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NGO2.0 and Social Media Praxis: Activist as Researcher

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This article tracks the emergence of a particular brand of ICT activism that promotes the use of social media as a means of helping Chinese NGOs break out of their communication bottleneck. The author starts by introducing NGO2.0, an activist project targeting China’s rural regions, using it as an entry point to examine the practice of “social media for social good” and shed light on the ecosystem of social media usage by Chinese NGOs. The author also deliberates on the explanatory value of the binary paradigm of “rural vs. urban,” looks into the methodological implications of undertaking “social media action research,” and articulates what it means to be engaged in the hybrid practice of “activist as scholar” in the specific context of Cultural Studies.

**Keywords:** social media; tech4good; Web 2.0; ICT in China; NGO2.0; Cultural Studies; social media action research; Participatory Action Research; activism 2.0

**Introduction**

Web 2.0 has revolutionized how people communicate and how content is created and distributed. The rise in the popularity of social media is particularly important to those living in authoritarian countries where state-controlled media pay little attention to lone activists, not to mention non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to serving, in systematic ways, the underprivileged (many of whom live in rural regions). This article tracks the emergence of a particular brand of information communication technology (ICT) activism that promotes the use of social media as a means of helping Chinese NGOs break out of their communication bottleneck.

NGOs in China have developed rapidly since 1995 across diverse fields. However, small, mid-sized, and emerging NGOs have encountered a bottleneck of growth for a number of reasons. First, nurturing non-governmental civic participation is hardly a priority for the Chinese government. Second, a large number of NGOs are semi-legal and highly constrained in acquiring resources and regularizing program activities. Third, they cannot compete with governmental-affiliated NGOs for media coverage. The lack of media exposure makes NGOs invisible to each other and to the general public. We do not get to hear their stories, learn about the causes they are promoting, and respond to their needs. Many NGOs toiled quietly until their thin workforce burned out. Social media arrived in China around 2009, providing NGOs an alternative means of communication to break this vicious cycle.

Tencent QQ, an instant messaging platform, has been popular among NGO users since 1999, but it was not until 2009 when Sina.com launched its Weibo or microblogging service that the interactive, open, and “writerly” Web began to flourish in China. Here I wish to make a distinction between the ICT experience of individual users and that of an organization.
While individuals are autonomous media users free to try anything new, organizations are risk averse and conservative in new media adoption. It is often the case that individual staffers in an organization are active microbloggers, but the NGO itself is mired in debates about whether to set up a microblog account for the organization. In fact, the primary ICT experiences of most NGOs are often confined to building traditional websites. The caveat: there is little traffic to those sites. To make the situation more challenging, Web 2.0 tools and services have proliferated quickly, making it even more demanding for NGO staffers to navigate the digital landscape, which has constituted another bottleneck of growth for Chinese NGOs.

Enter NGO2.0 (www.ngo20.org), a project I launched in 2009. Together with five Chinese partner institutions, I established the flagship program of a Web 2.0 workshop that provides digital and social media literacy training to grassroots NGOs in the western and central provinces of China. Guided by instructors, participants learn how to use social media to increase the transparency of their operations, engage in participatory thinking, and gain hands-on experiences while examining successful worldwide NGO2.0 cases. As of November 2014, we have completed ten workshops, trained 304 organizations, compiled an online toolbox (http://tools.ngo20.org), and built a Web 2.0 map (www.ngo20map.com) on which over 1,604 NGOs have registered their organizational and project data. Literacy training is only part of our program. In recent years, NGO2.0 has developed a larger mission—advocating a new brand of public interest sector that utilizes digital and mobile non-profit technologies to build a better society. Toward that goal, we collaborate with philanthropy actors from multiple sectors such as foundations, NGOs, corporations, universities, communities of software developers and interaction designers.

This latter vision—an open, multi-sector collaboration—is true to the spirit of network society and crucial to my attempt to map the social media ecosystem of Chinese NGOs, which this article is mainly about. Such an ecosystem was unthinkable five years ago. Non-profits are not natural adopters of digital trends. More importantly, promoting social media to NGOs entails joint investments by multiple sectors, and the condition for such cross-sector collaboration did not mature until 2012.

At the turn of the 2010s, forward-looking enthusiasts began asking whether NGOs have a role to play in China’s rush to a rosy ICT future. This was not just fortuitous futurism. The transition of the Chinese Communist Party to Xi Jinping’s regime led to new slogans, among them the familiar “Chinese dream” and a lesser known depoliticized discourse of zheng nengliang (“positive energy”—a call from old and new media for stories celebrating good deeds and glorifying the brighter side of society that incorporate fantasies about the elimination of all inequalities, the digital divide included. In the ascendance of this ideology of “positive energy,” I saw the consummation of a mutual consent, or a sturdy pact, made between the leaders and the led—be upbeat about the status quo. Stability trumps all other needs. As for ICTs, the politics is consistent: if one cannot rattle the government through a systemic overhaul of the status quo, one can at least trumpet the transformative possibility of digital technologies in bringing about social good piecemeal.

To minimize governmental scrutiny, I strategically positioned NGO2.0 as a technology project (rather than a media initiative), imbued with a utopian roadmap of redressing the digital divide, a discourse well accepted by the authorities. It was a journey filled with obstacles at the beginning. Yet four years later, “social media for social good” has become a popular concept embraced not only by the non-profit sector, but also by IT industries and
Collaborators flowed in from multiple sectors to propagate the benefits of social media in effecting social change. It all suggests a deeper shift in consciousness than a fleeting cultural fad.

This happens at a poignant moment when anything aspirational that can be brought to serve the discourse of “positive energy” is considered legitimate. In China’s precariously balanced political climate, actions aligned with the production of “social good” have potentials to reduce distrust and withstand censorship. The fact that NGO2.0 has navigated the terrain with relative impunity suggests that technologically-motivated social transformation is a “change” category tolerable to the authorities thus far.

Moreover, corporate interest and the state’s agenda of developing IT industries have undeniably played a significant role in alleviating political concerns over social media practices. Major Chinese Internet portals (e.g., Sina, Tencent, Sohu, and Baidu) have vested interest in promoting a new brand of philanthropy driven by social media. Under the sway of the popular slogan “micro-charity” (wei gongyi), compassionate citizens in first- and second-tier cities are called upon to perform good deeds. All of a sudden, protecting public interest and contributing to the common good via social media seem well “within the reach of everyone” (renren ke gongyi). Crowdfunding 2.0 generated several successful platforms, including Tencent’s Micro-Compassion Program and Sina’s Micro-Philanthropy platform.

