

Supporting Civil Society in China

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Supporting civil society in China presents a dilemma for U.S. policymakers. In well-established one-party states – like the one governed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) – grassroots organizations only survive when they do not threaten the regime’s hold on power. As a result, support for most types of civil society groups in China does not necessarily translate into support for liberal values or political reform. Instead, it can strengthen one-party rule.

Support for groups with agendas that explicitly push for liberal values and political reform may even backfire. For example, supporting groups in Hong Kong that call for maintaining the civil liberties promised by the “One Country, Two System” policy risks playing into a propaganda narrative that the United States is attempting to sow disorder in China. Support for Hong Kong civil society could, conceivably, have the perverse effect of undermining it in the long run.

What is to be done about this dilemma? In this brief, I argue that despite these tradeoffs, the United States should not disengage from Chinese civil society. Instead, I argue that U.S. government policymakers and American NGOs should continue to robustly support civil society in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan where it aligns with American interests and values, but does not attempt to drive large-scale political change. The U.S. should continue support efforts that make incremental improvements to the lives of vulnerable populations, from workers to dissidents, and advance American interests through (1) global public goods, (2) transparent human rights advocacy, and (3) peace and international exchanges.

The State of Civil Society in China

Conventional wisdom holds that a strong civil society can make governments more democratic. This idea has its roots in the American experience of democracy. As Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in the 19th century, civic and religious organizations in the United States created “habits of the heart” that helped build democratic institutions. This idea has since been applied to a wide range of contexts.¹ The most hopeful such example comes from the fall of the Soviet Union, where grassroots groups were credited with helping citizens organize against the regime and topple dictators. As Larry Diamond argued in an influential essay, “the stimulus for

¹ Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, (Princeton University Press: 1994).

democratization, and particularly the pressure to complete the process, have typically come from the resurrection of civil society, the restructuring of public space, and the mobilization of all manner of independent groups and grassroots movements.”²

However, recent research has shown that civil society in China and other authoritarian states does not mobilize to hold the state accountable or pressure for democracy—instead, grassroots organizations help the state to govern. Grassroots social organizations do so by providing policy feedback,³ by providing services during disasters like earthquakes,⁴ and by helping the state identify and defuse protest.⁵

This is not to say that civil society in China and other autocratic regimes does not play a beneficial role. Often these groups provide important services and empower individuals in meaningful ways. The most powerful example may be the part that civil society played in the immediate aftermath of the devastating 2008 Sichuan earthquake, when grassroots organizations played an important role in mobilizing aid.⁶

As the response to the 2020 coronavirus pandemic shows, civil society organizations’ positive role in the lives of many citizens does not mean that civil society has carved out a role as meaningful bulwark against an authoritarian state. In response to the coronavirus epidemic, NGOs helped the party provide disaster relief, much like in the aftermath of the 2008 earthquake. One such organization was the Blue Sky Rescue Team, which has some 30,000 volunteers across 31 branches, and is led by a former police officer.⁷ The role of this group and others are praised

² Larry Diamond, “Rethinking Civil Society: Toward Democratic Consolidation,” *Journal of Democracy* 5, no. 3 (1994): 4.

³ Jessica Teets, *Civil Society Under Authoritarianism: The China Model*, (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁴ Xu Bin, “Consensus crisis and civil society: The Sichuan earthquake response and state-society relations,” *The China Journal* no. 71 (2014): 91-108; *The politics of compassion: The Sichuan Earthquake and Civic Engagement in China*, (Stanford University Press, 2017).

⁵ Daniel Mattingly, *The Art of Political Control in China*, (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁶ Xu, “Consensus crisis and civil society”; *The politics of compassion*.

