

# CHINA'S SOCIAL SECTOR AND THE EMERGENCE OF GONGOS

*Backgrounder 06*



**GONGOS**

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## Summary

- In China's communist regime, social organizations exist to serve at the discretion of one party that rules over the state apparatuses in the country. This approach of integrating civil societies within the state's dynamics is widely known as the state-led approach of social organizations, more generally finding their inception in authoritative regimes and contrary to the western understanding of Civil Societies.
- These Government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs), receive a majority of their funding from state-owned enterprises as well as the Chinese state, thus further complicating the distinction between non-state and state actors in China's political dynamics.
- Many of China's self-grown GONGOs have also gone global by setting up bases in Africa and South Asia; working primarily in countries with large-scale ongoing infrastructural projects funded by the Chinese entities.
- Party Secretaries and other senior members of important GONGOs are granted membership in the CPC's Central Committees, signifying the important role GONGOs play in China's political dynamics.
- China's GONGOs are a contemporary example of how Beijing views the global future dominated by a form of Chinese statecraft and how it has very little to do with western democratic values, thus, also signifying the Chinese state's perspective of GONGOs as an essential medium of export to nations that are vital for China's domestic and international interests.

## Introduction

Civil societies in China's modern history, have mostly remained unnoticed, if not absent. Non-governmental organizations in present-day China, are not defined in the conventional ways that an NGOs in the Western world are understood to be. Rather, in China's communist regime, these special organizations exist to serve at the discretion of the one party that rules over the state apparatuses in the country. This approach of

integrating civil societies within the state's dynamics is widely known as the state-led approach of social organizations, more generally finding their inception in authoritative regimes.

In the conventional understanding, civil societies and non-profit organizations serve to fulfil certain specific purposes; whether it advances the parent nation's goals and objectives or not, depends on the organization's purpose and motive of operations. An NGO thus can also be viewed as an 'agent of export' in foreign nations, attempting to further the parent country's objectives through soft power tactics. Yet, at the crux of the organizations' purpose, is the need to enhance the lives of those who suffer due to socio-economic instabilities. Generally, in the traditional understanding, a civil society is also seen as an entity that fulfils the scope left unattended by the state in terms of its functioning. In that sense, traditionally defined NGOs serve as an essential filler in societies that seek to balance governmental institutions. These organizations hence, when operating over the span of decades, establish themselves as essential international institutions that are enabled to drive an impactful change in the long run.

According to the western perspective, civil societies emerged during the Enlightenment era in Europe, with the objective of upholding citizens' interests and providing a platform for the same. The role of social organizations was elevated to an important position in the 1980s when they primarily began promoting democratic rights and sought institutional changes in authoritative regimes. Hence the traditional view of social institutions was as a mechanism that catered to represent and articulate the political, economic and social interests of citizens.

## Role of Social Organizations in modern-day China

However, in China, these conventional definitions of an NGO are quite different from how the Communist Party of China views civil organizations. NGOs in China are invariably linked to the CPC and are heavily politicized in terms of their aims and objectives. Therefore, these Non-profit Organizations in China are

categorized as Government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) which are facilitated and funded by the Chinese state. GONGOs in Chinese society is generally understood to be a social institution that stands somewhere in between a governmental agency and an NGO. The name GONGO hence is precisely derived from China's internal functioning and its domestic restrictions on civil autonomy.

The state-led model of civil society in China, thus, is deeply rooted in its political and cultural system of functioning where the boundaries between the state and individual are frail. This in a way is also indicative of the Chinese state apparatus's adaptive nature in inculcating GONGOs as part of its arms to channel the diverse demands of society. However, this has also presented the CPC to further cement its own legitimacy by catering to domestic needs that may not have found voice through solely the political party's agency. Hence, China's social organizational structure has developed and functioned under an authoritarian enclosure; these institutes have differencing objectives and characteristics that their western counterparts and are technically not meant to act as a balancing measure to the state as a whole but are supplementary to the state's actions itself. These civil societies in China's domestic realms maintain closer ties with the state apparatus and aide in narrowing socio-economic gaps all the while furthering the CPC's interest both internally and in the international arenas.

