Cruel Activism: Precarity, Labor, and Affect of Chinese Feminist and LGBT Rights NGOs

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A dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

2022

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies

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Abstract

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This dissertation explores a central tension and contradiction between the social reproduction of NGOs and the social reproduction of activist workers in the People's Republic of China since the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. It investigates how feminist and LGBT rights NGOs are a specifically Chinese formation that is entangled with state regulation and the transnational non-profit funding complex. I theorize the triple mechanisms of moralization, illegalization, and professionalization in which the party-state absorbs the social reproduction function of NGOs while containing their political influence. At the same time, the transnational non-profit funding complex utilizes NGOs for political intervention in China. The party-state's

dynamic relations with the transnational non-profit funding complex foster a shifting enabling or disabling environment for these NGOs to socially reproduce themselves. These processes result in the devaluation and erasure of feminist and LGBT rights NGOs, as well as the labor value of activist workers. In particular, I theorize mental, emotional, communicative, and caring labor as the kinds of social reproductive labor activist workers perform. Though invisiblized and devalued as gendered and racialized labor, I suggest that they are of value because they require labor time socially necessary towards the execution and completion of NGO projects. However, the mechanisms of triple erasure transfer the cost of the social reproduction of NGOs unto the bodies of activist workers. I foreground the affective dimension of precarity which is manifested in the burnout, depression, and trauma of activist workers. The cruel activism lies in that the ways in which the feelings that fuel the activism can also serve to invisiblize and erase the workers' affective labor, and legitimize power inequalities and disputes in activism. The contradictory affect of hope is precisely how activist workers are exploited at the intersection of state violence and the professionalizing NGO sector. I suggest that the affective struggles of activist workers are the embodied effects of the very contradictions of state-NGO relations in China.

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Acknowledgement

This dissertation has been a long way in the making. It documents a chapter of Chinese feminist and LGBT NGO organizing in the last decade, and it is also a summation of my passion, reflection, and complicated feelings of hope and frustration towards NGO activism in China. I am proud of my steadfast commitment to grounding my research and activism in the longer history of feminist and LGBT activism, and the broader civil society organizing in China, and beyond. I am deeply invested in this research because I am also one of the protagonists in my writing, who consider activist work as inseparable from life. I am profoundly curious, and committed to the questions of integrity, wellbeing, and care of activist worker communities in China. None of these thinking and reflection could have been possible without my comrades along the way: the young feminist groups that I was a part of (青年女权行动派), my feminist LBT colleagues and friends, and my bisexual and pansexual community in China (r&B 双性恋团体) and other Asian countries. I am also deeply grateful to the three organizations that opened their doors to me, and the activist workers, interns, and volunteers that have shared their lives and thinking with me: you are the backbone of this dissertation.

I could not have completed this dissertation without the unwavering support from my dissertation committee members. I am deeply grateful to my co-advisors: Dr. Priti Ramamurthy, and Dr. Sasha Su-Ling Welland. Priti has been my primary source of inspiration to become a feminist scholar focusing on international feminist political economy. Travelling between worlds, Priti shows me what it means to be a grounded ethnographer, an empowering teacher, and a caring mentor, in a very Asian way, which I adore. Sasha is my model of an intellectual thinker, a great feminist writer, and she always asks thoughtful, critical and inspiring questions, without which I

could not have pushed myself to think beyond my own constraints. I am also deeply grateful to Dr. Sabine Lang, whose work on the ngoization of feminism, and her expertise on NGOs and civil society guides me to frame and articulate my research in the longer trajectory of NGOs transnationally. Sabine is always the first or second reader to read my writings and offer constructive feedback to me. Her mentorship and support have been fundamental to my growth as a scholar-activist working on transnational issues. I also want to thank Dr. Susan Whiting, whose expertise on Chinese politics and state-society relations lay the groundwork for me to conduct my research. I am very privileged to have Dr. Radhika Govindrajan as my graduate school representative (GSR) on my committee. Radhika is powerful thinker and scholar, and I only wish I could take more of her classes! Beyond the duties of GSR, she offers me valuable comments and references to advance my thinking, to which I am truly thankful. I want to give a special thanks to Dr. Chandan Reddy. Chandan is not on my dissertation committee, but he is more than a committee member to my growth as an independent scholar. He is not only a talented and critical thinker, but he is also genuinely caring and supportive, and he is always there to cheer for me.

Last but not least, I want to thank my dearest friends and lovers that have carried me through all these years of my drifting lives, from Zhuhai, Guangzhou, to Hong Kong, Beijing, and to Seattle. To my best friend Chen Mingcan, we are one and only. A part of me will always be yours, and you are the sunshine in my life. To Ye Shana, you are my muse and moonlight, the person who always inspires me to think critically, explore, and experiment with life. To Xiong Shiming, you are a firecracker, and shining stars in my life. Thank you for sharing your life with me as we grow together. To Xin Ying and Wei Tingting, my most daring and powerful sisters, you are my comrades and my role models. Your resilience and love have shown me the

power of feminism and friendship. To Jean Chong, thank you for everything you've done for me. I will always admire your commitment to LBT movements and hope the best for you. I am grateful to my GWSS family in UW, Michelle Morada, Shuxuan Zhou, Anna Ziyi Zhao, Fabian Romero, Christina Chung, Jey Saung, Mediha Sorma, Keila Taylor, Jainey Kim, Saad Khan, Nastasia Paul Gera, Catalina Velasquez, Iris Viveros Avendano, Elizabeth Ramirez Arreola, Jiwoon Yulee, Romon Johnson, and Bobbi Kindred, you made my six years in UW beautiful and fun. To my wonderful teachers, Shirley Yee, Cricket Keating, Amanda Swarr, Regina Lee, Kemi Adeyemi, Bettina Judd, Michelle Habell-Pallan, and Nancy J. Kenny, you are my forever role models of great feminist teachers. I. want to thank our wonderful GWSS staffs, Catherine Richardson, Young Kim, and Whitney M Miller, and our librarian Cassandra J. Hartnett.

To my family, my parents, Wang Guobiao, Lü Yudi, and my little brother Wang Shuyang, you carry the most vulnerable part of me, and I will never be enough of your love. To my partner, Shi Guangye, you are my rock and my backbone. I am truly grateful to your love, patience, and support during my most difficult times in my life. You are a miracle and wonder in my life, and I am hopeful to see our lives blossom in the so many years to come.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all my comrades in China.

Chapter One

Introduction

The Research Agenda

Background

Everyone bears a mark of their particular epoch. The social, cultural, political and economic landscape of the era, shape how individuals understand and experience their lives. I was born in the year of 1989, around the same dates that the student-worker movement erupted in Tiananmen square in Beijing, demanding for a more democratic future and a fairer distribution of wealth just a decade after the economic reform in the People's Republic of China[1]. Having the last and fading memories of the socialist legacies and growing up witnessing the encroachment of communal life by consumerism and individualism, me, like any other Chinese born in the first decade after the economic reform, are the embodiment and witness of the great transformation of China. By the time I started college in 2008, the social and civic life seemed to reinvigorate, signaled by several important landmarks. The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 reopened China to the world via the window of NGOs. Wenchuan earthquake in 2008 was dubbed the "year-one" of China's civil society by practitioners and popular media, as thousands of Chinese joined disaster relief efforts and formed volunteer initiatives, and philanthropic capital poured into the domestic NGO sector. Throughout the decades, the wealth gap has widened, and inequality consolidated. Immersed in a radical and open university campus, I became an outspoken feminist activist during

[1] Hence abbreviated as China.

my college years, and participated in many street actions, community events and conferences which advocated and championed the rights, equality and freedom of women and other minorities.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been in the center of scholarly, activist, and media attention in the last four decades. It has been fiercely debated by Chinese and non-Chinese practitioners and theorists of whether NGOs are conducive to the formation of civil society in China, as well as the kinds of political, economic, and social impacts of NGOs (Deng, 1997; Jing, 1994; Kuhn, 1991; Ma, 2006; Rankin, 1986; Rowe, 1989; Xiao, 2002). In their study of Chinese NGOs, Wu and Chan (2012) define NGOs as "voluntary based, not-for-profit, and private organizations that exhibit a minimum level of institutionalization and self-governance" (10). Once popular usages by practitioners and activists, the term "NGO", along with "civil society", have been increasingly associated with foreign imperial and colonial forces in state propaganda, and targeted by national security laws since the 2012 Xi Jinping administration. The NGO form's rich historical and transnational connections dating back to late imperial Qing and the republican era were invisiblized and erased by nationalistic anti-globalization sentiments. The Chinese party-state developed its own regulatory framework through politics of naming and erasure. As such, social organization (*shehui zuzhi*, 社会组织) is used as an official term to avoid the political connotations attributed to NGOs. According to the 2020 Blue Book of Philanthropy, there are 8.67 million social organizations in China as of 2019. Overseen by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, social organization is an umbrella category consisting of three types of organizations: social groups (*shehui tuanti*, 社会团体) (3.72 million), foundations (*jijin hui*, 基金会) (7,580) and social service organizations (*shehui fuwu zuzhi*, 社会服务组织) (4.87 million), the latter is also referred to as non-commercial enterprises (*minban fei qiye*, 民办非企业). Some social organizations are established and organized by the government, which are called government-organized NGOs (GONGOs), such as the All-

China Women's Federation (全国妇联)and the Federation of Trade Unions (全国总工会). However, these categorizations are more disciplinary than exhaustive, as many rights-based organizations could not register by law in either category. Thus, NGO, the subject of research in this dissertation, refers to *self-governed, not-for-profit organizations initiated by grassroots effort, and relatively independent from the government*. This expansive definition allows me to include groups and organizations which are not registered or are legally recognized as business enterprises due to the stringent social organization registration process.

The academic and activist interest and concern over the issue of labor precarity in the NGO sector arose when I was working as an NGO worker in a civil society research organization in Beijing in 2014. As a 20-year-old grassroots civil society research NGO, our organization was a leading NGO in providing in-depth research and analysis on the Chinese civil society and served as the bilingual channel between China and the rest of the world on the latest civil society initiatives and developments. Our organization had been repetitively targeted by the national security bureau. The perceived danger of NGOs with foreign connection was just beginning to sprout under the Xi Jinping administration in 2012.

Several months prior to the arrests of the "feminist five" for "picking quarrels and provoking troubles" (*xun xin zi shi*, 寻衅滋事), my then-colleague who is a French national, was detained illegally for 10 days, fined 3,000 USD and then deported to France in early January 2015. He was charged of working illegally on a spousal visa. Because our organization had already sponsored a British national on his visa, as a small, registered NGO, we did not have the legal qualification to apply for another working visa for the French colleague. While his illegal working status warranted legal problems, it was illegal for the public security bureau to arrest and detain citizens of foreign

countries or anyone without legal procedures. Around the time my colleague was detained, two other foreign nationals working for international NGOs were also arrested and deported immediately. We had reasons to believe that the visa issue was just a cover-up for the authority's intention to get rid of the French colleague who was very outspoken about Chinese politics and rights issues.

Devastated by the deportation of my colleague, I was further disheartened by the reaction of the NGO director on this incidence. She chose to remain silent about the illegal detainment of the French colleague, and discouraged us from mentioning it to others, as a gesture to show our organization's compliance to the authority. Neither did she concern about and respond to the poor mental status of the rest of the co-workers induced by this sudden traumatic event. Frustration and perplexity about the external and internal suppression imposed by the state and the director of our organization overshadowed my motivation and confidence towards the job and the broader civil society organizing in China. Disillusionment ensued.

The arrests and detentions of my friends and colleague in succession, and the constant censorship and self-censorship in my job, struck me with a painful realization that the prime days of activism when I started feminist campaigns with other women college students around the early 2010s, were gone. The subsequent questions were, why did so many of the activists and NGO workers continue to work under these conditions with heightened political insecurity and economic precarity? And how do we/they care for ourselves/themselves? These questions were what first brought me to my doctoral research. As my activism and observation continue over the years, and I witnessed many internal splits, disputes and injustices within the activist circles and NGOs, due to various reasons, e.g., the lack of institutional support and resource which led to unhealthy

competition between organizations. My blind confidence towards the NGO world and activism started to fade and I became more critical. I came to the realization that a simplistic and liberal account of activists against the authoritarian state could not help to answer my questions nor shed light on the complexity of doing NGO work in China.

NGOs are a world in itself. They consist of individuals with different motivations, desires, personalities, gendered and sexual identities and class differences. NGO work is work, first and foremost, and NGO workers are subjected to labor contracts and are paid for their jobs. The common confusion about the slippery boundary between NGO work and volunteerism makes the claim on the positive valuation of NGO labor difficult. Recent mounting labor disputes within the NGOs, and NGO workers inability to voice out the economic injustices indicate an urgent need to foreground NGOs as economic entities and confront the present and potential mistreatment of workers in NGO workplaces. My research foregrounds *the tension and contradiction between the social reproduction of NGOs and the social reproduction of activist workers*. In particular, I am interested in the questions of how NGO workers and activists understand and carry out their work in relations to the party-state, their domestic and transnational donors, their beneficiaries and fellow activists, and what are their ways of survival in China, where inequality and class differences continue to soar.

Research puzzles

The central tension in this dissertation, is the contradiction between the social reproduction of NGOs and the social reproduction of NGO workers. The NGO form, with its specific relations to the human rights narrative and transnational non-profit funding complex, became the primary organizers of social movement in China since the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing

in 1995. Despite increasing political insecurity and economic precariousness, the desire and optimism to continue organizing is predicated on the continuation and reproduction of NGOs. However, while attention has been given to the reproduction of NGOs in most activist, scholarly, and media discussions, the social reproduction of NGO workers is rarely addressed. Social reproduction, a key Marxist feminist thinking that is developed and debated over the last five decades, has recently been theorized by Tamara Jacka as inclusive of "biological reproduction through childbirth and child rearing; the reproduction of humans, through socialization and education as well as the provision of food, shelter and other goods; the maintenance of human wellbeing through the provision of welfare, health care and other services, and through social and cultural activities; and the reproduction of social relations and social institutions" (Jacka, 2017: 2). This dissertation examines multiple sites of social reproduction: first by exploring the social reproduction functions of the party-state in caring for its citizens, including migrants, sex workers, and LGBT citizens, and discusses how such functions are transferred to the NGOs; second, by examining the social reproduction of NGOs as institutions, as they try to reproduce themselves politically, economically to continue their work on a daily basis, and the ways in which the party-state disrupts the social reproduction of NGOs by characterizing them as moral, illegal, and/or unprofessional work; third, by investigating the social reproduction value of NGOs for transnational non-profit funding complex, as they regard Chinese feminist and LGBT rights NGOs as important actors in making political interventions in China; fourth, by discussing the social reproduction of NGO workers, examining the precarity and affective struggles experienced by them as they try to reproduce themselves despite minimal income, welfare protection, surveillance and censorship. Lastly, social reproduction theory offers analytical framework to theorize the kinds

of labor performed by activist workers which is otherwise dismissed, devalued, and erased by a productivist framework.

This research is in conversation with an interdisciplinary scholarship on state-society relations in China, studies of precarity, Marxist feminist scholarship, affect studies and feminist disability studies. It builds on the insightful theorizations of activism, labor, precarity, and affect of these studies, and advances a vantage point to understand NGO activism in China and beyond, especially in Southern countries where activism is deeply entangled with state governance and funding complex cooptation both domestically and transnationally.

Scholarship on contentious politics in China and Chinese feminist and LGBT activism often pits the state against the activists and NGOs. The western-centric, and state-centered scholarship sees activists as either democratic fighters in an authoritarian country, or the extension of the Chinese state, in a binary framework of oppression versus resistance (Fu, 2017; Hou, 2015; Pun et al, 2016; Wang, 2015; Wu, 2017; Zhang, 2009). In this framework, they tend to look at NGOs as monolithic entities, and choose to focus on a few heroic leaders, thereby dismissing the complex realities individual activist and workers experience, and the pressing reality concerning the labor precarity of these activists. In this regard, besides a few heroes and sheroes, most activists or NGO workers are generalized as instruments of activism.

Studies of precarity and precarious labor inform the theorization of NGO labor that is contingent upon the hierarchical global funding politics and limited-term labor contracts as a form of precarious labor (Alison, 2013, 2016; Carbonella and Kasmir, 2014; Denning, 2010; Gill, 2016; Hardt and Negri, 2000). While attentive to the larger political economic forces that render labor informal, temporary, or contingent, and lives precarious, these studies have elided the significance

to investigate the affective experiences and struggles under the uneven impact of capitalism and global forms of exploitation. Importantly, cultural anthropologists have attuned to precariousness as "a generalized and pervasive human condition" that extends beyond the current political-cultural moment and affects people of all socio-economic groups (Kasmir, 2018). By attending to a wide range of experiences and struggles from economic insecurity, injury, to violence and forced migration, their studies foreground structures of feeling associated with precarious lifeworlds (Alison, 2016; Cvetkovich, 2003, 2012; Stewart, 2007). Building on these different strands of scholarship in exploring precarity and precariousness, my research establishes the connection between precarity as an unstable labor condition NGO activist workers experience, and the ontological condition of precariousness that manifests in their feelings and affect. Paying attention to the affective experiences and struggles of precarity opens up new room to understand the affective responses of precariousness, pointing to the much-needed discussion and theorization of relationality and care. At the same time, my research contributes to studies of affect grounded in materiality, and of its embodied effects. In a way, the affective struggles of the activist workers have very material consequences which cannot be overlooked. I suggest that is a crucial theoretical entry point to understand Chinese feminist and LGBT rights NGO activism beyond a state-centered framework.

