

Re-theorizing civil society in China: Agency and the discursive politics of civil society engagement

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Abstract

Scholarship on Chinese civil society has produced rich empirical studies, but there have been few attempts to theorize the empirical knowledge acquired. Moreover, the question of how to conceptualize the political agency of civil society in a non-democratic context has received limited systematic attention. In this conceptual article, we draw on a discursive approach to politics to analyse the political agency of Chinese civil society. Our analysis is based on synthesizing insights gained through three separate research projects. We propose a conceptual framework which focuses on how civil society actors position themselves within a structured political space, how they represent social groups and issues through advocacy, how they care for these groups, and how they engage in processes of identity formation. Taken together, these four modalities constitute a framework for analysing the different political dimensions of civil society agency.

Keywords

politics, discourse, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), representation, advocacy, identity

Over the past decade, new restrictions have been imposed on civil society engagement in China, in the form of arrests of activists, tightened censorship, and new legal regulations.¹ These recent developments have accentuated a long-standing scholarly debate concerning civil society's degree of autonomy vis-a-vis the state.² There are, indeed, important differences in the functioning of civil society in a one-party state, such as China, compared to civil society in liberal democracies. In China, the state has a dominant position in society and plays an important role in not only shaping, but also restricting the political space for civil society engagement. For this reason, the question of autonomy of civil society organizations vis-a-vis the state has received considerable attention in the literature on Chinese civil society. In this conceptual article, we acknowledge the importance of the state for understanding civil society engagement in China. However, instead of focusing on questions of autonomy, we build on what we have conceptualized elsewhere as an agency-oriented approach in the literature on Chinese civil society.³ A key concern within this agency-oriented approach is to study how civil society organizations exercise agency within their restricted political space. Scholars have for instance demonstrated how civil society organizations exercise agency by developing formal or informal ties with state actors in order to access resources.⁴ In this article, we seek to contribute to this agency-oriented approach in two ways. First, we identify additional ways in which civil society actors exercise agency. We conceptualize this as four distinct, but interlinked modalities of civil society engagement. Second, we discuss how civil society agency can be conceptualized as political. While the general literature on civil society asserts that civil society can play an important political role in democracies,⁵ there is limited research on the political role of civil society in the Chinese context.⁶ In this article, we argue for the usefulness of adopting a discursive approach to politics to grasp the various ways in which civil society actors exercise agency within a restricted political context such as China. Within a discursive approach, politics is seen not only as the actions and power of key state and governmental actors but also the power to define social problems and construct the identities and interests of particular social groups.⁷ This power can be exercised both from above by state and governmental actors and from below through civil society engagement. A discursive approach to politics therefore opens up the way to analyse the political in practices that might otherwise be seen as apolitical. The Chinese political context is characterized by

‘cycles of contraction and expansion’⁸ of civil society space. In emphasizing agency, we draw attention to the strategies actors use when the political space is sufficiently open. When political space becomes narrower, as seen under the current political leadership, civil society actors still possess the know-how and experiences gained during more open periods, but are forced to shift their engagement to what James Scott describes as the ‘hidden transcript’,⁹ or spaces and practices less visible to the public eye.

The article is organized as follows. In the next two sections, we give an account of our empirical data set and discuss briefly the political space for civil society engagement in China. We then discuss our discursive approach to politics in the third section of the article. The fourth section constitutes the core of the article. Here, we outline a conceptual framework consisting of four different but interlinked modalities of civil society engagement. These four modalities are concerned with how civil society actors position themselves within a structured political space, how they represent social groups and issues through advocacy, how they care for these groups, and how they engage in processes of identity formation. Taken together, these four modalities constitute a framework for analysing the different political dimensions of civil society agency.

Data set and analysis

Our arguments are based on a rich empirical data set collected through the course of three separate research projects on Chinese civil society. The first project included interviews with 17 activists and investigative journalists working within the fields of HIV/AIDS and environmental issues. The interviews were conducted by the second author (Elin Sæther) in 2009 and 2010, mainly in the cities of Beijing and Guangzhou. These interviews were complemented by analysing selected newspaper articles written by investigative journalists. The author also observed activists and journalists at conferences and workshops which they attended. For the second research project, the first author (Marielle Stigum Gleiss) conducted 16 interviews with 18 different NGO representatives and individual activists working with internal migrant workers in 2011 and 2012 in the cities of Beijing, Hong Kong,¹⁰ Shenzhen, and Guangzhou. In addition, two sets of textual material were collected and analysed: a corpus of 102 newspaper articles covering eight news incidents from 2012 involving migrant workers and a corpus of 2,487 SinaWeibo posts published by the Chinese charity association, Love Save Pneumoconiosis (大爱清尘), in selected months spread over a two-year period in 2011 and 2012. For the third project, the third author (Kathinka Fürst) interviewed 72

representatives of environmental NGOs in different locations in mainland China. Interviews were mainly conducted from August 2011 to February 2012 and September 2012 to March 2013. In this article, we enumerate these three research projects as: research project 1, research project 2, and research project 3, respectively.

