

# **The Limitations of NGOs: a preliminary study of non-governmental social welfare organisations in China**

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## **Summary**

Based on case studies of NGOs in three cities, this paper discusses some of the common constraints on the ability of Chinese social welfare NGOs to perform both service delivery and advocacy functions at the present time. It shows that the effectiveness of NGOs is above all conditioned by their institutional environment. When the general level of social welfare provision in a country is low, it also sets a limit to what NGOs can achieve. Given the crucial importance of the institutional context to NGO performance, the paper concludes by arguing that unless the context is changed, NGO performance is unlikely to be drastically improved by capacity building programmes that only focus on these organisations themselves.

## **Introduction**

With the future direction of administrative reform captured in the slogan ‘small government, big society’ and the development of the social welfare system guided by the principle of ‘socialising social welfare’<sup>1</sup>, it has become fashionable to talk about the potentials of NGOs in delivering social welfare in both government and academic circles in China. Although there has been no shortage of speeches and articles setting out in somewhat grand terms the multiple functions which NGOs can perform, very few empirical studies have been carried out to see whether those high hopes can be realised in the current institutional setting and to find out what constraints are faced by NGOs in assuming a more significant role in a plural social welfare system.<sup>2</sup>

This paper attempts to address some of the constraints on the ability of Chinese social welfare NGOs to perform both service delivery and advocacy functions at present. It is mostly based on case studies of NGOs in Guangzhou, Beijing, and Shanghai that provide services to disabled children and their parents, but I have also drawn on my knowledge of organisations in other fields and localities. Researchers on Chinese NGOs often make careful distinctions between organisations with different degrees of autonomy and voluntariness. The mass and semi-official organisations are often created top-down and their main task is to perform various functions on behalf of the state.<sup>3</sup> The popular organisations, on the other hand, are born of private initiatives and exist primarily to respond to society’s needs or to represent its interests in a bottom-up fashion. The case studies for this paper consist mainly of popular organisations. The various constraints on these NGOs’ ability to serve the interests of their clients or members therefore highlight the current limit to popular participation in achieving better welfare for vulnerable groups in China.

## **The Context for the Development of Social Welfare NGOs**

This section briefly discusses some contextual factors which directly affect the ability of Chinese NGOs to deliver social services and advocate for enhanced welfare provision for their constituencies.

The Chinese welfare system for vulnerable and marginalised members of society is a residual system. The state only assumes direct responsibility when other institutional arrangements have failed. Even then, the provision tends to be narrow and minimal. To give just one example, according to the 1987 nation-wide sample survey of disabled people<sup>4</sup>, 99.85% of disabled children in China were supported by families or relatives, only 0.15% lived on financial support from the state or collectives (Wang and Wang, 1992:55-59).

Despite rapid development in recent years, there is still a conspicuous shortage of social services for various groups with special needs. In some areas, service remains non-existent. In 1987, only 55.2% of disabled children aged between 6 and 14 in China attended school, which accounted for 61.6% of the total number of disabled children who were judged to be able to attend school (ibid:133). When the famous Zhiling School, the first private school for mentally disabled children in mainland China, was founded in Guangzhou in 1985, there was not a single school, whether government-run or private, for such children in this city with a population of nearly seven million. Neither was the option of integrated education in normal schools available to mentally disabled children. Up to 1992, official statistics showed that only 18.13% of children with sight-related, hearing and speech-related, or mental disabilities in Guangzhou were able to attend school (Yao, 1999).

Many areas of social services are marked by the scant supply of specialists and professionally trained personnel. A good example is service for autistic children. An analysis of 500 cases from all over the country revealed that less than 2% of autistic children in China were diagnosed before the age of three, which means the loss of precious opportunities of early training and rehabilitation for many autistic children. Furthermore, many hospitals have no specialists who are able to diagnose autism, therefore about 95% of autistic children were only diagnosed after the parents had taken them to many different hospitals, often in many different cities. Since there are no specialised agencies which can provide professional advice, counselling, and training for parents of autistic children in most Chinese cities, even after their children are correctly diagnosed, many parents are unable to help the children to improve their condition. Very few autistic children are able to attend school. Even in special education schools for mentally disabled children, few teachers have been trained to teach autistic children (Tian, 1999).