It is within this ideological context that my subsequent inquiries into Chinese NGOs’ social media usage will be conducted. Given that NGO2.0 itself serves as a prime example of how ICT and social media can be leveraged to produce social good, this article starts with the introduction of NGO2.0, using it as an entry point to examine the ecosystem of social media usage by Chinese NGOs. I conclude with a concrete question—which I will call the mother of all questions—Is social action spurred by social media helping NGOs to become more capable of self-transformation, more creative, collaborative, and transparent?

Methodological Considerations

The study of ICT in China is a fairly young field. Jack Linchuan Qiu and Wei Bu have mapped the terrain while making a clarion call for research that highlights the ways disenfranchised groups use ICTs to facilitate social transformation (Qiu & Bu, 2013). Several scholars have paved the way for the evolution of this field, among them Guobin Yang who set a milestone in investigating citizen activism in cyberspace (Yang, 2009). Jack Linchuan Qiu’s seminal work on mobile phone usage by migrant workers and his proposition of “working-class ICTs” embody another landmark of ICT scholarship (Qiu, 2008). The excellent book recently published by Ding Wei—Mobile Homelands (Ding, 2014)—investigates the communication practices of taxicab drivers in Shenzhen. Both Qiu and Ding make inquiries into the mutual constitutiveness of new communication technologies and the making of new spatial and social relationships in China. Although their ethnographic scholarship is focused on specific urban communities (e.g., migrant workers and taxicab drivers) rather than on NGOs per se, their insights on visual participatory research and community communication are highly relevant to what I study here. Research on the relationship between media making and activism will continue to evolve. This essay joins those critical efforts, and I believe a predominant media trajectory will also enrich the literature on Chinese civic associations.

This article is the first of a series I am working on to map the terrain of “social media action research,” a term I coined to indicate the research opportunities opened up by the
convergence of social action and social media. Much work has been published on the impact of Web 2.0 on corporate strategies and social media users as consumers. However, little scholarship has focused on the ways with which Chinese grassroots NGOs are leveraging those free tools and platforms to produce social good. NGO2.0 possesses by far the most up-to-date datasets of social media usage and Internet communication patterns among Chinese NGOs. With those data in hand, we can take a structural look at the ecosystem in question.

Since I implemented NGO2.0, the method question has loomed large. How can I articulate my hybrid practice of “scholar as activist” in the context of Cultural Studies, my home discipline? Furthermore, some foundational discourses underlying Communication Studies and Cultural Studies are such that the definitions of “change making” are negotiated differently. I will address some of these questions through my reconstruction of what motivated me, a Cultural Studies critic, to launch NGO2.0.

The overarching theme of this special issue—ICTs in rural China—invites an immediate word of clarification. While there is increasing ICT diffusion, especially of mobile phones, among rural residents, institutions that are technologically empowered to serve the underprivileged are usually not “rural” ones per se. Their operations are most likely based in cities even though the services they provide benefit rural communities. Indeed, apart from infrastructural investments made by local governments, most human and technological resources travel to rather than emanate from the countryside. “ICTs in rural China” is thus a paradoxical proposition needing to be unpacked. To problematize the dichotomy between “rural” and “urban” is not simply a theoretical proposition made by a critic prone to deconstruct foundational categories. As I have learned through my experiences on the ground, the province is where the action is, and therefore, a productive unit of analysis. That is where the censors show their faces and where negotiations with them can take place at in-person meetings. Most importantly for NGO2.0, our mission of mobilizing local resources to help local NGOs often translates into mastering the skills of maneuvering provincial interests to stack up resources and make them available to provincially-based NGOs. Where the “rural” is located is thus the crux of the matter. Just as rural Qinghai has little to do with rural Xinjiang, the provincial is ultimately one of the most productive scales that are generative of meanings and actions, resources, and taboos.

NGO2.0: How Did It All Start?

There are multiple storylines with which NGO2.0 can be narrated. Apart from enhancing NGOs’ social media literacy, the project is designed to mobilize indigenous Chinese resources and build grassroots leadership by identifying and training media and tech-conscious NGO change makers. We are not the first to leverage ICTs as a means of empowering Chinese NGOs. Green Web, New Philanthropy Partners, Microsoft, and Google China have all sporadically held IT training workshops, serving Beijing-based NGOs and big foundations. But NGO2.0 pioneered the effort of targeting grassroots NGOs in China’s hinterland—organizations based in western and central provinces of which more than 30% are not registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs.

What is NGO2.0? Are we a project or an organization? We have recently transformed ourselves from an academic project of international origin to a non-profit organization formally registered in Shenzhen. We started off with five institutional partners—MIT’s New Media Action Lab, the Institute of Knowledge Management at the University of Science and Technology of China, NGOCN (China’s largest grassroots NGO portal), Friends of Nature
(an environmental NGO), the Institute for Civil Society at Sun Yat-Sen University, and last but not least, a corporate partner, Ogilvy & Mather Public Relations. To be honest, not all of them are active collaborators. The real work is done by twelve volunteers who live in different Chinese provinces, and in my case, abroad. I run NGO2.0 long-distance through social media platforms (e.g., QQ, WeChat, Skype, JoinMe, Tower, etc.). For five years, I have presided over weekly Skype meetings with my core team, which take place every Sunday, Beijing time from 8:30 PM to midnight. Program ideas are brainstormed, strategies discussed, and work assigned and completed during those meetings. Highly dependent on digital and social media, NGO2.0 has also grown several additional virtual volunteer teams including an interaction design team and three civic hackathon teams in Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Beijing, respectively.

What does NGO2.0 do for grassroots NGOs? During the first three years, we focused on communication capacity building for grassroots NGOs. Web 2.0 is known as poor men’s communication tools. With those tools in hand, NGOs stand a better chance of finding and collaborating with each other, branding themselves at little cost to attract volunteers and other resources. Theoretically, all NGOs are change agents. If they are familiar with social media, they can be better equipped to push creativity to the next level. Thus, NGO2.0 is not only a project about ICTs, but one built on the belief that social innovation, enabled by new media, can be triggered at the grassroots level. This phenomenon—the coming together of the NGO sector and social media—is a transnational phenomenon with the US leading the way, and China a decade behind.

