

## **Public Trust as a Driver of State-Grassroots NGO Collaboration in China**

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**Abstract** While the moniker non-governmental organization (NGO) connotes distance from the state, it is widely recognized that civil society in a range of political contexts is in fact characterized by close ties across the public-private divide. Scholars of Chinese social organizations have noted that proximity between the state and NGOs is even more pronounced in the context of China. What is less clear is why this is so. Why do grassroots NGOs overwhelmingly pursue engagement with the state? This paper presents findings that enumerate a number of motivating forces that drive state-NGO collaboration, particularly with respect to small, grassroots NGOs that do not have preexisting ties to elites or to the state. Most notable among these is that NGOs seek engagement with state agencies primarily in order to secure public trust. Public trust is found to be key to the ability of such groups to run programs, mobilize citizens or raise funds. These findings therefore have implications for how we understand the critical role of public support and legitimation—in addition to state control—in the enabling of civil society under authoritarianism.

**Keywords** State-NGO Relations · Public Trust · Cross-Sector Collaboration · China · Grassroots NGO

### **Introduction**

The rise of the NGO sector in China's rapidly shifting social landscape led to a burst of scholarly interest in the nature of social organizations and their relationship with the state. An initial question preoccupying researchers was whether China's burgeoning NGOs were signs of an 'independent civil society' arrayed against the state or evidence of corporatist control. Subsequent studies advanced more complex views of state-NGO relations in China by identifying collaborative modes of engagement and mutually beneficial interactions, focusing on state interactions with well-established groups in urban centers or NGO-friendly regions [1]. Important insights have been advanced despite limitations in access to other types of organizations. For example, less is known about China's small grassroots non-governmental organizations, many of which are unregistered, operate in rural areas, and do not benefit from preexisting ties to government or elites. Because of the lack of official data and access, there is a paucity of empirical work on these grassroots NGOs, even though they constitute the bulk of the third sector, both in terms of numbers and distribution, and, according to some scholars, are 'the most meaningful indicator of civil society' [2].

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Therefore, important questions remain about the nature of NGOs' engagement with the state. First, opinions differ on the extent to which grassroots NGOs seek government ties—it has been suggested that such groups prefer to stay away from the state and operate under the radar [3]. Second, there is confusion about what motivates such organizations, that are seen to have been operating relatively freely under the government's 'three no' policy of 'no recognition, no banning, no intervention' to seek ties with the state. Most scholars assume that Chinese NGOs seek state ties for legality and funding[4]. Western theories of NGO legitimation under authoritarianism note that organizations without the state's trust exist in a precarious situation, particularly unregistered grassroots NGOs without legal and regulatory protections, and that therefore they seek to align themselves with the state for security and legal registration [5]. Other studies have noted that grassroots NGOs work with the state to scale up limited models, access resources, or influence policy [2, 4].

In this paper, we find that, while these motivations are all relevant in explaining state-NGO collaboration, they are primarily mediated through a single factor—public trust. Drawing on interviews and field observations, this study finds that grassroots NGOs seek to engage with local authorities because collaboration can enable them in a number of ways. Key among these motivations is that government collaboration allows grassroots NGOs to gain public legitimacy and trust, and is thus a key determinant in the ability of such groups to run programs, mobilize citizens or raise funds [6]. These findings therefore have implications for how we understand the critical role of public support and legitimation—in addition to state control—in the enabling of civil society under authoritarianism.

### **Explaining state-NGO collaborations in global context and the divergent Chinese experience**

A growing body of scholarship in a range of global contexts seeks to understand the dynamics behind a rise in cross-sector collaborations. State-NGO partnership, one form of such collaboration, is thought to hold promise in advancing the 'new governance' model, in which both parties and the public benefit [7]. Potential benefits are largely thought to outweigh potential risks, such as a decline in state control or authority, the dependence of NGOs on public funds and accountability challenges [8]. In addition to understanding the risks and benefits of state-NGO collaboration, a few studies have sought to identify its determinants.

Gazley attempts to integrate previous theoretical frameworks, and the large number of potential explanatory factors to which they give rise, into an integrated theory at three levels: the sectoral level, organizational level and individual level [9]. These explanations of collaborative motivation between state and NGO have drawn on three approaches: first, exchange and resource dependency theories, which identify the organizational resources each party can provide in collaboration [10]. Second, explaining the impetus to collaborate has drawn on institutional theories of isomorphic behavior, in which collaboration is viewed as a desirable behavior and thus increasingly pursued by similar actors [11]. Finally, a theory of transaction costs shows how col-

laborative relationships increase organizational efficiency [12]. For instance, Gazley and Brudney ([13]: 389) find that ‘motivation to partner is driven by a desire to secure those resources most scarce for the respective sector: expertise and capacity for government, funding for non-profits.’

In another study, Oliver argues that determinants of cross sector collaboration can be considered along six categories, which map somewhat onto predominant theoretical frameworks in the field [14]. The first is necessity. Organizations collaborate because they have to in order to meet legal or regulatory requirements or because scarce resources dictate that they must join forces to survive. This determinant appears closely linked with resource dependence theory. The second is asymmetry. Collaborations are about one organization asserting its power or influence over another organization. Resource dependence theory is also associated with this determinant as the need to assert power may be related to resource scarcity. The third is reciprocity; that is, organizations join together because they have mutually beneficial goals and interests. The fourth reason for pursuing collaborations is to achieve efficiency. This is a primary tenet of transaction cost theory. The fifth proposes that organizations enter into collaborative relationships in order to achieve stability, predictability and dependability. Finally, inter-organizational alliances can be viewed as a strategy for enhancing legitimacy [15].

Studies on state-NGO collaborative motivation in China have generally been consistent with the above explanations. They advance a range of explanations for why Chinese NGOs seek government collaboration. Media reports and early scholarship on China’s emerging NGO sector framed government ties as a survival strategy. Organizations without state sponsorship exist in a precarious situation, particularly for unregistered grassroots NGOs that lack legal and regulatory protections. Observers have suggested that such groups are only able to survive by cultivating the favor of local officials [16]. Hasmath and Hsu ([17]: 936) explore such factors as “coercive pressures brought about by the regulatory environment; mimetic pressures that arise from uncertainty in the social space to operate effectively; and normative pressures that would eventually arise from a convergence of attitudes, norms and approaches through the professionalization of Chinese NGOs.”

