Preface and acknowledgements

At the outset of this book project, we found that despite the vast scholarly output in the research of Chinese NGOs, particularly in the 1990s and early 2000s, there were at least three blank areas on the map of research on China’s third sector. First, the main stream perspectives in the research literature, namely the civil society perspective and the corporatism perspective, are both very much concerned with the question of independence of civic organizations and cannot capture well – much less explain – the existence and work of China’s third sector organizations. Second, we found that foundations, as part of the third sector, are a rather neglected type of organization, often dismissed as a homogeneous group of large, inflexible, tank-like organizations that are close to the state and the Communist Party, sometimes without even noticing the more recent transition of foundations towards entrepreneurs’ foundations and privately initiated foundations. Third, and more recently, we, along with other scholars in the field, observed a shrinking space for third sector organizations in many countries of the world, including China, and we wanted to understand the scope of this trend in China.

We tackled this threefold task by developing an analytic model, the Functional Governance Model, which identifies third sector organizations as fulfilling part of the governance responsibilities of the Chinese government in cooperation with other actors. Further, we talked to foundation staff, foundation stakeholders, and experts, and we painstakingly analysed the historical, legal and political background of foundations in today’s China. We hope that the contribution made by this book opens up the space of third sector research for new perspectives and new insights.

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Katja Levy and Knut Benjamin Pissler
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