

The Growing Influence and Challenges of China's NGOs in Development and Humanitarian Aid in Africa: China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation Case Study

Nonstate actors in world politics

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Introduction

China's growing power has prompted an important debate about the essence of its foreign policy interests. Others agree that the country's long-term ambition is to become a world power but argue that the most important driver of Chinese policy is to maintain and enhance the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Yang and Zhao, 2014). However, China still seeks a peaceful international environment in which to continue its economic development, which is the essence of the country's national interest (Deng, 2008). Views about the relationship between Chinese foreign policy and humanitarian action are similarly diverse. It is debatable whether humanitarian action simply a means to enhance material power and influence in crisis-affected regions as a way to compete to Western states and other emerging powers. The humanitarian community recognizes and acknowledges the importance of diversity in the international humanitarian system, while still figuring out in how to deal with new actors, one of them is China.

China's foreign aid pay surprisingly close attention to humanitarian assistance. The Chinese government includes provision of humanitarian aid within the overall foreign aid programme. This is due to the fact that the amount of money China spends on what it calls humanitarian assistance is very small, totalling with only 1.7% of its overall foreign aid budget (UNDP, 2019). However, humanitarian assistance has different foreign policy implications, which is based on a different set of national interests and different decision-making processes and involves different actors. Since the rapid economic growth over the past decades, China has transformed its position from a recipient of international aid to a donor nation. China's overseas development assistance has mirrored its state-run commercial investments and trade activities. In other words, the majority of China's overseas development assistance is directed at nations, notably in Africa, where it has a substantial stake in accessing natural resources and low-cost human capital.

The expansion of China's overseas development assistance has embodied in its Going Out policy. Chinese assistance is mostly provided largely in the form of concessional or low-interest loans and government-financed infrastructure projects. Hence, these activities are not exclusively in the domain of the state. NGOs have traditionally played an important role in the development outcomes of a recipient nation. Under the current legal system, China had registered 702,000 social organizations (Zhang et al, 2016). With China proposing the Belt and Road Initiative and deepening the South-South cooperation, a number of Chinese NGOs have started to carry out foreign aid activities in African countries. These foreign aid activities by Chinese NGOs include humanitarian assistance, education, and healthcare (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2013). Due to the dominance of the state, the growth of Chinese NGOs has not been easy. There are a lot of opportunities and challenges that these NGOs face in conducting development in African countries, such as Ethiopia and Malawi.

Prior to the internationalization of Chinese NGOs, they could not enjoy the space and environment necessary for their existence and development because of the strong identity of Chinese government (Deng, 2000). From then on, China state has gradually creating space for the growth of NGOs, whereby NGOs start to receive recognition for their positive social contributions to society (Hsu et al, 2014). This has brought great changes to the relationship between government and the society that

gave Chinese NGOs more potential possibilities to play an active role abroad. This essay examines the links between Chinese foreign policy and humanitarian action performed by Chinese NGOs in Africa. Moreover, the role of these Chinese NGOs in Africa, particularly in humanitarian and development assistance will be analysed to cover the behaviour of Chinese NGOs in African countries (Hsu et al, 2016). In this essay, one of the Chinese NGOs, China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation (CFPA) with numerous kinds of international poverty alleviation projects and crisis response activities in Africa is chosen to be analysed. CFPA expands its role as a provider of aid and thus indicates the emerged of Chinese NGOs as potential key actors in humanitarian aid, international affairs, and international cooperation.

