Rationalizing (In)Capacities: The Impacts of NGOs' Ways to Mobilize Resources

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Rationalizing (In)Capacities: The Impacts of NGOs’ Ways to Mobilize Resources

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A thesis

submitted to the Faculty of

the department of Sociology

in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Boston College
Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences
Graduate School

June 2020

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Existing literature on NGOs in China depicted NGOs as either depoliticized service providers or harbinger of democracy expecting them to mobilize movements or participate in policy advocacy. However, few explain what accounts for differences in their capacities. While some scholars argue that NGOs' relations with different actors in the field have influence on variations of their capacities, they do not disaggregate what resources are mobilized in such relationship management. Extending their arguments, I argue that NGOs leverage relationships to obtain essential resources such as symbolic legitimation from the state, financial support from civil society actors and social embeddedness from constituencies to operate effectively. Drawing upon four months ethnography on three NGOs serving the needs of sex workers in greater China region, I illustrate how these NGOs are either capable of carrying out their original political mission—to decriminalize sex work in China—or deflected into service provision, through their mobilization and attainments of different resources.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This master thesis began in 2018 with an unintended tour into the field of NGOs in China. Originally interested women migrant workers, I came to know NGOs serving the needs of sex workers. I owe my great gratitude to all the NGO leaders, full-time staff, interns and sex workers I met in the field. Without them, I would never have started this adventure.

I thank professor Julia Chuang and professor Sarah Babb for instructing me through the strenuous process of composing and writing this thesis in my second language. They meticulously revised my drafts over and again and generously offered inspiring and sincere advice. I also owe special thanks to professor Wen Fan, who introduced me to the third NGO that I worked with.

I thank my fellow graduate students at BC sociology, Hellen, Isabelle, Sandra and Steven, for their warm support and advice during the write-up of this thesis.

Finally, I thank my parents in China for supporting every decision I have made.

INTRODUCTION

On July 1st 2018, crowds of people marched on the street of Hong Kong, marking its traditional rally on that day (figure 1). Crowds roar "people power!" while holding placards with various political agendas written on them. On one of the placards, I saw "sex work is work," reminding me of another plaque I saw in the new office of the NGO in mainland China I was interning for. A couple of weeks ago, I just helped this NGO serving sex workers in Shenzhen—several miles away from Hong Kong—to move into its new office due to soft repression by the local police. After unpacking, the director placed the registration certificate sealed in a photo frame solemnly on its shelves, hoping it can bless the NGO away from another crackdown. A year later, on the wall of another NGO in an inner land city Tianjin, hung yet plaques different from those I saw in the other settings: its silver-colored award plaques reading "level AAA social organization" and "outstanding organization" respectively. On the opposite wall a picture captures its director and two other staff standing alongside Peng Liyuan, wife of Xi Jinping.

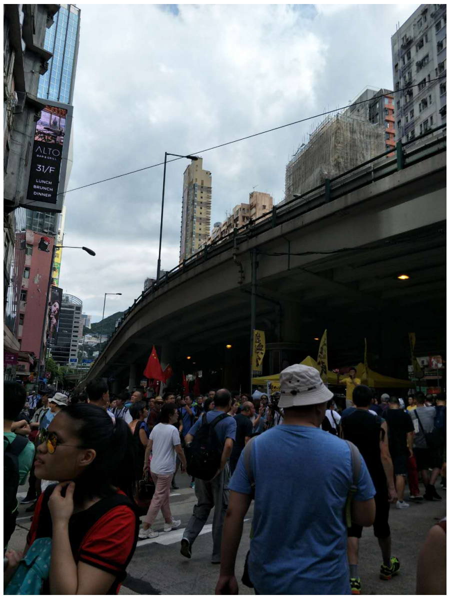

Figure 1. Rally on July 1st 2018. Photo by Fengrui Tian

In various political settings, these three forms of placards and plaques represent different symbols for each civil society organizations. In Hong Kong, citizens concerned with rights protection for sex workers can hold up high their political mission, pressuring the state to make a move; in mainland China, those political mission translate into certificate and evaluation of legitimate status granted by the state. What accounts for such variation? Why are some organizations more political capable of shouldering rights or policy advocacy while others maintain a close relationship with the state? This paper starts with these questions.

Many literature accentuate the importance of either social capital or institutional embeddedness, in the form of NGOs' relations with various actors in the field—the state, other civil society actors, and their constituencies—to explain the variegated nature of their capacities (Franceschini 2014; Yuen 2018). However, they do not differentiate between these relations or explain how or why NGOs leverage these relationships that enable or disable them to accomplish their long-term political missions. Drawing upon ethnography data from three NGOs serving the needs of sex workers in greater China—two NGOs in mainland China and one NGO in Hong Kong—I illustrate how their activities and capacities to carry out their missions are influenced by how NGOs mobilize different resources through leveraging their relationships with other essential actors.

I argue that NGOs in China differ in their ways to leverage their relations with the local state, civil society actors and constituencies to mobilize resources such as symbolic legitimation, financial support and social embeddedness. This variation is manifest in two ways. First the requirements to obtain certain resources while not others vary by the political context that NGOs are embedded in. For instance, NGO in Hong Kong does not require symbolic legitimation from the state as its counterpart in mainland China do. Second even in the same context, one type of resource has potential influence on facilitating or undermining the attainment of others. For instance, in mainland China, symbolic legitimation from the state can impede the financial support from international private foundations to NGOs in China yet can deepen their social embeddedness within their constituencies by lending NGOs more legitimacy. As a result, NGOs display variation in their capacity of carrying out their political missions.

In the following sections, I will first lay out the political context in which Chinese NGOs operate, illustrating a nascent thus whimsical field where the state exerts cycles of relaxing and constraining controls over civil society in China. Followed by the background section I illustrate the variegated nature of NGOs in China and how their activities have been studied as influenced by various forms of their interactions with other state and societal actors. Finally, drawing upon data collected on three NGOs serving the needs of sex workers, I first extend previous literature by delineating how the three cases vary in their ways of resource mobilization and thus in their ability to accomplish their political goals.

GOVERNING NGOS IN CHINA

A civil society built by grassroots actors and exist rather independently from the state is a relatively recent concept in China. During the Maoist period, civil society organizations were outlawed in China, with the exception of professional associations which were established and organized by state organs. The central state treated these associations as “transmission belts” or intermediaries facilitating social surveillance and control, and recognized the need for these organizations as a means to control influential constituencies such as workers, peasants, and businessmen (Ma 2002a; Unger and Chan 1995; Unger 1996).

When grassroots organizations emerged in late 1970s, the state treated these organizations’ existence as a stopgap measure for incomplete welfare reforms. The “reform and opening up" policy in 1978 brought substantial transition to a market economy but also left holes in a social welfare system that was formerly monopolized by the state. Specifically, the collapse of work unit (*danwei*) system—which was the main welfare provider—created the needs of alternative organizations for service and welfare provision (Howell 2004). To solve the incapacity of the state generated by 1987 reform, the state called on grassroots NGOs to fill in the holes and help to solve social problems (Saich 2000; Ho 2001; Ma 2002b; Howell 2004; Deng 2010). Regulation of these social associations was minimal until in 1989 when in response to the Tiananmen Square Movement the state bolstered its repression of large-scale associations for fear of their threat to its legitimacy (Simon 2013).

In the aftermath of Tiananmen Square Movement, state management and regulation toward social organizations were formalized for the first time to address both the dilemma of the imperative of expanding the welfare function of social organizations and the party-state's wish to extend its control over all societal sectors (Saich 2000). In 1998, the Jiang Zemin administration recognized the important role social organizations could play but the expansion of the social organization sector was at odds with state's "Leninist predisposition", which precludes the plurality of organizations (Saich 2000). Consequently, the central government promulgated a set of regulations regarding social organizations which clarified the rules and policies for social organizations to operate legally.[1]

These regulations formed the basis of NGO governance today. They require NGOs to register dually, both with Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA) and a supervisory management unit that is another government agency (Saich 2000). This has since become a considerable hurdle for grassroots NGOs, especially those lacking networks or resources to find a sponsor government agency to supervise them in obtaining legal status. Those organizations that remain unregistered organizations become illegal entities and thus cannot form contractual relations, open bank accounts, or provide transparent finance records (Ho 2001). This dual management system allows the state to place civil society organizations under close surveillance and cooptation, or choke off their existence entirely.

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[1] Regulation on Registration and Administration of Social Associations and Provisional Regulations for the Registration and Management of Civil Non-Enterprises Institutions in 1998.

NGOs in China, however, find various ways to evade the strict regulations. Some register with the Industrial and Commercial Bureau as business enterprises; others operate as branches of dormant organizations (Lu 2008). Still others simply choose not to register and thus remain underground.

For registered NGOs, relations with state had been collaborative in general. In the late 2000s, the state formed a strategy of what Teets (2013) calls "consultative authoritarianism" that at once tolerates the development of civil society and deploys more indirect and nuanced control over society. The state encourages development of NGOs in certain service provision realms while repressing others.[2] For example, after a series of natural disasters in the 2000s culminating in the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, the state recognized particular NGOs, but emphasized their role as service providers.[3] Accordingly, the 12th Five-Year Plan of 2011 addressed social organizations for the first time, recognizing their assistance in the development of the state (Han 2018). Such recognition at once brought opportunities for partnership between NGOs and the state but also channeled functions of NGOs to service delivery only.

