Disability Service Organizations and Their Relationship with the Chinese Government: A Case Study in Beijing

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Abstract
The capacity of the Chinese government to provide adequate public services is constrained. Social service organizations have been founded to fill the gap. The Chinese government reformed its policies in 2007 to more effectively use social organizations to meet people’s needs and strengthen its management to avoid social disorder. The decentralized governance system assigned local government units to develop specific policies to fulfill this goal. To provide updated information on social service organizations and their relationship with the government in this new context, this study investigates four disability service organizations with a focus on Beijing. It is found that grassroots service organizations exhibit fairly strong autonomy and viability in the development process. However, these organizations have an ambivalent potential to contribute to the development of civil society in the future. Both facilitating and constraining factors are identified in this study. Moreover, policy changes alter the relationship between the government and social service organizations. This study argues that a state-led partnership has emerged between the state and the grassroots service organizations in China. The future development of this embryonic partnership depends on the degree to which the government relies on grassroots

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service organizations to meet people’s needs and its regulatory capacity to effectively manage this partnership-building process.

1. Introduction

Since 2007, the Chinese government has emphasized social construction and the monitoring of the state-society relationship. At the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2007, Chairman Hu Jintao 胡锦濤 underlined social construction as one of the most important tasks. Social construction is a task similar to economic construction, with a different focus on social development rather than economic growth. At the core of social construction is the goal of improving people’s livelihood. Therefore, the regulation of social organizations has been considered an integral part of social construction. The government will lead social organizations to improve their services to meet people’s needs, and simultaneously strengthen the management of social organizations to avoid social disorder. This process provides a new institutional context to examine the NGOs and their relationship with the Chinese government.

In China, the concept of NGOs has been increasingly used by the public since 1995, when the UN World Conference on Women was held in Beijing. However, as several researchers have noted, the term “NGO” is not officially used because of its negative connotations; instead, government documents use the term “social organization 社會組織 shehui zuzhi.” Social organizations include social groups 社會團體 shehui tuanti, private nonenterprise units 非企業單位 fei qiye danwei, and foundations 基金會 jijin hui. Social groups are membership-based voluntary groups that engage in nonprofit activities. PNEUs are social organizations established by individuals, social organizations, or enterprises that engage in nonprofit social services. Foundations are nonprofit legal persons who pursue welfare undertakings that are funded by donations from natural persons, legal persons, or other organizations.

The Chinese state has implemented stringent regulations in administering social organizations; therefore, the Chinese state–society relationship has been widely characterized as corporatism. This control of social organizations by the government arose from the fear that social organizations may induce social instability and political opposition to the state. Nonetheless, although the regulatory structure has been generally tight, the attitude of the state toward different types of social organizations varies