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

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Chapter 8 Conclusion

As a previous NGO practitioner in development and a researcher on Global China, I still vividly remember the time I found out that a few Chinese NGOs had entered the field of international development years ago. I could not stop thinking about the opportunities that Chinese NGOs, as new blood, could bring to the scene of Global China and global civil society in general. However, after the initial excitement faded away, I became concerned about the potential constraints that Chinese NGOs might face in their journey of internationalisation. My concerns did not arise from nowhere. For decades, scholars have studied Chinese NGOs' autonomy from the state, searching for signs of a democratic change in China, more often than not finding that the development of Chinese NGOs reflects the constraints on civil society in an authoritarian regime instead of being a force strong enough to counterbalance the power exercised by the Chinese party-state. The autonomy of Chinese NGOs and the tension between them and the Chinese state are constantly studied and contested. These concerns stay with Chinese NGOs when they go international. Why are they "going out"? Are they required by the Chinese state to do so? Do they represent the strategic interests of the Chinese state, or can they become autonomous, offering an alternative to the state-centric form of global development promoted by the Chinese state? In addition, discussions have arisen regarding Chinese NGOs' role in social and environmental issues of Chinese companies. How have Chinese NGOs dealt with the overseas operations of these companies?

This thesis has addressed these questions through a thorough examination of 28 Chinese NGOs which have gone international, featuring a wide range of organisational characteristics. Step by step, I have used multiple methods and focused on several aspects to approach these questions. My answer has begun with a thorough look at the current state of Chinese NGOs' internationalisation in Chapter 3. Then, I have studied the autonomy of Chinese NGOs (Chapter 4, 5, 6) and the ideological underpinnings of their global endeavours through a discourse analysis (Chapter 6). In Chapter 7, I have conducted a comprehensive study on the relationship between Chinese NGOs and companies regarding their overseas social and environmental concerns. The studies in these five chapters served as the foundation for addressing the key concerns about Chinese NGOs and their potential roles in Chinese international development. In the next sections of this concluding chapter, I consolidate my findings and respond to broader concerns and questions. In addition, I discuss the implications and limitations of the research and the future prospects of Chinese NGOs' internationalisation.

8.1 An Alternative Form of Chinese International Development?

The overarching research questions in this thesis are: what roles do Chinese NGOs play in Chinese international development? To what extent do the international development activities of Chinese NGOs constitute a major new form of engagement in Chinese international development, different and separate from those of the Chinese state and corporations? In other

words, are Chinese NGOs likely to provide an alternative form of international development alternative to those of the Chinese state and the corporations?

The role of NGOs in international development as alternatives to the mainstream donor state-led model has long been discussed. Being flexible, innovative and non-governmental, they are expected to provide development practices that can engage and empower local communities and produce transformative changes on the ground, in ways that cannot easily be matched by the state and the mainstream development system (e.g. Lewis and Kanji, 2009). Studying whether NGOs can provide an alternative form of Chinese international development implies identifying a development paradigm that is influential and different enough from the mainstream model led by the Chinese state and corporations. The key factors for an alternative role lie in the scale and independence of NGO activities. Only projects that are large and autonomous enough can become truly influential and unique to represent an alternative to the mainstream. Based on the criteria of scale and independence, I have demonstrated that Chinese NGOs can hardly be considered an alternative form of international development that is influential enough and distinctive enough to be separated from the state and corporations. Instead, I argue that the role of internationalised NGOs is complementary to the mainstream Chinese international development landscape.

First, this thesis has demonstrated that the internationalisation of Chinese NGOs is still in an emerging stage and its current size and scale remain limited. As shown in Chapter 3 through a comprehensive study of all Chinese NGO projects overseas, the scale of the sector in terms of annual international spending is less than 1% of that of its Western counterparts in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Canada (the average of the three). The size of Chinese NGOs' international development spending also corresponds to less than 1% of China's official aid, which suggests the volume of spending is hardly large and influential enough to make NGOs an alternative. Most Chinese NGOs have only made temporary international donations or projects, and those that aim to establish long-term continuous international projects have yet to fully institutionalize their practices. Although it is worthwhile to monitor the development of the sector in the future, the current scale of the sector is too limited to substantiate claims that NGOs can wield sufficient influence to challenge the mainstream.

