

# Before the NGO: Chinese Charities in Historical Perspective

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**Abstract:** *Two decades ago, only a handful of NGOs operated legally in China. Today the sector is thriving. Even with the threat of new restrictions under the Xi Jinping government, private social initiative appears poised for even greater expansion in the future. To fully appreciate the significance of these recent developments, this essay presents a wider view of China's long history of civic organisation, comparing the contemporary resurgence of NGOs to the historical development of private charities in the Qing and Republican periods. It finds similarities in the motivations of organisers and donors, as well as in the relationship between civic organisations and the state, but sees other developments, such as the capitalisation of the NGO sector and its ability to mobilise public opinion, as substantively new.*

**Keywords:** *China, charities, civil society, disaster relief, Qing, Republican China, Red Cross, NGO, shantang*

Since the mid-1990s, the Non-Government Organisation (NGO) sector in China has experienced explosive growth. Scholars and observers have approached this phenomenon from a number of overlapping perspectives: examining the legality of the NGO sector, its role in public advocacy, its financial and political independence, and its changing connection to a wide spectrum of domestic and foreign actors. More recent events, such as the expulsion and detention of civil rights activists, and draft issuance of newly restrictive NGO regulation laws, suggest that significant changes may lie on the horizon.

This article will examine the development of the NGO sector by focusing on the historical development of charities. Although only one part of the full spectrum of social welfare and advocacy groups, charities are among the most emblematic civic organisations, and in many ways representative of the trajectory of the NGO sector as a whole. Having lain dormant for decades, Chinese charities began to revive in the 1980s, and

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grew steadily throughout the 1990s. By the early 2000s, official policy towards charities had grown from tolerant to guardedly supportive, prompting even greater development and institutionalisation, both of foreign philanthropic organisations working in China and especially of home-grown Chinese charities. This promising trajectory was given its greatest boost in the aftermath of the 2008 Wenchuan 汶川 earthquake, which opened the door to rescue and reconstruction aid from foreign entities such as the Taiwan Tzu-chi 慈济 Foundation, and prompted a massive wave of Chinese giving that fed the development and visibility of Chinese charities. Although the newly proposed restrictions are not directed against charities as such, the close ties between charity and social advocacy suggest that few groups will avoid feeling their impact.

Yet to fully understand these recent developments, we must look back much further. China of course has its own long history of private charitable endeavour. The cultural ideals of charity run deep in each of the three main religious traditions, particularly the Confucian model of *ren* 仁 (benevolence), and the deeply held sense that those in power had an ethical responsibility of care for the vulnerable, tellingly defined as those without families (*guan gua gu du* 鳏寡孤独). Buddhism emphasised the ideals of charity and kindness (*ci* 慈, *shan* 善). The tie between religion and charity was both ethical and operational. For centuries, monasteries served as places of refuge for those displaced by poverty, war or famine. During the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) periods, these efforts were joined by a new tradition of religiously inspired lay charities called *shantang* 善堂 (benevolent associations) (Fuma, 2008; Smith, 1987; Smith, 2009).

When Western charities (primarily but not exclusively those associated with Christian missions) arrived in the nineteenth century, they presented this native tradition with both challenges and opportunities. Mission-run poor houses, schools and hospitals dwarfed even the largest *shantang*, and moreover enjoyed both endowed funding and a dedicated administrative structure, two institutional innovations that Chinese charities were quick to adopt. A new generation of hybridised Chinese charities blossomed during the Republican period (1912–49), thanks both to the development of civic organisations overall, and to the need created by a series of natural and manmade crises that the weak government was poorly equipped to handle. The founding of the People's Republic in 1949 brought these developments to a screeching halt. While the Republican regime had expressed reservations about the operation of private charities, the Communist government confronted these organisations adamantly and directly. Missionary institutions were closed almost immediately. Some native charities (particularly those with connections to religious or foreign interests) were purged; those that were not were effectively rendered redundant by virtue of a state that endeavoured to take direct charge of the material equality and material welfare of the people.

Even in this very brief overview of the development of Chinese charities, we are able to discern both linear change and the recurrence of familiar problems around funding, support, social and legal status. As we shall see, all of these issues resemble, and in some cases directly anticipate, those encountered in the revival of the charitable sector since the 1990s.