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[2] A third round of regulations in 2016 and 2017 further consolidates this strategy (Han 2018).

[3] The earthquake not only drew considerable resources to disaster relief from non-profit sectors (Shieh and Deng 2011; Han 2018; Gao 2019) but also cultivated volunteerism and philanthropy in a new generation of citizens (Hsu 2010; Han 2018). Chinese media even called 2008 "Year of the Volunteer" or the "Year of Civil Society" (Shieh and Deng 2011).

Since Xi Jinping's administration in 2013, a third round of regulations and legislation simultaneously provided legal status for NGOs for the first time, and placed them under a system of disciplinary surveillance.[4] Consistent with Xi's "governance by law" (*yifa zhiguo*) approach, this new regime introduces a closer relation between local governments and NGOs. First, it encourages local governments to award contracts to NGOs which carry out vital social services functions in their jurisdiction (Howell 2015; Yuen 2018; Kang 2019). Second, local government bodies then provide annual evaluations of NGO performance (Kang 2019). Though the level evaluation is not mandatory, NGOs passed the evaluation are trusted by the governments, thus are more likely to be chosen to collaborate on government projects (Kang 2019). Accordingly, those with poor performances, particularly those with activities considered by the state are subject to withdrawal of their registered status. Third, the central state began to selectively relax the dual registration requirement specifically for NGOs operating in areas such as science and technology, community social services, and public-benefits (Howell 2015; Kang 2019).[5]

While this legal institutionalization of NGO governance rewards benign NGOs offering services that correspond to the state's needs, it penalizes those posing a potential threat to "national security" (Han 2018). It constrains NGOs seeking to accomplish policy advocacy goals (Yuen 2018). In contrast to the previous Hu Jintao administration which tolerated certain levels of dissidence and activism, Xi's leadership is marked by downright crackdown of contentious actions. If the Hu administration encouraged a fragmented civil society, then the Xi administration, by framing transgressions as national security matters, criminalizing dissidents and repressing preemptively, has consolidated repression (Fu and Distelhorst 2018). Many human right lawyers, labor activists, feminists were “disappeared” or publicly criminalized (Xu 2017; Fu and Distelhorst 2018). Therefore, NGOs acting in areas such as policy advocacy, human rights, and religion were not able to register or would be deregistered if found out (Simon 2013).

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[4] These laws and regulations are: Charity Law, Overseas NGO Law and Draft regulations on registration and management of three different types of social organizations (Han 2018).

[5] In addition, the Charity Law, effective in 2016 granted social organizations registered as charitable organizations benefit of public fundraising, which was not allowed for former civil non-enterprise institutions or social associations.

The state at once limits the capability of civil society organizations through crackdowns and repression and depends on them to solve social problems or complement on service provision. This interdependent relationship is well reflected in terminologies that scholars coined: dependent autonomy (Lu 2008), contingent symbiosis (Spires 2011), and consultative authoritarianism (Teets 2013). While there were fewer pressures to adopt such institutionalization prior to 2014, after the legal institutionalization since Xi regime, Chinese grassroots NGOs have to conceive ways to survive with the presence of more and more restrictive rules and regulations that now have legal effect.

NGOS CAPACITIES

In other contexts, the central question of studies of civil society revolves around civil society’s capacity to facilitate democracy (Fung 2003). However, after witnessing the Chinese state’s brutal repression of the Tiananmen Square protests, scholars of China’s civil society have had to relinquish their assumption of a public sphere that checks state power. Instead, many scholars acknowledge the variegated nature in activities of Chinese civil societies carry out. Howell (2004) for instance discerns tensions between a depoliticized civil society concerned with “philanthropy, service and public goods” and a politicized public sphere that promotes rights and checks state power (Howell 2004: 163). Scholars studying a depoliticized civil society in China thus depict civil society organizations as providers of services and public goods, mobilizing resources to survive (Hsu 2010; Hsu and Hasmath 2014). Other scholars view civil society organizations as able to mobilize and advocate rights for their constituencies (Fu 2017) and participate in policy making process thus altering political outcomes (Ho 2001; Yang 2005; Mertha 2009; Zhou 2018).

While this body of literature contributes to our understanding of various forms of civil societies in an authoritarian state, few scholars have examined what accounts for this variegated nature in NGOs' activities. Why are some civil society organizations in China deeply embedded in society, while others are coopted by the state? Why are some politically agentic while others marginalized? I argue that civil society organizations vary in terms of their capacities to carry out their missions and to maintain their positioning among their constituencies, and that this capacity is facilitated or constrained by how NGOs leverage their relationships with other actors to mobilize different resources.

Previous literature views the incapacity of NGOs carrying out political missions as a consequence of their linkages with both local state and other actors. Lee and Shen (2011) for example contend that far from facilitate solidarity, labor NGOs in China are "anti-solidarity machines" caught by either state cooptation or market commercialization (Lee and Shen 2011). Other scholars emphasize that lack in social capital (Franceschini 2014), represented by their weak relations with their constituencies, the state and donors, labor NGOs in China can hardly be a "progressive force for political change" (Franceschini 2014). Extending Jing (2018)'s view of NGOs in China as both state agents and social actors, Yuen (2018) further proposes institutional embeddedness—measured by the difference between the extent of relationships an NGO shares with local state actors and the number of external linkages it shares with the civil society actors—to explain their relative success in social activism, defined as activism through the delivery of social services to constituencies. Yuen argues that NGOs with balanced institutional embeddedness in both state and other society actors can achieve success in service activism (Yuen 2018).

These studies rightly recognize NGOs' relations with local state actors and other civil society actors influencing their capacities in carrying out their political missions. However, they do not disaggregate the types of relationships that NGOs build with these actors, or elucidate under what conditions NGOs engage them. In doing so, they treat these determinant factors as a monolithic conglomerate under the umbrella of either social capital or institutional embeddedness. They also obscure that NGOs are strategic actors which leverage social networks to mobilize specific resources.

I build on and extend this literature on NGO embeddedness by asking under what conditions, what types of resource mobilization enhance or constrain the political capacity of civil society organizations, defined as the extent to which civil society actors can challenge central state authority and advocate for its constituencies. In a typical case, NGOs leverage relationships with local state and civil society actors for two primary reasons: to gain financial support and to build the community rapport required to carry out their social mission. For example, many Chinese NGOs are funded by international NGOs like Oxfam or the Ford Foundation; and many are mutually interlinked in order to share membership lists. NGOs also leverage relationships with constituents that help NGO staff to understand the critical needs of their constituencies thus build solidarity among them. However, in an authoritarian regime where the central state has selectively criminalized some areas of NGO engagement but not others, NGOs also require symbolic legitimation in the form of state recognition in order to operate effectively.

Symbolic legitimation further intervenes with NGOs' attainment of the other two resources, financial support and social embeddedness. Dual registration, affiliation with local governments, and contract work with local state bodies can signal symbolic legitimation to local state actors as trusted entities thus viewed as accountable partner for collaboration instead of subjects to crackdowns. Symbolic legitimation from the state also ensures potential constituencies that individual affiliation with these NGOs will not lead to arrest or police harassment. How NGOs leverage their relations with different actors to succeed in or fail to access to these resources—financial support, social embeddedness, and symbolic legitimation—shape their capacities to carry out self-identified political missions.

DATA AND METHOD

To assess the types of institutional embeddedness that enable NGOs to act as political agents in authoritarian China, I examine three NGOs serving the needs of sex workers. Sex work is particularly subject to legal and political repression in China. Since 1987, sex workers and their clients have been legally subject to detentions, fines, and compulsory re-education under the Custody and Education system (C&E).[6] Furthermore, under the current Xi administration, the sex work industry has been caught between corrupt police who customarily collect bribes from sex workers in exchange for turning a blind eye to the industry, and a nation-wide police "campaign against the black and evil" (*saohei chu'e*). Despite the controversial nature of sex work, NGOs in the sex work advocacy space have set a high bar for themselves with regard to political capacity: one NGO (included in this study) worked for several years towards pressuring the central state to abolish the C&E system.

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[6] The Law on Penalties for Administration of Public Security stipulates that sex workers and their clients can be detained by police for ten to 15 days and/or fined up to 5,000 yuan. In 1991, National People's Congress Standing Committee passed the Decision of the Standing Committee of the NCP on Strictly Prohibiting Prostitution and the Visiting of Prostitutes (the Decision). In 1993, State Council promulgated the Measure on the Custody and Education of Prostitutes and their Clients (the Measure). It was the Decision that authorized the public security organs to force sex workers and their associated clients to "assemble for compulsive education in law and morality and participation in productive labor" (Asia Catalyst 2013), and the Measure provides detailed ways to practice C&E.

