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## Global China's human touch? The internationalisation of Chinese NGOs

Wang, Y.

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## Chapter 2 Methodology

This chapter will illustrate the methodology adopted for the present thesis, including the research design, data collection methods, the limitations of the research methods and the positionality of the researcher. Overall, the thesis employs a multi-method design with multiple-case studies. Different methods are used to target specific research sub-questions. The research begins with a basic quantitative analysis to present a comprehensive overview of Chinese NGOs' internationalisation (Chapter 3). Chapters 4, 5, 6 on Chinese NGOs' relationship with the Chinese state and Chapter 7 on Chinese NGOs' relationship with Chinese companies adopt a multiple-case study design. In addition to the multiple-case design, Chapter 6 includes a discourse analysis to examine the ideologic characteristics of Chinese NGOs in their internationalisation. The next sections in this chapter discuss the key methodological elements of the research and data collection methods utilised, followed by a discussion on the limitations and positionality of the research.

### 2.1 Research Design and Methodology

#### *Qualitative Multiple-case Study*

This thesis is primarily a qualitative research project, using a naturalistic and interpretative approach to study things in their natural settings and interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings that people give to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Qualitative research is particularly relevant in the exploratory stage of studying a little-known issue and provides a foundation for future studies (Corbin and Strauss, 2015; Yin, 2014). Following an interpretive approach, it offers insights into how social actors interpret and make sense of a specific phenomenon in a specific context (Stake, 2010). The use of an interpretative approach as opposed to a positivist one prevents the simplification of research subjects into variables. It also limits the loss of interpretative power of the analysis at multiple levels to provide a better understanding of the process and dynamics of a phenomenon. As the internationalisation of Chinese NGOs is a relatively new phenomenon with scattered and limited quantitative data and the goal of the research is mainly to understand the relational interaction of multiple variables shaping these processes, an interpretative method is preferred to a positivist one.

This research is primarily based on multiple-case studies. Case studies are favoured when research questions are “how” and “why”, focus on contemporary events as opposed to purely historical events and do not require control over behavioural events (Yin, 2018). The present research fits all three of the above-mentioned criteria for case studies. Multiple cases instead of a single case study are used to leverage the various advantages of the multiple-case study design. Multiple-case studies are sometimes considered more compelling and regarded as more robust than single-case studies (e.g. Baxter and Jack, 2008; Herriott and Firestone, 1983). Researchers can understand the differences and similarities between the cases (Baxter and Jack, 2008; Stake, 1995) and perform analyses both within each situation and across situations (Yin, 2003). The multiple-case study technique can lower the possibility of an individual case study

being exceptional, increase validity, reduce bias and provide a better foundation for analytical generalisation (Small, 2009; Yin, 2014). Multiple-case studies can also help to develop a more compelling theory when the suggestions are more thoroughly supported by a variety of empirical data. Multiple-case studies thus enable a deeper exploration of research issues and the further advancement of theory (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

### ***Multiple-case Selection***

The key units for this study are Chinese NGOs. At the beginning of the research, I created the Chinese NGO Internationalisation Database, which includes all Chinese NGOs that have engaged in international development projects and donations between 2005 and 2021. The database provided me with a sampling frame for the selection of cases. In total, the sampling frame consists of 142 Chinese NGOs.

Case selection is based on several criteria to ensure that the selected sample satisfies “symbolic representation”, having characteristics that are expected to exhibit salience and satisfy a high degree of diversity (Ritchie et al., 2003). Cases are selected and studied until saturation is reached, that is, the point of data collection when additional inputs no longer lead to new insights into the research topic (e.g. Aguboshim, 2021; Hennink and Kaiser, 2022). Saturation is a crucial sign that a sample is sufficient to examine the phenomenon under investigation, that the data collected have adequately captured the variety, depth and nuances of the issues at hand and that there is thus content validity (Francis et al., 2010).

