

Grassroot NGOs and the Development of China Civil Society

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Abstract: China is still in the pre-civil-society state. The emerging grassroot NGOs are facing various problems, such as whether their status is legal or not, the lack of human resources and funds, and the need for building up creditability and popularity. Taking two voluntary organizations in Shanghai and Guangzhou as examples, this author tries to explore how the grassroot NGOs are establishing norms and regulations, devising development strategy, and setting up organizational framework. This author is especially concerned with the voluntary spirit the NGO activists demonstrated in their fight against all the difficulties and in their promotion of a civil society in China.

The active grassroot NGOs of China can be divided into three types according to the source of the power capital and the composition of the members. The first one is the student voluntary group. Its members mostly are students. For this kind of group would offer voluntary service to the society, even public figures may participate to manage some of the groups such as the Student Legal Assistance Center of Fudan University in Shanghai (Zhu Jiangan, 1998) and the Lighthouse in Guangzhou. The second type is the voluntary organization or group affiliated with some formal organization or department. It is a relatively independent and self-rule group or organization, such as the Songbai Serving Group and Encouraging Group of Guang Zhou Young Volunteers Association, the Bone Marrow Donor Club of Shanghai Redcross Committee, and the local groups of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). Though these groups are affiliated with some formal organizations, they can still

sustain the activities independently. The third kind of the grassroots NGOs is the voluntary organization organized by the community spontaneously. This kind of organization is usually regarded as the subordinate organization of the neighborhood committee. However, it can also sustain the activities independently. Although there are differences in the power capital and members in the three types, they can launch independently, self-rule and public activities. Moreover, it is very interesting that the strategy for some voluntary groups to survive is “the same group of people with several different titles”. This strategy used to puzzle the researchers, but also alternates the essence of the organization. I will describe the development of the voluntary group with several titles in detail by giving the example of the Grassroot Community Association of Shanghai.

The Grassroot Community Association of Shanghai is a grassroots NGO established by volunteers. Its aims are to enhance the active attitude toward life and community, protecting the underprivileged people in the communities, accelerating the cooperation among different communities, and advancing the self-organize ability of the residents so that the living quality of the community can be improved. It also aims at uniting the communities and other grassroots NGOs to consist an action network which regards developing the public spirit as the fundamental goal. At present, there are 56 members and over 100 permanent volunteers in the association. At April 2004, the association has been finally registered as a formal organization.

The establishment of the association can be traced back to 1995. At that time, some students of Fudan University established the Student Legal Aid Center of Fudan University to provide the legal aid service to the local communities. It was the first student-run legal aid center and also a typical representative of the Shanghai Voluntary Service Movement at that time. These experiences during the university period influenced the students of the center so deeply that they wanted to continue the

similar serving activities after their graduations. Workstation of Pinmin Country was established in such background. In 2000, these students gathered again and determined to establish a new voluntary organization. They set down some common rules: to encourage the regards to humans instead of individual success only; to action instead of words; to do things that we are able to do first.

They firstly wanted to register independently. But after consulting with the government, they found that it was impossible for them to establish such NGO without famous members, enough funds and plenty of staff. As a result, they gave up the idea. At that moment, Liu Yonglong, one of the founders, said: “The only benefit of the registration is that we can own an independent account. And I don’t believe that we would receive money from other people now. So why don’t we take some actions to serve the communities instead of thinking about how we can register?” Other people agreed with him. They decided to work in the name of the staff of the Student Legal Aid Center of Fudan University. In this name, the voluntary group began to serve the communities even without an independent title.

The Workstation of Pinmin Country finally chose to provide the legal aid service for the community. It is very difficult for a group of strangers to enter the community, for the neighborhood committee do not trust the strangers and even the residents do not trust them. If the volunteers want the residents to trust their service, the voluntary group providing the service has to be familiar with a formal organization which is associated with the residents, or the voluntary group itself is established by the government. If it does not belong to either, the group needs an acquaintance in the community and the acquaintance is influential and powerful in the community, otherwise the voluntary group would find no way to enter and serve the community.