⁷ “NGOs in China have helped the government provide covid-related relief,” *The Economist*, July 9, 2020,

by state media like the *People's Daily*. Also central to the government's pandemic control efforts have been quasi-autonomous grassroots groups such as neighborhood committees, which are key to CCP monitoring and control of local society.⁸

The last decade has been especially challenging for civil society organizations working in China. Domestic organizations have faced growing repression and harassment from state authorities.⁹ Foreign NGOs and foreign funding for Chinese NGOs have been squeezed out by a strict new NGO law. The space for civil society, which has always been narrow, has been slowly diminishing.

The tightening policy environment reflects a sense at the top level of the CCP that the emergence of genuinely autonomous civil society organizations would threaten political stability and continued one-party rule. An internal party document, first circulated in 2012, argued that civil society is “a socio-political theory that originated in the West [that] has been adopted by Western anti-China forces and used as a political tool...to squeeze the Party out of leadership of the masses at the local level.” It seems likely that this attitude reflects an assessment by the CCP that civil society organizations such as unions contributed to the downfall of the Soviet Union and other autocracies—a fate the CCP is determined to avoid. The rhetoric that “civil society” is Western and “anti-China” has become embedded in CCP propaganda, most prominently in state media reports about the protests in Hong Kong.

<https://www.economist.com/china/2020/07/09/ngos-in-china-have-helped-the-government-provide-covid-related-relief>.

⁸ Benjamin Read, *Roots of the State: Neighborhood Organization and Social Networks in Beijing and Taipei*, (Stanford University Press, 2012); Mattingly, *The Art of Political Control in China*.

⁹ Diane Fu and Greg Distelhorst, “Grassroots participation and repression under Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping,” *The China Journal* 79 no. 1 (2018): 100-122; Diane Fu, *Mobilizing without the Masses: Control and Contention in China*, (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Past U.S. Support for Chinese Civil Society Was Not a Failure

American support for civil society abroad sometimes operates on the premise that a robust civil society will build support for democracy. In a speech in 2014, for example, President Obama noted that “America’s support for civil society is a matter of national security” because of its power to “build” and “nurture democracy.”¹⁰ Consistent with this message, the goal of the USAID program that supports civil society abroad is to “strengthen a democratic political culture” and “mobilize constituencies for reform.” Along these lines, one major foundation supporting civil society organizations in China has in the past described one of its key goals as to build “constructive support for the Chinese domestic reform agenda.”

Does this mean past support for Chinese civil society failed? If the only goal was to push China towards democracy, then yes. Some voices in the 1990s did argue that civil society might move China towards democracy, most prominently Bill Clinton who, on at least on one occasion, explicitly argued that a “pragmatic policy of engagement” – including “support[ing] civil society and the rule of law programs in China” – might “promote a more open and free China.”¹¹

However, as Alastair Iain Johnston argues, democratization was not the sole goal of engagement, or even its most important one, and policymakers were often pragmatic and qualified in their aims.¹² While Clinton – and later Bush and Obama – expressed hope that China would become more open over time, American policy had other goals, such as drawing China into international organizations. It is plausible that in the absence of this policy, China would

¹⁰ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at Clinton Global Initiative,” September 23, 2014, Available at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/23/remarks-president-clinton-global-initiative>.

¹¹ “Remarks by the President in Address on China and the National Interest.” Available at: <https://clintonwhitehouse4.archives.gov/WH/New/html/19971024-3863.html>.

¹² Alastair Iain Johnston, “The Failures of the ‘Failure of Engagement’ with China,” *The Washington Quarterly* 42 no. 2 (2019): 99-114.

have been even less open.

Moreover, support for Chinese civil society most likely did contribute to meaningful gains on issues like labor and the environment. Support for labor organizations helped to craft a strong labor law that, while not always strongly enforced, at least gives workers a legal framework to address their grievances. Similarly, support for environmental NGOs has helped to contribute to growing transparency among local governments about pollution problems. In each case, Chinese activists and NGO leaders should get the credit for these incremental advances. But the presence of American NGOs likely made a positive difference as well.