The first criterion for case selection is the degree of international engagement of Chinese NGOs and is meant to ensure the salience of the case sample. According to the Chinese NGO Internationalisation Database, 79 of the 142 included Chinese NGOs (56%) have only engaged in one-time international donations or projects, whereas 47 (33%) have sporadic projects (more than one time) and donations, and 16 (11%) maintain a long-term continuous overseas presence. The research prioritises the Chinese NGOs with a relatively high degree of international engagement (i.e. long-term presence and sporadic projects/donations) over one-time projects and donations. This is because Chinese NGOs with a higher level of international engagement have accumulated more internationalisation experience relevant to the research topic.

The second criterion to satisfy is the diversity of the case sample. There are many dimensions to a Chinese NGO, such as governmental background (i.e. independent NGOs/GONGO), size, location, overseas presence and issues of concern. Given that it is impossible to include every dimension, I have prioritised those that are the most relevant to the research topic based on my own knowledge and the insights that I have gained from the fieldwork. The first dimension is Chinese NGOs’ governmental background. Studies have shown that Chinese NGOs’ governmental background (that is, whether they are GONGOs or independent NGOs) has an impact on their relationships with the state, and it has been one of the most used variables in the scholarship on Chinese NGO-state relationships (e.g. Hasmath et al. 2019; Lu, 2007; Spires, 2011; Spires et al, 2014; Salmenkari, 2014; Wu, 2003;). The second dimension is the issues of concern to Chinese NGOs. It is common practice to divide aid into humanitarian assistance and development aid in international development (e.g. Nomura et al., 2021; OECD, n.d; United Nations, n.d.) given their distinctive operational characteristics. NGOs are also sometimes discussed separately for their work in humanitarian assistance and development programmes (e.g. Hermann and Page, 2016; Heyse, 2007; Krause, 2014). According to the database, non-humanitarian development NGOs focus on a variety of issues, such as education, healthcare,

poverty alleviation, environmental protection and sustainability as well as volunteering. The sample for the present research will include Chinese NGOs covering the range of issues of concern highlighted above.

In practice, based on the first criterion, I began with the 16 Chinese NGOs that have long-term continuous overseas presence as my initial sample and gradually added more cases to increase the diversity of the sample until I judged that the data collection is saturated. The process of increasing the diversity of the sample was also constrained by the accessibility of NGOs. For example, between two similar NGOs, I prioritised the one that I was able to gain access to as a case study. After taking all the aforementioned factors into consideration, I selected 28 Chinese NGOs as the primary focus of the study. I managed to obtain primary information through interviews with 19 of the 28 Chinese NGOs in the sample. For the organisations that I could not access directly, I collected information from various channels, including interviews with people outside the NGO, informal communications, conferences and secondary sources to gain as much insight as possible. Table 2 below presents the list of the 28 Chinese NGOs studied in the present research as major cases.

These 28 organisations include all 16 Chinese NGOs with long-term continuous engagement in international development activities and 12 Chinese NGOs that carry out sporadic or one-time international development activities. Among the 16 Chinese NGOs, 11 have registered overseas offices. In terms of governmental background, eight of the 28 Chinese NGOs are GONGOs (here the categorization is mainly based on their organizational origins, if they were initiated by governmental agencies), and 20 are independent NGOs. As concerns the type of work, there are two Chinese NGOs under study that have only engaged in making COVID-related donations. For the rest of the NGOs, two are purely focused on humanitarian assistance, 20 focus on development activities and the remaining four engage in both development activities and humanitarian assistance. These Chinese NGOs have carried out a wide range of activities in areas such as humanitarian assistance, education, healthcare, poverty alleviation, volunteering, environmental protection and sustainability.