## Size of the Sector

Before attempting to draw comparisons, we must first establish a sense of the relative size of the charitable sector in late imperial, Republican and contemporary China. How

large was the charitable sphere in these periods, compared both to the population, and to the size of the problems it faced? The imperial period presents certain difficulties as a baseline. Records provide only glimpses of individual *shantang* of the Ming and Qing dynasties, particularly those that operated in Jiangnan 江南, the wealthy region surrounding the Yangtze delta. Some of these *shantang* were large and well supported, but most were small enterprises, often organising only in response to a specific crisis. The Jiangsu district of Hui'an 惠安 presents a fairly typical profile: during the mid-Qing (late eighteenth century), this six-county area supported a handful of independent charitable institutions, including a lodge for labourers, a medicine dispensary and a home for indigent women and children (Hu, 2013), but because *shantang* generally operated individually, the bigger picture remains difficult to trace.

Moreover, some types of welfare activity were intentionally covert. The late imperial state aspired to tight control of the religious realm, and banned the tradition of syncretic teachings that circulated among the people. When militarised, these teachings could be spectacularly destructive, but at other times they acted as stable and very locally grounded institutions. Hints gleaned from criminal records show how these groups often provided food, medicine and protection for their own members or fellow villagers. Although this sort of very small-scale community activity is largely lost to historians, it shows a model of corporatist welfare, one that collected and distributed funds only among its own members. Mutual aid within this sort of group – clans, native place associations and occupational guilds – was the preponderant form of social welfare in late imperial China, or at least the type that most people would have encountered.

The picture of charities becomes significantly clearer following the mid-nineteenth century Taiping Rebellion. This 14-year war not only caused suffering on an industrial scale (including a death toll estimated at 20 million), but also severely damaged the central administrative capabilities of the Qing state. Beginning with the suppression of the rebellion itself, public works were increasingly carried out by local officials or local elites acting on their own initiative. As the official bureaucracy became less able to maintain necessary relief activities, local *shantang* began to expand their operations, joining forces to form networks and even coming to work cooperatively with missionary institutions. At the same time, some of the popular religious organisations began to take forms that were more socially palatable and aspire to social status similar to that of Buddhism or Christianity. Teachings such as Zailijiao (在理教 Teaching of the Principle) and Tongshanshe (同善社 Society of Common Benevolence, a name already reminiscent of *shantang*) became less interested in predicting the end of the dynasty or the world, and began to focus instead on a vision of social reform and global unity. At the same time, they embarked on large and very public charitable initiatives, which over time transformed from a sideline to a primary focus. By the turn of the century, these and other similar teachings had emerged from quasi-legal, semi-secret sects into what Komukai Sakurako has called “religious style charitable societies” (*zongjiao xing de cishan hui* 宗教性的慈善会; Komukai, 2008; Liang, 2008, p. 98; DuBois, 2005, pp. 112–21).

The expansion of religious charity was part of a larger transformation of ideas about public welfare and public good. The reformist sentiment of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries turned on two points: the idea that national salvation was to be found in the material prosperity of the masses, and a rejection of the familial

parochialism of Confucian society. The first of these found expression in calls to build national industry and trade, emphasising growth over the traditional virtue of ethical frugality. It combined with a growing acceptance of the Benthamite ideal of a state that owed a responsibility of care directly to its subjects, rather than to its component groups. One result of this new political perspective was the growing criticism of narrow corporatist social responsibility, one that recognises only responsibility to one's own family rather than to society as a whole. Reformist critics such as Kang Youwei 康有为 unflatteringly characterised this style of "clan charity" (*zongzu cishan* 宗族慈善) as emblematic of China's social and political weakness. Increasingly, ideas of political reform moved the discourse of welfare away from one of traditional moral responsibility and towards broader social transformation (Cai and Li, 2002).