Past American support for Chinese civil society should not be seen as a failure. In the absence of this support it is plausible that outcomes for vulnerable populations in China would be worse. However, it is clear that support for Chinese civil society should not proceed under the assumption that it will lead to political reform.

During the Trump Administration, the U.S. government turned decisively away from the policy of engagement with China. American connections to Chinese civil society had already deteriorated due to the restrictive NGO law and crackdown on civil society. However, the shift to a more competitive and conflictual relationship accelerated this decline. The Trump Administration also delivered conflicting messages about the importance of civil society and human rights, with Trump downplaying the importance of Xinjiang and Hong Kong while others such as Secretary of State Pompeo underscored human rights and values.

The Biden administration has promised to return democratic values to the center of the agenda with China. In a speech in February 2021, Biden stated that U.S. foreign policy “must start with diplomacy rooted in America’s most cherished democratic values: defending freedom, championing opportunity, upholding universal rights, respecting the rule of law, and treating

every person with dignity.” He went on to declare that the U.S. will “confront China’s economic abuses; counter its aggressive, coercive action; to push back on China’s attack on human rights, intellectual property, and global governance.”¹³ This shift in policy presents new opportunities to support Chinese civil society in a targeted way that advances American interests and values.

Why Support Civil Society in China? And How?

What principle should underlie government support for civil society in Hong Kong? I argue that government support should be premised on the idea that it incrementally strengthens America’s security and economic interests. Specific goals for the government might include (a) improving the quality of global public goods, such as public health and the environment, (b) advocating for human rights, and (c) promoting peace through international exchange. Private actors such as NGOs and foundations may wish to consider additional principles.

Priority 1: Global Public Goods

First, I argue that both the government and private actors should pursue cooperation with Chinese civil society in areas of mutual benefit. The most obvious areas of mutual benefit are global public goods such as clean air, clean water, and global health. For example, as the two largest economies, both China and the United States have an outsized role to play in fighting climate change. Yet partisan politics has prevented the United States from leading on climate change, and the Chinese government’s actual commitment to carbon reduction remains uncertain. Civil society cooperation can help protect the global commons, while restoring American leadership on the issue. How might civil society cooperation in this priority area proceed? This section considers global public health and infectious disease as a model.

¹³ Joe Biden, “Remarks by President Biden on America’s Place in the World,” February 4, 2021, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>.

Case study: Infections Diseases and Public Health

As the ongoing coronavirus pandemic illustrates, public health and pandemics are essential grounds for cooperation and national security. First, the United States government needs to reinvest in government-to-government cooperation. For years, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) had a robust emerging infectious disease program with an office in Beijing. These teams of virus hunters helped share technical expertise and went on missions with their partners in China CDC to investigate disease outbreaks. The program fostered informal ties with Chinese counterparts and strengthened cooperation between the agencies. Unfortunately, the U.S. government has gutted this program. It should restore full funding and staffing.

Second, private organizations based in the United States, such as the Gates Foundation, should continue to work in China, even though there are tradeoffs. The Gates Foundation does important work on infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. (Full disclosure: I briefly worked as a consultant in the Gates Foundation Beijing office and collaborated with U.S. CDC team members in China.) A reasonable criticism of the Gates Foundation work is that despite government commitments to the contrary, support for public health programs may in practice substitute for Chinese government funding of public health, and significant funding has gone to “GONGOs” (government-operated NGOs). Despite these tradeoffs, the work remains urgent and underfunded, especially in rural China. The work of the Gates Foundation also likely increases the popularity of the United States in China. American foundations should continue to fund public health efforts in China, especially around infectious disease surveillance and control.

Case study: Climate Change and the Environment

The United States and China are the two largest emitters of carbon dioxide in the world.

In 2018, the two countries combined accounted for 43 percent of world emissions, according to the Union of Concerned Scientists.¹⁴ Tackling climate change will require sustained cooperation between the United States and China.

