

The Importance of Culture Influence NGOs in China

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ABSTRACT—*NGOs in China nowadays have been changed so much since 1980s, especially after the government's foreign trade policy and open-up policy. However, the natures of NGOs in China are still different from the ones in western countries. This paper discovers the how those does the challenge of culture conflict plays an important part when western organizations try to help building the relationship with local government and communities and help the growth of NGOs in China.*

Keywords— clash of culture, culture in conflict, NGO

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, lots of Asian countries have led to a rapid growth of economic reform, especially China, Indian, and Japan. Under the impacts of world market and global village, which also led to a big growth of NGOs in them. China for example, has led to a rapid growth of NGOs since 1980s. However, most of those NGOs are originally formed from western countries, which bring a very different culture background when they come to China. Some of those organizations may share similar culture influences, but most of them are very different from the local Chinese culture. Under these circumstances, when those western organizations try to help building the relationship with local government and communities, and help the growth of NGOs in China, would face a big challenge of culture conflict.

China is a non-democratic state where society is tightly controlled by the authoritarian regime. In this political arrangement, free association is practically hard to manage. According to the regulation of associations, a sponsor organization must be found prior to registration with the Ministry of Civil Affairs (Ma, 2002). However, due to political sensitivity and the extra work load it brings, no organization is willing to be sponsor organization for NGOs. The regulation also bans the association if there is already an organization of the same type existing in a certain administrative area. In such circumstances, for many western NGOs come to China and works with local people and the community is even harder. Slowly but the number of NGOs are growing in China. In 2008, there were an estimated 4 million NGOs operating in China (Qin, 2008). More NGOs come into China is brings more opportunities for the world to know this country better and help the local communities as well. At the same time, because of the strict government roles, to operate NGOs in China also face a lot of challenges and conflicts. Therefore, the question “how do they manage to operate smoothly under such a different culture background and solve conflicts with local government and communities?” becomes more important. Therefore, culture plays an important role in conflict resolution.

2. NGOS IN CHINA

2.1 History

After the reform and opening policy since 1980s', Chinese government stated to attract some international business into Mainland China. Back in that time, NGO is totally a new word in the dictionary. Until later 1980s', the policy became more effective, the Chinese government loosened its control over society and, as a result, a social space was created where numerous associations emerged. This could count as the very first group international associations in China. However, still they were not real NGOs as we have known today. Later, with the economic market widely open to the world, not surprisingly, more and more international associations caught the attention of scholars in Mainland China studies. At the same time, they brought the idea of NGOs in China, and some western scholars believe those were the very first NGOs in China (Fisher 1998, & Salamon & Anheier, 1992). But, soon those scholars found out that those associations were not the same as their counterparts in the West: many associations in the early years were government organized non-government organization in China, controlled or largely influenced by government with respect to

funding, personnel and membership. After scrutinizing these associations, some scholars acknowledged that only a few organizations are qualified as NGOs by western standards (Fisher 1998). According to the widely cited operational definition of NGO suggested by Salomon and Anheier, there are five basic characteristics of NGOs “NGOs are formal, private, nonprofit-distributing, self-governing (or autonomous) and voluntary” (Salamon & Anheier, 1992, p. 126). Most Chinese associations fail in terms of autonomy and voluntariness. They are still very controlled by the Chinese government.

The economic reform is widely accepted as a sign of transition for Chinese society. The power of the state, to some extent, stepped back from the economic sphere; private enterprise was harnessed. From the beginning of 1990s’, a large amount of international business and corporations came to China, and more well-developed foreign policies and new laws started to widely use in China. At the same time, some social problems became serious. Such as unemployment and pollution during reform and economic development, alternative entities were needed to handle the problems (Kin-Man Chan et al. 2005). The Chinese government also realized its constraints in taking care of all aspects of economic development and social service needs. Therefore, the needs of NGOs became something new but necessary for the local business people and the government. Moreover, withdrawing from intense political engagement after 1990s, people had more free time to participate in associational lives (Kin-Man Chan et al. 2005). Furthermore, the opening-up policy made Mainland China more open to the world. Under this policy, new thoughts and ideas were introduced such as “NGOs” and “civil society” which are developed in the western world. Among all those above, these factors helped NGOs emerge in Mainland China.

At the same time, the impact of transnational organizations and international NGOs also plays an important role to help the growth of Chinese NGOs. While the reform provided a background for the emergence of NGOs, transnational organizations brought the concept of NGOs to China and set up models for Chinese society (Ma, 2006). The most significant was the United Nation World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 and the associated NGO forum. From then, the term “NGO” became popular in China during that period. According to Ma (2006), and Kin-Man Chan et al. (2005), the term “NGO” rarely appeared in writings before 1995 in major academic journals and newspapers in China. The only existing ones are in short description on NGO conferences held in other countries. However, currently, the estimated number of NGOs in china is 3000-6500 (Qin, 2008). Those NGOs are well involved in different kinds of issues, such as HIV/AIDS, labor, education, poverty alleviation, women right, and international businesses, etc.

