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The China Quarterly / Volume 213 / March 2013, pp 1 - 18

DOI: 10.1017/S0305741013000039, Published online: 21 March 2013

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0305741013000039

How to cite this article:

Patricia M. Thornton (2013). The Advance of the Party: Transformation or Takeover of Urban Grassroots Society?. The China Quarterly, 213, pp 1-18 doi:10.1017/S0305741013000039

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The Advance of the Party: Transformation or Takeover of Urban Grassroots Society?*

Patricia M. Thornton[†]

Abstract

While existing scholarship focuses attention on the impact of state control and repression on Chinese civil society, the increasingly independent role of the Communist Party has been largely overlooked. This article reviews the Party's drive to "comprehensively cover" grassroots society over the previous decade against the theoretical debate unfolding among Chinese scholars and Party theoreticians regarding the Party's role with respect to civil society. Focusing on greater Shanghai, frequently cited as a national model of Party-building, I describe the Party's advance and the emergence of Party-organized non-governmental organizations (PONGOs), a new hybrid form of social organization sponsored and supported by local Party committees. I argue that these developments invite a reconsideration of our understandings of the ongoing "associational revolution" and of the Party's relationship to China's flourishing "third realm."

Keywords: civil society; Chinese Communist Party; NGOs; Party building; urban; social policy; Shanghai

The crackdown against civil society organizations and activists that coincided with the 60th anniversary of the founding of the PRC brought a fresh reminder of the Party-state's checkered legacy in dealing with social groups. Following the 17th Party Congress, Party leaders claim to be "testing the waters" (*shi shui* 试水), seeking to "develop the positive functions of civil society and religious organizations" in hopes of creating a "modern civil society" by 2020.¹ Yet mounting tales of harassment, arrest and detention of activists evince the continuing suspicion and mistrust with which central leaders regard grassroots social forces.

* An earlier version of this paper was delivered at a University of Oxford Contemporary China Studies Programme conference entitled "Civic Culture, Harmonious Society: Rethinking Civil Society in Greater China Today," held on 27–28 August 2010 at Jesus College. The author gratefully acknowledges the comments and suggestions offered by conference participants Diana Fu, Karl Gerth, Walter Hatch, Jianyu He, Ming-sho Ho, Michael Hsiao, Winnie King, Qiushi Ma, Vivienne Shue, Sun Tao, Jessica Teets, Xibai Xu and Hong Zhang; and two anonymous reviewers.

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¹ Zhou Tianyong et al. 2008, 311–12.

Scholarly speculation of the early 1990s regarding the “resurgence” or “re-emergence” of a vibrant civil society capable of countering the Party-state² has given way to complex theorization regarding the “blurred boundaries” between the two,³ and the ways civil society organizations “negotiate the state” by “chipping away at the edges” of its restrictive regulatory and legal frameworks.⁴ More recently, Andrew Mertha has described how savvy “policy entrepreneurs,” often working in and through non-governmental organizations (hereafter NGOs), are entering the political process “within the structural and procedural constraints of the fragmented authoritarianism framework” to carve out new spaces for participation and contestation.⁵

Yet, whereas the literature on civil society in China has focused on state control over social organizations, the role of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been largely overlooked,⁶ despite waves of intensive grassroots Party-building targeting civic organizations that began in the 1990s. The 1998 downsizing under the “small government, great society” (*xiao zhengfu da shehui* 小政府大社会) model was followed by an unprecedented advance of the Party to fill the gaps left by the withdrawal of the state. Party membership has expanded over the course of the reform era from 3.8 per cent of the population in 1978 to 5.2 per cent in 2002; by the end of 2008, the CCP claimed some 75.93 million members, making it the single largest political organization in the world.⁷ Well over 120,000 private non-enterprise units (*minban feiqiye* 民办非企业) in 2008 boasted internal Party organizations, a number that continues to rise with the Party’s effort to “comprehensively cover” (*quan fugai* 全覆盖) society by establishing footholds in so-called “two new” (*liang xin* 两新) organizations – new economic and new social organizations created since market reform.⁸ The advance of the Party in the wake of the state’s retreat is being heralded by some as a Chinese “theory of limited government” (*youxian zhengfu lilun* 有限政府理论) involving a “big Party, small state, great society” (*da zhengdang, xiao zhengfu, da shehui* 大政党、小政府、大社会).⁹

Nevertheless, Chinese scholars and Party theoreticians remain divided on the nature of the Party’s relationship with emerging social groups. On the one hand, many note that more powerful and capable NGOs and non-profit enterprises can provide much-needed services, reduce governing costs, safeguard social stability and bridge gaps in China’s fragmented administrative structure. On the other hand, the presence of Party cells in grassroots social organizations restricts their autonomy and may compromise their ability to speak and act on behalf of

2 Gold, 1990; Strand 1990.

3 Shue 1988; Wang Xu. 1999.

4 Saich 2000; Howell 2007.

5 Mertha 2009.

6 Unger 1996.

7 Appleton et al. 2009; Shambaugh 2008; Dickson 2008, 125–131; Dickson 2007.

8 Lu Yuemian 2004.

9 Hu 2007.

vulnerable groups. Viewed from the grassroots, while the Party offers administrative, political and logistical support to struggling social organizations, it does so at a price. Some charge that internal Party branches exercise excessive zeal in monitoring accounts and activities, police strict legal and regulatory compliance, and demand more frequent participation in events that promote the Party's own agenda at the expense of core service tasks. In short, the emerging consensus is that while the expanding "third realm" (*di san bumen* 第三部门) represents a double-edged sword for the Party, the Party's new involvement with social groups may steer the development of Chinese civil society to serve Party ends.