**Table 2: List of Chinese NGOs in the Multiple-Case Studies**

NGOs	Degree of engagement	Governmental Background	Issue of Concern	Major Areas of Concern
China NGO Network for International Exchanges	Long-term	GONGO	Development	Education, Healthcare, Poverty Alleviation, Communication
The Amity Foundation	Long-term (O)* *O= with overseas office	Independent	Humanitarian and Development	Education, Healthcare, Poverty Alleviation, humanitarian assistance
China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation (CFPA) <sup>1</sup>	Long-term (O)	GONGO	Humanitarian and Development	Education, Healthcare, Poverty Alleviation, humanitarian

<sup>1</sup> China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation was renamed as China Foundation for Rural Development. For consistency with other literature and convenience, the thesis will only use China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation (CFPA).

				assistance, volunteering
China Foundation for Peace and Development (CFPD)	Long-term (O)	GONGO	Development	Education, Healthcare, Poverty Alleviation
Chinese Red Cross Foundation (CRCF)	Long-term	GONGO	Humanitarian and Development	Healthcare, humanitarian assistance
Global Environmental Institute (GEI)	Long-term (O)	Independent	Development	Environmental and Sustainability
Lunch for Children	Long-term	Independent	Development	Education
Peaceland Foundation	Long-term (O)	Independent	Humanitarian and Development	Environment and sustainability, Refugee care, humanitarian assistance
Rainbow Volunteer Club	Long-term (O)	Independent	Development	Education, Volunteering
RamUnion	Long-term (O)	Independent	Humanitarian	Humanitarian assistance
Shenzhen Foundation for International Exchange and Cooperation (SEICF)	Long-term	GONGO	Development	Healthcare, Poverty Alleviation
Yundi Behavior and Health Research Center (Yundi)	Long-term (O)	Independent	Development	Education, Healthcare, Poverty Alleviation, Volunteering
Youth Bridge Foundation (Common Future Project)	Long-term (O)	Independent	Development	Education, Refugee care, Volunteering
Sichuan Haihui	Long-term (O)	Independent	Development	Education, Healthcare
Ruili Women and Children Development Center	Long-term (O)	Independent	Development	Education, Healthcare
Kunming Zhi Gen Social Work Development Centre	Long-term	Independent	Development	Education, Healthcare
China Social Assistance Foundation (Increasing Love for Decreasing AIDS Fund)	Sporadic	GONGO	Development	Healthcare
Shenzhen Rescue Volunteers Federation	Sporadic	Independent	Humanitarian	Humanitarian assistance
The Paradise Foundation	Sporadic	Independent	Development	Environmental and Sustainability
Green Watershed	Sporadic	Independent	Development	Environmental and Sustainability
Yunnan International Non- Government Organization Society	Sporadic	GONGO	Development	Healthcare, Poverty Alleviation
SZ Long Yue Foundation	Sporadic	Independent	Development	Elderly care
Tibet Shan Yuan Foundation	Sporadic	Independent	Development	Education, Poverty Alleviation
China Council of Lions Clubs	Sporadic	Independent	Development	Healthcare, Volunteering

TCL Foundation	One-time	Independent	COVID donations	only Covid donation
BV Vocational School	One-time	Independent	Development	Education
Mammoth Foundation	One-time	Independent	COVID donations	only Covid donation
Yunnan Green Environment Development Foundation	One-time	GONGO	Development	Environmental and Sustainability

## 2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

### *Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis: Interviews and Fieldwork*

The present research is primarily based on qualitative data that I have collected through primary sources, such as interviews, meetings and conferences, as well as secondary sources. Semi-structured interviews are the main method for data collection in this study. Interviews are one of the most common methods for gathering data in qualitative research, and the semi-structured format is among the most frequently used interviewing techniques (e.g. Creswell, 2013; Edwards and Holland, 2013). Semi-structured interviews help researchers to standardise the questions for different interviewees while allowing a certain degree of openness, which can be helpful to delve deeply into any answers (Wengraf, 2001).

However, semi-structured interviews have limitations, which lie in the subjectivity involved in the qualitative research process and the lack of a systematic model for decision-making (Belina, 2022). There is no single way to practice qualitative interviews, and it greatly depends on the circumstances of the research as well as the goals and abilities of the researcher (Brinkmann, 2013). Thus, the triangulation of the research findings based on interviews is highly recommended to increase the validity of the research (e.g. Belina, 2022; Dodge et al., 2012). Attending formal conferences related to the research, engaging in informal communication with insiders and collecting data from secondary sources are the methods I used for the triangulation of the information gathered through interviews.