One direction in which the socialisation of social welfare has proceeded is to open up state welfare institutions, which used to admit only people with no alternative means of support, such as elderly people with neither income nor families to rely on, to self-financed clients. State welfare homes tend to be much less cost-effective than private welfare homes. However, since state welfare homes are still heavily subsidised by the government, they are able to charge less from self-financing clients than private welfare homes, which results in unfair competition with non-government institutions.<sup>5</sup>

Another government strategy for socialising social welfare is to encourage all kinds of private investment in social services, whether profit-oriented or not. Consequently non-profit organisations have also had to compete with for-profit ones, some of which pay no regard to the quality of service but are able to charge less fees by using lower-grade facilities and hiring fewer staff, hence attracting some low-income clients. The existence of such institutions also puts pressure on NGOs which try to maintain certain basic standards.

Although these problems have been noted by government policy makers and some efforts are being made to address them, they are unlikely to disappear in the near future. Even assuming that further reform does not involve such difficult tasks as balancing conflicting goals and challenging vested interests, to improve the environment for NGOs the government will need at least to put in a new set of regulations on such issues as quality control and financial supervision and to develop the capacity to enforce them, which will take time to happen.

The traditional work unit based social security arrangement for the urban population saw a wide range of benefits, including pension, health care and housing, being offered exclusively to public-sector employees. Reform is currently underway to install a new system which extends social insurance coverage to people employed outside the public sector, but it is still at an early stage. Whereas private sector employers who are able to offer salaries several times higher than those offered by the public sector may be able to compete with the latter to some extent in recruiting skilled or talented people, NGOs are clearly in no position to join the competition at the moment.

### **Current government policies regarding NGOs**

All would-be NGOs are required to find a 'professional management unit' to act as their sponsoring agency first. Only after obtaining the approval of their sponsors can NGOs apply for registration with Civil Affairs Departments, which is mandatory. The sponsor must be an official agency above the county level or an organisation authorised by such an agency. It must also be 'relevant' to the activities proposed by the NGO, i.e., it must have responsibilities in the same field in which the NGO operates. Current regulations also stipulate that only one NGO of each kind may register at each administrative level. For example, if there is already an association of physically disabled people in Beijing, no new association of this kind will be allowed to register.

Although individual NGOs may have received subsidies, allocations, or donations from various government agencies on an ad hoc basis, there is not yet any institutionalised funding for NGOs from the government.

### **Private philanthropy**

The field of philanthropic activities has been dominated by state-backed funds or fundraising drives. The former include the China Youth Development Foundation (which runs the internationally well-known Project Hope), the China Charities Federation, and various provincial and municipal charity foundations, while a typical example of the latter is the nation-wide fundraising campaign after the flood in 1998. Since the state-backed initiatives are able to use all kinds of state-controlled resources and even official organisational systems to mobilise private donations, for example, by organising semi-compulsory donations through work units, they have considerably squeezed the charitable resources for NGOs.

Corporate rather than individual donations currently constitute the bulk of charitable giving. Various evidence suggests that corporate donors prefer to give their money to large state-backed funds instead of small NGOs. The reason is best summarised by the authors of a book on the fundraising strategies of the China Youth Development Foundation (CYDF): Businesses consider donations to CYDF a form of advertising which tends to be cheaper and more effective than commercial advertising. In the

words of a CYDF staff member: 'Our fundraising department has become an advertising agency.' (Sun et al, 1999:162). CYDF offers various publicity opportunities to corporate donors. A main task of its fundraising department is to organise donation ceremonies for its donors which are attended by top state officials and ensured coverage by major news media. This service has become so standardised that all a corporate donor needs to do is to sign a detailed agreement with CYDF which specifies the amount it is going to donate. Depending on the amount, CYDF promises to secure the presence of state officials of a certain rank at the ceremony and coverage of the event by a certain number of media units. Once an agreement has been signed, the corporate donor can leave everything to CYDF and just wait to hand over the cheque and have its representative shaking hands with state leaders in front of media cameras at the ceremony (ibid). Given what state-backed funds can offer corporate donors, it is not surprising that they appear to be far more attractive targets of charitable donations than pure NGOs.

Do the state-backed funds share the money they raise with NGOs? Although some NGOs have received funding from organisations such as the China Charities Federation, the practice, like government funding for NGOs, is not institutionalised. Furthermore, the majority of the funds raised by the state-backed funds are spent by themselves, which mostly go to projects not easily distinguishable from government activities and are usually implemented by the government.