Enduring cooperation between Chinese and American NGOs will help in this fight, even if the political environment in China makes it difficult. American NGOs, such as the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Environmental Defense Fund, have China programs that help share technical expertise across borders. The United States should also welcome and encourage reciprocal exchanges of information and expertise in the United States from Chinese civil society leaders. Both climate change and infectious diseases have been noted by the Biden Administration as potential areas for Sino-American cooperation.

Priority 2: Human rights and other core values

Government and NGO support for civil society in China should continue to promote core values, including human rights. Doing so may create friction with the Chinese government and Chinese citizens who view this support as interference in China's sovereign affairs. These concerns and the potential for backlash that actually harm the interests of vulnerable individuals on the ground should be taken seriously. But this does not mean that the United States government should remain silent. In particular, the United States government and civil society should continue and deepen support for Uyghurs in Xinjiang and for Hong Kong civil society. Such support should be robust and, to fight misinformation campaigns, transparent.

Case study: Civil Society in Hong Kong and Taiwan

American support for Hong Kong civil society faces grave threats in the wake of National Security Law introduced in May 2020. The law effectively curbs freedom of speech, assembly,

¹⁴ See Union of Concerned Scientists. "Each Country's Share of CO2 Emissions." August 12, 2020. Available at: <https://www.ucsusa.org/resources/each-countrys-share-co2-emissions>.

and association in the territory, putting Hong Kong's robust network of NGOs at risk. The law also states that officials in Hong Kong will "take necessary measures to strengthen the management" of foreign NGOs, which means that the activity of foreign NGOs may soon be curtailed.

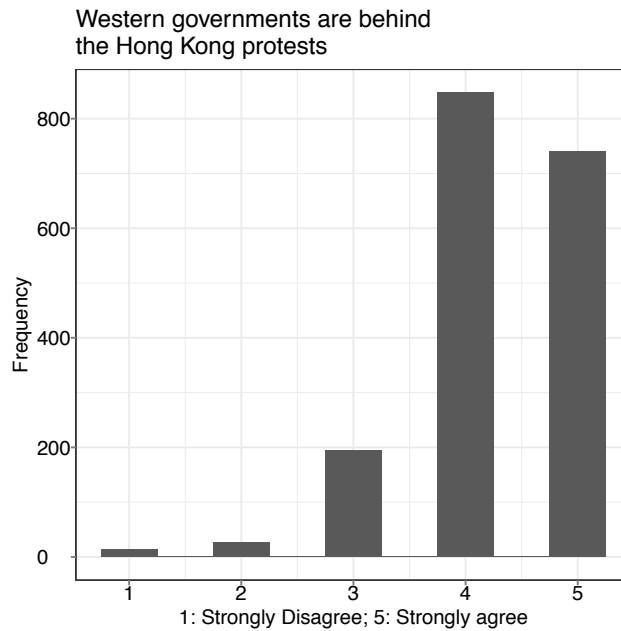
Supporting civil society in Hong Kong is not without risks. CCP propaganda has been extraordinarily effective at painting the pro-reform movement in Hong Kong as a puppet of "foreign forces." Unfortunately, this narrative, which trades in conspiracy theory and downplays the organic, bottom-up nature of the movement, has gained considerable traction in mainland China. In a recent survey, my co-author Elaine Yao and I find that a majority of respondents in mainland China believe that Western forces are behind the protests in Hong Kong (see Figure 1).¹⁵

Yet despite the risks, the United States government should continue to robustly support civil society in Hong Kong. It might do so in the following ways:

1. The United States government can robustly support democracy activists in Hong Kong. This means not only issuing public statements, but taking robust action, including creating an asylum and citizenship program similar to that developed by the United Kingdom.
2. The United States government can clearly signal that if the new National Security Law is interpreted in a way that severely constrains or even bans foreign NGO involvement, it will be met with further sanctions or other action.
3. It is possible that further direct government support for Hong Kong NGOs through the National Endowment for Democracy or other organizations may backfire and make it difficult for American NGOs to operate in Hong Kong. The government should carefully assess the value of these programs relative to the risks.