Because of the outbreak of COVID-19, my fieldwork was limited to three provinces in China, namely, Yunnan, Guangdong and Beijing, and was carried out from August 2020 to August 2022. However, many of the interviews I have conducted and the conferences I attended were online. I attempted to gain access to the 16 Chinese NGOs with long-term continuous engagement in international development activities as much as possible through socialising at conferences and events. More opportunities for interviewing other NGOs and relevant institutions emerged through my inquiry into these 16 NGOs. In the end, the selection of NGOs to interview was based on the criteria for a reliable sample. For some NGOs with significant international activities, I conducted multiple interviews with people holding different positions in the organisation. In total, I carried out 43 interviews, covering 21 Chinese NGOs (19 of which belong to the list of 28 NGOs in Table 2), 2 international NGOs, 5 companies with overseas investments, 2 consulting firms and 6 academic institutions, think tanks and media. The complete list of the interviews conducted is provided below in Table 3.

**Table 3: List of Interviews**

<b>Code</b>	<b>Institution</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Date</b>
Interview 1	Chinese NGO 1	Project Manager	Yunnan	Aug-20
Interview 2	Chinese NGO 2	leader	Yunnan	Aug-20
Interview 3	Chinese NGO 3	Project Manager	Yunnan	Sep-20
Interview 4	Chinese NGO 3	Director	Yunnan	Sep-20
Interview 5	Chinese NGO 4	Founder	Yunnan	Sep-20
Interview 6	Chinese NGO 5	Director	Yunnan	Sep-20
Interview 7	Academic Institution 1	Expert	Yunnan	Sep-20
Interview 8	Academic Institution 2	Expert	Yunnan	Sep-20
Interview 9	Chinese NGO 6	Staff	Shenzhen	Sep-20
Interview 10	Chinese NGO 7	Director	Shenzhen	Sep-20
Interview 11	Chinese NGO 8	Director	Shenzhen	Sep-20
Interview 12	Chinese NGO 9	Director	Shenzhen	Sep-20
Interview 13	Chinese NGO 10	Director	Shenzhen	Sep-20
Interview 14	Academic Institution 3	Expert	Beijing	Sep-20
Interview 15	Company with Overseas Investment 1	Project Manager	Online	Sep-20
Interview 16	Chinese NGO 11	Project Manager	Beijing	Oct-20
Interview 17	Chinese NGO 12	co-Founder	Beijing	Oct-20
Interview 18	Chinese NGO 13	co-Founder	Online	Oct-20
Interview 19	Chinese NGO 14	co-Founder	Online	Oct-20
Interview 20	Chinese NGO 15	Country director	Beijing	Nov-20
Interview 21	Chinese NGO 16	Country Director	Online	Nov-20
Interview 22	Academic Institution 4	Expert	Beijing	Nov-20
Interview 23	Chinese NGO 17	Project Manager	Beijing	Dec-20
Interview 24	Chinese NGO 18	Project Manager	Beijing	Mar-21

Interview 25	Chinese NGO 15	Country Director	Beijing	Apr-21
Interview 26	Chinese NGO 17	Project Manager	Beijing	Aug-21
Interview 27	Chinese NGO 19	Founder	Online	Mar-22
Interview 28	Chinese NGO 20	Project Manager	Online	Mar-22
Interview 29	International NGO 1	Director	Online	Mar-22
Interview 30	International NGO 2	Project Manager	Beijing	Mar-22
Interview 31	Media 1	Director	Beijing	Mar-22
Interview 32	CSR Consulting Firm 1	Project Manager	Beijing	Mar-22
Interview 33	Development Consulting Firm 1	co-Founder	Online	Mar-22
Interview 34	Chinese NGO 11	Project Manager	Beijing	Apr-22
Interview 35	Chinese NGO 21	Director	Online	Apr-22
Interview 36	Thinktank 1	Expert	Beijing	Apr-22
Interview 37	Company with Overseas Investment 2	Investment Manager	Beijing	Apr-22
Interview 38	Company with Overseas Investment 3	Investment Manager	Beijing	Apr-22
Interview 39	Company with Overseas Investment 4	Investment Manager	Beijing	Apr-22
Interview 40	Company with Interview Overseas Investment 5	Director	Online	Apr-22
Interview 41	Chinese NGO 15	Director	Beijing	Aug-22
Interview 42	Chinese NGO 15	Country Director	Beijing	Aug-22
Interview 43	Chinese NGO 15	Country Director	Beijing	Aug-22