Introduced by the acquaintance, the members of Workstation of Pinmin Country

visited the Pinmin Country Community for the first time. Many volunteers had never seen such a needy place in Shanghai. The first task for them was to get to know the neighborhood committee of the county in order to get the “entrance” to the community. Because of the acquaintance, it was easier for the volunteers to get to know the committee. Tang, the secretary of the Pinmin Neighborhood Committee, was worried about whether this service would cost money or not. When he found that it was free, he was puzzled that why the volunteers serve the community for free. Finally he knew that the members wanted to learn from Lei Feng - the soldier who always helped people voluntarily. And the other reason was that the volunteers had been working for a foreign company in which their work become very boring, and wanted to find something meaningful to kill time. After knowing this, Secretary Tang could accept the workstation. Meanwhile, the volunteers had emphasized their former experience of providing legal aids. Knowing that these volunteers were students graduated from Fudan University, it was easier for Secretary Tang to understand the entrance of the workstation.

However, it was not enough to make the residents feel safe about the volunteers. The volunteers still had to make the residents feel that the service provided by the volunteers can satisfy their needs, not an air castle. Finding out the needs of the residents was the next task of the workstation. The workstation had to discover a way to combine the needs and the service.

In fact, the Volunteer Movement started by the official and the Community Construction Movement had established an unusual situation. In this situation, people would mistake the new words for the words they were familiar, though they were unacquainted to the contents of the words. Once people accepted the new concepts which were delivered to the community by the government, they would be used to understand these concepts by their experience.

Pinmin country was such an example. The Neighborhood Committee was familiar with the words - “community” and “voluntary service”, while in fact they knew little about the meaning of the words. So, the volunteers skipped the process which used to establish the understanding of the words, and as a result, the residents regarded the voluntary group as a “learning-from-Leifeng group”, which had provided many chances for the group to enter the community.

At that moment, the Aging Committee of the community had developing the popularization of “Law of the Peoples Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of the Aged”. The aged people wanted some experts to explain the law to them. But they could not find any experts by themselves in Pinmin Country. The members of the workstation found out that it was a great opportunity. Introducing by the acquaintance in the community, soon the workstation decided to provided legal aids and legal consultant service to the aging people of Pinmin Country.

As an external voluntary organization, its entrance to the community is usually celebrated by holding a large activity as a ceremony. After discussing with the Neighborhood Committee, the workstation decided to hold a large lecture and consultation of legal rights and interests to the aged at the Senior Citizens' Day as their first activity. The lecture was organized by the Aging Committee and the Workstation of Pinmin Country. The workstation took charge of giving the lecture and consultation while the Aging Committee was responded to invite the activists and cadres of the community to attend the lecture. The emcee of the lecture was a commissary of the Aging Committee. When Grassroot Community Association wanted to develop the legal aids projects or environment projects in other communities later, it learned from the example of Pinmin Country that holding a large activity is a good way to be accepted by the local residents.

After the first lecture, the workstation started to keep on supervision. For most of the leaders of the workstation were clerks in the company, they preferred to make a plan at first and then they discussed while they were on duty and finally divided the activities into two phases. The goal of the first part was to increase publicity and education concerning the law. They would hold several special activities focused on the specifics of the community about “dismantlement and relocation”, “rights and interests of aging people”, “rights and interests of external employees”, “dissension between neighbors”, etc., by providing lectures, posters, notices on boards, flyers and consultations. The aim of the second phase was to provide legal aids to the aging people by providing agent ad litem.

