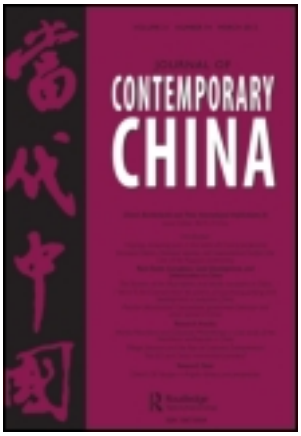
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New Strategies of Civil Society in China: a case study of the network governance approach

ANDREAS FULDA, YANYAN LI and QINGHUA SONG*

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Since the turn of the millennium, a second generation of Chinese civil society organisations (CSOs) have started taking on issues such as rural migrant integration, social service provision, as well as community building. Organisations such as Beijing-based Shining Stone Community Action (SSCA) can be seen as the avant-garde of a second wave of humanistic, community-based CSOs which are willing to help improve the strained state–society relationship in the People's Republic of China (PR China). In order to advance their values and interests, civil society practitioners are willing to engage with Chinese government officials. By gaining the trust of First-in-Command (FIC) cadres they manage to introduce ideas such as the principle of subsidiarity, solidarity and reciprocity. Civil society practitioners thereby initiate open-ended processes of communication, consultation and cooperation. Such processes help promote cross-sector collaboration between Chinese civil society organisations and local government agencies. These developments signify an incremental change from government control (guanzhi) to public management (guanli) and to network governance (zhili). As a framework for the case study the authors look at strategies for the establishment of cooperative relations, focusing on steering mechanisms and process factors. In order to further understand the dynamics of cross-sector collaboration they further explore the social capital dimensions of the principle of reciprocity and trust. To evaluate outcomes and impacts of cross-sector collaboration, the authors discuss the ability of collaboration partners to produce tangible results and to innovate. The findings show that successful experiments with cross-sector collaboration not only depend on structural factors but also on the skills and strategies of the individuals and organisations involved.

1. Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, Chinese social activists have founded their own second-generation civil society organisations (CSOs) which have started taking on issues such as rural migrant integration, social service provision, as well as community

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building.[1] Differing from the first wave of Chinese environmental activists these 'communitarians, as social environmentalists, do not seek to bring society back to a state of nature but to advance it, toward a good society'.[2] In order to understand the changing strategies of these social activists and the new functions of their associations we have two choices. One possibility is to see their work through the lens of state corporatism. According to Unger, 'the corporatist view (. . .) examines from the perspective of the state how the government for its own purposes develops a special relationship with selected associations'.[3] Steve Tsang describes the relationship between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and civil society as follows:

> The approach Hu (Jintao) has adopted is to treat civil society like a bird in a cage. The Party or the state is prepared to enlarge the cage as it sees fit but a cage is nonetheless maintained. This is to ensure that civil society can have sufficient scope to operate in the non-critical realm while its ambition to extend its scope to the critical realm is contained so that the development of civil society cannot pose a threat to the continuation of Party rule.[4]

Tsang's description of China's new political framework highlights the ability of the CCP to control the activities of Chinese CSOs.

The competing analytical lens of civil society can help shed light on existing spaces for social activists and their associations. According to Alan Fowler,

> civil society in its narrow Western theoretical grounding is inherently about power relations between state and citizen (van Rooy, 1998). In liberal interpretations, a fundamental task of civil society is to constrain the natural tendency of government to expand its sphere of influence, resorting to civil disobedience in extreme cases.[5]

Research on changing functions of Chinese CSOs conducted in 2006 revealed that such maximal definitions of civil society do not fully grasp the nature of civil society development in the People's Republic of China (PR China). In a comprehensive review of 40 Chinese CSOs, Robyn Wexler *et al.* experienced that

> at no point did any interviewee express any anti-state or 'dissident' sentiment. (. . .) On the contrary, the grassroots NGOs (on whom suspicion most often falls), overwhelmingly expressed a positive desire to work constructively with government partners, for the benefit of the whole society, and in many cases argued that their work directly reduces social conflict and promotes 'harmonious society'.[6]

1. We prefer the term civil society organisation (CSO) which emphasises what these organisations stand for rather than what they are not (non-governmental organisations, NGOs). According to Salamon and Anheier, CSOs should represent non-profit group interests, be anchored in values, promote solidarity and volunteerism, and enjoy some personal and financial autonomy from the state and private sector. See Lester M. Salamon and Helmut K Anheier, 'The third world's third sector in comparative perspective', *The Johns Hopkins Comparative Non Profit Sector Project Working Paper*, (1997), p. 9.

2. Amitai Etzioni, Andrew Volmert and Elanit Rothschild, *The Communitarian Reader. Beyond the Essentials* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), p. 1.

3. Jonathan Unger, 'Zhongguo de shehui tuanti, gongmin shehui he guojia zuhe zhuyi: you zhengyi de lingyu', *Kaifang Shidai* [*Open Times*] no. 11, (2009), p. 133.

4. Steve Tsang, 'Consultative Leninism: China's new political framework', *Journal of Contemporary China* 62(18), (2009), p. 874.

5. Alan Fowler, 'Getting real about NGO relationships in the aid system', in Michael Edwards and Alan Fowler, eds, *NGO Management* (London: Earthscan Publications Ltd, 2003), p. 248.

6. Robyn Wexler, Ying Xu and Nick Young, 'NGO advocacy in China. A special report from China Development Brief', *China Development Brief*, (2006), p. 11.

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Such research findings suggest that the lens of civil society, with its emphasis on autonomy of societal actors, seems to have its limitations in explaining civil society development in the PR China.

The three authors agree with Lu Yiyi who states that

> analytical frameworks based on the state-versus-society dichotomy, such as civil society and corporatism, are unable to capture the complexity of the relations between NGOs, their constituencies and the state. A deep understanding of the nature and functions of Chinese NGOs requires that researchers disaggregate both 'state' and 'society' to take into account the diverse interests and goals within them.[7]

We argue that the analytical framework of civil society tends to overemphasise the ability of CSOs to protect their autonomy vis-à-vis the party-state. The corporatist framework on the other hand exaggerates the constraining power of existing political institutions on CSO agency. While both analytical frameworks are useful to capture parts of the bigger picture, they cannot fully capture the fluidity of interactions between the Chinese party state and organised members of Chinese society. In order to fill this gap in research on China's civil society, in this article we will present new strategies of civil society in China and a case study of the network governance approach of a Beijing-based civil society organisation.