Second, the thesis has shown that the process of Chinese NGOs' internationalisation is not sufficiently autonomous from the influence of the Chinese state and corporations and, thus, cannot offer a viable alternative. The independence of internationalising Chinese NGOs can be explored by examining three aspects: the agents, methods and values of development. These three aspects are often referred to as the key elements of an alternative approach to development (Pieterse, 2002).

The first sphere focuses on the "agents" who conduct international development activities. NGOs can be considered "alternative" given that they are one of the three sectors that are distinct from the state and the market. However, in the case of Chinese NGOs, the existence of GONGOs blurs the line between the NGO and the state. This research has presented a nuanced understanding of the distinction between GONGOs and independent NGOs in internationalisation. As demonstrated in Chapters 3 and 5, many independent NGOs have "gone out". As shown in Chapter 5, the GONGO status or lack thereof does not determine the exact NGO-government link in the internationalisation process, and GONGOs are not necessarily more tied to the government than independent NGOs. Yet, it is true that some

GONGOs are set up specifically for international affairs, and, overall, GONGOs tend to rely more on governmental referrals for implementation in host countries. Such nuances complicate the distinction between GONGOs and independent NGOs in the study of internationalisation and make the angle of “agents” alone an insufficiently clear indicator of whether Chinese NGOs could represent an alternative or not.

The second sphere is that of “methods”, which can be understood as what has been conducted and how. Chinese NGOs are engaged in an embedded form of internationalisation. As shown in Chapter 5, the Chinese state adopts a relatively hands-off approach to the internationalisation of Chinese NGOs, considering that rules and policies specifically encouraging or regulating the internationalisation of Chinese NGOs are largely absent, except for a few indicative guidelines. Governmental funding for Chinese NGOs’ internationalisation is very limited, in contrast to what may be expected considering the presence of GONGOs. The reality is that even for GONGOs, governmental funding is scarce. Based on direct state intervention, the internationalisation of Chinese NGOs cannot be characterised as directly state-led and targeting strategic interests. Chinese NGOs have autonomy in initiating, designing and implementing their projects, and they have exhibited a wide range of organisational behaviours in terms of project operations. Nevertheless, there is no significant evidence that Chinese NGOs have carried out activities that are more critical and confrontational than their domestic projects since they are influenced by the state in many ways other than direct intervention on internationalisation. The state’s influence is embedded in the domestic regulatory system for Chinese NGOs (shown in Chapter 5) and in the sources of legitimacy and value for Chinese NGOs to internationalise (shown in Chapter 6). Such indirect state’s influence is strong enough to make Chinese NGOs behave in a self-limiting way by avoiding confrontation with the Chinese state and any other critical stakeholders. Their approaches to development issues are largely non-critical, non-confrontational and based on traditional charity, donating goods and providing services. Moreover, as shown in Chapter 7, Chinese NGOs’ approach to Chinese companies on social and environmental issues is also non-confrontational and hardly transformative. Chinese NGOs are generally more dependent on companies for resources and are in imbalanced power relationships with the companies. Overall, the self-constrained and non-transformative behaviour of Chinese NGOs cannot be considered to constitute an alternative to the mainstream.

The third sphere is that of “values”, that is, NGOs’ views on their international projects and development issues. As illustrated in Chapter 6, the values held by Chinese NGOs are implicitly influenced by the Chinese state, as evidenced by the fact that Chinese NGOs are unable to develop discourses that are independent of the Chinese state. Instead, I have demonstrated how their discourses are characterised by depoliticisation and diplomatisation. Chinese NGOs have a depoliticised view of development. Development problems are presented as a given, and there is no reflection on the global power structure underlying them. Their projects are viewed as immediate solutions to these uncritically defined problems. Part of the reason behind such depoliticisation is to avoid delegitimisation, especially from the Chinese state. Meanwhile, Chinese NGOs commonly diplomatised their activities by referring to the Chinese state’s discourses and actions, which can help legitimise their international projects. Thus, Chinese NGOs are hardly completely independent of the state’s influence.