The role of China's NGOs in development

The work of NGOs is vital to communities around the world as both advocates and service providers. NGOs are credited for bringing an array of important issues, such as poverty reduction, climate change, health care, education, and many more. Despite their importance, NGOs had to contend with issues and questions about their accountability and legitimacy (Hasmath and Hsu, 2008). In this case, NGOs in China are closely monitored by the state, where state regulate their development and movements. Nonetheless, NGOs in China are emerging as important stakeholders in the delivery of social services and got less constraints than before (Hildebrandt, 2011). As they develop, Chinese NGOs are looking beyond their local communities and broaden their target under the framework of China's Going Out policy. There are around 100 Chinese NGOs working in Africa, among them are China's national Red Cross and China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation (CFPA). The most important thing to note is that the majority of these NGOs are government-organised nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs). It has an intimate and intertwined connection with the state which make them qualitatively different from other NGOs. In the Chinese context, GONGOs emerged and were effectively constructed of the state. They acted as transmission belts between the party and the people. In the case of social development work, GONGOs like CFPA were initially led by individuals in which the finances and personnel were not fully independent from government. The consideration about the role of GONGOs in Africa is necessary due to the overlap between their work and that of NGOs.

From the standpoint of Chinese government, Chinese NGOs are seen as facilitators of friendlier relations with African countries. Despite the increasing exchanges between Chinese and African governments, many African NGOs still has inadequate infrastructure and capacity building knowledge. In line with the rise of Chinese investments in Africa, Chinese NGOs are seen as a way to soften China's image abroad and even to rectify the damages caused by Chinese investments. Zadek mentioned that "Chinese NGOs can make a major difference in helping African countries to avoid sort of conflict that has taken place.... Chinese NGOs can also help African communities hosting Chinese enterprises to talk effectively with local managers and other China's companies' senior executives" (Norris, 2016). Chinese NGOs' role here is to supplement the corporate social responsibilities of Chinese companies.

From development aid to humanitarian aid

For the institution, official development assistance includes grants and loans on favourable terms as well as transparency in financing mechanism (Barne,, 2009). Transparency and the purpose of this aid are the main Chinese shortcomings in integrating the Development Assistance Committee (DAC). Thus, China started to implement the mechanism of interest-free loan, grants and concessional loans. As China's presence in Africa continues to grow, humanitarian aid actions are being combined indiscriminately with development aid. More specifically because of the proximity of Chinese NGOs

to the central government which suggests that they may be carrying Beijing's political and economic intentions and it did not match the characteristic of humanitarian aid. The reason of why humanitarian aid organized within the Chinese state control is because the Council of State decides on the main guidelines for the humanitarian aid to be allocated. Furthermore, the state also strongly encouraged to develop aid activities as part of the new Silk Roads.

Until 2010, Beijing followed the non-intervention in intra-state conflicts principle, but then driven by the deteriorating security climate in African regions where China had economic interests (Binder & Conrad, 2009). All of the CCP actions are coherent and part of long-term vision for African content. The increased participation in peacekeeping operations, the development of GONGOs and the structuring of the humanitarian sector reflect several Chinese political objectives. On the international scene, China is looking for prestige. At African level, it plays on the discourse of the South-South cooperation and strengthen these bilateral partnership with African states and institutions. The strong economic interests behind these political ambitions must not be overshadowed. While China is trying to break away from the recurring accusation of energy diplomacy in Africa, a large part of humanitarian aid is sent to the East, along the land and sea routes of the new silk routes. Despite the economic and political aims of Chinese humanitarian aid, the question of its place in the global humanitarian system will continue to arise.

The internationalization of Chinese NGOs and the case of CFPA

CFPA is the typical Chinese NGOs that embodied the following three aspects, which are development, internationalization, and influence. In the context of development, Chinese NGOs were strictly controlled by the government. However, the government started to get rid of this system and CFPA is one of the Chinese NGOs which successfully being independent from Chinese government. The most important thing is that it is no longer use governmental power to collect donations (Ling, 2010). Meanwhile, in the view of internationalization, CFPA has achieved the goal of "going out" including in funds, personnel, office, projects, etc. (Zhao & Han, 2016). By the end of 2017, CFPA had cumulatively raised poverty alleviation funds and materials. CFPA is not only first foundation to develop overseas charitable activities, but also the largest and most powerful foundation in China (Deng, 2014). It was first identified by the Minister of Civil Affairs as a charitable organization with public fundraising qualification and very influential. From those aspects alone, CFPA is a representative organization in China.