Another set of explanations emerges from organizational theory, suggesting that NGOs work with state agencies to access resources. Such resources could include funding, manpower, administrative infrastructure or more intangible resources such as approvals, legitimacy and opportunities for policy influence. Hsu suggests that alliances can help both types of organizations secure necessary resources and gain legitimacy [18]. Gallagher discusses such state interventions as financial subsidizing, legitimacy authorizing, double posting of personnel, ideology and interest representation [19]. Hsu also studies state-NGO relations in China in the context of resource dependence, arguing that resources can include both material as well as less tangible resources [20].

Research also shows that there are NGOs in China that choose not to engage with the state. It is possible for these organizations to rely on alternate strategies such as gaining popular support, seeking media attention or relying on international funding, to operate and expand—at least up to a certain point. But the evidence suggests most Chinese NGOs seek government engagement [21]. NGO respondents in this study,

whether registered or not, were no exception, almost universally pursuing relationships with local government. Thus, scholars such as Hsu and Jiang ([21]: 100) interpret NGO activists statements that ‘China is a society with a strong government,’ not as conveying fear of a powerful state, but rather a recognition that the Chinese government is ‘the center of resources and power, a site for one-stop shopping for everything an NGO needed.’

Among the many benefits that accrue to grassroots NGOs because of government ties, public trust seems to be of primary significance. As suggested by Hasmath and Hsu, the building of mutual trust incentivizes both NGO and local government to collaborate with each other [17]. The role of trust in state-NGO collaborations in China is little understood and deserves further study, especially given the way it diverges from global experience. Globally, high levels of public trust in NGOs are implicitly expected. General perceptions of NGOs see them as value-oriented, normative actors that selflessly champion the public interest [22]. NGOs’ institutional design is also thought to make them inherently trustworthy. A non-distributional constraint means that NGOs cannot distribute profits earned in ways that are expected to corrupt organizations and their leaders [23]. Despite this expectation, levels of public trust in NGOs have been found to vary significantly across contexts [24], even post-communist societies.

Conversely, scholarship on Chinese NGOs consistently finds low levels of public trust in NGOs. A 2006 survey by the Qinghua NGO Research Center found public trust in NGOs so low that few citizens would choose to approach voluntary organizations when in need [25]. Bruce Dickson ([26]: 141) reports on survey research conducted in 2010 and 2014, noting that almost 65 percent of respondents ‘believed that large numbers of social organizations with different points of view are a threat to social stability, which adds to their suspicions about the work of NGOs.’ In 2014, only 38 percent of survey respondents trusted NGOs. Trust in NGOs was found to be lower than trust in most other categories, including local officials. Jennifer Hsu likewise finds in a study of HIV/AIDS organizations that interviewees across the board noted low levels of trust towards NGOs [20]. Based on a study of NGOs in ethnic minority regions, Sara Newland similarly notes that these groups lack legitimacy in the eyes of citizens and are largely distrusted [27]. A number of explanations have been advanced for widespread mistrust of NGOs in China. A lack of associational experience, paralleling that of many post-communist countries, in which ‘the NGO sector is in a nascent stage and citizens lack prior experiences with NGOs as activist organizations and providers of public goods and services’ could be part of the picture [24]. In these states, characterized by weak civil societies, citizens express little interest in participating in the voluntary sector [28]. When what little associational experience exists has been negative, characterized by corruption or public scandals, public trust in NGOs suffers [29]. Tianjian Shi suggests that Chinese citizens may mistrust NGOs because they represent ‘selfish’ special interests [30]. Other explanations attribute low levels of trust in NGOs to their close ties to the state [31].

Whether proximity to the Chinese state strengthens or weakens the strikingly low levels of public trust in NGOs is uncertain. On the one hand, China displays unusually high levels of trust in political institutions. In theory, NGOs lacking public trust should derive legitimacy from affiliating with trusted institutions. This seems to be

the predominant official narrative, and is certainly the general understanding in NGO circles. Several reports show NGOs intentionally blurring distinctions between themselves and government partners to expand public trust [27, 32]. Studies of citizens have indicated that they would find NGOs more credible if they were supervised by government [26]. An analysis of NGO funding sources also found that institutional donors tend to prefer formally registered groups with ties to the state [33].

However, the same analysis also found that individual Chinese donors disfavor officially approved groups connected to the state and prefer grassroots group that may be seen as more independent, and, therefore, legitimate [33]. There is, then, an alternate perspective that sees state ties as depressing trust in NGOs. This is particularly relevant with the general decline in institutional trust in China over the past two decades. Survey data shows small declines in trust in central political institutions and greater declines in trust in local government. Specifically, based on Asian Barometer and World Values Survey (ABS) data between 1995 and 2008, Heurlin concludes that state affiliations could be depressing trust in NGOs in three ways. First, as general political trust has declined, it seems to have decreased trust in NGOs. Second, as the political environment for NGOs worsened, and the perceived risk of joining NGOs increased, public trust in NGOs also declined. Finally, authoritarian political culture could also be having negative effects on trust in NGOs. These effects are predicted to extend into the future, suggesting that ‘NGO-state relations are likely to exert a largely negative influence on public trust in NGOs in the near future ([32]: 103).’

While, echoing the trust-based view, findings derived from the subset of NGOs included in this study suggest that among the complex motivating factors driving state-NGO collaboration, public trust and legitimation play a key role.

## **Data and Method**

This paper is based on a broader study of Chinese grassroots NGOs and local government agencies carried out using a case-oriented comparative approach across six subnational units in Hebei Province, Yunnan Province and Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region [34]. Data for this study is drawn from fieldwork carried out between 2009 and 2012, and again between 2018 and 2019.