These ideas are seen in the strong civic response to a series of humanitarian crises that arose during the period of transition from Qing to Republic, a time when the weak central state was poorly equipped to respond. The North China Famine (1876–79) not only drew Western missionary charities into relief efforts in China, but also affected the structure and ambition of native Chinese charities, even those far from the affected area. Three wars in North China and Manchuria fought in rapid succession and at great price to Chinese civilians prompted the formation of the first large-scale native charities, such as the Red Cross of China, which was founded in 1904<sup>1</sup> (Chi, 2004; Jin, 2008). The most visible shift from state to private initiative was the response to epidemic disease. When bubonic plague struck Guangzhou in 1894, "private charities mushroomed all over the city" (Lin, 2004, p. 161). When the disease again emerged 15 years later in Manchuria, the ailing Qing regime handed control of the situation to an energetic Penang Chinese doctor named Wu Liande 五连德. In response to the complete absence of state structures, Wu created his own epidemic research and prevention office that served as the region's de facto health service for the next three decades (Wu, 1959; Gamsa, 2006; DuBois, 2014). The effective disappearance of any central government during the early years of the Republic increasingly pushed the burden of care onto private actors, electrifying the development of the charitable sphere. When a flood of the Yellow River in 1921 displaced millions of peasants across the North China Plain, a small religious group in the Shandong capital of Ji'nan 济南 organised a new charity to handle the torrent of refugees that was streaming towards the city. Named the World Red Swastika Society (*Shijie hong wanzi hui* 世界红卍字会) in emulation of the International Red Cross, this charity collected a hundred thousand yuan for the purchase of blankets and emergency provisions.<sup>2</sup> Within a decade, the World Red Swastika Society had emerged as one of the largest civic organisations in China, and was able to mount massive-scale relief efforts throughout the country (Guo, 2005; DuBois, 2011).

Despite this initial promise, events of the 1930s and 1940s made it impossible for welfare organisations, private or public, to continue along this same trajectory. The Japanese invasion of Manchuria and northern China, followed by four years of brutal conflict between the forces of Chiang Kai-shek's Guomindang (Nationalist People's Party) and the Communists, had made much of the country an active war zone that was either too dangerous to work in or simply inaccessible. What relief efforts there were tended to operate with political protection, and in contrast to the earlier attempt by groups such as the Red Cross or Red Swastika Society to remain visibly neutral in conflicts, charities during these years were unavoidably tied to one or the other of the belligerent parties, often as active participants in the political struggle (DuBois, 2011).

Charities did not disappear immediately after 1949, and some continued to play a very particular social role during the early People's Republic. The new state initially wavered on the question of how much latitude should be accorded to popular organisations, and eventually came to support a heavily restrictive legal framework and a policy of replacing independent trade unions, peasant associations and chambers of commerce with Party institutions (Simon, 2013, pp. 144–65). These changes hit religious charities especially hard, particularly after the outbreak of the Korean War fed campaigns against the Catholic Church and other religious groups. Even before this time, the World Red Swastika Society had been cautioned that it would need to break all ties to its religious origins in order to continue its charitable work (Shao, 1997, p. 391). Yet not all charities were banned, or even affected adversely. The People's government initially welcomed overtures from the remaining merchant community to care for refugees in places such as Shanghai. But like the commercial class itself, these initiatives were part of a planned transition to a new society. By 1954, even favoured charities had been goaded by political campaigns, registration requirements and a lack of funds to disband, or to surrender their activities to a state-dominated structure (Dillon, 2007).

### Scale of Need and Scope of Control

How do contemporary charities measure up against these historical antecedents? In many ways, the current crop of organised charities in China is a pale shadow of the sector that existed during the Republican period. No doubt, the size of the sector is at least to a certain degree a function of diminished need. The 2008 earthquake in Sichuan was the largest single disaster in more than a generation, with a total mortality in excess of 70,000. Yet even with massive infrastructural damage, official rescue and relief teams were able to access the area relatively quickly and effectively. By contrast, the official death toll of the 1938 Yellow River flood was over ten times that number, with refugees numbering in the millions (Lary, 2010, pp. 61–62). During the periods in which political dislocation was most severe, disasters of any scale took a greater toll: even such basic concerns as removing corpses from battlefields or decimated villages were often left to private initiative (Shijie hongwangzi hui, 1930; 1932; 1935).

Looking back to the late Qing, the scale of need relative to official relief efforts becomes even more striking. The North China Famine of 1876–79 was undoubtedly one of the greatest ecological and humanitarian disasters of the century. But it did not need to be. In its heyday, the Qing government had been reasonably well equipped to face such crises: during the famine of 1743, the machinery of empire had moved quickly and smoothly to deliver relief supplies. By 1876, however, the energies of the dynasty had been so badly sapped by the Taiping Rebellion and by decades of administrative decay that it was far from adequate to the task of responding (Xiao et al., 2012). The mortality of this famine was of a magnitude greater than the Wenchuan earthquake, with in excess of 13 million believed to have died in the most horrific of circumstances (Rowe, 2009, pp. 250–51; Zhu, 2008).