This article evaluates recent Party-building efforts in "two new" organizations specifically targeting private non-enterprise units (*minban feiqiye* or *minjian feiqiye* 民间非企业), private foundations (*jijin hui* 基金会) and social organizations (*shehui tuanti* 社会团体)¹⁰ against the broader theoretical debate among Chinese scholars and Party theoreticians regarding the Party's evolving role with respect to civil society. Reviewing the Party's recent initiative to "comprehensively cover" society in greater Shanghai, frequently cited as a national model for Party-building, I describe the emergence of Party-organized non-government organizations that I refer to as PONGOs, a new hybrid form designed to encourage the formation of civic groups, and particularly professional charitable organizations capable of taking on public welfare provision under the aegis of Party control. Unlike government-organized NGOs (so-called GONGOs or QUANGOs),¹¹ the new PONGOs not only rely upon the sponsorship and support of local Party committees for the purposes of registration, but also maintain active internal Party cells that carry out recruitment and other Party-directed activities alongside their core tasks, and police popular compliance with the Party line. In Shanghai, furthermore, the new PONGOs encourage public-private partnerships, social entrepreneurship and branded corporate sponsorship of charity and community events, frequently combining such efforts with patriotic education and the mobilization of public demonstrations of support for Party rule.

These recent developments invite a reconsideration of our understanding of civil society development in contemporary China, and suggest the emergence of a new model of social governance in which a more independent Party mediates between the smaller reform-era state and an increasingly mobile and diverse Chinese society. In building flexible "hub-style" Party organizations capable of spanning jurisdictional and sectoral gaps, the Party explicitly aims to alleviate the "matrix muddle" produced by its crosscutting *tiao* 条/*kuai* 块 administrative structure,¹² and to foster a more integrated, cohesive and harmonious society at

10 On "civic organizations" (*minjian zuzhi*) see Yu 2006.

11 Hood (1973) coined the term "QUANGO" (quasi-non-governmental organization) to describe formally private bodies that maintain a significant relationship to the state, and often discharge state functions.

12 The *tiao/kuai* administrative structure describes the internal division of power within the Chinese Party-state: vertical bureaucratic relationships linking central to local organizations are commonly referred to as "lines" (*tiao*), while horizontal bodies coordinating action within given geographic

the urban grassroots. However, the question remains of whether drawing grassroots civic associations and NGOs into the Party's net facilitates their autonomy¹³ or signals an early end to the robust heterogeneity of China's "associational revolution."¹⁴

The Party and the "Third Realm"

The instability introduced by the expansion of market forces during the reform era triggered a scholarly reconsideration of the optimal balance between state, market and social power in the PRC, amid mounting calls for "the state to advance and the popular to recede" (*guojin mintui* 国进民退), particularly in the aftermath of the 2008 global recession. Some see the rise of organized social forces as a buffer between state and society capable of channeling resources to redress social needs. Others argue that the regulatory pressures imposed upon Chinese NGOs render them entirely dependent upon official support and constrain their activities.¹⁵ While most agree that China's flourishing "third realm" offers both challenges and opportunities for the regime, some envision a new relationship between social groups and the Party independent of the state, particularly as the government withdraws from social welfare and public goods provision. Nonetheless, there is disagreement about how the Party should exercise its power, as well as about the likely consequences of the Party's increasing penetration of the social sphere in the era of reform.

Wu Hui and Zhao Xusheng of the Central Party School, for example, argue that social groups represent a "double-edged sword" (*shuangren jian* 双刃剑) for the Party that might improve governance over the long term, but more presently threatens the Party's leadership at the grassroots by crowding out the social space traditionally occupied by party organizations, thereby undermining the Party's capacity and prestige. Thus, they advocate tightening the existing system of controls to maintain the Party's position of power.¹⁶

Political scientist Lin Shangli agrees that civic organizations challenge the ruling Party's social base, generating tension and mutual suspicion at the grassroots that undermine its ability to integrate new social forces.¹⁷ However, Lin points out that after 1949, the Party's process of social systematization "not only swallowed up the social space in which NGOs exist, but fundamentally 'hollowed out' (*kongdonghua* 空洞化) the non-governmental nature of the various surviving

footnote continued

areas are known as "pieces" (*kuai*), resulting in a crosshatch of political authority characterized as "fragmented authoritarianism" (Lieberthal 2004, 186–88).