In the first round of data collection, 122 semi-structured interviews were conducted, including, 55 interviews with government official, 16 with scholars and researchers, and 51 interviews with NGOs. Most of these interviews took place with staff from a set of 22 grassroots NGOs that form the core of this study. Table 1 describes the grassroots NGOs in the core sample. In person questionnaires were administered to government and NGO interviewees following interviews:

**Table 1** 2009-2012 fieldwork round core grassroots NGO sample

		Yunnan	Ningxia	Hebei	Total
<i>Number of NGOs</i>		8	7	7	22
<i>Issue Area</i>	Environment	4	4	5	13
	Education	4	3	2	9
<i>Registration Status</i>	Registered as NGO	5	4	2	11
	Registered as business	0	0	2	2
	Unregistered	3	3	3	9
<i>Average Age (years)</i>		13.3	6.2	10.9	10.1
<i>Founder Origin</i>	Same village or city as NGO	5	3	6	14
	Same province	3	3	2	8
	Other provinces	0	0	0	0
<i>Size</i>	Under 5 Core Staff	5	5	5	15
	5-10 Core Staff	2	1	2	5
	Over 10 Core Staff	1	1	0	2
<i>Geographic Scope</i>	Urban	0	1	2	3
	Rural	4	4	2	10
	Urban and Rural	4	2	3	9

Narrow criteria were used in sample selection: groups included in the study had to be rooted in local communities, have a defined organizational identity and implement concrete programs, either in the broad area of environment or education. While these issue areas are not representative of the NGO sector, they are suited to observation of state-NGO interactions as they are both areas that are broad enough to encompass a range of issues from benign to politically sensitive and approaches from service provision to advocacy.

The second round of fieldwork included 43 interviews and visits to several of the 22 organizations included in the original study. Table 2 presents information on the second round of interviews.<sup>3</sup> While the three provinces represented in the original study are not representative of China as a whole, they are well positioned to showcase the understudied universe of small, indigenous grassroots NGOs that exist outside the key centers of political and economic power. In addition, the study included a review of NGO materials, relevant bureaucratic documents; government websites, newspapers, national statistical yearbooks and attendance at government and NGO workshops and conferences. The paper is also informed by a decade of ethnographic research and participant observation among grassroots NGOs.

<sup>3</sup> Two separate tables containing different descriptive variables are presented because the two rounds of fieldwork were undertaken with different aims and therefore dealt with distinct samples. Table 1 captures the narrowly defined core sample of grassroots NGOs in the first study, while the second round provides a broader snapshot of shifts in the sector from government, academic and a range of NGO perspectives.

**Table 2** 2018-19 fieldwork round interviews

		NGO	Government	Academic	Total
<i>Number of Interviews</i>		32	6	5	43
<i>Included in original sample</i>		11			
<i>Issue Area</i>	Sustainable development	23			
	Education	9			
<i>Province</i>	Beijing	8	4	4	
	Ningxia	15	5		
	Gansu	1			
	Shanxi	1			
	Yunnan	3			
	Guangdong	2			
	Shanghai	1		1	
	Jiangsu	1			

The original study primarily sought to uncover sources of variation in state-NGO engagement across research sites. One element of the study explored motivations for collaboration between the two parties. This paper discusses findings on NGO motives for collaboration, and, in particular, how NGOs discuss their efforts to establish ties with the state as a mean to securing public trust. Therefore, rather than providing participants with a list of potential determinants of collaboration derived from relevant theoretical frameworks, an evidence-based approach was taken in allowing relevant determinants of collaboration to emerge directly from the interviews themselves [14]. The factors independently mentioned by respondents do, however, relate closely to several of the theoretical frameworks discussed in the literature, such as resource dependence and legitimacy.

This paper also draws on data from the third and fourth wave of the Asian Barometer Survey, conducted in 2011 and 2015 (the most recently available wave of ABS data). Partial correlation analysis was conducted in order to provide a fuller picture of public trust in NGOs and other public agencies during this period, and to shed light on the relationships between government trust and NGO trust, in line with the main argument of this paper.

### **Grassroots NGO motivations for engaging the Chinese state**

For Chinese NGOs, government relationships are of critical importance. This is particularly true of grassroots NGOs without preexisting ties to elites or powerful political actors. Questionnaires administered to NGO staff representing the 22 grassroots NGOs included in this study found that over 90% of survey respondents agreed with

the statement that their organization should establish relationships with local government. Both registered and unregistered groups in the sample were equally desirous of forming ties with government agencies, problematizing the assumption that unregistered groups avoid or operate without state sanctioning. As interview excerpts show, NGOs have a sophisticated awareness of how engagement with the state can enable them to achieve their goals. One experienced and savvy director of a grassroots environmental NGO described the organization's motivation for cooperating with government in terms that referenced survival and guards against threats of oppression, as well as such practical benefits as access to policy support, financial resources, efficiency, administrative capacity and mobilization ability:

Cooperating with government brings a lot of benefits for us...with an NGO everything is related. The local government plays the primary leading role. If government opposes you, you can't operate long-term or large-scale. The local government has a lot of resources, policy and money, if they don't support you, they can oppress you ... Or if you go to a project site they can get the local government in the township to support you. They can use their administrative power to gather the local community, they can get workers to support our work. This will be much better than doing it by ourselves.<sup>4</sup>

Some organizations do not see local government support as necessary to their survival: 'for us, we don't have a lot of dependence on government. We can still do our work regardless of whether we have the support of the government or not.'<sup>5</sup> For these organizations, government cooperation is a voluntary strategy. One educational NGO that has considerable experience working closely with government compared the success of projects they had carried out in conjunction with government collaboration and projects carried out independently: 'This other project was not carried out in direct cooperation with government, we only secured their approval for it... But if we had had their participation it would have been better.'<sup>6</sup>

In these cases, engaging with the state is less a matter of survival and more a question of using the power of government to their advantage in maximizing resources, impact, and effectiveness:

Over many years the government's function has been very extensive and powerful, while NGOs lack, or have minimal access to, funds, resources, human resources and material resources. So NGOs can give relatively little play to their functions compared to the government's functional effectiveness...[Cooperation] can make it easier for you to do your program on a large scale, and do it well.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Interview Y134, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, May 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Interview N142, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Interview Y158, NGO, director. Yunnan, July 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Interview N238, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

NGO respondents reported a range of motivations including increased impact, information, funding, technical support, administrative infrastructure and human resources, as well as the ability to circumvent stringent rules, facilitate registration, and achieve policy influence. Table 3 shows the number of NGOs, out of the 22 organizations that formed the core of this study, that in interviews mentioned, unprompted, the following motivations for seeking government collaboration.

