Comparing Government-Organized NGOs and Civic NGOs in China: Funding, Structures, and Activities

A hallmark of China’s NGO sector is the coexistence of two distinct types of NGOs: government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) and civic NGOs. Most GONGOs were originally set up by the government to channel international funding and expertise and to absorb retired government officials from the administrative reform in the 1990s. In contrast, civic NGOs are mostly organized by individual citizens who are devoted to a specific social cause. As semi-governmental organizations, GONGOs have been enjoying various institutional benefits, such as extensive financial support and special personnel arrangements. Civic NGOs, however, have been institutionally discriminated against in many ways. Local governments tend to consult with GONGOs when making policy decisions (Zhang, 2017), yet they are often unaware or suspicious of civic NGOs’ existence and their activities.

Studies on Chinese NGOs are booming recently. Yet, most have focused on civic NGOs; there is virtually no discussion of how the two types of NGOs may differ in important ways. This study seeks to take on the endeavor. It addresses fundamental questions about how GONGOs and civic NGOs differ in their structures, funding sources, activities, policy advocacy, and perceived organizational effectiveness. The study focuses on environmental NGOs (eNGOs) for several reasons. First, being increasingly viewed as “politically less harmful” (Ho 2007, p.193) by the government, eNGOs have been able to gain political space to grow in recent years. In the past three decades, eNGOs have been very active in environmental education, nature conservation, species protection, and various forms of policy advocacy. Second, while eNGOs are the most studied social organizations in China, most of the studies used a case-based approach or focus on groups in major cities, and few have used large data sets to examine the difference between GONGOs and civic NGOs in a systematic way.

The data for the study comes from two sources: 1) a nationwide survey of 267 eNGOs, in which there are 150 GONGOs and 117 civic eNGOs, and 2) thirty-nine in-depth interviews with leaders of selected GONGOs and civic eNGOs from Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, Chongqing, and Guangzhou. By comparing GONGOs and civic eNGOs in terms of their activities, structures,
sources of funding, policy advocacy strategies, and effectiveness, the study will identify important patterns of the two types of organizations and unveil the complex NGO-government relations in China.

**Keyword**