13 Lu Yiyi 2007; Lu Yiyi 2009.

14 Wang and He 2004. The term "associational revolution" was coined by Lester M. Salamon (1994).

15 Hu 2007, 15.

16 Wu and Zhao 2009.

17 Lin 2008.

bodies,” reshaping them as de facto Party and state organizations and reducing their effectiveness. Li concludes that the Party’s ability to define a more rational relationship with such groups will depend upon its capacity to adapt to changing conditions.¹⁸

Yin Deci of the Guangzhou Municipal Party School finds that the social diversification (*duoyanghua* 多样化) produced by market reform destroyed the Party’s absolute control (*juedui kongzhi quan* 绝对控制权) over society, and threatens the Party’s core methods of social mobilization, political instruction (*zhengzhi guanshu* 政治灌输), policy-making and operation (*yunxing* 运行). However, he warns that since new social groups lack the capacity for self-governance, if “the Party’s leadership cannot be expressed [there], it will constrict the space within which civic organizations can develop, social capital won’t be utilized effectively, and the dynamism of the Party’s governing methods will likewise be lost.”¹⁹

Luo Feng, an associate professor of public administration in Shanghai, concurs, but nonetheless criticizes the Party’s management of social forces. Luo finds that official attempts to rationalize the administrative structure of social groups and incorporate (*naru* 纳入) them restricts their autonomy, delimits their functionality and engenders political conflict between officials and NGO activists. The Party-state’s integrative mechanisms (*zhenghe qi* 整合器) create resistance, as groups struggle to maintain their distinctive identities in the face of countervailing pressure. Luo concludes that a more nuanced approach – that will preserve both the existing administrative order of the Party-state and the ability of legitimate social groups to respond to real social needs – has yet to be found.²⁰

By contrast, sociologist Hu Bing asserts that as the state downsizes, it should cede the task of managing social groups to the Party. Whereas history has demonstrated that state power is inefficient, Hu asserts, “with the separation of Party and state, the Party is fully capable of ...firmly establishing ‘comprehensive coverage’ in the social sphere.” Social organizations in the PRC tend to be either “top-down” state-organized (*guanban* 官办) NGOs (GONGOs, QUANGOs) or grassroots (*caogen* 草根) social groups. The former encounter difficulty in mobilizing local enthusiasm and interest, whereas the latter lack administrative and financial resources. The Party, however, can bridge these divides: as the state downsizes under the “small state, big society” model, the Party should expand, drawing in and redistributing both power and resources from atomized (*zhidianhua* 质点化) enterprises and agents arrayed within the framework of the market. The Party’s “comprehensive coverage” of society makes it uniquely capable of transcending the conflicts of interest and jurisdictional disputes arising from

18 Lin 2007.

19 Yin 2004.

20 Luo Feng 2009.

cross-cutting *tiaolkuai* relationships,²¹ and the weaknesses inherent in the “fragmented authoritarian” model.

Wu Xinye, an associate professor of public administration and management, argues that contemporary Chinese civil society is plagued by path-dependent (*lishi de lujing yilai yin* 历史的路径依赖因) outcomes that reproduce weak civic consciousness and low rates of volunteerism, problems that only the Party can solve. However, Wu finds the theoretical debate too polarized, with one extreme position advocating that “the Party completely dominate (*han'gai* 涵盖) society... to the point that Party organizations replace (*daiti* 代替) social groups;” and other extreme advocating that the Party “not interfere in the political sphere of NGOs, allowing complete autonomy to be realized.”²² But NGO development independent of the Party creates fragmentation and the splintering of society into myriad interest groups, working at cross-purposes with each other. Instead, Wu advocates the selective “absorption” (*xina* 吸纳) of NGOs, allowing the Party to shape social policy by legitimating the interests, scope and mode of political participation of NGOs, supporting their provision of public services, and ensuring that they continue to meet genuine social needs. She offers the example of the Shanghai municipal Party committee’s 2002 project to “engineer radial influence” (*fusheli gongcheng* 辐射力工程) by “fusing” (*ningju* 凝聚) Party members with grassroots sports teams (*tuandui* 团队), organizations (*zuzhi* 组织) and society (*shehui* 社会). Wu points out that the Party now covers and successfully manages more than 90 per cent of Shanghai’s NGOs through its policy of selective “absorption.”²³

However, Li Jingpeng at Beijing University asserts, it is unclear whether the Party’s sustained expansion into the “third realm” supports or suffocates new social forces. While “the post-totalitarian political framework generally favours civil society development,” the question remains “whether the ‘retreat of the state and advance of the Party’ actually benefits the development of civil society.” The answer “lies in the nature of the Party’s advance. If the ‘advance of the Party’ means that the Party extends its grasp of administrative power, then... the space within which civil society can develop shrinks.” But if “the ‘advance of the Party’ means only the expansion of its power to lead (*lingdao quan* 领导权) and not the expansion of administrative power, then, possibly, the ‘advance of the Party’ will benefit the development of civil society.” The crux of the matter is whether the Party can continue to exercise leadership while letting go of administrative control, and whether the Party can delimit the exercise of its own power, and allow civil society to grow.²⁴

While the emerging scholarly consensus concedes that the Party will continue to play a decisive role in shaping China’s “associational revolution,” most

21 Hu 2007, 13–14.

22 Wu 2006.

23 Wu 2006, 50–54; Kang Xiaoguang 2002.

24 Li 2005.

scholars also agree on the need for reform. At stake is the nature and extent of Party leadership to be exercised in the “third realm,” as well as the Party’s capacity to “selectively absorb,” “integrate” or “comprehensively cover” new social forces in a manner that permits their continued development with a degree of autonomy. The Party’s earlier “absolute control” of civic associations “hollowed [them] out,” reproduced “path dependent” social pathologies, and prevented the representation of genuine social needs. The success of the Party’s new efforts to “engineer radial influence” and “fuse” with new social forces, under test in greater Shanghai, may well be determined, as Li Jingpeng trenchantly observes, in part by the Party’s capacity to observe the narrow and sometimes uncertain boundary between its “power to lead” and “administrative control.”