### **Political culture and modes of popular participation**

The political institutions of a country shape the way its people participate in politics. It has been noted that in many aspects the political institutions in China favour individualised action over collective action. Whereas the institutional arrangements in many societies make it difficult for ordinary citizens to influence policies at the implementation stage, hence forcing them to pursue their interests by targeting the agenda setting or policy formulation stages of the policy process, the institutional design in China is such that the reverse is true. In China, policies are usually not formulated in a precise form and bureaucrats tend to have considerable leeway in interpreting and implementing policies according to local situations. As a result, it is much easier for citizens to pursue their interests by influencing policy implementation, which, compared to influencing agenda setting and policy formulation, puts less demand on group-based activities (Shi, 1997).

Collective actions are obviously not helped by the government's attitude, either. On the one hand, the government sends out clear messages that it does not like autonomous collective actions; on the other hand, it has defined the 'proper organisational channels' for citizens to pursue their legitimate private interests and encourages people to use these channels. Research finds that the officially sanctioned methods of interest articulation have been very successful in channelling people's participation and they have served to discourage collective actions and confrontational strategies (ibid).

In addition, the institutional design in China made the *work unit* the key institution in the distribution of resources. The state controlled most of the goods and services crucial to the daily lives of its citizens. These were allocated to work units and then distributed within them. People's primary strategy for pursuing their interests therefore involved competing with their colleagues in the same work unit for a larger share of a fixed amount of resources. This further thwarted group formation and group-based activities (ibid). Although market reform has significantly reduced people's dependence on their work units, the influence of the work unit system on the culture of participation may still linger.

Finally, as mentioned above, lower-echelon bureaucrats in China are given much discretionary power in implementing policies. Such an arrangement induces ordinary citizens to focus their energy on influencing individual officials rather than the policy-making process. This in turn encourages participants to pursue such strategies as developing patron-client ties with officials or using *guanxi* (personal connections) to get what they want, which may be more cost-effective than other strategies, e.g., engaging in confrontational political actions to pressure officials to meet their demands.

## **NGOs and Service Delivery**

Owing to the lack of stable funding from either government or private sources, most NGOs I studied have to charge for their services. Needless to say, this results in people who need the service but cannot afford it being excluded. Given that the

government currently does not provide any subsidy for people with special needs, e.g. disabled people<sup>6</sup>, even those who are able to pay for some services cannot afford high prices. As a result, most NGOs set the standard of their services at a very modest level in order to make them affordable to the average client. Since both the quality and range of services currently provided by fee-charging NGOs tend to be determined primarily by how much the average user in China is able to pay, the ability of these organisations to experiment with new ideas and develop innovative service models is seriously limited.

The same is also true of NGOs which do not charge fees but rely entirely on donations. Unless they have stable and abundant sources of funding, the amount of donations they raise is unlikely to support high-quality services. An illuminating example is a private orphanage in Wuhan which experimented with a new model of care. Before starting the orphanage, the founder visited both state-run children's welfare homes and SOS children's villages set up in China by the charity SOS-Kinderdorf International. The former were large institutions which deprived orphans of experience of normal family life. Although the latter are organised around small group homes, they only employ single women as house mothers, so the experience of family life they offer children is not entirely normal, either. In order to provide a better alternative for orphans, the founder of the Wuhan orphanage organised it into small group homes and recruited married couples to work as carers. Each couple was assigned a few orphans who came to live with them and their own children. The experiment failed because the modest allowance for each orphan which the orphanage was able to provide could only support a relatively frugal life. If their own children were to be treated in the same way as the orphans living with them, which was essential to the success of this care model, it would mean a considerable decrease in the living standard of their own children, which proved to be too difficult for the house parents to accept. After some time, the founder had to abandon the experiment and reorganised the orphanage along the line of state-run children's welfare homes, which seemed to be the cheapest way to care for a sizable number of children.<sup>7</sup>