In order to capture each NGO's strategic attempts to cultivate specific political and social relationships, I conducted four months of ethnographic fieldwork while working as an unpaid NGO volunteer. In 2018 I worked for two months at an NGO in Shenzhen which I call Red Sun Center (RSC). During my stay at RSC, I was granted a visit to the second NGO, Honghua in Hong Kong. I participated in community outreach activities along with Honghua staff and several other RSC staff for 5 days. In 2019 I worked for two months at an NGO in Tianjin, which I call Home of Love (HOL). Crucially, all three NGOs share a similar mission—decriminalize sex work in China.

All three NGOs are grassroots organizations that are not established by the government. Both RSC and HOL are registered at local branches of the Ministry of Civil Administration as civil non-enterprise institutions. Honghua on the other hand is an independent NGO that has no affiliation with any governmental agencies. All three NGOs are small organizations that consist of fewer than five full-time, paid staff members. RSC and Honghua regularly recruit college students as interns while HOL recruits sex workers working as volunteers. Given my age and gender, I was treated more like an intern than a scholar. This allows me to build rapport with both staff members and interns at RSC and HOL. The benefit is that staff were able to reveal more openly whatever is on their minds. Therefore, along with formal interviews, I was able to gain insights by observing their daily interactions with different actors in the field, such as government officials and their beneficiaries.

At all three organizations, my regular duty was to engage in community outreach with sex workers, accompanied by full-time staff and other interns. In addition, at RSC and HOL, I participated in writing up monthly newsletters, organizing events, and helping with administrative work. By working closely with NGO personnel, I absorbed individual staff members' viewpoints on their contracts with state agencies, as well as NGO founders' motivations for pursuing strategic partnerships. During outreach visits, I also observed NGO personnel interactions with state employees at various local government agencies. Finally, I supplement my ethnographic data with four semi-structured, two-hour interviews with NGO leadership. I also collected primary literature produced by these NGOs including newsletters. I did interviews and transcribed in Chinese, and translated into English. I recorded the interviews with the informants' permission. All the informants are given pseudonyms.

WAYS OF RESOURCE MOBILIZATION

This paper, by constructing a three-case comparison between sex workers NGOs operating in Hong Kong and mainland China, attempts to illustrate how NGOs leverage their relations with the local state, civil society actors, and constituencies to mobilize symbolic legitimation, financial support and social embeddedness, has impact on variations of their political capacities. In the following sections, I first illustrate how these three NGOs leverage their relationships with different actors to succeed in or fail to obtain certain resources. Following it I elucidate how the presence or absence of these resources influence on their political capacities. To access to more potential constituencies, all three NGOs conduct regular outreach to sex workers. The major difference of political capacities thus can be captured in their tactics used in outreach and how they rationalize these practices.

Honghua

Operating in a civil society that are relatively free from state intervention, Honghua is an ideal typical case that does not require symbolic legitimation from the Chinese state to operate effectively. Honghua possesses both the financial support independent from state agencies and is well-embedded within its local society. It has the long-term goal as decriminalizing sex work in Hong Kong and devotes on the mission accordingly.

Hong Kong, a special administrative region, is governed under a “One Country, Two Systems” policy which enables it to have certain degree of political autonomy, and to maintain its “capitalistic and democratic core” (Wong et al. 2008). After Hong Kong’s transfer of sovereignty from the British back to Chinese rule in 1997, the region has maintained de facto autonomy from authoritarian rule. As a result, a nascent yet robust civil society functions in Hong Kong: pro-democracy protests such as the Umbrella Movement in 2014 and the 2019 protests demonstrate a civil society eager to challenge the existing political power.

In the Hong Kong criminal law system, sex work is not illegal. However, sex work is placed in a gray zone where laws restrict certain actions such as solicitation for an immoral purpose, living off the earnings of others’ prostitution, etc. (Lim 2008). As a result, sex workers in Hong Kong are no less vulnerable from threats. In addition, many sex workers in Hong Kong are migrants from mainland China and other countries. They are more vulnerable to violence because exposure of identities might provoke deportation due to their illegal status working with temporary visas. Honghua thus exists to fight against the violence and protect the basic rights of sex workers.

Due to its location in Hong Kong, Honghua is not subject to state intervention pervasive in mainland China thus does not require symbolic legitimation from the local state. Far from requiring the local state's recognition, Honghua was established to protest against the monopolization and abuse of power in hands of the state. Honghua's initiatives were situated in a vibrant labor protest context, that argues the exploitation of sex work is similar to oppressions of other forms of labor (Lim 2008). Honghua was established by a group of women activists in 1996 (Lim 2008). One of Honghua's early founders is known as a labor activist as she claims that she started working for factory unions at a young age (Yan and Yao 2012). On its website, Honghua defines itself as an NGO "formed by people of different working experiences. They are social workers, labor activists, researchers specializing in women studies and church workers etc. who care and concern about the interest and basic rights of women." Therefore, Honghua believes that sex work as a form of legitimate work.

Honghua enjoys financial autonomy from the state. It secures its funding mostly either from international organizations or local charities (Lim 2008) so it does not collaborate with any forms of local state agencies. It occasionally has project-oriented fund, but it collaborates with churches instead of CDCs. To understand the needs of its constituencies, Honghua outreaches to a wide range of sex workers in Hong Kong. The aforementioned leader later became a sex workers herself and referred to it as "depraved" together along with sisters (Yan and Yao 2012). Honghua thus gradually built reputation among constituencies and even helped to establish individual organizations catering to the needs of sex workers with different backgrounds: local Hong Kong sex workers, migrant sex workers, and transgender sex worekrs to name only a few (Yan and Yao 2012).

With financial support independent from the state system and a solid standing within its constituencies, Honghua thus is able to accomplish its political mission, mobilizing rights for and among sex workers (Lim 2008). Honghua mediates relations between society and the state, and given its mission as a legal advocacy group, it at once expands the space for available public discourse around sex work and checks state power abuses that violate basic human rights of sex workers. For example, Honghua staff often interacted with local Hong Kong police, either to appeal for police protection on behalf of sex workers, or to protest corrupt police officers who illegally seized sex workers' profits. In this vein, Honghua is not simply providing social services, or filling in the void of social welfare that state fails to accomplish. It exists with an explicit mission to negotiate with existing institutions, instead of collaborating with them.

In sum, Honghua is able to operate as an NGO working for protecting the rights of sex workers with absolute autonomy. Though nascent since 1997, Hong Kong's civil society is vibrant and capable of shouldering accountabilities to check and challenge state power, at least compared with its mainland counterparts. Further benefitted from sufficient financial support from other civil society and societal actors and its deep social embeddedness with its constituencies, Honghua is able to develop a rights-based approach to its constituencies sex workers and represent their interests.

By contrast, NGOs in mainland China, although working on the same agenda, cannot completely imitate Honghua's rights advocacy approach. Though Honghua attempted to expand its services to sex workers in mainland China—it trained similar organizations in places such as Beijing, Shandong, Yunnan—their approaches are mostly service provision and remain relatively "discreet and inconspicuous" (Lim 2008). Owing to state repression on collective action and censorship on public debate, a traditional Tocquevillian civil society serving as a counter force to state power is absent in mainland China. As a result, NGOs operating in mainland China require symbolic legitimation granted by the state and its interactions with financial support and social embeddedness further rendered incapacities in carrying out their political missions in different ways.

RSC

Located in Shenzhen—a southern city just seeing Hong Kong across a river—RSC has long been subject to state repression and struggled with obtaining symbolic legitimation to no avail. In early years, lacking in symbolic legitimation from the state provokes numerous repression from local authorities and RSC was forced to relocate many times. Though RSC secured basic legitimation by registering with a local MOCA, without close personal connections with any individual state agencies or agents RSC was yet again subject to state repression. The state repression further made RSC lose its core support from international NGOs and it was forced to grow dependent on local state funding to survive. As a result, this relegated the organization to community-oriented service provision. Accordingly, though RSC is aware of similar threats that their constituencies face as their Hong Kong counterparts, it is incapable of carrying out similar advocacy approach as Honghua does because its mission was diluted to catering to a broader population.

In early years, RSC attempted to imitate Honghua's rights advocacy approach but failed due to illegality of sex work in China and state repression on civil society. The history of RSC dates back to Beijing in 2006 when Jingmin, RSC's current director, was introduced to one of the leaders of Honghua. Jingmin and her colleagues tried to imitate Honghua's methods of legal aid to sex workers, but soon found these methods impractical in mainland China. In the runup to the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, a central state crackdown on sex work debilitated RSC as it lost potential constituencies. National "strike-hard" campaigns ("*yanda*") are not uncommon in

China especially right before important political events (Kaufman 2011).These crackdowns on sex work industry evicted sex workers out of Beijing thus RSC lost access to outreach to service targets, therefore lost its meaning to operate in Beijing. No longer a suitable place to operate against the local government, RSC relocated to Tianjin, a neighbor city of Beijing.

Their outreach continued in Tianjin. There, RSC staff attempted to apply the methods they learned at Honghua: negotiating sex workers' interactions with the police. However, a conflict with the Tianjin local police eventually made Jingmin and her colleagues targets of repression. After providing aid to a sex worker who was enmeshed in a troublesome affair with a local gang, RSC reported the situation to the police. However, the police sided with the gang, which collected "protection fees" from sex workers, due to its longstanding corrupt practice of receiving a portion of these fees. Instead, the police used the case to begin investigating RSC's status, even confiscating RSC documents to bring charges against the NGO.

