CASE STUDY TEN

For this organisation the provision of theatre education services on a commercial basis has enabled them to continue their China engagement

A key objective of this Ford Foundation-funded research project is to monitor and evaluate the state of implementation of China's Overseas NGO Law by documenting the intended and unintended consequences of the new law for European non-profit organisations and their Chinese partners. This case study is based on an in-depth interview conducted after the enactment of the law. It has been anonymised to protect the identity of both the organisation and interviewee(s).

Full version

Past

This European organisation is an inclusive social arts organisation that promotes diversity and challenges social exclusion. The organisation began life in the 1970s performing in local church halls before expanding into theatre education and moving to a permanent home. The organisation has a global reputation for creativity and high-quality performances, leading the way in offering truly inclusive theatre to young and adult performers. Funding for the organisation comes from ticket sales, income from training, grants and sponsorship. It is a registered charity and enjoys the support of high profile patrons.

As part of its mission to see a society that celebrates diversity and enables everyone to thrive the organisation has taken their work abroad. A US-based offshoot now exists thanks to the enthusiasm of an American family that wanted to share their approach to theatre in the USA. The organisation does not have a formal international programme and their involvement in China grew out of a chance encounter. Several years ago, the organisation presented their work as an arts organisation and social enterprise at a conference in China. The presentation piqued the interest of one of the Chinese participants who came from a Chinese NGO working with children on the autistic spectrum.
The European organisation was excited and intrigued by their first trip to China. They also recognised that attitudes to diversity and inclusivity in China were behind those now more mainstream in Europe. An inclusive approach to the arts is at the heart of the organisation's work and they were determined that this strong ethos would need to be reflected in any work in China. They rejected the idea of restricting their China project to children with disabilities. The Chinese NGO accepted the challenge and identified a mainstream primary school with which they could cooperate. Several rounds of discussions resulted in an invitation to visit central China and mount a joint production.

Despite a range of challenges, including being filmed in rehearsals by a Chinese TV company with a very different agenda, the organisation was able to stage a performance of musical theatre involving children of all abilities. To the delight of the European organisation, all the Chinese parents were enthusiastic about the inclusivity of the production.

With the first event a success, it was agreed to return with a more ambitious project. In the second year the organisation worked with a group of young Chinese performers to develop an English-Chinese storyline and songs. The performance that followed collaborative workshops was on a much bigger scale than in the first year and was very well attended. The audience responded with huge enthusiasm and the performance was also very well received by local government officials.

The local authority initially showed interest in furthering the relationship and visited the organisation in Europe. The European organisation had hoped to develop their work in collaboration with the Chinese NGO, but the local organisation lacked resources and staff capacity to invest in advancing the relationship and there were practical difficulties in bringing Chinese colleagues to Europe, including arranging visas. The European organisation also lacked funds for this area of work. New sources of funding would have to be found that would, ideally, also cover salaries but statutory arts organisations seemed uninterested. When officials on the Chinese side failed to respond on their return to China, the European organisation concluded that their China venture was probably over.

Nevertheless, for the European organisation the engagement with China had already brought benefits to both sides. Chinese participants and audiences were exposed, for the first time, to the joy and possibilities of an inclusive approach to the arts. In a country where the socially excluded and people living with disabilities are largely invisible and their needs ignored, inclusive theatre offered new prospects for challenging stereotypes and discrimination. For the organisation's staff, working in a culturally very different context was a huge learning opportunity. Working outside their usual comfort zone stretched the organisation's creative staff in new ways.

The European organisation did not follow closely the twists and turns of Chinese politics and the closing space for civil society. In 2015, as news of the proposed new Overseas NGO Law spread (henceforth: the law) it was not active in China although still open to future engagement.
Present

State of China-related activities. Without an organisational and strategic commitment to engaging with China, the European organisation had depended on ad hoc interest and contacts from the Chinese side. When Chinese local government officials seemed to lose interest, the organisation believed its China engagement had come to an end. A chance meeting with a representative from a European performing arts management agency, however, recently opened up new opportunities. The agency had noted the growing interest in creative education in China and saw an opportunity to promote theatre education. The agency believed that this would be most promising at the primary school level in China where children face less exam pressure and there would be time for extra-curricular activities.