“Comprehensively Covering” Grassroots Social Organizations

Intensive Party-building in China’s “third realm” preceded the state’s tightening of the existing regulatory framework for social organizations. In February 1998, several months before the State Council issued its “Regulations on the Registration and Management of Social Organizations,” the Central Committee’s Organization Department and the Ministry of Civil Affairs jointly called upon Party personnel to establish grassroots Party branches in social organizations under their supervision, and ensure that they fully “implement the Party’s line.”²⁵ In July 2000, the organization department reiterated the call for Party-building, asking internal Party branches to ensure that social organizations comply with national laws and regulations, “adhere to a correct political orientation,” and “take the lead in building a [socialist] spiritual civilization and political thought work.”²⁶ This drive to “eliminate blank spots, expand comprehensive coverage, increase effectiveness” (*xiaomie kongbai dian, kuoda fugai mian, zengqiang youxiao xing* 消灭空白点, 扩大覆盖面, 增强有效性) resulted, by the end of 2008, in the creation of Party branches in 53.5 per cent of eligible social groups (*shehui tuanti* 社会团体), 55 per cent of eligible private non-enterprise units (*minban feiqiye danwei* 民办非企业单位), and 51 per cent of eligible foundations (*jijin hui* 基金会) nationwide.²⁷

In Shanghai, where grassroots Party-building aimed at “comprehensive coverage” (*quan fugai* 全覆盖) of “two new” organizations began as early as 2001,²⁸ one recent report suggests that the Party’s penetration of eligible social groups now approaches 100 per cent.²⁹ Another notes that in 2008, out of an estimated three million NGOs, 8,659 had formally registered with the Shanghai Ministry of

25 Zhonggong zhongyang zuzhibu, *mingzhengbu* 1998.

26 Zhonggong zhongyang zuzhibu *guanyu yinfa* 2000.

27 Sun 2009, 204–05.

28 Hong 2001.

29 Sun 2009, 205.

Civil Affairs, and over 98 per cent of all eligible social organizations had met Party-building targets.³⁰

To accomplish this aim, the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee experimented with new organizational forms, including joint branches (*lianhe zhibu* 联合支部) combining different enterprises, and sometimes local residents, in a neighbourhood or district; temporary branches (*linshi zhibu* 临时支部) for seasonal workers or temporary residents; and Party working small groups (*dang xiaozu*, *dangde gongzuo xiaozu* 党小组, 党的工作小组) to address specific problems at the grassroots level. The Shanghai Municipal Party Committee organization department and social organization office (*shi shetuan ju* 市社团局) oversaw a four-stage process of application, registration, approval and certification with the Shanghai Ministry of Civil Affairs, and carried out annual inspections to guarantee that supervisory relationships are kept up to date.³¹

These new institutional arrangements facilitate an agenda that fuses entrepreneurial and philanthropic aims at the urban grassroots. New Party branches in private firms push their members to participate in public service activities and “corporate social responsibility” (CSR) programs; social organizations are likewise pressed to adopt more entrepreneurial discourses and professional standards of practice. In December 2009, the National Small Leading Group on the Study and Practice of New Social Organizations (*Quanguo xinshehui zuzhi xuexi shijian huodong zhidao xiaozu* 全国新社会组织学习实践活动指导小组) organized a symposium chaired by the Shanghai Ministry of Civil Affairs to urge local social organizations to not only pursue “real results” (*shishi zaizai de xiaoguo* 实实在在的效果), but to “go a step further” by “paying attention to the fostering and creation of their own brands” (*zhuyi peiyang he chuangzao zishen de pinpai* 注意培养和创造自身的品牌): “only once you have a brand can you boost your influence: the benchmark of development is to become a brand leader. We must cultivate sincere and plain-speaking, competent and effective, and useful new social organizations.”³² In Shanghai’s Changning 长宁 district, the Party member service centre (*Dangyuan fuwu zhongxin* 党员服务中心) encourages member organizations to “establish a standard, project distinction, and build the brand” (*lizu guifan, tuchu tese, gouzuo pinpai* 立足规范, 突出特色, 构筑品牌) of the Party, and raise its profile by marketing the delivery of high quality public services.³³ The Xu Beihong 徐悲鸿 Fine Arts Kindergarten Party branch, working alongside the school principal (whose motto for the staff is “succeed, improve, develop”), organized a series of activities that encourage “striving to achieve brand excellence in education, and opening up the school to a new developmental road” (*chuang youzhi jiaoyu pinpai, tuo yuanben fazhan xin lu* 创优质教育品牌, 拓园本发展新路).³⁴

30 Luo 2009, 36.

31 *Zhongguo shehui bao* 2002.