¹⁵ Daniel Mattingly and Elaine Yao, "How Propaganda Manipulates Emotion to Fuel Nationalism: Experimental Evidence from China," (2020) Working paper.

Figure 1: Perception of Western Influence in Hong Kong Protests



Data from a survey of 1,835 respondents in mainland China.

In addition, American NGOs and foundations should, as long as possible, continue to fund and support democracy activists and NGOs in Hong Kong that advocate for peaceful collective action, to ensure their rights consistent with the “One Country, Two Systems” principle. This support needs to continue to be transparent in order to make it more difficult for Beijing to claim such efforts are covert and should only support organizations whose members do not advocate for political violence.

Finally, American foundations and universities might plan to support political refugees by taking them in as students and lecturers, much as they did in the wake of the 1989 student protest movement.

Ultimately, it is probable that no matter what the United States does that the Communist Party will decide to further clamp down on civil society in Hong Kong. As space in Hong Kong becomes more restrictive, the U.S. government can look towards Taiwan as a site for investment

in civil society. Taiwan can serve as a valuable demonstration that a robust democracy and civil society is compatible with Chinese values.

Case study: Technical assistance for legal reform in China

NGOs and other private organizations may have broader, more encompassing principles than the U.S. government, which is often focused narrowly on the national interest. NGOs can also sometimes operate in China in ways that the United States government cannot because NGOs are generally less politically sensitive.

For example, it benefits Chinese citizens when American NGOs and universities lend their expertise to further develop the country's legal system. This expertise often helps vulnerable populations in China and is morally important. For example, American universities have developed programs that provide technical assistance as Chinese lawmakers and lawyers develop Chinese laws around LGBTQ+ rights, gender equality, and domestic violence.

Case study: American colleges in China

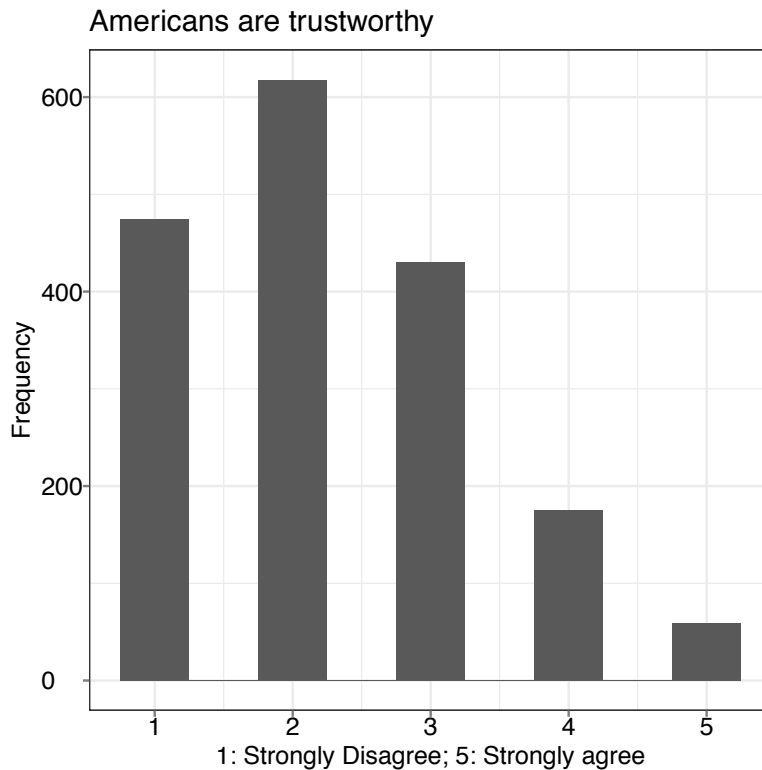
Universities with joint venture programs in mainland China should consider clear redlines on continuing to operate their satellite campuses. Unfortunately, taking a stand on academic freedom entails serious costs and diffuse benefits. Universities face the possibility of shuttered offices or campuses, lost revenue, and lost livelihoods for local staff. The U.S. government can help universities stand up for core values by offering support and funding for organizations that pay a financial cost for closing Chinese campuses if freedom of speech is curtailed.