My research foregrounds the complexities of NGO work at the conjunction of transnational flows of funding and ideas, the Chinese party-state and the communities activist workers claim to serve. In order to do this, I use labor and affect as analytic categories. Instead of instrumentalizing activist workers and simplify them as heroes or sheroes with high moral value and noble vision, I take an activist-centered approach by acknowledging local activist workers' labor and practical know-how. I theorize the term "activist workers" to highlight the political and labor dimension of

their identities. Activist workers have varied relations to the Chinese party-state, their domestic and transnational donors, beneficiaries and their fellow activities. By looking at activist workers who are differentially positioned, and by asking how they do their work, how they feel about their work, my research moves beyond an economistic model of studies of precarity, to look at the political, economic, and affective dimensions of precarity these activist workers experiences. In particular, I pay attention to the feelings and emotions of these workers, and their affective struggles in relation to their labor precarity.

The feminist political economic perspective, informed by Marxism and Marxist feminist theories, connects the micro with the macro, and offers a materialist and grounded explanation in understanding the ways in which the labor precarity that activist workers in China experience is produced, legitimized and erased. I utilize social reproduction theory to theorize the multiple sites of social reproduction in contention in regard to the party-state, the non-profit funding complex, and the feminist and LGBT rights NGOs and activist workers, as well as to valorize the social reproductive labor of activist workers and volunteers in order to understand why they are precarious and invisiblized. Feminist theories of representation, queer theories and affect studies shed light on how feelings and affects, gendered, racialized, and able-bodied identities and practices, as well as care, are being (re)produced and (re)defined in doing NGO work. Taking Chinese feminist and LGBT rights NGOs as sites of inquiry, this research asks what are the ways in which the labor of activist workers is devalued and erased? How do NGOs and activist workers reproduce affect and feelings, gendered identities and practices through the work they do, and how are these reproductions reflection of the internal NGO structure and the hierarchies in the transnational NGO world? And lastly, how do we (re)define notions, moments and practices of

care in NGO work that are intersected with a multitude of desires, economic imperatives and gendered and class differences?

While my research brings to the fore a sector-wide issue of labor precarity in the NGO world, my research specifically situates in feminist NGOs and LGBT rights NGOs. Feminist NGOs and LGBT rights NGOs are the pioneers in China's civil society in negotiating with state governance, transnational flows of capital and ideas, as well as the key sites of discursive battles on gender, rights and empowerment in mainland China. In addition, NGOs often consist of the individuals who are most affected by the issues that they are trying to address. Activist workers in feminist and LGBT rights organizations are mostly women and sexual minorities, and they embody the kind of feminized and gendered labor this dissertation specifically highlights on. They are also at the forefront of articulating alternative narratives of survival, care and relating. Thus, these NGOs are the case exemplar for starting the conversation on NGO work, labor precarity, and neoliberal governance in China.

Arguments

This dissertation explores the central tension and contradiction between the social reproduction of NGOs and the social reproduction of activist workers in the People's Republic of China since the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. First, it investigates how feminist and LGBT rights NGOs are a specifically Chinese formation that is entangled with state regulation and the transnational non-profit funding complex. I theorize the mechanisms of triple erasure of moralization, illegalization, and professionalization in which the party-state absorbs the social reproduction function of NGOs while containing their political influence. At the same time, the transnational non-profit funding complex utilizes NGOs for political intervention in China.

The party-state's dynamic relations with the transnational non-profit funding complex foster a shifting enabling or disabling environment for these NGOs to socially reproduce themselves. This results in the devaluation and erasure of feminist and LGBT rights NGOs, as well as the labor value of activist workers. In particular, I theorize mental, emotional, communicative, and caring labor as the kinds of social reproductive labor activist workers perform. Though invisiblized and devalued as gendered and racialized labor, I suggest that they are of value because they require labor time socially necessary towards the execution and completion of NGO projects. Yet, the socially necessary labor time invested in the labor could not translate into exchange value in the NGO sector. This is because NGOs produce services and products that are not marketable. Thus, it requires an alternative model of evaluation of such work. Although, as I will show in later chapters, some NGOs are marketing their services to become business enterprises, which fly under the radar of Chinese state surveillance.

Second, I suggest that the affective struggles of activist workers are the embodied effects of the very contradictions of state-NGO relations in China. The tension between the social reproduction of NGOs and the social reproduction of activist workers lies in the affective and emotional capacity, or lack of thereof, for the activist workers to reproduce themselves. By valorizing the affective dimension of precarity, I examine the ways in which the mechanisms of erasure transfer the cost and responsibility of social reproduction, one being the party-state welfare responsibilities, and the other being the social reproduction of NGOs, onto the bodies of NGO workers, interns and volunteers. Their burnout, depression and trauma become what social

reproduction theorists[2] would call the "hidden abode" of reproduction. These processes are reflective of China's shifting modes of neoliberal statecraft and governance, and its increasing retreat from its social and welfare responsibilities, which are partially sustained by NGO workers' cheap and devalued labor.

Third, I argue that the contradictory affect of hope is precisely how activist workers are exploited at the intersection of state violence and the professionalizing NGO sector. My research shows the ways in which these feelings that fuel the activism can also serve to invisiblize and erase the workers' affective labor, and legitimize power inequalities and disputes in activism. The cruel activism lies in that the care and reciprocity these young feminist and queer activist workers so long for in these organizing spaces, are soon overshadowed by the overall precarity of the NGO sector, and an exploitation of their gendered and racialized labor in the hierarchical NGO sector.

Far from the rosy pictures of justice, equality and freedom they paint for themselves before entering the turbulent NGO world, activist workers find themselves caught up in complicated webs of unequal relations: with their donors, beneficiaries, and with other activist workers and volunteers. These unequal relationships have been structured by multiple hierarchies of power and racialized politics in the NGO world, between the transnational and the local, the urban and the rural, the external and the internal. Multiple and contradictory affects of hope, cosmopolitanism,

[2] In Nancy Fraser's "Behind Marx's Hidden Abode", she theorizes the "hidden abode" of production, which is social reproduction. I suggest here that the more invisible "hidden abode" of reproduction is born by caregivers.

disappointment, anger, burnout and depression in NGO work tell a story of why NGO activism in China, as in many other Global South countries in the world, is cruel.

Fourth, in the dynamic relationship with the party-state and the domestic and transnational NGO funding complex, and in their struggles to survive and thrive, these activist workers display the contradiction and interplay of agency and conformity whereby they reshape, revise or reinforce norms associated with gender, sexuality and neoliberal standards of productivity and able-bodiedness. I suggest that NGO workers utilize various strategies to negotiate NGO work, and that they create, reinvent alternative networks of care to socially reproduce themselves.

Research Significance

This dissertation contributes to an interdisciplinary scholarship at the intersection of gender and sexuality, China and Asian Studies, and Labor studies. First, my research on Chinese feminist and LGBT rights NGO activism sheds light on pluralizing feminist and queer politics as it can take multiple forms across social, cultural and geopolitical borders. It informs and draws parallels to movements in the Global North as the hope for transformative justice confirms activists' attachments to the state policies and the non-profit systems, which work to sustain the exploitation of their labor and symptoms of political depression.

Second, building on transnational feminist theorizing of the state and NGOs as processes rather than fixed and confrontational entities, my research advances studies of state-society relations, feminist and LGBT activism in China, by providing a materialist and ethnographic account of doing NGO work. My research moves beyond a binary framework of either treating China as a third-world country or an authoritarian party-state and advances a South-focused and

decolonial analysis of precarious social movements by foregrounding local working experiences and highlighting uneven global powers shaping complex local realities.

Third, my research theorizes NGO work as an emerging form of precarious labor structured by state governance and funding complex domination. Instead of prioritizing the economistic notion of precarity, my research contributes to studies of precarity by foregrounding the affective dimension of precarity and valorizes the significance of the political economy of affect in theorizing activism. By delineating and documenting the affective experience of precariousness, it not only allows for a more expansive exploration of precarity in the contemporary geopolitical and socioeconomic landscape, but it also sheds light on studies of affect in understanding the materiality of emotions and feelings, as well as affect's embodied forms and effects.

Lastly, building on a feminist political/relational model of disability, this dissertation addresses a wide array of able-bodied practices and able-minded mentality saturated in productivist framework in NGOs, and calls for a feminist political economic method that can allow flourishing lives by advocating for equal protection for workers with different abilities.

This dissertation is an invitation for more academic and activist dialogues and writings on NGO labor and precarity, movement building, relationality and care in the "South" of global and regional geographies. As a feminist scholar-activist, I hope to facilitate more constructive conversations that are conducive to a self-sustaining and caring activist community, one that is reflexive to the dynamics between macro political economic structures, state governance, and affective responses and struggles of individual activist workers.

Ethnography

My ten years of involvement in gender and sexuality organizations since 2010 firmly situate me as a scholar-activist in the field. I have worked with multiple international organizations, grassroots NGOs, and have had the opportunity to engage with institutional actors such as the women's federation and other Government-organized NGOs (GONGOs). I did a pilot field research in the summer of 2018 in the city of Beijing and the city of Kunming, Yunnan province. In Beijing and Kunming, I conducted individual semi-structural interviews with workers in NGOs, public and private foundations, as well as GONGOs. The pilot research indicated the passing of the Charity Law in 2016 and the Foreign NGO Management Law in 2017, as well as the tightening control of the Chinese state over social organizations since 2012, put grassroots NGOs in an even more precarious position. At the same time, it was intriguing to see a plethora of domestic philanthropic initiatives burgeon, such as the heated debate over "the commercialization of philanthropy" (*gongyi shangye hua*, 公益商业化). Inspired by the social enterprise model originated in UK, "the commercialization of philanthropy" resorts to using commercial logics to run philanthropic programs. There has also been increasing investment from the state in terms of "government purchasing programs" (*zhengfu goumai xiangmu*, 政府购买项目), outsourcing government welfare services to social work organizations and NGOs. Based on my initial observation, I decided to conduct in-depth ethnographic research in three grassroots NGOs in my year-long fieldwork in 2019-2020.

This dissertation is based on archival study, participatory observation, my fifteen-month doctoral fieldwork from 2018 to 2020 in multiple locations in the People's Republic of China, as well as my autoethnography as a bisexual activist. I participated in feminist activist demonstrations,

and queer community building initiatives as a scholar-activist since 2010. Parts of the ethnographic stories presented in this dissertation are drawn from my first-hand experience working in several Chinese NGOs, including my fulltime job as an editor and writer in a civil society research NGO from 2014 to 2016, and my involvement as a steering committee member in a regional lesbian organization from 2015 to 2018.

During my field work, I conducted a year-long institutional ethnography in three grassroots NGOs (a rural women NGO "Sun Rise[3]", a migrant sex worker NGO "Green Flower", and a LGBT NGO "Fierce Love"). The three organizations are in different relationships to the party-state, the domestic and transnational donors and in different areas of focus in the field of gender and sexuality, namely, the sexual minorities, migrant sex workers and rural women. The different cities they locate in also bring interesting comparisons of local politics and NGO strategies. I spent an average of three to four months in each organization, working as either their intern, or volunteer. By working on their projects, I got to experience firsthand of being a worker in their organizations, and had the opportunity to engage with their donors, beneficiaries, and sometimes with the police.

Besides archival research and ethnography, I carried out eighty semi-structured interviews with fifty-eight feminist and LGBT NGO workers, twelve volunteers, six donors and four partner organizations with the NGOs. As a keen participant and observer of Chinese feminist and LGBT NGO activism and dissatisfied by a simplified conclusion drawn by many activist and scholarly inquiries centered on political oppression, my graduate study and doctoral fieldwork guide me to explore the tension and contradiction between the social reproduction of NGOs and the social

[3] In order to maintain confidentiality, I use pseudonyms for these NGOs.

reproduction of activist workers. I am interested in examining the ways in which social reproductive labor of Chinese feminist and LGBT rights NGO workers is devalued and erased, and how such devaluation and erasure is part and parcel to maintain the prevailing structure and inequality fortressed by post-socialist state governance and funding complex domination. By doing so, I aim to excavate the hidden connection between NGO labor precarity, affective stakes, state governance, transnational geo-politics and non-profit funding complex.

Three NGOs

Sun Rise is a grassroots NGO founded in 2013 on rural women development. Recognizing the unique challenges to rural women and children who are left behind in the villages in China's rapid modernization, Sun Rise designs and implements projects to empower rural women and children on a wider range of issues including cultural life, health, rights and capacity building. By providing grants for local rural women's groups to organize, facilitating a series of capacity training workshops, and developing gender awareness raising toolkits, Sun Rise has supported over a hundred rural women's groups and helped built community centers in more than thirty villages across China. In addition, Sun Rise focuses on the wellbeing and education of rural women and children by developing toolkits on sex education for children. The organization also explores and invests in rural revitalization projects and ecological agricultural business. Located in a southern city, Sun Rise benefits from its founder's business connection and resource to fund its projects. Rural women development aligns with state-sponsored poverty elimination and rural revitalization schemes, which has singled out rural women as a "vulnerable group" (*ruoshi qunti*, 弱势群体) and underutilized population whose labor should be deployed more effectively (Jacka

and Sargeson, 2011). Therefore, Sun Rise taps into these development programs and has been able to grow even under shrinking space for civil society organizing in China.

Green Flower was initially established as a sex worker rights NGO in 2008. Funded by international NGOs and foundations, Green Flower has undertaken outreach, research and advocacy work on behalf of sex workers. The three areas of work are interdependent of each other, as outreach work produces needs assessment of the sex workers, which facilitates the design of the research, and advocacy is based on outreach work and the findings of the research. This participatory and action-oriented research resembles one of the most typical intervention methods of international organizations in Global South countries. International NGOs and foundations are keen on funding those local NGOs who can make policy and public impact, and they prioritize NGOs' advocacy capacity. However, as advocacy work became increasingly challenging to deliver in China since 2012, Green Flower shifted their focus to outreach and service and started to cultivate their relationship with domestic funders. This transition was facilitated by Green Flower's institutional connection with public health state agencies such as the Center for Disease Control in the past, as well as its rebranding as a migrant women organization by tapping into the state's migrant labor policies and collaborating with the local civil affairs bureau and women's federation. Nonetheless, the loss of international funding, and the labor-intensive domestic funding requirement have taken a toll on Green Flower, as the size of the NGO shrink, and they could no longer have more than one full-time staff since late 2018.

Fierce Love was founded by leading LGBT activists in the year 2008. Located in a large city in north China, Fierce Love has been supported by international NGOs and foundations on human rights research and campaign. As a pioneering rights-based organization, Fierce Love recruits a

large number of interns and volunteers in community organizing, media and marketing, and research and advocacy. Since early 2010s, Fierce Love has focused on LGBT mental health and rights, launching several influential campaigns against conversion therapy targeting LGBT people, as well as the de-pathologization of transgender people in China. The NGO has been providing awareness-raising training to LGBT-friendly therapists for over ten years. At the same time, police surveillance, harassment, and interrogation have become the norm for NGO activist workers in Fierce Love for their rights activism. Due to the increasing challenge to receive international funding, the organization started their journey to develop income-generating business premised on their previous collaboration with LGBT-friendly therapists, hoping to market their mental health training and toolkits to potential consumers in this niche market. As such, Fierce Love ventured into establishing a social enterprise which can sustain its operation by the revenue it generates. Their aim is to support the NGO work with the social enterprise. This is primarily because domestic donors and state agencies are either hesitant, or unwilling to fund initiatives related to sexual minorities, given that the topic remains a taboo that is highly stigmatized in the Chinese society. Furthermore, Fierce Love's history with rights-based activism has made them a constant target of national security police. Going into business seems the only viable path for the NGO as business is less intervened than activism in China.

Fieldwork during Covid-19

I began my year-long ethnography in the summer of 2019. I had planned to spend the whole year in three different NGOs. I spent the first four months in the first organization, which is a rural women NGO. Walking in southern and northern villages in China and visiting rural women groups, it was a rare and unforgettable experience for a city girl like me. I travelled to Beijing in autumn,

for the second field site in a LGBT NGO. However, no one could have ever predicted, the usual Spring Festival break in January would mark a catastrophic global public health crisis which claimed millions of lives in the world. The COVID-19 pandemic, as we now refer to, first hit China, and quickly spread over the globe, swallowing lives, striking hard on the economy and livelihoods, and made social distancing and quarantine a new normal for human connection and existence.

Like everyone else, my fieldwork was interrupted because of the pandemic. Life under quarantine for the first three months has been filled with despair, loneliness and anger. We witnessed a massive amount of loss which was hard to comprehend in this so-called modern and technologically advanced era. Questions about governance, individual privacy, and international relations became the daily topics of individuals in China, which were especially paramount for civil society organizations and activists working on sensitive issues. The justification of the unapologetic gathering of human biological and medical data, as well as the enabling of the tracking of individual movement via cell-phone network and GPS location sharing under this global pandemic emergency, provoked the fear of many Chinese activists of the normalization of these "emergency measures". Under these extreme circumstances, the organizations I was working with, including many others, struggled to continue their work online.

