Introduction

The Chinese community of non-profit and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has been going transnational, collaborating with international peers and engaging global governance mechanisms. The evolving record of activist groups’ participation in mega-conferences organized by the United Nations (UN) is a good indicator of this trend. When the Conference on Environment and Development was held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, no Chinese NGO attended this so-called Rio Earth Summit. The first grassroots environment NGO was not formed until 1994, when Liang Congjie, citing Greenpeace as a role model, founded Friends of Nature (FON) in Beijing. At the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg from 26 August to 4 September 2002, a Chinese civil society delegation appeared, consisting of 12 activists (two from Hong Kong), each representing one NGO. The dozen, with Liao Xiaoyi (founder and director of Global Village of Beijing, GVB) as the leader, and their travel partly funded by the Ford Foundation, caused curiosity from the international media as they behaved differently from the representatives of the government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) and Chinese official delegates. Then the 15th Conference of Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change held in Copenhagen from 7 to 18 December 2009 witnessed the presence of a Chinese civil society which had further expanded and diversified. This epitomized the fact that while the country had become the world’s biggest carbon dioxide emitter in gross terms, its people became more mobilized to tackle the challenge. Incomplete statistics show that at least 15 grassroots NGOs sent representatives to Copenhagen. Half of these groups organized their own delegations and the rest dispatched their people in a combined delegation in the name of China Climate Action Network. There was also a Chinese youth leader delegation (China Youth COP 15). Its 50 members came from various university-based NGOs from 18 universities. Furthermore, delegates and volunteers came from the China offices of international NGOs including Greenpeace, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Oxfam, the Climate Group and the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC). Reporters from 50 Chinese media outlets descended on Copenhagen. Meanwhile, during the event, Chinese delegates intensively broadcast their reflection and observation through blogs and other online
forums. In Johannesburg, most Chinese activists were grappling with the basics of international norms and ideas of global governance, avidly learning from international campaigners. While also intending to study and observe, the Copenhagen attendants were more proactive, staging elaborately prepared side events and colorful educational shows, both inside and outside the Bella Center, the official venue of the event. Some even raised critical suggestions about how to improve the UN’s consultation mechanism with civil society, considering that many NGOs (Chinese and otherwise) were prevented from attending the late stage of the conference due to the Danish government’s poor management of the gathering, though understandably no Chinese NGO critically commented on their own government’s approaches towards climate change.1

Participation in global governance forums, whether in environmental or other issue fields, is just part of China’s international integration at the civil society level. The mainstay of this integration is manifested in the increasing number, personnel and projects of international NGOs working inside China, collaborating with the local groups and government authorities. This book discusses the penetration, growth and operation of transnational civil society (TCS) in China. It explores TCS’ impacts on the incremental development of China’s political pluralism, mainly through exploring the influences of the leading TCS actors on the country’s bottom-up and self-governing activist NGOs that have sprung up spontaneously, in terms of capacities, strategies, leadership and political outlook, as a result of complex interactions between the two sectors.2

