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**Negotiating Political Spaces:
Social and Environmental Activism in the
Chinese Countryside**

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Abstract

The proliferation of social organizations in China has engendered a lively debate about how to conceptualize these social forces. This paper argues that such a conceptualization should take into account the role that both the party-state and social actors attribute to social organizations. With an empirical case study from the western Chinese countryside, this paper explores how social organizations both adapt to the restrictive authoritarian framework and negotiate the spaces opening up to society in the realms of environmental and social politics. The study shows that while the party-state understands organizations as consultants and partners in service provision, they have a deviating self-image with the Western concepts of “NGO” and “civil society” becoming increasingly relevant as frames of reference. While their practices remain within the limits imposed by the authoritarian framework, they impact policy formulation, local political participation, and the formation of social networks according to their own self-image as members of a budding Chinese civil society.

Keywords: China, civil society, NGO, social organizations

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Maria Bondes

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1 Introduction

China’s economic reforms and the loosening of the party-state’s Mao-era almost complete control over society have led to a rapid proliferation of social organizations in recent decades.¹ This development—within the context of an authoritarian one-party state—has brought about an active debate among Western and Chinese scholars on how to conceptualize these newly-emerging social forces. The academic discourse on Chinese state–society re-

1 “Social organization” (shehui tuanti or shetuan) is the official Chinese term for “voluntary groups formed by Chinese citizens in order to realize a shared objective according to their rules and to develop non-profit-making activities.” For an overview of the Chinese terminology and definitions for various forms of socially-organized associations, see Ma (2002). Various authors have adopted the Western term “non-governmental organization” (NGO) to refer to Chinese social organizations. However, as the term NGO circumscribes a Western concept encompassing features such as the organizations’ autonomy from the party-state, this term should not be applied to Chinese civic organizations without further analysis.

lations has long been dominated by the Western models of “civil society” and “corporatism” (for example, Brook and Frolic 1997; White et al. 1996; Unger and Chan 1994). However, in recent years it has been widely acknowledged that these concepts fall short in their ability to describe the complex developments taking place in China (for example, Alpermann 2010; Teets 2010; Zheng 2010). Counter to these theoretical considerations, the civil society concept is nonetheless gaining influence as a frame of reference for Chinese organizations.

Some authors have thus acknowledged the need to take the prevalent understandings of the proper role for social organizations in China into account. Based on the official Communist ideology of “mass line” consultation, as promoted by Mao Zedong, Taru Salmenkari (2008) argues that the Chinese party-state draws on social organizations as a source of expertise for policy formulation and as a communication channel between the state and society. He acknowledges, however, that this approach is insufficient to explain the organizations’ main social and environmental tasks. For a more comprehensive framework of understanding, the notion of mass line consultation has thus to be complemented with the official view of organizations as partners in social service provision. This approach, however, focuses on the official notion of social organizations.

The present paper argues that to come to a comprehensive understanding of the practices of the newly-emerging actors and their interactions with the party-state, their self-image also has to be taken into account. It is argued that the Western concepts of “civil society” and “NGO” are becoming increasingly relevant as frames of reference for social activism. The organizations’ self-image thus deviates considerably from the official view. While this is an observation also made by Salmenkari (2008), his study focuses on their accommodation to the mass line concept. This paper analyzes the organizations’ practices against the backdrop of the roles that both the party-state and social actors attribute to the organizations, as they both circumscribe their reach.

Particularly in an authoritarian setting, in which each social organization creates its own niches for action (Saich 2000), their concrete practices have to be analyzed in a local political scenario. Drawing on field research and documentary analysis, this study investigates how five social and environmental organizations in western China’s Minqin County (Gansu Province) both adapt to the official view and seek larger spheres of autonomy based on their own self-image. The study finds that, while the organizations at large adapt to the authoritarian framework, they nevertheless negotiate its boundaries, creating autonomous spaces for political debate and participation and therein form comprehensive social networks according to their self-image as members of a budding Chinese civil society.

The research for this paper was conducted in 2008, and encompasses all social organizations that were engaged in the solution of the region’s environmental issues at the time of field research.² The analysis draws on qualitative interviews with members of the organiza-

2 Despite their diverging registration status, for simplicity’s sake they will be referred to as “social organizations” throughout the rest of this paper.

tions and cadres at the local and county level,³ project participation and documents provided both by the organizations and by the Minqin County administration, both on paper and on their official websites, as well as on a non-representative survey among Minqin residents. Further sources used are selected government documents and media reports, as well as secondary data.

The paper is organized as follows: the first section will discuss the competing approaches to the study of state–society relations in China and the shortcomings of conventional models. The mass line approach will then be introduced, as adapted by Salmenkari, and complemented with the social service component as a framework for the official understanding of social organizations. In the third section, I will give a brief introduction to the case of Minqin County and the organizations under scrutiny. The fourth section looks at the authorities' notion of social activism, before the contrasting of the organizations' self-image in the fifth section. Based on both understandings, the paper will then analyze the practices of those organizations operating in Minqin County and their interactions with the party-state. The last section concludes with the identification of the implications that the organizations' negotiations for larger political spaces have for local state–society relations.

2 The Search for a Chinese State–Society Model

According to the official numbers, 387,000 “popular organizations” (*minjian zuzhi*) were registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs in 2007 (Ministry of Civil Affairs 2007).⁴ However, as the restrictive legal framework makes it hard for “bottom-up” organizations to register, unofficial estimates are as high as two million (US Embassy Beijing 2003; Young 2000). Like in other authoritarian countries, a lively academic debate has emerged both in China and abroad on how to conceptualize these organized social forces within the context of an authoritarian one-party regime.

The debate has long been dominated by Western models of “civil society” and “corporatism.”⁵ One branch of literature saw the formation of social organizations as the emergence of a Chinese “civil society,” similar to the developments in 1980s Eastern Europe and the former USSR (for example, Brook and Frolic 1997; He 1997; White et al. 1996). Various variations on the concept of civil society were advanced by this group of authors, including the notions of a “state-led civil society” (Frolic 1997), “semi-civil society” (He 1994) and “fragmented civil so-

3 Following standard practice in Social Science research in China, interviewees' names are not disclosed in this paper.

4 These numbers include “social organizations” (*shehui tuanti*), foundations, trade unions, traditional mass organizations, and state-initiated organizations often referred to as GONGOs (governmentally-organized non-governmental organizations).