In late January when the Spring Festival holiday ended, it was time for migrant workers including white collar workers, to travel back to the cities of work. It posed a great threat of human-to-human transmission especially in the early stage of understanding the virus. People organized on social media to voice out their concern over the further spreading of the virus. One of the most significant events was the 48-hour online campaign led by Chinese LGBT activists, to pressure the People's Congress to extend the public holiday so people could stay home until the first

incubation period passed. The campaign which I also took part in, mobilized over 500 persons to join the working group and assigned them with different tasks. We wrote campaign articles and posted them on social media platforms, and we also lobbied our friends and colleagues. In the end, the posts garnered a readership of 2 million collectively. A few days later, the People's Congress released a statement that public holidays would be extended to February 10th. Although there had been other expert advice and similar netizen proposals, the campaign led by LGBT activists was certainly one of the loudest and most powerful.

The pandemic hit the individuals who were most marginalized and vulnerable the hardest. The delivery workers, the care takers and factory workers who could not enjoy the "work from home" policy faced greater risk of exposure to virus because their jobs require physical presence. It was not a surprise that the LGBT activists stepped up to advocate because they have been working for the most underprivileged and marginalized in terms of sexuality and class. For instance, the Wuhan LGBT center helped thousands of gay men with HIV/AIDs who were trapped in villages when transportation broke down during quarantine, to get medication from the local CDCs (Center for Disease Control). The difficulty of organizing solely based on the issue of sexuality in China has also pushed these LGBT organizations to build cross community networks and collaborations. The 48-hour campaign was an example of such attempt.

The skills and tactics utilized by LGBT NGO activist workers in the campaign were years of experiences of dealing with Chinese authorities. They understood the rules of maneuvering spaces in China, and of walking a fine line between dissent and cooperation in relation to the party-state. Even though I found it intriguing at first about their language of appealing to state-centered narratives which ran counter to the human rights discourse these LGBT activists would most often

adopt in challenging state surveillance and censorship. The knowledge of local networks and local government politics, which was gained in a hard way through activism, was crucial to their successful organizing in the crisis of COVID-19.

Like many other organizations and business enterprises, the LGBT center I worked with was severely impacted by the pandemic. Most of their activities were designed to be in-person. They also had to pay for the expensive rent and staff costs which didn't generate any income or put to use during the lockdown. In fact, many businesses went into bankrupt only a few months into the pandemic. The LGBT center switched their programs to target specifically pandemic related issues, such as providing support groups for LGBT persons who were experiencing depression and anxiety because they were trapped in their natal homes without peer support from their community. For those who were not out to their family members, the lockdown intensified the isolation and increased the chance of conflict between family members over issues of gender expression, sexuality and marriage, which often led to family violence. Domestic violence rates soared during the lockdown, and news media reported that the application for divorce increased in many cities in several months after the pandemic hit. Anti-domestic organizations also offered emergency hotline and support to domestic violence victims during the pandemic, and they created pandemic-specific help-seeking guideline to disseminate on the Internet.

It became evident that it was the individuals, groups, and social organizations including NGOs, who organized to help address the increasing public discontent towards the Chinese government's intervention on the pandemic. Medical professionals, activists and ordinary citizens wrote diaries from the epic center of the disease in Wuhan and exposed fabrication of stories and death toll by authorities. Journalists, academics, and activists facilitated the donation and delivery of crucial

feminine hygiene products to women medical staffs in the hospitals in lockdown cities. NGOs and academic institutions organized online sharing events, self-care writing groups and support group consultations free of charge to everyone. It has also become apparent that after the breakout of the pandemic, activist and NGO work has moved to specifically target care provisioning and mental health issues, as well as the revival of livelihoods for their beneficiaries.

NGOs' responses to COVID-19 reflect the larger issues of shrinking civil society, crisis of social reproduction and care in China. It highlights the incapability of the government in dealing with public discontent. Rather, citizens formed voluntary groups to counter government censorship and provided critical support to those in need. NGOs played a vital role in helping to establish the connection between those who were in danger, and those who could help. However, as we moved into the latter stage when the Chinese state began to censor information, shutting down public dissent voices on social media platforms, as well as rewriting the nationalist script of "the state led the people to conquer the virus", the spaces for earlier activism shrunk. The censorship of critical information and dissent voices triggered further discontent from the general public, especially the netizens. Millions of people expressed their anger and their desire for freedom of speech on social media platforms. Unfortunately, the posts were wiped out almost overnight. The pandemic was a critical moment for China's civil society because ordinary people learnt the hard way that economic security and social privilege could not protect their lives from the hands of a corrupt and dysfunctional government. As I am completing this dissertation in May 2022 in Seattle, more than two years after when the pandemic first hit, Chinese cities such as Shanghai and Jilin have been in months of lock down due to the spreading new variants of the corona virus. Extraordinary and heartbreaking stories have been shared and censored online where people with chronic illness and other emergencies were unable to seek treatment and died, babies were forced to be quarantined

without their parents, and people were evicted from their apartments to comply with pandemic regulations. These disheartening moments have been endless. Questions and critique about China's tough "zero-Covid" policies abound, and the ever more top-down tightening control of the Chinese government over the society raises red flags for many depoliticized ordinary citizens. Many more are agitated, in fear, and in desperate desire for change.

It is under this backdrop of emergency, crisis, and survival that I conducted my fieldwork. Although this dissertation will not focus specifically on the case of the pandemic, these extraordinary moments are the cases in point to shed light on the complexity of doing NGO work in China, of dealing with the local politics and government, of negotiating relationships with overseas donors, and of supporting and working with their beneficiaries.

Chapter summary

Chapter two, ***NGOizing China: feminist and LGBT rights NGOs as Chinese formations,*** theorizes feminist and LGBT rights NGOs as specifically Chinese formations with historical and transnational roots. It critically engages with scholarship on state-society relations in China, studies of precarity and precariousness, and introduces the central theoretical framework of this dissertation, the social reproduction theory in theorizing NGOs as important social reproduction sites for the party-state and non-profit funding complex, the social reproduction of NGOs and activist workers, as well as ruminating on the forms and valuation of NGO labor/work.

Chapter three, ***The "good" NGO work: precarity, tension and opportunity,*** explores the contested terrain of doing NGO work in China since 2012. It foregrounds three types of NGO

projects feminist and LGBT NGOs maneuver on the ground, as well as the precarity, tension, and opportunity each of these projects bring to NGO workers and their beneficiaries. By comparing the human rights projects, gender and development projects with the state-sponsored projects, I suggest these different political economic projects give rise to distinctive ways of organizing. These include access to different streams of funding with varying degrees of vulnerability, different processes of monitoring by the state, and more or less room for strategic maneuvering.

Chapter four is entitled ***Mechanisms of Triple Erasure: Labor precarity of Chinese feminist and LGBT NGO activism***. It theorizes the ways in which state- and market- orchestrated processes of moralization, illegalization and professionalization that disrupts the social reproduction of feminist and LGBT NGOs by characterizing them as moral, illegal and/or unprofessional work. In the dynamic relationship with the state and the domestic and transnational NGO funding complex, and in their struggles to survive and thrive, feminist and LGBT activist workers display the contradiction and interplay of agency and conformity whereby they reshape, revise or reinforce norms associated with gender, sexuality and neoliberal standards of productivity and efficiency.

Chapter five ***Cruel activism: affective struggles in the NGO world*** excavates undocumented and forgotten stories of feelings in the NGO world. The relations of care and reciprocity NGO activist workers foster in their work, complicate the professional relationship of giving and receiving. Nevertheless, such ties are affected by different notions and standards of care, as well as economic imperatives of NGO workers and their beneficiaries. I aim to demonstrate that the care and solidarity between NGO workers and their colleagues, donors and beneficiaries are shaped by multiple unequal relations between the transnational and the local, the urban and the rural, and the institutional and internal politics, and can be easily compromised by affective and

material constraints. In particular, I make the connection between emotional labor and the affective regimes of NGO work, parceling out the gendered ethics, standards of care that comprise the mechanics of NGO work, and its (un)intended consequences of contradictory affects. Lastly, this chapter ends on the discussion of the limitation of the politics of care in NGO activism and its possible futures.

Grounded in two labor disputes in two NGOs, chapter six ***Managing "unproductive workers": ableism, depression and NGO labor disputes*** examines how NGOs manage "unproductive" workers, including workers with depression. It highlights able-bodied and able-minded practices in NGOs and interrogates the non-profit sector which internalizes the logics of the market and neoliberal governance by valorizing standards of ableism, competence and productivity. By drawing the connection between productivity and ableism, I seek to foreground labor disputes in NGOs which are oftentimes dismissed as the cost and consequences of activism under political pressure. The displacement of labor rights issue with the fear of political suppression works to justify oppressive violations of the Labor Law and anti-feminist work ethics around the workplace, and thus rendered them inconsequential and random episodes of a growing movement. I also briefly discuss the transnational production of worker subjectivities and the differential understanding of depression and able-bodied narratives embedded in transnational circuits of inequalities.

Epilogue follows the movement of the activist workers surveyed in this dissertation and reflect on the tensions and negotiations between NGO management and other workers. By returning to my original impulse and desire to begin this research, which is what does work mean to people, I discuss the entanglement of work and life for activist workers, and the need to foreground the

tension between the social reproduction of NGOs and the social reproduction of activist workers materially and affectively, in future activist and scholarly discussions of NGO organizing and movement building in the "South" of global and regional geographies.

Chapter Two

NGOizing China: feminist and LGBT rights NGOs as Chinese formations

The NGO form in contemporary China could best be understood as a product with both historical and transnational roots. Early forms of NGOs in late imperial China were large kin-based organizations, and later metamorphosed into trade and occupational associations in the republican era as business opportunities proliferated with thriving economy and exchange, accelerating internal migration (Goodman, 1995). These local and grassroots initiatives reflected bottom-up efforts in building the proto-type NGOs in China. At the same time, foreign missionary groups brought into China models of associational life in the US and elsewhere, generating dynamic energy and debate with respect to questions of national development, colonialism, and transnationalism (Thomson, 1969). Thus, as the tales of the modern NGO form in China most frequently reference the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 as its inception, it is important to connect with its historical and transnational lineage that predates 1995.

This chapter foregrounds Chinese feminist and LGBT rights NGOs as a specifically Chinese formation with historical and transnational roots. First, it suggests that the social reproduction of Chinese feminist and LGBT rights NGOs is entangled with state governance and the transnational non-profit funding complex. The first session delineates the trajectory of the making of the modern NGO form in China and marks several significant events that generated renewed interests and debates over discourses on, and translations of "NGO" and "civil society" in the past three decades since the economic reform of 1980s. It grounds the contemporary development of feminist and LGBT rights NGO activism in the feminist literature of the NGO form in relation to questions of feminist and LGBT struggles, the states and neoliberalism. Second, it engages in critical

conversations with studies of state-society relations in China, studies of precarity as a labor condition and precariousness as an ontological state of insecurity and vulnerability to theorize NGO work as a form of precarious labor, as well as conceptualization of NGOs beyond a state-centered framework, but rather, in a process- and activist-oriented approach. Third, I introduce social reproduction theory, the major theoretical framework in the dissertation to theorize the forms and valuation of labor in NGO work.

Feminist and LGBT rights NGOs as Chinese formations

Metamorphosis of NGOs and civil society

The NGO form, or social organizations as we know of today, have gone through tumultuous changes in the history of modern China. Its early forms took shape in late imperial China and the republican era. Immigrants separated from their native place to live and work in other places of China started to form large kin-based organizations, called *tongxiang* (同乡) associations (Goodman, 1995). Trade and occupational organizations were also established as grassroots initiatives to facilitate networking, cooperation, and business. Among the China historians that debated whether China had "incipient civil society" outside of state influence and "public sphere" activities identical to that of their western counterpart, a group of Chinese scholars engaged in studies of chambers of commerce, student and scholar associations, and other associations during that time (Kuhn, 1991; Ma, 1995; Pye, 2001; Rankin, 1986; Rowe, 1989; Zhu, 1997). These studies show that these modern Chinese associations were "formally established and professionally managed", and "demonstrated a certain degree of democratic and voluntary nature", as well as exhibiting strong western influence, which were contrary to earlier kin-based organizations (Ma, 2006: 37-38). In late Qing and early Republic, various social movements such as the May Fourth

student movement and labor uprisings initiated in Beijing and Shanghai were born out of lively debates with Western ideologies, colonial influence and discontent with a weak national government (Ma, 1995; Thomson, 1969;). Multiple transnational philanthropic projects were facilitated by incoming foreign missionary groups. They helped establish some of the earliest international NGOs in China including the YWCA [4] and YMCA (Qu, 2010). International foundations such as the Rockefeller Foundation promoted Western scientific medical discourse and the educational model, which culminated in the building of the Peking Union Medical College (Bays, 1996; Bullock, 1980, 2011; Graham, 1995; Ninkovich, 1984). Without a centralized government, there was relative freedom of association during the republican era.

With the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Chinese society became a "total society" where the party-state monopolized power and resource, redistributing them through the *danwei* (work unit) system (Wang, 1994). *Danwei* blurred the distinction between the state, the society and the individuals, and connected them via its wholesome bureaucratic, economic and redistributive systems. In state socialism, "production and reproduction, entitlement and obligations, and economic functions and social importance" were all bundled together (Zhan, 2020: 70). Little space was left for autonomous organizing. Formally established social groups were either paralyzed or disbanded. Except for trade associations and the Red Guards, which were bottom-up initiatives during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. However, scholars

[4] YWCA stands for Young Women's Christian Association of the United States of America, and YMCA stands for Young Men's Christian Association of the United States of America.

question the independence of the Red Guards as they functioned as political tools of Mao Zedong's revolution (Ma, 2006).

The market reform in the 1980s was a process of reconfiguring responsibilities of the socialist *danwei* system. As the socialist planned economy began to liberalize, *danwei*'s welfare functions were separated from its production function. The social reproductive services, such as day-care centers and allocation of housing, were gradually privatized under the market reform (Xu and Song, 2018). On the one hand, workers were no longer entitled to the rights and benefits working for the state enterprises, and they were told to use their salaries to purchase those services from the market. On the other hand, voluntary organizations, which were either banned or taken over by the state in the socialist period, resurfaced to fulfill the welfare functions the state has retreated from in the 1980s (Whiting, 1991). Most of the organizations founded during this time were academic and occupational associations (He and Wang, 2008). According to the Blue Book on Civil Society Development in China, independent social organizations either operating in grey areas or being explicitly targeted by the state such as religious and political groups were established bottom-up, but they were not widely known to the public. The burgeoning of social organizations was nipped in the bud following the political turmoil in 1989. The party-state reinstated it firm grip on social organizing at large. In a few years' time, the Chinese state utilized the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 in Beijing as an opportunity to regain political legitimacy and reputation, as well as benefiting from the global funding of "violence against women" (VAW) and human rights (Xu, 2009).

There were two milestones that marked the consolidation of the contemporary NGO form and the introduction of the term "civil society" in China, which were the Fourth World Conference on

Women in Beijing in 1995, and the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008. The Fourth World Conference on Women was significant in many ways. On the one hand, it was a power struggle between the Chinese state and women's rights activists. The party-state made a compromise by opening institutional spaces that allowed women's rights NGOs in China to proliferate prior to the event. Chinese women's rights activists took advantage of these international and institutional opportunities. Yet, the state deliberately tried to tame the NGO forum's political influence and the sensationalist rumors of a lesbian bare-breasted public demonstration by moving the Forum to the suburbs of Huairou, fifty kilometers from downtown Beijing (Wei, 2015; Wilson, 1996; Xu, 2009). On the other hand, the Conference was a watershed moment for transnational feminism and LGBT activism. Not only was the liberal feminist agenda of "Women's rights are human rights" famously endorsed by the speech of Hillary Clinton, the then First Lady of the United States, the controversial "lesbian tent" and "Lesbians are women. Lesbian rights are women's rights" was put forward by Palesa Ditsie, the first openly lesbian and anti-Apartheid activist from South Africa (Wei, 2015; Wilson, 1996). The Fourth World Conference on Women was a crucial institutional space that addressed intersectional feminist concerns and struggles. It introduced the NGO form as legitimate organizational platform endorsed by the Chinese state, and brought in ideologies, frameworks and funding related to VAW and other human rights issues to China (Xu, 2009).

These transnational funding and opportunities also bred a new generation of Chinese philanthropists aiming to solve China's social problems. The Wenchuan earthquake in 2008 was dubbed by Chinese practitioners and popular media as the "year-one" of China's civil society and volunteerism (*gongmin shehui yuannian* 公民社会元年) (Xu, 2017). Thousands of Chinese joined disaster relief efforts and formed volunteer initiatives, and philanthropic funding from the party-state and the domestic foundations poured into the domestic NGO sector (Kang, 2021). The

domestic philanthropic industry was also in forming. One hundred and fifty-three domestic foundations were founded in 2008, and many were founded by major corporations after the disaster (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2009). International NGOs were eager to seek collaborations with local NGOs. Grassroots initiatives sought to learn from these experiences to better coordinate relief efforts, and there were growing conversations on participatory democracy, empowerment and independence from the central government. Yet, the government took over most of the NGO-initiated shelter facility and community rebuilding projects only a year after the disaster (Kang, 2021).