Despite the scale of need, Qing and Republican-era charities always faced a certain degree of political, financial and social insecurity. Late imperial charity was always an elite endeavour. The *shantang* model had arisen out of a growing pool of commercial wealth, as well as a model of imperial governance in which the official bureaucracy was expected to work *with* local elites in the provision of public good. In times of

particular duress, the local magistrate was able and expected to approach the major families in his area for financial contributions (Chü, 1962). It is easy to construe the growth of “private” (*minban* 民办) associations in late imperial China as something comparable to European-style civil society, but it is important to remember that such organisations were more likely to be integrated into the state than adversarial to it (Huang, 1993). *Shantang* often received personal donations from sitting officials, including the local magistrate, and were generally seen as a supplement, rather than a challenge, to the official network of granaries and emergency relief. At the same time, the largely ad hoc nature of relief efforts worked against the institutionalisation of the sector as a whole.

The political relationship between the state and private charities changed abruptly after 1927, when the newly resurgent Guomindang took the stage with the stated desire to assert its moral and operational authority over society. Civic organisations such as trade unions and religious groups soon found themselves subjected to new levels of scrutiny, including the imposition of legal restrictions under the Guomindang Civil Code of 1930. Even before this time, municipal governments had been taking steps to regularise and regulate the charitable sector. In 1928, charities in Shanghai had been ordered to register with the municipal government, a process that to be successful demanded compliance on a number of sensitive issues, chiefly the strict prohibition of charitable institutions from religious propagation or the receipt of foreign funds. The problem of bringing charities under control was clearly a high political priority: even the concerted intercession of commercial and religious luminaries such as Wang Yiting 王一亭 failed in the end to gain significant concessions. Even as many individual charities continued to enjoy high-level support from within the Guomindang government, the sector as a whole was firmly brought to heel (Zeng, 2011; Lin, 2004, pp. 151–56).

The Republican charitable sector was on the whole quite well capitalised, although not without a certain cost to itself. Founded in 1921, the World Red Swastika Society was soon able to draw on a wide network of donors. On three separate occasions between 1921 and 1924, the group was able to raise funds in excess of one hundred thousand yuan, enough to provide food, shelter and clothing to more than 40,000 desperate refugees. Many Republican-era charities enjoyed the financial patronage of national or local political figures, but such support came at a price. In 1934, the Canton warlord Chen Jitang 陈济棠 established the Ren'ai 仁爱 (Benevolence and Love) *shantang*, which served as a clearing house for charities in the city. Both Chen and the Guangzhou municipal government had over previous years made numerous donations to local charities, but their doing so had the dual purpose of supporting and exercising control over the charitable realm, characterised by Alfred Lin as the “paradoxical desire to both serve and gag the public”. The same instinct to take direct charge of public welfare drove the even more generous financial support that the Guomindang regime and the Japanese occupation extended to a variety of national charities (DuBois, 2011; Lin, 2004, p. 185).

Contemporary policies aimed at keeping the charitable sector under political control are not substantially different from those employed by the Guomindang government – if anything, the current regime succeeds where its predecessor failed. The sector today is observed far more closely than any previous government would have imagined possible. All charities must register with authorities and are compelled to work within a



tightly defined sphere of operations, and at best they enjoy a state of benign neglect. Some among the recent crop of Chinese social welfare organisations are directly tied to the state. Others are bound by softer ties of visible political patronage or preferential contract provision (Jing, 2015). A select few among these enjoy substantial political and financial encouragement. But even as charities and charitable giving again take root in China, the contemporary state retains a far firmer grip on its own social service provision. The situation less resembles the 1920s, in which private charities arose to fill a vacuum of welfare provision, than the subsequent decade, in which political elites sought to control and lay claim to the charitable sphere.

### Questions for Today

The contemporary re-emergence of the charitable sector raises a number of important questions. The first is why the Chinese state would now encourage this phenomenon, even if only very selectively. One answer certainly has to be found in the combination of newly emergent social welfare needs and the massive transfer of wealth into private hands, with the result that burdens once borne by the state or the work unit are increasingly shifted to the private sector. The 1984 founding of the Chinese Disabled Persons' Welfare Fund (*Zhongguo canji ren fuli jijinhui* 中国残疾人福利基金会), followed in 1988 by the Chinese Disabled Persons' United Association (*Zhongguo canji ren lianhehui* 中国残疾人联合会), were among the early indications that the state intended to devolve some responsibility for social issues into private hands (Yang, 2006, pp. 70–71). More recent social legislation such as the 2013 Elderly Rights Protection Act (*Laonian ren quanyi baozhangfa* 老年人权益保障法) has continued this trend of shifting the moral and legal responsibility of care from the state to private social actors such as families.