TCS generally connotes cross-border cooperation and joint campaigns among NGOs from different countries to achieve social and political change, typically operating in the issue areas of human rights, environment, gender, development, humanitarian relief, capitalist globalization and health epidemics. From consciousness-raising and empowerment in the community, to attempts to change policies of governments and inter-governmental organizations, grassroots activists have increasingly collaborated beyond traditional territorial entities. However, it is analytically more useful – particularly for this project – to also highlight TCS as a sphere still dominated by influential international NGOs (or INGOs) which include large organizations maintaining their own formal branches in many countries (such as Greenpeace and Oxfam) and many internationally-oriented or active national NGOs which also maintain global representation (such as the Ford Foundation and The Carter Center). Major INGOs are headquartered predominantly in Western capital cities. Providing services and advocating reform through their global networks, INGOs are the most significant actors in TCS. For these reasons, this discussion often equates TCS to the work and influence of INGOs.
This idea of TCS is close to the notion of transnational social movements. Kriedberg divides NGOs broadly into social movement and non-social movement organizations. The former category refers to the grassroots advocacy groups or cause-oriented groups working to change some elements of the social structure. They are also called ‘protest groups’, or ‘social change groups’. The idea of transnational social movements simply points to their surging networks across national borders, with INGOs or TSMOs (transnational social movement organizations) playing the leading roles. Social movement groups are usually more assertive than non-social movement NGOs which work for charitable, professional, recreational and numerous other community needs without aiming at broader social or political reform. However, one needs not be dogmatic about such a dichotomy because traditional charity groups can and do become more involved in social change campaigns, and what is apolitical in one polity can be politically meaningful in another. Transnational advocacy network is another concept related to TCS. According to Keck and Sikkink, a ‘transnational advocacy network’ includes those relevant actors working internationally on an issue who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse and dense exchanges of information and services. They are organized to promote causes, principled ideas and norms, and they often involve individuals advocating policy changes that cannot be easily linked to a rationalist understanding of their ‘interests’. This definition highlights civil society actors as leading advocacy networks which may incorporate elements from the state and inter-governmental bodies.

A project like this is both important and timely because the subject reflects not only a post-Cold War worldwide trend of solidarity and coalition-building among citizens’ voluntary groups, but also a fundamental transformation in the domestic socio-political contours and foreign relations of China as an emerging global power. Expanding collaboration between Chinese activist NGOs and their international counterparts has become a distinct phenomenon in both the country’s international relations and in TCS. It is the culmination of the conjunction of several factors: growth of Chinese civil society organizations and their interest in transnational connections, the rise of TCS at large and INGOs’ growing interest in China, China’s integration in international regimes and norms, and the international community’s interest in engaging the country on an array of global issues. In a general review of the field of study of civil society in China in 2002, Yang presented areas for further research including connections between China’s domestic civil society and what he called global civil society. He pointed out that ‘Studies of global civil society have been a major new enterprise in social science research, and the focus
so far has been on transnational social movements and global governance through nongovernmental organizations’. He asked: ‘Do elements of Chinese civil society – for example, China’s public sphere and social organizations – have any connections with the global civil society? What kinds of connections? How are they maintained? How do they shape the dynamics of China’s domestic civil society? The gap started to be filled in subsequent years, with more literature published on the relations between China – particularly its civil society – and INGOs, and the latter’s roles in China in general.

Works discussing the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing are among the early publications. This is not surprising since it was the first event exposing Chinese activists to the burgeoning global governance atmosphere. Howell, and Hsiung and Wong debate the profound multifaceted influences of that conference and the attending international feminists over Chinese NGOs and the mass organization All-China Women’s Federation. Morton highlights Chinese NGOs’ growing relations with their international partners by presenting information about three transnational campaigns in China (AIDS awareness, antelope protection and Nujiang River conservation), in order to obtain a more comprehensive picture of China’s ongoing process of reform and opening to the outside world. Bentley briefly reviews Chinese NGOs’ cooperation with international donors including governments, multilateral agencies and INGOs. Chan studies the civility of transnational civil society by observing the solidarity and cooperation achieved by two Protestant Christian development NGOs in China across intersecting social, cultural and political cleavages. Yang ascertains the role of the Internet in the international communication of the Chinese NGOs, the role of the Internet for the Chinese diaspora and INGOs in their work on China. Some authors concentrate on INGOs’ relations with the Chinese state. Yin, and Hsia and White discuss the impacts on foreign NGOs of a delicate political climate and lack of clear regulatory structure and explicit legal framework. Ma generally examines Beijing’s policies towards INGOs, the latter’s roles in China and their limitations. Wu looks into external advocacy actors’ adjustment of practices to strategically engage Chinese governmental agencies and officials for urgent relief delivery and opportunity of policy advocacy in the cause of AIDS prevention. Operation of individual INGOs in China has also been examined. Litzinger discusses the compromise by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) of its declaratory globalized agenda when working with the Chinese state in its projects in Southwest China, and investigates the contested role of The Nature Conservancy (TNC)’s Yunnan Great Rivers Project over the issues of development, conservation and cultural representation. More recently authors have started
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to focus on the complex political influences of transnational activism in China. I have tried to clarify such influences of the China operations of a group of humanitarian and environmental INGOs, with special reference to their interactions with local activist communities. Morton illuminates the benefits and potential risks of transnational cooperation for local environmental NGOs’ policy advocacy and for a more vibrant local democratic culture.