Since the 1990s, with growing discussion of NGOs and civil society, efforts were made by Chinese scholars to translate the latter into Chinese. There are multiple competing translations of "civil society" with different emphasis and concerns. The earliest translation of civil society to "*gongmin shehui*" where "*gongmin*" (公民) means citizen, and "*shehui*" (社会) means society, was in 1988. Scholars used "*gongmin"* to challenge the party-state's interpretation of citizen, which was distinctive to that of "*qunzhong*" (群众，masses), powerful forces in communist mobilization (Liu and Wang, 1988: 9-12). "*Gongmin*", "represents a new image of Chinese people who take responsibility for the public good and behave accordingly, in comparison to the Western notion of citizen as a signifier of individual rights for property, political power, and social or economic welfare" (Ma, 2006:19). The other two translations are ancient Chinese terms. "*Shimin shehui*" with "*shimin*" (市民) meaning townspeople, and "*minjian shehui*" with "*minjian*" (民间) meaning literally people and their space, often interpreted as popular society (Ma, 2006:18). While "*shimin*" does not carry the notion of political rights and was less circulated than "*gongmin*", the concept "*min*" (people) in "*mingjian*", stands in contrast with "*guan*" (官,officials or government), and therefore was later argued against by some scholars as they did not view the state-society relations

in China as oppositional. Ma Qiusha, a scholar on Chinese NGOs, suggests that "most scholars in Taiwan use *minjian shehui* with the intention of preserving China's tradition and making a strong political statement. In mainland China, on the other hand, their counterparts choose a more neutral term, *gongmin shehui* or *shimin shehui*, because they are seeking 'the constructive and interactive relationship between state and society" (Ma, 2006:22). These translational politics indicate the rich connotations of the work "civil" and the complex origin of the term civil society.

The two decades between the early 1990s and early 2010s are the prime days for NGO activism in China. According to incomplete statistics by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the number of social organizations increased from 10,836 in 1990 to that of 8.67 million in 2019. On the one hand, the Chinese state relies on social organizations to bring in international funding and fulfilling social welfare functions. On the other hand, the Chinese state ensures the compliance of NGOs through top-down control and co-optation (Hildebrandt, 2011; Wu and Chan, 2012). Sanctioned by law, the state "recognizes one and only one association as representing a given constituency" (Unger, 2008:7), which is government-organized NGOs (GONGO). NGOs must look for a supervising unit (a GONGO) in their field to sponsor their registration and vouch for their annual reviews. The hierarchies between the state, the GONGOs and NGOs reinforce the control of the Chinese state over the civil society.

NGOs in China fulfill various economic functions guided by the state mandates, including promoting economic growth, proliferating social enterprises, innovating governance, and expanding foreign exchange[5]. Empirical evidence suggest that NGOs and local governments

[5] General Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China on social organization reforms.

develop "contingent symbiotic" relationships (Spires, 2011). By channeling international and domestic funding through local governments, NGOs strategically maneuver spaces of activism. Since the 2012 Xi Jinping administration, the socio-political influence of NGOs has become a cause for concern to the Chinese state. NGOs have increasingly become subjects of surveillance as the central government grows hostile to foreign influences (*waiguo digui shili*, 外国敌对势力). The once celebrated transnational connections are deemed susceptible of inciting Color Revolutions (*yanse geming,* 颜色革命), which refer to protest movements named after a color or flower since the 1980s. In countries with socialist past and relations such as China and Russia, state propaganda suggests that Color Revolutions are manipulated by the US and other Western powers, posing vital threats to the public and national security. The Chinese party-state has used various means to co-opt NGOs with state-funding, regulate NGOs by drafting new laws and restrictions, or eliminate those they consider to be "corrupted" by foreign imperialist agendas. The end of the "civil society era" was marked by the 37-day arrests of five young feminists for their intended public acts in 2015, and the subsequent arrests of hundreds of labor rights activists and human rights lawyers (Wang, 2015). Rumors have it that "*gongmin shehui*" became a taboo to talk about as one of the seven serious ideological problems warranted by the top party leaders in 2013[6]. The passing of the 2016 Charity Law (慈善法) and 2017 Foreign NGO Management Law (境外组织管理法) is one example of how legality could be utilized to disempower certain rights-based groups in China. The Charity Law promises to smooth how NGOs could register and raise funds, yet in reality, they struggle to find a government supervising unit to sponsor their registration. For

[6] https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/14/world/asia/chinese-leaders-warn-of-dangerous-western-values.html?ref=china

rights-based NGOs, their "illegal" status raises grave concern for them because domestic or international foundations could not fund unregistered organizations in China under the Foreign NGO Management Law. It becomes a vicious cycle when these groups continue to receive funding from overseas organizations which are unregistered in China and thus remain "illegal". The shrinking spaces for activism not only send strong signal to those working on politicized agendas, but also influence the decisions and livelihood of those who seem more benign to the state.

NGOization of Feminist and LGBT activism

Transnational philanthropic ventures can be dated back to the early eighteenth century with multimillionaires such as John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and Russell Sage setting up private foundations in the US. The early philanthropists created these institutions with humanist, colonial mindsets working on scientific research to cure "social ills" both at home and abroad (Brown, 1976). Registered as non-profits in the US, these transnational organizations helped the capitalists shield their earning from taxation while serving as vanguards in opening new markets for imperial and capitalist expansion with a benevolent facade. As of late 1970s the Reagan Administration began privatizing public services, more and more organizations operating in the 501© (3) non-profit model in compliance with the Internal Revenue Service grew in numbers to fill the social welfare gap abandoned by the neoliberal state (Incite, 2007). This process has also been referred to as responsibilization where non-state actors, including the for-profit and non-profit sectors, become the providers of social welfare services and delivery other than the state (Trnka and Trundle, 2017). Scholars of development point out that the non-profit sector, albeit unintentionally, helps reconfigure responsibility under neoliberalism (Edelman and Haugerud, 2005; Ferguson, 2015; Ferguson and Gupta, 2002; Petras, 1997, 1999). In the ensuing decades,

the institutionalization of social movements evolves into a full-blown transnational NGO industry, with increasing professionalization, standardization, and evaluation metrics.

NGOization is the process that "social movements professionalize, institutionalize, and bureaucratize in vertically structured, policy-outcome–oriented organizations that focus on generating issue-specific and, to some degree, marketable expert knowledge or services", and that "emphasis is placed on organizational reproduction and on the cultivation of funding sources" (Lang, 2013:64). National and local politics, as well as funding sources are key factors that influence the processes of NGOization. As rich empirical research on the relationship between NGOs, state and the market suggest, donors (be they the states or foundations) pre-define and shape NGO agendas in their framing of program calls, in ways that establish specific norms while marginalizing the others (Bloodgood and Tremblay, 2017; Rathgeb and Gronbjerg, 2006). In the European context, NGOs in EU member states must comply with stipulations which inhibit them from influencing politics; the compliance to the tax code and the fear of losing charitable status "prevent public interest groups from participating in the public part of public policy making", though NGOs still engage in semi-public or closed-door institutional advocacy (Lang, 2013: 104). Through actively engaging in "the market for projects" (Krause, 2014) to appeal to donors and sustain their own organizations, NGOs have been questioned widely on issues of accountability, transparency and political effectiveness.

NGOs have become the most visible actors championing and addressing women's rights, gender and development issues since the 1970s (Bernal and Grewal, 2014). By definition lacking in official status within the government, NGOs are a recognizable platform for women or minorities who are underrepresented in official positions and in public space. NGOs question the

Habermasian conceptualization of public sphere as they are the public and official platforms for the contestation of once "private" topics, thereby challenging the dichotomies of public/private, production/social reproduction. Multiple discourse and frameworks with different focus such as women's rights discourse, women in development (WID) and the subsequent gender and development (GAD), gave rise to a plethora of women's rights and women-centered organizations (Cornwall et al, 2007; Kabeer, 1994). These narratives and frameworks help define the category of women, women's issues and ways to address them, albeit with constant debate and tension between different women's groups. NGOs are also fields of gendered struggles and politics over power, resources and status. Silke Roth (2015) illustrates that aidland has been historically gendered in processes of colonial expansion when missionary work provided employment opportunities to educated white middle-class women who could not find jobs in their home countries. Aidwork is also a racialized project as it is embedded in Global North/Global South inequalities. It not only transmits Global North concerns to shape southern movements, but it is also a highly unequal ground with power imbalances and differential material benefits between Global North and Global South aid workers. In China, multiple gender and sexuality discourse become available since the late 1980s, facilitated by feminist academics and practitioners (Hou, 2020). Feminist activists took advantage of these frameworks and funding opportunities, shaping the landscape of women's rights, gender and development and LGBT activism in China in the years to come.

With the inception of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, newly established women's NGOs collaborated with the ACWF, the largest women's organization in the state apparatus to facilitate women's NGO program across the country (Hou, 2020). The first generation of Chinese feminists who actively involved in the 1995 conference were women of

professional background, including feminist academics, women cadres in various levels of the party apparatus, and women working in state-affiliated agencies. The legacy of CCP feminists working within institutional settings proved to be effective at this time as the central government was receptive to transnational funding and opportunities. These early feminist initiatives included the Anti-Domestic Violence Network (ADVN) established in 2000, the Gender Reading Group and the Gender and Development (GAD) Monthly Meeting which began in 2001. One of the most notable transnational feminist interventions in China is the anti-domestic violence project launched by China Law Society, the first women's NGO organized exclusively against the issue of domestic violence in Beijing in 2000 (Wu, 2014). The anti-domestic violence project then was co-funded by the Ford Foundation, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), Oxfam Novib, and the Norwegian Center for Human Rights at the University of Oslo (NCHR). It is not an overstatement that the rhetoric of VAW (violence against women) which is based on principles of human rights, its materialization in NGO projects with specific target population, methods of intervention and criterion of evaluation set the foundation and direction for the future Chinese feminist movement. It took the anti-domestic violence project more than ten years to push for the passing and enactment of the first Anti-domestic Violence Law in 2016. At the same time, the gender and development project in rural China tapped into the state-sponsored rural revitalization/poverty elimination schemes. With the support from international organizations such as Oxfam, these rural development projects achieved relative success in multiple locations in China, making "rural women" subjects of empowerment.

It was also at the Beijing Women Conference in 1995 that "LGBT rights as human rights" achieved official recognition (Wilson, 1996). A US-based LGBT human rights NGO, which was then known as the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, set up a lesbian tent

in the NGO side event and gathered over a hundred lesbian activists to speak out their long-repressed discontent towards the marginalization of sexuality in mainstream women's movement. These lesbian and bisexual activists contended with the issue of difference among the "women" category. The lesbian tent subsequently inspired a new generation of Chinese lesbian and bisexual women activists to interrogate their particular situation in China (Wang, 2021). Many of them went on to establish their own grassroots organizations with the facilitation of international funding and the LGBT human rights framework.

While *lala* (Chinese vernacular term of women loving women) NGOs in China frequently adopt the human rights discourse to solicit funding and conduct projects since 1995, the mainstream gay organizations are closely associated with funding from global HIV/AIDS initiatives and work with disease-prevention causes sanctioned by the state. The different trajectories shape how their work is being received and regulated by the local governments. Where the gay community organizations can help generating economic revenue locally, the *lala* organizations are less "useful" in the eyes of government official. Although with shifting organizational and strategic mutations in the changing structural constraints and political opportunities, these NGO projects predicated either on rights narratives or state-sponsored programs produce distinct gendered and sexual subjectivities. The *lala* leaders represent highly educated elite women well-versed in English, feminist queer theories and rights language, and the gay men who are more grassroots-oriented, often critiqued by *lala* activists as holding on to essentialized understanding of sexuality, lacking gender perspectives and more easily co-opted by the government.

In the second decade since the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, state feminists' internal institutional working could no longer respond to needs of the "masses" of women as the party-state tightened its grip on its bureaucracies and the civil society. A typical case in point is the China Law Society which was soon pressured to cease operation after the passing of Anti-domestic Violence Law, due to increasing government interference and control. In 2012, a new generation of Chinese feminists who were college-educated and mostly raised in urban cities in China, took to the streets and advocated for women's rights in education and employment, as well as engaged in legal campaigns and litigation cases to raise public awareness (Wang and Liu, 2020). Disconnected from their previous generation feminists' resources and position within the state system, these feminists were trained in NGO-sponsored gender equality camps, and they were heavily informed by the liberal feminist politics of visibility in Euro-American societies.

The NGO-sponsored feminist activism successfully grasped media attention and intrigued public debate by staging flash mobs such as "occupying men's toilet" to advocate for toilet use parity between men and women, "bloody brides" and naked chest campaign against domestic violence, as well as digital activism on the hashtag MeToo movement in China (Hou, 2020). Within a few years since 2012, their outspokenness about the structural inequalities that Chinese women had faced and their determination to push for policy changes pressured local governments to implement and refine several policies about gender disparity. However, their vocalness was perceived by the general netizens as too radical, dubbing them as "men-haters". The notion about women's rights, and the visibility of feminist issues, went against the Chinese articulation of social harmony which has been predicated on the subjectification and objectification of women in a patriarchal society. Meanwhile, feminist activists' ability to mobilize masses was deemed a threat to governments at all levels, thus, the party-state shifted its strategies of co-optation to censorship

and illegalization in just a few years. Not surprisingly, these feminists became increasingly stigmatized and silenced on the internet. Such surveillance has been a concerted efforts between the state-media and netizens. With growing hostility to rights-based organizations with foreign connections, these feminists, along with the NGOs that supported them, were targeted by the national security bureau for their alleged actions to destabilize the Chinese society, in terms of the notion of Chinese womanhood and nuclear family, as well as national security. The year 2015 marked a year of loss for these young Chinese feminists as five feminists were arrested and detained for their intended public action against workplace sexual harassment on the eve before the International Women's Day that year (Wang, 2015).

The crackdown on rights-based NGOs, including labor rights NGOs, feminist NGOs, LGBT rights NGOs and human rights lawyers ensued till this day. Multiple laws were passed and enacted to contain the growth of these NGOs in China such as the 2016 Chinese Charity Law, and the 2017 Foreign NGO Management Law. As a result, funding was cut, and activists had to face constant police harassment. It has taken a toll on rights-based activism overall as many were forced to stop working, and even left the organizing. Those who seem more benign to the party-state became even more cautious not to affiliate with any foreign organizations, nor to speak on rights issues.

Today's Chinese social media have seen a reemergence of feminist voices, not from activists, but from non-activist women, who are young and outspoken and enraged by the misogynist remarks and treatment on women. They are nicknamed by Chinese male netizens as "female boxers" (*nv quanshi*, 女拳师), as boxing in Chinese is a homonym to rights in feminism or women's rights. Even though still highly stigmatized, the involvement of a younger generation of women who are sensitive to gender discrimination and have the initiative to combat misogyny in their own

way is indicative of the spread of feminist ideas by the previous generations of Chinese feminists. Nonetheless, these connections have been erased due to the lack of institutional endorsement and the censorship and elimination of previous feminist accounts and documentations.

Theoretical Interventions and Main Inquiries

Grounded in the previous discussions of Chinese feminist and LGBT rights NGOs as specifically Chinese formations with historical and transnational roots, this section engages with important theoretical debates on Chinese state-society relations and develops a unique approach using labor and affect as analytic categories, and social reproduction theory as the major theoretical framework to theorize NGO work. First, this section builds on theorizations of state-society relations which simplify NGOs as monolithic entities and/or treat them as abstract symbols for political emancipation and argues for an activist-centered approach that tends to the internal dynamics of doing NGO work. It draws insights from scholarship on NGOization and foregrounds the agency and subjectivity of NGO workers in the process of doing NGO work. Neither treating NGOs as proxies for civil society or regarding them as pseudo-governmental agencies, Sabine Lang (2013) suggests examining the sector by the ways in which whether they help to enhance strong publics that combine and bridge institutional and public advocacy. I utilize NGOization as a useful analytic perspective to investigate processes of power negotiation and subject formation when social movements institutionalize. This research goes beyond theorizing NGOs as only counter-movements to the state.

Second, I utilize labor and affect as analytic categories to shed light on NGO work in China as these categories attend to processes and formations of work, emotions and affects. I build upon studies of precarity and precarious labor to theorize NGO work as an emerging form of precarious

labor which is structured by the state's technologies of governance and an overarching logic of neoliberal market economy. At the same time, I build on cultural anthropologists' studies of precariousness as an ontological state of insecurity and vulnerability, as well as studies of affect, to understand the affective dimensions of precarity of NGO work in China.

Third, I draw upon social reproduction theory as a central theoretical framework to theorize the roles and functions of NGOs in China. Social reproduction theory informs the conceptualization of kinds of gendered and racialized labor performed by activist workers and volunteers in order to reproduce the NGOs, which are oftentimes invisiblized, devalued, and erased by state governance and funding complex domination. It discusses the easy conflation of the moral value of NGO work with its labor value, and grounds the discussion of NGO labor value firmly in the Marxian Value theory of Labor, which is the labor time socially necessary for the execution and completion of NGO projects.