**A Critique of Creative Commons via Cultural Studies Imperatives**

How did we come into existence? NGO2.0 has international roots that began in 2006 when I started a project on the “public domain” and discovered Creative Commons (henceforth CC), a global open-content movement built on a Web 2.0 legal protocol that promotes a set of free digital licenses. CC became popular all over the world. Once Internet users began to create, post, and freely distribute content digitally, new copyright questions popped up. How do we go about distributing our own work online while making personal decisions about how others can reuse and redistribute our work? CC provides an excellent solution.

CC was founded in 2001 and China joined in 2006. Working as a CC volunteer for two years, I later chaired the International Advisory Board of CC China Mainland and began envisioning a model that could benefit the underprivileged in China’s less developed regions. At CC-China’s launch ceremony in Beijing in March 2006, Lawrence Lessig, the mastermind behind CC, made the auspicious remark that “CC’s global user community exploded instantaneously with the addition of 1.3 billion Chinese users overnight.” Lessig’s upbeat sentiment notwithstanding, I felt a bit dubious not least because China’s several hundred million peasants were still not online. Unable to create digital content, they have no use for CC licenses.

As CC spread across the globe, I also wondered whether one concept could fit all. I continue to ask how we could feed the indigenous needs encountered in developing countries back to the license-centric approach of global CC. And how do we meet the enormous challenges of propagating CC in places where digital elites are a minority? My answer was later translated into my vision for NGO2.0. Around 2008, I started conceptualizing a project that puts less emphasis on CC licenses than on the spirit of Web 2.0 culture that gave life to open-content movements like CC. In my view, the blind spot of CC’s transnational model
resides in its assumption about universal digital literacy on the one hand, and its lack of attention to the needs of the underprivileged on the other hand.

NGO2.0 quickly gained a life of its own. Reflecting in hindsight, my critique of CC must have come from a trained intuition with which all serious Cultural Studies critics are equipped. More aware of the blind spots of CC than its founders—cyber law scholars—I am concerned with the question of center/periphery power relationship. Meanwhile, more than a critique of CC, NGO2.0 represents the return of my critical practice to the empirical and the experiential, and a radical response I made to the ongoing crisis of Cultural Studies as a discipline.

Many critics have deplored the ominous shift of Cultural Studies from its early substantive political, social, and material roots to meta-theories on the one hand, and a postmodern indulgence in textualism, on the other. Indeed, entire books such as Cultural Studies in Question (Ferguson & Golding, 1997) were devoted to the subject, laying bare and mourning the depoliticization of the original project of Cultural Studies—its retreat from “class” as a prism of social analysis and the growing indifference of critics to the fundamental questions of structured inequality. Years have passed since such a collective soul searching was undertaken. NGO2.0 is, in effect, my own answer to those critiques and a mirror of my desire to move back to the discipline’s intellectual “roots once firmly planted in the social and material” (Ibid., xxvi). I am once again drawn to the notion of praxis, be it Maxian or Deweyian. It preaches something that Stuart Hall would have endorsed: the missing link of academic practice is not to reflect society in discourses, but to change it in practice.

Internet Infrastructure in West China
When we started NGO2.0, there were many questions the team had to deal with: First, do our target areas—west and central China—provinces like Yunnan, Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu, Ningxia, Shaanxi, Chongqing, Guizhou, Guangxi, Henan, Shanxi, Shandong, and Anhui—have adequate digital infrastructure? Second, are Chinese grassroots NGOs ready to leapfrog into Web 2.0? Could we have overestimated the readiness in both regards?

To address the first question, I turn to China’s Village-to-Village (cuncun tong) Project. Launched in the early 2000s with the goal of alleviating the digital divide between rural and urban China, the governmental project had already enabled 98% of townships to gain Internet access by 2008. In 27 provinces, people living at the county level can now log in either at an office, information kiosk, or Internet café. By 2013, 87.9% of administrative villages had broadband access, which indicates that the lack of infrastructure is no longer the main issue for western and central provinces. The dividing line is knowledge about how to navigate the Web, a real obstacle for grassroots NGOs.

The Ecosystem of Social Media Use by Grassroots NGOs: A Bird’s Eye View
If infrastructure is no longer a worry, are our target NGOs ready for Web 2.0? Or may we begin asking if the next digital generation of NGOs has emerged in China? Statistics from NGO CN (China’s biggest grassroots NGO portal) and our own survey results are both positive. Traffic volume on NGO CN.org is telling: between June 2007 and June 2009, the website had 723,941 single absolute visitors. The total volume of visits in June 2009 alone amounted to an astounding 1,401,383. On average, a single visit lasted four minutes and the number of page view was 3.30. This is not bad for a civic media channel with little
entertainment value. We are certain that a critical mass of NGO relevant Internet users had already existed around 2009. The digital ecosystem of grassroots NGOs in China is taking shape.

But what about social media? Since 2009, NGO2.0’s effort of promoting social media has created a trickling down effect. To capture the usage data, we have conducted five online surveys, including three nationwide NGO Internet Usage Surveys (henceforth NGO-IU Survey), and two follow-up surveys to track the social media use of organizations trained by us (henceforth NGO-SM Survey). Approximately 50% of the 327 NGOs participating in the first NGO-IU Survey (2009) were based in western provinces, and 41% in eastern provinces. Unexpectedly, 79.68% of those sampled accessed the Web through broadband (see Figure 1). This trend continued to dominate our next survey. Of the 401 organizations surveyed, 72.57% used broadband (NGO-IU Survey 2, 2010). In comparison, mobile Internet access was surprisingly low probably because most grassroots NGO staffers could not afford smartphones or streaming fees. NGOs with regular Web access identified the following barriers: “insufficient skills of navigating online,” “Internet access fees,” and “no appropriate hardware device.” Despite those barriers, an overwhelming majority—86.24% of those in Survey 1 and 85.54% in Survey 2—considered the Internet extremely important to their operation.

![METHODS OF INTERNET ACCESS BY NGOS](image)

Figure 1. Methods of Internet Access by NGOs (NGO-IU Survey 1, 2009)

Approximately 93.52% of NGOs in Survey 2 had used QQ or MSN for internal and external communication. More than 50% of organizations in 2009 used either QQ, MSN, or Skype to conduct online meetings (NGO-IU Survey 1, 2009), which climbed to 63.59% in 2010 (NGO-IU Survey 2, 2010). In the latter study, 84.04% of NGOs not only produced organizational videos with software tools or smartphones, but they also uploaded them onto video-sharing websites like Youku and Tudou. In all, a variety of social media content was produced and published (see Figure 2). Noticeably, microblogging had not developed into a trend in 2010, when photo-sharing, blogs, and video platforms were the most popular. The least adopted was wiki, which stayed that way in the following years.
Chinese Wikipedia is unfriendly to grassroots NGOs for political reasons. Even NGO2.0 failed to gain a footing there. Even without that entry barrier, collaborative writing online is not an easy task for NGOs to sustain. Equally surprising was the high percentage of NGOs owning organization blogs—45.71% in 2009, which increased to 56.11% in 2010 but dropped to 53.58% in 2012, with Weibo usage surging to an overwhelming 68.94% (NGO-IU Survey 3, 2012).