32 Shanghai shi ziqiang shehui fuwu zongshe 2009.

33 Wang and Wang 2006.

34 “Xu Beihong yishu you’eryuan qing sanba xilie huodong” (“March 8 celebratory activities at Xu Beihong Fine Arts Kindergarten roster”). www.shlxhd.gov.cn, 4 April 2009. Accessed at <http://tinyurl.com/9npbnoq>.

Similarly, in November 2003 the Communist Youth League joined forces with the National Youth Federation, the Prince's Trust Enterprise Leadership Conference, and UK-based Youth Business International (YBI) to establish Youth Business China (YBC). According to its website, under the Party's tutelage, YBC's chief mission involves increasing employment by helping young entrepreneurs build successful businesses; "vitalizing" the economy by helping entrepreneurs shoulder social responsibility; and increasing social harmony by assisting the government in resolving the problem of unemployment. In the aftermath of the devastating Wenchuan earthquake, YBC launched the "rebuild our home entrepreneurship" campaign and the YBC Special Disaster Region Relief Foundation provided funds to 24 youths in the affected areas to attend a week-long seminar of entrepreneurship training and job shadowing in Shanghai. Additional internships were later arranged in Fujian along with a five-day course in the "Start Your Business" method held at the Haixi Youth Entrepreneurship Training School.³⁵ Closer to its Shanghai base of operations, YBC hosts a local "young entrepreneurs club" that recently, with the help of the enterprise Party branch at Shanghai Allied Investment Advisory Services, convened a "Who Moved my Cheese?" seminar at a smart hotel for interested members.³⁶

The Privatization of Public Services and the New PONGOs

The Party's inculcation of entrepreneurial values and corporate culture among grassroots social organizations is designed with a longer term purpose in mind: the contracting out of public service provision to this emerging tier of non-state organizations through a competitive bidding process. The amount currently budgeted by Shanghai municipal and district level administrative bureaus for the purchase of services formerly provided by the state ranges from several million to several billion yuan per year. In 2006 alone, municipal authorities contracted out a staggering 1.5 billion yuan of special operations, budgetary and extrabudgetary funds collected by state offices to the Shanghai Cultural Development Foundation for cultural projects; the municipal and district governments expended another 67.79 million yuan on political and legal services, community crime prevention, youth services and care for drug addicts. In 2007, Huangpu district purchased services worth over 22.19 million yuan from various community service organizations and enterprises; and in Pudong New Area, the cost of services purchased more than doubled in three years, from 22.282 million in 2003 to 59.55 million yuan in 2006.

Pudong New Area has been designated a "national comprehensive reform municipal city" experimenting with the "service purchase model" (*goumai fuwu*

35 Zhu 2009.

36 "Nailao zai nali?" YBC (Shanghai) chuanyezhe julebu tiebie huodong" ("Who Moved my Cheese? Special activity of the YBC (Shanghai) entrepreneur club"). <http://www.ybc.org.cn/news/newsdetail.jsp?newsid=4577>, 21 April 2009. Spencer Johnson's 1998 *Who Moved My Cheese?* is a best-selling motivational book designed to help people cope with change, particularly in the business world.

moshi 购买服务模式) in which the district government “jump-started” 26 community service organizations (CSOs) capable of providing social services on a contractual basis through subsidies, loans and other inducements. In order to qualify, CSOs must observe “six divisions” from the state: no sharing of administration, organizational structure, functions, staff, property or physical facilities; during the course of the contract there must be no subordination of the CSO to the district, no exchange of personnel or employees between the two, and no shared property or capital between them.³⁷

The “six divisions” observed between the state and non-state service providers, however, do not apply to the Party. Rather, according to the February 1998 notice, Party branches established in registered social organizations “assist [those organizations] in resolving practical problems in their work,” and must “be brought into full play in the drive for reform and modernization.”³⁸ In practice, this places social organizations with large and active Party branches at the centre of public service provision within grassroots urban communities, and allows the Party to shape service delivery in a manner tailored to suit Party needs.

In the case of the Putuo District Changshou Road (Street-Level) NGO Service Centre (*Putuoqu Changshoulu jiedao minjian zuzhi fuwu zhongxin* 普陀区长寿路街道民间组织服务中心), established in August 2002 as the first Party-organized NGO clearing house for non-state, civic and non-profit organizations in the PRC, the centre’s director concurrently serves as the service centre’s branch Party secretary at the behest of the Putuo district joint Party committee. The service centre received 280,000 yuan in operating funds (*jingfei* 经费) from street offices in 2006, which covered approximately 100,000 yuan for the salaries of six full-time employees (the director, a deputy-director, and four staff members), and another 180,000 yuan to support the activities of various social organizations within the district. Its chief function is to coordinate the activities of the 281 registered NGOs and CSOs in the area, advise them regarding existing regulations, and assist and assess their readiness to prepare competitive bids for local public service provision totaling some 1.5 million yuan. The Centre’s member organizations – in effect, Party-organized NGOs (PONGOs), with the Centre facilitating the process of registration – employ or represent over 900 Party members, and are in turn represented by nine overlapping Party organizations at the enterprise, street, building or district level, including, as of July 2009: 56 civic non-enterprise units (*minban feiqiye*), 7 social groups (*shehui tuanti*), 25 charitable and philanthropic social organizations, and 193 teams (*qunzhong tuandui* 群众团队).³⁹ The Centre’s constituent organizations span six categories – private non-enterprise units (*minfei danwei* 民非单位), social organizations (*shehui tuanti*), public groups and teams (*qunzhong tuandui*), volunteers (*yigong* 义工), collectively supervised entities (*zonghe guanli* 综合管理), and charity supermarkets (*cishan chaoshi* 慈善超市).