Theorizing state-society relations in China

Scholars have advanced multiple competing theories on the shifting state-society relations in the rapidly changing political economic context in China. In the 1990s, many scholars proposed the top-down state corporatist model as the model of managing social organizations in China (Brook and Frolic, 1997; Pearson, 1997; Unger and Chan, 1996). In corporatism, the state monopolizes the power over social organizations as it "recognizes one and only one association as representing a given constituency" (Unger, 2008:7). The economic reform, as well as the increasing transnational exchanges in the late 1990s and into the new millennium, have broadened the number and scope of NGOs in an unprecedented manner. The dismantling of the *danwei* system called for a new social sector to cater to the needs of the population, either in organizing for

collective interests or providing public goods and services. Even though the state recognizes the gap brought by the drastic social-economic transformations, it still fears that this new social sector would challenge its monopoly rule when given too much autonomy. Thus, "(t)his ambivalence has created a lot of inconsistencies and even conflicts among state agencies concerning matters related to NGOs" (Wu and Chan: 11). "Fragmented authoritarianism" is conceptualized to understand the negotiation between NGOs and state agencies, highlighting the autonomy of the NGOs in this period of relative freedom and the political opportunities engendered by this ambivalence (Chan and Zhou in Hao and Chen, 2014; Mertha, 2008). Civil society was emerging as a new phase in China's state-society relations promising the recognition of the rights of ordinary citizens, especially for the minorities such as women, the sexual minorities, and the disabled. Some of the earliest women's rights NGOs were founded during this time, such as the Maple Women's Psychological Counselling Center in Beijing, established in 1988. After the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, the anti-domestic violence network and gender and development projects were founded. The introduction of the NGO form as well as international funding resources, the rights-based discourse and participatory methods, significantly altered the landscape of social organizations in mainland China, as well as the rest of the developing world (Bernal and Grewal, 2014; Xu, 2009).

"Contingent symbiosis" coined by Anthony Spires (2011) examines the evolving state-society relations from the political economic perspective. "Illegal" grassroots organizations operate in a grey area by local governments' arbitration. Based on the political calculations of government officials, these NGOs can negotiate the boundaries and maneuver the space if their work converges with government interests, e.g., bringing in foreign funding as one of the local state's income sources. In a similar fashion, "embedded activism" proposed by Ho and Edmonds

(2008) captures the interactive nature of the relationship between local government agencies, NGOs and contextual factors. These studies have suggested that the Chinese state's strategies of social governance are also evolving as it adapts to new variables in state-society relationships. Ching Kwan Lee's conceptualization of "bargained authoritarianism" points to exactly the kind of capacity of the Chinese state to learn, adapt and improvise strategies based on three micro-foundations, which are protest bargaining, legal-bureaucratic absorption, and patron-clientelism. Kang and Han (2008) theorizes the mechanism of "graduated control" (*fenlei guanzhi* 分类管制) in which the state everts various control strategies over different types of social organizations "according to the capacities of the social organizations to challenge the state and the value of the public goods they provide" (36). This mechanism manifests the pragmatism of the Chinese state utilizing the function of public service provisioning of the NGOs while containing their potential to disrupt regime stability.

The civil society boom was cut short when the Xi Jinping administration came to power in 2012. With the shrinking spaces for political negotiation between NGOs and local state agencies, as well as the introduction of a series of regulatory legislations with the aim to tame the NGO sector, the autonomy of NGOs has been greatly reduced and repressed. Developing his idea of "graduated control" in this new era of state-society relations, Kang Xiaoguang (2018) theorizes the core institutional mechanism of "Administrative Absorption of Society" in Chinese government's new social governance to explain the puzzling situation of the development and under-development of the non-profit sector in recent decade. In this mechanism,

> (T)he government is in a dominant position as governor and supplier of the social order and public services, whereas the NPOs serve the dual purposes of challenging the political authority and providing public services. To make the NPOs work for the governor, the

> government adopts dual strategies to make full use of the service capacity of the NPOs on the one hand, and to repress their challenging potential on the other hand…"Absorption" refers to the process through which the government makes a series of efforts to prevent social structures such as civil society or public space from emerging and developing (1).

Kang's analysis brilliantly captures the dynamics of the NGO sector by illustrating the dual purposes of the NGOs and the dual strategies of the state to contain and co-opt NGOs accordingly. The Chinese state narrows the social and political space for NGO rights activism with regulations and legislations including setting up party branches in NGOs, and at the same time, supporting and promoting the development of a domestic non-profit sector with a series of incentivizing schemes such as "government-purchasing programs".

Regarding research on Chinese feminist and LGBT activism, scholars have focused on the histories and shifting strategies of activism and community building in relation to state governance and transnationally circulating ideas of gender and sexuality (Engebretsen, 2011; Hou, 2015, 2018; Hisung, 2021; Kam, 2013; Kong, 2011; Wang, 2010; Wang and Liu, 2020). Scholars have highlighted the agency and subjectivity of feminist and LGBT activists to strategize under cultural taboo, social stigma and evolving statecraft (Wang, 2011; Wu, 2014). A significant portion of these studies is concerned with the development of women's NGOs and LGBT groups and NGOs as platforms to advance the rights of women and LGBT persons since the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 (Kong, 2011; Jacka, 2011; Kam, 2013; Engebretsen, 2011). These NGOs, formed by socially marginalized groups, are semi-public spaces for women and LGBT persons to collectively share stories, provide services, form alliances and advocate for themselves. While these research foreground insights of these otherwise invisiblised efforts of activist strategies and community building, document important histories of feminist and LGBT NGO

activism, they easily slip into a singular dimension of conceptualizing NGOs as monolithic entities or represented by a few NGO leaders. At the same time, they run the risk of instrumentalizing activists as tools of activism and simplify them as heroes with high moral value and noble vision. This falls into the binaries of civil society/state and oppression/ resistance, and consequently, omit a pressing reality concerning the labor precarity of feminist and LGBT activists. Ping-Chun Hsiung (2021) challenges the Western and state-centered lenses that have been used to theorize the development of NGOs, civil society, and the women's movement in China. Instead of framing NGOs as extensions of the state or pits the state against the NGOs and civil society, she proposes an NGO-centered framework that goes beyond the dual theory and by acknowledging local participants' labor and practical know-how. Building on Kang's new model of graduated control and Hsiung's theoretical insights, my research foregrounds the connection and negotiation between NGOs and the Chinese state, and uses labor as a central analytic and examines feminist and LGBT NGO activism through the lenses of NGO workers. By theorizing activists as workers, I situate activists in the political economy of non-profit funding complex and provide a materialist account in exploring the complexities of doing NGO activism in China.

Theorizing precarity and precariousness

Precarity describes and conceptualizes the predominant mode of work and life that is informal, temporary, or contingent in contemporary world. It emerged as a central concern in scholarly research in the twenty-first century, partly because precarity as a form of unstable working condition, and precariousness as an ontological condition of vulnerability, displacement, and insecurity, have become pervasive across race, gender and class (Kasmir, 2018).

One strand of argument concerns with precarity being new and as a distinctive phase of capitalist development associated with neoliberalism. The five decades of neoliberal restructuring of the world capitalist economy have brought significant impact to the lives of people globally. However, scholars have shown that the transformation of work from stable and full-time jobs towards a flexible labor regime is only applicable to a small section of the population, particularly white men, as it describes "the decline of Fordism and the anxiety, insecurity, and feelings of un-belonging in its wake" (Kasmir, 2018). Women, immigrants and racialized workers have been historically excluded from these welfare schemes and labor protections (Gidwani and Ramamurthy, 2018; Glenn, 1992; Yulee, 2021). Nonetheless, ethnographic research reveals that even for stable, unionized workers, their jobs and lives were not fully secure. For high-paying, full-time autoworkers in the leading sector in the US, they are "constantly on guard for signs that their plant is in trouble and that layoff is immanent", and they relocate to other facilities once their plant closes and are separated and isolated from family and social networks, thereby weakening the union's power (Kasmir, 2014).

Sociologist Guy Standing's (2011) theorization of precarity being a new historical moment and the "global precariat" as an emergent class that has no work-based identities or affinities for labor politics has been fiercely debated. While studies have shown some evidence that support Standing's claim that the distinction and divide between formal workers and informal workers cannot be overcome by traditional labor solidarity and collective politics, and new forms of association and policies are needed; there are major oppositions to Standing's argument as the labor markets in the Global South has always relied on insecure and exploited labor force (Parry, 2013; Berman, 2011). Authors argue that precarity leads to the diminishing of collective power of working class, and fuels disorganization and disempowerment, and efforts should be made not on

insisting that the unbreachable antagonism between formal and informal workers, but to facilitate alliances between them (Gill, 2016; Harvey, 2012; Lazar, 2017).

The conceptualization of precarity as a norm for workers in the Global South, and an increasingly pervasive phenomenon in the Global North countries warrants attention to how precarious working conditions are facilitated by the intervention of state and capital both domestically and transnationally. At the same time, theorists have extended interests from studies of informal labor in manufacturing industries, to forms of precarious labor in the commodified and informationalized service industries, and the emerging "gig economy" and entrepreneurial freelance and artist work (Hardt and Negri, 1999, 2005; Neilson and Rossiter, 2005).

Building on studies of precarity and precarious labor, I theorize NGO work as an emerging form of precarious labor which is structured by the state's technologies of governance and an overarching logic of market economy. NGO work, or aidwork, which is contingent upon the hierarchical global funding politics and limited-term labor contracts and has proliferated in the Global North and Global South countries, has rarely been theorized as a form of precarious labor. Partly because of its close connection to politics and humanitarian discourses, the political aspect of NGO work is prioritized in most scholarly analysis. As such, these studies foreground the intersections of race, gender and class in NGO politics, as well as the political implications of philanthropy as an industry (Feldman, 2018; Roth, 2015; Wallace et al, 2013). By regarding NGO work as identity-based profession and highlighting individual subjectivity of NGO workers and their beneficiaries, these studies miss the opportunity to understand NGO work as structured by funding and state governance, and how internal NGO labor relations complicate external NGO politics. Next, I turn to cultural anthropologists' studies of precariousness as an ontological state

of insecurity and vulnerability, to understand the affective dimensions of precarity in NGO work in China.

The affective dimensions of labor precarity

Precariousness, as an ontological condition of vulnerability, displacement, and insecurity, has been theorized as a "generalized and pervasive human condition" that extends beyond the current political-cultural moment and affects people of all socio-economic groups (Kasmir, 2018). This distinction between precariousness and precarity is first made by Judith Butler in her discussion of war, that precarity is a "politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks…becoming differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death", and it is unequally distributed and experienced by poor, marginalized, disenfranchised people (Butler, 2009: 25). Neoliberalism, war, and climate disasters and public health crises intensify these structural inequalities. Precariousness describes the interdependency of human relations and thus all humans are vulnerable. Her conceptualization of the general condition of precariousness valorizes a transhistorical and existential concern, not necessarily associated to contemporary neoliberal capitalism or class relations. As such, Butler argues for an egalitarian politics of precariousness that unites against politics that endorses certain lives as livable while excluding the others. However, the conceptualization of precariousness has been criticized for flattening out important differences among social groups and diminishing the conceptual acuity of precariousness (Kasmir, 2018).

Cultural anthropologists have attuned to the expression of precariousness and the politics of precarity, by focusing on feelings and subjectivity with regard to displacement, uncertainty and disenfranchisement (Shaw and Byler, 2016). By attending to a wide range of experiences and

struggles from economic insecurity, injury, to violence and forced migration, their studies foreground structures of feeling associated with precarious lifeworlds. As Ann Cvetkovich writes from the site of lesbian sexuality and trauma, one can approach national histories from sites of emotions and feelings, and "affective experience can provide the basis for new cultures" (2003: 7). The scrutiny of unnamed, fragmented and varied affects and feelings, shed light in exploring the affective dimensions of precarity, and understanding "how those who are thrown into precarious circumstances find ways to live otherwise" (Shaw and Byler, 2016). These ordinary affects, have the "capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences" (Stewart, 2007: 2). Therefore, they are not inconsequential, but rather, important expressions of the ways in which precarity is structured and how it is lived.

Studies of precarity and precarious labor have primarily focused on the political and economic dimension of precarity, and they largely elided the significance to examine the affective experiences and struggles under the uneven impact of capitalism and global forms of exploitation. Drawing on the work of cultural anthropologists on precarity, precariousness and affect, I pay attention to the feelings and emotions on a micro level that ruminate impacts of larger structural processes on a macro level. In so doing, I am cautious not to generalize feelings of precariousness as a universalized human condition that is the same to everyone, but to discern the shared and/or varied affects associated with differential conditions of living and working.

Scholarship on Chinese feminist and LGBT politics is largely concerned with shifting historical and institutional context for the strategizing of feminist and LGBT activists vis-à-vis the party-state. Even though particular strategies proved to be successful in promoting policy reforms

and cultural shifts, what happened to these activists were undocumented and understudied. It cannot explain the empirical observation of individual activists being diagnosed with depression and other mental disorders, exiting the organizing, or personal accounts of traumatic events from external and internal forces. Most often, activist workers remain faceless and emotion-less, though they embody the kind of politics and are affectively involved with their work. Therefore, to establish the connection between precarity as an unstable labor condition NGO activist workers experience, and the ontological condition of precariousness that manifests in their feelings and affect, is a crucial theoretical entry point to understand Chinese feminist and LGBT rights NGO activism. I draw on social reproduction theory to foreground the inherent connection between the two analytic categories of labor and affect. By doing so, this research presents a fuller picture of what does activist work look like and feel like on the ground.

Social reproduction theory and NGO labor

Studies of precarity and precarious labor shed light on the changing labor relations and newer forms of laboring practices undergirded by the reorganization and deepening inequalities of the global division of labor. It further raises questions on the interdependency of human being, as "the bodies of affective labor of other human and nonhumans sustain our survival", which is the social reproduction of human life as a whole (Shaw and Byler, 2016). Social reproduction, first theorized by Karl Marx as the hidden abode of production, refers to the social process that is fundamental to supporting the workers to return to the factory the next day in capitalist relations of production. Marx understands that social reproduction is the reproduction of the capitalist system, so that there is no separation between the noneconomic sphere from the economic, as he states that "when viewed, therefore, as a connected whole, and in the constant flux of its incessant renewal, every

social process of production is at the same time a process of reproduction" (Marx, 1965: 427). However, Marx's focus on wage labor as the ultimate proletarian class struggle against capital limits his theorization on social reproduction as he considers social reproduction secondary and less relevant. This view was also shared in Friedrich Engels's (1942) work in the discussion of the origins of the family and gender inequality. Engel's romanticizing of women's liberation in productive activities obscures the unpaid labor that women shoulder in domestic and community spaces. Marxist feminists challenged Marx's ideas of prioritizing production over social reproduction, and they contend to go beyond the public/private, productive/unproductive, and waged/unwaged dichotomy inherent in classic economics theories (Boris and Parreñas, 2010; Federici, 2012). They argue that both production and reproduction are part and parcel of the economic system, and efforts should be made to valorize the value of social reproductive labor (Bhattacharya, 2017). Following Brenner and Laslett's theorization (1989:382), social reproduction refers to:

> the activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis, and intergenerationally…and the organization of social reproduction refers to the varying institutions within which this work is performed, the varying strategies for accomplishing these tasks, and the varying ideologies that both shape and are shaped by them.

This definition of social reproduction sheds light in understanding the roles and value of NGOs as social reproduction institutions. NGOs have historically been important sites for social reproduction, as the party-state transferred its social reproduction functions to NGOs in caring for its citizen. NGOs in service-provisioning and/or political advocacy, represent the interests of groups of people, addressing social ills and inequality, and providing care and support for the most

disenfranchised in the society. NGOs produce affects, experiences and ways of imagining a more just world via their projects. They define who gets to be represented as beneficiaries and what counts as violence, as well as craft out moral standards of a society (Klenk, 2004; Suchland, 2015). As important sites of social reproduction, feminist and LGBT NGOs provide the space to cultivate care and solidarity, to offer help to those in need, and to advocate and empower socially marginalized groups. Thus, the processes of producing NGO projects, is at the same time processes of reproducing human relations. This speaks to a recent theorization by Tamara Jacka in expanding on the specific connotations of maintenance of life.

Thus, the multiple sites of social reproduction regarding the Chinese party-state, the transnational non-profit funding complex, and the NGOs are of analytical and empirical importance here. First, the party-state transfers its social reproduction function of caring for its citizens, including migrants, sex workers, and LGBT citizen, to NGOs. Second, the transnational non-profit funding complex relies on the social reproduction values of NGOs in making political interventions in China. However, the shifting terrain of Chinese social governance and its relations to transnational non-profit funding complex enable and/or disable the social reproduction of NGOs. For two decades after the Fourth World Conference on Women, these two processes were in concert with each other. On the one hand, the party-state benefited from the global funding to do service provisioning work on the ground, such as the HIV-AIDs prevention work (Ye, 2021). On the other hand, the transnational donors were eager to see rights-based NGOs making waves in China, exemplified by the Anti-Domestic Violence Network (Xu, 2009). During this period, the social reproduction of feminist and LGBT rights NGOs was facilitated by transnational funding, and the party-state's implicit tolerance of its political work. Yet, such balance was disrupted by shifting statecraft engineered by the Xi Jinping Administration and changing geopolitics in the

early 2010s. The party-state's tightening surveillance and control of foreign funding and influence have endangered the social reproduction of feminist and LGBT rights NGOs which are dependent on transnational funding. With increasing challenge to reproduce the organizations, the social reproduction of activist workers is rendered even more precarious.