5 Overviews of this “civil society” versus “corporatism” debate in China are given by Ding (1998) and Perry (1994). English-language overviews of the Chinese civil society debate in the 1990s are given by Brook and Frolic (1997) and He (1997: 38–46). Some newer conceptual contributions to the Chinese debate are Deng (2007), He (2007), and Yu (2006).

ciety" (Alpermann 2010). Environmental organizations in particular have frequently been described as its most active component (for example, Yang 2005; Ho 2001; Wen 1998).

As civil society in Western theory is understood as a voluntarily organized social sphere, outside of the realms of both the economy and the state (Cohen and Arato 1992),⁶ this group of authors mainly focused on the relations between the newly-emerging social organizations and the party-state, contending that a civil society in China is still in the making because of the social actors' lack of autonomy. Another group of authors has thus preferred to draw on corporatist models to explain the state's attempts to co-opt the newly developing social organizations, placing them under strict state control (for example, Unger and Chan 1994). Subtypes advanced by this group of authors include "socialist corporatism" (Pearson 1997), "local state corporatism" (Oi 1992), as well as "corporatism Chinese-style" (Unger and Chan 1994).

However, similar to the developments in the study of state–society relations in other authoritarian countries (for example, Hann and Dunn 1996), it has in recent years been widely acknowledged that these concepts fall short in describing the complex developments in China. For one, civil society is often understood as a catalyst for the transition of authoritarian regimes to Western-style democracy, analysts thus focusing on civil society organizations' contributions to such a transition (He 1997; Howell 2007). But, most empirical studies—including this one—found that organizations in China neither explicitly nor implicitly question the political status quo and the leading position of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), nor do they make any attempts to introduce Western-style democracy at a national level (see also Lu 2009: 11–12).

A second critique is the concepts' central assumption of a state-versus-society dichotomy, while most empirical studies in China actually reveal blurring lines and rather cooperative than oppositional relations between social actors and the party-state (Alpermann 2010). Zheng Yongnian asserts that, "[w]hether it is a corporatist model, a civil society, a continuum from corporatism to civil society, or a particular mix of the two, it all boils down to a state-versus-society framework" (Zheng 2010: 130–131). Elizabeth Perry thus contends that a deeper understanding of the complex post-reform changes in China requires researchers to move beyond this "state–society paradigm" and further disaggregate the "unwieldy concepts of 'state' and 'society'" (Perry 1994: 708). "By viewing the policy process as a tug of war between a unitary 'state' and an undifferentiated 'society,' we run the risk of obscuring some of the most intriguing aspects of the reform experience," she warns (*ibid.*). Indeed, neither Chinese society nor the Chinese party-state can or should be perceived as monolithic entities. The party-state is itself in transformation, with relations between the party and the state and between central and local party-state organs in flux, adding to the complex picture of state–society relations in China.⁷

6 A comprehensive overview of the history of the concept of "civil society" is given by Hall (1995). On civil society in authoritarian contexts see, for example, Hann and Dunn (1996).

7 On changing party–state relations and reforms within the CCP see, among others, Zheng (2010). On central–local relations see Zheng (2007).

These criticisms led to what Jessica Teets called a “proliferation of new state–society models in China” (Teets 2010). Various recent studies have taken the growing complexity of Chinese state–society relations into account, focusing on the interactions and linkages between social and state actors. Examples include Caroline M. Cooper’s “local associational model,” describing the mutual accommodation of state and social actors based on the examination of environmental organizations in three southwestern Chinese provinces, Andrew Mertha’s and Lei Xie’s comprehensive studies of environmental activism, and Lily Tsai’s investigation of rural governance and accountability (Cooper 2006; Mertha 2008; Xie 2009; Tsai 2007).

The literature points to increasingly complex state–society relations in the ongoing process of China’s transition. Some authors have thus acknowledged the importance of taking the prevalent Chinese notions of the proper role for organizations into account. An approach originating from the Chinese state itself was advanced by Taru Salmenkari (2008). He argues that Chinese organizations can be conceptualized on the basis of the official Communist ideology of “mass line” (*qunzhong luxian*) consultation. The mass line concept, as formulated by Mao Zedong in 1943, circumscribes a hierarchical model of political communication between the CCP and society. The Party thereby collects the “ideas of the masses” and translates these social inputs into policies and long-term developmental plans, again drawing on social feedback during their implementation (Mao 1967: 117–122). While Mao’s original concept describes direct communication between the Party and the masses, Salmenkari argues that it is often mediated through intermediary organizations. These provide the government with the aggregated needs and demands articulated by ordinary people, as well as specialized and expert information about different localities, social strata, and subject areas. According to Salmenkari, the CCP thus draws on social organizations for expertise and policy formulation as it traditionally does with other entities such as “democratic parties,” professional associations, and mass organizations (Salmenkari: 2008, 399–400). While the mass line concept in Mao’s terms stipulates two-way communication between the CCP and the masses, Salmenkari finds that the organizations provide information to the government, but do not constitute a channel for the state to reach their constituency.

In his study of social organizations in Beijing, Salmenkari acknowledges, however, that the mass line concept is insufficient to describe the organizations’ main social and environmental tasks, with the state in recent years promoting the idea of social organizations as independent service providers (Salmenkari 2008; Ma 2006). This aspect has been the focus of various studies (for example, Schwartz and Shieh 2009, Teets 2010, Ma 2006, Howell 2004) and needs to be incorporated into a framework for the analysis of organizations in China. Salmenkari, moreover, centers in on the official understanding of the correct role for social organizations. While he finds that the organizations’ self-image deviates considerably from the official model, seeking a larger sphere of autonomy with Western NGOs as their frame of reference, his study focuses on the organizations’ accommodation with the mass line concept. This paper argues that to come to a comprehensive understanding of the organizations’ prac-

tices and their impact on local state–society relations, both the official notion and the organizations’ self-image have to be taken into account.

3 Analytical Framework

The mass line concept, as adapted by Salmenkari, implies various features of social activism in China. A central assumption is social activism directed vertically towards the party-state, instead of horizontal alliances. In a rather corporatist fashion, social organizations are understood as entities acting in cooperation with the party-state, and creating information channels between the state and society. Rather than being actively involved in the policy formulation process, they are sources of expertise for policy-making and the solution of problems in official arenas, thus having a predominantly “deliberative” function by influencing the state not through pressure but through the aggregation and provision of information.⁸ The authorities thereby retain a high degree of autonomy about which social information to incorporate into their decision-making processes (Salmenkari 2008).

