

## Seeking Legitimacy:

### The Life, Death and Revival of a Chinese NGO

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**Abstract**—Growing in a special political environment, Chinese Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) have been developing rapidly in the past few years. The economic reform and trend of modernization and globalization have created new opportunities, while the slowly-changing authoritarian regime has long been a challenge. To achieve their own legitimacy and development, Chinese grassroots organizations have been negotiating the state with various strategies. This paper presents a real case of the life, death and revival of a Chinese grassroots NGO, showing the difficulties it faced and strategies it adopted to seek legitimacy, finding that despite the difficulty for Chinese grassroots NGOs to obtain a legal status, there are various ways for them to establish legitimacy in other forms. (abstract)

**Keywords-component; NGO, legitimacy, negotiation, China, civil society (key words)**

#### I. INTRODUCTION

Growing in a special political environment, Chinese Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) have been developing rapidly in the past few years. The economic reform and trend of modernization and globalization have created new opportunities, while the slowly-changing authoritarian regime has long been a challenge. Nevertheless, considerable progress in the loosening of political control has been seen since the 1970s, and relation between the state and NGOs is becoming more complex. To achieve their own legitimacy and development, Chinese grassroots organizations have been negotiating the state with various strategies, including approaches in ideological, political, administrative, legal, social and moral levels. Previous researchers have been concerning this issue and conducting relevant researches (Saich 2000; Zhao 2004; Chan, Qiu and Zhu 2005; Gao 2007), however, study in this area is highly limited due to lack of credible data and sufficient concrete cases. Moreover, recent events such as Beijing Olympic Games, Sichuan Earthquake, riots in Tibet and Xinjiang and new policies of information control are significantly influencing the path of development of civil society in China; therefore, more updated data need to be collected for further analysis to keep pace with the transforming society, and more conclusions may be drawn from the new information.

The aim of this paper is to present a real case of the life, death and revival of a Chinese grassroots NGO, showing the difficulties it faced and strategies it adopted to seek legitimacy. The examined organization is called National Union of Psychological Help (NUPH); it was founded after the Sichuan earthquake, aiming at providing psychological assistance to the victims in the stricken area. The research is based on qualitative analysis of both first-hand and second-hand data: the first-hand data were collected through participant observation as well as in-depth and short interviews with the NGO leader and volunteers. The second-hand data were accessed under the permission of the organization, including newspaper reports, internal documents of the NGO, and interview recordings and transcriptions with the earthquake victims. The collected data are analyzed in the framework of organizational theories from the new institutionalism school, focusing on the process of legitimating of organizations in an institutionalized environment.

New institutionalism views the environment as something penetrating the organizations. To increase their legitimacy, organizations are driven to “incorporate the practices and procedures defined by prevailing rationalized concepts of organizational work and institutionalized in society” (Meyer and Rowan 1991: 41). In this process, two kinds of inconsistencies may arise. First of all, organizations adopt external rules and structures simply for legitimacy rather than efficiency; this ceremonial conformity often leads the organizations to become loosely coupled with gaps between the formal structures and actual practices, which Meyer and Rowan define as “decoupling”. Secondly, the institutional environment can be highly pluralistic, and ceremonial rules may arise from different parts of the environment; therefore, the rules themselves may conflict with one another (Meyer and Rowan 1991: 49-55). As a result, organizations may have to adopt conflictive practices.

China has been changing from the status of being highly integrated in political, economical, legal, administrative and cultural realms to a new status of being relatively scattered in a lot of different “fields” with independent logics, values and rules (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 94-98; Gao 2007). Responding to demands from different aspects of the environment, legitimacy of Chinese NGOs may thus be

divided into political, administrative, social and legal; a certain social organization may obtain one or several or all of the four kinds of legitimacy. (Gao 2007) In other words, Chinese NGOs are legitimate at varying levels. While legal legitimacy has become an explicit requirement after the enactment of regulations since 1989, organizations without legal status can still seek for recognition by fulfilling requirements of political, administrative or social legitimacy. (Gao 2007)

The findings of this study indicate that, despite the difficulty for Chinese grassroots NGOs to obtain a legal status, there are various ways for them to establish legitimacy in other forms. Particularly, Chinese NGOs may choose to partly rely on morality to achieve their legitimacy, leading to a phenomenon that some NGO leaders and volunteers are regarded and reported as “heroes”. However, the pluralistic environment makes it difficult for organizations to conform to all of the legitimized practices arising from different spheres of the institutionalized environment. As a result, two forms of inconsistency were observed: first of all, the actual practices of the organization may violate its formal rules; secondly, the organization’s strategies to achieve legitimacy in different aspects may conflict with each other.