2.2 The Impact of Western NGOs

As mentioned above, after the open-up policy, China has attracted more and more international business partners to come overseas and doing business here. Therefore, the effort of those international corporations also helps the growth of NGOs in China. NGOs have been originally formed from western countries (Fisher, 1998), which is why they are heavily influenced with western culture. Since those western NGOs are well established and organized, have their own set of roles and policies to run successfully, they also tried to use the same way to in China. This is where the problem occurs; China has very different cultural background than most western countries, and those successful cases cannot just simply “borrowed” here to use.

According to Jackson (2003), “in order to build NGO capacity in an international development context successfully it is imperative to look at issues through a cross-cultural lens” (p. 2). Nowadays, NGOs involves working across cultures, but not much growing literature on NGOs has mentioned “culture” in them. Jackson (2003) mentions there are three levels of cross-cultural interactions: the inter-continental level, the cross-border level, and the cross-border level. The inter-continental level focuses on “the dynamics of Western-indigenous interaction of cultures and management systems (Jackson, 2003, p. 5). The cross-border level focuses on interactions inside each country. The inter-ethnic level focuses on everyday issues of conflict, peace, and power relations within ethnic groups. There is no better or best among three levels, which one to use is depends on the situation and each country’s own culture background. Without understanding the local culture, and choosing the right policy to work, some western partners had a difficult time to work with Chinese NGOs. Therefore, conflict occurs more often. Sometimes, even when conflict occurs with the local community or the government, those western organizations still do not know what are the real causes the problem, and how to manage the conflict effectively. That is why, more and more scholars and organizations have realized the importance of culture in conflict, especially in the case of NGOs in Mainland China.

3. CULTURE AND CONFLICT

After the Cold War, people left a complex world but entered another new intricate world. A new element started to be more actively involved in the international stage, and that element was culture. Some people think operating NGOs in China should follow the roles, which most western countries did, since that’s where NGOs were originally started, and were good examples and models to follow. This is so wrong. For sure, there are good examples from western states that can be used in China; however, with such different culture influence, there must be a specific and special way to handle conflict when it comes in China. Culture is an essential part of conflict and conflict resolution (LeBaron, 2003, p.1). Culture is embedded in every conflict because human beings are the ones who start conflicts, and conflict is a normal part

of human interactions. Cultural differences must be taken into consideration when managing conflict because they explain how people think and act. In today's world, under the impact of globalization and modernization, no one can live outside the influence of culture. The complexity of culture often becomes a pretext for dismissing it, especially in realist models of conflict resolution or conflict management.

3.1 About Culture

Today, people are living in a global world. An American can eat at a nice Italian restaurant owned by an Australian in Britain; a peacekeeper from the United Nation works as a mediator between two conflict groups; thanks to the technology, people live all over the world can find out news at the same time. All those examples are showing that culture is everywhere around us. To have a better understanding in culture, the first step in understanding culture is to explore its meaning. What is culture? Avruch (1998), in his book *Culture and Conflict Resolution*, says, "Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (p. 6). He indicates there is no one standard definition of culture because many people in many different situations could classify it in different ways. Moreover, Avruch (1998) draws a useful distinction between what he terms generic culture (human culture as an aspect of the species *Homo sapiens*, essentially adaptive to environmental factors) and local culture (the variations in the complex systems of meaning that are created, acquired, shared, and transmitted by individuals within social groups). Among different scholars' definition on culture, Edward Tylor's is one of the most influential and stayed with anthropology a long time. He defines culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (p. 6). This extremely inclusive definition describes culture as a quality possessed by all people in all social groups. In the twentieth-century, Franz Boas disagreed with Tylor. Boas argues there should never be a differentiation between high and low culture. His view is classically liberal (Avruch, 1998). With contributions from both Taylor and Boas, culture becomes more scientific than aesthetic. According to Avruch, there are two main reasons that explain the difficulty that occurs when people apply culture to conflict resolution or management. One reason is that from the beginning the history of culture was more aesthetic than scientific. Second, as a technical term in the social sciences, culture is still burdened by too many classifications (Avruch, 1998).