While NGO accountability to their clients may be weak where the service is free, with fee-charging NGOs one would normally expect the clients to be in some position to demand that the service be delivered to their satisfaction. This does not seem to be the case at the moment. The reason is simple: as mentioned earlier, specialised



social service agencies are currently in very short supply. At places where one or two do exist, they are the only choices. To some people, any service is better than no service at all. The case of one family in Shanghai with an autistic child can serve to illustrate this situation. The mother of the child divorced her husband and abandoned the child. The father therefore has to care for the child on his own. He has a salary of around 1,400 yuan per month. The minimum living standard in Shanghai is currently set at around 300 yuan per person per month, which means this man is not qualified for financial assistance from the government. The man needs to work full-time in order to earn the salary to support himself and his son. Since it is too difficult to look after an autistic child all by himself while working full-time, he tried to find a residential home for the child. There are very few residential homes for mentally disabled children in Shanghai. He learned about a private home which was said to be good, but it charged over 1,000 yuan a month—obviously beyond the means of this man. With considerable efforts he finally obtained a place for his son in a private non-profit home whose price was affordable to him. However, its service was not very good and after some time the child's condition worsened. During my research I also interviewed a friend of this man who had visited the child at the residential home. She was shocked by its poor quality of care and wanted to make complaints to the management of the residential home. However, the father begged her not to do so. Even though it was far from ideal, obtaining a place in that home for his son had not been easy since it had a long waiting list. Besides, he had no other place to go.<sup>8</sup> This case is not unique. In other cities, I also encountered similar situations in which parents did not dare to complain about the services because they had no other option and they thought complaining might result in their children being discriminated against in the future.

In fact, in some places a perverse situation seems to have developed: instead of witnessing clients pushing NGOs to improve their services, one finds NGO managers criticising clients for obstructing their attempts to upgrade the services or hiring better-qualified staff. The comments of a veteran NGO leader in the field of service for mentally disabled children in Guangzhou sum up the situation very well:

Since private social services in mainland China do not receive funding from the government, the primary consideration of parents is the affordability of the services, not children's needs, which have not been put in the first place. In Hong Kong, parents play the role of spokesperson for the users of social services. They

monitor the performance of service agencies, but Guangzhou parents do not wish to play the role of watchdogs, because if they ask for better services, the cost will also rise (which will be born by themselves), so they don't raise such issues, and there can be no breakthrough in terms of user participation.<sup>9</sup>

Under present circumstances, where several service providers co-exist in one locality, instead of creating pressure on every provider to offer better service to users, the competition between them may actually be played out to the detriment of users' interest. This seems to be what happened in Guangzhou with regard to residential care service for mentally disabled people. The service was started by two NGOs. Later, when the 'socialisation of social welfare' policy encouraged private investment in social services, a couple of for-profit organisations were also set up. The investors were attracted to this field because apparently existing service could only accommodate a small proportion of the total need in Guangzhou, so they thought there was a big market out there to be occupied. What the investors of the for-profit organisations failed to realise was that many people who needed the service still could not afford it. The NGOs were charging between 580 and 750 yuan per month for service during weekdays. Another 240 to 400 yuan was charged for service on weekends.<sup>10</sup> On top of that, parents also needed to pay any medical cost which might arise. In 1998, the per capita disposable income of Guangzhou residents was only 938 yuan per month (*Guangzhou Yearbook*, 1999), which means the fees charged by the NGOs were already quite high relative to the income of the average Guangzhou family.

Not surprisingly, the for-profit organisations had an extremely hard time finding enough clients, even though their prices were only slightly higher than those of the NGOs. To attract clients, one for-profit organisation introduced a service called the lifelong care arrangement. The arrangement allows parents to pay a lump sum when they send their children to a residential home. The home then commits itself to take care of the children for as long as they live. Some parents want this kind of service because they worry about what may happen to their children once they themselves pass away, given that these children cannot live on their own and there is no guarantee that they will be well provided for by the state. In effect, the lifelong care arrangement offers clients insurance against an uncertain future. However, the insurance came with strings attached, for the for-profit organisation would not refund parents once they had paid the lump sum. Even if parents were dissatisfied with the

service later on they could not pull out, unless they were prepared to lose all the money they paid at the outset for lifelong care. In 1998, the lump sum charged by the for-profit organisation was 100,000 yuan<sup>11</sup>, a huge amount of money to an ordinary Chinese family.

What about clients who chose not to join the lifelong care scheme but to pay the fees on a monthly basis? The for-profit organisation also made it difficult for them to quit by charging a 'sponsorship fee' when they first signed up for its service. The sponsorship fee, which was also non-refundable, was set at 30,000 yuan in 1998<sup>12</sup>, again a huge amount which few families could afford to lose.

Obviously, the non-refundable charges seriously undermined users' rights of choice and exit and it allowed the service provider to keep its clients without offering good service, but the for-profit organisation succeeded in snatching away a few of the NGOs' clients with the lifelong care offer. Angered by such unfair competition, the NGO which was the main competitor of the for-profit organisation then decided to introduce non-refundable charges as well. Eventually this practice was also copied by other organisations. This case shows that when competition is still not well regulated, instead of increasing choices to users, it may actually curtail user choice, and the entry of for-profit organisations in a field of service dominated by NGOs may drag down rather than push up the standards of NGOs.