As suggested by Salmenkari, this model lacks, though, the state’s attempts to draw on social actors as partners in service provision. The literature shows that social welfare has become a central task of Chinese organizations (for example, Schwartz and Shieh 2009, Teets 2010, Ma 2004, Howell 2004). The mass line concept has thus to be complemented with the notion of social organizations as the state’s partners in social service provision. Jessica Teets (2010), in her study of the government’s attempts to outsource certain welfare services in Shanghai, finds that the partnership between social organizations and the local government in social service provision changes the traditional relationship between the state and society from a hierarchical one—as described by the mass line model—to a more pluralistic one, giving organizations and private groups the legitimate right to participate in public policy and to play an active role in local policy formulation, particularly in the realms of public goods provision.

Combining both approaches thus assumes that social activism is directed vertically towards the party-state rather than being horizontal social alliances and organizations standing in cooperative terms with the government. As a source of expertise and aggregated social needs and inputs for policy formulation, they influence the state mainly through deliberative means. As partners of the government in social service provision, they are, however, expected to become actively involved in local policy formulation—in realms such as social and environmental politics.

The study draws on this framework to, first, take a closer look at the official role that the party-state attributes to social actors as evidenced in its policy and selected party and state media documents, as well as in secondary data. In a second step, the organizations’ self-

8 This function is based mainly on Jürgen Habermas’ conceptualization of a “civic society” and “public sphere” within deliberative democracies, and is often attributed to civil society in Western theory.

image and practices will be contrasted with the official notion, drawing on the information collected during field research. Initially, though, I will introduce the case of Minqin County and the organizations under examination.

4 Social and Environmental Activism in Rural China: The Case of Minqin County

Minqin County is facing some of China's most pressing ecological and socioeconomic problems. The remote oasis region is threatened by desertification, water shortages, and growing poverty. The severity of these problems has not only led to the involvement and emergence of a variety of local and regional social organizations, but has also attracted party-state engagement at both the local and national level. The case of Minqin County is, therefore, well suited for investigating the interactions between social actors at the grassroots level and the local party-state in one of China's most active policy fields.

Minqin County's socioeconomic and ecological problems have been attracting national attention since Premier Wen Jiabao first visited the region in 2001 and pledged, under no circumstances, to "let Minqin turn into a second Lop Nor"⁹ —a once-blossoming ancient caravan town, which disappeared in western China's Taklamakan Desert after the nearby lake had dried up around 330 AD. Minqin County, an oasis region of about 16,000 square kilometers, is trapped between two fast-approaching deserts. At the same time, the ground water level, which is the only source of water for the county's approximately 300,000 inhabitants—most of them farmers—is rapidly sinking. This has led to rising poverty in, and migration from, the region.

Desertification has been one of China's most pressing ecological problems since the 1970s, countered by the party-state through huge afforestation projects.¹⁰ In recent years, however, the sand storms hitting China's capital Beijing have increased in fierceness and frequency. Thus far, the oasis formed a natural green shield against the storms passing on towards the east. According to Chinese scientists, the complete abandonment and drying-up of Minqin County would have severely detrimental climatic consequences for the whole of China (Cold and Arid Regions Environmental and Engineering Institute Lanzhou, cited by Chinanews 2001). The "rescue" of Minqin County (*zhengjiu Minqin*) has therefore been declared a national priority by the party-state.

Since 2001 the county and local administrations have thus been undertaking comprehensive measures to improve the situation in Minqin, explicitly calling for support from local residents, the media, and from social organizations. As part of China's national environmen-

9 Original: "Yuebu neng rang Minqin chengwei di er ge Luobubo."

10 The most famous afforestation project is China's "Great Green Wall" (*lüse changcheng*), a green shelterbelt planted along 4,480 kilometers of northern China's border. Until 2050 the "green wall" is supposed to cover a total area of 1.7 million square kilometers, about one fifth of China. About 400 million people in China are affected by desertification.

tal protection and poverty alleviation programs, state measures implemented in Minqin County include large-scale afforestation and sand dune stabilization, the improvement of irrigation systems, the construction of greenhouses to prevent evaporation, large migration projects, the conversion of farmland to bush forests, and the extensive closure of wells. While the county and state administrations are intent on actively involving Minqin residents in their implementation, the last three measures—migration, conversion of farmland, and well closures—have met with strong resistance from the local population, as they threaten to prejudice their livelihood. Due to the grievances of the local population and the national prominence of the case, after high-level political engagement, five social organizations of different geographical scope and with diverging organizational structures and legal status thus became engaged in the area in recent years.

In 2003 the College of Earth and Environmental Science (CEES) of Lanzhou University became active in Minqin County due to the College's discontent with the "inadequate" government measures taken. In cooperation with the international NGO Hong Kong Oxfam, the College runs poverty alleviation, desertification combating, and environmental protection projects in different Minqin municipalities. The major objective of CEES is not only to improve the local situation, but also to promote sustainable environmental and poverty alleviation policies. Other central objectives of CEES are local community development, the promotion of political participation, and the implementation of local democratic structures.

In 2004 five Minqin residents directly affected by the region's problems founded a local grassroots association and internet platform to protect the rights of those local residents jeopardized by state measures, thereby raising nationwide public awareness for the county's state of emergency and organizing collective social action directed at tackling local problems and improving living conditions in the whole of Minqin County. According to its own calculations, the association has 190 registered—and about 50 active—members, most of them Minqin natives living and working in Lanzhou. The association is not officially registered due to problems in finding a supervisory institution and collecting the mandatory start-up capital.¹¹

In 2006 two Lanzhou-based environmental organizations further took up project work in Minqin County. The province-level environmental organization Green Camel Bell (*Lü tuoling*), which was established by students in 2004, is active in Minqin with an environmental education project. The organization's ultimate mission is the "protection of the western Chinese environment with a vision of green mountains, clear waters, and blue skies" and the "harmony between humans and nature." Since 2007 the organization is registered with the Gansu Province Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA) bureau as a "non-governmental, non-profit work unit" (*minban feiqiye danwei*). Green Camel Bell has three full-time staff members and claims to have more than 300 registered—and about 30 active—members, most of whom are Lanzhou