Over 300 NGOs participated in the third NGO-IU survey, which revealed a fairly matured media ecosystem. First, 46% of NGOs surveyed factored “wireless service in the office” as a “means of Internet access.” Second, the Internet was now ranked as the favorite medium of communication, with “face-to-face meeting” trailing in as second, and “telephone” the third—when NGO staff communicate with volunteers and the communities they serve. This was no small change for grassroots who used to rely heavily on in-person meetings and telephone calls. These statistics may also indicate the expansion of their activities spatially.

The following chart (Figure 3) provides a panoramic view of the major digital platforms used by NGOs surveyed in 2012. The big four were QQ, Weibo, organization website, and blog, in that order, of which three were social media outlets. Also notable was the sliding importance of BBS, whose 58% usage in 2009 (NGO-IU Survey 1, 2009) had declined dramatically to 20.82%, losing NGO users to more nimble and interactive platforms (NGO-IU Survey 3, 2012).
The overall picture of NGOs’ media practice conjures up an interesting vista where spreadable content is actively produced and distributed across social media platforms. But in a country pervaded by censorship, does the politics of NGOs influence how they use ICTs? Will they attract government attention and get into trouble by disseminating sensitive content over social media? By enhancing their capability in using social media, is NGO2.0 putting our trainees at risk?

**Grassroots NGOs: The Logic of Semi-Autonomy and Nonresistant Activism**

The above questions presume the oppositional impetus of grassroots NGOs in China, a premise that needs to be demystified. The concept of NGO caught on in China via the World Conference on Women in 1995. Since then, Chinese grassroots NGOs have grown rapidly, but their total number fluctuates greatly. Some experts assumed there are 82,000 (China Development Brief, 2011). My estimate is that only 3–4,000 are institutionally stable. Although many grassroots NGOs are not registered, they fill in the big service gaps neither the government nor the market can mitigate. In the wake of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake during which NGOs contributed tremendously to post-disaster relief efforts, the government’s perception of those semi-autonomous organizations softened. In recent years, the reform of the NGO registration system has paved the way for relaxing control. As a result, more grassroots in progressive provinces like Guangdong have gained legal status.

I use the term ‘semi-autonomous’ to characterize Chinese grassroots NGOs because all of them, registered or not, maintain a decent and sometimes cordial relationship with the state. Former Ford Foundation Beijing chief Anthony Saich teases out this paradox most succinctly: Chinese NGOs’ voluntary subordination to the existing state structure should be viewed not as a measure of expediency but a strategic move to enhance their ability to “manipulate the official and semi-official institutions for their own advantage,” which means making more impact on society and gaining a louder voice in policy-making discussions than if they were to remain completely autonomous (Saich, 2000, p. 139). Herein lies the fundamental difference between Western NGOs and their Chinese counterparts. There is no shortage of
American, British, and Australian advocates who believe that by transplanting to China the universal standard of operation, often in the name of “NGO capacity training,” they could professionalize Chinese NGOs, normalize the sector, and build a civil society that would eventually challenge the autocratic regime. The zest for such cross-pollination is missionary and has borne fruits here and there. But the primary political agenda remains unrealizable. Western NGOs act like edgy pressure groups whose raison d’être is to challenge and critique government policies. In contrast, with the exception of a small handful of rights advocacy non-profits, the majority of Chinese NGOs serve as informal social service or welfare relief organizations that are compelled to work within the system.

There is already a scholarly consensus that characterizes the Chinese NGO-state relationship as nonconflictual (Howell, 1994; Perry, 1994; Shue, 1994). Whereas such scholarship calls into question the application of the American paradigm of civil society to the Chinese case, there is something implicitly and intrinsically condemning about this paradox—the potential incorporation of NGOs into the state agenda. Apologies, or lengthy explanations at least, have to be made for and by “social service” oriented Chinese NGOs whose work has little to do with the notion of “social change” valorized in Western epistemology. I emphasize that the Chinese practice of nonresistant activism should not be seen as ideologically rooted, but strategically driven. Paradoxically, although Chinese NGOs are heavily dependent on the state, they enjoy “a remarkable degree of de facto autonomy” (Lu, 2009, p. 9). Sometimes, the closer they are to the government, the less suspicion they arouse, and the more autonomy they gain.

Regardless of their legal status, NGOs surviving in China have to learn how to navigate within the state apparatus. More precisely, they should be conceptualized as “semi-official” and “semi-popular” entities (Wang et al., 1993). I have written elsewhere about the pitfall of treating all organized spaces in contemporary China as devoid of transformative potentials (Wang, 2005). This is not just a theoretical issue. The Chinese have a saying, “The most invisible place is the spot right underneath the light,” meaning no place is safer than the place of danger. In other words, under party-state surveillance, it is easier to carve out “breathing spaces” within the planned space than create them outside it (Ibid., p. 28).

This suggests that those habitually clinging onto dichotomous paradigms will have difficulties grasping how Chinese NGOs navigate in the seamless web of political control. Do they ever criticize the government openly? Of course they do, posing themselves as contentious, anonymous individuals rather than as members of NGOs. That said, NGOs in China tend not to use social media to stir up revolution or ignite public controversies, although in recent years we have witnessed more NGOs identifying “policy advocacy” as an arena of their work.8 What then are they using interactive media for? Building social networks to mobilize resources to bring relief to the underprivileged in rural and impoverished communities. How to improve an organization’s communication capability is therefore a major concern. The mobile apps and other ICT tools in which Chinese NGOs showed interest would naturally gear more toward service provision than lobbying.