Because they cannot offer competitive salaries, let alone the kind of social security provisions which have largely remained the prerogative of public sector employees, NGOs are not able to attract many highly-trained or experienced people. Most NGOs in big cities such as Beijing and Guangzhou hire migrants from rural areas or small cities in less developed regions, or laid-off workers, who need to be trained on the job. Inevitably this affects the quality of their services. In all the cities where I have conducted research, well-off families choose not to use NGO service because they are not satisfied with the qualification of their staff. The difficulty in finding people who are willing to commit themselves to an organisation which offers little security and no prospect of a high-flying career or big earnings also made many founders of NGOs hire relatives or friends to work for them when they first started. Later, when they expanded and hired more people on the market, strife often broke out between those staff who had special connections to the managers and those who did not. At least in

some of the NGOs I studied, internal strife had seriously affected the moral of the staff, which in turn affected the performance of the organisations.

But the problem is not just NGOs' inability to offer attractive remuneration or career opportunities. As mentioned earlier, in many fields there are simply not enough professionally trained people. To use the example of service for mentally disabled children again, when the first NGO, the Zhiling School, was set up in Guangzhou to provide special education for these children, it was difficult to find any people trained in special education or care for mentally disabled children—hardly a surprise considering that there was not a single special education school in the city at the time. None of Zhiling's early staff had any previous training in working with mentally disabled children, but fortunately Zhiling's main donor in Hong Kong helped to train them. Over the years, many specialists in Hong Kong were invited to give instructions to Zhiling staff. Hong Kong social work students also came to Zhiling for placement every year. Later, some Zhiling staff left to found another NGO called Huiling, which also provides education and care for mentally disabled children, as well as adults. Today, veteran Zhiling and Huiling staff are considered experts in the field of service for mentally disabled children, so much so that they have been asked by the provincial Disabled Persons' Federation to train special education teachers from other agencies.<sup>13</sup>

When experienced employees are in short supply and they tend to be the veteran staff of the earliest organisations in a particular field, new comers in the field are often forced to 'steal' the staff of the existing organisations. In the places where more than one organisation exist in a single field, many old scores tend to have accumulated between the different organisations for taking away each other's staff, among other things. As one parent in Guangzhou remarked: 'There is a chasm between government and popular organisations, but there is also much animosity between the popular organisations.'<sup>14</sup> When organisations working on the same issues choose to 'grow old and die without having had any dealings with each other', as the Guangzhou parent put it, instead of working together, what implications does it have for their ability to advocate for the interests of their clients? This question leads me to the next section on NGO's efficacy in advocacy.

## **NGOs and Advocacy**

Not only do NGOs compete for each other's skilled staff, but they also compete for clients, funding, media attention, and favours parcelled out by government officials. This unfortunate situation does not augur well for NGO solidarity. In addition, the culture of participation in China also seems to work against NGO collective action. As explained earlier, the institutional design in China encourages individual actions aimed at persuading bureaucrats to use their discretionary power to the advantage of the parties engaging in those actions. At present the government has no clearly stipulated obligation to support NGOs, therefore they cannot demand any concrete assistance from the government by citing any regulation or policy. Meanwhile, a particular NGO can often obtain some individually negotiated favours from officials or government agencies if it enjoys good relationships with them or is skilled at soliciting their support. Consequently it makes more sense for individual NGOs to quietly cultivate good relationships with government officials in order to obtain particularistic favours than to work together with other NGOs to fight for universal rights and benefit. When a particular NGO has indeed received special favours from government officials, it is usually wise for it to keep it from other NGOs. Under such circumstances, the NGO is also likely to consider its own interests to be better served by forging close ties with the government rather than with other NGOs, and it is less likely to damage its good relations with the government by challenging any government policy or practice.