Another useful analytical insight offered by social reproduction theory is to valorize the kinds of labor performed by activist workers in feminist and LGBT rights NGOs which is otherwise dismissed, devalued, and erased by a productivist framework. This relates to the precarious social reproduction of NGOs, as the value of these organizations are erased precisely because of their lack of market value in terms of labor. Marx treats slave labor/racialized labor to be the condition of possibility for capitalist accumulation, instead of regarding gendered and racialized labor as subjects on their own (Robinson, 1983). Marxist feminists, feminist political economists develop rich accounts of social reproduction incorporating diverse arrays of gendered and racialized labor in the changing international political economies, highlighting its crucial material consequences on social relations and individual lives, both nationally and regionally.

"Emotional labor" or "emotional work" was coined by sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1983) to theorize the labor of emotional regulation which modifies publicly visible facial and bodily display to create desired emotion in the workplace. With the commodification of the service industry, Hochschild argues that workers are estranged from their own feelings in the workplace. The conceptualization of emotional labor breaks new ground in embedding social reproductive practices in productive activities, manifesting the impossibility to separate the two especially in the new structure of the labor markets. Emotional labor also reveals the gendered aspects of such labor both within and outside of the workplace, e.g., in the realm of housework. Subsequently,

theorists further the concept of emotional labor with an emphasis on the effects of performing service work.

Autonomist Marxists such as Hardt and Negri put forward their thesis on "affective labor", and "immaterial labor". Hardt (1999) suggests that the labor that produces immaterial goods such as services, knowledge, or communication is immaterial labor. Particularly, he conceives "affective labor" as the essential component in the "in-person" services which is the "creation and manipulation of affects" (96). Hardt and Negri subsequently develop their idea of immaterial labor as a form of "biopolitical" production which not only creates material goods but also social relationships and forms of life. They insist that immaterial labor today has become hegemonic in qualitative terms, as they suggest that "just as in that phase [industrialization] all forms of labor and society itself had to industrialize, today labor and society have to informationalize, become intelligent, become communicative, become affective" (Hardt and Negri, 2005: 109). Their contention critically shows the fundamental shifts of the laboring practices in the era of informationalization which engender new and intense forms of violation or alienation, but they nonetheless trivialize the continuing material labor that is being performed by gendered and racialized workers in the "peripheries" of the metropolis and the workshops globally. Neilson and Rossiter (2005) argue that it is insufficient to subordinate the very different laboring practices to a single logic of production which is informationalization, as it "is an eclipse of those forms of bodily, coerced, and unpaid work primarily associated with migrants and women (and not with artists, computer workers, or new media laborers)."

Besides emotional labor and affective labor, concepts such as "invisible labor", "intimate labors", and "life's work" have been theorized to emphasize different aspects of the kinds of social

reproductive labor. “Invisible labor” seeks to make visible the kind of labor not recognized as worthy of inclusion in the category of “work” and regulated as such (Crain et al, 2016). “Intimate labors” understands intimacy as material, affective, psychological and embodied practices, as it “denies the separation of home from work, work from labor, and productive from nonproductive labor that has characterized capitalist globalization” (Boris and Parrenas, 2010: 2), and reveals the interdependency of relations through their interrogation of care, sex, and domestic work. “Life’s work” calls our attention to the least explored aspects in Marx’s notion of species-being connected to production of nature and human life. It broadens the notion of social reproduction consisting of non-human subjects and the environment (Meehan and Strauss, 2015; Mitchell et al, 2004).

These conceptualizations are useful to understand the social reproductive labor that NGO workers perform in their service and advocacy work. Activist workers perform a variety of social reproductive labor that is not regarded as productive in conventional Marxism, which is mostly mental, emotional, communicative, and caring labor that is crucial to NGO work. The large concentration of women and minority workers in the NGO sector currently in China also reinforce the notion of the gendered NGO work, as well as the justification of NGO work as less skilled “women’s work”, thus less pay. These workers are expected to be caring, compassionate, and they are considered the embodiment of the politics the NGO represents. In a sector with a moralizing tendency, NGO workers are often estranged from their feelings which do not fit in the mainstream philanthropy discourse. To be able to mobilize emotions and “change hearts and minds”, NGO workers construct certain images of suffering and victimization, as well as imaginations of different futures (Goodwin et al, 2001; Suchland, 2015). Thus, social relations are (re)created, and affects (re)produced, through much of the immaterial, affective and intimate labors via NGO work. The incommensurability of social reproductive labor in the current capitalist market system,

contributes to the devaluation and erasure of the social reproductive labor performed by activist workers in non-profit funding complex.

As such, social reproduction theory is helpful in theorizing NGOs as sites of social reproduction in China's social governance, as the party-state absorb the social reproduction function of NGOs while containing their political influence. The processes of cooptation and containment devalue and erase feminist and LGBT rights activist workers, not only because NGOs are regarded as non-economic entities in China's market economy, and thus unproductive in a Marxian sense, but also because of the devaluation of the social reproductive labor performed by activist workers. Social reproduction theory also sheds light on understanding the specific laboring practices in NGO work, as activist workers perform mental, emotional, communicative, and caring labor central to NGO activism, and these kinds of social reproductive labor are also gendered and racialized in the domestic and transnational non-profit funding complex. I suggest their social reproductive labor are of value because they require labor time socially necessary towards the execution and completion of NGO projects. Marx describes labor as "the living, form-giving fire; it is the transitoriness of things, their temporality, as their formation by living time." (Op. cit., p. 361) In the Marxian value theory of labor, the value of labor does not reflect on exchange value or price, which is the form of value. Nor does labor value reflect on the use value of labor, which is the interchangeability of, and relations between all other commodities (Elson, 1979). Rather, value ultimately is determined by the amount of labor socially necessary for its production, as the objectification and materialization of certain aspect of the labor time. In industries such as the service sector and the NGO sector, labor is itself a form of commodity, and it serves to produce certain feelings and affects, to affect those who they serve. The evaluation of the NGO labor value rests on the socially necessary labor time invested in NGO work. On the one hand, it is easy to

conflate the moral value with the labor value of NGO work, on the other hand, the moralization of NGO work runs the risk of devaluing and erasing such kinds of social reproductive labor. Chapter four specifically discusses the process of moralization as one of the mechanisms of triple erasure of NGO work. In conclusion, social reproduction theory offers a new vantage point to theorize NGO labor and calls for an alternative model of evaluation of NGO work.

Chapter Three

The "Good" NGO Work: Precarity, Tension and Opportunity

I was sitting in a nice ethnic-styled restaurant with Yan, an NGO worker from a migrant worker organization near Xihong Men （西红门）in the suburban Daxing district in Beijing, in the summer of 2018. About half a year ago, a huge fire broke out in the "urban village" (*cheng zhong cun*, 城中村) in Xihong Men, taking 19 lives and injured 8 people. These "urban villages", while not uncommon in many large cities, were basically urban slums. Migrant workers have turned these seemingly uninhabitable spaces into lively and crowded streets brimming with small business owned by migrant workers, and made it their home in a large alien city. Apartments and basements were remodeled and partitioned to create as many as eight to nine smaller rooms in a single 300 square feet apartment. The illegal partitioning proved to be a serious fire hazard. The fire was the precursor to the massive eviction of migrant workers, who were then labeled as the "low-end population" (*di duan ren kou*, 低端人口) by the Beijing municipal government. At least a few million migrant workers were evicted and had to return to their home villages because they could not afford housing in Beijing. It seemed an appropriate time to talk to a migrant NGO worker who worked around the area and asked about her opinions.

Contrary to my stereotypical impression of NGO workers in migrant organizations, Yan showed up wearing a light makeup and put on a velvet red color lipstick. As a migrant herself, she belonged to the more privileged and luckier batch. With her doing the NGO work and her partner working for a higher-paid job, they were able to pay the 500 USD for rent, as well as saving up to buy an apartment in Daxing district. She looked very proud that they would be able to make Beijing their home.

I was very curious to ask Yan how labor rights NGOs cope with the ever more stringent control on social organizations by the state. To my surprise, Yan quickly corrected my categorization of their organization as a labor rights NGO.

> There is no labor rights organization in Beijing. All labor organizations in Beijing work around worker integration in city life, community integration, employment trainings and safety awareness-raising programs etc. Although we provide counselling to individual workers on how to demand unpaid salary, and ask for compensation for work injury, but that was only on an individual level. We don't do collective bargaining if that's what you mean by labor rights NGO.

Yan's staunch attitude to distinguish service NGOs from rights advocacy NGOs was revealing of the heightened sensitivity of labor rights issues and organizations. Indeed, since 2013 several labor rights NGOs in southern China were forced to cease their operation in China, with the leaders and activist workers arrested, detained and forced to make public confession of their alleged "crimes" (Franceschini and Nesossi, 2018).

Later into our conversation, I realized that her distancing from the labor rights NGOs might not only be strategic but in fact was rooted in ideological and moral judgement. She did not approve of the ways rights activism work and suggested that the government wanted to get rid of these NGOs because what they do were illegal. In addition, when discussing about the fire in Xihong Men, she considered the government's violent eviction to be an inevitable response to the situation, with so many people protesting migrant workers' hazardous habitation. "Violence was inevitable when the government wanted to contain conflict. What's more, the government was not targeting migrant workers, but those who lived in illegal accommodations", she added.

Yan's response seemed baffling to me because it was exactly because migrant workers couldn't afford expensive and legitimate apartments that they risked their safety in these "illegal" housing compounds. The disconnection of Yan from labor rights NGOs, as well as her endorsement of the government narrative in cracking down "illegal" habitat for migrant labor made it clear to me that there are contested definitions of what is "good" NGO work in China.

The NGO Yan works for receives funding from domestic foundations affiliated with the City General Trade Union of Beijing. These organizations are either affiliated with the CCP or have internal party branches. Given the difficult situation for rights-based NGOs, it is not surprising to see NGOs working on sensitive topics such as labor issues, feminist and LGBT issues to adopt another framework to describe and implement their work. The mainstream discourse being promoted is the "rule of law" framework, which is a part of the Chinese state-led project of "legal society" (*fa zhi she hui*, 法治社会)announced by the CCP leaders in 1997. However, the definition of legality has been fraught with tension and the notion of "authoritarian legality" was coined by Mary Gallagher (2017) to foreground the role of the Chinese state in manipulating the legal system to monitor and contain dissent. The vignette provides an interesting case in point for observing how NGO activist workers' experiences of work are mediated by their varied relations to the party-state, the domestic and transnational donors, as well as their beneficiaries.

This chapter explores the contested terrain of doing NGO work in China since 2012. It foregrounds three types of NGO projects feminist and LGBT NGOs maneuver on the ground, as well as the precarity, tension, and opportunity each of these projects bring to NGO, activist workers, and their beneficiaries. By comparing the human rights projects, gender and development projects with the state-sponsored projects, I suggest these different political economic projects give rise to

distinctive ways of organizing. These include access to different streams of funding with varying degrees of vulnerability, different processes of monitoring by the state, and more or less room for strategic maneuvering.

The "good" NGO projects?

What are "good" NGO projects? This section dissects this seemingly naïve and binary question, delineating three evolving trajectories of NGO projects in relation to local governments, transnational and domestic donors, and their beneficiaries, namely, the human rights project, gender and development projects and the state-sponsored projects. Constraint by different contexts and power relations, certain NGO projects are valued as "good" projects by the party-state. Building on the "market for good projects" conceptualized by Monika Krause (2014), the consumers for NGO projects are not just donors who shop for good projects, as the Chinese state plays a crucial role in cultivating the kind of environment conducive to the development of certain kinds of NGOs in China. Consequently, the social reproduction of these different projects is conditioned by the party-state's regulatory policies and its dynamic relations with the transnational non-profit funding complex. These NGO projects' differential relations to the party-state lead to antagonisms between rights-based NGOs and service organizations due to contrasting views with regard to political ideologies, and strategies in reaching out and working with beneficiaries.

The introduction of the "Violence Against Women" rights discourse in the 1995 Beijing Women Conference gave rise to women's rights NGOs and LGBT rights NGOs in China. They have been advocating for the rights of women and sexual minorities, providing them with social services such as mental health counselling, anti-domestic violence legal aid, as well as organizing awareness raising and solidarity activities for urban and rural women (Wu, 2014). These

developments are hard-won results of the negotiations between NGOs, local governments and foreign and domestic donors (Hildebrandt, 2011; Wu and Chan, 2012; Zhang, 2009). In "Global concepts, local practices", Wang and Zhang (2010) traced the transformation of Chinese feminism with the aid of international funding and "gender" as an analytical category since the Beijing Women Conference, that feminists "enthusiastically turned gender training into an innovative form of activism in their engagement with the existing political system and social institutions." (51) The early feminists were mostly urban-based professional women, with affiliations in academia and the Women's Federation. The feminists in the interviews conducted in the Global Feminisms Project[7] (GFP) mentioned the importance of subtle discursive negotiation between the new concept of "gender equality" (*shehui xingbie pingdeng* 社会性别平等), and the official gender discourse of "equality between men and women" (*nannv pingdeng* 男女平等) endorsed by state feminists/femocrats. Being an insider in the state system, and at the same time an outsider aiming to critically transform the confining agenda of state feminism and the gender-blind Marxist theory, these feminists worked their way around the system to promote a rights-based narrative which acknowledges women's agency and autonomy, instead of rights granted by the state.

Although the pursuit of gender equality has been officially sanctioned by the Chinese party-state, which allows feminists to operate effectively in the official system, "but only so long as they restrict the nature of their activism" (Wang and Zhang, 2010: 68). This still rings true to the current state of feminist activism in China. While the state endorses apolitical social services provisioning

[7] Global Feminisms Project (GFP) at the University of Michigan collected interviews with women's movement activists and women's studies scholars in sites around the world. See https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/globalfeminisms/

by the NGOs, it is vigilant to any rights-based claims or mass mobilizations by these organizations which pose potential threats to regime legitimacy (Friedman and Lee, 2010; Friedman, 2014; Fu, 2017; Hou, 2018). The new generation of Chinese feminists with no position and resource in the state system, adopts a different strategy informed by the liberal feminist politics of visibility to advocate for human rights, which were met with increasing state surveillance and crackdown, culminating in the arrests of the five feminists for their intended public action against sexual harassment in 2015 (Hou, 2014, 2015; Wang, 2015). With more and more foreign foundations ceasing their programs in China due to the 2017 Foreign NGO Management Law, the reproduction of the rights-based NGOs becomes a priority concern for the activist workers.

The anti-domestic violence project in urban China, and the gender and development projects in rural China were two of the most prominent rights-based projects enabled by gender mainstreaming programs and initiatives since 1995. The two projects worked around different sets of rights endorsed by the UN Declaration of Human Rights. The former emphasized on the political and civic rights, and the latter on economic, social and cultural rights. Compared to the anti-domestic violence project which outrightly utilized the human rights language, the gender and development project aligned with the state-sponsored rural revitalization/poverty elimination projects spearheaded by the Chinese state. With the subjects of "rural women" and gendered power relations in the core of these development projects, they seek to understand the particular needs and concerns of rural women, disseminate ideologies of gender equality, and work on projects that can potentially empower women and children in rural China (Jacka and Sargeson, 2011). The debates of the two gender and development discourses, the linear modernization framework of Women in Development (WID) which instrumentalizes women as tools of development, and the more nuanced social relations of gender framework (gender and development, GAD) that pays

attention to structural inequalities, were also rife in China (Kabeer, 1994). Unpacking the local relations of gendered power dynamics that might hinder rural women's participation in development projects, feminists have cautioned against the mentality of some of these poverty elimination projects regarding "women as the object of development and the development of women as a means of the government to realize its goals of social development" (Wang and Zhang, 2010: 52). Projects such as micro-credit loans to rural and ethnic women, rural women empowerment programs are welcomed by local governments, if they could capitalize on these projects, and fulfill its development functions. Gender and development projects also attract domestic philanthropic investment and donations from the corporate social responsibility departments. With more ability and space to negotiate with domestic donors than outright rights-based groups, these NGO projects emphasizing on economic and social rights of women survived even when international funders retreated from China.

Since the 1980s, the Chinese state has been invested in developing a comprehensive "rule of law" project which emphasizes building a socialist country governed by the law, which was sanctioned in the 1999 constitutional amendment. The legal construction project includes an "explosive growth of formal legislations passed by the National People's Congress…the training of legal professionals", as well as "the expansion of the court system, and a sustained program to promote legal consciousness on the part of all Chinese citizens." (Whiting, 2017:2) Political scientists have investigated the contradictory effects of the "rule of law" project by looking at "the rising legal consciousness" of ordinary citizens, their tendency to frame grievances in terms of legal rights, as well as increasing political legitimacy of the state as a single-party ruler (Gallagher, 2006; O'Brien 1996; O'Brien & Li, 2005). These critical studies have manifested the de-mobilizing effects of the legal trainings to rights-claiming workers by individualizing their

interests and the differing reception and utilization of laws by different generational cohorts of workers (Gallagher, 2016; Lee and Shen, 2011).