There are already many debates on why CSOs and governments feel that it is in their interest to collaborate. As direct participants in public activities, CSOs cannot avoid having some level of contact with government. This is all the more the case in China, where CSOs are constrained by the existing registration system.[8] They find it extremely difficult to register and attain legal status as 'social organisations' (*shetuan*) or as a 'people-run non-profit unit' (*minban feiqiye danwei*). This legal limbo leaves them no other option than to secure their organisation's survival by registering as firms or to link their organisations to existing organisations. Gao Bingzhong has pointed out that the legitimacy of CSOs not only relates to legitimacy by law but also legitimacy based on the procedures and practices of the bureaucratic system.[9] Unregistered CSOs can expand their scope of activities quite considerably when they receive support from leaders in the party-state bureaucracy. With their tacit support, civil society practitioners are granted the permission to develop activities in the field of that particular administrative body.

Whether or not a CSO can sustain and develop as part of China's organised society also depends on its ability to mobilise and use resources provided by government agencies. Qiusha Ma describes the situation more clearly: 'A prerequisite of government promotion of NGOs is its confidence in its control of NGOs'.[10] In order to carve a niche for their organisation Chinese civil society practitioners have to engage with leading cadres of an administrative organ, the so-called 'First in

7. Lu Yiyi, *Non-governmental Organisations in China* (Oxon: Routledge, China Policy Series, 2009), pp. 8–9.

8. China does not have an NGO law but three administrative regulations: the 'Regulations on the Registration of Social Organisations' (1998), the 'Provisional Regulations for the Registration Administration of People-Run Non-Enterprise Units' (1998) and the 'Regulations for the Management of Foundations' (2004).

9. Bingzhong Gao, 'The problem of social organisation's legitimacy by law', *Chinese Social Science* no. 2, (2000), pp. 100–109.

10. Qiushi Ma, *Non-governmental Organizations in Contemporary China: Paving the Way to Civil Society?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 5.

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Command' (*yibashou*). This is not without risks since the FIC cadres overconcentrate executive power, have a tendency to implement policies rather rigidly from the top down and are often suspected to be involved in large-scale corruption.[11] Despite these shortcomings, FICs are also able to make authoritative decisions and provide crucial political space. This was also the case with the Beijing-based CSO, Shining Stone Community Action (SSCA).[12] Throughout their activism co-workers at SSCA realised that FICs are key players who cannot be ignored.[13] Many Chinese CSOs have a deep understanding of the strategic role that FICs play in effective communication and collaboration with the government.

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2. Difficulties of grassroots NGOs collaborating with the government: how to build trust and promote system innovation?

Let us start by defining what we mean by cross-sector collaboration. Bryson *et al.* describe the process as follows: 'We (...) define cross-sector collaboration as the linking or sharing of information, resources, activities, and capabilities of organizations in two or more sectors to achieve jointly an outcome that could not be achieved by organizations in one sector separately'.[14] The definition is useful since it describes the key elements of collaboration, without being too specific on the exact nature of outcomes. In any kind of state and society CSOs will face difficulties when establishing collaborative relationships with the government. While both types of actors—civil society organisations as well as administrative agencies—work in the realm of public affairs, their work ethics, organisational forms, modes of operation and even types of rationality among its co-workers differ quite considerably. This becomes all the more visible when CSOs want to live up to one of their key functions, which is to innovate. In order to realise system innovation, Chinese CSOs need to influence government policies. In order to achieve this ambitious goal, CSOs first need to let the government understand their values and working styles. We argue that such a joint understanding can only be realistically achieved through face-to-face collaboration between civil society practitioners and government officials.

In this article we will explore what kind of strategies CSOs apply when establishing a relationship of mutual trust which in turn leads to the realisation of collaboration and innovation. We will focus primarily on CSO strategies in this interactive process. We assume that interaction is the struggle between competing actors and that it is a process of mutual influencing. Such interactive processes can be better understood by reflecting on Migdal's theory of 'state-in-society'. It helps to 'break down the undifferentiated concepts of the state—and also of society—to

11. Jianming Ren and Zhizhou Du, 'Institutionalized corruption: power overconcentration of the First-in-Command in China', *Crime Law and Social Change* no. 49, (2008), pp. 45–59.

12. More information about SSCA can be obtained on the following English-language website: http://www.communityaction.org.cn/ (accessed 25 August 2009).

13. This insight resembles the paradox Plummer and Taylor identified when stating that 'top-down capacity building in government is essential to take forward bottom-up approaches'. Jannelle Plummer and John G. Taylor, *Community Participation in China. Issues and Processes for Capacity Building* (London: Earthscan, 2004), p. 309.

14. John M. Bryson, Barbara C. Crosby and Melissa Middleton Stone, 'The design and implementation of cross-sector collaborations: propositions from the literature', *Public Administration Review* Special Issue, (2006), p. 44.

understand how different elements in each pull in different directions, leading to unanticipated patterns of domination and transformation'.[15] Migdal asserts that

> patterns of domination are determined by key struggles spread through what I call society's multiple arenas of domination and opposition. Officials at different levels of the state are key figures in these struggles, interacting—at times, conflicting—with an entire constellation of social forces in disparate arenas.[16]

This theoretical framework is useful since it enables us to recognise that strategies of Chinese CSOs are being applied in places that Migdal calls 'multiple arenas of domination and opposition', each of them representing a critical juncture of party-state and civil society. Yet collaboration partners are unlikely to frame their collaboration in Migdal's language of domination and opposition. Instead they are more likely to make good use of partnership rhetoric.[17]