However, although Chinese NGOs are unlikely to serve as an alternative to China’s mainstream state- and investment-led international development, they have played a complementary role,

as demonstrated in the following aspects. First, Chinese NGOs have enriched the varieties of Global China's aid and development cooperation. Although Chinese NGOs are mostly engaged in humanitarian donations and traditional charity projects in healthcare and education, they have extended their activities to a host of social issues, such as anti-poaching activities, demining and refugees, which are seldomly addressed by state-led international development programmes. Although these projects are usually small in scale, they are complementary to China's official foreign aid system. In addition to broadening issue areas, Chinese NGOs have also diversified the ways of connecting with local people. China's development cooperation is largely state-led and top-down; thus, the aid recipient is usually the local government or governmental organisations. As shown in Chapter 5, Chinese NGOs sometimes implement projects directly with local NGOs and local communities. In doing so, direct society-to-society links are built that are complementary to government-to-government links. In addition, as discussed in Chapter 6, Chinese NGOs tend to diplomatised themselves and become Chinese soft power promoters. This role fits the people-to-people connecting role expected by the Chinese state, which indicates a certain subordination to state goals. Chinese NGOs have thus largely complemented the state's efforts to promote China's image in developing countries. Lastly, Chinese NGOs can be complementary to Chinese companies' efforts in dealing with the environmental and social issues associated with their overseas investments. They are often considered more trustworthy than non-Chinese organisations by Chinese companies, and they can act as a bridge between Chinese companies and the local/international society.

These findings have enriched the studies on China's global engagements, which have focused on the Chinese state and Chinese investments (e.g. Bräutigam, 2011b; Eichenauer et al., 2021; Shapiro et al., 2018; Wolf et al., 2013). The research shows that Chinese NGOs, as social actors, are largely complementary to the interests of the Chinese state and companies. Notably, Chinese NGOs are now complementary in a way that differs from many Northern NGOs, which act as contractors for donor agencies to provide aid services in developing countries. The complementarity of Chinese NGOs is largely based on their own behaviour and value instead of direct contractual links with the Chinese government.

8.2 The Future of Chinese NGOs' Internationalisation

The development of INGOs is driven by different political, economic, social, environmental, and technical factors (Davies, 2014). Similarly, when we look at the future development of Chinese NGO internationalisation, it's important to look at a variety of drivers. One type of drivers is organic (as opposed to the factors that are intentionally imposed on internationalisation) and conditional, such as international natural disaster and humanitarian crisis. The 2015 Nepal earthquake and Covid-19 pandemic have shown that large-scale international humanitarian crisis could stimulate the international activities of Chinese NGOs. Another type of drivers is organic and systemic, such as economic development and change of social values. The emergence and current development of Chinese NGO internationalisation has benefited from the strong economic development in China in the past two decades, which has freed up resources used domestically and internationally. The future development of the Chinese economy will continue to have an impact on Chinese NGO internationalisation. Currently, international donations, especially international donations for non-humanitarian causes are still a nascent concept among the Chinese public. Cosmopolitanism and religious

value, which are some of the common underlying values for international donations, are not widely present among the Chinese public. This is partly the reason why marketing international projects for their diplomatic value is appealing to Chinese stakeholders. The change of social value is a complicated and lengthy process and whether the Chinese public can be more acceptable to cosmopolitan value and willing to make international donations is unclear. However, one thing is certain that if nationalism become more rampant in China, it will become more complex for Chinese NGO to gain public support unless they make even more efforts underlying the national interests to justify their international projects. Lastly, there is a type of drivers that are top-down and can make an immediate impact: the governmental policies. I will illustrate how different scenarios of governmental policies make an impact on the future development of Chinese NGOs' internationalisation.

In the coming decades, Chinese NGOs operating overseas may follow different trajectories, depending in particular on the attitudes of the Chinese state towards their internationalisation. In this section, I propose three potential future trajectories for Chinese NGOs, dependent on three possible directions of Chinese governmental policies regarding Chinese NGOs' internationalisation: supportive, restrictive and hands-off. Within the "supportive" direction, a particular policy regarding official funding for Chinese NGOs' international development projects must be discussed separately given its potential significance to the development of the sector. Different directions will have a different impact on the development of Chinese NGOs' internationalisation, particularly on the dimensions of scale and diversity, as shown in Table 19.