The framework for analysing the political agency of civil society that we develop in this conceptual article draws on insights gained from synthesizing these three research projects. Because our aim is to use the empirical data to build theory about the political agency of Chinese civil society, the article does not offer any detailed analysis of the empirical data.¹¹ Instead, we seek to contribute to a field of literature that is characterized by an abundance of empirical work but a lack of theorization across individual case studies.¹² In order to build the conceptual framework we present in this article, the data from the three separate research projects has been reanalysed through a series of workshops conducted over a three-year period. In these workshops, we have synthesized our knowledge of Chinese civil society, identified patterns within and across the separate research projects, and explored ways of interpreting the political agency of civil society actors. Our joint process of analysis and writing is therefore characterized by what Karen Littleton and Neil Mercer refer to as ‘interthinking’,¹³ in which new ideas develop as people come together and jointly put their thoughts into words.

The political space for civil society engagement in China

China is often described as an authoritarian party-state in which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has a monopoly on state power and controls large sections of society, such as the economy, education, the media, civil society, the government, the legislative and judicial system, and the state administrative bureaucracy. Despite efforts to distinguish between the state and the party, the CCP still holds the ultimate power in practice and political reforms have been slow. Yet, during the past decades of economic reform and opening up, Chinese society, including the sections controlled by the CCP, has undergone large-scale economic and social change. In the case of civil society, civil society organizations set up by groups of citizens now exist alongside the so-called mass organizations established by the state in the Mao period to bridge the gap between the party and the people.¹⁴ The existence of these civil society organizations reflects a development in which the party-state has become less omnipresent, and new spaces for civil society engagement have developed, in particular as a response to the social problems caused by China’s rapid economic development.¹⁵ Different

levels and actors of the party-state have responded to this engagement in different ways, depending on the nature of the issue, geographical location, timing, and perceived sensitivity. Collaboration with civil society actors can be a means for the party-state to provide social services, and by assisting the state in solving social problems, civil society actors gain legitimacy for themselves, and also contribute to strengthening the state's legitimacy. However, civil society can also be perceived as a threat to the legitimacy of party-state rule as it offers people an arena for engaging outside direct party-state control and draws attention to the state's incapacity to solve social problems. At other times, the party-state appears to adopt an 'opening one eye and closing the other' approach, in which civil society actors are allowed to operate as long as they respect the boundaries of engagement.¹⁶ As a result, state-civil society relations are marked by various degrees of conflict, coexistence, and collaboration.

The political space for civil society engagement can be defined as the opportunities for and restrictions on such engagement.¹⁷ The party-state relies on a range of disciplinary means to shape the political space for civil society engagement, thereby governing the potential threat of a growing number of civil society actors outside direct state control. State disciplining of civil society engagement can be communicated either through codified requirements, such as registration rules, or non-codified expectations. Registration rules serve the purpose of making civil society legible.¹⁸ Through registration, an organization becomes known to the party-state and is inserted into a classification system of different organizational forms. When entering a particular slot within this system, the organization is placed in a network of horizontal and vertical relations to other organizations and responsible governmental agencies. Registration rules change temporally and geographically, reflecting the changing objectives of the party-state and the need to adapt classification systems to the realities on the ground.¹⁹

Non-codified expectations are communicated in both mediated and face-to-face meetings between party-state representatives and civil society actors. Through invitations to cooperate, censorship, and subtle signals about future opportunities, the party-state emits signals indicating the political space for civil society engagement. Given the non-monolithic nature of the party-state, different levels and actors will sometimes send out conflicting and mixed signals.²⁰ Even more so than with codified requirements, non-codified signals can be volatile and difficult to predict. These signals must, therefore, be interpreted by civil society actors, and successful activists refine their abilities to decode these signals, an ability that is often referred to as their 'gut feeling'.

Both codified requirements and non-codified expectations structure the opportunities for and restrictions on civil society actors to exercise their agency. Yet, focusing only on how the party-state shapes the political space for civil society engagement from above would imply a narrow view of politics. Such a view reduces politics to the actions and power of the party-state, thus overlooking the political agency exercised from below by civil society actors themselves. In the following section, we outline an alternative approach to politics, which sees politics as wide, discursive, and dynamic, and we argue that such an approach to politics is more appropriate for analysing the political agency of civil society actors.