This reality, which many consider crippling to the operation of Chinese NGOs, gives rise to a potential point of contention—is “social service” not as valuable as “social change”? I mentioned earlier that the meaning of “change-making” could be interpreted differently. Cultural Studies scholars are acutely aware of the traps of subscribing to dichotomous analytical frames. Quoting myself, “domination is not total, resistance is never complete” (Wang, 2001, p. 99). I cannot emphasize strongly enough the importance of delivering
ourselves from “the conceptual deadlock of power versus subjugation versus resistance” (Ibid.), especially when it comes to our understanding of mainland Chinese society. Chinese grassroots NGOs understand this anti-binary thinking intuitively because doing consciousness-raising and triggering small change, which often means nothing more than bringing relief to the disadvantaged in the communities they serve, is what they can do and what they do best. Using social media to engage in oppositional politics is not on their agenda. I wonder if this is something that scholars in communication studies whose disciplinary premise is built on freedom of expression and oppositional activism would find problematic. Is social service leading to social change? The answer ultimately rests on whether reform or revolution is deemed the most sustainable motor of social transformation in China.

NGO2.0 in a Snapshot: Addressing NGOs’ Communication and Technology Needs

Sorting through the issues above cleared the way for our understanding of what Chinese NGOs can do and what NGO2.0 is capable of achieving. We now turn to the programmatic design of NGO2.0 (see Figure 4) and the needs of grassroots NGOs.

![NGO2.0 Project Infrastructure](image)

Figure 4. NGO2.0 Project Infrastructure: Addressing NGOs’ Communication Needs, Resource Needs, and Technology Needs

First, a discussion of the basic communication needs of Chinese NGOs is in quick order. I will showcase two grassroots organizations—one rural and another based in a third-tier city—that attended our Web 2.0 training workshop in 2009. Rescue Minqin in Gansu Province, an environmental NGO located in a county undergoing drastic desertification, has a traditional website (http://www.minqin.cn/) that attracts few visitors, a dilemma typical of small and mid-sized NGOs. The faster such small websites mushroomed, the more insulated they grew from each other, fragmenting the online NGO scene in China. Rescue Minqin had
to rethink their communication strategies so that they could become more interactive. Hui Ling, a Lanzhou-based NGO helping children with learning disabilities to cope with discrimination, faced a very different problem. They did not have a website due to insufficient resources and were thus unable to reach out to a broader audience beyond the small city of Lanzhou. NGO2.0 addresses those needs with a twofold task: *training NGOs that already have websites to start using social media for interactive communication and convincing those without websites to bypass the expensive 1.0 architecture to leapfrog into social media practices.*

Through Web 2.0 workshops, we instruct NGOs in how to develop social media strategies and build their social network across major platforms. Held twice a year, these workshops train NGOs spread across six issue areas (i.e., environment, health, women & children rights protection, community development, rural education, and support type NGOs). We bring together representatives from approximately 35 organizations per workshop for a three-day immersive training of 2.0 concepts and tools. A critical mass of our trainees are congregated in the vicinities of Kunming, Xi’an, Chengdu, Nanning, Hefei, Changsha, Lanzhou, Yinchuan, and Guiyang. We anticipated, but were still pleasantly surprised by, the snowball effect triggered by our trainees who, after attending the workshops, voluntarily held local workshops training smaller grassroots in their hometowns. Our teachings have thus trickled down from province to province and from mid-sized to tiny organizations.

**The ‘C’ in ICTs: Communication 2.0**

How are Web 2.0 tools changing the ways NGOs mobilize support, empower themselves and the communities they serve? The best of our trainee NGOs have developed skills in using ICTs to fulfill specific missions. Rurally based Rescue Minqin, for example, resorts to Weibo and WeChat to build an ecologically conscious online community, to which they make open calls for volunteers to travel to Minqin and plant trees in the desert bordering the county. Their media-savvy not only brought national spotlight and resources to Minqin, but also helped slow down the exodus of local youngsters fleeing to cities in search of a better livelihood. Just as a greener Minqin is dependent upon the ability of the NGO (and its local government) to impress upon the general public the urgency of “saving the next Lop Nur,” so can we argue that ICTs for “communication” is a prerequisite for ICTs for “development.” The ‘C’ in ICTs can never be overestimated.

Let us examine another example, Greening Han River, a Hubei-based grassroots NGO we trained in 2011. Inspired by our training, the organization live-broadcast the entire journey of a water testing activity in the polluted Han River using microblogs. Members of NGO2.0 followed the water testers on Google Buzz and shared the inspection results in real time. The daylong connectedness was remarkable, given we all lived in different parts of China! The benefits of this experiment were numerous: it helped Greening Han River gain more transparency about this annual event. Donors and the NGO’s board members could follow the team and participate as active observers in real time. Most interestingly, they attracted strangers to virtually follow the water-testing team and spontaneously report polluted spots. A crowdsourced practice like this raises consciousness and mobilizes local residents to care about their own river and not litter.

The two examples above led me to postulate that NGOs could play a role as *facilitators of behavioral change*. In ICT4D projects, technology and community-building are equally indispensable. That is, a sustainable vision for any tech-driven project must not stop at
technological innovations. Consciousness-raising and partnership building should go in tandem to achieve sustainable collaboration among multiple stakeholders (e.g., donors, NGOs, governments, local communities, technologists, and the private sector). NGOs should undoubtedly be enlisted to do what they do best: advocating their cause and raising local consciousness (e.g., saving water and planting suosuo trees in Minqin’s case, and keeping their river clean in the Han River example). A better and more just society demands a change of old attitudes, something technology alone cannot achieve. Relegating technology matters to other players such as the government and the private sector, NGOs can better concentrate on knowledge transfer and community building—that is, making their contribution through the ‘C’ in ICTs by resorting to social media as a means for sustainable and scalable communication. Indeed, returning to our earlier debate on ‘social service’ versus ‘social change,’ I argue that changing consciousness and behavior constitutes the first step toward transformation of any kind.

The ‘T’ in ICTs: Designing Non-Profit Technology

As mentioned earlier, NGO2.0 is designed to mobilize indigenous Chinese resources and build grassroots NGO leadership by identifying and training media and tech-conscious NGO change makers. Although our strength over the first few years lay in meeting the communication demands of NGOs, as early as 2009 we aspired to build technology cooperatives. As we matured, building local technology expertise became a priority because two missing pieces had fallen into place: a technology-ready non-profit sector, and an emerging critical mass of socially-concerned techies in first-tier cities that was absent earlier. This new phase of programming enabled NGO2.0 to shift gear to pursue a double-tracked approach of strengthening the ‘C’ (communication) and ‘T’ (technology) in ICTs simultaneously.