The most notable development to watch is official funding for Chinese NGOs' internationalisation. The South-South Cooperative Assistance Fund began to provide official aid funds to two Chinese GONGOs in 2022. The fund can become a major platform for the Chinese government to support Chinese NGOs' internationalisation. As this platform scales up, a window of opportunity for Chinese NGOs to expand their overseas operations will arise. However, official aid funds are most likely to be allocated to large GONGOs with trustworthy backgrounds and a stable track record of international projects. With the scale-up of the impact of these governmental funds, many Chinese NGOs will eventually be subjected to the state's preference in terms of the location and issue areas of the international projects. The diversity and robustness of the sector may be compromised. Too much governmental mobilisation can have the opposite effect in terms of global impact, as the example of the Confucius Institute shows (e.g. Yuan et al., 2016). How Chinese NGO internationalisation will be affected will largely be dependent on how governmental funding is designed and allocated. Too many restrictions on governmental funding will lead to the consolidation of the sector in which only a few NGOs benefit from the funding and will decrease diversity.

The other direction of supportive governmental intervention is the adoption of policies providing a favourable environment for Chinese NGOs to "go out". Unlike awarding official funds to a few NGOs, such policies will benefit the sector, including various kinds of NGOs with an interest in "going out". For example, the government could create specific channels for Chinese NGOs to address logistic and operational issues for their international activities. Chinese NGOs have often complained about the inconveniences they have faced in their international operations. They frequently encounter considerable speculation from commercial banks when making international money transfers due to the lack of specific rules on the topic and commercial banks' unfamiliarity with their intentions and international operations.

Chinese NGOs have also faced challenges in auditing their international expenses as international receipts are not recognised by supervision units. The Chinese government could gradually develop supportive policies to address these operational challenges and improve the operational infrastructure necessary for Chinese NGOs to go international and do so more efficiently. Such supportive policies could benefit all Chinese NGOs, large or small, and help the sector to scale up. Because supportive policies are not direct governmental interventions, the diversity of the sector will not suffer. By far such supportive policies are largely absent, though there is rising pressure on governmental agencies to make relevant supportive policies as the more Chinese NGOs internationalise and some operational challenges become systematic and sectoral problems.

However, the Chinese government can choose the opposite direction and impose more stringent restrictions on the internationalisation of Chinese NGOs. The 2016 Opinion (Opinion on Reforming the NGO Management System to Promote Healthy and Orderly NGO Development) requiring Chinese NGOs to get approval from either their supervisory unit or foreign affairs offices is one example of this. In addition, the Chinese government has authorised only a few Chinese foundations to raise funds publicly for international donations to the fight against COVID-19. This authorisation was imposed to control the risk of misbehaviour in the face of large amounts of international donations. Although this control is temporary and applies to a special occasion, it illustrates the possibility that as Chinese NGOs start to grow, the Chinese government may intervene and impose more regulations when their impact becomes more significant. Such restrictions tend to control the development of the sector and make the sector less vibrant.

The last scenario is that the Chinese state maintains the current, relatively hands-off approach, where official funds for Chinese NGOs remain limited and specific policy support for or restrictions to Chinese NGOs' internationalisation are scarce. In this scenario, the development of Chinese NGOs' internationalisation will largely be bottom-up and dependent on other factors, such as public opinion and the support of the international community and companies. The Chinese government will not have a significant impact on the growth of Chinese NGOs' internationalisation, and an increase in diversity can be expected from the bottom-up growth.