Migdal's 'state-in-society' approach helps to show that *ex ante* it is impossible to fully anticipate both the dynamic of the open-ended process and to predict the likely outcomes of experiments with cross-sector collaboration between CSOs and the government. According to Migdal, 'the results of the engagement and disengagement of states and other social forces are tangible, even momentous, but outcomes rarely reflect the aims and wills imbedded in either'.[18] Outcomes of the interaction are likely to benefit involved actors to varying degrees, enabling them to realise some but not all of their respective goals. Given the limited political space provided for Chinese CSOs by the party-state, we acknowledge that the latter are clearly in a disadvantaged position when entering the arena of cross-sector collaboration. Migdal further points out that 'in the end, those local interactions cumulatively reshape the state or the other social organization, or most commonly, both'.[19] Such reshaping of the government can be understood as system innovation. In the following we will analyse the process of mutual influencing from the perspective of Shining Stone Community Action (SSCA), a grassroots NGO established ten years ago. Since its foundation in December 2002, this Chinese CSO has been successful in pushing for participatory urban community governance reform. This case study is informed by repeated field visits and participant observation between 2003 and 2009 as well as by the collection and analysis of the organisation's publications and newsletters.

3. How the Beijing-based civil society organisation Shining Stone Community Action is contributing to system innovation

We argue that a certain degree of relaxation of government control is an important prerequisite for reformed relations between CSOs and government. A case in point is a new community policy called 'Community-building standardization' (*shequ guifanhua jianshe*), issued by the Beijing municipal government in summer 2009. The new policy is significant because it calls for a shift from management of communities (*shequ guanli*)

15. Joel S. Migdal, Atul Kohli and Vivienne Shue, *State Power and Social Forces. Domination and Transformation in the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 8.
16. *Ibid*., p. 9.
17. Tuan Yang, 'Dui "hezuo huoban" de zhongwai renshi chayi', *China Development Brief* no. 3, (2006).
18. Migdal *et al.*, *State Power and Social Forces*, p. 23.
19. *Ibid*.

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to community governance (*shequ zhili*). In this context governance entails: (1) a greater plurality of actors; (2) more flexibility of processes and procedures; (3) leaner structures; and (4) internalisation of objectives. We understand the new municipal government rhetoric to mean the following: 'a greater plurality of actors' is a call for reformed working practices of the Community Residence Committees (CRCs) with a particular focus on the participation of all relevant stakeholders including municipal government agencies, CRCs, community-based organisations, community-based small businesses, enterprises, civil society organisations as well as community residents. 'More flexibility of processes and procedures', on the other hand, refers to overcoming formalism and proposing the realisation of stakeholder interaction. 'Leaner structures' implies the softening up of top-down command and control structures, while 'internalisation of objectives' requires that community objectives are set in accordance to residents' requirements and are not merely a repetition of policy slogans.

Such changes are indicative of the long journey of the Chinese urban community management system, which in the past 50 years has been undergoing profound changes. According to He Haibing it has shifted from control and regulation through work units (*danwei zhi*) to one based on street-level administration (*jieju zhi*) to a more community-based (*shequ zhi*) approach.[20] Since 2000 the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MoCA) has started to implement its new policy on community building nationwide.[21] He outlines that the MoCA's community-based approach differs from the previous two approaches in a number of ways. First of all, a community-based management approach is supposed to be increasingly people-centred and service-oriented. With its emphasis on dealing with the various needs of community residents, this community-based approach stands in stark contrast to the previous approach of control and regulation. Secondly, the management style has also evolved to an emphasis on community resident participation (*jumin canyu*).[22] At the same time, we would like to emphasise that local government officials often understand resident participation (*canyu*) to mean resident involvement (*canjia*) in government-sponsored community activities, thereby becoming mostly manipulative or therapeutic in nature.[23] Despite such shortcomings even incremental changes to the way Chinese urban communities are being managed are politically significant. It is a recognition on behalf of the government that community residents need to be given the opportunity to participate fully in the process of community building, the planning of community projects, as well as the handling of all other community affairs. A community-based approach requires the government to acknowledge a plurality of stakeholders and recognise the value of community-based organisations, professional community service providers,

20. James Derleth and Daniel R. Koldyk, 'The Shequ experiment: grassroots political reform in urban China', *Journal of Contemporary China* 41(13), (2004), pp. 747–777.

21. Ministry of Civil Affairs, 'Document No. 23: Opinions of the Ministry of Civil Affairs on promoting urban community building across the country', in Hu Shensheng, ed., *Shequ cidian* (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe), pp. 403–404.

22. He Haibing, 'Changes to the Chinese urban community management system. From control and regulation through work units to one based on street-level administration to a more community-based (*shequzhi*) approach', available at: http://www.shequno1.com/shh/ShowInfo.asp?InfoID=103&Page=3 (accessed 27 October 2009).

23. See also Sherry R. Arnstein, 'A ladder of citizen participation', *Journal of the American Planning Association* 35(4), (1969), pp. 216–224.

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as well as social work institutions. From the perspective of good government, the new objective is the maximisation of the public interest.[24]

This change in government attitude towards managing urban communities makes it necessary that all relevant stakeholders participate in community building. It opens spaces for the work of Chinese CSOs such as Beijing-based Shining Stone Community Action (SSCA). SSCA has continuously lobbied for participatory community governance. The new policy emphasis by the Beijing municipal government can be seen as a systemic breakthrough. For the past eight years SSCA has been promoting action research as well as piloting initiatives making use of the same reformist language. SSCA was established in December 2002 and has continuously promoted public participation in community affairs. In collaboration with American and German development practitioners, SSCA has progressively introduced participatory methods such as Future Search Conference,[25] Open Space,[26] Appreciative Inquiry[27] as well as conflict mediation in pilot sites all across China. Seven years later, in 2009, SSCA gained the trust of the Department of Civil Affairs of the Dongcheng District, a Beijing municipality, and registered as a 'people-run non-profit unit'. The Department of Civil Affairs acted as SSCA's 'authorised department', thereby granting SSCA the legal status of a government-recognised Chinese CSO. Its organisational mission is to 'assist China's urban communities develop capacities and build institutions to allow for effective participation in community affairs, to promote sustainable participatory governance reforms, and to facilitate harmonious community development'.[28] SSCA works in the following activity fields. It provides information, consultancy and training relating to urban community participation. SSCA also provides capacity building for social innovation work and collects and publishes related documents. Furthermore, SSCA conducts action research on innovative pilot initiatives in Chinese urban community participation reform. SSCA acts as a platform for information exchange, communication, cooperation and interaction between government, enterprises, academicians, civil society organisations as well as community residents. Finally, SSCA helps to nurture and develop community-based organisations.