Joana Breidenbach and Pal Nayiri in their book 'Seeing Culture Everywhere' also build a strong argument on how culture does is relevant in society today. They argue that culture is often seen as static and unchanging, locked within borders. They explain how culture relates to different aspects by saying, "culture—or rather, cultural difference—is now held to be the main explanation for the way the human world functions" (2009, p. 9). According to Breidenbach and Nayiri, there has been one important debate over culture. The debate is focusing on the view what holds culture. On one side, people argue that "culture as a set of values, attitudes, and behavioral norms facilitates or impedes development" (2009, p. 97). The other side is the extreme opposite from the first one and focuses on how development affects the view of culture. The development has worked to displace large groups of people. This debate firmly shows that social and historical analysis is as important as economic analysis when it comes to policy design.

3.2 The Role of Culture in Conflict

In 1933, Samuel Huntington's "The Clash of Civilization," in the journal *Foreign Affairs*, brought a huge debate into the field of international relations. The debate is not only about the clash of civilizations, but it also focused the attention of scholars on culture and conflict. In this article, Huntington (1993) claims that "the clash of civilizations will dominate global politics; the future conflict would occur along cultural fault lines" (p. 22). However, so many scholars from different areas disagree with his idea. Huntington's views about culture are inaccurate and do not account for either cultural change or diversity. Each year, millions of people leave their homes and travel to different countries. When they do this, no matter for a short visit or a permanent stay, they also bring culture into the new places. Therefore, the world is shrinking every day; one cannot simply group people by their religions or values. Second, Huntington's "civilizations" ignore all the changes cultural identities have already undergone since the creation of national ideologies (Breidenbach & Nayiri, 2009). Gusterson also criticizes Huntington's thesis as including his article on "seven deadly sins." He argues that Huntington "stereotypes entire cultures while denying the reality of change and diversity within cultures and the possibility of solidarity between them" (2004, p. 25). As Breidenbach and Nayiri assert, Huntington "is taking a normative position rather than committing an analytical mistake" (2009, p. 51).

The world has greatly changed since the Cold War. New power has risen in the international relations arena. Conflict has also been redefined since then. It is not only limited to inner states or limited only to armed and violent conflict. Contemporary conflicts include economic, religious, social, and political disputes around the world. Cultural variations are reaching into each category. These were emphasized less by those scholars who define conflict "objectively" in terms of structure, behavior, and power struggle over scarce resources. They are emphasized more by those who define conflict "subjectively" in terms of perceived in compatibility of interest, interpretation, and belief (Miall et al. 2012, p. 332). Some conflict theories, like those of Burton and Zartman, hold that cultural variation is not relevant to conflict resolution because most conflicts are violent. To criticize this, Lederach (2003) indicates that violence is a behavior taught by the

culture or an infectious disease endemic to certain environments (p. 335). Another group of conflict resolution specialists, including Bercovitch, Cohen, and Gulliver, recognize the significance of cultural variation in conflict, but they do not believe it is as important or serious enough to take into account. Avruch (1998) challenges their views by saying they are taking the wrong “how to” approach in understanding cultural factors. He summarized six outmoded anthropological views of culture that many conflict scholars are still using in their work. Those six inadequate ideas are oversimplified and fail to reflect the depth of culture. That is why those scholars can seldom find the right path to solve or manage conflict with culture. Of course, there are few conflict theorists who agree that cultural variation is fundamentally significant in conflict resolution. Galtung, for example, believes the way to handle conflict is through diverse cultures. He sees violence in three forms: direct, structural, and cultural. Cultural violence occurs when people only assume what they know about another culture. Lederach expresses his view by defining conflict transformation as “a culture sensitive elicitive approach” (2003, p. 338). No matter who we are, where we are come from, we all see things through the lenses of our culture. To resolve and manage most armed or violent conflict, meditation is an important step. Mediators serve a wide range of activities to help parties transform a conflict. By doing this effectively, they need to have a strong culture knowledge on both groups. It gives people attitudes, expectations, and assumptions on everything. In summary, conflicts can be successfully mediated and resolved only if culture is considered. It is the same for NGOs management in China. To manage conflict well with local communities and government, it is very important to understand the role of culture and conflict.

4. CONCLUSION

NGOs in China nowadays have been changed so much since 1980s, especially after the government’s foreign trade policy and open-up policy. However, the natures of NGOs in China are still different from the ones in western countries. The relations between government and NGOs in China are still closer than that in western countries as well. In order to organize the NGOs in China, it is important to understand the culture and know how to minimize and manage the conflict under certain culture background. For a better development in the future, a lot of work needs to be done.

China is a fast-changing society. Many new NGOs have been established in different years and have rapidly grown in the last decade; however, they are still in their primary stages, and the legal environment is still not favorable for NGO development. In a long run, it would be better for scholars find out a new solution which leading NGOs in China running without too much control by the government. And there has been little research found in how NGOs are managed in China.

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