

NGOs and Civil Society under the Context of Humanistic Community Construction:

Practice and Review of China

ORGANISATIONS NON GOUVERNEMENTALES ET LA SOCIÉTÉ CIVILE DANS LE CONTEXTE DE LA CONSTRUCTION DE COMMUNAUTÉ HUMANISTE :

PRATIQUE ET REVUE DE LA CHINE

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Abstract: Since the mid 1980's, the issue of community construction in China has been put on the agenda for governments of various levels. The shift from community service to community construction witness the development of community management as well as the Chinese social reform. The humanistic community construction has become the cornerstone for social reform, and also an important practice to Chinese harmonious society. In the future social and economic frame, the grass-root level self-government organizations, community organizations, social organizations will contribute to most nongovernmental, nonprofit social institutions. Neither is it a sheer governmental behavior, nor is a sheer civil activity. The community construction consists of various community actors and community forces. The process is a trinity of the government, nongovernmental organizations and the residents. The nongovernmental organizations, especially the voluntary and self-governmental organizations, will promote the participatory democracy in the community management. The cultivation of nongovernmental organizations and the self-governmental institutions would be translated into the future government management pattern of Chinese society.

Key words: nongovernmental organization, humanistic community construction, civil society

Résumé: Depuis le milieu des années 1980, le problème de la construction de communautés a déjà été mis à l'ordre du jour des gouvernements à divers niveaux. Le changement du service de communauté en construction de communauté témoigne du développement de la gestion de communauté et la réforme sociale chinoise. La construction de communauté humaniste est devenue la base de la réforme sociale et une pratique importante pour la société harmonieuse de la Chine. Dans le futur cadre social et économique, les organisations autonomes, communautaires et sociales vont contribuer aux institutions non gouvernementales et non lucratives. Ce n'est ni une action gouvernementale pure ni une activité civile pure. La construction de communauté consiste en divers acteurs et forces communautaires. Son processus est la trinité du gouvernement, des organisations non gouvernementales et des habitants. Les organisations non gouvernementales, surtout les volontaires et les organisations autonomes, pourraient promouvoir la démocratie dans la gestion de communauté. Le développement des organisations non gouvernementales et institutions autonomes pourrait être transformé en modèle futur de la gestion gouvernemental de la société chinoise.

Mots-Clés: organisation non gouvernementale, construction de communauté humaniste, société civile

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1.

Since the mid 1980's, the issue of community construction in China has been put on the agenda for governments of various levels. Since 1996, most of the large cities in China have witnessed an extraordinary fashion of community construction, which is followed by a relatively amazing passion. The Shanghai Municipal Government, which acted as the bull werther, put forward the reform scenario concluded as "Bi-level government with tri-level administration" in the Shanghai Municipal City Work Meeting, and later that scenario was readjusted as "Bi-level government with tri-level administration and quadruple-level networks" in 1998, therefore, Shanghai initiated the reform of the city administration system. In the end of 1998, Beijing and Guangzhou put the assumption that the work of neighborhood administration system was the essential issue for the promotion of the city administration by modern means.³ Both the community service in the elementary period and the community construction of the present period reveal the deepening of our comprehension of the community issue in China, as well as that of the social reform in China. The construction of humanistic community should be linked with the social reform in China. At present, the humanistic community construction has functioned as the starting point of the general social reform in China, even an important move towards the construction of a harmonious society in China. In Hu Jie's points of view, community is the basic organizational form of civil society, which includes three meanings⁴: first of all, community is the structural base for civil society, and locality is an important feature of a community, but the common value views are crucial to a community, which has raised so much attention gradually, only to lead the emergence of spiritual community and mental community, such as associations and league. From this point, civil society is composed of communities of various forms. Second, community is the origin of energy for civil society; on the contrary, work unit is the basic organizational form in the traditional planned economy society in China. In civil society, work unit has gradually transformed into as a workplace, only to make the position of a community more and more obvious. The entire citizen activities operate in the society level, and a citizen's interests is linked to the community closely. In addition, community is an important political resource for the civil society. In civil society, community works as the footstone for the regime construction, therefore, becomes an important part of the state regime frame. The competition and

development of various political forces embark on from the community.