Table 19: Future Scenarios of Governmental Influence and Their Implications

	Mobilization/Fund	Policy support	Policy restriction	Hands-off Approach
Scale	Positive	Positive	Negative	No impact
Diversity	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive

8.3 Implications for Chinese Civil Society

To many Chinese NGOs, internationalisation, as an emerging field, provides new opportunities for organisational development. As shown in the case of both GONGOs (e.g. CFPA) and independent NGOs (e.g. Yundi, Peaceland Foundation), internationalisation can be an effective organisational development strategy. Internationalisation offers opportunities for geographical expansion. For example, according to Provisional Regulations on the Registration and Management of Private Non-enterprise Units (*minban feiqiye danwei dengji guanli zanxing tiaoli*/民办非企业单位登记管理暂行条例), private non-enterprise units cannot have

branches in China and thus their work is limited to the administrative area where they are registered. By crossing borders, they have significantly more freedom to choose where to operate as there are no rules to guide or regulate their international destinations. In addition to additional geographical opportunities, the variety of issues that Chinese NGOs address has increased. For example, Peaceland Foundation has conducted projects in Syrian refugee relief and landmines detection in Cambodia. These projects are very specific to the international setting and non-existent domestically. Moreover, Chinese NGOs could extend their funding sources by going international. In China, an NGO can only raise funds from the domestic public if it possesses a public fundraising license or is partnered with a foundation that does. By going overseas, a Chinese NGO can expand its fund-raising activities to overseas audiences, as shown in the case of CFPA, which raised funds through Global Giving, an online platform mainly targeting international public donors, and Lunch for Children, which partially raises funds from the US to support its operations in Africa. Whether these geographical, operational and financing opportunities can be seized is mainly constrained by organisational capacity and resources and the international environment rather than the current Chinese policies on internationalisation, which are largely absent. However, as discussed in the previous section, the regulatory environment can change, which could easily affect the operational spaces of Chinese NGOs.

Chinese NGOs also face numerous operational challenges, such as a lack of financial resources and human resources. In particular, the human resource challenge, ranked as a top hurdle in internationalisation by a few NGOs (e.g. Interview 17, 28, 41), is very specific to internationalisation. The human resources required for international projects are different from those needed for domestic projects. People who master foreign languages, can handle international affairs and are willing to relocate to foreign countries for the long term are very rare. The uncompetitive salaries offered by Chinese NGOs compared with other international development organisations make it even harder for Chinese NGOs to hire the right people.

Apart from operational challenges, Chinese NGOs face a potential legitimacy crisis. These challenges can become more apparent when Chinese NGOs grow in size and acquire more visibility in the international development landscape. International development NGOs must gain multi-faceted legitimacy, and stakeholders can have conflicting requirements for legitimacy (Lister, 2003). Such conflicts have led to a legitimacy crisis for Northern development NGOs (e.g. Sogge, 1996; Deloffre and Schmitz, 2019). Donors in the North and beneficiaries in the South pose structural challenges to the legitimacy of Northern NGOs (Saxby, 1996). In many cases, the supposed beneficiaries in the South are not the priority compared with the donors in the North (Atack, 1999). Chinese NGOs also face such structural legitimacy tension between fulfilling donor interests and the demands of local constituencies. However, the legitimacy crisis of Chinese NGOs goes beyond the tension between donors and beneficiaries. It also results from the different requirements of domestic and international stakeholders. Notably, while leveraging political discourses and resources can help Chinese NGOs gain legitimacy with the Chinese domestic audience, it poses a threat to their legitimacy with international communities, who perceive closeness with the Chinese government as a liability rather than an asset. Some Chinese NGO has already been challenged about their relationship with the Chinese government when attending international conferences and trying to establish international networks (Interview 23). As shown in Chapters 4 and 6, referencing official discourses, complementing national strategies and giving credit to government officials