In 2011, Greening Han River used Google Buzz, Follow5, and Twitter to live-broadcast its water-testing journey, which was an inspirational experiment. Since then, NGO2.0 has explored ways of motivating more NGOs to create customized social media solutions to the problems they face. Since most NGOs are incapable of conceptualizing or making tools by themselves, they need help from programmers and interaction designers. By 2013, socially concerned techies from IT companies had formed communities in first-tier cities. Mobilizing them is a matter of tapping into the venues they frequent and building activities appealing directly to their faith in the transformative capability of technology to make a more just society.

In 2014, with the help of TechSoup Global, a US-based technology non-profit, NGO2.0 kicked off a series of civic hackathons or hackfests, where techies and NGOs congregate and design non-profit technology together. Hackathons are originally events where programmers, interface designers, and product managers get together to create software prototypes in a day or two. Traditional hackathons usually take place in areas where tech companies are thickly populated, but they can easily be repurposed if we throw NGOs into the mix.

What does a typical civic hackathon look like? In each chosen city, we create a local cluster made up of three stakeholder groups—local NGOs, local techies communities, and a local university with strong software and interaction design programs. The three groups come together for regular hackathons and tech salons, through which local resources are mobilized to solve local problems, a model we successfully implemented in Guangzhou, which we replicated in Beijing and Shanghai. The overall goal is to spread the concept and practice of
collaborative design that integrates the quadruple expertise of programmers, NGOs, interaction designers, and ideally, product managers.

**Civic Hackathons in Action**

Civic hackathons need to overcome many obstacles. Besides technological determinism, techies are prone to mistake cool technology for the best technology. On the NGO side, articulating technology needs is not their forte. Easily intimidated by technology, many of them see ICTs as nothing more than website construction or some grand digital systems not deliverable through hackathons.

How does a civic hackathon work on the ground? I attended one in July 2013.11 We first held a preparatory session where eight NGOs were invited to present user stories that became the basis for defining the functions of a software that techies would help design. A user story captures the “who,” “what,” and “why” of an NGO’s needs. Programmers and designers are then called upon to provide suggestions to sharpen the user stories. Out of the eight organizations, we picked six to attend the hackathon. Each of the six teams included at least one techie, one interaction designer, the NGO who proposed the user story, and other ideas people like myself. The team I joined was tasked with designing a crowdsourced audio book app for the blind, an idea proposed by an NGO serving that particular community.

We first discussed our project goal. Although plenty of similar products exist in the market, most e-readers have a limited inventory of books. Furthermore, they are read by robots, the syntax is broken up, the voice cold, with no interaction between the reciter and the listener. The NGO wants to break down the boundary between the blind and the seeing people, the reciter and the listener, so that the blind will not feel different and insulated from the ‘normal’ people. If implemented, this dream app should enable the blind to read for the seeing people and for themselves. This is a typical example of service-oriented non-profit technologies that are in great demand.

Another hackathon team was organized around an NGO that serves migrant workers in Beijing. One of the services they provide is collecting and selling second-hand clothes at cheap prices to workers. They need a mobile app that would allow them to motivate donors, collect clothes easily, record inventories, and mobilize crowdsourced donation stations throughout the city. The user story was debated and refined in the hackathon where techies provided a preliminary solution and then passed it on to professors and students in a co-design course taught at the School of Software of Sun Yat-Sen University. The course creates prototypes with an estimated delivery time of half a year or longer for each. Although both apps originated in city-based NGOs, the second case—the clothes-donation app—can easily be repurposed and turned into donation tools for NGOs serving rural populations that need other resources such as drinking cups, mosquito nets, and bookpacks.

**Technology Determinism Revisited**

In spite of what I presented above, only a minority of China’s grassroots NGOs can take full advantage of ICTs. Most of them serve small communities and their services remain local whether or not they have gone digital. Many NGOs in our workshops are locale-bound, facing very locally defined problems. Sometimes, young NGO workers had moved elsewhere for better livelihoods. Yet a strong commitment to their rural hometown summoned them back as in the case of Ma Junhe who left a comfortable life in Kunming for his beloved desert town Minqin. Rescue Minqin has a dominant clientele surrounding Minqin County
and Lanzhou City in Gansu Province; Guangxi-based Baise Learning Center for Poor Students (http://www.bszhx.com/) serves villagers of the Zhuang minority; Daba Mountain Environmental and Poverty Research Association (http://www.83zpss.com/) helps impoverished townships and villages at the Daba mountainous areas in Sichuan. All three rural NGOs have built Web 1.0 websites, which is a feat in itself. But simply going digital does not guarantee sustained visibility. Their main challenge lies in learning how to market their conviction and services to a national audience and beyond, communicating with the public interactively. But as social media went mainstream and our attention span shortened, NGOs have had to make content not just spreadable but also competitively creative, a task technology trainings alone cannot accomplish. I should also note that NGO2.0’s three original NGO partner organizations—Kunming-based NGOCN, Beijing-based Friends of Nature, and Guangzhou-based Institute of Civil Society (ICS)—represent a small minority of NGOs that serve cross-provincial communities. To the dismay of digital evangelists, ICS exerts national influence grown purely from holding regular, offline NGO capacity-building workshops.

For NGOs currently bound to traditional websites, the constraints of Web 1.0—an essentially top-down broadcaster that cannot generate bottom-up and instantaneous dialogue—constitutes but one communication bottleneck. I often wonder if the acquisition of social media knowledge and skills can help NGOs attract not only eyeballs but also long-term resources as Ma Junhe did for Rescue Minqin. I also ponder other questions beyond NGO operations. Will the translocal networked communication we promote affect our target NGOs’ identity formation? Is the theoretical emphasis on translocality, transnationalism, and globalization really relevant? I am acutely aware of these questions as we move forward. The bottom line, I argue, should not be about the validation of academic theories or the celebration of social media for its own sake, but whether these new concepts and tools can make a difference—helping NGOs improve their transparency, sustain growth, and trigger real change on the ground.

Now the inevitable scalar question: to what extent is the concept of the local and the provincial still crucial to the operation of NGOs who are now entering the digital era and functioning in the Web 2.0 environment that is supposedly geography blind? To do justice to that question, I suggest that we undo the conventional association of the “local” and the “provincial” with offline reality alone. We also need to readjust our perception that “offline” is somehow less cool and less progressive than “online” experiences. To do that kind of unbundling necessarily entails another radical conceptualization, i.e., untying the inextricable link of the “global reach” with “bigger” and somehow more “advanced” humanity. What NGO2.0 has taught me is that as far as humanity is concerned, the scale of “big” and “small” does not apply. Local, individual lives are worth as much as, if not more than, the abstract formulation of the “global village.” Each act of compassion counts. How can we care about the “globe” if we have little interest in serving our local community?