4. Framework for the case study

In the following we will outline the framework for the case study analysis on cross-sector collaboration between CSOs and the government. The case study is designed in a way that satisfies both the need for rigour among academics and also helps provide insights for civil society practitioners looking for strategic advice. According to Thomson and Perry, actors in cross-sector collaboration have to continuously monitor and evaluate three key processes: (1) the process of informal communication between individuals as well as formal negotiations between organisations; (2) the

24. He Haibing, 'Changes to the Chinese urban community management system'.

25. Marvin Weisbord, *Discovering Common Ground: How Future Search Conferences Bring People Together to Achieve Breakthrough Innovation, Empowerment, Shared Vision and Collaborative Action* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1993).

26. Harrison Owen, *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide*, 3rd edn (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008).

27. David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2005).

28. Available online at: http://www.communityaction.org.cn/index.aspx (accessed 27 October 2009).

process of building up commitment through formal and mental contracts, thereby reducing the possibility of free-riding among partners; and (3) the process of implementation, where cooperation partners reveal whether or not they are living up to their commitments. Once collaborators violate the principle of reciprocity this can lead to a revision of commitments among partners and a renegotiation over rights and duties.[29] Our framework for the case study is based on Thomson and Perry's understanding of the three key processes.

Our framework can be summarised as follows: we will start with an analysis of the prerequisites for collaboration as well as strategies in the establishment of collaboration mechanisms, with a particular focus on the two structural factors' steering mechanisms and network management as well as process factors. In a second step we will focus on CSO strategies applied during the collaboration process, with a particular focus on factors pertaining to social capital, e.g. the establishment of trust and reciprocity. In a third step we look at the effects of cross-sector collaboration and analyse CSO strategies for system innovation. This approach will help generate a cognitive map of the relevant elements that need to be considered when conducting experiments with a network governance approach. Each step will be discussed by drawing on first-hand empirical data and linking them with insights gained from the literature on cross-sector collaboration and network governance.

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5. Emerging CSO strategies

5.1. From 'CSOs procuring government services' to 'government procuring CSO services': structural and process factors

In July 2009 the three authors conducted a capacity-building workshop in Beijing. Together with co-workers from various Beijing-based environmental and social development CSOs, we discussed how CSOs could establish collaborative relationships with the government. When asked about the driving forces in experiments with cross-sector collaboration, there was a consensus among participants that such experiments were mostly initiated by the CSOs themselves. Three initial phases in the collaboration between CSOs and government were identified. In a first phase it was mainly the CSOs who would make good use of their own resources, such as project funding and human resources, to persuade the government to engage in network governance. During this first phase the government would closely monitor their working style. After a while government officials would often realise that they may actually gain from collaborating with CSOs. In a second phase the government would actively seek CSO collaboration in areas of their interest, while the government would still expect the CSOs to provide their own organisational resources. Only in the third phase would the government start to procure CSO services in areas where there was enough overlap of common interests and joint policy objectives.

This process can be seen as a transition from 'CSOs procuring government services' to 'government procuring CSO services'. Whether or not there is a chance for cross-sector collaboration between grassroots CSOs and the government therefore

29. Ann Marie Thomson and James L. Perry, 'Collaboration processes: inside the black box', *Public Administration Review* Special Issue, (2006), p. 24.

mainly depends on whether or not in the first phase CSOs are willing and able to engage with the government. Such approaches to collaboration are often not the result of a deliberate strategy by civil society practitioners but rather a practical prerequisite to be able to do anything at all. Yet we recognise that such practices can be described as an important CSO strategy in dealing with the government. We will start our case study analysis by focusing on both structural factors and process factors. Structural factors mostly relate to steering mechanisms as well as network management, while process factors deal with the capacity of collaboration partners to recognise that collaboration is a process, and that community building is also a process.

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5.2. Steering mechanisms: applying the 'First-in-Command strategy'

In the Introduction we mentioned the importance of the 'First-in-Command strategy'. It is also the key to a better understanding of steering mechanisms. FICs need to be involved if CSOs want to engage in cross-sector collaboration with the government. Co-workers of SSCA learned about this only after various attempts to establish a working relationship with the government. Whilst SSCA has been using office space provided by the Hepingli sub-district office in Beijing municipality throughout their existence, they have not established a joint project for participatory community governance. The reason is that while repeated efforts were made to contact and communicate with the Hepingli sub-district office's FIC, the person in charge often changed, so they had to start their communications anew.

SSCA had a similar experience in the Haishu district of Ningbo municipality. They had successfully initiated a pilot site in Ningbo in 2005, but when the FIC in charge left, SSCA had no choice but to stop their work as well, since the new FIC had different priorities from the previous leader. These are two examples which underline the key role that the FIC play. When SSCA was approached by the Daxing sub-district office of the Beijing municipality for advice about the use of the sub-district's community service centre, SSCA immediately requested to discuss this issue with the FIC. The reason was that if SSCA had explained their ideas and plans to government officials of a lower rank, these officials would still have had to report to and gain the support of their superiors. Without the support of their superiors, however, any kind of collaboration would not be possible.

A basic NGO strategy therefore is to directly discuss matters with the FIC. SSCA's collaboration with the Daxing sub-district office helps to further illustrate this point. At the beginning the local government's understanding of the community service centre had been a fairly traditional one, which meant that they were willing to provide the space for the community centre rather than services to community residents. SSCA emphasised that the key function of a community service centre was to provide services rather than space for activities. Rather than targeting all the community residents, the sub-district office should also focus on vulnerable groups; and instead of discussing how to make use of the community centre's space they started discussing what kinds of service projects should be provided. A further innovation was SSCA's requirement that members of vulnerable groups themselves should do the planning and implementation of such service projects rather than rely on the help of CRC co-workers. These differences in perspective indicate that, without repeated

communication and consultation, it would have been impossible for both partners to develop a mutual understanding about the problem at hand.