**Table 3** NGO motivations for working with government

	<b>Number of Responses</b>	<b>Percentage of Total</b>
Impact	2	9%
Scale	7	31%
Sustainability	3	13%
Information	3	13%
Funding	4	18%
Technical support	3	13%
Problem solving	2	9%
Registration	2	9%
Policy influence	2	9%
Legitimacy	3	13%
Public trust	14	64%

DATA SOURCE: collected by author.

A number of these motivating factors are discussed in further detail below, with a particular emphasis on public trust. It should be noted that the motivations discussed here refer to perceived or expected outcomes of engagement between NGOs and government; not all expected outcomes are realized. Some of the real outcomes of reciprocal engagement uncovered in this study, such as policy influence or reduced risks in policy innovation, are discussed elsewhere [35].

### *Societal Impact, Scale and Sustainability*

Ties to the state can help NGOs achieve greater impact [36]. Respondents also discussed their efforts to address social issues and those of government in terms of two separate but aligned, rather than counteracting, forces that can increase the impact and effectiveness of a single effort. Cooperation ‘benefits local people and local society, too, because these are two forces, one from society, one from government, the two should cooperate to do things for local people.’<sup>8</sup>

One educational NGO mentioned that they work with the Women’s Federation ‘because they also are working for women, so if we do something together with them, we will have a deeper impact.’<sup>9</sup> Another educational NGO also discussed the possibility

<sup>8</sup> Interview Y132, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Interview Y158.

of increased impact: 'If we and the government cooperate in our work, our strength will be greater, we will have greater social impact and help more people. So we hope to have a good cooperative relationship with them.'<sup>10</sup>

Many groups reported seeking government collaboration in order to scale up and thereby boost impact. With the limited resources at their disposal, grassroots NGOs can often only reach small numbers of beneficiaries or work within a limited geographic area. Several of the NGOs working in the field of education, in particular, found themselves limited by trying to work outside the formal educational system. To enter public schools in the formal educational system requires permission and support from local government:

If you want to expand, or have more people benefit, you have to go to the schools, this way in a week you can have a few hundred people benefit. In this way they will help and educate their friends and brothers and sisters and this way it will expand faster, there will be more beneficiaries. And if you work in the schools everyone will see what you are doing, and come and support it, so the effect of the program will expand quickly. Because local schools are managed by the local government, so you have to cooperate with the government.<sup>11</sup>

Consistent with Newland's findings, respondents suggested that expanding social programs into new and unfamiliar territory or across a wider geographic region is also difficult without government collaboration [27].

### *Information*

Information is a valuable resource that government ties can yield for grassroots NGOs. One respondent explained that '[Cooperation] strengthens communication, dialogue, sharing of resources, especially the asymmetry of information.'<sup>12</sup> The sponsoring government department of an environmental grassroots NGO lets the director know about relevant information or opportunities that they may become aware of. For example, when the provincial Civil Affairs Bureau and Poverty Alleviation office started to focus on and provide funding for rural economic associations and cooperatives, the sponsoring department passed this information on to the NGO so that it could organize villagers into cooperatives and apply for these funds. The founder says:

Because there are many documents and regulations that support private non-enterprise units, and special preferential policies for them. And because my projects are relatively remote, I spend a lot of time doing work in the rural areas, so I often don't know of them. So through strengthening these relationships, I hope to receive more support from government and have more

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<sup>10</sup> Interview H168, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, November 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Interview N236, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Interview N142.

access to this kind of information, as well as financial support, support in material resources, and direct support in carrying out work in the village. Through the government's support, the program can achieve large-scale, strong expansion.<sup>13</sup>

Another environmental NGO said of its collaborating government department: 'We need to have a relationship with them, because they are professional, so the information at their disposal is greater than that of the environmental protection volunteers.'<sup>14</sup>

### *Funding*

Financial resources might be thought to be of primary importance as a motivating factor for cash-strapped grassroots NGOs struggling to survive. However, research did not indicate that this was the case, with public trust being more significant. While grassroots NGOs can generate their own funding through membership or service fees, or apply for grants from private foundations, public trust and government collaboration were both seen to be helpful in securing financial resources. Some funders, particularly international foundations or government funders, require funding applications to be jointly lodged by government departments and NGOs, presumably as a measure to ensure projects enjoy both government and societal support. Thus, cooperation with a government department can often allow access to additional sources of funding.<sup>15</sup> It can also indirectly open channels to (legal) funding by enabling NGOs to register with nonprofit status: 'If we are able to register, we will be able to raise funds... and we will be able to grow sustainably.' This impacts long term development and, ultimately, survival: 'if we raise funds now it is actually against the law. But by registering it will be easier. Now our funding sources are very narrow. Organizations with insufficient funds will be unable to survive.'<sup>16</sup>

Government departments can sometimes also directly provide some funding to grassroots NGOs: 'if they observe that your program is very good, it is likely that they would invest some financial resources into it and give you some money.'<sup>17</sup> The prevalence of government funding and contracting to NGOs has generally increased over the past decade [33]. Yang and Alpermann ([37]: 311) find that 'even civic groups that lack good personal ties with officials may be able to obtain some public funding.' For many of the grassroots NGOs in this study, however, government funding was still out of reach. Securing public trust though demonstrating state ties, therefore, was seen to hold significant promise in allowing NGOs to raise public funds or apply to private donor organizations.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The official term for NGOs that register as nonprofit organizations. Interview N273, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, December 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Interview N142, NGO.

<sup>15</sup> Interview N143, NGO, director of external affairs. Ningxia, June 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Interview H263, NGO, deputy director. Hebei, August 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Interview Y131, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Interview Y158.

*Administrative infrastructure, technical support and human resources*

Access to the administrative infrastructure of government agencies can be valuable to grassroots NGOs operating on a shoestring budget. Cooperating government departments can provide venues for events, and have been known to provide small office space for the use of grassroots NGOs. They can also loan sound or video equipment for special events, allow NGO staff to use printers, computers or equipment for reproducing publications.

Respondents also noted that government ties can provide grassroots NGOs with access to experts that can advise on technical aspects of their programs or provide technical support for program participants. One environmental NGO explained that by working with government, ‘we receive some technical support and some policy support. For example, cooperation with the Water Resources Bureau or Animal Husbandry Bureau can allow us to arrange free training for the villagers.’<sup>19</sup> From agricultural extension agents to educational experts, these resources can be invaluable to NGOs engaged in development interventions.