11 Interviews, Lanzhou, 25 July 2008; Minqin, 8 August 2008; Minqin, 9 August 2008.

students. The organization is primarily financed through international funds that it has received.¹²

The student environmental association, Lanzhou University Green Team (*Lanzhou daxue liudui*), founded in 1999, also started an environmental education and afforestation project in the region in 2006. The Green Team has a nationwide reputation due to its active engagement in various national-level environmental campaigns.¹³ Similar to Green Camel Bell, the association's ultimate goal is a "harmonic unity between humans and nature."¹⁴ The Green Team is listed as a student association within the University of Lanzhou and affiliated with the Lanzhou University branch of the Communist Youth League (*Gongqingtuan lanzhou daxue weiyuanhui*). According to its own figures, the association had 500 registered—and around 100 active—members in 2008 (both students and teachers of Lanzhou University). Due to comprehensive financial support, the association has a relatively stable financial basis.¹⁵

Finally, also in 2006, the state-run newspaper *Lanzhou Morning Post* (*Lanzhou chengbao*) set up the "Worldwide Initiative for the Rescue of Minqin" (*Zhengjiu Minqin quanqiu xingdong*) in close cooperation with various local, regional, and national state-run media institutions—as well as the Gansu Province and local administrations in order to support the government in its fight against desertification in Minqin County.¹⁶ As a launch for the initiative, the involved media institutions called on the public to participate in the "large-scale charitable initiative" (*daxing gongyi yundong*). While the editorial of the *Lanzhou Morning Post* claims the initiative to have been socially-initiated,¹⁷ its Action Committee reflects close ties with various Gansu Province government departments and the Gansu branch of the China Charity Federation (*Gansu sheng cishan zonghui*), one of the so-called "governmentally-organized non-governmental organizations", or GONGOs.

Despite the wide variety of organizations, they still show some common features. In accordance with most international empirical studies on social organizations in countries of transition, their founders and core members can be assigned to the newly-emerging urban

12 Among others, from the Global Greengrants Fund, Pacific Environment, Give2Asia, and the British Institute of Environment and Development.

13 In 2005 the student association was listed as one of China's hundred most important social organizations (*quanguo baijia shetuan*) and one of its ten most important environmental organizations (*quanguo shijia huanbao shetuan*) by the Chinese government. In 2006 the Green Team received a prize from the Jane Goodall Institute in the United States.

14 Interview, Minqin, 8 August 2008.

15 The association's budget is derived from the Lanzhou University budget for student associations, the Communist Youth League, national foundations such as the China Environmental Protection Foundation, various project-related funds from international organizations such as the Global Greengrants Fund, the Worldwide Wildlife Fund, and Greenpeace.

16 Media institutions involved include: the Beijing Morning Post (*Beijing chengbao*), Shanghai Youth Daily (*Shanghai qingnian bao*), the Chongqing Daily (*Chongqing shibao*), Shanghai Television, and the national broadcast institution China Central Television (CCTV).

17 Interview, Lanzhou, 25 July 2006.

“middle class.” Also in line with international empirical findings (for example, Croissant et al. 2000), the organizations are struggling with a lack of members and low social mobilization. With regard to the local populace in Minqin County, this can be attributed to the residents’ lack of economic security as a necessary precondition for social action. However, also among the urban “middle class” in Lanzhou participation is limited. Generally speaking, the organizations report that the population lacks trust in non-governmental activities and that social organizations continue to rely on a strong party-state for the solution of the county’s problems. “Instead of taking action themselves, they are waiting for the next visit of Wen Jiabao or the reincarnation of [Buddha] Shakyamuni or Marx,” the local association asserts on its website. “They think, the government will fix it and do not understand that they can only rescue themselves.” Particularly the two grassroots organizations—the local association and Green Camel Bell—are further facing severe budget and personnel restraints, and are thus highly dependent on international financing.

5 The Official Conception and the Limits Imposed by the Authoritarian Framework

Well aware of the political consequences that public action had in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, the CCP is wary of the emerging social forces, placing them under strict state control and severely limiting their growth. In a rather state–corporatist fashion, it attempts to co-opt the newly-emerging organizations into the fold of state organizations and to restrict their horizontal spread. Organizations not playing by the rules of the party-state, such as those pledging for political rights, face stern repression. This is reflected in the restrictive legal framework for social organizations. After their almost uncontrolled growth in the early years of reform and the 1989 democratic movement, the provisions for social organizations were tightened and stricter regulations were enacted from 1998. A core feature of these regulations is a dual registration process, by which all organizations have to find a professional supervisory agency (*yewu zhuguan danwei*)—an official institution or mass organization that is responsible for their supervision and control—before they are able to register with the local bureau of the MOCA. For many organizations, such a supervisory institution is virtually impossible to find, as many official units shy away from the responsibility.

In addition, the authorities limit the dispersion of organizations by only admitting one registration per field of activity and administrative level. These “slots” are often occupied by GONGOs. The organizations are, further, not allowed to open branches in other parts of the country and to have members from or get involved in activities in regions outside of their original administrative area of registration. Another hindrance, especially for rural organizations, is the requirement to have high capital shares for the founding of a new organization. Many socially-initiated, or “bottom-up,” organizations (*minban tuanti*), especially grassroots associations in rural areas, therefore operate in a legal “grey zone,” as non-registered organizations are formally illegal. This severely limits their effectiveness and potential for action.

Nonetheless, the state has in recent years increasingly opened up spaces for social organizations. While society at large has profited from China's economic opening and the introduction of private market reforms, the downsides to rapid economic development have also become visible in recent times. China's society is facing growing income disparities between the benefactors from reform and the less privileged social strata, as well as between urban and rural areas.¹⁸ Decades of economic policies focusing on fast rather than sustainable development have further led to severe ecological problems.¹⁹ These are perceived as a serious challenge to the legitimacy of the CCP, both by international scholars and by China's intellectual and political elites (Holbig 2009). With society growing more diverse and pluralistic, the CCP further acknowledges the "increasingly complex interests in different social sectors" and "people's heightening awareness of democracy and the law and growing enthusiasm for political participation," as explicated by President Hu Jintao in an official speech in January 2005 (cf. Holbig 2009).