are common strategies of Chinese NGOs to gain the approval of the Chinese state and other domestic stakeholders. These practices, which are also common in their domestic projects, are unproblematic when they only target domestic stakeholders, but they risk hurting Chinese NGOs' image with international stakeholders. Some Chinese NGOs are already aware of this risk, as evidenced by CFPA's purposeful removal of the term "BRI" and other Chinese official rhetoric from their fundraising advertisement on Global Giving, which mainly targets the Western audience. Even though, in some specific contexts, Chinese NGOs can strategically avoid using Chinese official discourses, the tension resulting from the difference between legitimacy for domestic stakeholders and for international stakeholders does not disappear. For example, when CFPA presents its general motivation and purposes, it often uses both Chinese official discourses (e.g. "BRI"), which reflects a diplomatic intent and a tendency to gain political resources, and "love without borders" ("*da ai wu jiang*/大爱无疆"), which refers to cosmopolitan values, as if it is a safe package that can be tailored to different contexts. Nonetheless, these two positions can be fundamentally incompatible when there is a conflict of interests between the Chinese state and local communities. Association with the interests of the Chinese state may harm Chinese NGOs' representativeness of the local community, which is also deemed an important dimension of INGO legitimacy (Atack, 1999). Chinese NGOs must think carefully about their priority when such conflicts of interest exist. This is also true when Chinese NGOs work with Chinese companies on controversial social and environmental issues. Working too closely with these companies can jeopardize Chinese NGOs' legitimacy with the international and local communities. Internationalisation has provided a crucial opportunity for Chinese NGOs to reflect on their normalised practices and rethink the motivations behind their operations.

8.4 Implications for Global Civil Society

The emergence of Chinese NGOs on the international scene also has implications for global civil society. First, it has pluralised the norms and values of global civil society. As argued by Hasmath and Hsu (2021), the rise of Chinese NGOs in international development will ultimately challenge the contemporary understanding of global civil society, which is often considered to support and strengthen democratic institutions and values, and instead legitimise global social processes that compete with Western norms. This thesis has provided further evidence to support these claims. Chinese NGOs are distinct from the associations that broadly hold liberal, democratic and cosmopolitan values. From a liberal perspective, an important role of NGOs is that of a "troublemaker" for their capability to represent local interests and challenge the mainstream. Conversely, Chinese NGOs have taken up the role of "peacemakers". They have restrained themselves and are being restrained from expressing values inconsistent with the authoritarian regime. As shown in Chapter 6, except for the basic humanitarian values that underlie charitable work, Chinese NGOs hardly promote any liberal and democratic norms explicitly. Instead, they have intentionally or unintentionally positioned themselves as friendship messengers, endorsing peace, solidarity and non-interference, which are also the attitudes advocated by the Chinese state in international affairs. These values show respect for diversity while avoiding judgment, confrontation and transformation. Ironically, the Chinese identity reflected in this role has actually strengthened the difference between Chinese NGOs and others, which can be counter-productive to the solidarity and unity in the state's slogan "A Community with a Shared Future for Mankind" (*ren lei mingyun gongtong ti*/人类

命运共同体)。Furthermore, the strong Chinese national identity shown in the Chinese NGOs has differentiated Chinese NGOs from others and prevented them from consolidating into the current structure of global civil society. Such national identity is already prevalent among Chinese NGOs without concrete and material governmental mobilization. It will be even stronger if the Chinese state starts to mobilise more resources to scale up the internationalisation of Chinese NGOs.

Second, the inability of Chinese NGOs to develop a complete action and discourse independent of the Chinese state has inevitably brought the Chinese state's influence into global civil society, although the degree can vary significantly among Chinese NGOs. One appealing characteristic of NGOs, as the major associational institutions in global civil society, is their stance as representing the bottom-up interests of people and their capability to hold government and institutions that have malign practices accountable (e.g. Kenny and Germain, 2006). However, many scholars have shown that these aspirations have romanticised the role of NGOs (see, e.g. Smith, 2010; Mohan, 2002). Particularly, NGOs are mainstreamed into the New Liberal agenda and are criticised as too close to donor states (Hulme, 1997; Banks et al., 2015). The presence of Chinese NGOs has further complicated the NGO–state relationship. Even though this thesis has shown that most GONGOs are not required and financed by the Chinese state to go international, the very presence of GONGOs, with their organisational characteristics distinct from NGOs, already blurs the line between the state and civil society. As GONGOs go international, their paradoxical nature will also cross borders. The internationalisation of Chinese NGOs has also diversified the types of state's influence on global civil society. The Chinese case demonstrates that states' influence over global civil society does not necessarily come from straightforward financing, as exemplified by the donor-states' influence on NGOs in the Global North. The state's influence is already institutionalised in Chinese NGOs through domestic regulation and supervision system and internalised in Chinese NGOs through legitimacy for and value behind internationalisation. When Chinese NGOs go international, the state's influence follows them. This kind of influence goes beyond GONGOs.