Finally, while local government agencies are often themselves short-staffed, there are situations in which they have provided NGOs access to human resources that can help with coordinating activities, preparing documents, and accounting. One of the most time-consuming and thus valuable contributions collaborating officials can make is coordinating inter-departmental initiatives: ‘government can assist us to coordinate certain activities that are managed across different departments, and with venues.’<sup>20</sup>

*Problem solving and Approvals*

Engagement with local authorities can make it easier for grassroots NGOs to obtain the necessary approvals for activities and events. ‘Because they are in charge, without their approval we cannot do many projects, exhibitions, and so on. If you don’t have the signature of the police and so on, it is illegal, so we need their approval.’<sup>21</sup>

This approval can either be explicit or implicit, and approval from a government department can also open other doors. An environmental NGO explained how working with government benefits the organization:

It allows us to legally carry out large-scale activities.... For example, now we want to do an activity in [the city’s] biggest shopping center. If we do it by ourselves they will hesitate. But the shopping center actually takes their cues from the government, so they will do it.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Interview Y155, NGO, Staff. Yunnan, July 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Interview N142.

<sup>21</sup> Interview Y158.

<sup>22</sup> Interview H165, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

*Public Trust, Legitimacy and Recognition*

As Table 3 shows, for the NGOs included in this study, the most commonly cited motivation for engaging with the state was to secure legitimacy, trust and recognition. Respondents stressed that in order to operate and to be effective, their organizations had to somehow be perceived as legitimate and trustworthy by both local government agencies and of the people. Various terms were used by interviewees in discussing this important ‘good’: trust (*xinren*), credibility (*gonglixing*), legality (*hefa*), illegality (*weifa*), and recognition/approval (*renke*).<sup>23</sup>

As discussed above, previous studies have posited that state affiliations depress public trust in Chinese NGOs, with the implication that trust in NGOs with state affiliations will continue to decline as general political trust declines over time. More recent data from ABS indeed shows that the relationship between political trust and public trust in NGOs remains present (shown in table 4). However, it is noteworthy that variation in levels of public trust in NGOs is closely tied to variation in levels of trust in local governments, rather than in the central government.

**Table 4** Public trust in institutions in China (2011–2015) (%)

<b>Institution</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>Change</b>
Courts	85.5	84.2	-1.3
<i>National government</i>	<i>95.9</i>	<i>94.7</i>	<i>-1.2</i>
Parliament	95.7	92.6	-3.1
Civil service	69.4	63.6	-5.8
Military	96.4	95.8	-0.6
Police	84.6	82.4	-2.2
<i>Local government</i>	<i>80.3</i>	<i>68.7</i>	<i>-11.5</i>
Newspaper	75.2	69.2	-6.0
Television	80.3	76.5	-3.8
<i>NGO</i>	<i>61.4</i>	<i>53.1</i>	<i>-8.3</i>

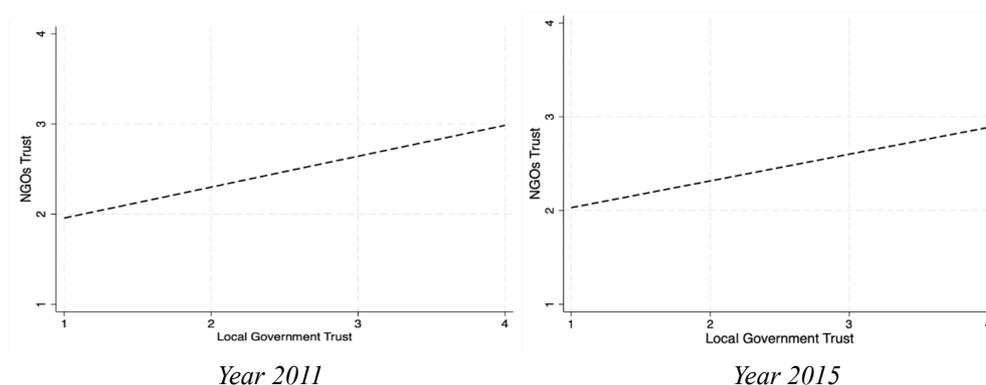
DATA SOURCE: Asian Barometer Surveys (2011, 2015).

Moreover, there is a high positive relationship between local government trust and NGO trust (See Figure 1)<sup>24</sup>, or it can be argued that public trust in NGO seems to be highly dependent on trust in local governments. These findings confirm the conclusions drawn from field research, that public trust has been and continues to be a primary driving force spurring NGOs to seek government ties in China’s current political context. Questionnaires and interview data illuminate the dynamics underlying this

<sup>23</sup> Two different terms are used to refer to something not being in accordance with the law, not legal (*buhefa*) and against the law (*weifa*). These two terms have slight different meanings, the latter usually referring to a more serious breach.

<sup>24</sup> For instance, we find that correlation between trust in NGO and trust in local government in 2015 is 0.293 at 0.1% significant level, whether or not controlling for age, gender, education or income etc.

relationship, and provide a deeper understanding of NGO motivations in their efforts to build public trust.



**Fig. 1** The relationship between local government trust and NGO trust in Mainland China  
DATA SOURCE: Asian Barometer Surveys (2011, 2015), the trust level is measured by four degrees in both surveys.

Chinese NGOs' drive to avoid low public trust has significant negative implications for the development of the third sector. Ho and Edmonds ([38]: 29) note that low levels of legitimacy in environmental NGOs is of concern because 'the lack of grassroots support, materially and morally, is likely to hamper NGO development and weakens the role that NGOs can play in environmental politics.' Public trust and legitimacy are critical to an organization's ability to raise funds, and many Chinese NGOs depend on public donations for survival. They also rely on volunteers and members, who are less likely to engage with NGOs that they do not see as trustworthy or legitimate. Thus, 'lack of trust is considered a difficult barrier for NGOs to overcome' in addressing social issues [20]. As one NGO practitioner and academic described it, NGOs can play a significant role in governance, but in order to do so must be able to earn the trust and recognition of the people:

Social management...has two aspects. One is the government's management of society. The other is self-management... If there's work to be done, if the government doesn't do it well, can you [as an NGO] do it well? Can those around you trust you and put this task in your hands? So building capacity is important and it is related to the question of legitimacy and trust.<sup>25</sup>

How do grassroots NGOs build trust, legitimacy and recognition? Limited associational experience means that these groups are often under significant scrutiny. The above respondent, along with several others, draws a connection between credibility and 'self-development', or building institutional capacity. The founder of an environmental NGO represents the views of many respondents when he values organizational trust and legitimacy above financial resources:

Our indigenous organizations are not backward or narrow. But the people's perception of us has been 'looking at flowers through a fog'—one can't see

<sup>25</sup> Interview BJ07, Government, staff. Beijing, September 2009.

them clearly. And local organizations don't always behave well, or hold themselves to high standards. It's not just finances which are important, you also need trust and credibility.<sup>26</sup>

Despite such claims, the idea that grassroots NGOs build trust and legitimacy essentially by developing their own institutional capacity does not seem to be the whole story. Research indicated that, instead, many grassroots NGOs seek to secure public trust through developing government ties.