CFPA was founded in 1989 and was formerly known as the Foundation for Underdeveloped Regions in China. It put forward the international development strategy in 2007 after getting independent status from the Chinese administrative system (Zan, 2017). In December 2009, CFPA established an international development project department responsible for undertaking international aid projects. In the effort of internationalization, CFPA established its first overseas office in Myanmar in 2015. Up to now, CFPA has carried out projects in 18 countries and regions with a total input of RMB 120 million yuan with African countries accounted for one-third as recipient region (CFPA, 2016).

The well-known CFPA's international development program in Africa is China-Sudan Abu Ushar Friendship Hospital which focuses on maternal and infant health (Hsu, 2016). This program was inaugurated in 2011 and funded by China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC). As Chinese companies continue to engage in environmentally and socially vulnerable sectors, it was believed that they increasingly have an interest in working with civil society groups to fulfil their social responsibility. China also involved in Sudan's Merowe Dam project in 2003 which sparked discontent among local Sudanese (Bosshard, 2008). In order to avoid local discontent on this project, China needs to allow Chinese NGOs to engage with their African counterparts for greater local involvement

in such projects (Askouri, 2008). With realizing the NGOs' ability to mobilize social resources and foster mutual understanding between stakeholders, the Chinese Embassy in Sudan even gave full support to CFPA for the hospital construction (Fu, 2008). It was argued that Chinese state and companies desire to portray them as a friendly and pragmatic development actor is one of the reason for the internationalization of CFPA (Hsu, 2016).

Whereas, other CFPA program such as the Smiling Children School Feeding Program and the Water Cellar Project are operating as long-term development assistance in Africa, mainly in Ethiopia and Sudan. The program was also funded by donations from Chinese individuals through an internet platform where NGOs can launch public fundraising (CFPA, 2011). The feeding program focused on providing free breakfast and lunch to students in school and improving their nutritional status, while the water cellar program is a program to store water in each cellar for a family of five members for 30 years. Those programs shared rich experience of poverty reduction and practices from domestic context and transferring them to other developing and underdeveloped countries (Zhao & Han, 2016). Chinese NGOs and state believed that the development experience can be used in Africa and helping to promote poverty reduction of African countries. Having these experiences is another reason for Chinese NGOs to go out and operating abroad.

Other than development aid projects, CFPA also focuses in humanitarian assistance in emergencies. In the beginning of internationalization, CFPA mainly focused on natural disasters as its international humanitarian aid by providing disaster risk assessment, carrying out rescue missions, and contributing in the post-disaster reconstruction (Zhang et al, 2016). After 2018, the role of CFPA expanded from focusing on natural disasters to refugees in the context of conflict and violence. They launched the Brighter Futures Program to help South Sudanese refugees in northern Uganda become self-reliant (Large, 2008). In the end, the internationalization of Chinese NGOs to Africa is a process of combining the state's public interest with organizations' natural selection and also expanding their roles in humanitarian aid.

Chinese Development Assistance in Africa: Opportunities and challenges

In Chinese NGOs' development and humanitarian program, there are some opportunities that benefited both China and recipient countries. Chinese NGO's played crucial role in infrastructure and human resource development. Thus, China is getting diverse economic benefits because of this development assistance. The market potential for Chinese products, promotion of trade, and employment opportunity for Chinese citizens are examples of China's opportunities in this project. A significant part of the aid activities is used as means for promoting China's interests in terms of security policy and foreign economic policy. It is also used in order to gain support for Chinese concerns in international forums and to flank the expansion of Chinese foreign trade. China actively promoted their political and diplomatic interests abroad. One of the African countries, Ethiopia, played an important role in African politics because of its strategic location in the region as the seat of a continental political body like the African Union and other agencies of the UN as well as World Bank and IMF (Brautigam, 2009). Hence, Ethiopia has become the focus of China's wider ambitions in Africa and the changes it signifies for the region.