The major work areas for the NGOs are social grass roots, to serve the common people, esp. the social groups in disadvantage, therefore, the self-help commonalties and community organizations will become the most important relying forces for the common people. Both the self-help commonalties and community organizations are non-profit organizations, therefore, they share the similarity with the NGOs in this point. Since the 1990's, along with the deepening of China's reform and open-up as well as the gradual expanding of the social and economic activities, there has emerged a more and more urgent need for both the self-help commonalties and community organizations, which were established one by one automatically or guided and supported by the government. In the future social and economic system frame in China, self-help commonalties, community organizations and social organizations will be the important organizational forms of a non-governmental and non-profit social system.⁵ The reform and open-up enhance the democratization process of social administration, only to provide the community organizations with a more and more important in the management and administration of the social public affairs, displaying more and more powerful vitality. The upsurge of the humanistic community construction is the first wakeup of a democratic, independent and autonomous participation into the administration for the city people in China. The consequence of the call for self-interests is as follows: after the shift from work unit to individual in terms of interest actor, the shift from tradition to modernity in terms of cities, and the shift from control to service in terms of administration, the government will transform itself actively to seek after the new conjunctive point among work unit, citizen and government. The government will give more and more power to those communities that are liked to the citizens more closely, and readjust the city administration system actively. The emerging "citizens" and "citizenship" in the cities make the real sense. The individuals that detached from the work unit come to express their concerns over the municipal issues related to their individual interests. At the grass-root level, the "civil society organizations" has emerged as the cluster of individual's comprehensive interests. At the medium level, government-background NGOs evolved from the neighborhood committees and street offices are organizing all kinds of activities, providing all sorts of services and setting the norm for the appropriate behavior by strengthening the interactions and mutual help between individual citizen, to cultivate the modern citizen awareness such as participation, environmental protection, and common virtues.⁶

³ 'Promote the Reform of the Street Administration System, Enhance the Modern Administration of the Cities', Beijing Daily, December 7,1998; Guangzhou Deepens The City Administration System Reform', *Guangzhou Daily*, December 29,1998.

⁴ Huang Jie, *Civil Society and Community Construction*, *Discovery*, June 2002.

⁵ Zhao Liqing, 'Issues On the NGOs in China', *Jiangsu Social Sciences*, April 2000.

⁶ Yu Keping, *Transition of the Interest and Governance of the Civil Society in China*, Social Sciences Academic Press, 2002,

The humanistic community construction is neither a simple governmental action nor a simple civil activity; rather it is a process which involves various community actors and community forces. In the whole process of the humanistic community construction, government, the NGOs and residents are a trinity, which is combined to closely to separate from it. The government will operate the macro leading of the humanistic community construction, and set up the plans for it; the NGOs will act as the runner and organizer for the humanistic community construction, working as a bridge between the government and the residents, which are the important carrier to separate the government from the public affairs; the residents are the base for the humanistic community construction, and their wills are the fundamental driving force for the enhancement of humanistic community construction. In the humanistic community construction, the NGOs' participation into the community affairs can facilitate the development towards modernization and professionalization for the humanistic community construction; it also can realize the NGOs' functions fully to encourage the residents to participate into the distribution of the community resources and construct it hand by hand. The NGOs' participation into the community affairs, esp. the development of those voluntary and self-rule organizations, provides a practical approach for the broadening of the resident participation and the promotion of democratic politics in community administration.⁷

2.

Along with the reform in fields such as enterprise system, housing system, social security system and medical care system gradually in China, the interests have been separated from the their work units for most of the resident, rather these systems are more and more professional. The residents' committees and villagers' committees established among urban and rural residents are typical Chinese community organizations. In terms of public security, environment and sanitation, the reconciliation of conflicts and disputes, family plan, and the administration of the migrant residents, the community enjoys an advantage rather than the government. The community members participate into the cultural, medical, sports and sciences activities in the community, advocate a civilized and healthy lifestyle, and construct the community culture, therefore, they are the most important relying factors for the spiritual culture construction. Based on the common needs, with the characteristics of self-administration, self-development, and self-service, the members of these communities manage the community affairs by means of the social groups, the NGOs and volunteer's

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⁷ Zheng Anyun, Dai Yaling, 'An Assumption on the NGOs' Roles in the Community Construction', *Journal of Humanities*.