A few examples can serve to demonstrate this situation. A NGO in Guangzhou managed to get 100,000 yuan from a government fund in 1999. Its manager told some other NGOs about it. Afterwards she was reproached for being ungrateful by officials, who said: 'You should have kept quiet. Why did you have to let everybody know? What can we do if they all come here to ask for money?'<sup>15</sup> In Beijing, grapevine rumours suggest that a couple of NGOs have powerful patrons in the relevant government agencies. Each of them is identified by other NGOs as the protege of a particular government official. Other NGOs all have bitter tales to tell about how the patrons treated them unfairly in order to give advantage to their proteges. One NGO manager went to ask an official, who was said to be an old friend of the manager of her rival organisation, why his agency had given four times more money to the other NGO, which she considered to be poorly managed. She was told

that since her organisation was in a stronger position, more money should go to the weaker one.<sup>16</sup>

When NGOs working in the same field feud with each other, it also hinders collective actions by their members or clients. A few years ago, a NGO leader in one of the cities where I have conducted research asked the parents of children who received service from her organisation to take the lead in forming a parents' association in order to promote the rights of mentally disabled people. The plan was to bring together all the parents of mentally disabled children in that city under the association. However, it was frustrated by the long-standing friction between the NGOs from the very beginning. As the president of the association told me:

If we call our organisation the association of parents of X city, then we cannot just have parents linked to one organisation. However, since the association was formed at the suggestion of the leader of one NGO, others all identified us with this particular NGO. This rather limited our scope, so we decided that in order to avoid being identified with this NGO we should adopt a detached attitude and place ourselves above the concerns of individual organisations. However, this attitude offended the NGO leader who first proposed the association so she also started to give us the cold shoulder. Since other people were not showing much interest in us and this NGO leader also cold-shouldered us, we were left in an increasingly awkward position. So, after organising a few activities we did not want to carry on any more.<sup>17</sup>

Factionalism was not the only problem which had plagued the parents' association. Government policy on the registration of NGOs was another major obstacle it had encountered in striving to be an effective advocate for the interests of its members. Since the Disabled Persons' Federation, a semi-official organisation, already exists in every city, other organisations which aim to represent the interests of disabled people are unlikely to be allowed to register. In any case, the parents' association could not persuade any government agency to agree to act as its sponsor, therefore it could not register itself and remained strictly speaking an illegal organisation. Although the government did not take any action against it, its lack of a legitimate status further dampened the enthusiasm of its members. As the president said: 'Every time we want to organise a meeting or send out a notice to our members, we cannot just go

ahead with it. We have to do it through the disabled person's federation. They said to us: 'You are illegal.' So there is a big unresolved problem there for us.'<sup>18</sup>

In another city, some parents of autistic children organised regular activities amongst themselves for years. They called themselves a 'club' although it appeared to be a full-blown formal organisation in every respect. For example, the members elected an executive council once every four years and they paid annual membership fees which were used to publish a newsletter, among other things. The club organised a wide range of activities, e.g., inviting specialists from other cities to give training and lectures to its members; conducting surveys of the needs of families with autistic children; drawing media attention to the lack of social service for autistic children. In fact, it was the best-organised grassroots autonomous organisation I had ever come across in China. Since 1996, the club had been trying to register as an independent organisation. Obviously it had not been easy for it to gain approval from the government. When representatives of the club first went to see government officials, they were considered troublemakers and were refused a reception. However, with perseverance and the right tactics the club eventually gained the sympathy of relevant government officials. In 1998, the Civil Affairs Bureau of the city finally decided to allow the club to register. However, before the registration went ahead, the *Falun Gong* incident<sup>19</sup> took place. Afterwards the registration of new popular organisations was frozen and the club was told by civil affairs officials that no new organisation of its kind would be approved in the next 5 to 10 years.<sup>20</sup>

With the campaign to straighten out social organisations underway after the *Falun Gong* incident, the members of the club were afraid of carrying on their activities without a legitimate status, therefore the club was left with one choice, i.e., to become the 'subsidiary' of a registered organisation. The city has a semi-official organisation called the Mental Health Association. Its leaders agreed to let the parents' club 'hang under' it. However, there were serious concerns among the parents that once the club became a subsidiary organisation of the Mental Health Association, it would lose its autonomy, and its freedom to organise activities would be restricted. The fear seemed to be well-founded. As one parent related to me:

Last time we met with the secretary general of the Association he said: 'In the past some parents insisted on remaining independent. They were going too far.' Then I mentioned that we wanted to invite certain experts from other cities to

come here to give us some training. The secretary general immediately reacted by saying: 'Once you have joined our association, we will take care of these things. You parents can just sit back and act as our advisers.'<sup>21</sup>