Chinese NGOs are complementary rather than an alternative to China's mainstream international development landscape, even though most of their internationalisation is not initiated and managed by the Chinese state, unlike China's global media campaign to improve China's image and the Confucius Institute to promote Chinese culture. Does it matter whether these are state initiatives or not if they inevitably exhibit state-influenced characteristics, such as self-limited behaviours and promoting China's image? To various degrees, Chinese NGOs have become part of the “authoritarianism goes global” machine even if they do not intend to be (see the concept in *Authoritarianism Goes Global*, Diamond et al., 2016). Moreover, they have shown that not only top-down initiatives, as often noticed, but also bottom-up initiatives can become part of this machine. Based on liberal and democratic standards, is there a way for Chinese NGOs to rid themselves of the “original sin” of arising from an authoritarian context? The empirical evidence by and large points to a negative answer. The emergence of Chinese NGOs in international space will eventually stimulate new rounds of debates that challenge the clear division of three sectors, the role of NGOs and the constraints of NGOs in global civil society.

8.5 Contributions, Limitations and Future Studies

This thesis has made several major contributions. First, it has filled the data gap on Chinese NGOs' internationalisation. The Chinese NGO Internationalisation Database is the first database comprehensively and systematically collecting data about Chinese NGOs' international development activities. It has provided a comprehensive picture of Chinese NGOs' global endeavours and the informational infrastructure for the field of Chinese NGOs' internationalisation. The database has already attracted attention from scholars, NGO practitioners and policy makers. Second, the thesis has significantly extended the range of case studies from a few popularly studied cases, such as the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation and the Global Environmental Institute, to more than 20 Chinese NGOs with a variety of organisational characteristics, including GONGOs and independent NGOs and organisations with various degree and areas of international engagement. Particularly, 20 independent NGOs are examined, which have often been under-studied given their relative invisibility compared with large GONGOs. This rich and diversified selection of case studies has substantiated the findings of the research and provided a much more comprehensive view of the study of Chinese NGOs' internationalisation. Third, the thesis has applied a multiple-layer approach to the autonomy of Chinese NGOs, further enriching the continuing academic discussion on Chinese NGO–state relationships and the autonomy of Chinese NGOs. The internationalisation of Chinese NGOs has revealed the complexity of these organisations' autonomy. There is no simple answer to the question of whether Chinese NGOs are autonomous or independent or not. Instead, the research has explained how Chinese NGOs are influenced by the state by applying the concept of embeddedness and using different layers of analysis. Fourth, this thesis is the first attempt to systematically examine the role of Chinese NGOs in Chinese international development, contributing to not only the literature on Chinese NGOs but also on Global China. It has followed the Global China approach which avoids essentializing China and brought Chinese NGOs, as emerging actors, to the debates in Global China. Fifth, the thesis has further enriched the discussions on global civil society by presenting an emerging player in international development – Chinese NGOs – and analysing the implications of Chinese NGOs' internationalisation for global civil society.

As discussed in Chapter 2, a major limitation of this thesis is the inability to conduct comprehensive fieldwork in the host countries where Chinese NGOs operate due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This has resulted in a limited number of interviews with mainly Chinese stakeholders and a lack of direct perspectives from local communities. However, this research has paved the way for further studies including local perspectives. The future study of Chinese NGO–local community relationships could help us understand how local communities perceive Chinese NGOs and evaluate the impact of these organisations. Such local perspectives could also deepen our understanding of Chinese NGO–state. Particularly, it will be significant in addressing questions such as: how do local recipients and local partners perceive Chinese NGOs' independence of the Chinese state? Do they perceive Chinese NGOs as a mere extension of the Chinese state? How does their perception on Chinese state's influence differ from the governmental influence studied in Chapter 5? Do local communities consider Chinese NGOs to play a role in improving China's image? In other words, does the soft power promotion function of Chinese NGOs discussed in Chapter 6 work in local communities? Moreover, do local communities have a better image of Chinese NGOs than of Chinese companies, as discussed in Chapter 7?