Beyond simply saving resources, the policy of encouraging private initiative for social issues also integrates charitable causes into the moral education programs that have grown increasingly important since the late 1990s (Barmé, 2013). Simply put, charity is a kind of public performance of state sanctioned ethics. Events such as public donation drives are at once a means of raising revenue and a stage for the scripted display of national identity and morality. In the articles that follow, Deng Guosheng (2015) and Elaine Jeffreys (2015) both discuss the ways in which Chinese media and the Chinese public have become increasingly concerned with the generosity (or lack thereof) of China's new class of super wealthy, celebrating the most famous donors as the face of personal responsibility and national unity as they “give back” to society's needy.

The mobilisation of “worthy causes” as a public performance of national values and priorities is by no means new – campaigns during World War II to sell war bonds were as much about patriotism as they were about fundraising – but it has taken on a new life in the era of mass communication. The Chinese government does not lack inspiration from within the region. The government of Singapore supports two annual donation campaigns – the National Kidney Foundation and the President's Foundation Challenge – tying its own legitimacy to the image of a caring and compassionate citizenry. For these events, Singapore mobilises its entire stock of cultural capital, particularly its media celebrities, to produce events that are heavily laden with social and political meaning. Elaine Jeffreys analyses the ways in which Chinese celebrities

involve themselves in charity work, not surprisingly restricting themselves to non-controversial causes such as disaster relief and poverty alleviation. The importance of image also leaves state-linked charities particularly vulnerable to scandal, however, such as struck the NKF in Singapore (Barr and Skrbis, 2008, pp. 255–56), and more spectacularly in China after a 20 year-old woman named Guo Meimei 郭美美 posted pictures of herself with cars and luxury items allegedly purchased with funds embezzled from the Chinese Red Cross. The fallout from the Guo Meimei affair was immediate and disastrous. Chinese netizens did more than voice their rage; they and large segments of Chinese society cut off donations – shunning the charity in its appeal for funds following the 2013 Ya'an 雅安 earthquake.

The public significance of philanthropy is clearly a double-edged sword. Christian mission charities exercised significant influence in late Qing and Republican China. Through their networks of schools, hospitals and orphanages, mission charities directly encountered millions of people, great and small. Many perceived the unchecked cultural influence of foreign interests as cause for alarm. Beyond the well-known xenophobia of many Qing officials, the legal reforms of the Guomindang clearly aimed to keep in check the influence of foreign missionaries within the charitable sector. The early People's Republic was particularly unsubtle in this regard, simply expelling most remaining missionaries during the early 1950s. Even during the resurgence, the Chinese government would occasionally raise the charge that international charities or NGOs were acting as a Trojan horse for foreign political interests, or more generally as a conduit of spiritual pollution. This concern over foreign influence, as well as similar policies enacted by Vladimir Putin, directly inspired the restrictive 2014 draft law (Famularo, 2015; Panda, 2014).

At the same time, the Chinese government understands well the political costs and benefits of acting as a charitable benefactor internationally. It was visibly generous in its response to tsunami disasters in the Indian Ocean (2004) and Japan (2011), as well as to Hurricane Katrina (2005) in the United States. China has been particularly active in Africa, providing direct aid and funding infrastructure projects, concomitant to the rise of its commercial interests on the continent. It has also learned the price of inaction. China's widely criticised response to the 2013 Typhoon Haiyan disaster in the Philippines, initially a paltry US\$200,000 aid package (compared to Australia's total contribution of US\$28 million), might suggest that the benefits of conspicuous generosity were not yet universally appreciated. Yet considering recent tensions between the two countries, an overly generous response might well have incurred political costs at home.

