This paper is to disentangle a puzzle of why there was enormous participation of NGOs in the relief of the massive earthquake in Sichuan, China in 2008 when only scanty involvement of NGOs could be found in combating the SARS epidemic in 2003. Was the nature of these disasters different? Or was it caused by the changes in the environment, values and structure of the civil society in China in the five-year time?

The evidence used in this paper is based on the author’s research on the SARS epidemics in Hong Kong and a field research in Sichuan after it was seriously hit by the earthquake. The author was a member of an experts team formed right after the earthquake to give advices to the Chinese authorities concerning disaster relief and reconstruction of communities there.

This paper will show that the divergent natures of these two disasters cannot explain the enormous differences in the level of civic participation in the disaster relief. During the SARS epidemic in 2003, the author conducted a research in Hong Kong documenting the newspaper reports of a large range of activities launched by the NGOs there. It shows that civil society can still play a significant role in responding to a public health crisis like SARS.

As the nature of the disaster is not the determining factor, adopting the framework of Civil Society Index conducted by Civicus, this paper proceeds to solve the puzzle by investigating the changes in the environment, values and structure of the Chinese civil society in that five-year period.

The paper will show that the legal environment of civil society remained rather stringent during that period. The state, though giving more space for social service organizations to grow, still exerted enormous control over social groups with advocacy potentials. Concerning the value dimension, this paper argues that it is difficult to document the value change and its impacts. The more vivid evidence of change in that period was found in the structural dimension. In terms of resources mobilization, more and more local private foundations were established by corporations or individual businesspeople with some of them having clear direction to foster the development of civil society. More than a dozen of “peak organizations” were also established in that period providing capacity building programs to grassroots NGOs, enhancing information exchange, and coordinating collective actions. The paper will discuss in details the alliances and coordinating offices set up for the relief projects right after the earthquake so as to illustrate the impacts of the structural change discussed above. This also leads to a question of why this structural change is possible under the authoritarian regime.

The paper will conclude by discussing the life and death of an NGO in the aftermath of the earthquake. Through this case, the opportunities and challenges of Chinese civil society will be vividly revealed.
References