Why did Honghua's methods of direct police confrontation fail when implemented in Tianjin? First, before C&E was abolished, Chinese police shared a longstanding corrupt relationship with sex workers. Sex workers bribe the police either to obtain information about coming crackdowns or to avoid long-stretching custody in facilities.[7] Advocating for sex workers' rights and confronting with the police power thus undermine the police's revenues. Second, local state methods of repression on civil society organizations, through soft tactics of interference and harassment, were frequently applied in Tianjin. Sex work, while tolerated in Hong Kong, is illegal in mainland China, and the police viewed RSC as a party abetting illegality rather than an organization advocating for legitimate sex workers' rights.

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[7] Since the C&E was no longer allowed in mainland China recently, sex workers didn't need to bribe the police that much since the punishment of detention for 15 days is less severe compared to custody for at least 6 months.

After Jingmin and a colleague of hers suffered weeks of police harassment, they decided to shut down the organization in Tianjin. Both relocated to separate cities and continued the mission of RSC in their respective sites. Jingmin thus settled down in Shenzhen in 2011. In addition, after so many forced relocations, Jingmin was adamant to stop operating underground and formally register the NGO because lack in symbolic legitimation from the state provoked repression. She attempted to register the organization but registration hurdles were high at that time in Shenzhen. Jingmin did not have the 100,000 yuan required to register RSC with a district MOCA; registration with the city MOCA on the other hand was infeasible without an appropriate supervisory agency. Therefore, Jingmin's organization remained underground until in 2015, when registration rules were relaxed. Jingmin managed to register with a district MOCA as an NGO serving migrant workers on its official claim.

As RSC only registered with a local MOCA without constructing individual relationships with any specific state agencies, the symbolic legitimation was minute. As a result, even with a legitimate status, RSC was not free from repression by the police. In 2018 when I interned at RSC, it was once again forced to move its office from downtown to a suburb of Shenzhen. Two weeks before I started my internship, RSC was notified by the landlord that its lease was up, a decision which had been motivated by local police pressure. RSC's former staff said that the police did not tell them specific reasons but they suspect that it was because of its services to sex workers. Later looking retrospectively in a meeting with interns, one of RSC's former staff, Yumeng thought that the message conveyed was clearly soft repression. Although the moving cost was not substantially high, it could still be devastating for a small NGO like RSC. For fear of provoking even harder repression based on past experiences, RSC did not confront the police.

Instead, it packed up and moved into an office located in a rural residential neighborhood and expanded its service scope to community residents.

The relocation this time transformed the RSC to a community-based organization that collaborates with local residents' committees on government projects. The transformation seemed natural given the office's proximity to a residential neighborhood. Interviews with RSC staff however, revealed that another reason for the transformation was state surveillance of international NGOs, which came in form of encouraging local governments purchase of NGOs' services. Earlier in 2018, RSC lost its core funding from Oxfam, which had been a major sponsor of RSC, offering annual grants as large as 200,000 RMB and more. Oxfam's funding was critical for RSC's survival as the nature of core support funding rendered RSC more space to use the money at its discretion, contrasted by project-oriented funding that limits the ways of expenditure. RSC thus used Oxfam funding to cover institutional costs such as rents, personnel salaries. Losing its support was devastating to RSC's survival, so it had to seek for alternative funding sources.

The withdrawal of Oxfam funding to Chinese NGOs is an indirect result of the state repression on INGOs. Before Xi regime, domestic NGOs in China often receive funding from international NGOs (or INGOs) (Shieh and Brown-Inz 2013; Fulda 2013; Kang 2019), but a newly enacted law[8] on regulating INGOs has dried up this funding source. Meanwhile, in a move to coopt now resource-starved NGOs, the Chinese state offered its own funding sources to Chinese NGOs through encouraging local governments to purchase their social services.

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[8] In 2016 the National People's Congress promulgated a law on managing INGOs in China (Li 2019). The law stipulates that all INGOs in China to register with the Public Security Bureau before holding activities including funding domestic NGOs (Fu and Distelhorst 2018; Li 2019). Those fail to do so can be forced to stop working in China (Hsu and Teets 2016).

As mentioned earlier, the Chinese government encouraged local states to contract social services from NGOs after seeing their performances in the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008. Municipalities allocate significant funds—for example, the Shenzhen government allocated 2 million RMB per local residential neighborhood in 2018—which fund contracts with registered social organizations, corporations, and other enterprises to carry out social services in collaboration with residential neighborhoods.[9] The NGO contracting process is competitive, with district governments soliciting NGO project proposals and inviting "experts" to review and evaluate them. After losing Oxfam funding, RSC simply relied on government funding by collaborating with local residential communities. In the two years that RSC became majority government funded, the organization has delivered contracted services to full-time mothers, sanitation workers and children. In doing so, RSC's political mission was diluted and its practices were no longer concentrated on delivering services to sex workers. Accordingly, RSC deploys a casual talk approach to outreach sex workers, rationalized by its staff as therapeutic, thus sidestepping more critical needs of their constituency that it is incapable of responding to.

In sum, lack in symbolic legitimation from the local state incurred state repression, which jeopardized RSC's financial autonomy. As a result, RSC had to resort to reliance on funding from the local state and collaboration with local residential neighborhoods to survive. RSC failed to carry out its political mission and transformed into a community-based NGO majorly offering service provision to diluted constituencies.

HOL

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[9] 中共深圳市委办公厅深圳市人民政府办公厅印发《关于进一步加强和规范"民生微实事"工作的指导意见》的通知 http://www.sz.gov.cn/cn/xxgk/zfxxgj/zcfg/szsfg/content/post_6580468.html

Located in Tianjin—a city near to Beijing—HOL proactively sought for symbolic legitimation from the state from the outset. It secured state symbolic legitimation by registering at an early stage and building a rather stable and individualized affiliations with local state agencies. This shielded HOL from potential state repression. Compared with RSC which ended up having the local state as its sole funder, HOL maintained relative diverse sources of funding, offered by international and domestic foundations, local state and Center for Disease Control (CDC). Contrary to RSC, which was forced to obtain state affiliation caused by funding loss, HOL proactively rationalizes the symbolic legitimation as facilitating its social embeddedness among its constituency. Accordingly, HOL constructed and reinforced a sanitized discourse of sex workers, addressing their public health concerns and practicing stigma management of its constituencies, even though it was also aware that the crucial needs of sex workers lie in decriminalization.

HOL was founded by four sex workers in 2008. One of them, a middle-tiered sex worker named Shulan, would later become HOL's director. Shulan was inspired by voluntary activities she participated in at NGOs working on AIDS prevention and sought to expand peer education about AIDS prevention to sex workers as well. Shulan recalls that at first she was desperate turning to anybody for funding but as a rural woman with little education, she knew only complaining rather than appealing. Later in 2009, Shulan learned to write program proposals with the assistance of other activists and scholars and managed to solicit funding from international foundations. HOL began to take form as Shulan enriched her toolkit necessary for running a formal organization.

Under Shulan's leadership, HOL preferentially recruits sex workers to serve as NGO personnel, because Shulan believes it can raise their consciousness and empower themselves. In the beginning, HOL thus operated as a bottom-up organization established by sex workers and for their own well-being. Accentuating its grassroots feature, Shulan comments that HOL is a "wild child" (*ye haizi*), contrasted by RSC which has Honghua as its teacher.

As early as around 2012, HOL secured a legitimate status by registering with Bureau of Commerce and Industry, which is not uncommon among Chinese NGOs who feel registering with MOCA was too high a hurdle. Further, international private funding channels such as Oxfam and Ford Foundation enabled HOL to offer services to sex workers, without diluting its agenda by serving broader marginalized groups. Like RSC, in early years HOL focused exclusively on sex workers agenda, both by raising public awareness and policy advocacy approach. For instance, HOL produced a short movie based on the true story of a sex worker. Contrary to previous sex workers' image depicted in popular media as innocent victims of trafficking or morally corrupt whores, the short movie depicted a sex worker who accidentally stepped into the sex industry due to economic hardship, but eventually came to enjoy the sexual pleasure brought by her work. The movie was nominated for a prize in Cannes Film Festival.

In addition, HOL pursued policy advocacy, rather than intervening at the community level or acting as a legal advocate. A prime example of this approach is HOL's work on abolishing the custody and education system (C&E) ("*shourong jiaoyu*"), a central state policy mentioned earlier which exploited labor of sex workers when they were put in long-term custody in the facilities. By collaborating with Asia Catalyst, a think tank, on writing a report on the issue,[10] and helping to gather signatures from 108 experts, activists and politicians, HOL aided in persuading an NPC standing committee member[11] to propose the abolishment during its annual meeting. Activists began to take move after a similar system "Reeducation through Labor" ("*laodong gaizao*") was abolished in 2013. Even though a small move, it was effective as in this year the abolishment was officially approved, reported by Chinese media as progress toward lawful governance.[12]

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[10] Details about this report can be found https://asiacatalyst.org/blog/tag/custody-and-education/.