Theorizing politics: Wide, discursive, and dynamic

Lacking opportunities to conduct field-based research, scholars within traditional Pekingology have sought to identify political tendencies and power shifts by analysing the available material from afar.²¹ Politics was construed as government, and political changes were seen to depend on the identity of actors in leading positions within the party. This take on politics exemplifies a narrow understanding of political actors and processes. The tendency to equate politics with government is however not limited to China and is sometimes referred to as big-P versus small-p politics. Whereas big-P politics involves state interests and high politics, small-p politics refers to civil society actors such as social movements as well as the politics of everyday life.²² The big P–small p approach has the advantage of offering a broader conceptualization of political actors and processes. However, by delineating politics as a particular sphere or domain within society, this approach also presupposes a distinction between the political and the apolitical. From the perspective of discourse theory,²³ nothing is really outside of the political because the most fundamental aspect of politics is the constitution of the social in a particular manner that excludes other ways of constructing society. Categorizations, and the distinctions separating them, are important clues in identifying how the social is constructed. Hence, it is of particular importance to analyse how the distinction between the political and the apolitical is constructed. In the *apolitical*, the traces of the power involved disappear, and the result appears as natural and given. Power therefore becomes the factor that makes a process political.

Steven Lukes identifies a shift from understanding power as the ability to repress and hold power over others to seeing power as a dispersed force that enables the structuration of the social.²⁴ Within discourse theory, this structuration of the social is seen as a semiotic process connecting language to power. Through language, collective identities, group

interests, and ideas about society are created. Because these identities, interests, and ideas can be constructed in different and potentially conflicting ways, every status quo is based on the exclusion of alternative versions of the social. Politics therefore involves both hegemonic endeavours seeking to naturalize particular social structures and counter-hegemonic attempts to destabilize and replace these structures. Within a discursive perspective, language is an arena for politics, and politics is therefore not the domain of particular actors or scales, but an integral part of the constitution of the social. The focus on language does, however, not mean that discourse theory ignores the material reality; rather, discourse theory claims that we can only access this reality through language. In other words, every material aspect of society has a discursive side and vice versa.²⁵

Because there is a struggle between different discourses to define the social reality, society is never static. Even in situations in which there appears to be no resistance and no alternative versions of the social, there is an inherent instability. This instability stems from people always being able to imagine a reversed social order and share these imaginations with others. Although these expressions might be minor and hidden, such as jokes and songs, they nevertheless serve as a reminder to the people in power that their position cannot be taken for granted, but must be continually secured.²⁶ Such a dynamic understanding of politics does, to a certain extent, exist in current scholarship on Chinese civil society in the distinction made between sensitive and non-sensitive practices, actors, and arenas. The term *sensitive* here functions almost as a synonym for politics, in its narrow understanding of involving state power. Something is marked as sensitive when it is seen to contain an understanding of the social that diverges from the hegemonic view propagated by the party-state. What is labelled as sensitive does, however, change over time, as seen lately in the case of women's rights activists.²⁷ In contrast, the term *depoliticization* is used to signify attempts to rewrite an issue or actor from being perceived as a source of instability or conflict to being seen as part of the hegemonic, and therefore neutral, domain. A discourse theoretical approach to politics therefore points to the changing boundary between the political and the apolitical, and how certain actors or practices are made to appear as apolitical or political rather than being either apolitical or political in themselves.

Four modalities of civil society engagement

A discursive approach to politics opens up the analysis of the political in practices that may – using a narrow approach to politics – appear as apolitical. In this section, we draw on this

broad discursive approach to politics to outline four different modalities of civil society engagement that we have identified based on our data. Taken together, the four modalities build a conceptual framework that can be used to unpack the political agency of civil society by distinguishing between different ways in which civil society actors may engage in political practices. The first modality, which we call positioning, refers to how civil society actors use specific strategies to position themselves in ways which make it possible for them to operate within a restricted political space. Existing literature on Chinese civil society has already identified some strategies used by civil society actors.²⁸ In this article, we contribute to this work by identifying additional ways in which civil society actors position themselves and we situate the modality of positioning within a larger discussion on the political agency of civil society. In the three remaining modalities, our discursive approach to politics is brought to the fore. Here, we analyse a wider repertoire of civil society practices, including how civil society actors represent social groups and issues through advocacy, how they care for these groups, and how they engage in processes of identity formation, in which both their own individual and collective identities as well as the collective identity of the social groups they work with are constructed. The civil society practices captured by these latter three modalities have received less systematic attention in the literature on Chinese civil society. Our contribution in this part of the article is therefore to shed light on the existence of these practices as well as to argue for the need to conceptualize these practices as political.