These journal articles and book chapters together have made considerable contributions to the study of transnational politics and China. However, there is a need for further empirical and conceptual exploration, and for more significant historical and comparative investigation. Benefiting from communication with leaders, officers and activists of a range of INGOs and their Chinese partners in Beijing, Yunnan, Shanghai, Washington DC and New York, this book seeks to broaden and deepen the study in the following framework.

Chapter 1 describes the phenomenon. It presents a historical, statistical and geographical profile of TCS’ presence in China and its interactions with Chinese NGOs, paving the way for the more solid analyses in subsequent chapters. Following the developmental trajectory of Chinese civil society, the historical discussion first reviews prototype transnational social movements’ interest in China from the late nineteenth century to 1949, and ascertains their contemporary implications for the period under study, which is the period since the mid-1990s. Turning to the latter period, statistical discussion provides information on the number, professional fields, country background (or headquarter location), and provincial distribution of the international NGOs and private foundations which have set up projects and/or opened offices in China. This information will be collated with similar statistics on Chinese NGOs which have developed transnational linkages. Statistics will also record the remarkable growth of the size and resources of INGOs’ China offices/projects, and capture the rapid rise of both the number and percentage (in the overall NGO community) of transnationally-connected Chinese NGOs, from the 1990s to the present. Finally, to make the description of the transnational relations of the country more complete, the rarely noticed cross-strait relations at the NGO level between the mainland and Taiwan will be reviewed.

Chapter 2 examines the factors causing TCS actors to operate in China and analyses their relations with the government authorities. Borrowing from the general literature of TCS, it starts with a discussion of the rise, activities and influence of transnational actors in global governance in the recent decades as a background for their China intrusion. The chapter then analyses the international and national issues which have attracted the leading INGOs to China, and examines China’s transitioning political
opportunity structures which have enabled transnational cooperation, although with major limits. Subsequently the chapter specifically looks into China’s reactions to the global influence of transitional social movements, and the ambiguous relations between the government authorities and INGOs. Finally, it presents case studies of Heifer Project International (HPI), Greenpeace and TNC to highlight how the transnational actors have tried to modify their behavior to adapt to China’s political structures.

Chapter 3 explores the democratic influences of transnational activism, examining TCS’ contribution to the growth of Chinese civil society and political pluralism, a reflection of world civic politics. It first reviews the literatures establishing Chinese NGOs’ democratic impacts/functions, critically synthesizes their arguments and presents coherent indicators of Chinese NGOs’ democratic roles. These are then used as benchmarks against which TCS’ democratic influences on China through its collaboration with Chinese groups are examined. Therefore, once the roles of Chinese civil society in fostering political pluralism are clarified, the discussion tries to ascertain to what extent those impacts have been reinforced or brought about by TCS’ relations with, and its influences upon, Chinese NGOs. Finally, the chapter dwells on problems and challenges in transnational interactions and highlights an overall upward trend in the developmental trajectory of transnational activism in China.