5.3. Network management: setting up of specialised project groups

Findings from the literature on network governance suggest that civil society organisations and local government agencies are more likely to engage in collaboration in areas where they have a common problem to solve.[30] Furthermore, both sides need to be willing to accept the organisational interests of their counterparts as well as acknowledge their interdependence in order to be able to engage in collaboration.[31] In China such collaboration requires the support of the FIC. Participants need to be aware that once they start to collaborate they enter a network-based form of cooperation which significantly differs from the top-down working style of local Chinese governments. Peter Knöpfel *et al.* describe such networks as a kind of proto-organisation, which is less formalised in comparison to classic organisations and which uses the modus of negotiation in order to coordinate its activities.[32] According to Bryson *et al.*, these functions of networks can be realised in varying forms: (1) by self-government in regular meetings; (2) a formal coordinating organisation in the network; and (3) an administrative organisation, which is supporting the network in technical matters.[33] The search for a suitable administrative structure of the evolving network is likely to be guided by the question of whether all participating actors can agree to the chosen structure.

When cooperating with the Daxing sub-district office, SSCA chose to establish a number of different project groups at different levels, which included a 'leading small group', a 'coordinating small group' and various 'implementing small groups'. The relationship between the three groups can be described as the 'leading small group' being at the top of the vertical structure, while the internal structure of each small group is entirely horizontal and on an equal footing. This way the top-down approach of the Chinese bureaucracy is being married with the deliberative horizontal mechanisms required for effective network governance. The 'leading small group' included the party secretary and head of the Daxing sub-district office, the head of the community service centre, as well as the head of SSCA. They jointly discussed the progress of the project cooperation and found solutions to problems once they occurred. The 'coordinating small group', on the other hand, included co-workers from all three parties involved, the community service centre, the Community Residence Committee (CRC) as well as SSCA. Their responsibility was to facilitate the day-to-day operations of the project cooperation. Finally, the 'implementing small groups' were established and staffed by community residents themselves. The community service projects therefore were carried out by residents. In order to facilitate this process of self-organisation, SSCA analysed their target groups and identified residents with leadership skills. In a second step, they encouraged these community leaders to help mobilise and organise the relevant constituency. These 'implementing small groups' took on the form of community-based

30. Peter Knöpfel, Ingrid Kissling-Näf and Daniel Marek, *Lernen in öffentlichen Politiken* (Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn Verlag AG. Basel, 1997), pp. 24–25.
31. Bryson *et al.*, 'The design and implementation of cross-sector collaborations', p. 46.
32. Knöpfel *et al.*, *Lernen in öffentlichen Politiken*, pp. 23–24.
33. Bryson *et al.*, 'The design and implementation of cross-sector collaborations', p. 49.

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organisations (CBO). As citizen-led voluntary organisations they now either take care of the elderly, such as the 'Elderly Support Group', or they help provide inexpensive clothing for members of the rural migrant community, such as the 'Second hand shop for new residents'. Working with the Beijing municipal government, Shining Stone therefore extended the venue for community self-governance (*shequ zizhi*) and facilitated the proliferation of community-based organisations in their pilot sites.

The establishment of such specialised small groups in network management is something that the government accepts and can be seen as another effective CSO strategy. At the same time collaboration partners at all levels need to contemplate how to technically administer their network. Not all issues can be resolved with the help of small groups. Van Waarden distinguishes between the functions of providing information, consultation and the exchange of information, negotiation, and coordination and cooperation in planning and implementing projects.[34] From a legal-administrative point of view, CSOs are likely to be in a position of weakness, given that most civil society organisations are still registered as firms and therefore lack legal recognition from the government. Furthermore, they will need to agree on certain rules of the game, e.g. how to exchange information, how to engage in strategic planning,[35] how to divide labour, and how to implement specific programmes and activities. As we learned from the insights of Bryson *et al.*, the importance of repeated meetings of collaboration partners cannot be underestimated. It allows them to develop network-specific values, rules and trust. Knöpfel *et al.* refer to this as a 'local theory' which includes the shared assumptions about systemic interdependency.[36] This means that in order to develop mutual trust both sides need to have frequent meetings, establish small groups and agree on rules for their cooperation.

5.4. Process thinking: a driving force for cross-sector collaboration

If Chinese CSOs want to establish collaboration with government agencies, a key challenge is to overcome the tendency among local governments to settle for mere formalism. Civil society practitioners need to let government officials understand that results of the collaboration will not be realised overnight, that such collaboration should be seen as a long-term process that requires effort and commitment on both sides. Also, the government needs to be aware that collaborating with CSOs will require them to invest time. Enlightening the government about the importance of processes is another key prerequisite for the establishment of network governance. If the former structural factors can be described as 'organisational prerequisites', the latter process factors can be called 'conceptional prerequisites'. Neither discussions about collaboration nor implementation of joint initiatives are one-off events but should rather be envisaged as cyclical processes.

SSCA also cooperated with the Jianguomen sub-district office of the Beijing municipality on issues relating to the well-being of community residents. They let

34. *Ibid*., p. 47.

35. John M. Bryson, 'Why strategic planning in public and nonprofit organizations is more important than ever', in J. Steven Ott and E. W. Russell, eds, *Introduction to Public Administration. A Book of Readings* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006), pp. 314–323.