Positioning

The first modality pertains to how civil society actors exercise agency by positioning themselves within a structured political space that offers certain opportunities while at the same time imposing certain restrictions on engagement. As discussed previously, the political space for civil society engagement is structured in several ways. Registration rules shape the type of positions available, and non-codified expectations indicate the degree of sensitivity and the party-state's attitudes towards particular issues, activities, locations, and times. Chinese civil society organizations are subject to strict registration rules, which make it difficult for many organizations to become legally registered.²⁹ As a consequence, many organizations operate without registration or register as private businesses (all three research projects). Moreover, whether and how to register is a choice that an organization makes based on several factors. The organization's relations with government actors, the type of issues and activities the organization engages in, and its location and history are all factors that influence

this choice. Registration can be advantageous because it provides organizations with easier access to funding and secures some predictability in their future operations.³⁰ An organization may, however, choose to operate without registration because this gives it increased opportunities to address sensitive issues (research project 1).

Registration is not the only way in which how civil society actors position themselves. Regardless of their formal registration status, organizations also make strategic choices concerning how to relate to state actors. These choices can be placed on a continuum ranging from actively seeking to develop formal or informal ties with state actors on the one hand, to seeking to avoid the state altogether and adopting a lower profile (research projects 2 and 3). This choice between what Carolyn Hsu and Yuzhou Jiang term state alliance and state avoidance strategies is not only strategic, but also shaped by the particular personal background of civil society activists.³¹ Activists with former work experience in state agencies have the skills to utilize the advantages of closer relations with state actors, and they are also more likely to perceive collaboration with the state as beneficial for the organization (research project 3).

Positioning in terms of registration and ties with state actors has been discussed in depth by scholars studying Chinese civil society.³² However, our research projects show that civil society actors also position themselves in three additional ways, by choosing: (i) which issues to work with; (ii) which types of activities to engage in; and (iii) the time and scale of their engagement. First, the choice of issue involves both the type of social issue to work with (for instance environment, labour, or gender issues) and the specific social issue (for instance water pollution or biodiversity). The choice of issue can be conditioned by factors relating to activists themselves, such as personal experiences, individual motivations, available knowledge, and existing personal networks. For instance, one activist worked as a county-level medical doctor when he became concerned with the deteriorating public health situation in the area. Combined with information that his patients shared with him, this knowledge enabled him to identify a local chemical plant as the source of the problem (research project 3). The choice of issue can also be shaped by the party-state's attitudes towards an issue, how sensitive activists perceive a certain issue to be, and activists' individual evaluations of and aversion to risk (research projects 1 and 2). The form that engagement takes is therefore a result of the intersections between individual agency and the opportunities and restrictions within the political space. In positioning themselves, civil society actors also face local and regional differences in political space and they must therefore adapt their engagement to these circumstances. These circumstances can be stable over time, but may also change, as Jessica

Teets has demonstrated in her study of Yunnan, where the political space for civil society engagement has narrowed.³³

However, not all civil society actors concentrate on one single issue. Some activists work with different issues, in much the same way that members of political parties in a liberal democracy would do. These multi-issue activists are often motivated by ideals, such as solidarity, equality, freedom, justice, and human rights, and seek to change society on a structural level. Because of their ideals and objectives, the engagement of these multi-issue activists is often construed as more sensitive, and their organizations and networks are often difficult to register, short-lived, and more prone to crackdowns and sanctions (research projects 1 and 2).

The second way in which civil society actors position themselves is by choosing which types of activities to engage in. Different activities may be placed on a continuum ranging from clearly political activities involving the interests of powerful stakeholders to activities perceived as apolitical, such as self-cultivation in the form of movie clubs, reading circles, and dance groups. In between these two poles, activities such as service provision, consciousness raising, training classes, and public education can be found (all three research projects). As discussed previously, the seemingly apolitical can become politicized and vice versa, and these activities can therefore move along the continuum in both directions. For instance, in April 2015, Chinese authorities ordered the last-minute cancellation of an environmental festival in Beijing organized to raise awareness about climate change. The police claimed that the event did not meet application requirements since an application had not been submitted ten days in advance, but the environmental NGO organizing the festival was unaware of this requirement (research project 3). This incident illustrates two characteristics of how the boundaries placed on civil society are regulated. First, boundaries may shift suddenly, thus politicizing the seemingly apolitical. Second, changes in these boundaries are often signalled through non-political and arbitrary means rather than political statements.

