

“Faith-Based Organizations: Invisible Partners in Developing Chinese Society”

Oral Presentation

by

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In my presentation today, I will highlight the growing importance of faith-based NPOs (nonprofits) in China, both domestic and foreign, in shaping a rapidly changing society. For both Chinese and American observers of China, this has been a relatively “invisible” factor, despite its importance. For the sake of our discussion, I need to first clarify the definitions of the two terms “faith-based” and “religious” organizations. The more visible organized religious groups promote the traditional activities of worship and prayer, religious sacraments, the teaching of the laity and training of clergy, proselytizing and publication of sacred texts and other religious materials. In China, such work is supposed to be carried out only within the “religious sector.” It is considered the rightful domain of party and government authorities assigned to set religious policy and supervise “religious work,” which is to be implemented only by authorized religious authorities for Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism. Any involvement in religious work by foreign counterpart religious organizations – such as churches, temples or mission agencies – must be approved by religious authorities at the provincial level or above. Of course, there is much religious activity in China by unregistered and therefore “illegal” groups, many of which suffer repression; in fact, their members compose by far the majority of Protestants and their unofficial ties with foreign counterparts are expanding.

Faith-based social organizations, by contrast, are those nonprofit associations that have faith-based motivations, hiring policies, and funding sources, but that do not do “religious work” narrowly defined, but offer social services in other sectors such as education, health, or charitable work – under the supervision of education, health or civil affairs authorities, respectively. Of course, such organizations of any significant size must be affiliated with government agencies under the hierarchical and intrusive dual management system that pervades China’s residual Leninist political-social structure. So it makes more sense to call them NPOs (nonprofits) than NGOs (non-governmental organizations). Just like other Chinese NPOs, some faith-based organizations may even be registered in the business or academic sectors, but actually operate as nonprofit service organizations, and a multitude of small local operations are not registered at all.

Yet while I will move on to focus on these faith-based NPOs working in the non-religious sectors, I would make the point in passing that many specialists studying civil society would consider that the rapid development of both types of faith organizations are contributing to the growth of civil society in China. They are voluntary associations operating at the grass-roots or popular level of society; many are national or at least intra-provincial in scope; and there is growing autonomy of operation. Whether through

worship and prayer or through charity, they are providing China with new sources of social capital – ideas, values and networks that help people work together on a voluntary basis for mutual assistance.

Examples of Domestic Faith-based Work

The Amity Foundation was one of a handful of pioneer GONGOs (government-organized NGOs). Since the early 1980s Amity has been a channel for outside funding and services from mainline Protestant religious organizations in Europe, North America and Hong Kong. Amity is closely associated with the China Christian Council, which spawned its activities, but has often been viewed wrongly by researchers as independent of the government. In fact, it is registered directly with the Party's United Front Department. At first, Amity focused on English teaching and operated only in eastern China, but it now also has departments for rural development, social welfare, medical and health work focused on southwest China. It has spawned smaller NGOs as well as church-based social service projects. Amity is highly respected by others in China's Third Sector for the quality of its work and well-trained staff, and some view it jealously as China's "richest NGO," with a stable base of support, overseas offices for fundraising, and a budget in 2002 of \$7,500,000.

The YMCA/YWCA in China, headquartered in Shanghai, is a state-run NPO with a long pre-1949 history. After a slow recovery in the 1980s, it has revived operations in over ten cities. The Shanghai branch has been assigned to manage a pioneering multi-functional community center in Pudong to provide better services than those available from the government street offices.

Other official religious organizations have followed these examples, but only quite recently. The first domestic Catholic NGO – the Beifang Jinde Social Service Center in Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province – was established in 1998.

Growing numbers of smaller-scale local social service agencies have grown spontaneously out of local congregations or religious associations. One interesting example is the Signpost Youth Club affiliated with Ningbo's Catholic diocese in Zhejiang Province. A "virtual" club, it uses the Internet to promote spiritual formation for younger Catholics (ages 18-30) working and studying in different parts of the province.

Another example of a registered but independent faith-based organization is the Holy Love Foundation in Chengdu. A young couple, taking pity on idle handicapped youth unable to attend school, registered the foundation in 1992 under a business sponsor. They raised funds to refurbish an old warehouse into a boarding school. Board members include a government representative from the bureau of civil affairs, which takes up to 1% of donations. The school has survived several crises with bureaucrats and developers due to the support and influence of grateful parents and local popularity from winning Special Olympics events.

Domestic Buddhist, Taoist and Islamic humanitarian work appears to have grown in tandem with domestic and foreign pilgrimages to special holy sites. As famous monasteries or mosques were refurbished and ties with foreign co-religionists reestablished, the tourist industry generated funds whereby the largest and wealthiest sites were able to institutionalize local activities from small-scale welfare projects to universities and hospitals.