A second question is what sort of control the state might wish to exercise over the resurgent charitable sector. Although the 2014 draft law came as a surprise to many, the desire to control the sector is hardly new. Guomindang-era charity laws sought to exert control over two primary areas of concern: funding and religion. Legislation on the former was at least in part an effort to normalise practices within the sector as a whole, to prevent charities from becoming a channel for the unregulated flow of foreign funds, or a vehicle for crime and corruption. The latter was part of a larger effort to place the state at the spiritual centre of society (seen for example in the moral rhetoric of social campaigns such as the 1934 New Life Movement, *xinshenghuo yundong* 新生活运动), but was also aimed primarily at checking foreign influence. More broadly, the Guomindang clearly sought to control independent expressions of civil society, and



when possible replace them with its own national organisations. These same instincts, tinged with the political urgency of the 1950s and coloured by Stalinist innovations, drove the policies of the early People's Republic as well. Each of these concerns became evident in the regulation of the charitable sector over its 20-year resurgence, as the Party sought to encourage popular support for social causes, without allowing this enthusiasm to spin out of control. The current draft law may be more strict and far-reaching than most recent legislation, but it is otherwise not substantively different from the past 80 years of regulatory policy.

The problem of control becomes more complex and more important as the relationship between the state and charities shifts towards one of symbiosis and mutual interdependence, particularly as responsibility for social welfare provision is increasingly shifted to the private sector. Jing (2015) outlines the web of interests that tie the charitable sector to both national and in particular local governments. The Chinese state continues to face a particular challenge regarding foreign influences, both in terms of the ideas that foreign NGOs represent and more tangibly in the problems that inevitably arise with foreign funding. The requirement that donations gathered overseas be used by locally-registered charities greatly increases the potential for misconduct and misunderstanding, as was the case in the highly public controversy over the use of donations by overseas Chinese after earthquakes in Lijiang 丽江 in the late 1990s.

It is here that advocacy becomes a key problem. On the one hand, social welfare is in practice a very small step away from advocacy: for example, a group that is already organised to raise funds for indigent workers or wildlife conservation could easily transition to advocating the cause of workers' rights or environmental protection. As before, registration remains the primary gateway through which the state maintains control over the sector, the idea being that organisations will voluntarily engage in self-restraint in order to retain their legal status. In practice, however, it is not difficult for organisations to find ways around these regulations, for example by spinning particular activities into branches that maintain a distance from the main organisation. The sector has developed these techniques of avoidance and diversion as part of its institutional memory. Hans Gâsemyr (2015) shows how the experience of advocacy around HIV rights and prevention had already taught NGOs how to navigate the maze of bureaucratic restrictions, state needs and international donors two decades before major events such as Wenchuan brought the sector to its current prominence. Over time, advocacy NGOs have adapted into fluid networks that are more nimble and difficult to police or pin down.

The new importance of personal wealth within the charitable sphere has driven a substantive transformation of the sector. The past decade has seen a vast expansion in the amount of funds available to charities. In 2008, the year of the Wenchuan earthquake, the Red Cross of China raised more than 1.5 billion RMB (Zhongguo hong shizi, 2009). This figure was quite exceptional: it was nine times the amount raised the previous year, included a high proportion of government money, and is in any case not likely to be repeated in the wake of the Guo Meimei scandal, but can still be taken to demonstrate the upper limits of the state-linked sector. Individual private charities that operate on a smaller scale are nevertheless very well capitalised: the Narada Foundation was established with a fund of 100 million RMB. Even with these smaller sums, the use of personal wealth allows individuals significant influence over the priorities and practices of both state and private welfare. How new is this

phenomenon? To answer this question, we may begin by comparing today's figures with those in the Republican era. In each of its four most prominent disaster relief donation drives (1921, 1923, 1924 and 1933), the World Red Swastika Society raised 100,000 to 120,000 yuan. Calculated as a share of the economy, 100,000 yuan in 1933 translates to about 27.5 million RMB in 2012, slightly less than the 30 million RMB that Deng Guosheng cites as the ordinary annual expenditure of the Alashan Society. Considering that the four disaster relief drives most likely represented an atypical spike in the income of the World Swastika Society, and that Alashan is just one of a growing number of similarly sized NGOs, it seems fairly certain that the private charitable sector in 2015 is significantly better capitalised than its Republican counterpart was at its peak.<sup>3</sup>