Priority 3: Peace and International Exchanges

A third priority area for cooperation between American and Chinese civil society is programming that promotes peace and international cooperation. The deteriorating relationship

between the United States and China is happening at the same time as a more general rift between the two publics: in a recent survey I conducted of a largely urban population in China, a majority of respondents disagreed with the notion that “Americans are trustworthy” (see Figure 2).¹⁶

Figure 2: Chinese Perceptions of American Trustworthiness



Americans are seen as untrustworthy by a sample of 1,835 respondents in China that skews young and urban.

Other survey research has shown a trend among both American and Chinese populations towards decreasing trust over 2019-2020. Diplomatic, academic, government-to-government, and military-to-military exchanges remain important for bridging the gap between elites in the two countries.

¹⁶ From Mattingly and Yao, “How Propaganda Manipulates Emotion to Fuel Nationalism.”

Case study: Reviving Fulbright and Peace Corps Programs, Supporting Private Exchanges

Education and exchange programs help to build American expertise and understanding of China, which is essential to meeting the challenge of China's rise. Yet over the last year the U.S. has shuttered both its China Fulbright and Peace Corps programs.

These programs are essential for American national security and peace, and should be revived. Fulbright and Peace Corps have both been essential for creating cadres of individuals with extensive knowledge and background in China. For example, a survey of Peace Corps China alumni found that a third went on to careers related to China in journalism, diplomacy, law, and academia.¹⁷ Similarly, the Fulbright program has provided many leading China experts.

At the same time, university and NGO-led exchanges have become more difficult and costly because of the foreign NGO law in China, and increasingly complex visa restrictions in both China and the United States. While the foreign NGO law is here to stay, the United States government can work with the Chinese government by reciprocally easing some visa restrictions.

Case study: Disaster Relief

Highly visible disaster relief is another important avenue for building trust, even when there are deep grievances. For example, in the initial stages of the coronavirus epidemic, direct aid from Japan to China led to an outpouring of gratitude on Chinese social media.

Does disaster aid systematically help increase trust in government institutions? To investigate this, my coauthor James Sundquist and I conducted a survey among Indians, whose views of China are by some measures the most negative in the world. We exposed them to real messages from Chinese diplomats which largely focused on disaster aid. We found that these

¹⁷ Rob Schmitz, "Peace Corps to End China Program," *National Public Radio*, Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2020/01/24/799358578/peace-corps-to-end-china-program>.

messages led to significant increases in trust of the Chinese government.¹⁸

What works for the Chinese government in India, and what works for Japan in China, will likely work for the United States. American government and civil society leaders can make visible disaster relief efforts a priority, leveraging connections to domestic Chinese organizations to help distribute aid.

Conclusion

The next few years will likely set the course for Sino-American relations for decades to come, especially as the government conducts a cross-agency policy review following a period of sharp deterioration in the U.S.-China relationship. It is possible to both be clear-eyed about the need to counter the tactics of the Communist Party abroad, which poses a serious threat to American interests, while at the same time continuing to support civil society in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

In the big picture, the United States cannot prevent China's rise. China's rise has already happened. Within China, its rise is fundamentally a story about the rising prosperity of a fifth of the world's population—a development that Americans should welcome.

Moreover, the United States cannot do anything meaningful to try to change China's political trajectory. The Chinese Communist Party and Chinese people will determine how the country's political system evolves.

However, the United States can work with China to protect the global commons and promote peace—while still standing up for core values like human rights and democracy.

¹⁸ Daniel Mattingly and James Sundquist, "China's Twitter Diplomacy and Its Limits," (2021) Working paper.