Chapter 4 broadens the investigation in two ways. First, it incorporates the study of the impacts and limitations of transnational campaigns targeting China on human rights and democracy. Chinese civil society itself is a political continuum, consisting of a whole spectrum of groups from low key charities to organizations which are so ‘radical’ that they can only operate overseas. This pattern also applies to transnational activism targeting China which arguably shows two parallel layers. One, epitomized by numerous environmental and development INGOs, enjoys legitimacy with the Chinese authorities, and these organizations can operate inside China. Another layer, symbolized by the campaigns of Amnesty International (AI), Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Chinese dissident groups in exile, has no legitimacy in the eyes of the Chinese government, with the relevant organizations and activists denied physical access to China. However, they should be treated as part of a broad picture of TCS working on China. Second, in order to shed more light on the core arguments, this chapter explores TCS’ roles in the process leading to political liberalization in Taiwan and the Soviet bloc states in Eastern Europe through collaboration with domestic activists during the 1970s and 1980s. Comparing and contrasting the transnational experience of China with those historical models helps achieve a more nuanced understanding of the case of China. How the transnational connections exerted socio-political
influences in those fellow party-states of Beijing’s, which similarly experienced a surge of social movements in the shadow of the ruling regimes’ corporatist organizations, should be assessed to draw lessons and gain insights for the China case study.

The Conclusion presents a summary of the discussion and revisits the main arguments from a broader perspective. It also compares and contrasts the transnational experiences of the ‘old’ and ‘new’ China in an integrated fashion and speculates on their future development.

A project like this has inherent weaknesses in doing justice to the subject. In many ways it merely presents a broad observation and may have raised more questions than can be answered. The sphere of transnational civil society in general and INGOs’ operation in China in particular, is a nebulous and fragmented world. Organizations pursue mandates in specific fields, often lacking mechanisms to reach broad agreements and coordination in general aims across operators and issue areas. Tension exists between groups from the North and South, between moderates and radicals, between advocates for grassroots solidarity and believers in professional lobbying. Many concerns and actors compete for private donations, public subsidies and support from society at large. These general characteristics of TCS are manifested in its presence in China, where the lack of an explicit regulatory framework has also contributed to the arguably disorderly nature of the INGO sector. It should be acknowledged at the outset that this project, despite the author’s best efforts in field observation, personal interviews, and research of primary and secondary sources, runs the risk of oversimplifying a very complex phenomenon, almost inevitably.

NOTES

1. The Copenhagen information is sourced from the various reports which appeared in the forums created specifically for the event in two popular web portals in China: NetEase (http://discovery.163.com/cop15) and Sohu (http://green.sohu.com/s2009/copenhagen). The Johannesburg experience will be elaborated on in Chapter 3.

2. While it is necessary for this project not to be obsessed with the debate over the nature of NGOs or civil society in the Chinese context, I acknowledge the complexity of those concepts when applied to China. Broadly defined, the NGO community in China includes the various kinds of government-initiated and semi-official organizations, or GONGOs, and those voluntary, self-organized and autonomous organizations of varying grassroots background. I focus on the latter, though GONGOs will be mentioned occasionally for broader arguments in relation to transnational impacts. For an overview of GONGOs emerging from the government agencies and the ruling party’s reforming mass organizations from the 1980s, see Chen (2006a), pp. 29–40. He (1997, pp. 5–6) presents a definition of the ideal type of civil society which refers to a set or system of self-organized intermediary groups or organizations which have four features.
or norms: autonomy from the state, business firms and families; capability of taking collective action in defense/promotion of the interests or passions of their members; entertaining no intention to replace either state agents or private (re)producers or to accept responsibility for governing the polity as a whole; and agreement to act within pre-established rules including compromise and non-violence. Clearly autonomous NGOs in China are closest to being members of such a defined civil society (He concluded that as a whole there had emerged a semi-civil society in China [ibid., pp. 7–10]). The underlying idea of a Chinese civil society in this project is a broad one, implying an evolving phenomenon and a whole spectrum of organizations with varying degrees of autonomy while situated in the broadly delineated sectors of grassroots NGOs and GONGOs. The two sectors interact with each other densely, assisting each other using their respective strength, with the party-state-initiated organizations believed to have been moving towards a higher level of independence.