What makes the Chinese state-led "rule of law" project distinct from the human rights discourse and the gender and development projects, and indeed sometimes in contradiction to them, is the role of the Chinese state in shaping and enforcing the laws in domestic settings, whereas the human rights projects are evaluated by the UN bodies. Eli Friedman (2014) highlights the paternalism of the Chinese state in shaping labor politics in China, which he terms "alienated politics." By alienated politics, he refers to "a situation in which countless cellular and depoliticized economic struggles result in major political shifts at the national level, while workers are unable to actively determine the form and content of this politics." (1010) Rather, the effects (new labor legislations) seem to occur paternalistically from the central state's benevolence. By depoliticizing workers' unrest from the results of new legislations, the central state alienates the worker subjectivity and the class-level politics that they engage in. Thus, the central state consolidates its authority and acts as the protector and the sole arbiter of rights.

In the current Xi Jinping administration, a new national construction embedded in the slogan of the "Chinese dream" (中国梦) has replaced the "socialist harmonious society" (社会主义和谐社会) of the previous administration, emphasising the revival of the Chinese nation under the sole leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. Controlling and disciplining civil society organizations and liberating them from foreign influence by way of party-state sponsored "rule of law" projects, are crucial steps in making the "Chinese dream" come true. For those NGOs which are seen to be fulfilling the Chinese dream could lead to their societal value and the capacity to be funded.

In the following sections, I draw on my fifteen-month of ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation of Chinese feminist and LGBT activism since 2010 to illustrate the varying degrees of precarity, tension and opportunity with the respective human rights project, gender and development project and the Chinese state-sponsored projects.

The Human Rights Projects

> We gathered at Lvpin's place. She left for the fifty-ninth session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York City in March 2015. Upon knowing the arrest of her five fellow feminists, she decided to delay her return to China, in the anticipation of an immediate arrest if she ever came back. Lu let us use her place as a secret gathering spot for strategizing the rescue plan.
>
> The first thing we did, without uttering a word when we arrived, was to turn off our cellphones, and put them away in the fridge. It was for cutting off the signal to circumventing surveillance and avoid the tracking of our location. We were heartened to see each other, as the news of the arrests had forced a number of feminists to leave town. The gathering was empowering because the sense of community and solidarity was vital for our confidence and subsequent actions.
>
> Later that week, the photos we took advocating for the immediate release of the five feminists had made the headlines of international media, as well as transnational feminist circles. Thirty-seven days later, our friends were released from the detention center. It was widely believed that the feminist transnational solidarity network was crucial in pressuring the Chinese government and resulted in their subsequent release.
>
> Ethnographic notes of the "Free Feminist Five" campaign

The coordinated transnational advocacy to release five Chinese feminists is a prime example of the "boomerang effect" of transnational activism in which domestic activists work with

international groups and organizations to increase pressure on their national governments (Keck and Sikkinik, 1998). The Fourth World Conference on Women established the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action as a "progressive manifesto that makes unusual reading for an agreement between UN Member States, proposing structural changes to enable women to participate fully in economic life, support for women's autonomy in sexual and reproductive decision, elimination of gender stereotypes in the media, and recognition of the need to overcome attitudinal barriers to women in politics and to men in unpaid care work." (Goetz, 2020: 161) At the same time, the preparatory funding from donor government supported not only organizational development of women's groups and networks, but also sponsored over thirty thousand participants in the NGO Forum beside the ten thousand state delegates there. In particular, these funding primarily went to Global South countries. Chinese feminists also greatly benefited from these transnational exchanges and have solidified these networks over the next two decades. It was this foundation that enabled the coordination and facilitation of a series of transnational advocacy efforts including the "free feminist five" campaign.

Transnational feminist and LGBT approaches to human rights have unraveled complicated local negotiations with the universalizing human rights discourse by feminists and LGBT activists in the Global South (Chua, 2018; Thoreson, 2014). These research "sought to navigate between the danger of imposing a universalistic rights framework on cross-cultural contexts and the danger of minimizing the importance of the work that local activists and thinkers have done by strategically using rights-based frameworks to pursue very real struggles against cultural, political, and economic inequalities" (Fernandes, 2013: 34). Unlike the liberal feminist approaches to advocate global rights approaches, which often render the state invisible of the violence it enables by its domestic and foreign policies, Chinese feminists and LGBT activists have been particularly

mindful of the role of international advocacy to pressure the Chinese government to respond to its gender equality policy implementation and the recognition of the LGBT issues at home. Even though the promises made by the state does not necessarily actualize in the domestic setting, activists still consider it a success for future advocacy.

In domestic advocacy, Chinese rights-based NGOs localized the rights narrative and came up with a series of advocacy strategies to mobilize and promote the rights of minorities to the general public. With funding from international NGOs such as the Ford Foundation and OXFAM, the anti-domestic violence project was initiated in 1998, which later evolved into China's largest women's NGO, the Stop DV Network in 2006. The Network engaged with the political system by collaborating with state feminists and state bureaucracies such as the police and the court (Wu, 2014). It contributed to the first anti-domestic violence legislation in 2016 after ten years of consistent advocacy and training efforts. Besides working closely with the system, Chinese rights-based NGOs become increasingly informed by the liberal politics of visibility and the successful cases of impact litigation due to broadening transnational and regional exchanges, e.g., Taiwan passed the first ever marriage equality legislation in East Asia in 2019 and their strategies of feminist and LGBT legal activism. The most prominent rights-based NGO was Yi Ren Ping 益仁平 (in literal translation as public welfare, kindness, equality), an anti-discrimination non-profit organization established in 2006. Yi Ren Ping started their work by legally representing and defending people with Hepatitis B who faced exclusion from school and work in courts. Their strategies inspired subsequent cases of impact litigation in various fields of activism including feminism and LGBT activism and they played the most crucial role in educating and training Chinese activists in domestic advocacy. In fact, Yi Ren Ping organized the first gender equality workshop in 2011, inviting influential feminist activists and anti-discrimination activists to train

young college-educated students on the issue of feminism and rights advocacy. I was also part of the first cohort of college students who joined the workshop and participated in the series of street actions which followed right after the workshop.

Participants to human rights projects are required to possess advanced English writing and speaking skills, as well as to master administrative and strategic aspects related to human rights knowledge, including the framework and methodology of documenting human rights violations, writing shadow reports, advocating in international spaces such as the United Nations, while also coordinating domestic advocacy. In reality, only a few NGOs are equipped to receive such funding. The regional differences in education and proficiency in the English language contribute to the unequal distribution of human rights funding to large and elitist groups in relatively cosmopolitan cities such as Beijing and Guangzhou. The regional lala organisation I worked for in Guangzhou from 2016 to 2018 organised a series of human rights trainings aimed at equipping grassroots activists with the knowledge needed to utilise the international mechanism of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Law professors and experienced feminist activists were invited to train the queer activists. As most grassroots activists were not professionalised and were still struggling to balance their full-time jobs and unpaid activism, many of them showed no interest in international advocacy. At best, they contributed data on human rights violations to large and elitist group who could then access these international venues. This way, the regional inequality is reinforced as professionalised NGOs gain more reputation in the international spaces and receive more funding as a result of their advocacy efforts.

Nevertheless, even though rights-based projects often result in hierarchical and unequal receptions of the global to the local, and the privileging of elite voices and participation, some

scholars argue that the processes could still be regarded as productive as it enables educated elites with resources to make political use of their privilege and translate it into crucial institutional openings for minorities' civil society organizing (Zhang 2009). One of the significant moments that Chinese LGBT activists cherish as an achievement came in 2018, at the 38th United Nations Human Rights Council, when the Chinese UN representative Jiang Duan specifically mentioned China's opposition to discrimination and violence on all grounds, including sexual orientation. His remarks were in response to the report by Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Independent Expert Vitor Matrigal-Borloz (2018) documenting two successful anti-discrimination impact litigation cases in China. These two cases pointed to the existence of effective legislative measures to ensure the human rights of LGBT persons in China. The first case was an affirmative verdict against a company in Guizhou province that had discriminated against an employee due to their sexual orientation; the second case was a court ruling against forced conversion therapy in Henan province. In both cases, local LGBT NGOs had coordinated to provide legal aid to the individuals to file lawsuits against unfair discrimination and violence.

Meanwhile, activists have been particularly mindful of how international advocacy on feminist and LGBT rights is complicated by the increasingly treacherous terrain of geopolitics, foreign and trade policies. In the China LGBT+ Leaders Conference in winter 2019, the keynote speaker Mai who was an experienced gay activist, addressed the changing dynamics of civil society organizing in the new era, with references to the overpowering party-state, slowing economic growth and growing regulation on social organizations. In particular, Mai mentioned:

> As we might have already known, the "Belt-and-Road" initiative led by the Chinese state to promote economic development and inter-regional connectivity has received international backlash. When coupled with worsening diplomatic relationship of Sino-

> American, Sino-Canadian, China-European, as well as the geopolitics between the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, NGO activism and the issue of LGBTQ can become the bargaining chip for the other parties (other than PRC) on the table. At the same time, these issues could also be the first to be challenged and condemned in the domestic setting.

Mai was cautious of the ways in which Chinese LGBT activism might be manipulated by international powers with narratives of homo-nationalism and their interests in maintaining global hierarchy and suppressing the growing ambition of the PRC, without understanding and protecting the real needs of local activism. He was also wary of the backlash in the domestic setting in which LGBT activism might be regarded as proxies of foreign imperial forces and threats to national security under the Xi Jinping Administration, with the former lesson of feminist activism. Even though the transnational advocacy to release the "feminist five" was a tremendous success, it was solicited as the solid prove for Chinese feminist activists' collusion of colonial and imperialist forces. Within a few years, feminist activism (*nvquan yundong*, 女权运动) has become an extremely politically sensitive phrase to use in public and semi-public spheres, and a target of surveillance, censorship and outright suppression.

Mai's concerns were not unfounded. In October 2021, the handling accounts of major Chinese LGBT university groups were permanently deleted over one night on Wechat (a major Chinese social network site) (Yiu, 2021). These accounts were important sites for sexual minority students to connect and share stories and information that would lead to community building and rapport. The censorship is chilling for LGBT activists. It directly signals the party-state's suppression on issues of sexuality and crackdown on LGBT groups. It has also been confirmed that LGBT Rights Advocacy China (同志平等权益促进会), the LGBT rights NGO which facilitated the majority of the impact litigation cases such as anti-conversion therapy and workplace discrimination of gay

men who tested positive of HIV/AIDs, has been forced to terminate their operation in China as of October 2021. As evidenced by increasing surveillance and arrests, the denunciation of rights-based NGOs and their changing relationship to the party-state's global project have resulted in the vulnerability and precarity of these activist workers.

Gender and development projects

In a staff meeting of Sun Rise in late August 2019, we were discussing a rural development project that the rural women NGO was leading and collaborating with local government in a village in South China. Tired of the conventional development rhetoric that sees rurality as "backward" and "out-of-touch" from urban life, this experiment of rural revitalization foregrounds sustainable and green village life, and centers the rural experience as a down-to-earth, refreshing and artistic getaway for urban residents. Their vision was to transform the village into an ecologically sustainable green village by working with villagers to preserve the village environment, inviting artists-in-residence to the village and to make art, and establishing a village art museum, as well as building an Airbnb-styled hostel in the village. The questions being raised in the staff meeting were concerning with critiques of building hostels in the village and having bathtubs in the hostel. Jin, the media staff were quick to respond:

> Why can't rural women enjoy bathtubs? Why can't rural hostels have bathtubs that are like those in the cities? What are the assumptions behind that? I feel that this kind of critique is exactly why we need to do this project: to debunk the rural/urban divide and to see rural women with their own desires and needs.

I was immediately intrigued by this rhetorical question. Indeed, after three decades of rural development since the economic reform in the 1980s, as well as the emerging NGO-led gender

and development (GAD) projects sponsored by international organizations such as OXFAM and the Ford Foundation and supported by the All-China-Women-Federation in the past two decades, the structural inequalities between the urban and the rural remain significant, if not worsened. To counter the state-sponsored rural development/poverty-elimination discourse which portrays rural women as a "vulnerable group" who adhere to internalized gender norms, with limited education and "low quality" (*suzhi di*, 素质低), these NGO-led participatory projects are keen on refashioning and remaking the subjectivities of rural women. Typically, these projects train women "to develop themselves, their households and communities, by cultivating a new, open, 'mind-set,' acquiring the technical skills suited to commercial agriculture and in demand from employers, and parenting more highly educated, civilized children." (Jacka and Sargeson, 2011:9) While most NGO-led projects are wary of treating women as objects and tools of development as in the WID (Women in Development) framework, in reality, the implementation of these projects fall back to these assumptions due to the lack of grounded knowledge of local relationships on the part of urban activist workers, as well as the haste to quantify project goals following a professionalized evaluation matrix.

In their attempt to develop a new model of rural revitalization that integrates ideologies of gender mainstreaming and to distance itself from the previous approaches that is still constrained by rural/urban dichotomy, Sun Rise was engaging in an ambitious new project that aimed to transform the idea of "rurality" itself. This methodology not only requires NGO workers to think outside of the box, and to reimagine rural life with the villagers, and it would also almost definitely encounter challenges as well as critiques. By building village art museum and Airbnb homestay and inviting artist-in-residence in the village, the NGO tried to transform the village's mode of production that was solely based on farming, to an integrated economy of agriculture, tourism and

rural/urban integration. This also aligned with the recent social trend of retreating from city life and finding peace and home in small-tiered cities and villages due to increasing exploitative working conditions and worsening living situation for many urban workers. However, the subjects of the new development initiatives seem rather ambiguous and misplaced by an urban gaze. As with most rural revitalization projects, either government-sponsored or individual/NGO initiated, this new project is saturated with the "ideals of village life" of urban NGO workers. Matching up to standards of urban hotels and hostels, the conditioning of village hostel rooms with luxurious bathtubs seems to be making an appeal to urban tourists who are accustomed to the comforts of urban accommodations, rather than providing the same level of comfort to rural women who might most likely serve the urban guests as hostel managers and room makers in the hostel establishment. The role of rural women has yet to be re-envisioned besides their primary tasks of maintaining a good village environment for urban visitors (e.g., collecting deserted trash and recycling used materials), serving urban tourists, as well as acting as subjects for observation and experiential projects for the artists. Thus, their reproductive responsibilities have extended from their unpaid care for their households, to that of caring and serving these new village visitors and establishments.

The extant scholarship on gender and development in China is grappling with the ideologies and implementation of participatory development projects since the economic reform (Jacka and Sargeson, 2011; Hsiung, 2021). One the one hand, some scholars focus their attention on "who is the gendered subjects, 'rural woman'" in these projects, and suggest that development projects simultaneously might "extend the power of the state, organizations and activists to discursively construct the subjectivity of development participant-beneficiaries", such as the case in the newly-built bathtubs by Sun Rise, at the same time, they might also "expand the capacities of those participant-beneficiaries to conceive of, and pursue goals that are not mere reflections of, or

reactions against, the ideologies, goals and methods of the powerful." (Jacka and Sargeson, 2011:3). It is observed from the other rural women-led projects in Sun Rise that rural women utilized the resources and connections from the NGO to promote their status both in their immediate households, as well as in the village life. They also took advantage of the increasing networks with other rural women's groups, the local women's federation and NGOs to solicit funding and materials to improve the village life in general, especially on the education for rural children and teenagers. On the other hand, scholars like Ping-shun Hsiung (2021) challenges the state-centered framework implied in the analysis of NGO development projects, which overemphasizes the role of the party-state in circumscribing the effects of these projects. On the contrary, using re-presentation and writing-up that destabilizes the researcher's exclusive authority in constructing analysis, she proposes an NGO-centered perspective to see how development is a joint project facilitated by bottom-up efforts from the NGO and the rural women. Chao village, another project site of Sun Rise in south China was a prime example of how rural women actively appropriated the resources both from the government and NGOs for their agendas.

Chao village is one of the villages in Feng County. The county was famous for the household drug industrial chain as drug production has been the county's lifeline for decades. There has been coordinated government and police efforts on anti-drug operation and campaigns. A critical component of the anti-drug campaign is anti-drug education. Sister Fan, the leader of Chao village women's group, returned to the village after years of working as a migrant worker in north China, decided to utilize whatever resources they could get to work on village education, especially for village girls. They used the anti-drug campaign money from the county government to build two libraries for women and children which also attract interests from the women's federation and women's NGOs. In my first work trip to the village on the photo-voice projects Sun Rise

collaborated with the village women's group, I talked to Sister Fan in her furnish-less cement-built village house.

> I quit school in my teens and traveled to Beijing to work as a migrant worker. In our village clan, children are very pre-matured (*zao shu*, 早熟). Being economically impoverished, we shoulder family responsibility at a very young age. With the boy preference tradition, most girls quit school at a very young age. I've really learnt through these years of hard work that if you are not educated, you cannot control your own destiny, especially for girls. We hope that our children can develop reading habits and read more. I'm currently talking with county officials to build a third library but there seems to be some issues with the funding. Anyhow we're working on it.