The third way in which civil society actors position themselves is by choosing the time and scale of engagement. Activists may schedule their activities on symbolic dates, such as World AIDS Day, International Women's Day, or Earth Day (research projects 1 and 3). Conversely, activists often avoid attracting attention to themselves during social and political events characterized by a sensitive political climate, such as the Olympic Games in 2008, Party Congresses, or international meetings such as the APEC in Beijing in 2015 or the G8 Summit in Hangzhou in 2016 (all three research projects). Regarding scale, activists may

choose to focus their work on local issues or they may attempt to upscale their work either by addressing national issues, by connecting issues across different localities, or by networking with activists located in other places (all three research projects). Over the past decades, China has shown itself quite open to local and cellular forms of engagement, whereas attempts to upscale and connect engagement are sensitive. For instance, activists seeking to create inter- or intra-provincial networks among civil society activists face difficulties because such efforts connect local issues to broader social concerns.³⁴

Issues, activities, and the time and scale of engagement are choices that civil society actors make in positioning themselves. Combining these choices in different ways may enable civil society actors to manage risk. One activist expressed this line of thinking and stated, ‘when it is risky to do labour work, we will change to volunteer work’ (research project 2). Likewise, when working with a highly sensitive topic, activists can choose to engage in activities perceived as apolitical. Moreover, activists pushing the boundaries by engaging with more sensitive issues are more likely to be found in localities open to civil society engagement (research projects 2 and 3).

Advocacy: Representing social groups and issues

Advocacy involves speaking on behalf of a social group or issue and representing this group or issue in its dealings with the state. Through advocacy civil society actors exercise agency from below to influence the policies, priorities, and agendas of state actors. Attempts to influence state actors through representation can take several forms, including not only advocacy but also popular protests. In this article, we will focus on advocacy, since the representational engagement of the activists in our three research projects primarily involves advocacy and not popular protests.³⁵ In a way, advocacy is an extension of the third modality – caring for others – in that the knowledge and experiences gained while caring for a particular social group or issue is used as a springboard to defend their rights and interests and call for changes in public policies that will benefit this group or issue. In contrast to caring for others, which is often perceived by government officials as relatively non-political and innocent, advocacy is more clearly seen as political and potentially sensitive. While some civil society actors are involved in both, others focus on one or the other. Choosing between advocacy and caring for others is therefore an additional way in which civil society actors position themselves (research projects 2 and 3).

Advocacy can be based on two different types of representation, with each type invoking a different political relationship between activists and the social group being represented. When representation is horizontal, activists are part of the group they represent and can therefore speak *as* the group. This is for instance the case among many LGBT activists (research project 1). In other cases, representation is not based on horizontal relations between peers, but on a vertical act of solidarity. In vertical representation, activists are giving voice to others, seeking to represent people who are seen as unable to speak for themselves. In this case, activists do not speak *as* the group, but *for*, *with*, or *about* the group they represent. For instance, some journalists have developed close connections with groups of activists and take on the role of representing others through their reporting (research project 1). When analysing advocacy a central question is therefore whose voice civil society actors express.³⁶

Both horizontal and vertical representation invoke the question of legitimacy. Legitimacy is not pre-given; rather, civil society actors have to claim to be legitimate representatives of a particular group.³⁷ In China, most civil society representatives cannot base their claims to legitimacy on what Hanna Pitkin calls ‘formalistic representation’,³⁸ such as being authorized through elections or held accountable by members (research projects 2 and 3). Rather, activists typically engage in what Peter Houtzager and Adrian Gurza Lavalle call ‘assumed representation’.³⁹ When such assumed representation is horizontal, activists can base their legitimacy on claims to descriptive likeness between themselves and the group being represented. However, when representation is vertical, activists cannot claim such descriptive likeness. Instead, they may base their claims to legitimacy on the experiences, knowledge, and proximity gained from caring for a particular social group. In the case of labour organizations, the founders are often migrant workers, while staff members have various backgrounds, including both social workers and former migrant workers. The organizations’ legitimacy is therefore not based solely on descriptive likeness, but also on knowledge of and proximity to workers (research project 2).

Through their advocacy, civil society actors seek to create attention around an issue and influence the formulation and implementation of the specific policy measures adopted by the government with regard to this issue. In contrast to liberal democracies where activists can engage in advocacy through public hearings and lobbying elected politicians, the formal channels for civil society advocacy in China may be non-existent or hard to access. In our research projects, we have identified three different channels used by civil society actors to engage in advocacy. The first and most direct channel is to participate in the open public consultation process when a new law or regulation is being drafted. Some labour

organizations engage in this form of advocacy by gathering their opinions on the issue in question and then submitting these to the relevant government department (research project 2). A second channel, which can be deployed instead of or in combination with the first channel is to use personal connections to government officials and scholars involved in the policymaking process. To influence the opinions of these officials and scholars, civil society organizations invite them to seminars discussing a particular issue (research projects 2 and 3). One labour organization describes the purpose of these seminars as trying ‘to level our voices, our worker voices’ by creating ‘a platform for the grass-roots workers to sit in the seminar directly and talk and discuss with the academics and even the policymakers’ (research project 2). The third channel for engaging in advocacy involves seeking to influence policymaking indirectly through getting one’s opinions voiced in the media (all three research projects). Some organizations use social media to raise awareness of an issue and influence the general public debate on an issue. Others cultivate ties with journalists in order to – in the words of one organization – ‘push our ideas directly to them’ (research project 2).