**Researcher or Activist?**
Those inquiries signaled just the beginning of my methodological reflection. Equally pertinent is this question: What is the proper relationship between research and practice? How do I treat NGO2.0 as something accountable in research terms? To be frank, no matter how much I think that the project naturally falls within the domain of participatory action research (PAR), I remain uncomfortable with the positivist tradition ingrained even in this
progressive brand of scholarship. Although PAR theorizes “research objects” as full decision-making subjects whose relationship with the scholar is nonhierarchical (Heron, 1996; Reason & Bradbury, 2001), writing about action as lived experience is in itself an “othering” practice, as Olav Eikeland (2006) puts it.

Regarding the basic tenets of PAR, Paul Atkinson and Martyn Hammersley proposed a fourfold typology: complete observer, observer as participant, participant as observer, and complete participant (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2012). I belong to the fourth category. Regrettably, the holistic ontology of complete participation is undermined as soon as the reckoning of scholarship emerges to dictate the agenda of writing. Can I write as an activist in a scholarly journal? Do I have to choose in whose voice—an activist or a scholar—I am writing? The insider/outsider question is a mind game that can turn a living project into a mere representation, crystallized and flattened out.

Although there is a prolific corpus of PAR handbooks, none seem to satisfactorily help resolve those questions. I turn to some basics. For instance, Rebecca Hagey saw in PAR a focus on serving the “oppressed groups whose issues include inaccessibility, colonization, marginalization, exploitation, ... etc.” (Hagey, 1997, p. 1). All PAR scholars would agree that the “research problem” originates within the community, and that the relationship between researcher and community is characterized by a dialogue between intellectuals and the people they wish to serve (Reason, 1994). All these theoretical propositions come very close to the practice of NGO2.0.

That said, I remain wary of a complete subscription to PAR because it can arrest motion and movement, reduce what is amorphous and experimental into planned action, and turn experience into a didactic handbook on empowerment. Eventually, I coined the term “social media action research” in the spirit of Cultural Studies, using the term to evoke an activist’s Geminian imagination of a born-again researcher. To Cultural Studies I turn in search of an agenda that takes “the whole system of knowledge itself and, in Benjamin’s sense, attempt[s] to put it at the service of some other project” (Hall, 1990, p. 18, italics mine). That “some other project” is NGO2.0. More concretely speaking, in my vision, social media action research approximates a scholarly affordance that captures the authenticity of the practice of NGOs and my own modus operandi as an activist-scholar. The possibility of “knowing in practice” can be as tangible as activism itself.

On the other hand, activism, like knowledge production at large, involves a reflexive process. Critical engagements make me a better advocate for NGOs and get me better prepared for examining the strengths and blind spots of our venture. This includes an honest assessment of the relationship I have established with the NGO community and how much control we give community members to mold the future of NGO2.0. Equally important, what benefits can research projects bring to nongovernmment actors? In what ways does such research help strengthen digital activism? I am also intrigued by a question relevant to those living under authoritarian regimes: how are grassroots institutions regulated by policy discourse and how can these discourses be counter-managed by those subject to hegemony, namely, NGOs themselves? These are staple questions that both Cultural Studies critics and PAR researchers should ask. Could a thoughtful blend of PAR and Cultural Studies, being made self-conscious of their own disciplinary vulnerabilities, serve as an antidote for a full-length academic treatment of NGO2.0?

The Mother of All Questions
We have now arrived at an opportune moment to contemplate the mother of all questions—Is social action spurred by social media helping NGOs and other change agents to become more capable of self-transformation, and thus, more transparent, innovative, and collaborative? This ambitious question should take us years to fully address. The following tables and charts provide only a glimpse of our attempt to tackle that question now. Each chart speaks to a major criterion—transparency, collaboration, and innovation— with which we evaluate the impact of our social media workshops on trainee organizations.

**Transparency Index.** One hundred NGOs joined the 2013 social media follow-up survey (NGO-SM Survey 2, 2013), which we sent to 200 trainee organizations, with a 50% response rate. We established three evaluative categories—transparency, collaboration, and innovation—each corresponding to what is raised in the “mother question”—to assess the impact of social media on NGO work. We then define performance indicators for each category. Table 1 is the transparency model. On the left are all the tools we have taught that can help NGOs enhance transparency. An NGO’s transparency score is decided by two factors: (i) whether the organization has used those designated tools; and (ii) the number of transparency tools each organization has used since the training.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transparency Index</th>
<th>Impacting Factor</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have set up an organizational Weibo Account</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have built an Official Blog or Official Website</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have used e-newsletter subscription services (such as QQ newsletter open subscription)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have uploaded to a video-sharing website videos made by your organization</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have used wikis (e.g., Baidu Wiki or Wikipedia) to publicize information about your organization</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have shared pictures of organization’s activities on photo-sharing platforms (e.g., Weibo, QQ Space, FlowerPetals, NetEase Album, etc.)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have updated organization’s project information on NGO2.0 philanthropy map</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 5 illustrates how well participating NGOs scored in the survey results. Among the 100 respondents, five used all seven transparency tools, 15 NGOs used six tools, 21 NGOs used at least five, and 25 used four. Overall, 66 NGOs used four or more tools to publish organizational content, and achieved what we considered satisfactory transparency. Only one NGO used none of the tools and flunked the test.

**Collaboration Index.** We also set up a model for collaboration performance. Table 2 shows all the tools we taught that are relevant to enhancing the collaborative potentials of an organization.

Table 2. NGO Collaboration Indicator (NGO-SM Survey 2, 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collaboration Index</th>
<th>Impacting Factor</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have used multi-party online meeting/chatting tools (e.g., YY or Skype)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used desktop sharing tools</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used cloud note-taking tool (e.g., Evernote or Onenote, and Youdao Cloud Note)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used cloud storage (e.g., Sina Vdisk, Gold Mountain WPS Quick Disk)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used collaborative editing tools (e.g., Baihui, GoogleDocs, etc.)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have looked up CSR projects and information on NGO2.0 philanthropy map</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Based on this set of criteria and relying on the simple indicator of whether each organization has used each designated tool, we derived the following statistics:

Figure 6. Collaboration Scores

Figure 6 indicates that only 37 organizations used two or more collaboration tools, which we set as the bar for passing. This indicates that using online tools for collaboration is a relatively weak area of competency for our NGOs, but it is still encouraging that 38 organizations have used at least one collaborative tool.