Members of the club split up into two camps: those who favoured affiliation with the Mental Health Association, because this seemed to be the only legitimate means for them to continue working for the interests of autistic children and their families; and those who were against affiliation with the association, thinking that they could only carry out effective advocacy by being an independent organisation. Eventually those parents who favoured affiliation with the association joined it as individual members of its newly-formed Youth and Children Branch. The rest of the parents, a minority, became 'dispersed', and the club ceased operation. The parents who joined the association had hoped that some of them would be allowed to serve on the executive council of the Youth and Children Branch, so that they would have some influence on its decision-making, but it turned out that the association did not reserve a single place on the council for them. When I spoke to a couple of the parents who joined the association four months afterwards, they remained disappointed about the benefit of the new arrangement.<sup>22</sup>

The collapse of the parents' club shows how NGO's advocacy function can be seriously restricted by current government regulations, but there are also other factors which prevent bottom-up NGOs from becoming effective advocates for their members. One major obstacle seems to be the prevalent pessimism (or realism) among ordinary people about what they can achieve with their actions. In my interviews with parent leaders and NGO managers, many of them stressed that NGOs should not set unrealistic goals for themselves and should be sympathetic to the government's position. For example:

When so many able-bodied people have been laid off, how can we realistically expect the government to give subsidies to families with disabled people, or find disabled people jobs? My brother lives in New Zealand. I have heard from him that in New Zealand the government takes care of everything for disabled children. There are special provisions for them so they receive more benefits than normal children. If we want China to do the same, I am not even sure if it can be achieved 50 years from now, so I don't blame the government. There is no point in pressuring it to do what it is incapable of doing.<sup>23</sup>



I have said on various occasions that the economy of our country has not developed to a stage when we can expect the government alone to pay for the care of our disabled children, so let individuals, families, and society all contribute to it. I always say to other parents that we should face the reality and should not shout abuses in public whenever we are dissatisfied with things.<sup>24</sup>

Government officials are not really unsympathetic to our cause, so I have much understanding for them. For example, I ran into a retired director of the Education Bureau and he said to me: 'Don't blame me for refusing to support you in the past. We really did not have enough money. You should have seen the condition of normal schools. When normal schools were still seriously under-funded, where could we find the resources for special education schools?' So I said to him: 'Yes, I understand.'<sup>25</sup>

Even if they are not totally pessimistic about their ability to make a difference, most people want quick solutions to their problems and are impatient to wait for advocacy activities to change government policies or popular attitudes. Most revealing is the remark of a participant at a group discussion during a national conference of parents of mentally disabled children. The remark was made in response to another participant's suggestion that they contact representatives to the People's Congress to ask them to introduce new legislation concerning social service provision for disabled children:

It is too slow a remedy to be of any help. Even if we can make the People's Congress adopt new legislation to provide social services for disabled children, it may take five years for it to happen, but we cannot wait that long. By then our children will have become grown-ups. So let us focus on practical issues instead.<sup>26</sup>

The scepticism about what can be achieved plus preoccupation with immediate needs make many people reluctant to devote time and energy to any activity which does not promise quick results or concrete benefit to themselves. This is another factor which explains why the association of parents of mentally disabled people mentioned above has not being an effective advocacy organisation. As the president said: 'The Chinese people are very practical. They only make investments when they are assured of returns. If there is going to be a 50% gain, people will give you 50%

support, otherwise they give you nothing. Because there was no concrete benefit, parents were not keen on the association.<sup>27</sup>

In another case, a British couple, both specialists in education and rehabilitation for mentally disabled children, founded an organisation called Guangdong Special Children Parent Club in Guangzhou. The British couple obtained external funding to set up a resource centre for parents of mentally disabled children. The centre employs both administrative and professional staff. The latter provide professional consultation and assessment services for parents. The club's 100 or so members include parents of autistic children as well as parents of children with other types of mental disability, e.g., Down Syndrome and cerebral palsy. Although the club is intended to bring families in similar situations together so that they can join forces in 'improving public perceptions, awareness and attitudes toward children with disabilities'<sup>28</sup>, instead of pulling together, it seems that the members of the club have formed informal subgroups which quarrel with each other over the use of the club's resources. The preoccupation with immediate needs as opposed to long-term goals drew parents of children with the same type of disability together. For example, parents of autistic children organised activities specifically targeting autism using the resources of the club. Other parents were disgruntled because they felt those families got more out of the public resources of the club than they did. Parents of autistic children remained unrepentant, saying that the resources of the club were for everybody, so if other parents did not know how to make good use of the resources it was their problem. Meanwhile they also started to organise activities amongst themselves outside the club to avoid squabbles with other parents, which further weakened the sense of unity among members of the club.<sup>29</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I have focused on some of the problems that prevent NGOs from acting as high-quality service providers and effective advocates for their constituencies. This is not to deny the positive contributions which NGOs have already made towards meeting the social welfare needs of vulnerable groups in society and raising general awareness of their conditions. Most of the problems mentioned here are actually not internal problems of NGOs, but external constraints that prevent NGOs from realising their full potentials.