At first only few people came for consultation. The volunteers soon discovered that if they really wanted to settle in the community, they should not only develop their own activities but also involve into the activities of the community. In order to improve the situation that only few people came for consultation, they started planning to establish the “customers” records so that they can understand the basic information of the vulnerable group. Meanwhile, they provided their service actively to earn the recognition of the people. The most important activity during this period was “Celebrating the New Century for Aged People” in which the volunteers celebrated the New year’s Eve with the neighborhood. They gave shawls to the aged people over 80 as gifts. It was not a great amount of money for the volunteers to buy shawls, but it was a great support for the Neighborhood Committee. By doing so, the workstation earned another achievement. In the background, that most of the groups in the community were participating in the construction of the community, the Pinmin Workstation won the greatest recognition of the people.

However, there were dismantlement and relocation happened in the community later.

Then the residents started to find the volunteers to seek for legal aids but the Sub-district government felt pressure from it. In the coordinative meeting convoked by Street Office, Neighborhood Committee Relocation Group, and the Street Office asked the Neighborhood Committee to notify the workstation that it was forbidden for them to go to court for the residents in order not to influence the relocation. But it was allowed for the residents to ask for the consultation and for the workstation to publicize the law about relocation. The volunteers had no other choice for they knew the status they had and the resource they got in the community. Whereas, with the development of the relocation, the number of the residents coming for consultants had a rising. The residents soon found that they could only get the information they did not understand and need from the workstation. So they did not come to the workstation again. The ideas to be the consultant of the residents and to be the participant in the negotiation of the workstation ended even before it started. At the late phrase of the relocation, there were fewer and fewer residents to come for consultation. Even the volunteers had lost their power to continue. The founders of the workstation had already anticipated such situation at the beginning and they believed they have the belief to persist, which is what other organizations didn't have. At the very end of the relocation, there were only two volunteers, Liu Yonglong and Qu Dong, still working in the workstation. Liu printed some data about the legal procedure of forced relocation. But no people were willing to be on duty for the workstation. He was very disappointed. At that moment, Qu came to help him. So they two sent the data to the residents house by house.

After the dismantlement and relocation of Pinmin Country, the mission of the workstation was completed. The volunteers had been on duty in the office for 15 times. Later, they continued their journey to provide legal aids for the labor union in Zhijiangxi Street by accident. At that moment, they found that they do not have enough money and people. The only way to continue was to find enough volunteers. And there was no other thing except their ideal to attract volunteers. Then they

decided to confirm the idea of the organization first.

At the meeting in Huzhou, they invited their friends to discuss about the temporary rules of Grassroot Community Association. They determined to exert the voluntary spirit to build the community and they tried to establish a hope homestead for the underprivileged people, a spirit homestead for volunteers, and a hope homestead for public spirit. The ideas of “Three Homesteads” confirmed the direction of the development of the association on one hand, on the other hand earned the political stability for the association.

The fundraising of the association in the early period was mainly from the donation of the members and other individuals. The association received its first small amount of fund from the Swedish International Development Agency after contacted with the agency. By using the money, the association can employ an assistant. However, the members had to choose between efficiency and voluntary spirit in their actions. If they chose efficiency, they needed more professional individuals; if they chose voluntary spirit, for they were only volunteers and they had jobs, they could not make good on their promises to work in the association so that the voluntary activities might be delayed. In the discussion every volunteer realized that both efficiency and voluntary spirit were important. But they regarded ensuring the participant of the volunteers and the voluntary spirit were the most important thing in the association, for it was a voluntary organization which was different with government department or enterprise. The realization of the voluntary spirit was more important than other things. Then, in the association, some rules were established. They can be summarized as the follows:

First, do real work. There are too many unfruitful things in the world. And the

volunteers thought they must spend their time on practical matters no matter whether it is important or not.

Second, be democratized. Do not regard selves as elites and residents fools. Moreover, do realize that the association needs to depend on the support from the neighborhood committee in the community and the local government.

Third, establish and develop the association in the grassroot level. Do not discuss political issues but concern on the changes of daily life.

It was not easy for the members to accept these rules. But once the rules were formed, rules can guide the volunteers to do their new work.