Attending conferences related to Chinese NGOs' internationalisation also represented an important source of primary information. I have had numerous discussions with many experts and insiders at these events, which gave me important insights for the research. In total, I



attended 31 conferences from November 2019 to September 2022, many of which were held online as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Table 4).

**Table 4: List of Events Attended during the Fieldwork**

<b>ID</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Venue</b>	<b>Event Description</b>
Conference 1	2019.11.11	Beijing	China Development Brief Forum 2019
Conference 2	2020.4.30	Online	“Value+” Series No.1: Chinese Social Organization Humanitarian Relief in Covid Pandemic
Conference 3	2020.5.27	Online	China Foundation Development Forum: the Prospects and Challenges of Chinese Foundations “Going Out”
Conference 4	2020.6.22	Online	China Charity Alliance Forum on International Cooperation
Conference 5	2020.6.24	Online	“Value+” Series No. 2: International Standards for International Humanitarian Relief
Conference 6	2020.7.9	Online	“Value+” Series No. 3: International Environment for NGOs to Conduct International Cooperation
Conference 7	2020.7.12	Online	China House Conference: Myanmar-China Cooperation After Covid-19
Conference 8	2020.7.23	Online	“Value+” Series No. 4: Practicing Framework in International Cooperation and International Discourse System
Conference 9	2020.8.6	Online	“Value+” Series No.5: Financial Source for International Aid and Project Management
Conference 10	2020.8.20	Online	“Value+” Series No.6: International Communication and Promotion
Conference 11	2020.9.9	Online	Volunteering Service Forum
Conference 12	2020.9.9	Online	Experience Sharing by Dream Building Service Association
Conference 13	2020.9.9	Online/Beijing	Conference on Chinese NGO networks for humanitarian relief
Conference 14	2020.9.18-20	Shenzhen	Shenzhen Charity Forum 2020, 3-day event regarding the development of Chinese charity
Conference 15	2020.10.29	Online	“Value+” Series No.7: How Corporations Exercise Social Responsibility in Overseas Investments
Conference 16	2020.11.25	Online	China Foundation Development Forum 2020 Annual Conference-sub meeting: on NGOs”Going Out”
Conference 17	2020.12.2	Online	China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation Nepal Office Five Year Anniversary Conference
Conference 18	2020.12.8	Online	China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation Myanmar Office Five Year Anniversary Conference

Conference 19	2020.12.9	Beijing	China Development Brief Forum 2020
Conference 20	2021.3.5	Beijing	TianXia Class: the Drivers and Current State of Chinese CSR in Myanmar
Conference 21	2021.6.28	Online	Conference on The Practice and Experience of NGOs to Protect and Fulfill the Right to Development
Conference 22	2021.8.18	Online	“Value+” Series No.8: The Logistics Problems in International Humanitarian Action
Conference 23	2021.9.8	Online	“Value+” Series No.9: International Communication By Leveraging International Conference
Conference 24	2021.10.13	Online	“Value+” Series No.10: SDGs and Social Organizations
Conference 25	2021.11.23	Online	China Charity Fair 2021, a conference related Chinese NGO development
Conference 26	2021.12.4	Online/Beijing	Conference on Foreign NGOs Engagement in International Aid and Their Implications for China
Conference 27	2022.3.22	Online/Beijing	CFPA International Panda Pack Project Three-Year Ceremony
Conference 28	2022.5.10	Online	China Association For NGO Cooperation Conference on China-South Korea Civil Society Dialogue
Conference 29	2022.7.6	Online	China Association For NGO Cooperation Conference on China-Japan Civil Society Dialogue
Conference 30	2022.9.15	Beijing	China Association For NGO Cooperation Conference on Chinese Social Enterprise “Going Out”
Conference 31	2022.9.16	Online	Roundtable on Humanitarian Assistance in Afghanistan from Chinese NGOs

