

# China Policy Institute Policy Paper 2015: No 5

## The Survival Strategies of Transnational Religious NGOs in China

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### Significance

Understanding the behaviour of transnational religious NGOs (RNGOs) in China can be a challenging proposition. This is partially attributed to the nation's nascent civil society,<sup>1</sup> corporatist measures governing NGOs,<sup>2</sup> and the general suspicion towards social organizations with Western origins.<sup>3</sup> This is also due to the difficulties in categorizing whether a NGO is considered religious or not. To complicate matters further, the Chinese state has been wary of religion in general, with documentation by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China claiming "foreign hostile forces" are using religion to "infiltrate China" to "Westernize" and "divide China". The documentation highlights the spread of Christianity as notable concern.<sup>4</sup>

In reaction, the state has a tendency to over-regulate religious activities and RNGOs. For example, children under the age of 18 are not allowed to receive religious education in public sites. Public sector employees are not allowed to practice a religion or wear religious attire while working.<sup>5</sup> Further, the registration of religious organizations is handled differently than other types of NGOs in China. In general, NGOs should be registered under the Ministry of Civil Affairs, however, RNGOs are registered and managed under separate organizations, the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) at the central level, and the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) at the local level.

In spite of this environment, transnational RNGOs are increasingly prevalent in mainland China, and continue to be of the most resilient social organizations outside the Chinese party-state structure. This begs the urgent query: what tactics do transnational RNGOs employ to maintain a continued presence? Insight into their survival strategies can provide a blueprint to other NGOs operating in sensitive issue-areas in China, and in jurisdictions with restrictive regulations towards civil society actors.

### Main findings

The resilience of transnational RNGOs operating in China can be explained by their ability to navigate an authoritarian, socio-political environment by (1) cooperating with local partners; (2) fostering trust with the local state; and, (3) keeping a low profile. Our findings are based on semi-structured interviews and participant observation among eight RNGOs with strong transnational linkages in mid/late 2013.<sup>6</sup>

The findings further indicate that as the organizational experiences of RNGOs operating in China grow and matures, there is a more sophisticated organizational response to professionalize. That is, RNGOs activities will become standardized to the extent of fostering a higher degree of predictability, and in turn, increased trust by the state. Somewhat paradoxically, we expect that as the Xi Jinping administration continues its efforts to tighten the regulations governing social organizations, RNGOs that follow the said pattern of professionalization, standardization, and predictability will be under less threat for their organizational survival.

## **Detailed analysis**

### *Cooperating with Local Partners*

All RNGOs in our sample have some form of cooperation with local partners which include the state-sanctioned Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) or the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) churches, house churches, university clubs, training centers (for Christian theological education), and seminaries (that teach Christian theology).<sup>7</sup>

These partnerships provide RNGOs the space and opportunities to proselytize. Specifically, the partnerships provide opportunities to deliver educational services such as teaching courses and hosting summer Bible camps. In regions where TSPM/CCPA churches and house churches are mutually congenial they can share training sessions and workshops taught by the RNGOs.

Some RNGOs were not required to have Chinese partners in the first instance, and thus became localized partners themselves, for example, Orphanage of Joy (OJ), a RNGO operating local orphanages, daycares and schools. As their representative pointed out, the opportunity to become a localized partner is rare in China for two reasons: First, a RNGO purchasing land in China is considered a significant risk since the RNGOs may lose everything if state policies shift to their detriment. As a result, most RNGOs who have a base in China rent office space. Second, urban centers like Beijing or Shanghai seldom permit the devotion of land space to NGOs, given there are many NGOs waiting to service their region. On the other hand, if NGOs were willing to build in more remote locations they would be considered prestigious hallmarks for the local government. For instance, given the lack of NGO interest in its remote areas of operation, OJ was able to successfully purchase over 50 acres of land on which it constructed an orphanage village community in the 1990s. OJ has since begun to expand their services to include a pre-school and an international school for local students.

While OJ does not openly proselytize during official work hours, there are evening gatherings hosted on their campus where discussion of religion is permissible. Broadcasting Grace (BG), a religious broadcasting training center, suggested similar events occurred when Christian businessmen from Hong Kong built factory villages that included churches and religious events as long as it took place on community grounds. These efforts corresponded with accounts of local governments being amenable to RNGO aid given the free high-quality resources they provided.<sup>8</sup>

### **Fostering trust with the local state**

The notion of fostering relationships with the local state was a recurring theme among all interviewees. In essence, once a RNGO established a relationship based on trust with the local state they were granted permission to do their work and even tap into the local state's network of relations. Developing a trusting relationship with the government also helped RNGOs to manage regulatory hurdles.