37 Zeng 2008.

38 Zhonggong zhongyang zuzhibu, minzhengbu 1998.

39 Zhou Jiayan 2009.

Hailed as a great success in both local Party- and community-building, the “civic organization service centre” model has also been adopted in the nearby districts of Jing’an 静安 and Minhang 闵行.⁴⁰

In addition to opening up a civic organization service centre to sponsor PONGOs modeled on the one in Putuo, in 2007 the Jing’an district Party committee and district government established a district social organization union (*shehui zuzhi lianhe hui* 社会组织联合会, or *shelianhui* 社联会) capable of mobilizing the district’s social organizations to collectively and “conscientiously implement the ‘opinions’ and ‘advice’ of the Party committee” while maintaining communication with district street offices. The additional public services provided by member organizations in exchange for registration and support included a series of science lectures that involved the distribution of “anti-cult propaganda materials” aimed at discrediting *falun gong* and other *qigong* sects that boasted a significant following in Jing’an in the mid-1990s; the negotiation of the peaceful resettlement of some 350 district homeowners who had threatened to self-immolate if forced to move; and two social mixers, a “white-collar salon” (*bailing shalong* 白领沙龙) and “salon for middle-aged and elder singles” (*zhonglaonian danshen shalong* 中老年单身沙龙), that drew in 8,000 local residents and purportedly helped a staggering 30 per cent of the middle-aged and older singles find “their other half,” thanks to the organization’s Party branch.⁴¹ Likewise, in April 2007, Pudong Party and state officials jointly established a “Non-Profit Incubator Centre” (*Shanghai Pudong feiyingli zuzhi fazhan zhongxin* 上海浦东非营利组织发展中心) with the aim of “assisting the creativity of Chinese society and entrepreneurial talent to cultivate public welfare.” The incubator provides administrative support, field equipment and registration assistance to social groups, non-enterprise units and foundations within the district, and claims I Study Net (*Wo xue wang* 我学网, www.5xue.com) and 1KG More (*Duo bei yi gongjin* 多背一公斤 www.1kg.org), as successfully “incubated” organizations that are now nationwide non-profit service providers.⁴²

Shanghai’s new PONGOs include not only the umbrella “service centres” described above, but also a range of smaller Party-sponsored community service organizations and non-profit enterprises throughout greater Shanghai. For example, the Daning Road Street Office Society for the Elderly (*Daningle jiedao laonian xiehui* 大宁路街道老年协会), established in September 2002 concurrently with its internal Party branch, boasts nearly 200 members. Its mission is the education of neighbourhood senior citizens and retirees, and the creation of a “harmonious, warm, fragrant, and happy home for the elderly,” for which they have been recognized with four model civic association awards. According to their Party branch website, the society’s specialty is

40 Zhou Yang 2007, 4; Luo Yong 2009, 80–83.

41 Shanghai shi Jing’anqu shehui zuzhi lianhehui 2008.

42 Zhong 2009.

the integration of capital, taking service as the foundation, excelling at doing the Party's work among civic mass organizations (*minjian shetuan* 民间社团), bringing into play the Party's political core, strengthening the organization of the Party's branch among social groups, leading, mediating and serving, and unceasingly simultaneously strengthening both the Party's cohesion and its combat effectiveness (*zhandouli* 战斗力).⁴³

The society provides patriotic education lectures on “China's peaceful rise” and the “three represents,” helpfully organized by a retired PLA political commissar who is also a district resident. Other activities include outings to revolutionary heritage sites, “nostalgia tours,” and the Zhabei 闸北 district “million families learning etiquette” campaign in advance of the Shanghai Expo.⁴⁴ In a similar vein, just after National Day 2010, a team of five volunteers from a PONGO in the Changshou road district “braved the rain” to “search out red memories” (*xunzhao hongse jiyi* 寻找红色记忆) from local retirees. Armed with tape recorders, they visited elderly veterans in their homes and exchanged needed items, small gifts and services for their stories.⁴⁵