## II. LIFE: THE ESTABLISHMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

NUPH was founded on May 15th, 2008, seven days after the Sichuan earthquake. The founder, Liu Meng, was a university teacher, senior psychologist and supervisor in Psychologic health center of Hebei Economic and Trade University. He was thirty-four years old, and had a master’s degree in Psychology. Liu started to recruit volunteers right after the earthquake, and arrived in Dujiangyan on May 19th. Since then he has been working there as the leader of NUPH, and he is claimed to be the volunteer who has stayed the longest term in the stricken area.

As a non-government organization, NUPH has not registered with the government till now; therefore, it has been working as an illegal organization since the beginning. At first, NUPH worked in a temporary camping area on the playground of a university in Dujiangyan. Liu met the deputy mayor in the camping area and reported the working progress of NUPH to him. The deputy mayor was satisfied and approved Liu’s long-term project of psychological aid. Later, Liu was introduced to the Secretary of Youth League Committee of Dujiangyan via phone. The city government supported Liu’s work, provided Liu with several camps and allowed him and his volunteers to continue working in the name of NUPH. when the camping area moved to a temporary board house resettlement area. On July 27th, Liu and NUPH moved to Chengbei Xinju and settled down.

With the help of the city government and the administrative committee of this resettlement area, Liu got twenty board houses for his work, including one office room, three classrooms, two book rooms as a library, one room as a kindergarten, one room for mothers’ gathering, one consulting room, one physical therapy room, one dancing room, one recreation room, three dormitories, four storage rooms and one kitchen. He also got an open space and later

turned it into “Culture Square” (Wenhua Guangchang) for residents to dance, play basketball or table tennis, and enjoy other recreational activities. In total, NUPH was offered 1,000 square meters of ground.

Till the end of July, 2008, NUPH owned two PCs, one printer, ten sets of office desks and chairs, two beds for relaxing, 7,000 books, fifty sets of desk and chairs for students, one set of multi-media apparatus, one set of large outdoor stereo system, one portable outdoor stage, kitchen utensils, toys for children, and white board for students. Some of the assets were donated by individuals or schools; some were bought using Liu’s own money..

There were 5,864 residents in Chengbei Xinju, including 466 children under the age of fourteen, and 239 mothers who lost their children in the earthquake. Besides Liu Meng, NUPH had seven unpaid long-term staff; in addition, more than two hundred short-term volunteers had worked there. NUPH offered psychological assistance to all the residents, provided services such as baby sitting and physical therapy, and organized cultural and recreational activities regularly.

In June, 2009, college students started to come for volunteering. Short-term volunteers stayed in NUPH for various periods from one week to two months; they were appointed to different positions, such as Mothers’ Home, Sunshine Classroom, kindergarten, physical therapy room, and rear services. Liu Meng himself was often on trips to different conferences and meetings with government officials, but when he stayed in the NUPH work station, he was kept busy by consultations from residents both in Chengbei Xinju and from other places.

When arriving, all of the volunteers were supposed to register with a long-term volunteer in charge of personnel management. In fact, some of them got registered several days later, some had never registered during their staying. Volunteers got free accommodation and food, and some might also get travel allowance when leaving. Three dormitories and four storage rooms were used to accommodate the volunteers; there were four to seven bunk beds in each room, making it capable for eight to fourteen people to live in. Volunteers took turns to cook, and had meals together in the kitchen. Sometimes the residents would invite volunteers to have meals with them, or sent some food to the kitchen.

