources such as the Ford Foundation.¹⁵ In general, a great number of Chinese NGOs of both categories have benefited from international sources (foundations, western NGOs including INGOs, UN agencies and governments) in capacity-building, program planning, management and accountability.¹⁶ In particular, significant assistance has been given by many INGOs who operate projects inside China with local partners, mainly in the areas of women, environment, public health, poverty and education.¹⁷ Meanwhile, China's membership in INGOs, predominantly by GONGOs, has increased steadily, from 71 INGOs in 1977, 484 in 1986, and 2297 in 2002.¹⁸

The major forms of Chinese NGOs' transnational participation are gatherings with other like-minded NGOs and INGOs at various forums and conferences. Many Chinese groups have joined existing INGOs or forged such organizations with other NGOs, and become active participants in transnational campaign networks. Apart from seeking cross-border solidarity and moral support and exchanging information, ideas, strategies and experiences with fellow activists in general, the most important goal in transnational activism has been to learn new and advanced perspectives from the expanding forums of global governance, particularly from those civil society movers and shakers in such forums (mostly fellow groups based in the west or INGOs managed by western activists). This is important to Chinese activists' own domestic policy-oriented and social change campaigns. Chinese NGOs need to borrow from their western counterparts a form of global rhetoric (very often contained in the UN documents and international treaties) to advance their causes. Chinese activists are among the world's most sensitive civil society operators trying to find out what is

¹³ Nick Young, op.cit.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp29-31.

¹⁶ Ibid. p37.

¹⁷ Nick Young, op.cit.

¹⁸ *YIO 2002-2003*, vol.2, p1611, and statistics of *YIO 1983/84* and *1986/87*, vol.2, cited in Gerald Chan, *China and International Organizations: Participation in Non-Governmental Organizations Since 1971* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1989), p16.

happening in such UN-orchestrated events as Decade of the Indigenous Peoples (1994-2004), Decade of Human Rights Education (1995-2004), etc, but such awareness is usually passed on to them by western groups since they are more closely integrated with the structure of global governance.

To use international laws has become popular as leverage when Chinese NGOs lobby the authorities and as a foundation for their community education. Chinese groups have worked hard to compile and publish international laws, especially those conventions and treaties on environment and gender equality. They have made great efforts to find out the situation of international law-making in the UN's specialized agencies, treaty bodies and programs, and to attend those forums where key concepts, norms and policies are debated and made. However, Western NGOs' assistance is essential since they enjoy more first-hand experiences with the deliberation and making of international norms and standards in the UN structure of global governance.

5. Democratic Implications of Transnational Participation

Chinese NGOs' participation in transnational networking and cooperation facilitates a political pluralism at the societal level. To see this point, one has to understand the democratizing influence of Chinese NGO community itself, which is often understated. Though not all NGOs are democratically operated, mere existence of an expanding and increasingly autonomous social sector bodes well for the country's political future, even though, again, none of their activities touch on politically sensitive issues. If I may borrow from Putnam and Fukuyama, these organisations' interest in volunteer effort helps create a more liberal culture. Much of this volunteering is essentially charitable in nature, described and prescribed by the Chinese groups in terms of "loving hearts", "warm heartedness" etc. This may not seem a particularly exciting manifestation of "civil society" to those who associate the term primarily with citizens' movements that shook Eastern Europe in the 1980s. But it may be a significant indicator of social capital, civic consciousness and reciprocity that help bind societies together. This is encouraging for a country where volunteering and charity were the exclusive domain of the state and social "participation" was synonymous with Leninist mass mobilisations in the not-too-distant past. Whether they are making "exchange visits" to ethnic minority communities, teaching in rural schools, picking up litter from urban rivers or playing chess with people in retirement homes, very few of the charity volunteers and environmental activists would consider themselves either agents of social change or brokers of social capital. But their volunteerism may be significant barometers of both.¹⁹

Chinese NGOs' participation in transnational networking and cooperation facilitates a political pluralism at the societal level. First, transnational connections, by assisting the growth of Chinese NGOs and making them more accountable, amplify the pluralising effect of this sector as mentioned above. This is so despite a concentration of cooperative efforts in functional areas or "low politics", and despite the fact that such cooperation does not involve any human rights NGOs, free labor unions or militant groups on both the Chinese and international sides.

¹⁹ Nick Young, op.cit.

Second, western NGOs and INGOs transfer democratic culture and practices to their Chinese partners with respect to autonomous activism, issue-oriented advocacy, collective decision-making, and a sense of “third sector”. Organizations like Oxfam, Care International, World Vision, Save the Children International, World Wildlife Fund and Animals Asia Foundation may not be overtly political in their China operations, yet they can have a democratising effect on their Chinese partners. One good example is the recent experience of Lions’ Club International (LCI), which established branches in Guangdong and Shenzhen in April 2002. Despite its expressly non-political nature, the Lions has helped transform official and popular attitudes toward NGO activity by merely operating in China. First, there is the Lions’ own democratic structure (seen in Chinese context), with the members from Shenzhen and Guangdong branches deeply inspired by its annual presidential elections, participatory mechanism, equality among leaders and members, dedication, and transparency. Second, such culture is also influencing the operations of the two branches themselves.²⁰ Extensive case studies have also shown that the GONGOs’ recent independence tendency has been mainly caused by increased access to international NGO communities.²¹ Interactions with INGOs have also made some mass organisations develop some sense of autonomy.²²

6. Conclusion

It is true that transnational participation by Chinese NGO community is still largely limited to the non-political or de-politicized layer of the transnational civil society. Yet transnational civil society linkages slowly but effectively help chip away the country’s traditional authoritarian and state/family-dependent political culture, preparing a more cohesive, civil and dynamic community for the ultimate tipping moment of democratization. If a top-down democratization starts when citizens haven’t even got associational experiences on environment, animal rights, migrant workers’ conditions, and domestic violence, the scenario can be very dangerous. It is advisable that since the Chinese government itself tolerates – and in fact encourages in numerous circumstances – the burgeoning NGO community’s transnational cooperation in the apparently non-political issues and in depoliticized ways, the international community including Australia should make greater efforts to integrate China into transnational civil society with more focused and pointed programs. This not only helps China deal with the mounting challenges in social, environmental and health issues, which Chinese government needs NGOs’ expertise and their transnational cooperation to tackle, but more importantly it facilitates socio-political pluralization in China. The fact that a handful of European women activists were able to spawn numerous Chinese groups in an anti-foot binding movement from the late 19th to early 20th century China (a movement tolerated by the Qing dynasty government) and sow the seeds for Chinese women’s emancipation movement should enlighten us all.

²⁰ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 22, 2002, pp24-27.

²¹ Fengshi Wu, “New Partners or Old Brothers? GONGOs in Transnational Environmental Advocacy in China”, *China Environment Series*, No.5, 2002, pp45-58. Wang Ming, Liu Guohan and He Jianyu, op.cit., p172.

²² Deng Guosheng, op.cit., p33.