In contrast, Chinese NGOs' internationalization also has various kinds of challenges, such as lack domestic financial support, lack of policy support, and lack professional support. Funding is the main problem for Chinese NGOs because it lacks funds from the Chinese state (Huang et al, 2014). In the case of CFPA, the major donations of this project come from individuals and enterprises. China's foreign aid is usually carried out through the form of engineering projects for infrastructure construction. The state policy also did not offer provisions for international donation and charity work.

There is still no law that Chinese NGOs could consider in their overseas operations including opening branch offices, implementing projects or conducting research (Zhang et al, 2016). Furthermore, most Chinese NGOs are also short of human resources and experience to operate overseas projects. Low average employee salaries in Chinese foundations makes it difficult for them to attract or retain talent (Deng, 2014). The lack of professionals directly affects Chinese NGOs' capacity to carry out activities abroad and becomes one of the reasons for Chinese NGOs usually doing short-term projects (Yang, 2014).

Implication of Chinese political interests through NGOs in Africa

One of the China's key foreign policy priorities is the Going Out strategy. Based on this strategy, it is emphasized that the need is not only to continue bringing in foreign investments, but also encouraging Chinese companies to go out into the world. The growing presence of Chinese NGOs globally has some important implications. Western NGOs have traditionally been viewed as agents of export in terms of best practices and norms (Li, 2007). They are seen as builders of capacity in host nations and alternative social service providers. In Chinese case, the NGOs socialized and evolved in an authoritarian institutional environment in which they have adapted to tight state supervision and limitations. The domestic environment for Chinese NGOs can potentially serve as a guide for understanding Chinese NGOs' activities overseas, notably in Africa. Chinese NGOs have strong potential to offer valuable practices but in turn, it may face criticism and fear that Chinese NGOs will strengthen authoritarian tendencies or reduce the influence of Western NGOs (Wang & Jia, 2002).

China's steps to deepen its links with the international humanitarian community in addressing developmental and humanitarian issues, have stepped up their cooperation with international institutions. Nevertheless, the country has been careful to maintain some distance between itself and the structures of the international humanitarian system. China has shown a remarkable ability to adapt to multilateral mechanism despite an initial lack of knowledge or familiarity. The evolution of China's humanitarian assistance is featured by the national interest that has always mattered in determining the ways in which China has provided humanitarian assistance (Zhao, 2004). Those interests have evolved over time, from spreading communist revolution to gaining a favourable international reputation, depending on the foreign policy direction of particular regimes at particular times. It has also taken multiple approaches towards international norms and institutions. On the one hand, China has integrated into international institutions and norms when it comes to some technical aspects of humanitarian aid in relation to natural disasters and other development. In short, the internationalization of China's humanitarian assistance has come with Chinese characteristics as a norm taker and norm modifier.

Conclusion

Chinese state is strongly encouraging Chinese NGOs to go out and expects them to strengthen the role of Chinese NGOs in foreign aid projects through financial support and policy guidance for promoting their participation and internationalization (Yao, 2018). Embeddedness is the means whereby some Chinese NGOs have gained enhanced autonomy. Thus, we could assume that Chinese NGOs will actively continue going out, following the developmental strategy of the Chinese government. We can obviously observe that Chinese state wants actively to use foreign aid to expand its overseas influence and enhance for a great role on the world stage by making its internationalization strategy more broadly.

In the case of CFPA, internationalization give them an opportunity to play an important role at home and abroad as a social welfare and basic service provider in the arena of development and

humanitarian aid. Meanwhile, from the relationship between Chinese state and Chinese NGOs, we can see that they will be affected by Chinese government policies and make more efforts to enhance the image of China state and overseas enterprises. In the context of strengthening China-Africa cooperation, the interaction pattern between Chinese state and Chinese NGOs may effectively promote the development and internationalization of Chinese NGOs in Africa.

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