Trust between the local state and RNGOs rests on a number of considerations. First, the background of the RNGO matters. For example, the government has a tendency to trust ethnic Chinese-operated RNGOs rather than RNGOs run by non-ethnic Chinese. For the government, there is the fear of Western RNGOs mixing political agendas with religious teaching, contrary to state philosophy, in their work. Ethnic Chinese operated RNGOs are perceived (whether correctly or not) to be trustworthy given their ethno-cultural affinity. In turn, most of the RNGOs interviewed strictly employ ethnic Chinese over their Western counterparts. In fairness, this can be credited, in part, to the fact RNGOs in China function

primarily in a Chinese social network where linguistic proficiency and an understanding of group norms is an asset.

Furthermore, trust, knowledge and awareness of RNGOs work in tandem with each other.<sup>9</sup> Once the RNGO begins to deliver quality services and has proven to the state that it is a trustworthy organization, the state will grant them more space to operate. The representative from American Theological Education Center (ATEC), a theological training RNGO, explained,

Right now we work at one of the seminaries where half of the program is provided by us. I think the Chinese government like us to do things this way. They want to first trust you and then let you do a little bit more and then eventually you can do whatever you like. I think this is their way of handling “outsiders”.

The representative from Caring for China (CFC), an organization dedicated to providing skills training and free health clinics, echoed a similar sentiment,

The strategy that I adopted is to go slow and make sure that everywhere you go, you can build success stories. Where people can come in and will be able to see the program and see the actual impact, and then you can actually build much [stronger] government support for the long run.

Most of the interviewees who interacted with the state maintained that while they first had to report their lessons and itineraries to authorities, over time this became less of a requirement since they had earned the state’s trust. In the case of some RNGOs, the state agencies they interacted with actively promoted their work to other regions.

### **Maintaining a low profile**

Maintaining a low profile was a common strategy. All the interviewees suggested that the authorities are aware of the religious activities they are conducting in China since the state has “informants” in both the TSPM/CCPA and the house churches networks. There was an acute awareness that if house churches and its constituents became too active they would be shut down by the state.

When asked to elaborate on what it meant to have a low profile, interviewees consistently reported several patterns: First, they should not promote their work publicly. If the RNGO is having a public speaker in either the TSPM/CCPA or house churches, there should not actively promote the event. In fact, sometimes the churches will announce a special guest the following week, without the benefit of additional information, in order not to compromise the event. The cases of RNGO members getting deported and blacklisted for proselytizing on the streets were given as an example of those who failed to maintain a low profile.

Relatedly, RNGOs should not advertise their work in China as a means for profiteering. In the case of ATEC, the representative recounted an occurrence where a state official mentioned that the reason they trusted ATEC was because they had read all their publications about China, and noted in particular that they found ATEC especially trustworthy since they never posted pictures of their relationship with the government as a way to boast of their accomplishments in China to raise more funding. As a result, SARA stated on numerous public occasions that ATEC was an exemplary organization and granted them nation-wide access, greatly enhancing ATEC’s network.

The collective experiences of the RNGOs in our sample shows that refraining from political comments will increase their odds for organizational survival in the long-term, and allow them to execute their mandate with little interference from the state. This finding largely aligns with the state's policy and behaviour for maintaining "social stability", since the state perceives political criticism as a destabilizing factor. As a case in point: when an interviewee was teaching at a center, he was asked for his opinion about the *Shouwang* church's criticism of central government policies. The interviewee replied by stating he had no comment. Part of his thinking here was a recollection about previous RNGO leaders who critiqued the state's policy on religion in China, and quickly became blacklisted from entering China.

Finally, the language used by RNGOs should not alarm the state. Even though the state is likely to be aware of the RNGO's activities, the RNGO needs to creatively provide a reason for the state to turn a blind eye. For instance, RNGO leaders should not call themselves "pastors", but instead go by "teacher". In email correspondences, which can be monitored by the state, words suggesting a Christian background are avoided. In addition, keeping a low profile involves being sensitive to the current political climate. The Training for China (TFC) official, representing an organization that provides theological training, gave the example of U.S. President Barack Obama visit to China in 2009. During this period the police contacted the house churches informing them they "should lay low" for two weeks until the visit was completed. In practical terms, this meant keeping all gatherings to less than 30 people and avoiding public spaces.