As shown in Table 3, NGO respondents discussed desiring government ties with references to the way they are seen by the populations they work with. Government ties can allow grassroots NGOs to establish legitimacy in the eyes of the public: 'we can use the government, because using the government's face in going to the lower levels is more effective than going ourselves.'<sup>27</sup>

The domestic narrative holds that state intervention helps build civic awareness rather than compromising independence: 'The hidden advantage of this mechanism is that the visible governmental hand in China's NGOs has actually added to the credibility so that they are more likely to convince the public because people tend to believe the role of the government in regulating and supervising operations [39].' This contradicts a global narrative that sees regulatory restrictions and state interference as the primary obstacle to the development of civil society. In this view, NGOs need to secure the favor of local officials and state approval to operate and survive. For the grassroots NGOs in this study sample, by contrast, it is the people, from villagers to urbanites, perhaps in addition to state actors, that NGOs need to win over. It is the public on whom their survival depends:

If you don't have support of government, then in the village or in the area, one can say it is 'difficult to move even a single step'. After two years of working with the villagers I discovered a phenomenon: Whatever is the spirit or attitude of the leader, that is how the villagers will be. If the leader supports, the villagers will be positive and active. If the leader says 'Do it yourself,' or opposes, the villagers will oppose. They have the same direction of thought.<sup>28</sup>

By working with government, NGOs reported the ability to 'expand the social space in which we can work.'<sup>29</sup> When government ties exist, '...the villagers will be more positive. Initially, some people didn't really understand us, and were quite negative.' Cooperating with government 'increases our credibility, no matter what locality you work in or what kind of leader you cooperate with, first of all people will trust you, they won't have so many doubts and suspicions. This will make our work

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<sup>26</sup> Interview H164, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

<sup>27</sup> Interview Y158.

<sup>28</sup> Interview Y131.

<sup>29</sup> Interview Y131.

progress more smoothly.<sup>30</sup> In urban areas, too, legitimacy derived from government support can build confidence in volunteers.

Field research made it clear that public suspicion can constitute a significant obstacle to the work of these organizations. Some of this mistrust arose when NGOs offered free goods and services, encountering suspicion about a ‘free lunch,’ or as one respondent put it, ‘stuffed pancakes falling from the sky (*tianxia buhui diaoxia xianbing*).’<sup>31</sup> Mistrust also arose from negative associational experiences. One new NGO faced challenges trying to establish itself in a small town where, the previous year, a charitable organization was found to be a scam, fleecing people sums of money for ostensibly charitable purposes.

Another municipality had been plagued by pyramid schemes, and when a grassroots educational NGO first began operating there, doors were continuously shut to the founder by mistrustful government officials, schools, individuals, and even the founder’s own family members. Villagers in a region with a high incidence of drug use and forced rehabilitation were so wary of someone reporting to government the names of drug users that a grassroots NGO operating in the area, despite the founder being herself one of the villagers, met with significant suspicion and mistrust which took months to overcome.

An environmental NGO working in rural areas had been conducting environmental and agricultural trainings with villagers for a few months without the explicit support of village or higher-level leaders, when rumors began to spread that this activity was somehow related to Falungong. Soon after, villagers stopped attending training courses and interacting with NGO staff. The founder described this experience:

If there is no dialogue with government, the villagers will say ‘Are you lawful or not (*ni hebu hefa*)?’ or ‘Have you gone against the law (*weifan falv*)?’ Because without knowing the situation, the villagers are guessing and defining whether they can or cannot [participate]...this is the way we do things. Initially, our program was very new in the whole of [this locality], people hadn’t heard of such things and had never come into contact with programs that do public benefit work or training, so the government said “Let us first understand and learn about (*liaojie*) this.” So they *liaojie, liaojie*...but eventually, because of our limited abilities, we didn’t strengthen this contact or dialogue [with government] and it stopped. Then, some of the people in the village misunderstood our program, and thought it was not lawful (*buhefa de*) or illegal (*weifafa de*), and on their own initiative, reported it to the relevant government departments.<sup>32</sup>

At this point, ‘local authorities decided to once again go back and investigate and understand our program. Then at this time, we increased our dialogue with government to make it more regular and frequent.’ Through increased dialogue,

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<sup>30</sup> Interview N237, NGO, founder and director. Ningxia, June 2010.

<sup>31</sup> Interview Y229, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

<sup>32</sup> Interview Y131.

the NGO was eventually able to overcome the issue and continue working in the village with intervention and assistance from local government departments.

Other studies have found similar dynamics playing out between NGOs and publics. Dickson provides an account of the Fuping Development Institute creating a training school, which was then suspected by villagers of being involved in human trafficking [26]. Newland reports that because of citizen suspicions, NGOs found it difficult to recruit program participants. Because of these dynamics, ‘it is hardly surprising that many organizations see a partnership with [a government official] innovator as an essential tool for organizational success ([27]: 22).’

For citizens, government backing can also be an indication of program quality and effectiveness. The founder of an NGO with positive relationships with local government explained: ‘Through government cooperation, the people can then feel that the nongovernmental organization is trustworthy and that the program is very good, because it has been able to secure the trust of the government.’<sup>33</sup> This suggests that citizens may expect government to play a ‘gatekeeper’ role, protecting them from ‘harmful elements.’