Caring for others

Organizations addressing needs in the population are a central part of civil society. Such organizations establish platforms for groups of people who want to make a positive difference in the lives of others. Robert Putnam argues in his study of the United States that the voluntariness and outreach of civil society organizations are crucial for the development of social capital and the integration of the state.⁴⁰ The act of citizens helping others is however not limited to liberal democracies. The mass organizations of the Chinese party-state provide opportunities for helping others, and these opportunities have been supplemented through the growth of civil society organizations. To a certain limit, the party-state has encouraged such activism and framed state–civil society relations as a partnership, in which civil society can provide services that are beyond the capacity of the state.⁴¹

Caring for others can involve different types of activities, such as distributing financial or material resources, offering information and moral support through hotlines and training classes, or establishing social arenas where individuals can meet and develop networks (all three research projects). These activities bear many similarities to the work of Western charities, but reliance on individual donations is less common in China. There is not a long history of people giving to strangers through charity organizations, but there is a long-standing tradition of caring for others in need through kinship-based organizations.⁴² In all

three of our research projects, many organizations are involved in caring for others in need, but most do not solicit donations from private citizens.

Caring for others is easily construed as apolitical, as a social rather than a political mode of engagement. Within an authoritarian political context, the party-state is more open to accept engagement which it deems social rather than political. Civil society actors may therefore explicitly present themselves not as political actors, but as social organizations – a point to which we will return when we discuss the modality of identity formation. However, if we understand politics in broad and discursive terms, caring for others can be understood as political in three different ways. First, caring for others involves identifying specific social problems and attempting to find solutions that may alleviate suffering. Through understanding the plight of the individual, civil society actors also gain insight into the structural context surrounding individual suffering, such as the rights of the individual and the opportunities and constraints for improving the current situation. Such engagement can be conceptualized as a form of mapping, in which civil society actors acquire knowledge about the extent and character of a specific social problem. This mapping can be more or less systematic, as some civil society organizations even conduct small-scale surveys to gain deeper insight into the plight of the people they are helping (research projects 2 and 3).

Identifying and acting on suffering is political because it is based on constructing the specific social problem and the interests of the social group receiving care in particular ways. In this way, caring for others always implies assumptions about causes, solutions, interests, and responsibilities. In a discursive perspective, such assumptions work politically to either reproduce or challenge hegemonic discourses of a social problem and its place within a broader societal narrative. For example, in the case of migrant workers, the hegemonic discourse focuses on the problem of persistent wage arrears and defines this as a moral and educational problem. Within this discourse, employers are seen as black-hearted people who exploit migrant workers, whereas workers are seen as easy targets for dishonest companies because they lack an awareness of how the law works. Consequently, the proposed solution to the problem of wage arrears is to provide legal training courses to migrant workers, combined with punishing bad bosses. Some labour organizations reproduce this hegemonic discourse by focusing their work on offering legal training courses to workers or engaging in mediation with employers to win back wages. These solutions are based on the assumption that the cause of labour problems can best be countered at an individual level. However, other labour organizations claim that wage arrears are no longer a problem, and that the real problem is that workers lack a way of engaging in genuine collective bargaining with companies. While

these organizations provide migrant workers with knowledge and skills about collective bargaining, they also engage at a more structural level, by attempting to gain support for their own model of collective bargaining (research project 2).

A second way in which caring for others can be political is by creating bonds of solidarity among those suffering and between those suffering and their helpers. In this way, civil society actors caring for others extend reciprocity beyond a kinship-based community and construct a community of fellow citizens. The interactions between those giving and receiving care are always embedded in asymmetrical relations of power.⁴³ However, the two groups can still become acquainted with each other through interaction and may come to recognize each other as part of the same community of solidarity. The process of defining membership in communities involves both inclusion and exclusion, and is therefore inherently political.⁴⁴ Communities of solidarity can therefore be constructed in different ways. For instance, the organization Love Save Pneumoconiosis reaches out to poor workers suffering from the occupational lung disease pneumoconiosis. Through social media, the organization shares workers' life stories and appeals to netizens to provide financial assistance to and care for these workers. In its social media posts, the organization represents diseased workers as brothers in need and not as distant strangers, thereby constructing a community that transcends the urban–rural divide (research project 2). In the case of LGBT activists, communities of solidarity are constructed between individuals who share the experience of not corresponding to a heteronormative ideal, but who differ in terms of socio-economic background and sexual orientation (research project 1). When communities of solidarity are constructed between individuals who differ in terms of geographical location, socio-economic background, gender, sexual orientation, or other markers of difference, the field of care is extended from the immediate family and kin to the fellow citizen. In such communities of concerned citizens, the well-being of each individual is not only the concern of the individual and his family or kin, nor is it the sole responsibility of the state. Rather, citizens have a responsibility to care for each other, and in particular to care for marginalized and disadvantaged groups in society. Additionally, the need for citizens to care for others also entails an indirect criticism of the state's incapacity to relieve suffering and solve social problems. In this way, not only is the process of constructing communities political, but the very existence of communities of solidarity can work to promote certain discourses about state and society and what it means to be a citizen.

