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Title

“Incubating Authoritarianism”: China’s NGO governance in Xi’s era

Abstract

As globalization deepens nowadays, China’s impact on the world’s economic and social development grows. However, it also faces the mounting pressure to recognize and engage with NGOs, the concept of which is basically foreign. Understanding relations between NGOs and the government is vital to analyse China as a global force. We have observed a range of significant policy shifts in NGO governance in China from Hu’s period to Xi’s era. On the one hand, the Chinese government has developed supportive policies to nurture NGOs to deliver public services. NGOs seem increasingly prosperous in terms of their expanding size, quantity, and coverage. It indicates the society has been impressively mobilized. On the other hand, severe restrictions have been placed on international NGOs and international funding; party building in the third sector has been dramatically pushed forward; and NGOs that engaged in more sensitive issues like right defence and managed to survive during Hu’s period have been forced to shut down. In this paper, two major questions would be addressed: how has the Chinese state managed the NGOs and governed its society in Xi’s era? How do NGOs respond to the Chinese state’s policy shifts? In dialogue with three strands of literature-authoritarianism, civil society and state corporatism respectively, we would propose a concept of “incubating authoritarianism”, describing the distinctive Chinese model of NGO governance: the state has not been content with the “Three Nos Policy” (no recognition, no banning, and no contact) prevalent in Hu’s period and before, which in practice handed over policy-making authority and judgement to local governments, and as a result of which, even NGOs without legal identity succeeded to survive if they were able to help the local authority to solve social problems; it has been not only incubating a large number of NGOs with political allegiance and that meet its expectations, but also selectively propped up social organizations that incubate NGOs, thus creating voluntary paternalism. By doing so, the
state has gradually reached its end to control the civil society. With this conceptualization, this article attempts to reveal the mechanisms underlying the dynamic processes of “incubating”. It would argue that, far from being genuine civil society organizations in the Western sense, Chinese NGOs are becoming “red and professional”, and it is the case even for many of those organized from bottom to up.

Keyword