The government response to such grass-roots developments – as with many reforms – has been to grant legitimacy *ex post facto* in order to seek access to these resources. For example, the official Protestant organization has just set up a new Social Service Department to both encourage and "provide guidance" for such local initiatives. The Department's director mentioned the need to generate domestic funds, such

as from “rich churches in coastal areas” and cited as an example a “Light and Salt Christian Fellowship” of business people in Wenzhou, Zhejiang, that has provided flood relief and community service.

Examples of International Faith-based Organizations

Most foreign denominational organizations and religious groups, do humanitarian work in partnership with official faith-based counterparts. For example, the Islamic Development Bank, beginning as early as 1986, began funding projects such as schools in partnership with provincial or city Islamic Associations. But many nondenominational but faith-based agencies partner directly with government officials in the non-religious sector responsible for the type of project concerned. For example, thousands of teachers of English or professional skills have been sent by faith-based but not “religious” organizations working jointly with the Foreign Experts Bureau and state educational organs. One international institute with expertise in linguistics affiliates with state institutions responsible for minority nationalities. At several grass-roots locations, they help sponsor dual language schools.

Disaster Relief and Poverty Alleviation. Many humanitarian INGOs (international NGOs) got their start in China by providing relief to areas struck by disaster in the late 1990s, and they have since expanded their work in the poor interior areas. The Salvation Army and World Vision International are among the largest INGOs involved in relief and anti-poverty work. World Vision, for example, has developed a wide variety of programs such as helping orphans with school fees. Their Candlelight Project with the China Charities Federation – to support and advocate for poor rural school teachers – was the brainstorm of a Chinese researcher living in the U.S. who wanted to help friends back in a rural area where they had been sent to teach as “rusticated youth” during the Cultural Revolution. The ecumenical United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia has focused on enhancing education for women and ethnic minorities in more isolated tertiary institutions.

The Western China Development Program. Responding to the government’s encouraging of international participation in anti-poverty and development work in northwest and southwest China, which is home to most of China’s poor ethnic minorities, faith-based INGOs have expanded support for micro-loan projects and holistic community development projects. Significant work in poor Muslim and Tibetan villages in the destitute drought-ridden corridor linking Gansu, Inner Mongolia and Qinghai, for example, includes healthcare, water and sanitation projects, and micro-credit loans from groups as diverse as the Korean Buddhist Association, Islamic Relief, and the Christian Broadcasting Network’s China division. Work among Tibetans in provincial areas formerly part of the Kingdom of Tibet has been significant. ROKPA, a Tibetan Buddhist NGO in Switzerland, for example, is partnering with local government officials to support work with orphans, education, medical care and environmental protection.

In Kunming, Project Grace is home base for several hundred expatriates working with the Poverty Alleviation Office on training and empowering local people in education, health, agricultural extension work, rehabilitation of the handicapped or leprosy-affected, and AIDS prevention. In the year 2000, Project Grace received a China Friendship Award of appreciation from the national government for its work.

The Domestic and Foreign Faith-based Nexus

The pioneers who began humanitarian work in China in the early 1980s were primarily Christian humanitarian INGOs working out of Hong Kong, such as the Jianhua Foundation, CEDAR Fund and Caritas. Both Hong Kong and Taiwan’s vibrant nonprofit sectors have been an inspiring model for much of China’s social development, and the financial, intellectual, and technical resources of the global overseas Chinese networks have provided much support.

This more recent “boom” in INGO-NGO work at the grass-roots level is in part a product of the rapidly-changing culture of international development agencies – from mega-projects wherein UN agencies or the World Bank fund local government work to more customized and smaller-scale local projects involving INGOs and local community organizations in design and implementation. And the revival of former missionary ties at the grass-roots level has prompted more positive attitudes toward religion in general. Localized efforts have been developed by expatriates responding to warm welcomes to their return to areas where grandparents or parents had served as missionaries. Examples include the Shanxi Evergreen Family Friendship Services, a consultancy involved in everything from village teacher and doctor training to water conservancy projects, and Gansu Inc., a U.S. nonprofit that brings ophthalmologists to teach and perform cataract surgery for poor villagers, choosing a different county hospital base each summer. Recently, officials in a central Chinese city celebrated the centennial of its school system and its local church, inviting alums to visit impressive new buildings for both the school and church. Honor was given to the “old values and goals” from the fifty years of mission work that formed the base for today. PLAN International, which spends \$2 million per year in China, has received a twenty-year grant from the family of a 1930s missionary in Shaanxi to fund health screenings, awareness, and treatment.

The work of international organizations in the field has not been unnoticed by Chinese officials, and the modeling effect has inspired local officials to allow more direct cooperation between international and domestic NGOs, including faith-based groups, and to become more committed to getting projects done with efficiency and accountability. Currently, officials of the national China NPO Network are working in conjunction with U.S.-based Maclellan Foundation to provide training to Chinese NPO CEOs and staff in the area of accountability.