[11] NPC (National People's Congress) Standing Committee is China's legislative body.

To gain a more legitimate appearance (*baozhuang*) in the eyes of the state, HOL decided to register with a local MOCA and with a district level Women's Federation (WF)[13] as its supervisory agency in 2015. It began to implement government projects in 2017. Unlike RSC, which registered with local district MOCA only after it was forced to relocate, HOL proactively sought for the formal affiliation. Since serving sex workers will not be a legitimate cause for a registered NGO, HOL expanded its official service scope to migrant women in general. HOL concealed the true service targets, sex workers from WF and reported to it as an NGO concerned with the well-being of migrant women. When I was in the field, HOL was implementing a project it contracted with MOCA about improving life quality of migrant population in Tianjin. As part of many of its activities, HOL designed a one-day workshop that helps to improve the relationships between migrant workers and their children.

Unlike RSC, which lost its financial support due to state's intervention on INGOs and relies on state legitimation to obtain financial support, HOL does not rely on government projects for obtaining financial resources. On the contrary, the director Shulan complained that HOL loses money doing government projects to the extent that "they are exploiting" it. The administrative process in implementing government projects is more strenuous than other projects funded by international or Chinese foundations. Specifically, the administrative paperwork that social organizations are required to submit is meticulous, sometimes to an absurd extent. HOL staff must be more careful with government projects because a spurious number on its accounting records might provoke further distrust and repression. State guidelines for reimbursements were equally byzantine, in ways that left NGOs with little space for using government funding to cover their actual operating costs.

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[12] http://www.bjnews.com.cn/opinion/2020/04/03/712566.html

[13] The national level All-China Women's Federation is one of a few state-authorized mass organizations which acted as bridges between the CCP and the people. Most WF personnel are party cadres (Simon 2013). Other mass organizations include All-China Federation of Trade Unions, Communist Youth League of China, and All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce.

Instead, symbolic legitimation helps HOL to either conceal or sanitize stigma associated with sex work thus enhances its legitimacy both in the eyes of the state and its constituencies. Symbolic legitimation enabled by government affiliation first lends HOL more legitimacy by shielding it from potential state inspection. As Shulan herself notes, HOL signed a service provision contract with local MOCA to make its existence more "rational". This legitimacy became particularly valuable to HOL when the NGO encountered troubles with the local police.

For example, two months before I came to intern, HOL was experiencing a hard time due to an ongoing anti-corruption campaign (*saohei chu'e*), which largely limited activities of sex industry as the police cracked down on sex workers in Tianjin. During this period, a sex worker knowing HOL was arrested, and disclosed to the police a narrative that HOL had been gathering sex workers together and to teach them anti-government laws. As a result, Shulan was "invited" to the police station and questioned by them. During her police visit, Shulan showed the aforementioned contract HOL signed with the city MOCA to the police. To account for the charge of gathering sex workers for mobilization, Shulan showed the police the contents of the project written in their contract with MOCA, which included offering legal and health lectures to migrant population. Since this accounted for the gathering, and the police did not possess other evidence of anti-government actions, Shulan was set free. Without the contract, HOL would not be able to get around with the police.

Furthermore, HOL rationalizes the state legitimation as a way to facilitate its social embeddedness among sex workers: addressing their health concerns and managing a sanitized image of sex workers. Symbolic legitimation enables HOL to collaborate with CDC projects. The rather countable and profitable practices of STIs checks seemingly magnify HOL's efficacy, thus further justify its existence. In addition, HOL staff believe that the symbolic legitimation enhances its social embeddedness as sex workers trust organizations with more affiliation with the government. As a result, HOL reconfigures the discourse of sex workers and address their needs simply as ordinary migrant women. Accordingly, it tailored its approaches to sex workers, managing their image to match the discourse and increasing mutual interactions between sex workers and the public. This at once draws sex workers closer to the public view and deepens public understanding of a relatively just image of sex workers as hustling family care-takers. I will unpack these consequences in the following section.

To sum up, while Honghua serves as an ideal type of civil society organization that possesses both financial support and social embeddedness, exemption from a requirement of state symbolic legitimation is equally important to its political capacity to carry out rights advocacy mission. By contrast, though RSC had certain level of social embeddedness and financial support before it was repressed, a necessity of gaining symbolic legitimation intervenes with its financial autonomy. This diminished political capacity of RSC as it was drawn further away from its original rights advocacy approach owing to diluted service targets. Finally, through building more intimate relations with local state agencies, HOL was able to obtain more symbolic legitimation from the state than RSC. While lending HOL more legitimacy, the symbolic legitimation however, is used to enhance its social embeddedness with its constituencies. This in turn reconfigures the discourse of sex workers, thus influencing its political capacities by deviating from policy advocacy toward depoliticized public health initiatives and self-sanitizing image management.

VARIATION IN POLITICAL CAPACITIES

Standing Up to the State, Protecting Basic Rights

As mentioned earlier, Honghua does not require symbolic legitimation from the state; quite the opposite, it challenges the local state's authority that violates legal rights of sex workers. By intervening directly between police and sex workers, Honghua functions as a legal advocate for its constituencies. Before jumping to detailed strategies of Honghua deploys to protect their rights, I will first introduce background of sex industry in Hong Kong.

There are various forms of sex work in Hong Kong, including sex workers operating one woman brothels (*yeit lao yeit fong*), Karaoke hostesses, and street walkers, depending on types of services provided, their workplace and revenues.[14] Sex workers in Hong Kong come from a more diverse background than their counterparts in mainland China. They are Hong Kong citizens, mainland Chinese, and foreign migrants typically from Asian countries such as Philippines and Thai. The client profile has more diverse backgrounds as well. Clients to one-woman brothels are in various ages and occupations. Most of the local Hong Kong sex workers are commonly found in one-woman brothels, which are small apartments where independent sex workers operate. Sex workers used the space they rent both as brothels and living space, where they decorated with a thematic setting and basic living essential furniture. During worktime, sex workers dressed in their outfits and wait for clients to come. In an apartment building where many sex workers hold their brothels, clients can wander around and shop the entire building, knocking on their doors, checking out sex workers and asking prices.

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[14] http://www.ziteng.org.hk/eng/the-sex-trade-industry-in-hong-kong.

As in other regions, the public discourse on sex work is stigmatized as “dirty” and immoral (Wong et al 2011). Such typical public discourse on sex work pushed sex workers into a more vulnerable space. For instance, the police could act as clients and solicit sex worker into doing illegal behaviors before they can arrest them. Or they ask sex workers to perform free sex with them, threatening with detention if disobeying their order (Yan and Yao 2012). Clients on the other hand can rape sex workers, verbally abuse them, refuse to pay after service, and take their photos and videos while having sex with them.

Comparing itself to the wild grass that is able to survive in adverse circumstances, Honghua helps sex workers to fight against these abuse and harassment by providing them with legal aids and protection from the violence. Their approaches are roughly three-fold: protecting rights of sex workers through challenging laws and policies that are not in favor of sex workers, fighting for more political opportunities through lobbying politicians and attending rallies, and raising public awareness about sex workers through training volunteers (Yan and Yao 2012).

Fighting a war

Operating as a legal advocate, Honghua’s framing revolves around “fighting a war” (Yan and Yao 2012). According to one of its leaders, the biggest challenge for sex workers is power abuse of the police and restrictions of the law. What Honghua is fighting against, thus is majorly the law “that is supposed to protect sex workers, instead of currently misused to exploit them” (Yan and Yao 2012).

Accordingly, in early years Honghua mobilizes sex workers to “sue” the police when their rights are violated. However it was not as easy as filing a lawsuit against labor disputes owing to ambiguous legislative regulations on sex workers and public discrimination against sex work. To fight for more political space to ensure the basic rights of sex workers, Honghua actively participates in politics through either lobbying politicians or going on the street for rallies and marches. Since candidates used to crack down on sex work to win for more support, sex workers in Hong Kong oftentimes faced with more oppressions during election seasons. Honghua for instance, challenged such politicians by openly condemning them on a newspaper. It eventually collected signatures filling in over half of one page of the paper (Yan and Yao 2012). They also went on marches to protest a party against its self-contradictory and discriminating discourses on sex workers. Through years of lobbying, Honghua claims that there are several senators willing to openly support sex workers (Yan and Yao 2012).

Over years, Honghua also actively participated in many protests and social movements, mostly collectively with other labor rights organizations (Yan and Yao 2012). For instance, they attended March on July 1st—a traditional march in Hong Kong protesting on civil human rights—and went on march on Labor Day. They raised up high mottos such as “sex work is work” and “decriminalize sex work.” Large scale protests in Hong Kong are regular and in most of the times take place in order. Organizations with various political interests often seize these opportunities to advocate for changes. Given the vibrant political environment and autonomy of Hong Kong political system, Honghua was able to join with other organizations and advocate rights for sex workers in those occasions.

In Honghua’s rationale then, rather than obtaining symbolic legitimation from the local state, the legitimacy of which is at stake and the authority of it is viable to be challenged.