In addition to local perspectives, there are several other directions for further research. One is to study Chinese public opinion on international donations by NGOs. As shown in Chapter 3, public fundraising is one funding source for Chinese NGOs, although its scale is still limited. Chapter 6 has revealed that Chinese NGOs use nationalist discourses in public reports and advertisements for fundraising and that cosmopolitan and humanitarian values alone are not sufficient to mobilise public funds. It would be very meaningful to study public opinion and behaviour, such as the questions of which demographics are more likely to make international donations in China, what factors have motivated public donors and what kind of NGOs these public donors are most likely to donate to. These studies could help us further understand whether the Chinese public could become a major source of income for Chinese NGOs' internationalisation in the future. The rise of public donations may increase Chinese NGOs' autonomy from other donors, such as companies and the state.

Another direction for research is the role of INGOs in Chinese NGOs' internationalisation. Trilateral cooperation with China by OECD countries has been on the rise in recent years. Apart from the state level, such trilateral cooperation has also occurred at the non-state level. INGOs and foundations, such as the Asia Foundation and the Ford Foundation in China, have shown interest in Chinese NGOs' internationalisation and have funded relevant projects. Further research can be conducted to examine the interactions between international foundations, Chinese NGOs and local communities/NGOs in recipient countries and their implications.

The final avenue for research is to study the potential relationship between Chinese NGOs' international presence and Chinese overseas investments, and, in particular, whether the choice of location for Chinese NGOs and activity intensity is correlated with Chinese overseas investments. Such research could help us understand whether the presence and density of Chinese investments influence the destinations of Chinese NGOs. I have explored the possibility of performing a regression analysis of Chinese NGOs based on the Chinese NGO Internationalisation Database and Chinese overseas investments based on relevant data; however, given that Chinese NGOs are still in their emerging phase, the scale and quality of data are not yet strong enough to support it. In the future, as more data on Chinese NGOs' internationalisation is accumulated, such quantitative research may be feasible.

8.6 “Doing What You Can Do, Even For A Little Bit”

Although I am not optimistic about the potential of Chinese NGOs' internationalisation to evolve into a fully autonomous space that can provide opportunities for them to engage in alternative activities to the mainstream Chinese development apparatus at a structural and sectoral level, I recognise it as a growing sphere for individuals or groups that are truly passionate about effecting changes and making an impact beyond borders. Over the past four years, I have had the opportunity to meet numerous passionate and enterprising Chinese citizens who work tirelessly to carry out charitable activities overseas. As I conclude my four-year journey, many memories arise, be it an NGO leader vividly explaining his aspiration to initiate a charitable cruise providing free medical services (a project already in preparation as far as I am aware), a group of volunteers anxiously exploring possible channels for donating medical goods overseas at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic or a veteran in international development, who I knew before beginning my PhD, sharing her excitement, aspirations and ambitions for her new position in a Chinese NGO in Ethiopia. These individuals represent

something new in contemporary China: they are guided not solely by the pursuit of profit or state orders but rather by a true desire to aid vulnerable populations beyond the country's borders. They may face many operational and political constraints and are not ambitious enough to make fundamental and transformative changes, but they are making efforts to “do what you can do, even for a little bit” (“*Neng Zuo Yidian Shi Yidian*”/ “能做一点是一点”), a phrase I heard frequently in my interactions with them. The state and the nation continue to cast a long shadow, explicitly or implicitly, over Chinese NGOs' projects. Yet, this should not detract from the efforts of the many Chinese people who, despite numerous constraints, are taking small but meaningful steps towards engaging with the world and supporting their own vision of development in faraway lands. It is the existence of these people that opens possibilities for Chinese participation in global civil society.

To many Chinese NGO practitioners, autonomy is not the priority. Their ambitions are to ensure that charitable donations are successfully delivered and development projects are completed smoothly. Their daily work is ripe with various kinds of operational challenges, and their concerns and priorities differ significantly from those of many NGO and Global China scholars. This thesis, as an academic study, aims first and foremost at creating a dialogue with scholars in academic circles. However, I want to express my deepest respect and gratitude to all NGO practitioners, who are genuinely good-willed and compassionate and make internationalisation happen. Without them, this thesis would not exist.