The seven long-term volunteers were in charge of daily administration, including recruiting and selecting volunteers, maintaining the organization blog, arranging work to the volunteers, broadcasting notices to the residents, and staying on duty in the offices and libraries to provide help. Each of them had been assigned to a certain post, such as personnel manager, logistics manager, and coordinators of different projects. However, they were not exactly doing the job assigned to them. In fact, the main principle in NUPH is “whoever has time will do it”. Similarly, short-term volunteers also often worked in other sections rather than the one they were assigned to. For example, I was firstly selected as a teacher in Sunshine Classroom, but in fact, I helped working in the library and Mothers’ Home every day. In some cases, even volunteers without psychological training

were assigned professional work, such as interviewing the victims, and providing psychological comforts.

Volunteers were asked to comply with a conduct code. Besides, there were dormitory regulations, requiring: never disturb the residents; never make noises; never borrow money from the residents; respect the religious belief of the residents; be polite and smiling all the time; keep the dormitory clean and tidy. A similar regulation was posted in the office room and the library, requiring all of the volunteers and users to protect the assets.

Moreover, there were four “leading principles” posted in the major office room, guiding volunteers’ behaviors:

1. Always support the leadership of the communist party;
2. Always support the national reunification;
3. Never interrupt the work of the government and the party;
4. Never participate in any forms of religious propaganda.

Actually, in practice, the volunteers were not required to know and follow these rules strictly. One long-term volunteer told me: “They (the regulations) are more for the outsiders rather than for ourselves; at least we have to please the government with them.” I seldom saw anybody writing work reports, and the sharing meeting was not regularly held. Moreover, both Liu Meng and other volunteers would chat with the residents on “topics rather than psychological assistance”, particularly complaining about the government’s work.

### III. DEATH: SUSPICION AND FEAR FROM THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Although supported by some officers in the city government, NUPH had never gained a good relationship with the county government, who directly controlled and monitored its work. As Liu Meng indicated:

I tried my best to form good relationships with governments at different levels. At the beginning, whenever I could see the mayor, I would go to talk to him. I did the same to officials in the administrative committee. However, we never got a good guanxi with the county government... ..From the Ministry of Civil Affairs, to the Youth Communist League Center Committee, to the Sichuan provincial government, to the Dujiangyan city government; we got on well with all of them, except for the county government. That was where the problem came about. (From an interview with Liu Meng)

The interviews and researches conducted by NUPH were very sensitive topics to the local government; many residents, especially the parents who lost their children, blamed the local government for not caring about them and not taking responsibility of their children’s death. They expressed their anger:

We are very angry that after such a serious disaster, the local government does not care about us at all. Our child died, our house was destroyed, one year and half has passed... .. we are very sad. They did not arrange the

compensation properly, and when we want to complain to the upper government, they start trying to persuade us not to do that. We are so angry about everything they did. (From an interview with Mother Wan’s husband)

After the earthquake, the soldiers came and didn’t allow us to go in. But they just stood there, smelling on the wreckages instead of saving the children. They wasted such a lot of time! Our children did not die of the earthquake; they died of despire. It’s unfair... .. They earned so much money when building the school; now it collapsed, nobody came out to take the responsibility... .. It is the corrupt officials who should die, not our children! (From an interview with Mr. Yi, a resident).

In July, 2009, a volunteer reported to Guankou County government, alleging that some members of NUPH expressed an anti-government orientation. The county government blamed NUPH, and asked the organization to move out of the resettlement area. Liu Meng wrote a letter to the secretary of the Party Committee of Guankou County to explain and apologize, but received no reply. Warning and order were sent to NUPH, asking all of the volunteers to withdraw immediately.

From July 17th to August 6th, most of the short-term volunteers left in batches. “Sunshine Classroom” was closed on July 24th; the library, physical therapy room and kindergarten were closed on the next day; “Mothers’ home” was closed on July 26th. NUPH started to move the assets in early August, and on August 10th, it officially withdrew from the resettlement area. After fifteen months’ work in the stricken area, the once prospered NGO experienced a sudden death.

Liu Meng and his long-term volunteers did not left Dujiangyan. They rented a flat in a residential area and reopened the “Mothers’ Home”. Now Liu and fourteen volunteers live and work in the 120-square-meter flat. Liu is still offering psychological assistance to anyone living in the stricken area; he is also following the current situations of the mothers who used to seek help from him. Despite the fact that the organization is not allowed to go back to the resettlement area again, NUPH managed to keep on working.