As to the fund, the members realized that money was not their fundamental problem, for the participation of the volunteers saved many cost. So its rule of the fundraising was “We can do anything without money but we can do it better with money.” As a result, the association paid more attention to do real work and recruit volunteers. They hold Youth Tea Party by cooperating with the Shanghai YMCA and introduced their work in Pinmin Country. They hoped that there would be more and more volunteers to join the association. After two years, the party was proved to be effective. Many volunteers got to know each other through the party and many joined in the association.

By establishing the rules, confirming the source of the fund, and recruiting more volunteers, Grassroot Community Association won persistent energy. After three years, the association extended its projects from legal aids to the environmental protection of the community, poverty alleviation and even the Sunflowers Project

which aimed to help the children of the peasant-workers studying in school. Along with the further opening up of the government and society, Grassroot Community Association was finally registered as an organization subordinated to the Regimental Committee of Zhabei District in April, 2004. It became an independent organization.

Compared with the Grassroot Community Association, Guangzhou Green Hope Volunteers Network is a younger voluntary organization. It was established in 2002. At first some volunteers concerning about the environmental protection hoped they could exchange information more often and develop activities together. Later the network was established by the volunteers. These founders realized earlier than the founders of “Grassroot Community Association” that it was impossible for them to register at that time. So they decided to work without registration but with a title. Then, the network was affiliated to Guangzhou Environmental Protection Bureau Association for Promotion Green Hope by the help of an acquaintance who worked in the bureau. As a result, the name of the network was “Green Hope”.

With the help of an initiator, Green Hope soon started its work by utilizing the office of Green Community Graduate School of Sun Yat-San University. And soon it would also establish relationship with an international environmental protection group which had entered China to publicize the security of GM food. So, the volunteers exerted their advantages to develop related propagandas of the environmental protection. First, they recruited more volunteers by Internet. After more than a year, there are over 210 registered members in the group. The new members mainly came from student groups, working people and residents of the communities. And its activities included environmental protection propaganda in school, green community education and supermarket education. Moreover, Green Hope was also affiliated with Guangzhou Agape Social Service Center and publicized the environmental protection with the Guangzhou Agape Social Service Center by using the “Little Tiger Bus”.

Green Hope also found out that it lacked both money and intellectuals. At that moment Green Hope mainly relied on the volunteers. The group established temporary coordinating group and some teams. Some of the teams, such as Network Team, Media Team, Education Team and Research Team, were very active. The volunteers gave their own money to participate the meetings and voluntary activities.

The participation of the volunteers not only solved the problem of the lack of people in the group, but also brought their social resources into the group. For example, the communication between Green Hope and the media was established by the introduction of some volunteers. Even some of the volunteers were journalists. The entry into the community was also introduced by government officials who had participated in voluntary activities.

As to Green Hope, it benefited most from the projects cooperated with the famous domestic and international NGO's. The Antelopes Bus Activity in January, the visit to organic farm in March and the Open Day of the community organized and cooperated by Green Hope, Green Peace and Friends of Nature provided opportunities for the volunteers to do voluntary work. Meanwhile, they had also learnt how to develop a project, how to deal with the media, and how to make the activities more interesting. Green Hope even organized the Green Hope Training Campaign. Learning from self-training and cooperated projects, the members of Green Hope acquired much new knowledge. The knowledge helped the project operation of Green Hope producing a certain amount of media coverage by little cost and obtained certain social influence, especially attracted many new volunteers to join the group.

In fact, the lack of registration of a voluntary organization is not always a bad thing, for it can save some unnecessary organization cost. Green Hope mainly relied on the work of its core circle of members, which was established by key members through a

series of activities. These key members achieved the operation of the project by planning, executing and self-evaluating with little cost. Meanwhile, the volunteers also established the tenet of Green Hope. The organization was not operated only by spreading environment education, but also by emphasizing the importance of action. “Improve the Environment and Society by Practical work” became the tenet of the organization, while “Action is Hope” became the slogan of the organization. In 2003, Green Hope had been further reformed. It became a developing organization to accelerate the local sustainable development, and the construction of green community became its key idea.

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