36. Knöpfel *et al.*, *Lernen in öffentlichen Politiken*, p. 41.

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local government officials understand that it is not enough to simply put up formal plaques and banners in order to be a 'civil community' (*wenming shequ*) and to assume that such one-off activities could actually solve any problem. The Jianguomen sub-district office had planned to build a 2,700-square-meter community service centre which was supposed to be in use by October 2009. Local officials had approached SSCA since they realised that, in the past, they had spent a lot of money without achieving any great results. So they were interested in establishing a service centre that would truly meet the needs of the community residents. SSCA subsequently offered to organise an Open Space Forum on the topic 'I am willing to get involved in our community service centre'.[37] Working through the Community Residence Committees (CRC) an invitation to 200 community residents was posted online. With the help of the two-day community dialogue, residents were able to provide feedback on plans for the use of the community centre's space and give suggestions on how the centre should be managed.[38]

Had the government gone about this job by simply holding one of its traditional meetings it would have been impossible to discuss how to deal with the many suggestions raised by the participating residents. It would have resulted in another instance of mere formalism, where the work stops after the conduct of a one-off activity. This would have meant that the collaboration between the CSO and the government would have also come to an end. In order to prevent this from happening, SSCA prodded the sub-district to hold another meeting a month later in order to update the community residents on the project details, to showcase the revised plans for the renovation of the community centre and to explain what kind of resident suggestions the sub-district office had taken on board and which it had not and for what reasons. Such instances of informing community residents should not be dismissed as mere window-dressing. Instead it signifies the beginning of a reformed relationship between residents and local government officials, who become increasingly aware of the need to be both responsive and accountable to community service users. SSCA continued to provide trainings on project design and management, thereby creating a venue for an ongoing interaction between local government officials and residents. SSCA's experience shows that CSOs need to maintain this kind of work ethic to press for continuous change and that they should not be satisfied by one-off activities.

6. From reciprocity to trust: social capital factors

6.1. The principle of reciprocity: CSO strategies of 'helping the government to achieve' and 'serving as a bridge between the sectors and between different levels of hierarchy'

So far we have discussed both structural and procedural factors which are key to enabling CSOs and local governments to engage in network governance. In the

37. For more information about the Open Space methodology see Owen, *Open Space Technology*.

38. A video report on the Open Space can be found online at: 'Jianguomen jiedao shequ baixing: wo de fuwu zhongxin wo zuozhu', available at: http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XOTExMjUxMDg=html (accessed 9 December 2010).

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following we will turn our attention to social capital factors which are key to sustaining such collaborations, in particular the principle of reciprocity and the importance of gaining trust. Bryson *et al.* argue that power imbalances in cross-sector collaboration can make it hard for cooperation partners to agree on common goals.[39] In order to generate mutual understanding and trust among unequal partners, each side has to be able to appreciate the interests and values of their counterparts.[40] If civil society practitioners want government officials to accept their own values and take over responsibility for the collaborative effort they first need to understand the interests of the government. After all, a key prerequisite for successful collaboration is that both sides can forge a consensus and find common objectives; or in the words of Saul Alinsky, Chinese civil society practitioners need to be politically schizoid:[41] capable of understanding the individual needs of the FIC and their party-state organisations while still being able to maintain their own idea or vision of what constitutes a good Chinese society or community.

Upholding the value of reciprocity while working within the confines of the existing legal–administrative system requires Chinese civil society practitioners to be extremely flexible. As practices of New Public Management (NPM) have found their way into the party-state administration, Chinese civil society practitioners often face the challenge that local administrators have adopted the logic of target-oriented management[42] and are only willing to let Chinese civil society organisations contribute to goals which have been unilaterally set up by administrative actors. Such combinations of goals and means severely restrict the principle of reciprocity by forcing Chinese civil society organisations to adopt the agendas of local government agencies. This is problematic since

> in the constructivist view, the problems which governments seek to resolve are not just considered to have an 'objective' base in the economy or the material structure of society, but are also constructed in the realm of public and private discourse (...). A problem is the result of negotiations among groups with competing definitions.[43]

SSCA has been willing to help the government achieve its goals by serving as a bridge between the sectors and between different levels of hierarchy. Helping the government achieve its goals means that the work of government officials is considered successful if it is recognised as valuable by their superiors. In order to gain the appreciation of their superiors, government agencies need proof (*zhengji*) that their work has been both innovative and effective. In such instances, CSOs actually have room to manoeuvre by emphasising the need for 'win–win' solutions. In the process of designing and implementing their collaboration with the government, CSOs can deliberately include project components that will highlight the contributions of individuals within the participating government agencies as well as their service counterparts.

39. Bryson *et al.*, 'The design and implementation of cross-sector collaborations', p. 50.

40. For more information about the role of tacit knowledge, see Robert Agranoff, 'Inside collaborative networks: ten lessons for public managers', *Public Administration Review* Special Issue, (2006), p. 60.

41. Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals. A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), p. 78.

42. Jan-Erik Lane, *Public Administration and Public Management. The Principal–Agent Perspective* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 236.

43. Frank Fischer, *Reframing Public Policy. Discursive Politics and Deliberative Practices* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 61.

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We would like to illustrate this strategic approach with another example from SSCA's work in the Anshan municipality of Liaoning province. In an urban community with a high proportion of elderly people, SSCA and local government agencies jointly established a voluntary citizen association called the 'Community Repair Service Group'. Due to a lack of public relations work the group initially did not receive enough attention from community residents. Yet when the government issued a local policy requiring the replacement of old heaters in community buildings a significant change occurred. The reason was that in order to install heaters on walls, people needed to drill holes. Private sector enterprises in Anshan provide such services for RMB12 per hole, which was quite a heavy burden for low-income households. So the 'Community Repair Service Group' made good use of this opportunity and offered to help to implement this municipal policy. For low-income households they provided their services for free, while charging all other community residents RMB2 per drilled hole. The residents responded very well to this service. This immediately increased the overall standing and respect for the group within the community, thereby enhancing the self-respect and confidence of its members. At the same time, the success of the 'Community Repair Service Group' was also a recognition of the municipal government's policy. When SSCA organised a project evaluation meeting together with local government agencies and community residents, this positive example was widely seen by the political leadership as a good example of successful public participation in community management. It is indicative of how Chinese CSOs can help the government achieve its objectives by insisting on a 'win–win' model which benefits the community.