Innovation Capability Index. How to measure the potentials of NGOs for technological innovation? The 14 tools and methods listed in Table 3 indicate an NGO’s interest in and the degree of their acceptance of tech-enabled solutions. By “innovation capability,” we mean an NGO’s ability to adopt cutting-edge tools to complete tasks such as identifying partners, communicating with them, and finding opportunities for new philanthropy practices. Tool adoption and digital action only represent one small step toward the creative use of social media and ICTs. But these criteria provide us with a useful starting point to delve deeper into the innovation inquiry.

Table 3. NGO Innovation Indicator (NGO-SM Survey 2, 2013)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Innovation Capability Index</th>
<th>Impacting Factor</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have used keyword search services (such as Google News Alert)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have used Web analytics tools (e.g., Baidu Analysis, Google Analytics, etc.)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have used WeChat</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have used online survey tools (such as Wendaos, Survey Monkey, etc.)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have used desktop sharing tools (such as JoinMe, Team Viewer, etc.)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have used cloud note-taking tools</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have used cloud storage services (Baidu, Gold Mountain, etc.)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have used collaborative editing tools (e.g., Baihui, GoogleDocs, etc.)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used visual discovery and visual curating tools (e.g., Petals, Pinterest, etc.)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have used Weibo analytics (Zhiwei Analytics, etc.)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have established social media communication strategies for your organization</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have hands-on experience of making logos for organization or activities</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have searched for corporate social responsibility projects on NGO2.0 map</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have used Douban.com and Renren.com to plan and hold off-line activities</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**INNOVATION SCORES**

![Diagram showing the number of NGOs with different numbers of innovation tool categories used.](image)
As shown in Figure 7, only two organizations flunked the test. Twenty-nine NGOs surveyed used at least two innovation tools. The strongest performance came from 22 organizations that used five or more tools.

So, is action spurred by social media helping NGOs and other change agents become more capable of self-transformation and more transparent, creative, and collaborative? Are they more transparent now? Absolutely yes, transparency involves a concentrated effort on the part of an NGO to transform itself from its previously self-enclosed and haphazard presence to a trustworthy entity highly conscious of public scrutiny. Those findings are impressive, given the participating NGOs’ ability to understand what “openness” means and their attempt to professionalize despite scarce resources. Looking at the lists of the difficult tools we taught them, I sometimes wonder if they do better in ICTs than most people like ourselves.

Are they becoming “creative”? Undoubtedly, whether they achieved it through digital means or not. Looking at the data sets, I feel confident that more exemplary cases like Greening Han River will emerge as we continue our educational mission. As I write, NGO2.0 is experimenting with new ways of turning our students from passive learners of new technology into actors collaborating with techies to co-design non-profit technology.

Next, the collaboration data deliver a lesson that goes beyond ICTs: It is not easy to ascertain to what degree new media tools stimulated grassroots collaboration and helped grow translocal causes. After all, revolutionizing organizational thinking and changing communication patterns may not be the key reasons why most NGOs joined our workshops and collectively produced more than 25,000 pages of conversation.

NGO2.0’s QQ instant messaging forum during the first two years of the founding of the project. It has been a delight to visit our QQ group where ICT-related instructions took place (yes, we teachers are available for chats) along with hearty discussions of NGO-related issues. Above all, this is a cross-issue NGO community self-conscious of its vanguard position in creating a new NGO culture in China. The spirit of sharing, which is central to the culture of Web 2.0, is already boosting the morale of resource-deprived NGO workers. The bonding of likeminded idealists is an achievement as precious as improved ICT and social media proficiency.

Conclusions
Finally, we need to remind ourselves that rural China is never a homogenous entity, much less China itself. But if we have to name a scale pivotal to how political, linguistic, community cultures and practices are organized in China, no doubt the “province” stands out. The provincial unit of analysis is not just a reminder that “rural vs. urban” is a dichotomy whose explanatory value is limited, but it is a conceptual tool compelling us to refocus ourselves on “culture as lived”—service delivery, struggles for resources, and day-to-day community formations both online and offline. Chinese NGOs are primarily divided by provincial boundaries. One can indeed argue that the key to the sustainable development of NGOs lies in the creative consolidation of resources spanning across provincial government, provincial media, provincial universities, and provincial business sectors. Indeed, we are witnessing the emergence of provincial support-type NGOs that utilize the Internet to establish cross-issue, provincially-based digital platforms. Perceivably under their guidance, online provincial NGO networks whose reach penetrates into the backwaters of small
villages are being formed one after another. This model of intra-province collaboration will help us nurture provincial ICT clusters and in the long run, it will help NGO2.0 fulfill the goal of leveraging provincial resources to sustain the growth of provincially-based NGOs. It is here where the online and offline converge and real changes can be measured, and where humans and technology meet, neither being ultimately independent of the other.

Acknowledgement
I thank Elisa Oreglia and Jack Qiu for their insightful feedback on the early draft of this paper.

Notes
1. As of July 2014, 895 grassroots NGOs among 1,492 that appeared on the NGO2.0 philanthropy map did not own Weibo accounts.
2. A scandal—known as the Guo Meimei Incident—involving China’s Red Cross broke out in 2011. Known as the atomic bomb of the Chinese non-profit sector, the incident blew away the last shred of the public’s trust in the state-monopolized philanthropic structure. Multi-sectoral collaboration began to take shape in renewing the philanthropy sector.
3. The Chinese government backed up the IT sector’s dabbling in social media to promote a new brand of philanthropy that would involve the participation of average netizens. In 2011 and 2012, Beijing hosted the summit of “Global Social Media and Social Good,” which involved a host of international and domestic Chinese luminaries. For details, see http://news.56.com/sp/zt2012 and http://gongyi.qq.com/a/20111203/000010.htm.
4. Tencent.com launched a crowdfunding platform in October 2011 to enable NGOs and volunteer communities to raise public funds. Sina.com established its Micro-Charity Platform soon after.
5. The first non-profit technology conference in the USA was held in 2002. Beth Kanter, one of the most passionate American advocates of non-profit technology started working in the field in 1992.
7. The statistics were provided by the Chief Technology Officer of NGOCN in 2009.
8. Please visit www.ngo20map.com, click on “NGO Issue Areas,” and choose the category of “policy advocacy” to find the self-identified policy-advocacy NGOs.
9. Minqin County is known to be the next Lop Nur, which was formerly a salt lake, now largely dried-up, located in the southeastern portion of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region.
10. First-tier cities refer to Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen.
Notes on contributor

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