Sometimes intervention of higher authorities or even horizontally linked government departments can facilitate other relationships, and assist grassroots NGOs in ‘going down to the grassroots’:

For example, with respect to seeking support for our program, there are a great many government departments... With China’s administrative system, if the government doesn’t support you, they will tell you that you can’t or shouldn’t do this, or say: ‘We don’t know about this thing.’ This will be bad for the project. Secondly, without their support, if we directly operate in the local communities, our costs will go up a lot. But if we just call [the local officials] and tell them to do it, it keeps costs down. Also, as local people, they know the situation better and know how best to arrange things.<sup>34</sup>

Local governments can also act as allies with NGOs in their efforts to gain trust and effect change in the private sector. One educational NGO operating in an area with a high incidence of HIV/AIDS is engaged in HIV/AIDS prevention education in addition to other kinds of educational work. Their AIDS prevention projects focused on construction workers, one of the most high-risk populations in terms of HIV/AIDS infection, because of their low education levels, and being far from home, frequent patrons of sex services. To effectively implement AIDS education projects with these populations, the NGO had to go through the construction companies:

If I go directly to construction company managers, they won’t listen to me. They will think it will adversely affect their work, and then when I work with the workers, they won’t listen to me either. But if it’s done through the government office the officials will insist that the workers’ health needs to be

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<sup>33</sup> Interview N238.

<sup>34</sup> Interview Y134.

protected, and so on ... Usually it's only when the other party doesn't understand us that we draw on the coordinative power of the government. Even so, we still have to respect them in all we do, in our methods, timing, and so on. They recognize and appreciate it when they see that we are looking at things from their perspective and taking into account their needs.<sup>35</sup>

Making use of government channels allows programs to be implemented more smoothly, especially when working at the grassroots. 'When the relationship with government is smooth, the program is more effective and has better results, because then we have the government's assistance. Then the masses trust us more, and many things are easier to arrange.'<sup>36</sup> Another NGO founder shared:

Last year the training in XYZ village was organized through the county Women's Federation, who contacted the township Women's Federation, who organized the people with the village leaders. It was a successful training... with this support they [the villagers] won't think it is a bad thing or illegal. Otherwise, no matter how good your program is, they won't work with you... If you cooperate with government the common people won't think you are illegal (*weifa*). Otherwise they will think so... because the common people's conception of people's organizations are blank.<sup>37</sup>

While grassroots NGOs almost unanimously note and welcome the power that government ties can give them to get things done, some also recognize that it can sometimes have a detrimental effect on efforts to garner true support in a locality, and can even backfire. An educational NGO cooperating with the local Education Bureau, and through them, with local schools described these concerns:

... I don't know whether it puts local people in a difficult position (*weinan*). For example, when we cooperate with government or schools, we've had this kind of situation, where the school doesn't necessarily really welcome this program, but because we are working with the government, they accept it... With government actions they generally just comply, regardless of whether it is beneficial to them or not, they will accept it... But when the two cooperate, they don't know whether or not to accept it.<sup>38</sup>

As the above example suggests, government links can result in only formalistic compliance with an initiative, rather than true support at the grassroots, which NGOs can also secure through other means. Other detrimental effects of government ties are discussed by Heurlin, who finds ties to the state can reduce public trust in NGOs when political trust declines [32]. Despite the fluctuations in public trust over the in-

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<sup>35</sup> Interview Y250, NGO, director of external relations. Yunnan, July 2010.

<sup>36</sup> Interview Y132, NGO, founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Interview H260, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

<sup>38</sup> Interview Y132.

tervening decade, interviews conducted in 2018-19 indicated that the drive for grassroots NGOs to establish relationships with government agencies had not decreased. This was noted particularly to be the case for Party ties: during visits to the offices of NGOs in Yunnan and Ningxia, government collaborations and Party affiliations were much more prominently displayed and emphasized in interviews. And while associational experience certainly rose over the intervening years, increasing public familiarity with NGOs was not necessarily positive. Several prominent scandals around Chinese nonprofits, particularly regarding their use of funds, between 2011 and 2013, caused public trust in Chinese nonprofits and charities to plummet.<sup>39</sup>

On the other hand, the expansion of online charitable fundraising platforms over the subsequent years has both disseminated information about Chinese grassroots NGOs and mobilized large swathes of the population in support of them, including a significant population outside first and second-tier cities.<sup>40</sup> Notwithstanding these changes in public familiarity with and trust in NGOs, interviewees maintained the strategy of collaborating with government agencies, in large part in order to secure public trust and operate at the grassroots.

In general, however, the numerous examples provided by interviewees show that ties with government can facilitate the ability of grassroots NGOs to work with the people. It should be emphasized again, however, that this finding is limited to the perceived effects of government engagement on securing public trust. Whether such ties actually serve to strengthen public trust in NGOs is a separate question that is beyond the scope of this study, though a fruitful extension of this research would be to confirm or disconfirm these perceptions by engaging in a study of public attitudes towards grassroots NGOs with and without state ties.

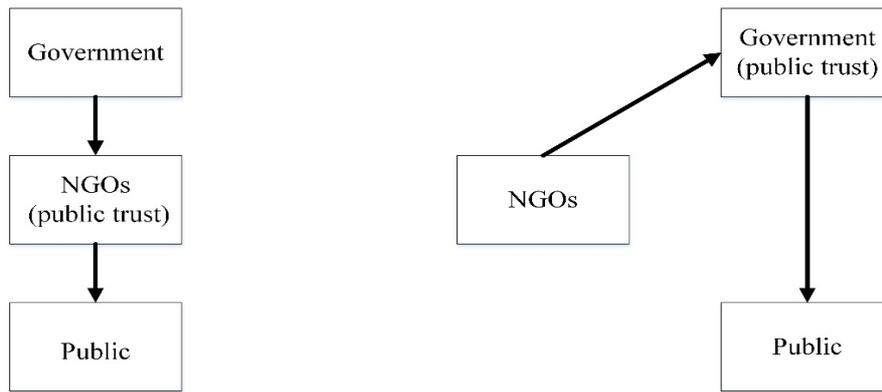
### *Mobilization*

Closely related to public trust is the capacity to mobilize citizens. Public trust can be an invaluable resource for grassroots NGOs who find it almost impossible to implement programs without it. Government ties, therefore, are sought in part because they can facilitate NGOs working at the grassroots in organizing and mobilizing the citizens. This is in stark contrast to the role NGOs—particularly grassroots groups—are seen to play in most political contexts, in which NGOs are seen as embedded in local communities and representatives of societal interests. Indeed, top-down government programs or international development interventions that work with local communities often turn to grassroots NGOs to facilitate grassroots engagement [40]. The cases examined in this study found the reverse to be true—NGOs rely on the state to reach the grassroots (Figure 2).