Even more than the influx of private wealth, it is the ability to mobilise public opinion that remains the great uncharted frontier. Taking the long view, it is clear that among the most fundamental transformations in China over the past two centuries has been the ever-widening circle of political and social awareness. From the publication of the first newspapers in mid-nineteenth-century Shanghai, to the switch from classical to vernacular language in print media and the emergence of public protest as a political force in the 1920s, to the unprecedented politicisation and expansion of literacy in the countryside under the Communists (both before and after the founding of the People's Republic), this change has been largely linear in terms of reaching an ever greater proportion of the population. Yet while the flow of information grew exponentially, its content was increasingly restricted, particularly during the first five decades of the People's Republic. The few experiences that the current regime has had with unfettered public opinion suggest that it will have no desire to open the floodgates to genuine public debate any time soon. Enter the Internet, which has proven to be an unstoppable force in the flow of information in China, and a boon to particular types of advocacy. Advocacy for legally grey causes such as awareness of domestic violence, demand for data on urban air quality and institutionalisation of LGBT rights has proven particularly effective when voiced through this medium. The striking popularity (1.3 million online views in 19 hours) and sudden disappearance of Chai Jing's environmental advocacy film *Under the Dome* (*Qiongdong zhi xia* 穹顶之下) demonstrate the speed with which politically embarrassing messages can spread and just as suddenly be wiped from Chinese servers. Other less sensitive issues go online simply because they are unable to command attention in first-tier media. Even when short-lived, Internet campaigns for these causes have proven remarkably successful in raising public awareness of issues that have heretofore been absent from public discussion.

Yet this very success also reveals two important caveats. The first is that while Internet advocacy may be successful in raising awareness and shifting policy, it has been completely ineffective in directly challenging the government on its core principles, including the freedom of speech itself. The idea of civil organisations acting as an adversarial check on the power of the state is very far from a reality in China, and is likely to remain so for some time to come. The second is that the shift to virtual space in some ways signifies surrender of the physical. The rhetorical power of iconic locations such as Tian'anmen Square lies in their idealised heritage as the sites of spontaneous demonstrations and mass rallies that revealed the soul and conscience of the nation. The continued power of this symbolism is evident in the extremely tight control that Chinese Public Security retains over public spaces, and its deep suspicion

of any physical gatherings, particularly in historically significant sites such as Tian'anmen. As a result, China is not likely to experience anything remotely comparable to the mass gatherings that sparked the Colour Revolutions of the late 1990s, or the Jasmine Revolutions of ten years later. Inability to control physical space drives people to the virtual, but at the same time, virtual space in many ways amplifies the significance of the physical. The Internet facilitates new modes of physical assembly and performance, even if these are not protest as such. At the same time, the ubiquity of cell phone cameras and the flow of digital information have robbed security forces of the power to simply implement news blackouts around sensitive events. Even if the Internet has not gathered crowds to demand change, it has revealed and very likely accelerated the prevalence of small breakdowns in public order – particularly rural riots and protests – that would have otherwise remained invisible.

## Conclusion

A wide view of the historical development of charities, and of civic organisations more broadly, brings into focus a number of clear patterns that inform more recent developments. While state imperatives across regimes have varied in degree and sophistication, the underlying substance is consistent. As would any government, successive Chinese regimes have felt the right and obligation to regulate their charitable sector, and have allied with private initiatives both to provide social services on the ground and to bind up expressions of civic-mindedness into their own legitimacy. The charities and NGOs of the twenty-first century continue to exist within a strictly delineated sphere, a key criterion of their legality and operational success being the ability to shape their own agendas to conform to government programs and demands, or at least to avoid public confrontation with them.

At the same time, the power of private wealth and public opinion have emerged as forces that are in some ways fundamentally new. The development of the charitable sector is just one expression of how moneyed interests have developed into a discrete powerbase. Similarly, each of the articles in this special section presents a different aspect of the intertwining of charity and public opinion: the mutual bolstering of state legitimacy and personal celebrity around worthy causes, the problems and promise of raising public awareness of issues outside the officially sanctioned framework, the role of foreign organisations, and the importance of charity to China's soft power abroad. The momentum with which public opinion gathers online is a force without precedent in China's history, and underscores the fact that even with draconian legislation waiting on the horizon, the Chinese state has perhaps more long-term interest than anyone else in ensuring the peaceful rise of the NGO sector.

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## Notes

1. The Sino-Japanese War (1894–95), Boxer Uprising and suppression (1900) and Russo-Japanese War (1904–05).
2. The left-handed swastika is a traditional Buddhist symbol, and unrelated to the reversed character used by Nazi Germany.
3. Liu and Yeh estimate the 1933 GDP of China as 29.88 billion yuan (in 1933 currency values) (Liu and Yeh, 1963, p. 94), compared to a World Bank figure (World Bank, 2012) of 8.227 trillion RMB for China's GDP in 2012.

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