Various academics have empirically argued that the western understanding of civil societies as an entity that challenges the state is perhaps an opaque view of how such organisations function in China. GONGOs are rather an organic part of the governing body and are interconnected in the large web of the Chinese state led by the Communist Party of China. While a contrary view on the same also states that GONGOs are strategically established for specific purposes, where they act as service delivery agencies for the state apparatus while also easing short-term socio-economic as well as environmental concerns. The presumption that China's social sector is facilitated under the ambit

of the state remains validated in the objectives these organizations fulfil in China, which in a sense is different from how conventional social organizations are seen in the rest of the world.

The GONGOs, on their part, receive a majority of their funding from state-owned enterprises as well as the Chinese state, thus further complicating the distinction between non-state and state actors in China's political dynamics. While a range of historical and cultural factors have played a part in the inception of such government-organized NGOs, their penultimate formation has majorly come after China's Cultural Revolution and is a direct by-product of the economic reforms in the country.

### **A Brief History of the Emergence of GONGOs in China**

Prior to the cultural revolution that forever changed the landscape of Chinese history, in and around the 1950s, the civil society in China comprised of three major distinctions. The first sphere constituted of the private organization mostly comprising of academics and professionals, the second dimension majorly constituted of camaraderie associations established for the purpose of promoting trade and cultural exchanges; while the third dimension composed of traditional civil organizations, which closely resemble the contemporary form in which one views modern civil societies. However, it was post the Socialist reform era in China's recent history that consolidated all these distinctive organizations and brought them under the ambit of the CPC for the purpose of transforming them into modern-day GONGOs.

From 1949 to 1978, China maintained very little interaction with international organizations, yet, most of it changed during Deng Xiaoping's reform era which expedited China's global outreach. The CPC in the Deng era began enhancing its engagements with international communities and organizations to permit them in assisting in China's developmental goals. Soon after, many international non-governmental organizations began setting up their bases in mainland

China, ushering into a modernized Chinese global outlook. The opening up of the Chinese economy also had its effects on the civil society sector in China, organization began to facilitate in sectors where the Chinese state was unable to focus upon, leading people to form their own associations in order to collectively tackle the deep-rooted structural issues. GONGOs in the 1980's began to forge partnerships with international organization and thereby fast-tracked the already emerging social sector in China. By the 1990's, local grass rooted organization began emerging in the sector and peddled their way into the booming industry. All throughout these defining, the CPC maintained their firm grip on the institutionalization of local social groups and initiated funds for the progress of the entities into a market that was generally dominated by western institutions. This in effect, laid the ground for the GONGOs to initiate its far-reaching presence not only in China but also all across the world in the decades that were to follow ahead.

Since the late 1980's, the number of Chinese social organizations have significantly risen in manifolds. From only around 4500 organizations in 1988, the number has increased to somewhere around 700,000 organizations, with an estimated 3 million unregistered organizations functioning as well. Most GONGOs in China enjoy some form of affiliation with the CPC, though not all are legally registered as GONGOs. Many of them are either registered as social organizations (Shehui Tuanti) or are affiliated units (Guakao Danwei) with the Ministry of Civil Affairs. Although, many other unregistered social organizations function under the same slab but within different structures such as public course units (Shiye Danwei), semi-affiliated units (Guapai Danwei) and double-governed units (Shuangchong Guanli Danwei). Many GONGOs in China play a vital role in facilitating of social welfare schemes as well as lobbying for varied factions within the CPC; the All-China Women's Federation, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese, China Writers Association, China Association for Science and Technology, China Federation of Literary and Art Circles are amongst the well-established units

that have played a pivotal role in China's modern history with similar objectives. This is further strengthened by the membership the Party Secretaries of important GONGOs are granted in the CPC's Central Committees, signifying the important role GONGOs play in China's political dynamics.