The CCP has thus recognized the need for "social intermediary organizations" as a "communication bridge between the government and the people," representing the interests of the public (for example, Chen 2001; *People's Daily*, 31 October 2007; Saich 2000) and encouraging mass line-type consultation. At a national conference of "Chinese NGOs" in Beijing in 2007, the deputy director of the State Environmental Protection Administration, Zhou Jian, praised the important role of environmental organizations as "advisers to the government" due to their "close ties with the people" (*People's Daily*, 31 October 2007).

However, the central focus of the government's policy towards social organizations is to engage society in the sharing of the burden of solving China's growing socioeconomic and environmental problems. The Chinese state has in recent years downsized the government and reduced some of its functions under the slogan "small government, big society" (*xiao zhengfu, da shehui*), turning over responsibilities to the newly-emerging organizations and explicitly encouraging them to get involved in realms such as social service provision and environmental protection (Chen 2001).²⁰ With the decentralization of social welfare since the 1990s, various policy fields—such as education, health care, poverty alleviation, emergency relief, and the fight against environmental degradation—have thus been opened (Ma 2006, Saich 2000, China National Committee for the Implementation of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification 1996). In cooperation with the party-state and under its "correct leadership," the organizations are empowered to take over "social administrative and service functions currently undertaken by the government" to support it in solving China's social prob-

18 In 2010 the Gini Index for China, as a metric for social polarization—ranging from 0 (absolute equity) to 1 (all wealth in one hand)—was set at 0.5 (Ru et al. 2010). This is above the critical margin for social stability, existing at 0.4.

19 On China's ecological problems, see, among others, Economy (2004) and Chen (2009).

20 This encompasses the task of community-based welfare provision. With the decline of the "work unit" (*danwei*) as a means of social control and as a system for social welfare provision, which had taken over major social functions after the disappearance of traditional social networks (such as clans, religious, regional, and professional groups), social organizations are now poised to play a major role in community construction and community-based welfare provision (Ma 2006: 58–61).

lems and to “mould the thoughts and sentiments of the people,” as explicated by the deputy bureau director of the MOCAs’ Nongovernmental Organizations Administrative Bureau, Chen Guangyao (2001). The organizations are thereby officially referred to as “partners of the government.” On the occasion of a national conference on a new “NGO Poverty Reduction Policy” in 2001, the *People’s Daily* (28 October 2001) wrote:

“Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in China will play a more active role in poverty alleviation as a ‘partner’ of the government [...] the government is relatively weak in improving efficiency and targeting the specific needs of certain poor groups [...] good cooperation between the government and NGOs will have a better result in poverty reduction.”

In addition, social organizations are expected to “help the government draft laws, regulations, and policies and ensure the feasibility and correctness of laws, regulations, and policies” (Chen 2001).

To summarize, social organizations are understood as cooperative entities directed vertically towards the party-state in a predominantly state–corporatist framework, in which it strictly controls their activities and attempts to limit their uncontrolled growth and the spread of horizontal social alliances. As assumed by mass line consultation, they are expected to relay expert information for policy formulation and to function as intermediary organizations communicating aggregated social inputs to the government. A central focus of the recent policy towards social organizations, however, has been based on public goods provision, as partners of the government. In certain policy fields, the state is, moreover, beginning to promote the idea of social actors’ active involvement in the policy formulation process.

6 The Organizations’ Self-Image: Between Service Provision and “NGO”

A closer look at the organizations’ self-image shows that, while the official view lies at the center of their publicly-promoted self-image, their own perception of the proper role for social organizations goes beyond this notion. Instead, the Western concept of “NGO” is gaining influence as a frame of reference. The term “NGO” has been common in China at least since the 1995 UN World Conference on Women, held in Beijing. In the last two decades Chinese scholars and organizations were also engaged in a lively debate about a budding Chinese civil society (He 2007; Yu 2006). In recent years, “NGO” or “Non-Profit Organization” (NPO) research centers were founded at various Chinese universities.²¹ As a result, “civil society” (the term was translated into Chinese as *shimin shehui*, *minjian shehui* or *gongmin shehui*)²² is usually understood as a public sphere emerging in the course of China’s economic transition and the dissolution of Leninist state–society relations—a sphere that does not position itself

21 Examples are the Qinghua University NGO Research Center and the People’s University NPO Research Center, both in Beijing.

22 For an overview of the different connotations of these terms and their history in the Chinese language, see Yu (2006) and He (2007).

in opposition to the party-state, but which negotiates spaces of relative autonomy within it (Deng 2007; He 2007; Yu 2006).

Additionally, in a relatively remote area such as Gansu Province, the social actors have come into contact with the Western notions of “civil society” and “NGO” due to their cooperation with international organizations, international financial and structural support, their participation in national and international conferences, and through Western and Chinese literature. Like in many authoritarian countries, socially-initiated organizations in China are to a large extent dependent on international financing, as national funds are still rare and often restricted to GONGOs. Public donations are yet uncommon and further complicated by the current donation law.

Whereas in Minqin County all organizations except for the newspaper initiative make references to the term “NGO,” the degree to which the concept influences their self-image and project work varies. Green Camel Bell and the local association in particular explicitly understand, and frame, themselves as members of an emerging Chinese civil society. Meanwhile, members of the local association express the objective to turn the association into an “NGO according to the standards,” yet still lack the financial and structural means to do so, while Green Camel Bell calls itself an “exemplary Chinese NGO” under the motto “from the public, to the public.” Also, the student association refers to itself as an “NGO” in internal documents, jokingly claiming the term to stand for “Never give-up organization.” This section will discuss how this “NGO” discourse, on the one side, and the official notion, on the other, impact the organizations’ self-image and self-ascribed tasks within Chinese society.

In their public mission statements and project reports, all of the organizations emphasize that they stand on cooperative terms with the authorities and declare the support for the government in its combat against desertification and poverty as their central goal, referring to the official discourse and ideology for self-legitimization. Virtually all organizations prominently and repeatedly cite Premier Wen Jiabao’s pledge not to “let Minqin turn into a second Lop Nor” as authority. For this objective, the active participation of society is indispensable, they argue, thus calling on the official discourse. In a project report published on its website, Green Camel Bell states that:

“Regional development in the last instance has to rely on the local residency. In Minqin, the educational situation has for some years been very poor. This not only leads to the migration of the poor population, but especially to a massive land flight of the young and educated. If this development continues, nobody will be left to [...] fulfill the historical obligation of ‘not letting Minqin turn into a second Lop Nor.’ It is therefore essential that desertification and regional environmental protection play a central role in local education.”