organizations within these communities, which displaying the features of by all members, for all members, and of all members. With the promotion of the citizens' capability to manage the social affairs, the tight tensions between governments and the public because of the complex public affairs can be mitigated. The construction and development of the humanistic community facilitate the promotion of the residents' life quality, encourage the members to help each other, strengthen the defense and management abilities of the community, and nurture the community sense and social responsibility. In those countries with mature community development, the governmental administration is relatively neutral. Governments set up the policies and rules for the community development, while the administration within the community itself is exercised by itself.⁸ The humanistic community construction provides the construction of civil society in China with a fine opportunity. The fundamental target for the community construction is to establish modern civil society; viz. the skeleton administration form in cities in China conformed to the democratic politics and market economy system. In addition to the governmental forces in the humanistic community construction, a powerful civil society is needed to shoulder the enormous social affairs, which can promote the development of the Chinese society and encourage the city community in China to realize self-rule gradually.⁹ The development of civil society in China is a long and hard process, and there is a long way ahead. But starting with the NGOs' participation into the community affairs, there is no denying the fact that the humanistic community construction in China is a perfect cut-in point into the construction of civil society in China.

Meanwhile, civil society will pay much attention to the humanistic community construction. The organization, system and ideas of civil society are necessary to the humanistic community construction, and will put positive influences upon it. The NGOs, as the nuclear elements in civil society, can play an important role in the humanistic community construction.

The connotation of the humanistic community construction is the withdrawal of government forces from the communities. The government consciously cultivates all kinds of community organizations to shoulder the responsibility of community management, which are civil-society-based and self-governing. From the reform and change within the city community administration forms, we can conclude that in the market economy system, the city governments should realized the importance of civil society rather than get

⁸ Wang Yuming, 'The NGOs and their Social Administration Functions', *Journal of the Party School of the Jujian Province*, July, 2001.

⁹ Yu Keping, *Transition of the Interest and Governance of the Civil Society in China*, Social Sciences Academic Press, 2002, p.113

out of the social affairs or leave all of these affairs to market, esp. in the condition of the wakeup of the citizens in China. Under the condition that the governments respect the citizens' interests, they should link the interests of various parties together to establish an organized and systematic community administration network and diverse cooperative partnership relations, so that we can set up a new democratic community administration form. Then we can combine various interests groups together along with the sought for community interests. In the process of a new readjustment and combination, governments can exercise its guidance, reconciliation, organization and service by those media groups' participation into the communities to realize the community reconstruction, by means of the separating government from public affairs and the separating government from social affairs.¹⁰

According to Juergen Habermas, the healthy development of the autonomous and non-political social organisms is the way to get out of the legitimacy crisis for the contemporary capitalist countries. In some sense, that means the re-design of a society. Habermas' scenario to cure the legitimacy crisis for the contemporary capitalist countries enlightens the project of civil society in China. The construction of a civil society in China is an interactive process between the state and the civil society. On one hand, the state should withdraw from the social, economic fields to change the government function along with its headway for reform; on the other hand, the social actors should take the advantage of the reform, organize the NGOs, and press ahead the construction of civil society from the bottom. This process rushes into the economic field at first and then gradually into the public fields. The social members participate into and influence the state decision-making with the assistance of the NGOs, and develop a benign dynamic relation with the state.¹¹ The combination between the NGOs' participation into the community affairs and the civil society will push the social reforms in China effectively, and these two factors will supplement each other and facilitate each other mutually. The democratization process in China will have to start from the grass roots, therefore, the democracy construction in the residents' committees and villagers' committees established among urban and rural residents are grassroots democracy and grassroots politics with China's characteristics, which displays profound meanings for the social development in China. We must pay enough attention to the western countries' social experiences. In the western market economy society, generally speaking, there is no community government, but the community is the base for the state

regime and the basic work unit for the state politics. Therefore, each political force pays much attention to the unique but indispensable political resources within the communities. The NGOs' participation into the humanistic community construction will provide China's political from-bottom-to-top reform with a special notion. The comprehensive public social participation is the essence for civil society and humanistic community construction, as well as one of its terminal aims. The humanistic community construction can promote the participation passion among the general public, realize the self-rule of the communities through the comprehensive participation of the public, facilitate the humanistic community construction in turn, and enhance the establishment and development of civil society to play a positive role in China's social reforms.¹²

3.