In addition to these primary sources of information, secondary sources were also important to the present research. The main secondary sources I relied on are the official publications of NGOs and companies, including annual reports, public statements published on their websites and social media, and news from credible media, such as the *China Development Brief* and the *China Philanthropy Times*. Secondary sources form the basis for the critical discourse analysis in Chapter 6 and help triangulate and complete the information I have collected from the primary sources.

### ***Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis: Discourse Analysis***

Discourse is an inherent aspect of social events and is dialectically tied to other aspects. Conducting research using some form of discourse analysis can be an effective way to understand a social phenomenon (Fairclough, 2003). In addition to the primary sources that helped me understand the behaviour of Chinese NGOs, the organisational discourses of these organisations constitute an effective resource for studying their underlying values as concerns their internationalisation. In other words, analysing the discourses of Chinese NGOs is helpful

for determining what the NGOs “think” in addition to what they do. Particularly, Chapter 6, which examines the ideological underpinnings of Chinese NGOs in their internationalisation, uses qualitative content analysis to study the organisational discourses of these organisations. Qualitative content analysis, as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, p. 1278), helps to streamline, analyse and generate patterns from a large amount of data drawn from qualitative material.

There are two channels for collecting the necessary data. One is the official websites and official WeChat accounts of 16 Chinese NGOs (out of the 28 NGOs from Table 2, see Table 5), where documents such as annual reports and press releases are collected and studied. The other is public fundraising advertisements by Tencent Charity, the main Chinese online public fundraising platform for international projects. These 16 NGOs include 4 GONGOs and 12 independent NGOs; one humanitarian-only NGO, one NGO solely engaging in COVID donations and 14 NGOs with development activities. In total, 660 documents, which are enough to satisfy “symbolic representation”, were collected and studied through qualitative content analysis. In Chapter 6, I provide a detailed account of how I used qualitative content analysis to study the discourses of Chinese NGOs and the findings of this analysis.

**Table 5: List of the 16 NGOs under the Discourse Analysis**

Amity Foundation	Mammoth Foundation
BV Vocational School	Peaceland Foundation
China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation	Rainbow Volunteer Club
China Foundation for Peace and Development	RamUnion
Chinese Red Cross Foundation	SEICF
Global Environment Institute	Shenzhen Rescue Volunteers Federation
China Social Assistance Foundation (Increasing Love for Decreasing AIDS Fund)	The Paradise Foundation
Lunch For Children	Yundi Behavior and Health Research Center

### ***Quantitative Data***

In addition to qualitative analysis, I conducted a basic quantitative analysis (described in Chapter 3) to map the current state of Chinese NGOs’ internationalisation. To perform a quantitative analysis that can provide an overview of the landscape of Chinese NGOs’ internationalisation, I compiled information relevant to the topic through an intensive search of several online platforms related to Chinese NGOs, such as the China Foundation Center database, *China Development Brief* and *China Philanthropy Times*. The data collected was also triangulated with the official publications (e.g. annual reports and official social media accounts) of each NGO. After building the database, I was able to analyse the broad trends in Chinese NGOs’ internationalisation through a quantitative exploration of the data generated through the database. The details of the process of creating the database are presented in Chapter 3.