Through at least 10 years of efforts, Honghua helped to largely mitigate the police harassment and they grew more willing to deal with reports of sex workers about ill-behaved clients. As its founder claims that "at least now the police are willing to sit down and talk to all the *yeit lou yeit fong* in Hong Kong every three months" (Yan and Yao 2012). Honghua thus believes that it would decriminalize sex work in Hong Kong eventually, through efforts of continuing this war.

Legal counselling

Accordingly, the major tactic of Honghua's outreach is legal counselling. Its outreach thus involves little or no casual talk. Honghua staff focus on disseminating legal knowledge to new sex workers and collecting their complaints about police abuse and clients harassment. A typical Honghua site visit involves its staff touring the entire building where sex workers operate their one-woman brothels. Staff members or volunteers of Honghua knock on each of their doors, introduce the organization and its mission, and ask if they know about their basic rights as sex workers in Hong Kong. In each issue of their newsletters, Honghua reports how many complaints about abuse and harassment from the police and the clients were collected since the last issue to raise awareness of sex workers.

During my first outreach activity with Honghua, I was surprised by this straightforward approach. I had been trained by RSC to stay as long as possible in their brothels and engage in small talk in order to establish rapport with sex workers. On one occasion, I stayed in a sex worker's brothel, developing a long conversation with the sex worker, only to be interrupted by a long-term volunteer knocking on the door and reminding me that we should go. When we were out in the hallway, she told me that we are not supposed to be in there for more than 15 minutes because our presence would disrupt their business. "If sex workers want small talk," another Honghua staff told me, "they can always go to see therapists. Or just church will do."

In addition, Honghua offers strategic advice to sex workers to solve these abuses and concerns. For instance, a full-time staff Gin described how they helped to deal with misbehaving clients ("*suike*") taking secret sex photos of sex workers. A sex worker reported to Honghua about a client taking pictures of her while having sex, and threatened her to post them on social media. Honghua helped to identify the client and posted his pictures all over the walls of the apartment building where the sex worker worked, thus both revealed his face and reminded other sex workers that he is a suike. Honghua also wrote in its newsletters about similar event that sex workers reported their sex videos taken by "candid cameras" being uploaded on popular websites. Honghua contacted the uploader of the video and successfully asked him to remove it. Honghua also accompanies sex workers with charges going on court and make sure that their legal rights are respected.

To raise the public awareness about sex workers to make them more visible and less stigmatized, Honghua also publishes on sex work related topics and train volunteers. Its staff members collaborate with scholars and activists doing research on sex workers and publish relevant findings. They follow up new policies related to sex workers in other countries around the world. They also collect and publish violent incidents on sex workers reported in the news, in most of the cases, murder of sex workers. In addition, they regularly train volunteers from the society and organize lectures by sex workers in universities to increase mutual communication (Yan and Yao 2012).

As a result, Honghua is able to represent interests of its constituencies sex workers and confront the authorities to push the boundaries between the legal and the illicit. Starting as collective activism, Honghua is able to carry out its missions without deflections and maintain autonomy without cooptation or rarely with repression by the state. By contrast, its counterpart in the neighbor city Shenzhen—though only several miles away—is limited to deploy depoliticized strategy in lieu of rights advocacy. While Honghua is allowed to push boundaries, RSC is faced with a more constraining environment, thus can only resort to a casual talk tactic in its outreach, backed up by a therapeutic rationale.

Sidestepping Repression, Offering Camaraderie

In the suburb of Shenzhen where RSC operates, NGO work is depoliticized and transformed into community service. RSC's premises have thus become a space of solidarity where staff offer therapeutic services to sex workers.

Shenzhen is home to a vibrant sex industry like other major cities in China. Shenzhen, one of the earliest special economic zones assigned by former premier leader Deng Xiaoping, has a relaxed tax regime and financial policies that are conducive to business development. Because of this, the local job market is more vibrant in Shenzhen compared with other Chinese cities. In addition, due to its proximity to Hong Kong, the city has frequent cross-border transactions and foreign investment business deals. On the other end of the economic spectrum, this vibrant economic activity also attracts migrant labor from inland, rural provinces.

The sex industry in Shenzhen is highly stratified, ranging from high end sex workers catering to Hong Kong businessmen working in starred hotels to street walkers living in less privileged rented apartments in city villages.[15] RSC serves low-end sex workers who either open their brothels disguised as massage parlors or barber shops, or solicit on the street. They gather mostly in city villages of Shenzhen. The client profile accordingly is multi-tiered. Businessmen from

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[15] City villages ("*cheng zhong cun*") are used-to-be rural villages transformed into local resident neighborhoods. They mostly located in periphery districts of Shenzhen so rent is lower.

Hong Kong go to nearby brothels where sex is sold cheaper than in Hong Kong. Sex workers working in rural city villages cater to clients who are either residents in the same village or migrant workers working nearby.

Like their counterparts in Hong Kong, sex workers in Shenzhen face constant threats of arrest and crackdowns in addition to more severe threats, given the illegality of sex work in mainland Chinese criminal laws. Illegality and stigma oftentimes discourage sex workers from seeking help to outside sources. They also refrain from consulting medical professionals in hospitals for fear of their identity exposed. They do not report violence at the hands of clients to the police. Client violence include but are not restricted to robbery, rape, free sex, smash their furniture, and murder.

Before it came to Shenzhen, RSC attempted to imitate strategies of Honghua by negotiating between the police and sex workers as mentioned in the last section. However, RSC's courageous attempt to confront the police power in Tianjin brought itself repression. Jingmin, the director of RSC, learnt from years of failure to attempting rights advocacy approach that the illegal nature of "sex industry doesn't allow social workers to obtain any sense of accomplishments, let alone talking about rights protection." The relocation to suburb Shenzhen further further urged RSC to transform into a service provider organization that expanded its service scope to the general public oriented by its projects funding. Obtaining symbolic legitimation from the state rendered RSC little space to represent the interests of their original constituent sex workers as its practices were diluted to satisfy needs of other groups. Accordingly, in lieu of rights advocacy that its teacher Honghua deploys, RSC resorts to a casual talk approach to its original constituent sex workers and rationalizes it as a way to meet the therapeutic needs of sex workers.

Therapy

To resolve the contradiction between its original mission and its inability to perseverance to the rights advocacy approach, RSC thus resorts to therapeutic framing both to rationalize the needs of sex workers and the objectives of their outreach. As such, both outreach and service provision of RSC have a therapeutic feel. RSC staff members mostly sidestep the political repression that pushed sex workers into vulnerable state, believing that there was nothing they can do about it, even though years before its formal registration RSC at least was concerned with rights advocacy for sex workers. Hence, the real needs of sex workers are either obscured or considered non-existent in the beginning.

As the director Jingmin reflected the failed attempt in Tianjin for instance, without further discussing the consequence brought by state repression, she jumped to conclusion that "as social workers taking the company of these sisters, we can only seek comfort from the services we provide with them." Similarly, asked to explain the reason of the change, a former staff Yumeng sidestepped deeper issues of illegality, and instead offered a breezy description of camaraderie: "living in a big city alone, you need someone to give you some support and reliance. People can get lonely in Shenzhen."

RSC staff believe that it exists for sex workers as both an outlet of their emotions for therapeutic reasons and a social circle for solidarity reasons, which are evident in both former staff Sichun and Yumeng's account. Sichun interprets their outreach strategies as therapeutic.

> To tell the truth, some sisters, they don't need you to do anything for them. *What they need is company, outlet for their talks*. During these discussions you would insert your services and see if they want them or not. Like doing their nails and all the other things.

Similarly Yumeng described that RSC's existence to sex workers is like a "tree hole," a metaphor that stands for a safe place where people take their secrets off the chest without others' knowledge:

> I think our existence to them, is like telling them that the society still accepts you. Acceptance and respect. Or our existence is like a *tree hole*. You can talk and I can listen. I will understand you, and give you some help. Other than that, I tell the truth, they don't need our help.

Staff of RSC thus believe that sex workers do not need any help that they could offer. Its function thus stop at being a tree hole where sex workers can dump their negative emotions. The mission to fight against violence to sex workers and negotiate more rights for sex workers was gradually gone with the wind. The mission of RSC thus transformed into "build trust and solidarity among them." Accordingly, RSC deploys casual talks as its major tactics in outreach.

Casual talks

In its outreach, RSC neither collects complaints from sex workers nor raises awareness about abuse and harassment of the police or clients. Instead, staff members rely on casual talk with sex workers to collect information about what happened in their lives. Three times a week they visit city villages where brothels gather, preparing for sitting in each parlor for at least half an hour and chatting with sex workers either familiar with or new to RSC. A typical outreach usually starts with a greeting from the RSC staff, asking them how they are doing and how business is recently. RSC staff then find related topics to chat, ranging from news they are checking on their phones, clothes they wear, where they go shopping, their marriage, their children, their relationships with the clients.