Shanghai's PONGOs likewise sprang into a high-tide of mobilization to prepare for the 2010 Expo. The Changshou Road (Street-Level) NGO Service Centre organized classes in conversational English and etiquette for civic association staff and volunteers.⁴⁶ Party activists within the Shanghai Technical Arts School organized a “Develop Artistic Skill and Grace, Promote the Spirit of the Expo” fashion and make-up show, replete with catwalk, for senior citizens and industry representatives at the local community center.⁴⁷ The Putuo District NGO Service Centre organized a “volunteer rescue management team” to crack down on vagrants and beggars congregating in the Jade Buddha Temple area to spruce up the neighbourhood for tourists.⁴⁸ The Changshou district cycling team, organized by the Changshou Road (Street-Level) NGO Service Centre, boasts 50 members, 16 of whom also belong to the Party: the group's motto – “Not just a riding team, but a propaganda team, and, moreover, a seed spreader” (*bozhongji* 播种机) – was chosen to highlight the fact that they “are not merely satisfied to pursue their own enjoyment, but moreover in the process wish to support the government's ongoing propaganda efforts, sometimes following the lead of the street committee,” and sometimes cooperating with fellow

43 “Zhibu jianjie” (“Introducing our organization”). www.shlxhd.gov.cn. 2007. Accessed 11 August 2011 at <http://tinyurl.com/2wwavqyy>.

44 “Daning Laoxie chuangping ‘wuhao’ dang zuzhi de shenbao cailiao” (“Daning Elderly Assistance reviews ‘Five Goods’ Party organizations information report”). www.shlxhd.gov.cn, 29 August 2007. Accessed at <http://tinyurl.com/2fzzaqdk>.

45 “Xunzhao hongse jiyi” (“Search for red memories”). <http://www.zunlao.org/eventview.asp?id=136>, 24 October 2010.

46 Changshou shequ shehui zuzhi jiji canyu ying shibo huodong” (“Changshou district social organizations actively participate in World Expo welcoming activities”). http://www.csjd.gov.cn/cscs/WebFront/sub_news.aspx?cid=35&id=102, 27 March 2009.

47 “Hongyang shibo jingsheng, zhanxian huiyi fengcai” (“Carry forward the World Expo spirit, develop artistry and grace”). <http://stj.sh.gov.cn/Info.aspx?ReportId=7335673e-7082-43fd-ab77-706e778dc767>, 18 May 2010.

48 “Jianli liang ge gongzuo jizhi—jiuzhu guanli xiaoguo xianzhu” (“Establishing two working mechanisms— notable effect in supporting administration”). http://www.csjd.gov.cn/cscs/WebFront/sub_news.aspx?cid=35&id=67, 16 October 2008.

PONGOs to arrange joint activities. Their efforts and creativity have earned them the grateful recognition of Shanghai municipal authorities, who awarded them “advanced team” status for four consecutive years.⁴⁹

The Shanghai Municipal Party Committee’s new “hub-style” network facilitates the exchange of resources and organization of joint activities among various “two new” linked party branch groups. For example, at the behest of their enthusiastic Party branch secretaries, the Xu Beihong Fine Arts Kindergarten and Yixian Garden jointly celebrated International Women’s Day with a series of “rich, colourful and varied” activities. In accordance with the theme “I am healthy, bright, happy, and beautiful,” representatives of the beauty product line COCO were invited to offer live skincare demonstrations and professional makeovers for members of the staff in the multi-purpose room at Yixian Garden. Their joint report described the event as “novel in form, ground-breaking, and moreover possessing more ideological content, mass character, entertainment value, and broader-ranging” than traditional Party activities. Other recent events have included dominoes tournaments, dance contests and a three-legged race.⁵⁰

Party branches in community and civic associations also engage in monitoring activities, acting either as “barometers” (*qingyubiao* 晴雨表) of grassroots popular sentiment,⁵¹ or “early warning” (*yujing* 预警) nodes that portend social discontent or threats to system stability. In 2003, grassroots NGO branch Party cadres in Xigong uncovered an underground cell of *tian gong* 天功 (heavenly *gong*) practitioners; and the following year, broke up two practice sites for other banned *qigong* groups in their area.⁵² In 2008, the Changshou NGO Service Centre organized a volunteer “early warning” information network that quickly unearthed 12 illegal and unregistered grassroots societies, and uncovered plans for no fewer than 20 illegal collective activities, all of which were duly reported to Party and municipal authorities.⁵³

Internal Party members in social organizations are required to report to higher levels any activities that deviate (*pianli* 偏离) from the Party line, violations of national or local regulations, and irregularities in financial matters, as well as the involvement of organization members in any “significant political plots” (*zhongda zhengzhi tumou* 重大政治图谋).⁵⁴ Not surprisingly, concern about increased surveillance, additional financial obligations and potential meddling by Party members has posed a barrier to Party-building in social groups. The

49 Zhou Hongyun, 2009.

50 “Xu Beihong yishu you’eryuan ‘qing san ba’ xilie huodong” (“March 8 celebratory activities at Xu Beihong Fine Arts Kindergarten roster”). www.shlxhd.gov.cn, 22 April 2009. Accessed at <http://tinyurl.com/9npbnoq>.

51 Hu 2007, 14.

52 Zhou Jiayan, 2009.

53 “Shequ shehui zuzhi shunishi guanli de tansuo yu shijian—Changshou lu jiedao minjian zuzhi fuwu zhongxin” (“Exploring and practicing community social organization hub-style administration—Changshou Street Civic Organization Service Centre”) www.shlxhd.gov.cn, 3 September 2009. Accessed at <http://tinyurl.com/b77c4me>. See also Meng 2009.