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<sup>39</sup> See <https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/03/why-no-one-trusts-government-charities-in-china-any-more/273989/> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/04/world/asia/04china.html> accessed June 15, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> See <http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.cn/news/chinas-online-fundraising-platforms-raised-over-1-8-billion-rmb-in-the-first-half-of-2019/> accessed June 15, 2020.



**Fig. 2** Distinct paths to citizen mobilization

These NGOs draw on the Party’s long history and extensive experience with ‘mass mobilization’. An environmental NGO says of local government that ‘their mobilization ability is very strong. If NGOs don’t have the cooperation of government, it is very hard for them to work in the local area. The common people prefer to listen to the government.’<sup>41</sup> This seems to be particularly true for NGOs operating in rural areas: ‘The government can help my work because they organize and gather the villagers together. The villagers listen to them.’<sup>42</sup>

The state’s ability to mobilize the populace also has some salience in urban settings. An urban environmental NGO pursued collaboration with government so that:

The government officials can come out and do some activities together with the volunteers, to show their attitude towards these kinds of issues, this will increase the volunteers’ enthusiasm. Because the government’s posture is important, to demonstrate this posture will have very deep and far-reaching impact on volunteers. Their zeal will be affected, they expend great time and energy on this work, their contribution should be recognized, affirmed and encouraged by the government, because their motives are good.<sup>43</sup>

Government collaboration can therefore bolster NGO efforts in several ways: by facilitating the actual organization of training participants and the mobilization of volunteers, as well as by mustering zeal and enthusiasm.

#### *Additional motivations*

Several other factors driving engagement with the state were identified in the course of research. For example, respondents discussed how ties to the state facilitate the navigation of stringent registration requirements, and allow NGOs to circumvent other restrictions. Government collaboration allowed such groups certain leeway with regard to publication of written materials, such as newsletters, training materials and

<sup>41</sup> Interview Y155.

<sup>42</sup> Interview Y229.

<sup>43</sup> Interview N142.

reports, restrictions on fundraising and opening bank accounts, and receiving and converting foreign currency.

Perhaps the most politically significant way in which engagement with the state benefits grassroots NGOs is by opening sought-after opportunities to influence public policy. Findings from this study on how grassroots NGOs influence policy, particularly by modeling innovations in action, are discussed in detail elsewhere [35].

Finally, non interest-based explanation of motivations for collaboration should be considered. It is worth noting that many respondents also discussed norm-based motivations for seeking government engagement. Many interviewees recognized development challenges were simply too complex to be resolved by a single organization, and required concerted and coordinated action across the public-private divide, necessitating collaboration between NGOs and a range of government departments. The founder of an educational NGO noted that: ‘What we are doing is helping the government in a spirit of service. So we want to have cooperation with the organizations that are doing this kind of work and learn from each other.’<sup>44</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This paper has discussed several factors motivating NGOs to engage with government agencies. Among these factors, respondents emphasized public trust as being particularly significant. Collaborating with government is important to the ability of grassroots NGOs to establish legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of the people [6]. Public trust, in turn, mediates a range of other motivating factors; it enables grassroots NGOs to secure funding, scale impact, access information, and influence policy. This analysis does not discount the impact of overt and subtle forms of state control on the NGO sector, a topic which has been well studied in the literature [41]. Rather it highlights the importance of a specific dimension of state control—and how it is mediated through public trust—in state-NGO relations in China [42, 43].

While NGOs are generally seen to be closer to societal interests and better able to mobilize publics than other institutional actors, this study suggests a reverse dynamic, in which NGOs rely on government institutions to accrue public trust and mobilize citizens. Gallagher ([19]: 419) discusses a ‘paradox of legitimacy’ in which Chinese social organizations need legitimacy from a branch of Party or government body, as well as from within market society. While a paradox assumes that these two forms of legitimacy work in opposition, this study finds that societal legitimacy and government legitimacy are intricately linked. Is this dynamic a stable characteristic of state-NGO-citizen relations in China, or the consequence of a particular confluence of factors in flux? Unusually high levels of political trust among Chinese citizens and low levels of trust in NGOs seem to contribute to the dynamics discussed in this paper. But political trust in institutions—particularly local institutions—is thought to be declining. And as associational experience accrues, publics are becoming increasingly familiar with nongovernmental or nonprofit organizations and the services they offer.

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<sup>44</sup> Interview H259, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August, 2010.

Spires, Tao and Chan find that societal support for grassroots NGOs—in the form of money, volunteer hours, and legitimacy—is growing [33].

As this fast-growing sector increasingly brings NGOs in the public eye and public recognition of private non-profit work as a legitimate and lawful area of activity grows, it is possible that the need for government ties would weaken, decreasing the reliance of NGOs on the state [42, 44].

On the other hand, low trust in NGOs could be derived from more constant factors, such as low general social trust or a political culture that assigns primary responsibility for the provision of public goods and social development to the state. For example, Ho and Edmonds discuss a nationwide 1998–99 survey in which respondents were asked which measures they considered most important in environmental protection, noting that the perceived role of NGOs was insignificant, as most people prefer to rely on government for solving problems rather than civil organizations [38, 45]. As one respondent put it: ‘For China’s common people, they think the whole of Chinese society is directed by the government and they should be responsible to the people. So in their hearts they can live with or without popular organizations, because they don’t have any real effect.’<sup>45</sup>

It would seem, then, that the roots of the dynamics discussed in this paper lie deeper than a simple lack of public experience with NGOs [44, 46]. Rather, the centrality of the state to social and economic activity, aspects of political culture and state capacity may be more relevant to the need for social organizations to derive legitimacy from the state. Publics may expect government to play a ‘gatekeeper’ role, and grassroots NGOs therefore may be expected to continue ‘facing skepticism and even opposition from both state and society,’ depending on government legitimacy, as well as logistical assistance, to ‘go down to the grassroots ([26]: 143).’

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<sup>45</sup> Interview H165, NGO, founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

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