Every time we returned from the outreach, the first thing in the next morning is to write outreach records, reminding ourselves what we chatted in the last outreach. Each sex worker has her own archive of chatting history and RSC kept track of what was going on in their lives as if preparing for writing up a biography for each one of the sex workers. Their archives are then grouped together by brothels if they work in the same one, by village and by district. RSC staff and interns instructed by them, take pride in staying long in the brothels and writing long outreach records. For instance, the first time I participated in a site visit with Sichun, a former staff member of RSC, we wandered and sat in about 5 brothels in one village for about three hours. When asked to describe a successful site visit, Sichun recollected:

> I remember one time I talked for the longest time. I went there [a brothel] at round 3 and chatted with them [sex workers] until 6 to 7. It was about 3 to 5 hours of talking. I remember I wrote the outreach records for many pages. All the pages were written by me. That time was when they were not in a good mood. So they wanted to talk.

While experienced staff members set the standard as the longer chat the better, interns who cannot find the right topic to talk with sex workers felt the situation was awkward. Interns of RSC are typically college students majoring in social work and are required to do internship to graduate. Outreach undertaken by interns alone without a staff's presence usually ended early. They talked about how the chat was not going well and reflected to improve.

RSC staff explain the purpose of the long casual talks are both for building up relationships with sex workers and for collection reasons. Sichun talked about how she managed to transform passive sex workers to active participants in RSC's activities by building up relationships with her.

> Like sister Jiang from A district … To tell the truth I'm not good at remembering people's face. But after our talk that time I was able to remember her. I forget how I got into this topic, but we mainly talked about her kid, who just went to college…At first sister Jiang didn't agree [to participate in RSC's activities]. But I tried the second and the third time. We can do it nice and slow. So later when we were there doing regular three diseases rapid checks, she was enthusiastic. She even asked others to participate. I think that was progress.

Sichun reflected that when she resigned from RSC, she felt proud of being able to build connections with 20 to 30 sex workers. She built rapport with a brothel of sex workers in A district and introduced them to RSC and its activities all from scratch. She thinks that “it was quite something.”

In addition, stories collected during outreach visits are said to be potential materials for publicizing use. For instance, another staff Yumeng argues that sex workers’ life stories can be accumulated and made into “promotion” for the organization or a “compilation” for the individual sex worker. RSC also regularly post life stories of sex workers on its official Wechat account, an online platform where registered user accounts can publish articles to its followers. Whether these articles were read by a broad audience or helped in any ways to change the discriminating public discourse about sex workers however, is left unaddressed.

According to RSC staff, relationships built during outreach thus can promote future service provision. RSC’s services are twofold, health and leisure. Health related services include free rapid tests for syphilis, AIDS and hepatitis B. They also instruct sex workers on how and where they can go to standardized hospitals for STIs, without disclosing their occupation. RSC also holds gatherings and activities on special occasions such as traditional Chinese festivals, as well as beauty related lessons on doing nails, hair, and makeup.

In addition to regular site visits and activities designed for leisure purposes, RSC offers material and social support to sex workers in detention. Both of the former employees I interviewed went to visit a sex worker in detention. They brought about 500 to 1000 yuan to the sex worker and some life essentials such as bed sheets and comforter to her. But they stopped short of offering legal advice or addressing the conditions of her detention.

Without their critical needs being addressed and knowing that RSC was not capable of helping them in legal terms, sex workers are not as enthusiastic to attending the activities held by RSC. When I was accompanying one of the college student interns to a group activity she designed, we basically sat through the one hour activity, watching a group of sex workers talking to each other instead of to us. During outreach, sex workers did report to RSC staff whether recent police crackdowns were severe or not, but they do not expect that RSC staff, referred by them as "little girls" to help them with such grievances. Though RSC interns and staff talked about crackdowns are unfair and exploitative for sex workers, they choose to sidestep the political issue and rationalize their therapeutic approaches as the only means to help them.

Utilizing State Legitimation, Sanitizing Stigma

Although both RSC and HOL expanded their service scope to a broader population, RSC was forced to implement government projects while HOL proactively sought for collaboration opportunities. Like RSC, since government affiliation, HOL drifted away from rights advocacy approach to sex workers. Unlike RSC that admits its inefficacy when it dilutes the agenda with other service targets, HOL on the other hand carries out the public health needs for the state and uses the legitimacy to manage a sanitized image of sex workers.

The sex industry in Tianjin is similar to that of Shenzhen. The industry is tiered and most of the women that HOL serves are also lower-tier sex workers. They are in their 40s to 50s, frequently formerly married with children, now divorced or separated. The modal Tianjin sex worker is a rural woman migrant who serves local older men or migrant workers. Sex workers work in brothels which also double as massage parlors or barbershops. Many sex workers are rural women who used to work in brothels in villages on the outskirts of Tianjin, where village demolitions due to rapid urbanization have forced them to relocate to residential neighborhoods all over the city. They typically rent a small apartment on the first or second level of the residential apartments so that it is convenient for the clients to come.

While HOL attempted to fulfill its old mission to fight for more spaces for Chinese sex workers, its efficacy was minimal. The organization expended most of its resources obtaining legitimacy and conjuring up a legitimate image of sex worker. What HOL offered to its sex workers, then, was reduced to health services provision and image management.

Profiting off public health initiatives

To maintain and match with its legitimate status, HOL relies on devoting to health initiatives even though it contradicts with its mission to combat against the real threats facing its constituencies. The direct transaction between tubes of blood tested in exchange of a portion of its funding is deemed to be more feasible and legitimate than policy advocacy. HOL rationalizes the focus on providing health related services as a way to improve the well-being of sex workers.

In partnership with the district CDC, HOL conducts surveys and tests on STIs and AIDS among sex workers and their male clients.[16] Unlike RSC, which devotes only a small portion of its total budget to CDC projects,[17] HOL devoted nearly 50,000 RMB to collaborative projects with the CDC. Although HOL staff acknowledge that health concerns are not by far the most critical needs of their constituency sex workers, they perceive it as a more legitimate cause of its existence than policy advocacy.

HOL staff were aware that rather than STIs, the more significant threat to sex workers' well-being were police crackdowns. For example, a full-time staff Mudan explained that legalization of sex work can help reduce the risks of diseases.

> [Now] sex workers have to let the clients [to finish and] get out of the room as soon as possible, minimizing the risks [of being caught]. Sometimes it's not like the clients don't

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[16] There are two types of tests, the one using simple test sticks and the one that involves blood sample lab tests. Both tests come along with questionnaires to either sex workers or clients. They surveyed the sexual behaviors of test takers and their knowledge about AIDS.

[17] RSC only devotes on average 10,000 yuan per year of its funding to CDC projects, which was funded by CDC.

> want to wear condoms. It's the sex workers don't want them to, in order to let them finish quickly. So she would just do it with him without condom. So that's why it's so easily transmitted. If you only spent two or three minutes in the room, it's hard to get caught on site. Especially now when they are not caught on site, then the police can't really say anything if they don't admit it.

As Mudan argues, the prevalence of STIs among sex workers is a result of the criminalization of sex work. She also argues that the decriminalization of sex work would encourage more widespread condom usage which would prevent STI infection.

> If it's legalized, then there is not going to be so much disease. Legalization would let people wear condoms more. If you really legalize it, then she would think like, well it's okay to take it slow, as long as he wears condom. She would not be afraid of the police arresting them. It's for their own safety.

In Mudan's view, decriminalization is the ultimate public health measure. However, similar as abolishing C&E, she contends that "a righteous act doesn't mean that it's correct" implying that further policy advocacy would provoke severe repression, whereas "health is what can be done right now."

Similarly, the director Shulan also acknowledged that police crackdowns were more threatening to sex workers than AIDS and other STIs. Because "current polices forced [sex workers] to shut down" their brothels, sex workers were subject to various kinds of violence. Further, Shulan admits that over-emphasizing association between sex workers and STIs will magnify existing stigma of sex workers that labelled them as dirty. Yet even with these two rationales, HOL continues to carry out public health services because Shulan argued that without AIDS, HOL "doesn't have an excuse to exist." After all, "it's all about legality in China to operate NGOs."

As a result, HOL attempts to craft its outreach and activities to address health care needs of sex workers. HOL performs outreach more sporadically than RSC. Its staff go on site visits only when needed, usually to solicit more sex workers to participate in STIs and AIDS tests which the organization implements along with a local district CDC. Returning from the outreach, HOL staff do not write down in details new stories they knew from chatting with sex workers (though they also talk with sex workers); instead they record how many new sex workers were outreached, how many agreed to join in its Wechat group, and importantly how many consented to take the STI tests.

Though Shulan claims that collaboration with CDC is more for the purpose of legitimacy, HOL substantially profits from CDC projects. Because HOL drew a portion of its operating budget from conducting surveys and public health tests, more sex workers recruited meant more tests and surveys completed, and a higher funding received from each quota completed. For each person tested and surveyed, HOL can receive 150 to 200 yuan from CDC. Most of this funding goes to cover Mudan's salary and other subsidies for HOL's volunteers. The CDC ran its projects on an excessively tight timeline, leaving HOL in haste scrambling to meet unrealistic quotas for recruiting sex workers for participation in its studies. On one instance, Mudan and I commuted for two hours to reach a distant neighborhood where HOL outreach had yet to penetrate, in order to obtain "new blood." After a quick introduction and rapport-building, we proceeded to market CDC health services by asking sex workers if they needed free syphilis and AIDS tests. Shulan sometimes brought with her a brochure full of fearsome pictures of sexually transmitted diseases, then offered free tests to the women terrified by the pictures. As a result, even the health initiatives were reduced to accomplishing quotas for the local state agencies, rather than educating peer sex workers on how to prevent STIs or AIDS.

