

*Delivering Services in China's Fragmented Local State: The Procurement of Social Work NGOs in Guangzhou**

Samson Yuen

Abstract

Local states in China are increasingly active in delivering social services through formal collaborations with NGOs. However, existing studies tend to treat the local state as a unitary actor, concealing how the dynamics of its different institutional layers shape NGO behavior. Focusing on the government procurement of social work NGOs in Guangzhou through case studies, this article analyzes how different local state institutions in the administrative hierarchy influence NGOs through disparate policy imperatives. While Street Offices consider NGOs as “administrative arms,” the municipal government aims to cultivate their professional capacity for invigorating community services. Although NGOs manipulate such dynamics to prolong survival, these strategies in turn embed them in the local state and shape them into acquiescent service providers. The findings suggest that China’s top-down community governance reforms through NGOs is circumscribed by misaligned policy objectives and wide demographic

Samson Yuen is Assistant Professor in the Department of Government and International Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University. Correspondence should be sent to samsoneyuen@hkbu.edu.hk.

* The author would like to thank Patricia Thornton, Edmund Cheng, Karita Kan, and the three anonymous reviewers for providing helpful feedbacks to earlier drafts of the article. The author wants to dedicate this article to Mr. Bill Liao, who worked tirelessly for China’s civil society during his fruitful life.

variation across neighborhoods. They also caution us from seeing state-NGO collaborations as a sign of an expanding civil society.

The downward transfer of welfare responsibilities has prompted local states across China to experiment with innovative ways of social service delivery.¹ While local states have been anxious to obtain the fiscal resources to sustain public goods provision, many of them have also begun to outsource welfare delivery by collaborating with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) through procurement programs. Initiated under the central government's call for "social governance innovation" (*shehui zhili chuangxin* 社會治理創新) and the ongoing community governance reforms, these state-NGO collaborations often take place at the community level through offering social work services for residents or specialized services for vulnerable groups such as migrants, children, the elderly, and ex-offenders. By leveraging professional expertise from NGOs, local states hope that these state-society collaborations will meet citizens' evolving social needs while invigorating community governance from its insipid condition.

The diffusion of local state-NGO collaborations in China has generated a new research agenda among scholars, spawning questions that range from the autonomy of NGOs to their sociopolitical impact. However, existing studies tend to portray the local state as a cohesive strategic actor in dealing with NGOs. Relatively fewer works have taken a disaggregated view of the local state to scrutinize how different institutional layers within the local state shape NGOs in divergent ways.² Similar to how the Chinese party-state is fragmented along central-local lines,³ the local state is also administratively fragmented along a matrix of vertical bureaucracies (條 *tiao*) and horizontal coordinating bodies (塊 *kuai*). Policy innovation and implementation often requires the coordination and the alignment of objectives between different institutions across the *tiao-kuai* matrix. However, policy interests and objectives of these institutions do not always align. This is especially the case when it comes to policy innovation like the procurement of NGOs, which is typically initiated and implemented by different layers of the local state. Moreover, the local state is also "demographically" fragmented in that neighborhoods have diverse demographic and organizational characteristics. Street neighborhoods, whose boundaries are drawn by the government, differ widely in terms of geographical area, population size, the mixture of