Green Camel Bell²³

23 Green Camel Bell (2007a), *Gansu huangmohua diqu huanjing jiaoyu xiangtu jiaocai xiangmu zongjie baogao* [Gansu desert regions environmental teaching materials reflecting local conditions and suited to local needs final report], online: <www.gcb.ngo.cn/news/article.php?articleid=53> (2 October 2009).

In a similar fashion, frequent references are made to the ideological core concepts of the Hu-Wen administration, the “scientific development concept” (*kexue fazhan guan*) and the party-state’s vision of a “harmonious socialist society” (*shehui zhuyi hexie shehui*). With reference to the concept of a “harmonious society,” the two environmental organizations—the student green team and Green Camel Bell—on their websites name the “harmonic unity between human beings and nature” (*ren yu ziran hexie xiangchu*) as their ultimate mission.²⁴

This is, however, qualified in interviews with organization members, as well as in internal documents by the two grassroots organizations—Green Camel Bell and the local association—, who criticize the lack of government support and the overall wary attitude towards autonomous and socially-initiated organizations. “They think that they can do everything themselves,” a member of the local association said. “They think that they do not need you [...] in the end they do not stop your activities, that is all.”²⁵ A similar view is held by Green Camel Bell. As one of the interviewees argues, “whereas on paper the government puts great value on social organizations, in reality it ignores their existence, generally not respecting the populace but patronizing it.”²⁶ With the emergence of “NGOs” stepping in on behalf of the people’s needs and rights, however, “the age of ‘high priests’ is over,” the organization claims in its newsletter.

While these organizations point out that their goal is to support the government in social service provision in such realms as the combat against desertification, poverty alleviation, and education, some organizations are critical of the government’s policies. The local grassroots association was founded in response to the grievances of Minqin residents negatively affected by policies in the region. According to the association, the state measures taken cause more harm than good:

“[In Minqin] there is only one source of wealth, and that is soil. [...] If the people are not allowed to cultivate the soil [due to the closure of wells and farmland conversion], then what? Then we are all against [these measures], as our living standard will decline. But the government says this has some benefits for nature. [...] This is a typical case of only treating the symptoms. [...] But the populace has a diverging opinion. [...] Thus, like in many other places in China, a conflict between the government and the people emerges.”

Interview, Lanzhou (25 July 2008)

The university institute also got involved in the area due to its discontent with “inadequate” government policies. Like other environmental experts, the institute criticizes the authorities for thus far neglecting the connection between poverty and environmental degradation. “No good” could come of this despite the large amount of money invested, the institute contends.

²⁴ This reference is only made in the organizations’ Chinese-language documents.

²⁵ Interview, Lanzhou, 25 July 2008.

²⁶ Interview, Huining, 12 August 2008.

Fierce criticism is also directed at the official migration projects, which, according to the institute, often ignore individual needs and interests and cause further environmental migration.²⁷

In accordance with the mass line model, the organizations seek to impact local policy implementation and formulation by aggregating the people's needs and grievances, relaying them to the government administrations, and acting as source of expert information wherever they see the need to improve state measures. In line with the official role that is attributed to these organizations, they understand themselves as the voice of the people of Minqin County. Green Camel Bell, the local association, and the university institute CEES in their public mission statements and project reports explicitly refer to themselves as a "bridge between the people and the government" in reference to the official notion of social organizations. This is also reflected in a meeting protocol, in which Green Camel Bell identifies three core areas of activity within the range of competences of a Chinese "NGO." The first two are in line with the mass line consultation model: "initiate" (*changdao*) and "social investigations" (*shehui diaocha*). As concrete measures, these encompass the publishing of information of public relevance and the pressure for their official release, the aggregation of the voice of the people, and its communication to the government. CEES in its project reports further calls itself a "consultant and source of (local) expertise" to the government.

In line with Jessica Teets' (2010) findings, the organizations' self-image goes, however, beyond the provision of information for local policy formulation. The organizations' ultimate goal is to actively participate in the social and environmental policy processes, both at the local and national level. The third core area of activity identified by Green Camel Bell in its meeting protocol is thus "participation and control as a representative of the public" (*dai gongzhong canyu jiandu*), encompassing public pressure for sustainable and effective government measures. While the local association and CEES primarily seek to promote more sustainable poverty alleviation and environmental protection policies for China's arid areas, the two environmental organizations—Green Team and Green Camel Bell—seek to actively participate in national environmental policy formulation in cooperation with other environmental organizations.

According to their self-image as members of a budding Chinese civil society, in a vein similar to that of their counterparts in Western countries, Green Camel Bell, the local association, and CEES, moreover, formulate two central objectives, which deviate from the official role-conception. The first is the organization of society with the goal of local political participation and the creation of autonomous spaces for political debate. The university institute in its project report explicitly names local democracy-building and women's and people's empowerment as its central tasks, seeking to increase local political participation, accountability, and transparency and aiming to invoke a fundamental change in local state–society relations.

27 Interview, Lanzhou, 29 July 2008.

A second objective is capacity-building and the promotion of a “Chinese civil society,” a goal promoted particularly by the local association and Green Camel Bell. On its website, Green Camel Bell writes that:

“One of the responsibilities of GCB is to promote the capacity-building of NGOs. Generally speaking, NGOs in Gansu are underdeveloped because of geographic, economic, and historical reasons. [...] GCB made great progress in [...] local NGO capacity-building, especially when it came to teaching about public involvement.”

Green Camel Bell²⁸

This encompasses the aim of establishing and actively participating in regional and national social alliances, thus deviating from the official notion. These goals remain within the overall limits imposed by the authoritarian framework, as none of the organizations explicitly or implicitly question the political status quo, advocate Western-style democracy at higher administrative levels or propagate greater individual freedoms or political rights, as would be expected of civil society organizations in Western understandings. However, their objectives still go beyond the stipulated limits of the official model.