The first introduction to a prospective new Chinese partner was not a huge success. It soon became clear that the local partner did not plan to adopt the organisation's approach to inclusivity. The local partner was more interested in the commercial possibilities of reselling the European organisation's approach to theatre education to Chinese middle-class parents in search of new experiences for their children.

An introduction to a second partner has been more promising and the European organisation is now providing theatre education on a commercial basis in collaboration with a Chinese education company. The Chinese company works with a number of schools, including a charitable boarding school for disadvantaged girls. The school caters to girls from rural areas including orphans and left-behind children and from the outset there was an interest in encouraging the girls to tell their own stories.

The new law is an obstacle for the European organisation in pursuing a not-for-profit model of cooperation in China with values and a social mission at the core. For the organisation to operate under the new law it would either have to register an office, with all the cost implications of a permanent presence, or identify a suitable Chinese not-for-profit organisation that would be able to file applications to register temporary activities. The law provides little opportunity for international organisations to explore new relationships, particularly in areas, such as inclusive arts, where China lacks counterpart organisations.

For the Chinese authorities, the notions of not-for-profit and a social mission are unfamiliar concepts and are often treated with suspicion. For the European organisation the law hinders rather than thwarts further engagement with China. For the time being, a commercial relationship enables the organisation to continue to promote an inclusive vision for the arts in China while also offering development opportunities for its own staff.

Impact of the law on Chinese partners. The Overseas NGO Management Law has had no direct impact on the European organisation. Although as a not-for-profit organisation and registered charity they would appear to fall under the ambit of the new law, the organisation is also a registered company and has been able to structure their engagement with China on a commercial basis.

For the European organisation the provision of theatre education services on a commercial basis has enabled them to continue their engagement with China. In the short term this has been mutually beneficial. The organisation has not had to undertake the costly and burdensome requirements of trying to register an office in China or finding local partners willing and able to sponsor the registration of temporary activities.
They have also been able to charge salaries as well as direct costs unlike the earlier hand to mouth arrangement with a Chinese NGO. A commercial relationship has its limitations and the European organisation is trying to reinvent their status as service provider to the Chinese company in terms of a more collaborative, co-creating relationship. In the longer term, the organisation doubts that the role of service provider will satisfy the organisation. The relationship with the European arts agency is one, now, of partnership where both sides can brainstorm new opportunities of engaging with China.

The new law is unhelpful for overseas charities, such as this European organisation, that want to explore longer term engagement with Chinese counterparts. For this organisation it is still unclear how far they can sustain a satisfactory collaboration in China within a commercial framework.

**Future**

This European organisation's engagement with China has been championed by a senior member of staff who has been involved from the outset. He has welcomed the development opportunities engagement with China has provided to his colleagues. By working in China staff have had to operate in a very different cultural context. This provides a valuable learning opportunity which challenges staff to re-examine the very purpose and nature of their work. The development opportunities for staff have helped to ensure board level support for the work in China. As an arts organisation with an ethos of social inclusion, they also provide diversity training to companies and the China experience has provided valuable support for that aspect of their work. Contacts in China have also resulted in fee-earning work in Europe delivering theatre education, through workshops and summer schools, for Chinese students.

Some staff in the organisation have questioned the decision to engage with China because of the political situation in the country and the nature of the regime. Others have argued, that the activities, provided by the organisation, are empowering for the Chinese children and will help to broaden their outlook and support for diversity. The organisation acknowledges that its work with primary school age children is less political than the work it normally does at the secondary level and they have not encountered any opposition in China. Most not-for-profit organisations that engage with China are familiar with these tensions and the organisation recognises that there are no easy answers.

This European organisation engages with arts organisations in several countries around the world and the cooperation takes a number of different forms. The organisation acknowledges that its engagement with China is driven by one person and would cease if he left or the project became too difficult.

**EU-China relations beyond aid**

This organisation has not been involved in any broader bilateral or European level of engagement with China. They have not sought to position their work as cultural ambassadors although, like most arts organisations, they are open to opportunities that may bring new funding. Financial support is a perennial concern. As a social arts organisation promoting diversity they are not considered mainstream enough in Europe to benefit from long term support from most arts funders.
The organisation's initial work in China was supported by a grant from a German foundation. They have also received British and European arts funding. The organisation is also interested in pursuing the possibility of commercial sponsorship from companies active in China. However, while inclusion is now a priority for many companies in Europe, this may not yet be the case for sponsorship in China.

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