Managing a sanitized image of sex workers

HOL further uses the symbolic legitimation from the state to enhance its social embeddedness as it believes that the legitimation coming from the state translates to legitimacy in the eyes of its constituencies. In an interview, the director Shulan explains:

> For example, we used to find that when sisters came to our office, they didn’t want to. Because what we said to the public was we only provide services to sex workers. They would think that ‘I don’t want to go to your organization because if I go there it would prove that I’m a sex worker.’ So they were given a label. If we detach them from this label, we would treat her as a human being. She thinks that under that working circumstance, she has one identity [as a sex worker]. But out of that circumstance, she is just an ordinary person, an ordinary woman. She is *an ordinary migrant woman*. And we are just an organization that provides services to migrant women. We came to know her as a person, but not her identity. That way, she would feel lighter about our services and wouldn’t think that she is labelled.
>
> [With formal registration and affiliating with the state] our agenda can be broader, less limited. … Let them know that they can bath in sunshine, not just staying in the dark corner. Let them know that HOL can also be exposed in light as well. It’s very important to them.

Shulan believes that in the eyes of sex workers, registration with MOCA and the proof of legitimacy hung on its wall—the awards that HOL won as outstanding NGO given by the governments—are a sign of “authority” and “sunshine.” Ironically though sex workers abhor the police and their crackdowns, they otherwise “trust authorities” in Shulan’s view.

As a result, HOL treats sex workers as ordinary migrant women, corresponding with its official service targets. Accordingly, in conversations with other sex workers, HOL staff rely on topics to remind them of their role as ordinary women such as mothers, daughters, or wives. In their discourse, sex work is not a voluntary profession, but rather a compulsory condition that women undertake only in order to fulfil familial responsibilities to parents or children.

During an informal meeting among HOL staff and their long-term volunteers for instance, the topic soon tilted to their filial duties. Mudan shared her experience of failing to take care of her father who had Alzheimer back in her hometown. She felt guilty of leaving him there for working in Tianjin but she had to because her children rely on her remittance. After hearing about Mudan's story, Lan, a sex worker volunteer for HOL, spoke up: "I knew that being in this business could harm our bodies, but what else can I do?" Lan shared that her mother was in depression, her children were in college, and her husband had lung cancer. She performed sex work because she was the sole capable breadwinner.

During outreach, HOL staff also advised sex workers to align with an image of sex workers focusing on earning money to support their families. In some occasions for instance, Shulan taught sex workers to save their money for later use instead of spending it on themselves for leisure. One sex worker, Lu, worked in a rural neighborhood in her own brothel. Lu loved shopping and she admitted that she is a "shopping maniac." She showed us two full wardrobes of clothes that she bought online. She also signed herself up for online calligraphy and painting lessons and proudly showed us the paintings of hers hung on the wall. Seeing that Shulan said to her that she shouldn't buy so many clothes because it was not easy for them to earn money and she should save it for late life. On the way back Shulan confessed that she thought that Lu should start saving more money, since her parents need care, Lu is divorced and her daughter is not that close with her. The instructions also expand on managing relationships with their clients to insure wealth for themselves. For instance, Shulan advised a sex worker Zhang to take good care of a long-term client of hers, so she could ask him to buy her an apartment in Tianjin. Zhang followed her advice and the episode of hers was told to other sex workers as an ideal example of exit of sex industry. As Mudan told me in the interview that the ultimate mission of HOL right now, is to let sex workers earn more money, making ends meet, and "send them back to their loved ones at home."

An appropriate image of sex workers with wise options managing their money in turn rules out other possibilities of entering sex industry and draws boundaries with unwise ways to extravagant spending. For instance, a new outreached sex worker Xie expressed explicitly to us that no one wants to do it unless they have nothing else to do. She further continued that "for us old guys, we don't have too many years left for the job, but I would feel ashamed for young girls entering the industry." Mudan agreed to her words. As Shulan sums it up, people might think that sex work is an easy thing to do, "but actually a lot of people can't even do this well; they either use the money to gamble, ended up with bad guys, or spent the money very soon."

Since the symbolic legitimation is used to enhance its social embeddedness—namely helping HOL to gain more legitimacy in the eyes of its constituencies—HOL tailored the image of "just" sex workers to match with the legitimation. As a result, to HOL, the discourse of sex workers transformed from a rural woman boldly pursuing her own destiny and ended up enjoying the pleasure of sex work—as depicted in its early Cannes Festival nominated short movie—to one ordinary migrant woman compelled into the sex industry under the economic pressure to take care of her family.

To further reinforce the sanitized image of sex workers as migrant women, HOL encourages sex workers to interact more with the public. The director Shulan for instance invites sex workers volunteers to participate in non-sex-worker activities, specifically HOL's side projects on migrant population. Previous activities they held for government projects pictured familiar faces of sex workers volunteers. Shulan explained it as

> Migrant women can have interactions with these sex workers. We would let sex workers volunteer for other public welfare activities, let them have these training opportunities. Let them understand that participating in public welfare can be happy.

Volunteers and sex workers practiced the interactions positively and the effects were said to be substantial. Lan for instance, a long-term sex worker volunteer of HOL expressed in an internal meeting that she felt rewarding about the efforts she made in soliciting funding for a project of HOL dedicated to migrant workers on a crowd funding platform. In another meeting, sex workers talked about how they changed people's impression of sex workers by getting to know them in person. Xue's brothel was frowned upon when she first opened the place in her neighborhood. However, later she seized a chance to talk to her neighbor and managed to let the neighbor know her as a person, not a sex worker per se. Through working for HOL and knowing sex workers in person, a long-term volunteer who is not a sex worker Ying, internalized the reconfigured legit image of sex workers as she once commented that "all sisters have a high self-esteem so that is why they want to make a living to take care of their families."

This is supposed to be a softened approach that help sex workers "enter the public view" according to the director Shulan. However, the softened approach is contrasted by its original sharpened advocacy approach, which is thus considered not as appropriate. The whole tactic is built upon the assumption that only through sanitizing into ordinary migrant women can sex workers enter the public view. As Shulan explains it in an interview,

> It's not about accomplishing larger projects. But to make more people, more common people to understand your agenda. You can't let your agenda stay in ivory tower forever, that only a small group of people can understand what you are saying and doing. …If you keep exacerbating the problem, few people will accept it. If you *soften* it on the other hand [it is easier to be accepted]…In the future if you really want to do public welfare in China, or if you want to advocate for some changes, the things you do should be able to enter public view. If you want to enter people's view, letting more people see the problem, know the problem can trigger changes.

As HOL gained more symbolic legitimation from the state, it devoted more to maintain the legitimate status, to the extent to self-censoring the image of sanitized sex workers. While there is some truth in the rationalization that viewing sex workers as migrant women facilitates public acknowledgement of sex workers as individual people, the assumption that sex workers are stigmatized as they are left the origin of such stigmatization unquestioned. In so doing, a blurred boundary between sex workers and migrant women pales its mission of decriminalizing sex work.

CONCLUSION

As shown in this study, although all three NGOs serving the needs of sex workers have identical mission in minds from the outset, they deviate in their capacities to carry out the mission. Since Honghua operates in Hong Kong, it does not require state symbolic legitimation to operate effectively. Sufficient financial support and deep social embeddedness both add up fulfilling its role as a legal advocate, mediating between sex workers and the local state to advocate for more legal rights. Its capacity was contrasted by RSC and HOL's incapacity in continuation to carry out their shared political mission; only the two deviate from the original goal in different ways. While lack in state symbolic legitimation subjects RSC to repressions that eventually transformed it to provide innocuous therapeutic services, an excess of the legitimation drives HOL to self-sanitize its radical edge to match with its status.

Extending NGO institutional embeddedness literature which study NGOs in China as entangled in relations with various actors, this paper delineates how NGOs leverage relationships to mobilize resources that achieve different results in their political capacities. While NGOs are subject to meet different requirements of resources to operate effectively under distinct political contexts, they also vary in ways to deploy combination of these resources, utilizing them to justify their tactics. In this way, NGOs in China are neither total pawns coopted by state system as service providers, nor bold facilitator of democracy. Instead, the between and within variation in the three NGOs captured in this study show that they are at once caught in the political economy of a larger context and mobilizing various resources to negotiate its own objectives. Therefore, futures studies on Chinese NGOs should take into account the pathways these NGOs come along to either failure or success of their political missions.

While this study acknowledges importance of relationships between local Chinese NGOs and international donors, the analysis focused more on their relations with the state and their constituencies. Future studies can explore how the ways that NGOs leverage their relationships with international actors or other civil society groups can interact with other means to obtain resources, and the influence on their behaviors.

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