It is evident that the degree to which these organizations look to Western civil society organizations as a frame of reference varies. Whereas the size of my sample and its restriction to one policy field and region does not permit far-reaching conclusions to be made, my findings nevertheless point to two factors that might impact the extent to which organizations look to Western NGOs as their role-models. One is direct financial cooperation with international NGOs, as is the case with CEES, who cooperate directly with Oxfam, and Green Camel Bell, whose budget is largely derived from project-related international funding.²⁹ The other is relative autonomy from the party-state. Whereas all organizations are under strict state control, as will be briefly discussed in the next section, the degree of actual control and the organizations’ ownership and moral autonomy over their initiatives vary due to financial and structural ties with, and dependencies upon, the party-state, as well as “institutional autonomy”, understood by Shawn Shieh as less of a function of distance from the party-state, but rather as a function of having the resources and influence to resist state interference (Shieh 2009: 23). This is, however, not the focus of my study.

28 Green Camel Bell (2007b): 5.29 *Lan shihua baozha shijian Lütuoling yingdui fang’an* [Green Camel Bell reaction plan to the May 29 Lanzhou petrol station explosion incident], online: <www.gcb.ngo.cn/news/article.php?articleid=55> (2 October 2009).

29 For the impact of transnational linkages on the work of social organizations in China see, for example, Morton (2005).

7 Negotiating Political Spaces: The Organizations' Interactions with the Party-State

Due to the restrictive registration provisions, the obligatory affiliation with an official supervisory institute, and various supervision mechanisms, the organizations are under strict government control, which imposes limits on their fields of activity and geographic range of action.³⁰ Like their stated goals, their practices thus remain within the overall authoritarian framework. A closer look at their practices shows that they, by and large, correspond with their self-image.

In accordance with the official understanding and their public self-image, both social organizations and local government representatives proclaim overall good mutual relations.³¹ Parts of the socially-initiated projects in Minqin are subsidized by the local and county administrations and state institutions. On the website of the Minqin County administration, the secretary of the Minqin County Party Committee officially acknowledges the university institute's "services for local society, economy, the County, and its enterprises." The coordinators of the newspaper initiative were invited to the People's Hall in Beijing to participate in a central government discussion forum on the subject of Minqin and were applauded for their efforts in the region. As mentioned above, this is, however, qualified by the positions of the two grassroots organizations—Green Camel Bell and the local association—who in interviews and internal documents criticize the lack of government support and cooperation and the latter's overall wary attitude towards social organizations.

Corresponding to the focus of the recent policy towards social organizations and the actors' public self-image, their activities centre on public goods provision, mainly poverty alleviation projects (such as environmental and basic education, providing agricultural and economic information for farmers, or distributing sheep), and environmental work (such as planting a green shelterbelt and stabilizing sand dunes around different municipalities in Minqin), wherever they see the need to supplement or improve upon government measures.

Understanding themselves as representatives of the people, they further aggregate the residents' needs and grievances (such as those triggered by government measures prejudicing their livelihoods) through social surveys and pass them on to the responsible govern-

30 These include quotas for party-state officials on the non-university organizations' obligatory boards of directors; regular meetings with and reports to the responsible MOCA bureaus and the respective supervisory institutes, in which all finances and activities have to be disclosed; the tight supervision of the university Green Team by the local branch of the Communist Youth League, which has to rubberstamp all expenditures; and the supervision of the university institute by the Ministry of Education. Interviews, Lanzhou, 24 July 2008; Lanzhou, 25 July 2008; Minqin, 8 August 2008; Minqin, 9 August 2008; Huining, 12 August 2008; Huining, 15 August 2008. Whereas the unofficial local association enjoys a relatively larger degree of autonomy, it concomitantly sees itself confronted with serious budget constraints and the constant fear of repression due to its technically illegal status. The association thus prefers to adapt to the official framework and has recently commenced its registration process. Interviews, Lanzhou, 25 July 2008; Minqin, 9 August 2008.

31 Interviews, Lanzhou, 25 July 2008; Lanzhou, 29 July 2008; Minqin, 6 August 2008; Minqin, 7 August 2008; Minqin, 9 August 2008; Huining, 12 August 2008.

ment administrative department to invoke policy change through deliberative means. In a similar fashion, the university institute sends expert reports and recommendations for policy formulation based on original research to the county administration. Consistent with the mass line model, these represent hierarchical communication channels directed vertically towards the party-state. All organizations recognize the need for effective government measures for the solution of the socioeconomic and environmental problems in Minqin. At the local level, organizations with close ties to the local administrations and state representatives, and those in the official position of government consultants, appear to be more effective in bringing about policy change, therein relying on a mixture of formal and informal channels. All organizations reported receiving regular invitations to official meetings and forums on specific subjects in their area of expertise as well as their participation in national conferences. However, according to CEES, government bodies usually pay more attention to social needs aggregated in “scientific packages,” with concrete recommendations, than to the voices of the populace or volunteer associations.³² This is confirmed by the local association, which reports that, after it sent a comprehensive social survey reporting the local residents’ grievances to the Minqin County administration, it did not receive any kind of reply, nor, moreover, had the critical measures been stopped or reduced at the time of research.³³

However, in line with Jessica Teets’ (2010) findings, spaces are also opening up for the organizations’ active engagement in policy formulation and decision-making in the realms of social and environmental politics. As assumed by the mass line approach, the local party-state organs continue to show a high degree of autonomy about which social inputs to incorporate into their policy formulation processes. While the organizations’ impact is thus limited, some of them achieved concrete results in advocating policy change, also on a suprarregional level. In March 2009, for instance, a contract was signed between CEES and the Minqin County administration, cementing the institute’s active engagement in the development of a sustainable regional migration and poverty alleviation policy with the goal of turning Minqin County into a national pilot project for other regions with fragile ecosystems. Also the two environmental organizations, the student green team and Green Camel Bell, pointed to the political impact of national environmental campaigns, in which they played an active role.³⁴ The study found various examples of smaller effects on local policy change, such as alterations in the implementation of farmland conversion and sand dune stabilization based on the university institute’s recommendations.

According to their self-image as civil society organizations, the social actors in Minqin County negotiate the spaces opening up within the authoritarian framework, seeking larger

32 Interview, Lanzhou, 29 July 2008.

33 Interview, Minqin, 9 August 2008.

34 These include the campaigns to save the snub-nosed monkey and the Tibetan antelope. Comprehensive studies of national environmental campaigns and their impact on national environmental policy were conducted, for example, by Mertha (2008) and Sun and Zhao (2008).

spheres of autonomy and striving to increase local political participation. This includes the promotion of social empowerment and democratic self-governance, as well as measures to increase government accountability and transparency at the local level. While these efforts remain within the overall authoritarian framework and largely rely on state-initiated developments and official ideology, both residents and local administration representatives reported positive project effects on local political participation, accountability, and transparency.³⁵

Comprehensive measures in this direction were undertaken by the university institute in the course of four internationally-financed poverty alleviation projects in cooperation with Oxfam Hong Kong. Based on the World Bank's Participatory Rural Appraisal approach, the institute implemented various capacity-building measures, such as the founding of social groups (including a democratic awareness and women's advocacy team), regular trainings for the residents, the active involvement of the local populace in project implementation and decision-making processes, and the introduction of regular meetings between popular and local administration representatives, in which local political decisions were to be discussed with the residents, giving them space for active involvement.