The third way in which caring for others can be political is by conveying representations of suffering. When organizations or individual activists use social media to

promote their work or discuss the issues they work on with journalists or government officials, they represent suffering in particular ways. Such representations of suffering construct a relationship between the sufferer and the audience, which holds potential for political action. These actions may range from simply feeling pity on the sufferer to taking active measures to improve the life of the suffering person.⁴⁵ Mediated representations of suffering can also contribute to strengthening bonds of solidarity by constructing ‘imagined communities’⁴⁶ between citizens (research project 2). Moreover, even if journalists or activists focus on individual stories of suffering to avoid censorship, the audience may connect different stories together into a systematic understanding of causes and responsibility linked to a particular social problem (all three research projects). In this way, representations of suffering can contribute to politicizing the audience’s understanding of a social problem.

Identity formation

Our understanding of the process of identity formation draws on two different approaches to identity: a discursive approach and a socio-relational approach. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe conceptualize identity formation as a structural process in which individuals are interpellated into discursively constructed subject positions.⁴⁷ In other words, collective identities are formulated in language, and subjects enter these positions. If we think along these lines, collective identities can be first formulated and then enacted. Richard Jenkins, on the other hand, accords more agency to subjects themselves in forming their own identity, while also taking into account how identity is ascribed to the individual by external actors.⁴⁸

In a social constructivist perspective, collective identities do not exist a priori, but are constructed through social interaction. Collective identities are formed by drawing boundaries between ‘we’ and ‘others’ through mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion.⁴⁹ These boundaries establish relationships within the collective and between the collective and its social surroundings.⁵⁰ The formation of collective identities is a process of assigning meaning to who the ‘we’ is and what the ‘we’ does. Collective identities are constructed through including certain meanings and excluding others. Collective identities can be contested, because different internal and external actors draw the boundaries of what should be included into and excluded from the collective ‘we’ in different ways. Not all members of a collective group may define the identity of the group in the same way; similarly, external actors use different labels to refer to the group, thus influencing how the group is perceived. The construction of collective identities is therefore political, as it involves the power to define

and draw boundaries.⁵¹ However, some identity formations may appear as given and permanent. In a discursive perspective, such seemingly objective identities are the result of particular power relations that have suppressed alternative identity formations. Changes occur when such seemingly objective and stable identity formations are exposed to alternative identities. This politicizes the particular identity in question and may lead to a remapping of identities. The study of collective identities therefore involves studying identities that are contested, but also identities that appear as objective and given, as both change and stability are embedded in relationships of power.

Processes of collective identity formation play out differently in different political contexts, but are not limited to liberal democracies. In our research projects we have identified three forms of identity formation: the collective identity of the organization, the identity of the individual activists, and the collective identity of the social group that an organization works with. First, civil society engagement involves constructing a collective identity, a ‘we’ that comes to share an engagement for a particular cause.⁵² This process involves carving out a specific identity for the collective and may involve challenging the identity ascribed to the collective by external actors. In the case of Chinese labour organizations, forming a collective identity involves constructing boundaries which on the one hand distinguishes these organizations from the official trade union, and on the other hand challenges the identity ascribed to them as potentially threatening anti-governmental organizations. Labour organizations are careful about not presenting themselves as independent workers’ associations and distinguishing their own identity and work from that of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, in order not to be seen as challenging the union’s position as the sole official representative of workers’ interests. Nevertheless labour organizations also seek to construct a depoliticized identity as social and not political organizations. They are eager to present themselves and their work as beneficial, not only for migrant workers, but for society in general (research project 2). Constructing a collective identity can therefore also be interpreted as an attempt to legitimize the role and work of the organization (research projects 2 and 3).

