

論文 / 著書情報
Article / Book Information

題目(和文)	中国NGOの自治性と機能性：GONGOからState-Led NGOsへ
Title(English)	Autonomy and Functionality of Chinese NGOs: From GONGOs to State-Led NGOs
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出典(和文)	学位:博士(工学), 学位授与機関:東京工業大学, 報告番号:甲第11233号, 授与年月日:2019年6月30日, 学位の種別:課程博士, 審査員:坂野 達郎,猪原 健弘,池上 雅子,劉 岸偉,村山 武彦
Citation(English)	Degree:Doctor (Engineering), Conferring organization: Tokyo Institute of Technology, Report number:甲第11233号, Conferred date:2019/6/30, Degree Type:Course doctor, Examiner:,,,,
学位種別(和文)	博士論文
Category(English)	Doctoral Thesis
種別(和文)	要約
Type(English)	Outline

*Autonomy and Functionality of Chinese NGOs:
From GONGOs to State-Led NGOs*

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Summary:

This dissertation is a study of Chinese NGOs' autonomy and functionality in relation to providing public services to those in need. How can NGOs in China better serve its people while retaining their original aspirational goals, scope of work, and increasing the scale of projects at the same time? To answer this question, the central argument in this dissertation is that "granted autonomy" can be one of the promising means to resolve such dilemma of balancing autonomy and functionality for NGOs in China.

Theoretically from previous literature on autonomy and functionality of NGOs in China, there is a necessity of re-examining the casual relation between autonomy and functionality as neither Western associational theories nor modified corporatist approaches conducted by both Western and Chinese scholars fit the dynamic reality of Chinese NGOs. Therefore, to support the validity of my argument that autonomy can be compatible with functionality under granted autonomy, empirical studies on the actual relationship between autonomy and functionality are required. To this end, legal settings and typologies of NGOs must be discussed to holistically grasp how existing NGOs' operations are constrained or governed to what extent.

Furthermore, empirical data gathered from the extensive field works attempts to reveal the process of GONGO-nization in which grassroots NGOs, more or less equivalent to that of Western NGOs in nature, interact with their local authority to legal registration as one of the official social organizations. To develop the field work framework to evaluate the autonomy and functionality, these two elements are categorized into three levels: entrepreneurial, managerial, and operational. Utilizing this framework, the findings show that even when grassroots NGOs became closer to the state over the course of their organizational development, they were still able to remain autonomy at some levels.

Lastly, investigating the incubated NGOs, the newly-emerging phenomena at sub-district level community, the incubation center established by the state illustrates a possibility of granted autonomy where moving from one equilibrium that is vertical relation with lower social capital to another that is horizontal relation with higher social capital. At least toward this direction, China may be able to build a platform between the state and society to embrace constructive criticism to better future of the country.