Nevertheless, my case studies suggest that the strength of NGOs either as service providers or as advocates for disadvantaged people cannot be automatically assumed but must be empirically proved. The effectiveness of NGOs is inevitably conditioned by their institutional environment. In a country where the general level of social welfare provision is still very low and where private philanthropy is still underdeveloped, it may simply not be possible for NGOs to supply high quality social services in a sustainable way, at least not on any meaningful scale. In fact, it might be argued that NGOs should not even aim at providing its clients with a level of care and support that is beyond what is available to other members of the society, as it would prevent NGOs from gaining broad social support for their work.

I hope my case studies have also helped to show that most of the problems currently faced by Chinese NGOs have no quick or easy solutions. At the moment capacity building for Chinese NGOs is high on the agenda of many donor agencies. Partly as a result of donor interest, many organisations and individuals have been busy organising training programmes for Chinese NGOs. However, the problems afflicting these NGOs cannot simply be removed by, say, teaching them some fund-raising techniques, or telling them the importance of working together with other NGOs. The situation is far more complicated, and to help NGOs to assume more responsibility in the reforming social welfare system we may have to look beyond the NGOs themselves and direct our efforts at improving the general context for the development of these organisations.

## Notes

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1. The main objective of the government's 'socialising social welfare' policy is to mobilize societal resources, such as those of local communities, businesses, families, and individual citizens, to augment the resources of the state for social welfare. Some researchers have pointed out that in essence it is a drive to privatise social welfare (Wong, 1998).

2. The few studies which I am aware of include the evaluation of Hetong Old People's Home in Tianjin and Luoshan Community Service Centre in Shanghai by scholars from the Social Policy Research Centre under the Institute of Sociology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and a couple of case studies of social welfare NGOs conducted by the NGO Research Centre at Tsinghua University.

3. Obviously this does not mean they cannot perform some useful functions for their target groups at the same time.

4. No other national survey has been conducted since then, therefore data from the 1987 survey remain the most up-to-date comprehensive statistical data on disabled people in China.

5. For a detailed example see Yang (1999).

6. Urban residents whose incomes are below the official minimum living standard line can receive financial assistance from the government, but the amount of aid can only ensure the subsistence of the recipient and is insufficient to cover any additional goods or services.

7. Interview, 22 July 2000.

8. Interview, 26 March 2000.

9. Interview, 19 March 2000.

10. Based on information supplied by the organisations themselves, including information found in their brochures and newsletters. I have also checked these figures with the clients of the organisations.

11. The figure is from an information sheet produced by the organisation for prospective clients.

12. From the same information sheet of the organisation.

13. Interviews with Huiling and Zhiling staff and an official from the provincial Disabled Persons' Federation on 16 May 2000.

14. Interview, 28 March 2000.

15. Interview, 23 March 2000.

16. Interview, 23 March 2000.

17. Interview, 28 March 2000.

18. Interview, 28 March 2000.

19. *Falun Gong* is a *Qigong* (traditional breathing and meditation exercises) related sect that took the government by surprise when 10,000 of its followers surrounded the headquarters of the state apparatus in central Beijing for 13 hours on April 25, 1999, after some criticism of the organisation was aired in the media. The government subsequently launched a nationwide crackdown on *Falun Gong* and eventually banned it as 'an evil cult'. The *Falun Gong* incident reminded the government that it had not maintained effective control over the activities of non-government organisations, so it took steps to tighten its registration and supervision of NGOs all over the country after the incident.

20. Interview, 25 March 2000.

21. Interview, 27 March 2000.

22. Interview, 16 July 2000.

23. Interview, 28 March 2000.

24. Interview, 17 May 2000.

25. Interview, 22 May 2000.

26. Interview, 28 March 2000.

27. From the mission statement of the club.

28. Interviews, 25 and 26 March 2000.

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