The vitalization of civil society brings many influences to China's social, political and economic life, changes the condition of social administration to some extent, improves the good administration of the society, and is very important for the citizen's political participation, political publicity, self-rule, probity and effectiveness, and the democratization and scientification. Game theory proposes that everybody can enjoy the public goods such as pure air and secure neighborhood, regardless of their contribution. Therefore, generally speaking, nobody has the intention to provide the public goods of this kind, only to find that few people are likely to produce them.¹³ This is the paradox within a collective act, which takes the meaning that non-cooperation is a kind of balance faced with public goods. Through the case study of community autonomous administration in Haishu District, Ningbo City, Chen Weidong and Li Xueping reveal the reciprocal actions among the residents and public goods resulting from their cooperation can overcome the paradox of collective act, which is the major meaning of community administration and the essence of civil society. To transcend the paradox of collective action go to the heart of community governance and civil society. The essence of pure democracy and civil society is the process of voluntary organization, constant bargaining, majority decision or unanimous agreement, representative implantation, mutual supervision and arbitrament. The community governance structure is a new civic participatory network in which the trust and cooperation are co-related to the network density.¹⁴

¹² Huang Jie, *Civil Society and Community Construction*, Discovery, June 2002.

¹³ Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*, translated by Wang Lie, Nanchang, Jiangxi People's Publishing House, 2001, p.191.

¹⁴ Chen Weidong, Li Xueping, 'Community Administration and The Upgrowth of the Civil Society', *Journal of the Huazhong Normal University (Arts and Social Sciences)*,

¹⁰ Yu Keping, *Transition of the Interest and Governance of the Civil Society in China*, Social Sciences Academic Press, 2002, p.113

¹¹ Zhang Lirong, Jin Honglei, 'Incentives to the Vitalization of the NGOs—A Bi-dimensional Perspective', *Journal of Hubei Administrative College*, April, 2003.

From the perspective of economics, market mechanism is the best one to provide the private goods, while the public goods should be provided by the public organizations. In certain sense, a well-developed social media system can promote the state act, civil society and market economy to develop into a benign dynamic relationship. In short, that social media system is a kind of public good.¹⁵ As a democratization practice to participate into the civil society and a systemic institution to curb the excessive expansion of state power, the NGOs have to participate into the community affairs through the participation and influences of the educated group, under the previous condition, it's possible for us to make the real moral community come into existence, which has been fully revealed in modern democratic societies.¹⁶

The development of the NGOs is under the particular historical and social context, and the diversification of interest bodies is an important base upon which the original system begin to change and the NGOs emerge from and develop in. In recent years, China has seen many autonomous and spontaneous right-defending and participation activities, which reveal the growing of civil society in China, and the strengthening of the public's autonomy and self-rule view. A newly-adjusted interest relation has come into being, which is guided by the semi-executive mechanism, realized by the community administration and service institutions, and composed of the enterprises and governmental work units, social groups, as well as the individual resident. But the particularity of the Chinese social transition determines that the Chinese civil society should be different from the western road and style. With a short history, the Chinese civil society encounters many problems, both in the political and economic environment it exists and its internal structure and functions. In accordance with the review on the "civil society" emerging from the contemporary economic reforms in China carried out by Gordon White in 1993, the NGOs in China maintains at the elementary period. Rather than the big amount of the NGOs, they can't function as the principal part of social administration, as a result of the prevailing executive feature, unhealthy mechanism, innormative service, low quality of the members, poor external supervision. Therefore, it's necessary for us to reshape the current social administration form in which the government and society are combined closely and complexly. In addition, it's also necessary to define the essence, goal, function, obligation, power and interest of the NGOs.

Although the emergence of civil society is an autonomous process of molding, it needs the active fostering by the political countries, especially for those