### **Transnationalism and the professionalization push**

There was a consensus among interviewees that the state – ironically at first glance, given the over-regulation of RNGOs and religion – perceives a need for improved Christian education and a rapid professionalization to this effect, given the high rates of conversion occurring in the nation.<sup>10</sup> Currently, each province has one TSPC recognized seminary, totaling twenty-one nationally, but only Jinling Union Theological Seminary in Nanjing has the ability to train students for a Master's degree. In many seminaries, often professors holding undergraduate degrees teach other undergrads, reflecting the low quality of theological education.

A major component of the current upskilling push comes from RNGOs that tap into their transnational networks to serve both the TSPC and the house churches' higher education initiatives. Large numbers of Western qualified educators, teaching in seminaries in Hong Kong, Canada, and the United States, are routinely flown over to China to teach at seminaries and the house church training centers. As a result, the interviewees posit that they have noticed a dramatic shift of professionalization. Some noted that while they can teach random courses in the 1990s, where students memorized and regurgitated the course content, there is now more sophisticated educational package that includes assessments, grades, and feedback.

In short, part of the state providing tacit consent<sup>11</sup> to RNGOs' activities lie in its efforts to promote sound Christian higher education, which has become synonymous with maintaining "social stability", containing and controlling negative Western influences, and creating "good citizens". This stance is qualified best from an interviewee from Missions United (MU), who maintains the old adage, "One more Christian means one less CPC member" has now changed to "One more Christian means one more 'good citizen'."

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*Views and assessments articulated in the CPI Policy Papers are that of the authors. They do not necessarily represent the views of the CPI at the University of Nottingham.*

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> See Shieh, S. (2013). *NGO Law Monitor: China*. Retrieved from: The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law: <http://www.icnl.org/research/monitor/china.html>

<sup>2</sup> See Hasmath, R. and Hsu, J. (2014). "Isomorphic Pressures, Epistemic Communities and State-NGO Collaboration in China", *The China Quarterly* 220: 936-954; Hsu, J. and Hasmath, R., eds. (2013) *The Chinese Corporatist State: Adaptation, Survival and Resistance*. New York and Oxford: Routledge.

<sup>3</sup> See Hasmath, R. and Hsu, J., eds. (2015) *NGO Governance and Management in China*. New York and Oxford: Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> See General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. (2011). "Notice of 'Suggestions for Doing a Good Job of Resisting Foreign Use of Religion to Infiltrate Institutes of Higher Education and Preventing Campus Evangelism'", Document No. 18.

<sup>5</sup> See Hasmath, R. (2014) "What Explains a Rise of Ethnic Minority Tensions in China?", Paper Presented at American Sociological Association Annual Meeting (San Francisco, USA), August 16-19.

<sup>6</sup> The sample selection was conducted through snowballing, given the difficulty of gaining access to the knowledge of the internal operations of said RNGOs since the disclosure of confidential information may jeopardize their oft-covert operations in China. Secondary data from participant observation field notes informed the interview data. Archival documents were utilized, notably websites, brochures, presentation notes, and fund-raising documents provided by interview participants and other RNGO leaders who declined in partaking in the interviews.

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<sup>7</sup> The RNGOs in our sample share several common features. Foremost, proselytizing and education are central tenets of their efforts. They are headquartered in North America with established working relationships for at least a decade with local partners in China. The RNGOs surveyed are largely ethnic Cantonese utilizing their social capital in North America to recruit skilled volunteers, and raise donations among the transnational Cantonese diaspora. In addition, most RNGOs in our sample have operational budgets of over a million US dollars, with full- and part-time staff, and volunteers.

<sup>8</sup> See Vala, C (2013) "The State-Religion Relationship in Contemporary China: Corporatism with Hegemony", in in J. Hsu and R. Hasmath (eds.) *The Chinese Corporatist State: Adaptation, Survival and Resistance*. New York and Oxford, UK: Routledge.

<sup>9</sup> See Hasmath, R. and Hsu, J. (2015) "Communities of Practice and the NGO Sector in China", Paper Presented at *Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action Conference* (Chicago, USA), November 19-21; Hsu, J. and Hasmath, R. (2015) "Approaching Maturity: The Role of Knowledge and Professionalization in the Development of Chinese NGOs", Paper Presented at *American Sociological Association Annual Meeting* (Chicago, USA), August 22-25.

<sup>10</sup> See Madsen, R. (2010). "The Upsurge of Religion in China", *Journal of Democracy*, 21(4): 58-71.

<sup>11</sup> See Hsu, J. and Hasmath, R. (2014) "The Local Corporatist State and NGO Relations in China", *Journal of Contemporary China* 23(87): 516-534.