### 2.3 Research Design and Use of Data by Chapter

The research design, research objects and data sources used in different chapters are shown in Table 6. Chapter 3, which focuses on mapping Chinese NGOs' internationalisation, relies on a basic quantitative analysis of the data drawn from the Chinese NGO Internationalisation Database covering 142 Chinese NGOs. In addition, a comparative analysis was performed between the landscapes of international development NGOs in China and in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Canada. The findings in Chapter 4 to 7 are generally informed by multiple-case studies based on 28 NGOs. Particularly, Chapter 4 theorizes the autonomy of Chinese NGO internationalisation mainly based on evidence from Chapter 5 and Chapter 6. Chapter 5 provides empirical evidence regarding the Chinese state's regulatory and operational influence over Chinese NGOs based on interviews and fieldwork. Chapter 6 specifically examines 660 documents of Chinese NGOs through the discourse analysis. Even though each chapter relies more on one method, it also benefits from the insights provided by other chapters. For example, the chapter that relies on quantitative analysis is also somewhat informed by my judgement based on the insights I gained through interviews; meanwhile, the chapters that concentrate on qualitative case studies are built on the foundations of solid background knowledge acquired through the quantitative analysis. Thus, the thesis as a whole is driven by a diverse but integrated approach.

**Table 6: Research Design by Chapter**

<b>Chapters</b>	<b>Research Design</b>	<b>Research Objects</b>	<b>Data Source</b>
Chapter 3: Mapping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Basic quantitative analysis</li> <li>● Comparative analysis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 142 Chinese NGOs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Chinese NGO Internationalisation Database which is collected through online public data</li> </ul>
Chapter 4: Chinese NGO Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Multiple case study</li> <li>● Theorization of Chinese NGOs Autonomy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 28 Chinese NGOs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Interviews</li> <li>● Conferences and events</li> <li>● Secondary sources</li> </ul>
Chapter 5: State's Regulatory and Operational Influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Multiple case study</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 28 Chinese NGOs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Interviews</li> <li>● Conferences and events</li> <li>● Secondary sources</li> </ul>
Chapter 6: Discourse Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Multiple case study</li> <li>● Qualitative content analysis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 660 Documents from Chinese NGOs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Official publication of Chinese NGOs</li> <li>● Interviews</li> </ul>
Chapter 7: Chinese NGO- company Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Multiple case study</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 28 Chinese NGOs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Interviews</li> <li>● Conferences and events</li> <li>● Secondary sources</li> </ul>

## **2.4 Limitations of the Research**

### ***The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic***

The main limitations of the research result from the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly impacted the realisation of the study. I began the research and completed my research proposal in late 2019, before the outbreak of COVID-19. My original plan was to conduct field research in China, Myanmar, Nepal, Kenya and Ethiopia in 2020 and 2021. However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this plan because of the travel restrictions imposed by various countries. In addition, many Chinese NGOs suspended their activities overseas due to health concerns; therefore, had I been present on the ground, I may not have obtained access to their operations. As a result of the travel restrictions, my fieldwork was primarily conducted in China and online. Thus, the most significant limitation of the research is the lack of local perspectives from the communities in which Chinese NGOs operate, which I originally planned to include. On the other hand, my inability to travel to local communities also allowed me to allocate more time and resources to focus on the Chinese NGO-state relationship and Chinese NGO-company relationships and develop deeper engagement with Chinese NGOs in China.

### ***Interview Accessibility***

The accessibility of various Chinese NGOs, companies and other actors varies significantly. In general, Chinese NGOs, including independent NGOs and some GONGOs and academic experts, were easily accessible. Chinese companies with overseas investments were more difficult to reach, in particular because the fieldwork was limited to China. Through various efforts, I managed to interview five Chinese companies with overseas investments, a majority of which are large state-owned enterprises in the energy and infrastructure sectors. These companies have developed relationships with Chinese NGOs to various extents, from no relationship to deep collaboration, and are satisfactory representatives for obtaining the perspectives of companies on Chinese NGOs' internationalisation given access limitations. The most difficult actor to access was governmental agencies and some GONGOs closely connected to the government. According to my informants at the Ministry of Commerce, individuals who work directly with governmental agencies must go through a cumbersome process to obtain approval for interviews. Consequently, I was not able to conduct formal interviews with representatives of governmental agencies. However, I engaged in several informal conversations with some contacts who work in relevant governmental agencies, which provided me with some insights from a governmental perspective. Moreover, governmental officials are invited to many of the conferences and events that I attended. The knowledge I gained through these conferences largely compensated for the lack of direct interviews with representatives of governmental agencies.