underdeveloped market-driven society. On one side, the government should keep in touch with the public, give ear to their voices in the decision making process to minimize the gap between public need and the government capacity; on the other side, the government should control the participation in case of participation explosion in the political system. The development of NGOs is a good option because it could not only give public voices but also integrate the participation enthusiasm. It's necessary for the government to broaden the channels to participate into the political life for the citizens, create favorable conditions for the development of the NGOs (e.g. the NGOs' participation into the administration of public affairs), and assist the NGOs (human resources, goods) and guide their development in the proper time; but in a mature time, government should get out of the operation of the NGOs voluntarily in case of the NGOs' excessive reliance upon the government, which may lead to the governmentalization of the non-governmental organizations; government should supervise the NGOs' action, and enrich the operation means and functional mechanism of the NGOs; it's urgent to perfect the laws, enhance the legislation on the NGOs, and clarify the NGOs' obligations and standard operation forms to make them shoulder the relevant responsibilities resulting from their illegal actions. In addition, the government had better establish a system of laws and rules about the NGOs, to make sure that they administer the public affairs and serve the communities in accordance with the laws.¹⁷ The development and improvement of the NGOs in China needs both the gradual maturity of the civil society and the gradual development of market economy; it also needs both the active fostering and guidance and the generous support and participation from the general public. As a kind of organization with obvious voluntariness, self-rule and non-profitability, the NGOs can only rely on the society and the individuals. Therefore, in order to maintain a longtime development, the NGOs should establish and develop civil society beyond the states and markets. The NGOs express the will of the public, reveal the interests of citizens and invite opportunities for participation, the development of NGOs is sure to get the public support, including economic support. The fostering of civil society promotes the capability of the society and the individuals to shoulder their own responsibility and exercise their own functions, to set up the base for the NGOs to obtain its economic independence.

4.

In the market-driven society, the political state should establish the civil society actively so as to pursue the

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¹⁵ Li Hengguan, *Develop the NGOs and Promote the Executive Reform of the Government*, March 2002.

¹⁶ Xiong Yueyin, 'The Development of the 'Third Sector' in the Transitional Countries---An Analysis of China's Reality', *Sociological Studies*, January 2001.

¹⁷ Wu Qin, Gu Wen, 'The Development of the NGOs in the U.S. and its Reflections to China's Executive Reforms', *Journal of Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics (Social Sciences)*, April, 2001.

economic development and political reform at the same time, and to ensure the benign operation of the whole society. To display the effectiveness, efficiency, responsiveness and responsibility, the social administration must realize network. The so-called network administration is a three-dimensional and hierarchical administrative means in which involves various administration institutions and forces together with the readjustment of the social resources. It is not a simple and straightforward functional process of power, but an indirect and penetrative linking dynamics of multi-power, in order to obtain the effect of moistening everything with thinnish sound. What's important is that, as the carrier of shaping the civil society in China, the NGOs should exercise their administration function when penetrating into the network. In theory, this social administration form of network consists of the interaction of three actors in three layers, in other words, the government, market organizations (enterprises), and the NGOs are all the driving forces for the melodic function and gradual development, and these three actors mobilize the political, economic and social (cultural) resources and forces by means of executive approaches, management and self-rule, to form a management system which puts influences upon the society. As an important part within the civil society, the existence and operation of the NGOs represents certain social assets, and plays a positive role in the development of the Chinese society and economy. In a society in which the NGOs are very active, both the state and market will function more effectively. The NGOs endeavor to strengthen the self-management capability of the social members, therefore, they can promote the development of civil society and realize the increment of the social assets in terms of human rights, education, governmental participation, information circulation, etc.

Along with the in-depth development of the economic globalization, and the further engagement

between China and the international society, the social structure has undergone certain transformations, stratification within the classes and stratum in the Chinese society has emerged, and a diverse interest structure has come in being in the society. The civil society with the contract relationship as its medium has grown gradually; therefore, the Chinese government should pay more attention to the fostering and development of the NGOs, together with the establishment of social administration system upon the right base of the social bodies, which will be the important practice direction for the transition of the Chinese government administration mode. Through the fostering and development of the NGOs, we can realize the following targets: further reform of the government administration system and the correspondence between the governments and society; the further reform of the institutions; the promotion of the government's ability to manage the economy, with the aim to readjust the relation between the governments and enterprises and the relation between the governments and market; full use of the NGOs' self-management, and the strengthening of that of the society. In the process in which the state releases certain rights to the society, both the free-flowing social energy and the free-moving social space are expanding, only to realize the emergence of China's own civil society. Although it is still very small and faced with many obstacles, its development and growth is inevitable. There are reasons to believe that with the maturity of civic awareness comes the increasing number of NGOs. The autonomous and self-government organizations will contribute to civil interest protection and civil will expression. Democratic participation, civil self-rule in addition to the privatization of the organizations will push the NGOs in the Chinese society to develop forward more and more healthily, so as to play an active role in the forging of good administration and the great goal to fulfill the overall well-off society in China.

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