### **China's GONGOs going Global**

Many of China's self-grown GONGO's have also gone global by setting up bases in Africa and South Asia in particular. These organizations have been found to be working primarily in countries with large-scale ongoing infrastructural projects funded by the Chinese entities. In such cases, Chinese companies are becoming the biggest financers of GONGOs operating abroad, while also providing an alternative channel for financial stability of Chinese social organizations overseas. However, these investments or corporate social responsibility (CSR) aide are commercial procedures for enhancing China's sphere of influence in African nations. At present there are no official stats for how many GONGOs operate in the African continent but estimates state that over a 100 have established their footprints in different African countries over the years. These social organizations generally operate in regions that withhold China's commercial interests enabling them to integrate into the infrastructure established by Chinese firms. These GONGOs relatively operate in domains of welfare enhancement, healthcare, environment, agriculture, education and poverty elevation programs. For example, Chinese organizations like Project Hope for Africa initiated by the World Eminence Chinese Business Association, The Red Cross Society of China, Foundation of the Chinese Communist Youth League, International Development Department of China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation, The Chinese-African People's Friendship Association, Chinese Medical Association, China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, Volunteers Working Committee of the China Association of Social Workers are amongst some of the more prominent social organization functioning in Africa. Domestic political issues in host nations however have been a no-go zone

for such Chinese institutions unlike their western counterparts who seem to uphold certain basic political and human rights values in host nations, they operate within.

Yet the political nature of Chinese GONGOs in international forums has also raised some eyebrows causing some to describe these institutions as tools that undermine global efforts on various international issues concerning the world. More recently, China's CPC organized NGOs have been used as a tool to dominate the international discourse in a globalized world. For instance, the China Society for Human Rights Studies (CSHRS), a GONGO, considered to be amongst the CPC's propaganda apparatus, has on various occasions attempted to divert scrutiny from China's poor human rights history in international forums. The CSHRS is one amongst a large pool of GONGOs that enable the CPC to demonstrate its assertion over the other international and mostly west-affiliated civil organizations.

Even the international civil societies functioning domestically in China face obstacles that cause hindrances in their day-to-day activities. China's domestic legislations have also made it even harder for international NGOs to function domestically due to rifts between the organization's objective and that of the Chinese government. International entities such as WWF, Oxfam and others have come under great scrutiny from Chinese authorities for their agendas that seem to be at odds with the CPC.

## **Conclusion**

China's social sector whether domestically or internationally, portrays a set of values closely linked to the political structure of the Chinese state. They do not necessarily reflect the distinctive set of democratic and moral inclinations that western institutions uphold. On the contrary however, they showcase the Chinese vision of a global future which is imbibed in the CPC's political philosophy. These norms may generally stand at odds with the discourse dominated by the West, yet China's attempt of extending its outreach in the global

world with its set of GONGOs has largely been successful in presenting its global vision. China's GONGOs are hence a contemporary example of how Beijing views the global future dominated by a form of Chinese statecraft and how it has very little to do with western democratic values. In such expeditions, China's social sector overseas has been able to achieve an equal amount of impact in regions that have been largely exploited by the western world.

Ever since Xi Jinping's consolidation of his power over the topmost position in the party, a newer-governance approach has taken over the state's functioning. The fundamental elements of centralization and emphasis on national security has altered the dynamic under which international, as well as domestic organizations, had functioned. A recent legislation on the ONGO (Overseas NGOs) law has been at the forefront of such change. A firmer grip on what the ONGOs do in the country has prevented any form of differing ideas to prosper in Xi's rule; thereby also providing a wider base for China's in-grown GONGOs to function with greater legitimacy not only domestically but also internationally.

GONGOs therefore as an established set of institutions across the world have a significant role to play in a China led by Xi Jinping's ideologues. The Chinese leader's repeated mention of 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics' is an epitome of the goals these institutions intend to achieve- an understanding of values and norms detached from western definitions and one led by Chinese perspective which can present an alternative to the dominant discourse to the global world. China's political and social structure are evidently different than that of the West and so is China's understanding of Socialism. The repeated connotation of driving forward on the great road of development with the vision of 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics' is thus what GONGOs as part of their concurrent objective are meant to achieve for the CPC.

In the past decade, since Xi Jinping's rise to the top, GONGOs have not only multiplied into thousands but

have also expanded overseas. Thereby also signifying the Chinese state apparatuses' view of GONGOs as an essential medium of export to nations that are vital for China's international interests. Thus, with greater space to put forth their agendas in discussions at international forums, China's GONGOs have perhaps attained a position last only held by their western counterparts, making them amongst the few organizations with an effective say in matters of international importance but with a completely different philosophy altogether.

## About the Author

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