In November, 2009, Liu was appointed as the person in charge of the “Mianzhu 1+1 Heart Union Platform for Volunteers”. In April, 2010, Liu Meng was presented the “China Charity Award” (Zhonghua Cishan Jiang) as a charity model. After the Yushu Earthquake in Gansu Province on April 14, Liu Meng is planning to open another “Mothers’ Home” there.

NUPH is still unregistered, partly because it is not allowed for an NGO to use the word “national” in their name, but mainly because it is very difficult for NUPH to find a supervisory unit. Therefore, this organization is facing with many difficulties. As Liu Meng indicated:

The problem of registration is very serious. If we cannot solve it, we can hardly do anything. When they don’t

want to evict us, we can stay here; whenever they are not happy with what we do, all of us can be put into prison. We are illegal; more than five people getting together can make it an illegal gathering. Moreover, our work is about psychological assistance, which makes it even more illegal... Only a registered civil group can accept donations, we can only accept “gifts”, and we have to hold a ceremony, stating that the money is not for the earthquake victims, but for ourselves to eat, drink and play. In this way, when they want to check our account, they will get nothing. Or we will be in trouble. (From an interview with Liu Meng)

In fact, Liu Meng had got a special approval from the Ministry of Civil Affairs of China; however, he was still hesitating whether to use it in the registration process or not. He wants to be “ordinary” and refuse the privilege for a hero, but without a legal status, NUPH will face more obstacles. Its future remains unclear.

#### IV. RESPONDING TO THE PLURALISTIC ENVIRONMENT

##### A. Decoupling

The “decoupling” between NUPH’s formal structures and actual practices is observed in several cases.

Firstly, NUPH had a formal personnel structure with different posts, which is a legitimized practice for organizations to follow in society; however, this structure was not efficient in its actual practice. The reasons could be various: NUPH lacked capable people in certain posts, such as consulting psychologist and librarian; the job appointment was not reasonable enough, making some volunteers work in areas they are not familiar with or interested in; the working time of the volunteers was flexible, and sometimes they would be asked for a leave to travel or go home, thus other people have to take their work. As a result, although there was a formal administrative structure, it remained paper work. NUPH chose to behave differently to maintain efficiency.

Secondly, the formal regulations were often violated by actual practices; some volunteers were not familiar with the regulations at all. Part of the regulations were conforming to the elements in political legitimacy, such as the four “leading principles” showing the support to the party and government; the other part were responding to the demands from social legitimacy, such as writing working reports and attending sharing meetings, which make the organization seem more formal and professional. These regulations were highly ceremonial; in fact, volunteers often expressed their dissatisfaction towards the government, and moreover, no one had seriously written working report every day. Volunteers did not conform to the concrete rules because most of required practices would take too much time; they did not find it useful or meaningful. When it came to the ideological rules, the decoupling arose from the inconsistency between different forms of legitimacy.

Authors and Affiliations

##### B. Conflicts between different forms of legitimacy

NUPH has not succeeded in achieving legal legitimacy till now. It had tried to seek legitimacy in three other forms, but faced serious conflicts among the different rules.

The political environment of China requires all of the NGOs to conform to the leadership of the party; the goals and behaviors of the organization should be consistent with the contemporary political ideology. Therefore, to achieve political legitimacy, or “political correctness”, NUPH had to indicate its conformity clearly in the regulations. Moreover, Liu Meng had to be very cautious when facing the media, avoiding to blame or complain to the government, and intentionally praising the government’s leadership in the reconstruction process.

Basing on political legitimacy, Liu Meng further sought administrative legitimacy for NUPH, mainly by establishing personal relations (or “guanxi”) with government officials. At first, he intentionally approached the deputy mayor of Dujiangyan; later when he became more famous, he also formed friendship with officials in the Ministry of Civil Affairs. To maintain the connections, Liu Meng and his long-term volunteers often had to present at the banquets with local government officials or the Administrative Committee members; even when NUPH was leaving, Liu Meng treated the committee members again as a farewell dinner, aiming at preserving the “guanxi”.