The second form of identity formation involves constructing the identity of the individual activists. The civil society activists we have interviewed seldom see themselves as dissidents nor do they express any ambitions to overthrow the government. Rather, individuals’ motivations for engaging in a particular cause are more complex. Some seek to find an outlet for a pre-existing engagement. For others, being an activist is an identity that develops over the course of one’s engagement. The initial reason for becoming engaged may

be incidental. In such cases, exposure to the group's world view and participation in collective activities may transform and deepen the individual's interest in a cause. An identity as an activist may therefore develop over the course of an individual's engagement, instead of existing a priori (all three research projects). For instance, one activist became involved in legal activism because he worked night shifts and was therefore able to visit government offices during the day to help friends solve their legal problems. Over time, his activist career developed from being a volunteer to founding a network of activists. His thinking also changed as he gained more knowledge and experience and he became more aware of and concerned with the structural barriers to justice (research project 2). Other activists started working in a civil society organization because they found the work challenging and meaningful or because working in an organization offered a less hierarchical work environment and more responsibility than for instance working in a state agency (research projects 2 and 3).

Third, civil society actors also construct the collective identity of the social group that they work with. In this case, collective identities can be constructed through mediated communication in the public sphere. Activists voice their opinions in the public sphere through websites, microblogs, or in community meetings. In this process, they articulate claims about the needs and interests of the social groups they work with. These claims make visible different subject positions or collective identities, such as exploited worker, HIV carrier, or victim of air pollution (all three research projects). The presence of these subject positions in the public sphere enables individuals' identification: a person or group may recognize that other people share a similar interest and start to self-identify with this subject position. At the same time, governmental officials also ascribe collective identities to social groups, either through official media or in government reports. The collective identities constructed by civil society actors may work to either reproduce or challenge these official identity formations. For instance, migrant workers are often referred to as 'peasant workers' (农民工) in official media and government reports. Several labour organizations and commercial newspapers are critical of this term, choosing instead to refer to migrant workers as workers (工人), hired labourers (打工者), worker friends (工友), working sisters (打工妹), peasant brothers (农民兄弟) or new citizens (新市民). These alternative identify formations entail a different construction of migrant workers' position within Chinese society than the term peasant worker (research project 2).

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored how a discursive approach to politics opens up for a broader understanding of the political agency involved in civil society engagement. In a discursive approach, politics cannot be limited to a particular sphere or institution within society; rather, politics encompasses the practices involved in constituting the social. As practices, these are discursive as well as material. Through language, we formulate conceptions of what is natural, just, or necessary, and these conceptions are embedded in institutions. The material embeddedness of such discourses makes them harder to change. For instance, the conviction that citizen engagement is legitimate and necessary has been realized through the establishment of civil society organizations. Moreover, by their very existence, these organizations challenge the idea that engagement should only take place within the confines of the party-state.

Broadening the concept of politics runs the risk of making everything political, thus hindering the researcher from locating the political and differentiating between different political practices. In this article, we seek to respond to the necessity of a broader understanding of politics while also providing a framework guiding the analysis of civil society engagement. The conceptual framework we have outlined is based on the centrality of the formation of collective identities and relations between different actors to the establishment and operation of civil society. The four modalities within this framework point to different dimensions of the political agency of civil society actors, namely how civil society actors position themselves within a structured political space, how they represent the social groups and issues through advocacy, how they care for these groups, and how they engage in processes of identity formation. Future research can use this conceptual framework in empirical studies to investigate one or several of the four modalities of civil society agency. This may open up for analysing aspects of civil society engagement that have received less comprehensive attention in the literature on Chinese civil society. Furthermore, the conceptual framework encourages the researcher to look for the political in actually existing civil society practices rather than evaluating civil society engagement in the Chinese context based on assumptions about state–civil society relations implied by theories developed in Western democratic contexts.

The conceptual framework presented in this article provides us with an understanding of civil society that goes beyond the classical question of whether civil society exists in China or not. Instead, we are interested in analysing the political importance and meaning attached

to actually occurring civil society engagement. This engagement takes various forms, addresses diverse issues, and is directed at different audiences. Instead of placing engagement on a predefined scale ranging from sensitive and potentially subversive practices to practices seen as politically insignificant, our framework enables us to identify political aspects of practices that are often conceived as apolitical. Moreover, the discursive approach to politics accentuates how practices are inscribed with meaning. Through social change and discursive struggles, practices take on new meaning. In this conceptualization of the social, politics is a process rather than a sphere. A discursive and process-orientated approach to politics strengthens our ability to understand change and how traces of past practices and ideas continue to influence the ways in which civil society engagement is enacted, perceived, and regulated. Today, awareness of these traces is of particular importance, as the political space for civil society engagement is under pressure. In such periods of increased constraints, the four modalities of civil society engagement discussed in this article are still present, but engagement might take on new forms or shift to new spaces. A wide, discursive, and dynamic approach to the politics of civil society engagements is therefore crucial to grasp how the changes in political space will influence the exact forms and spaces of engagement in the coming years.

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