A Dynamic Trend that will Continue

While the work of faith-based NPOs in China is relatively recent (undergoing rapid expansion since 1997-98) and still quite sensitive and difficult compared with other sectors, the work will increase, and there will be no stopping the revival of traditional faith-based humanitarian work in non-religious sectors or the development of business for the support of both religious and humanitarian work. This will only be the beginning of other kinds of influence in society including in academia and the media.

The breakdown of state-provided social services stemming from the demise of the social structure centered on state work units (*danwei*) and communes has resulted in an uncoordinated two-pronged effort to fill the vacuum. The government is promoting top-down development of new types of GONGOS, including official religious NGOs, to provide services to maintain social stability and to provide jobs for state employees laid off with downsizing. But at the same time there is a spontaneous bottom-up development of more autonomous community mutual-aid and self-help NPOs to take care of needs the state no longer is meeting.

These trends feed each other: spontaneous grass-roots organizing prompts state adaptation to maintain dominance if not monopoly control over society; in turn, state endorsement of NGO activity provides more room for unauthorized groups to press the envelope.

These trends will accelerate in the next few years as the government carries out plans to further privatize many social service institutions – including schools and hospitals, all of which until recently were solely state-owned. The recent session of the National People’s Congress was replete with vague references to the “social forces” (*shehui lilian*) that should be mobilized to fill the gap in social service provision. Just as the 1990s witnessed the *de facto* privatization of thousands of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) through bankruptcy, this decade will witness the privatization of thousands of SOIs (state-owned institutions), which are also bankrupt, both financially and often morally as well.

Policy Implications

1. The most obvious implication for U.S. policy-makers is to pay attention – to the complex changes underway in grass-roots society of a spiritual as well as secular nature, and to the importance of our bilateral social and cultural relations, not just political and economic relations. Social and moral problems are China’s Achilles heel, and the ability to handle these problems is of tremendous importance both to the U.S. and to global economics and security. So I commend this commission for delving into the complexities of grass-roots society in China. Decision-makers planning for interchange with China need to listen to Americans already involved on the ground. This factor was missing, for example, in the highly unrealistic debate over the Most Favored Nation-Permanent Normal Trade Relations (MFN-PNTR) status for China a few years back. Recommendations for trade sanctions in response to Chinese human rights abuses came mainly from human rights NGOs and religious lobbyists who lacked experience in China, while counter suggestions from nonpolitical NGOs based in China more in tune with Chinese popular views were ignored. For example, the near-majority opinion of Chinese Christians, registered and unregistered, was both a desire for publicity for human rights abuses and support for MFN-PNTR status to keep China’s door open to resources of all kinds – including for business startups to become self-supporting – that could give them more autonomy from the state. The false depiction of a clash between moralists who care about human rights and greedy businesses which care only for profits does not serve U.S. or Chinese interests. These interests are much more complex in nature – involving social and cultural ties, not just political or economic relations, and U.S. policy needs to take that into account.

2. Secondly, do no harm. The role of the U.S. federal government is properly limited and indirect in promoting social and cultural change in China. At this fundamental level, change does not come overnight but is a long-term and internally-driven process. State and city governments – in cooperation with their business, religious and civic organizations – may play an increasing role as authority in China shifts to the provincial level. Nongovernmental organizations and the private sector – through corporate social responsibility programs – will be the main outside agents of change.

3. I would recommend that the Commission check to see whether there is a “level playing field” in the use of taxpayers’ money for the support of civil society, rule of law, or democratization in China. There may be inadvertent exclusion or discrimination in programming to the detriment of faith-based U.S. NGOs that might, for example, support Chinese faith-based NGOs or the development of religious freedom legislation. My own understanding is that programming so far is highly secular in nature. For example, pioneering conferences on the nonprofit sector, funded by American institutions, have included scant references to or involvement by faith-based organizations. A Chinese friend of mine who participated in a study tour focused on civil society in America was shocked when not a single visit or lecture touched on the role of religious organizations in U.S. society.

In these U.S.-funded conferences and projects in China it seems that faith-based work and opportunities are simply off the mental radar screen of Chinese and American organizers and sponsors, despite the central role of faith-based organizations in our own civil society. Yet the power of modeling inclusion in and of itself could promote positive change in Chinese thinking and behavior toward religious organizations. It is impossible to have a correct understanding of the history and development of the global nonprofit sector without full consideration of its faith-based actors. Moreover, democratic political reform in Asia, Africa and Latin America has been based on development of a civil society involving complex interaction between educated elites with grass-roots religious organizations. They often are the catalysts behind modern nationwide voluntary associations that transcend traditional ties of kinship and local community.