54 Ma 2009.

widespread perception that state- and Party-organized social groups are merely an extension of the government persists, despite official insistence to the contrary: “some take government-established civic associations that are neither wholly independent nor autonomous, known as GONGOs, and go so far as to disparagingly refer to them as the ‘second government’ (*er zhengfu* 二政府)... [implying] that they function as government lackeys and mouthpieces.”⁵⁵ Deng Guosheng of the Tsinghua NGO Research Centre observes that grassroots charitable associations organized “from above” (*guanban* 官办) are plagued by fears that donations of time and money to such organizations are the result of psychological pressure or implicit coercion, and current sponsorship of charitable organizations is “overkill” (*jiaowang guozheng* 矫枉过正). By including support for developing charities in the cadre performance evaluation, “it is entirely possible to set off a rash of impetuous activity leading to a ‘Great Leap Forward’ in philanthropy, wasting scarce resources and warping popular understandings of charity.”⁵⁶ Try as they might to assure the public of their independence from official control, Chinese NGOs established by official agents are still widely regarded as arms of the Party and state structure.

Conclusion: Transformation or Takeover at the Grassroots?

While the state’s “dual management system” has discouraged many social groups from formalizing their presence in grassroots society, the Party’s recent expansion into the third realm is quickly altering the associational landscape. In many of the urban and periurban areas most deeply affected by market reform, the Party is busily recreating itself as both a service hub and a social network in realms which are “difficult for the state to access and manage,”⁵⁷ by selectively encouraging social groups to operate under the watchful eye of local Party officials. The benefits of Party support are by no means lost on NGO activists: according to one author, the presence of an internal Party branch can increase effectiveness and attract talented volunteers and employees, and reverse the popular perception that a group’s activities are either mere “child’s play” (*xiao'er ke* 小儿科) or “irregular” (*bu zhenggui* 不正规), and “can help dissipate the wariness of potential clients and society at large.”⁵⁸ Such lures may tempt struggling groups otherwise sceptical of the Party and its agenda, although whether they succeed in winning the “hearts and minds” of either activists or the general public remains to be seen. It is also worth considering the impact of these new strategies on the Party itself: the new focus on facilitating grassroots public service delivery potentially dilutes the Party’s effectiveness as a vanguard organization,⁵⁹ and the

55 Zhou Hongyun 2009, 12–13.

56 Shen 2010.

57 Zhou Yang 2007, 4.

58 Liu 2009.

59 On the Party’s redefinition of its vanguard role, see Lewis and Xue 2003. I wish to thank one anonymous reviewer for pointing out these potential pitfalls.

heterogeneity of fledgling grassroots members may import contradictions from society and divergent interests into the Party.

Nonetheless, internal Party branches clearly exert influence on the NGOs and civic groups that house them, pressing them to adopt more professional and corporate-friendly management, and at least periodically diverting their manpower and resources to pursue the Party's recruitment and mobilizational agendas. While internal Party branches may provide stability, organizational resources and social capital, they also subject groups to increased surveillance and the obligation to participate in Party activities. To the extent that these are mutually supportive of an organization's core interests, the Party's presence is likely to be regarded as beneficial and desirable; but, for others, perceived "conflicts of interest" have already proved problematic, particularly within state-organized NGOs designed to advance the interests of their supervising government units, some of which have actually repelled Party-building efforts. In other cases, grassroots NGOs and non-profit enterprises with "a high degree of autonomy, public welfarism (*gongyi xing* 公益性), volunteerism, a non-profit orientation, and democratic governance" have "shown little interest in Party-building, worrying that the Party is seeking to influence their original organizational arrangements." The new professional associations established for legal personnel have proved unusually difficult for the Party to penetrate for the aforementioned reasons,⁶⁰ as well as because, as one Party journal complained, of the generally high "degree of specialization and strength of independence of the legal profession."⁶¹ Likewise, private schools and research institutes established as alternatives to the traditional Party branch-dominated model have doggedly repelled the Party's forays.⁶² Striking a satisfactory balance between the interests of the Party and the original mission of a social group requires both "first-rate management skills" and the willingness to negotiate with both state and Party authorities, qualities that not all activists possess.⁶³ Indeed, civic organizations and voluntary groups today arguably steer an almost impossibly narrow course between the Scylla of state repression and the Charybdis of Party capture, with highly skilled helmsmen apparently in short supply.

Yet as sociologist Kang Xiaoqiang notes, the presumed opposition between state and social forces may be a by-product of Western historical models open to challenge and revision by China's unique developmental trajectory: it is a "long-standing misconception that a simplistic, unilateral opposition arises...pitting the work of Party-building against the autonomy of civic organizations."⁶⁴ However, in the absence of clear evidence that such groups retain the power to determine for themselves the nature and extent of their engagement with the

60 Liu 2009, 59.

61 Pan 2004.

62 Yan 2009.

63 Liu 2009, 59.

64 Kang Xiaoqiang. 2008.

Party, it is difficult to predict whether the Party's advance will result in the rise of a more genuinely robust "third realm" in China, or simply strengthen the existing chains of power and control.

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