Besides, Liu Meng tried hard to please the governments at different levels. For every project and activity NUPH was going to organize, Liu wrote reports to the government for approval. When there were problems happening, he would immediately write letters to apologize. Whenever speaking at a sharing meeting or conference, he always remembered to express gratitude to the government. Even when NUPH was forced to leave, he tried to hide the real reason because he did not want to ruin the relationship thoroughly.

Social legitimacy is substantial for an NGO to survive and develop. However, in the case of NUPH, the rules and practices derived from social legitimacy highly conflicted with the ones from political and administrative legitimacy, causing problems which finally harmed the latter two. Being an NGO for psychological assistance after Sichuan earthquake, it was impossible for NUPH to avoid topics of the negative side of the government. Most of the earthquake victims had strong negative emotions towards the government, including dissatisfaction, anger, or even hatred. To provide psychological aid, the volunteers must listen and respond to the victims’ feelings; to track and analyze their mental status, the interviews had to be recorded. As a result, NUPH collected plenty of information which the government does not want to make public, causing fear and distrust from the government officials; the administrative legitimacy was partially destroyed.

Without administrative legitimacy, it would become impossible for an NGO to survive in China. The revival of NUPH relies on the undestroyed connections with upper government, and the social and political legitimacy which Liu Meng spent great efforts to maintain.

### C. Moral Strategy: Becoming a Hero

Moral appeal of Liu Meng was an important element for NUPH to seek social legitimacy. Although Liu insisted that he was just telling the truth to the media, some important aspects of his work and himself were paid special attention to, or even exaggerated in the reports: he gave up a high-salary job to become a volunteer; he spent most of his own savings to maintain the organization's operation; he had epilepsy, which did not allow him to work too hard, but he still worked till fainting; he was not afraid of offending other volunteers and psychological helpers, as long as he could protect the earthquake victims; he had been separated with his wife and parents for more than a year; among all of the volunteers in the stricken area, he was the one who stayed for the longest term. All of these descriptions catered for Chinese people's eagerness to see heroes like Lei Feng, and the government's need to make a moral model in the reconstruction process. In those reports, working in an NGO was regarded as a career of charity; volunteers were described as the most warm-hearted people who sacrificed their time and energy to help others.

Liu Meng admitted that the this kind of reports had helped him a lot; becoming a hero gave him more opportunities to meet government officials, which further increased NUPH's political and administrative legitimacy. Therefore, he welcomed all interviews, and kept in touch with many journalists from different media institutions, including the China Central Television. Moreover, he posted every report and video about him and NUPH in his blog, and also listed them in his reports to the government.

### V. CONCLUSION

This case study confirmed the new institutionalism proposition that organizations are penetrated by their institutionalized environment. During this penetration, inconsistencies may be found between the adopted formal structure and actual practices, creating the phenomenon of "decoupling". In response to different aspects of the environment, NGOs in China have to adopt different formal rules, which may sometimes conflict with each other, causing problems that can threaten the organization's survival. In addition, showing moral appeal can become a strategy to achieve social legitimacy, which may further help to increase legitimacy in other forms.

This case is interesting for presenting the real living situation of a Chinese grassroots NGO without legal status. Because of the limited research scale, it is still too early to conclude that the above findings are common phenomena among Chinese NGOs. The inconsistency between social

legitimacy and political/administrative legitimacy may be more subtle in NGOs working in other areas rather than psychological assistance; "decoupling" may disappear or become more serious as the organization grow. Organizations with and without legal legitimacy may have different strategies in achieving and maintaining other forms of legitimacy. Further researches with a larger scale will help to explore these issues deeper.

In particular, the role of morality in the legitimation process of Chinese NGOs is found important but still remains unclear. The social context needs further analysis to determine whether and why there is a trend for Chinese media and government to depict volunteers as heroes, and what would be the influences of this moral orientation on the development of Chinese NGOs. In the short term, morality may be used as one of the strategies to achieve legitimacy, providing privileges for NGO leaders to act as heroes; however, since "ordinary people cannot do what the heroes do", in the long run, the moral orientation may become an obstacle for the construction of a healthy civil society.

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