As Chinese CSOs are located outside the administrative system they can also serve as a bridge between various government sectors and establish cooperative relationships with agencies on different administrative levels. While civil society practitioners can take the liberty to engage with leading government officials, cadres within the bureaucratic system have to respect the hierarchy at all times. It thus frequently happens that government officials ask civil society practitioners to invite both leaders from other government departments as well as scholars to join their conferences in order for the latter two participant groups to recognise their work achievements. From the perspective of the local government, such opportunities to showcase their achievements are very rare. In their engagement with the local party-state, Chinese civil society organisations are well advised to set their own standards for how much they are willing to compromise. This is of key importance since, even in network governance, their collaboration partners with management functions are still mostly integrated within the top-down hierarchy of their organisation.[44] Civil society practitioners have to ponder the question of how much they are willing to integrate with a network which is likely to be dominated by bureaucratic actors. While such an integration allows CSOs access to the political process, this approach can also be regarded as a strategic attempt by political elites to integrate and neutralise the critical potential of a movement.[45] Both collaboration partners need to reflect on two fairly different planning logics: (1) the ideal of a rational planning process based on

44. Agranoff, 'Inside collaborative networks', p. 57.

45. Felix Kolb, 'Soziale Bewegungen und politischer Wandel', *Studie im Auftrag des Deutschen Naturschutzring*, available at: www.bewegungsstiftung.de (accessed 1 May 2005).

top-down goal-setting and the identification of means and measures of achieving them; and (2) a far more politically rational and interactive process of planning which aims to negotiate goal–means combinations in public policymaking.[46]

6.2. The importance of gaining trust: CSO strategies of 'showcasing the results of cross-sector collaboration' and 'getting the support of academia and the media'

Local government agencies have the power to allocate financial resources according to the priorities of the CCP and most of the time they do not support Chinese CSOs financially. Yet, (1) law, and (2) money are only two of the six possible resources in cross-sector collaboration, which also include (3) consensus, (4) legitimation, (5) information and (6) time. Knöpfel *et al.* argue that civil society organisations can mobilise the remaining four resources to advance their values and interests vis-à-vis bureaucratic actors. For example, civil society practitioners can exchange access to power against the non-mobilisation of popular resistance. Also, in terms of the legitimisation of party-state interventions, they can lend the Chinese communist party credibility simply by making sure that new actors, such as citizens, are being granted the right to participate and that more independent community-based organisations come into being.[47] Last but not least, by enrolling social scientists sympathetic to their cause, Chinese CSOs can forge alliances with the world of academia, which enhances their own credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of local power-holders.[48] The working practices of Shining Stone Community Action reveal that SSCA has utilised two types of CSO strategies to obtain the trust of the government which can be summarised as 'showcasing the results of cross-sector collaboration' and 'getting the support of academia and the media'.

In July 2008, SSCA volunteered to contribute to community reconstruction in the Mianzhu municipality after the 12 May earthquake hit Sichuan province. Its offer to help was initially rejected by the Mianzhu municipal government. The local government was wary of letting CSOs deal directly with local residents. Once SSCA co-workers realised that they could not establish genuine community partnerships they returned to Beijing. Only three months later did the Mianzhu municipal government start to encounter serious difficulties in implementing central government policies which dealt with the reconstruction of houses. The government faced increasing difficulties in managing rising neighbourhood conflicts. In order to solve these problems they held a conference to which they also invited social scientists. During the conference, academics successfully lobbied the government to allow SSCA to enter their communities. In October 2008, SSCA re-established contact with the Mianzhu municipal government and started to work in its communities after the beginning of the Spring Festival in 2009. Upon arrival it only took them a couple of hours to solve a pressing problem which had to do with the safety of remaining building structures. Some residents had been unwilling

46. Amitai Etzioni, 'Mixed scanning: a "third" approach to decision making', in Jay M. Shafritz, Karen S. Layne and Christopher P. Borick, eds, *Classics of Public Policy* (Beijing: Pearson Education Asia Limited and Peking University Press, 2006), pp. 42–46.

47. Knöpfel *et al.*, *Lernen in öffentlichen Politiken*, p. 48.

48. Melissa Leach and Ian Scoones, 'Mobilising citizens: social movements and the politics of knowledge', *IDS Working Paper* no. 276, (2007), pp. 16–20.

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to make the necessary investments to stabilise buildings that had been structurally weakened during the earthquake. The government felt unable to solve these problems and asked SSCA to mediate. SSCA was given the mandate to conduct a participatory community dialogue together with community residents. After only a couple of hours they managed to reach a mutually agreeable consensus among participating community residents. This event caught the attention of the local media and was also reported on the website of the Mianzhu government. This development underlines SSCA's philosophy of achieving change through action and influencing the government by solving problems in partnership with government officials.

The Mianzhu example shows that CSOs require the support of experts and scholars as well as the attention of the media in order to gain the deeper trust of the government. Since the central government has made 'Scientific Development' (*kexue fazhanguan*) a new mantra for a more balanced development model, which takes economic, political and social factors into account, CSOs can capitalise on contacts with scholars who can lend their scientific credentials to further their specific cause. SSCA has always tried to include academics in their work. Scholars are regularly invited to their trainings, project review meetings as well as conferences to provide feedback to all stakeholders involved. It is another example of how the interactive nature of SSCA's work has helped to strengthen its organisational role. It has also had transformative effects on some of the participating scholars who increasingly see the value of becoming more grounded in community work and are planning to conduct more action research in the future. Such support by academics has led government officials to adopt a more pragmatic approach towards civil society practitioners. According to Larry Diamond such pragmatism among all stakeholders is of crucial importance to the development of a political culture since it 'restrains the role of ideology in politics'[49] and since 'pragmatism generates flexible goals, it is consistent with a commitment to democratic procedural norms that take precedence over substantive policy objectives. This overriding commitment to democratic proceduralism is a critical political cultural condition for democracy'.[50]

6.3. The pursuit of system innovation: CSO strategies of 'using government rhetoric to change government concepts' and 'working with the government to change government thinking'

So far the discussion has mainly focused on the processes of cross-sector collaboration itself, but what about the outcomes of network governance? It has been argued that *ex ante* it is impossible for any participant to fully anticipate both the dynamics of the open-ended process and to predict the likely outcomes of experiments with cross-sector collaboration. This makes it difficult to assess both their outcomes and impacts. Alternatively we can turn to the question of how networks take over responsibility. According to Bryson *et al.*, networks become responsible: (a) by coming into being; (b) by serving the organisational interests and values of collaboration partners; and (c) by generating added value for the public good.[51] By creating transparency in their shared

49. Larry Diamond, *Political Culture and Democracy in Developing Countries* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc., 1994), pp. 10–11.