As a result of the projects, the relationship between local cadres and residents shifted from a "commanding administration" (*mingling xingzheng*) towards a local government "in service of the people" (*wei shehui fuwu*), both the university institute and local party-state representatives claimed with reference to official ideology.³⁶ In fact, democratic and self-government structures at the grassroots level were officially introduced in rural China at the beginning of the reform era. Since the end of the 1990s democratic elections have been formally implemented at the village and county levels. Their extension to the province level is under consideration.³⁷ Local cadre accountability, "rule by law", and the fight against corruption are a central political focus of the Hu-Wen administration. However, although the effects on local governance and political awareness are hard to measure and beyond the limits of this study, the observations made do point to heightened participation by the populace in local public and political life.

In contrast to the basic tenet of the mass line consultation model, which assumes social activism directed vertically towards the party-state rather than horizontal social alliances, the social organizations in Minqin County in recent years, moreover, started to form comprehensive regional networks, to join national alliances, and to participate in the above mentioned national environmental campaigns. According to their central objective of promoting regional "civil society structures," Green Camel Bell and the local association are engaged in "local

35 Non-representative survey conducted among village residents; Interviews, Minqin, 6 August 2008; Minqin, 7 August 2008. Positive "harmonizing" effects on the relations between the village residents and local party-state representatives were also reported by the state-led Lanzhou newspaper Lanzhou Daily (13 December 2006).

36 Interviews, Lanzhou, 29 July 2008; Minqin, 7 August 2008.

37 On rural political reforms and their implications for local governance see, among others, O' Brien (2009), He (2007), and Perry and Goldman (2007).

NGO capacity-building” efforts, such as holding various training units for student associations and regional social organizations, and organizing frequent “NGO symposia” and social organization exchange meetings, at which over 30 regional organizations participate.

In 2008 various organizations tackling the problems in northwestern China’s arid regions joined forces in the foundation of a “Gansu Association for a Green Home and Desert Combating” (*Gansu lüse jiayuan shamo zhili cujinhui*), established as an “alliance of welfare organizations.” Its members—including the local association and Green Camel Bell, as well as various national-level environmental organizations—implement joint research, develop collective strategies, and mutually support each other in the case of a shortage of personnel or project participants. Moreover, the organizations active in Minqin County frequently cooperate in their projects and organize regular discussion forums on the subjects of Minqin and desertification, at which various local and regional organizations and media representatives participate. More in accordance with the mass line model, all organizations receive comprehensive financial and structural support from prominent national-level environmental organizations such as Friends of Nature and Global Village Beijing, two of China’s first generation environmental organizations. For the formation of social alliances, the internet plays an important role, both as an exchange forum and by providing links to national networks such as the Chinese Environmental NGOs Online (*Zhongguo huanjing NGO zai xian*) and Greenweb (*Lü wang*).³⁸

8 Conclusion

This article argues that any conceptualization of social organizations in China should take into account not only the roles that the party-state but also social actors attribute to social organizations, as these notions circumscribe the organizations’ range of action. The study demonstrates that complementing the mass line consultation concept with a social service component provides a better framework for understanding the official view of social organizations. The state thus promotes social activism directed vertically towards the party-state and attempts to limit their horizontal spread, understanding them as cooperative entities both in providing expertise and aggregated information on social needs for policy formulation, as well as in social service provision and the fight against environmental degradation.

Contrasting the organizations’ self-image with the official conception showed that while their public self-image is, at large, aligned with the role that the state attributes to social organizations, their own self-image goes beyond the official understanding—with the Western concepts of “NGO” and “civil society” gaining in influence, thus confirming Salmenkari’s observations. The organizations emphasize standing on friendly terms with the authorities,

38 On the effects and potentials of the internet for social activism in China see, among others, Yang (2009), Zheng (2008), and Tai (2006).

frequently making references to official ideological concepts and drawing on state terminology for self-legitimization. In accordance with the official view, they understand themselves as partners of the government in the provision of public goods and as its consultants and the voice of the people of Minqin County. However, understanding and framing themselves as members of a budding Chinese civil society similar to those in Western countries, the organizations seek to create larger spheres of autonomy by increasing political participation and promoting regional civil society structures.

The organizations' practices are in accordance with their own self-image. Under strict government control, the organizations continue to operate within the overall limits imposed by the authoritarian framework. They neither explicitly nor implicitly question the political status quo, as would be expected of civil society organizations in Western notions. They both support the local government administrations in their fight against poverty and environmental degradation and provide expertise wherever they see the need to supplement or improve upon government measures. As assumed by the mass line concept, this reflects a model of vertical political communication, in which the organizations attempt to impact political change through deliberative means. While the local administrations retain a relatively high degree of autonomy in their political decision-making processes, the power to impact political change is increasingly negotiated also from the grassroots level up, a finding in line with both Jessica Teets' (2010) observations and Caroline Coopers "local associational model" (Cooper 2006: 127). The social organizations in Minqin County are gaining weight both in local and supraregional policy formulation in the realms of social and environmental politics.

According to their self-understanding as civil society organizations, the actors further seek to change local state–society relations by promoting local political participation and creating autonomous spaces for political debate. Resorting to state-initiated developments and official ideology, the organizations appear to be successful in impacting local state–society relations by contributing to the growth of political awareness about, and social participation in, local public and political life. Although comprehensive collective action is still hampered by the restrictive legal framework, the formation of social alliances both at the regional and national level will further impact power relations, as social actors are joining forces to increase their capacity to invoke political change and create autonomous spaces for political discussion, a development facilitated particularly by the internet. Although these findings emanate only from one specific political context in China, they nevertheless point to new shifts and possibilities in the field of local state–society relations in spite of the overall authoritarian context.

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