### ***Language Limitations***

As a native Chinese speaker and a proficient English speaker, I did not face any difficulty in interviewing individuals from Chinese institutions (i.e. Chinese NGOs and Chinese companies) and Western institutions (e.g. INGOs). However, as most of my primary information is in Chinese, I had to translate it into English to write the present thesis. Some nuances may thus have been lost in translation, especially where there is no direct corresponding concept in

English. For example, as I illustrated in the introduction to the thesis, “NGO” is not an official concept in China. Although the term “NGO” is widely used by Chinese practitioners, there can be variations in its interpretation and the understanding of what can be considered an NGO in China. Under such circumstances, I relied on my judgement, taking into account the context of the information (e.g. the backgrounds of the interviewees and the topic of discussion) to interpret the meaning of specific concepts and translate them into English.

Another language barrier must be highlighted, which has to do with the fact that I do not speak the languages used in the countries where the Chinese NGOs under study operate. Thus, the information I collected is primarily based on Chinese- and English-language sources. I was not able to access the news and local feedback, which are produced in local languages rather than English or Chinese. For example, local media in Myanmar have produced news reports regarding the activities of Chinese NGOs. However, given the linguistic limitations acknowledged above, I could not collect this information directly through online searches and by reading local newspapers. Without this language barrier, I may have been able to gain a broader perspective on the behaviour of Chinese NGOs based on the perceptions of local communities.

## **2.5 Other Concerns**

### ***Positionality and Self-reflection***

The positionality of the researcher refers to the stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study, that is, the community, the organisation or the participant group (SAGE Encyclopedia, 2014). This positionality is shaped by the researcher’s gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, educational background and other personal experiences. As a native Chinese female researcher working in a Western university, I am aware that my interactions with others in the course of the research may have been biased by my positionality, especially due to my nationality and educational affiliation.

On the one hand, as a Chinese studying a China-related phenomenon, I have easier access to Chinese sources through Chinese contacts. I may also be deemed more trustworthy by Chinese interviewees than foreign researchers because of our similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Moreover, I may be more sensitive to the political and cultural contexts in which my research subjects are located and may be better equipped to capture nuances in conversations with interviewees and observations during fieldwork. However, my sensitivity to political and cultural contexts may also lead me to make assumptions that prevent me from thinking “outside the box”.

On the other hand, my identity as a Chinese individual is complicated by my being a researcher at a Western university. Chinese communities, especially those connected to the Chinese official system, are more wary of speaking to foreign institutions because they are concerned that foreign media, NGOs and academia will misunderstand “Chinese characteristics” and blemish their reputation. This concern may have increased the distance with my interviewees, so that I may have received more curated information. The positive side of being affiliated with a Western university is that I am less prone to self-censorship as my research will be written in English and no Chinese institution is involved in the initiation, funding, supervision and publication of the research. Furthermore, I have made significant reflections on my

independence by fulfilling the requirements of the ethical committee of the Faculty of Humanities at Leiden University and have consciously continued to engage in such reflection throughout the research.

In all, my position as a Chinese and a researcher in Western academia may have had conflicting or off-setting effects, depending on the specific contexts encountered in the field. By critically reflecting on my positionality, notably by constantly challenging the assumptions underlying my questions and actions and triangulating information using different sources, I have done my best to minimise the bias caused by my positionality.

### *Ethical Codes*

I have ensured that my research was conducted in accordance with the five principles of honesty, scrupulousness, transparency, independence and responsibility, follows the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity and fulfils the ethical requirements of Leiden University.