50. *Ibid*.

51. Bryson *et al.*, 'The design and implementation of cross-sector collaborations', p. 51.

goals and means, both sides can deflect possible criticism. Due to the vastly differing value orientations of civil society practitioners and party-state representatives, it is fairly unlikely that both sides will be able to agree to pursue systemic or paradigmatic change objectives. Still, the added value of cross-sector collaboration may lie in the ability of civil society practitioners and FICs to agree to introduce new instruments and methods in public policymaking and policy implementation. As such, cross-sector collaboration can become a laboratory for new forms of governance. But what kind of innovations can result from cross-sector collaboration?

In the case of SSCA the innovation lies in the organisation's advocacy of participatory community governance. Their approach differs quite considerably from traditional top-down approaches to community management. SSCA calls for the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders and self-government at the community level. This approach stands in great contrast to conventional top-down approaches taken by many municipal governments. As we have outlined in the first part of this article, the innovative concept of community participation has already been included in the official work of the 'Beijing Municipal Societal Construction Working Committee'. There are also first signs of new efforts to put this concept into practice. The challenge in the future will be to make sure that new systems do not remain a mere formality but that they live up to their promises. SSCA advocates that system innovation can be enhanced by following the two CSO strategies of 'using government rhetoric to change government concepts' and 'working with the government to change government thinking'.

Co-workers of SSCA are convinced that many of the government's policies should be pursued, for example the provision of community services, community building, development of grassroots democracy, and community self-government. At the same time, they are aware that because of long-held attitudes within the Chinese administration there exists a large gap in policy implementation. SSCA derives much of its legitimacy by making good use of their practical skills and coming up with constructive proposals, thereby gradually helping the government to realise their policy objectives. 'Using government rhetoric to change government concepts' is not a contradiction as long as SSCA feels that there is not too much of a difference between government rhetoric and its own actions. Furthermore, they see the use of government rhetoric as another way of reducing suspicion among government officials, allowing them to believe that CSOs are not planning to obstruct government policies but that, in fact, they are willing to work in partnership with the government. The scholar Qiushi Ma summarises this approach as follows:

> Against such a broad context, Chinese NGOs do not consider themselves as the vanguard of society battling state intrusion or as an independent sector with a distinct function. Rather, the great majority of Chinese NGOs see their roles as complementing and assisting the state.[52]

One could argue that this also applies to the work of SSCA, but while SSCA helps the government realise its policy objectives by coming up with innovative ideas on suitable policy tools, it does not fully become an instrument of the government. In fact this strategic approach enables SSCA to influence its collaboration partners.

52. Qiushi Ma, *Non-governmental Organizations in Contemporary China*, p. 9.

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One FIC with whom SSCA started their first pilot site in Ningbo is now contemplating setting up his own NPO incubator in Ningbo upon his retirement in 2011. He has also extensively published on the issue of participatory community management, making good use of theories and practices obtained during his collaboration with SSCA.[53]

7. Conclusion

Organisations such as SSCA can be seen as the avant-garde of a second wave of humanistic, community-based civil society organisations which are willing to help improve the strained state–society relationship in the PR China. For the past eight years, co-workers from SSCA have continuously prodded Chinese local government officials to open up their planning, decision-making and implementation processes to the public and lobbied them to perceive citizens as partners for sustainable development. While SSCA had to sacrifice some of its organisational autonomy it is actively promoting good government on the local level, a necessary supporting factor in China's incremental democratisation process as understood by the Chinese scholar Yu Keping.[54] Citizens willing to exercise their citizenship, functioning civil society organisations and empowered communities are unlikely to succeed with their efforts unless changes to attitudes, working styles, planning procedures and modes of service delivery on the government's side occur.

Our case study has revealed that Chinese CSOs such as SSCA are already applying a great number of strategies in network governance. In terms of establishing a collaboration mechanism, they have followed the 'First-in-Command strategy', helped set up specialised project groups, and gained influence through repeated meetings with government officials. By emphasising process thinking they have become the driving force in collaborations with the government. Other applied CSO strategies included 'helping the government to achieve', 'serving as a bridge between the sectors and between different levels of hierarchy', 'showcasing the results of cross-sector collaboration' and 'getting the support of academia and the media'. With the help of these strategies SSCA initiated open-ended processes of communication, consultation and cooperation between government officials, social scientists and community residents. Such experiments of cross-sector collaboration between such varied stakeholder groups signify an incremental change from government control (*guanzhi*) to public management (*guanli*) to network governance (*wangluo zhili*).

While our findings are initially limited to the case of SSCA we are convinced that other Chinese civil society organisations are also contributing to this development. It is our hope that other Chinese CSOs, together with social scientists, can use our methodology in order to summarise and reflect upon their own experiences with the above-stated strategies in network governance. Critics of CSO strategies as exemplified by the practices of SSCA may argue that even successful experiments with cross-sectoral collaboration will only lead to new forms of party-state corporatism

53. See also Yiping Xu and Xiaoling He, *Xiandai shequ zhidu shizheng yanjiu* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 2008).

54. Keping Yu, *Toward an Incremental Democracy and Governance: Chinese Theories and Assessment Criteria* (University of Duisburg-Essen), available at: http://duepublico.uni-duisburg-essen.de/servlets/DocumentServlet?id=5262 (accessed 4 January 2012).

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and co-optation. Yet such reasoning underestimates the transformative nature of learning processes that accompany such open-ended processes of collaboration. Once Chinese civil society practitioners and local government officials start to interact, they continuously learn and adapt to new situations. Through interaction, both sides realise that rather than pursuing 'lose–lose' or 'win–lose' strategies they can also create 'win–win' situations. This is by no means a small learning achievement given the prevailing 'winner takes all' attitude in Chinese politics.[55] By helping reformist government officials experience 'win–win' situations in interactive processes Chinese civil society practitioners also achieve their own objectives. By finding constructive solutions to problems they gain increased government recognition as legitimate actors in China's multifaceted modernisation drive.

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55. Joseph Fewsmith, *Elite Politics in Contemporary China* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe Inc., 2001).