Compared to the other rural sisters in other villages, Sister Fan was very proactive. She had a clear vision and agenda of what and how her women's group want and can do, as well as the means of achieving their goals. Sister Fan knew how to tap into different resources and foster good relationships with multiple stakeholders, including government officials, county police, local women's federation, and women's NGOs. The strong clan-based village ties contributed to such tight-knit networks between women's groups, government and police officials as they were from the same clan. I had a very strong conviction that Sun Rise was only there to facilitate the women's group Sister Fan led and helped them succeed in ways that the county government and police fail to support. In this way, bottom-up efforts by local women's group respond better to the actual needs and concerns of local community. The women's group have the potential to sustain these initiatives even if NGOs retreat from the project sites because their resources are diversified and grounded by local connections. The rural woman groups are socially valued locally as they do not contest state narratives of gender and development, while less surveilled and policed by the state.

It is nevertheless financially vulnerable and depends on the strategic and organizational labor of one person, who is sister Fan.

The Chinese state project of "rule of law"

The "rule of law" project serves as the infrastructural base for achieving the "socialist harmonious society"[8] brought along by the Hu Jintao administration in 2002, and the new "Chinese dream"[9] promoted by Xi Jinping since 2012, as it extends to every facet of the social life in China. Emphasizing the role of the Chinese state, I document three crucial steps in the state's attempt to manage and discipline social organizations in the "rule of law" framework. The first is passing legislations specifically targeting NGOs such as the 2016 Charity Law and the 2017 Foreign NGO Management Law so as to contain their size and influence. Second, the state advances government-led philanthropy programs, namely, the state-led proliferation of the social work sector, and the government purchasing programs to organize and co-opt social organizations. Third, by legally and administratively demanding NGOs to set up party branches in organizations of more than three persons, the state further controls ideological differences and dissident voices within the NGOs.

Regulations and legislations

The first attempt by the state to regulate and organize NGOs was the Regulation on the Registration and Management of Social Organizations, promulgated after the crackdown on the

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[8] Social harmony, which could be dated back to Confucian China, has been characterized as a form of new Confucianism. The harmonious society was created by the Hu Jintao administration as a socioeconomic concept in response to increasing social injustice and inequality.

[9] Promoted by Xi Jinping, the Chinese Communist Party general secretary, it is a set of personal and national ethos and ideals in China.

Tiananmen student-worker movement in 1989. In 1998, the Regulation was amended due to the disruptive Falun Gong protests which questioned the party's legitimacy in ruling China. According to Wu and Chan (2012), exclusion and dual supervision are the two defining characteristics of the 1989/1998 Regulation. First, "it stipulated that only one social organization is allowed to register within an administrative sector at each level…simply put, with the existing government-established social organizations (also known as government organized NGOs-GONGOs) in almost every sector and at every administrative level, there is little institutional space for any new, voluntary-based, and non-government-initiated organizations to obtain formal registration". (10) Second, the Regulation stipulates that NGOs applying for registration must find a state agency as its "professional supervisory unit," in order to make sure the activities they conduct are within the realms of political control and policy framework. Thus, these two traits led theorists in the 1990s to come up with the "corporatist model" of state-society relations in China, highlighting its top-down feature (Unger, 2008).

In 2005, the drafting of the Charity Law was set in motion by the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the National Congress. It took eleven years to finalize the law and it was passed in September 2016. One of the central characteristics long-awaited by the practitioners is the removal of the dual supervision required of the NGOs. According to the new Charity Law, organizations no longer need to obtain the sponsorship of a state agency, and they could register directly with the relevant bureau of civil affairs. In practice, dual supervision is still a prerequisite for most social

organizations (UNDP, 2016). The Law specifies six[10] categories of approved charitable activities and encourage greater philanthropic giving. However, only entities with close government connections, or groups with good records could register without state agency sponsorship. In fact, the role of the state is strengthened in the law. Organizations working on politically sensitive topics, as well as foreign NGOs and foundations are under greater scrutiny, as the law demands that "charitable organizations may not engage in or fund activities that endanger national security or social public interests" which remain slippery under the authorities' interpretation (Charity Law, 2016).

In the summer of 2018, two years after the passing of the Charity Law, I talked to Susan, the secretary general of a major corporate foundation on the effects of the law, as well as her views on NGO development in China. Contrary to my assumption that corporate foundations were faring well under the new environment with abundant resources and funding from the corporation, Susan addressed the challenges they were facing:

> Corporate foundations are just one department of the corporation. We must support whatever political or social tasks the corporation are assigned by the state. There is actually little space to maneuver. All social organizations are tasked with the state's poverty-elimination efforts, and we need to file in our year-end reports of whether we've accomplished our mission. Afterall, Party is the boss. As for the Charity Law, Document 46 which was came out four months after the Law stressed that dual supervision be

[10] The six categories include 1) poverty elimination, 2) elderly and disability care, 3) disaster relief, 4) educational, scientific, cultural, public health and sports activities, 5) environmental protection, 6) other activities compliant with the Law. (Charity Law, 2016)

> remained, and that the supervising unit must be made accountable for the NGOs they represent indefinitely. This really scares away those mass organizations and state ministries to support NGOs to register. For gender-related issues, if the All-China-Women-Federation doesn't take the lead, there is not much other organizations can do to push for policy, resources or establishing systems for change. What's more, gender perspectives are so lacking in many foundations. I think change must happen from within state-affiliated organizations because they have the resources, authority and money.

As a person who was closely involved with drafting the Charity Law in its initial stage in her previous job, Susan was disappointed of how the final version came out constrictive rather than receptive. She was critical of the role of the party-state in controlling and monitoring the growth of the NGO sector, and she also mentioned that only NGOs which do not ask the party-state to be accountable (*wen ze*, 问责)might do well under the current climate, such as environmental organizations focusing on recycling actions but not accountability of pollution.

If the new Charity Law is China's effort in advancing its new framework of organizing social organizations, the Foreign NGO Management Law, which went into effect in January 2017 after only several months of drafting and discussion, is a clear gesture of the Chinese state to quell the influence and impact of foreign NGOs and foundations, and organizations with close transnational ties. Under this law, double registration is still required for foreign organizations, and there's a new obligation to register with the Ministry of Public Security rather than with the Ministry of Civil Affairs. The Foreign NGO Management Law has a chilling effect on the part of civil society as their activities are now punishable by law, as it clearly indicates that NGOs (foreign NGOs in China and Chinese NGOs with foreign ties) are first and foremost a public security concern to the state.

Apart from these high-profile laws, other regulations to contain the growth of the NGO sector and the welfare of NGO workers are also noteworthy. The Regulation on the Management of Foundations adopted in 2004 stipulates that no more than 10% of a foundation's total expenditure should be allocated to cover staff wages, benefits and overheads[11]. This regulation has affected the growth of the sector by discouraging sufficient monetary compensation for workers in foundations and has negative effects on NGOs who receive the funding from domestic foundations. Most funding, be it domestic or transnational, is project-based funding. Project-based funding is most of the time unsustainable, and it usually does not cover overhead and administrative costs. Lacking financial sustainability, many NGOs cannot afford to provide social insurance for its workers as a result.

Government-led philanthropy programs

Social work was first introduced by the Chinese state as an academic discipline in higher education in the 1980s. There were no social work organizations nor professional social workers at that time. It was the Wenchuan earthquake which brought the state's attention to social work as the earthquake revealed heightened need for social workers in disaster relief and post-disaster psychological assistance. Since 2008, the state promoted the social work occupation and encouraged people to apply for the social worker certificate with incentives. The trajectories of the NGOs and social work organizations differ in the role of the Chinese state in shaping their development and discourse. The different relations to the state also create antagonisms between

[11] https://www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/regulations-on-the-management-of-foundations-chinese-text

grassroots NGOs and social work organizations since they hold contrasting views with regard to political ideologies, and strategies in reaching out and working with their beneficiaries.

The Chinese state established the "government purchasing programs" (*zhengfu goumai xiangmu* 政府购买项目) in order to outsource its welfare responsibilities to the society. In essence, the government calls for bids from social organizations in particular areas of social service provisioning, such as education, HIV-AIDs prevention, elderly care etc., and pays these organizations from government budget for their services. The first government purchasing public service was an inter government-NGO collaboration on poverty alleviation in 2006. It shows the reliance of the state on the labor of NGOs to fulfill the government social service provisioning responsibilities. At the same time, by making NGOs compete for government resources and subjecting them to the project mandates and guidelines, the Chinese state monitors the parameters of NGO activities and goals. According to Lily, the leader of Green Flower (migrant sex worker NGO) who also works with the civil affairs bureau and the local women's federation on these government-funded programs, the budget per program is minimal but with great constraints. They are required to submit lengthy reports and detailed photos of their activities, which takes up a great amount of time and energy apart from their already busy itineraries.

I still vividly remember when Lily asked me to represent Green Flower and presented the grant report in the NGO evaluation meeting in the grand conference room of the city civil affairs bureau in summer 2020. I was responsible to present the PowerPoint slides and describe what the organization had done with the small grant from the civil affairs bureau during the first wave of the pandemic. The presentation went well. I talked about how Green Flower bought and distributed masks and disinfection supplies for migrant workers, facilitated online parent-child

communication learning sessions to ease family conflicts during the pandemic quarantine. What struck me was the fact that only eight out of the total eighty-five organizations which received the grants were grassroots NGOs, while the rest seventy-seven were residential community organizations. Residential community organizations (*juweihui*, 居委会) are in the lowest administrative level in China's political system, and they are responsible for the delivery and implementation of government policies. It was understandable that residential community organizations played a critical role in China's fight against Covid-19 because these organizations have established collegial relationship with residents in their daily involvement with the surrounding community. However, the disproportionate grant-making to these two types of organizations was still striking to me. After the evaluation presentation, Lily complained to me about the bureaucracies of these government-funded projects.

> Boring, isn't it? I just could not stand these meetings. I hate it. The last commentator from a university was talking about project management and reflection, but none of these were mentioned when we were granted. All they asked us was to take a bunch of pictures and attach them to the lengthy standard project report. They don't really care about what you've learnt from these projects, the government wants to see the results and the effects of their money. It was a completely different experience when we were doing international foundation funded projects. The process of writing report was a process of learning, identifying problems and making concrete suggestions and modification plans. They raised real questions. I actually enjoyed writing reports for these projects.

The contrasts Lily mentioned between government-funded projects and international foundation funded projects lay not only in their methodology of writing project reports, but most crucially, whether the projects represent a top-down approach in instrumentalizing NGOs for government

interests, or bottom-up efforts between the grantor and grantee to solve critically concerned issues. Lily's evaluation meeting confirmed that the bulk of the government purchasing program budget goes to social work organizations because they are more acquainted with the government's ways of thinking and can fulfill their requirements. Grassroots NGOs are wary of the co-optation of the government money therefore a lot of them do not even consider applying for it. However, due to the increasing draconian government tactics to surveil and suppress grassroots NGOs by legal and violence means since 2012, especially targeting human rights organizations, some NGOs try to register as social work organizations to continue their work and start to apply for government purchasing programs.

Party committees in NGOs

Registering as NGOs in China is problematic and two-fold: for one the registration process is strict and bureaucratic that requires a lot of human labor which small-scale organizations lack, and others fear that authorizing essential records for government inspection will endanger their future operation and thus become more vulnerable. It is worth noting that NGOs working on human rights issues rarely register as non-profits in China, whilst some may register as corporations for the ease of operation. Without legal status, many NGOs face multiple vulnerabilities in daily operations and personnel management. The bright side is, for those with no NGO registration status, they might be freed from mandatory government inspection including setting up party committee in the organization.

In 2016, the general office of the party's central committee and the State Council released a new guideline indicating party committees must be set up in all NGOs with greater than three persons, in order to "strengthen political thought education for responsible people at social groups

and guide them to actively support party building…promote the place of party building in the social group's charters." In my summer fieldwork in 2018, I visited a research foundation which I worked closely with when I was working as an NGO worker in Beijing in 2014. The general secretary, as well as the research project manager were very concerned of the infiltration of the party committee in their foundation.

> It is very possible that in the future, party representatives would have veto power in our decision making, rather than our board members. They also serve as focal points for stability control and managing conflicts within social organizations. We see this as legitimizing the role of the Party in NGOs. We're still struggling with this.

Although it is not welcomed by NGOs, most of the organizations abide by the guideline. From my observation, a common solution is to have the person who is a party member in the NGO, or hire a person with party membership to deal with party-related issues, such as attending party committee meetings for social organizations, filing up reports etc. However, it increases administrative as well as financial pressure to these organizations.

Valuation, tensions and levels of precarity

The 2012 Xi Jinping administration brought along hardening regulatory environment for any rights-based groups. The social reproduction of rights-based organizations has been disrupted by the party-state, making their operation and survival in China extremely challenging. At the same time, the gender and development projects, and the state-sponsored philanthropic programs have also encountered more censorship and control. In 2014, the China Law Society leading the Stop DV Network ended their collaboration. Without a supervising unit, the Stop DV Network had to cease operation. The anti-discrimination NGO Yi Ren Ping had been under constant police

crackdown since 2009 and was targeted by the Chinese government as the organization behind the mounting feminist activism since 2012 in China. The five feminists who were arrested were questioned in the detention center about whether Yi Ren Ping organized and coordinated these protests, including the sources of funding. The government allegedly claimed that Yi Ren Ping received funding from overseas donors, directing their disruptive actions challenging state authority at home. Till this day, Yi Ren Ping had ceased their operation in China. NGOs with explicit rights-based claims encountered severe government surveillance and crackdown. Organizations which do not engage in mass mobilization, but only domestic and international policy advocacy, research and public education have survived and continue to work, such as Common Language, the longest running lala group in China since 2005.

Gender and development projects, which also grew out of the rights-based discourse in the 1990s, have managed to align with state-sponsored rural revitalization/poverty elimination programs for endorsement and resources by coordinated efforts between femocrats, activists and NGO workers and state agencies. These projects have led to transformations of individual rural women's lives such as Sister Fan and the children and women in Chao village. Yet, these projects also encounter ideological and practical challenge negotiating with local government and village networks, as well as internal patriarchal gender relations. NGO workers in gender and development projects are still grappling to not viewing rural women as instruments of development, but as active agents who have particular needs and desires.

The human rights projects, which are disseminated and overseen by transnational foundations and NGOs, especially from the Global north to the Global south, produces a different type of "rights-bearing subjects" than the ones formulated by the Chinese state-led project of "rule of law".

One is the individualistic liberal market agents who claim to have inherent human rights. The other is the individualistic post-socialist market agents with rights granted by the state (Friedman, 2014). The Chinese state-led "rule of law" project shares many surface similarities with the transnational human rights discourse in the neoliberal era. Both emphasize individual rights and individualized means of achieving empowerment: through the freedom to enter and compete in labor markets or benefiting from market-oriented NGO projects. Both rely on formalized mechanisms and processes of ensuring the protections of rights: while the former is exercised via legislations including the Charity Law and Foreign NGO Management Law, the latter is realized in inter-government treaties and bodies such as the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the United Nations. Processes of valuation over what counts as "good NGO projects" are mediated by the differing political economies of the human rights project and the Chinese state-led project of "rule of law". Affiliation to one of the projects results in antagonism and hostility towards the other, exemplified in the remarks of Yan in the beginning of the chapter.

Largely implicated by their funding sources and political ideologies about rights, grassroots human rights NGOs are particularly vulnerable in China. However, this is not to dismiss the overall precariousness of the NGO sector. According to multiple research reports on philanthropy and the voluntary sector, NGO workers receive below average income than city and county enterprise employees and are also subject to insufficient social welfare benefits. Social worker organizations or NGOs on government purchasing programs are also financially unsustainable because the project money often does not cover administrative costs, and payments are significantly delayed as the bureaucratic procedures take a long time to review and process.

In this chapter, I theorize the shifting landscape of the NGO sector beyond the conventional political struggles over power and rights rooted in the binary state-society relations. Instead, I suggest that it's crucial to go beyond political ideological differences and understand the kind of political economic processes that render NGOs and NGO workers precarious in China.

Conclusion

In order to develop a comprehensive analytical framework to understand the labor precarity of feminist and LGBT NGO activist workers, the political economy of the NGO sector, and the social reproduction of these different NGOs in China must be first scrutinized and contextualized. The human rights project, gender and development and the Chinese state-led project of "rule of law" bring in different streams of funding, ideologies and frameworks. The human rights project was introduced to mainland China at a time when women-led social organizations were in dire need of funding and theoretical and practical framework (Xu, 2009). In a sense feminist and rights activists welcomed and helped the popularization of human rights discourse in China. The successful dissemination of rights-based narratives, as well as participatory methods, gave birth to a great number of NGOs working in advocacy and development. However, when the Chinese state became aware of the potential risk of such rights-narratives to its political legitimacy, the crackdown on NGOs with foreign connections began. The Chinese state-led "rule of law" provides another framework for NGOs who want to survive and continue their operation in mainland China. The question of whether human rights framework is compatible with the Chinese case obscures the real issue of who gets to define subjects in need, as well as methodologies in solving these issues, and for whom (Suchland, 2015). Rather, attention should be emphasized on the political

economic processes behind these projects, and how individuals entangled in these processes negotiate, strategize and get things done on the ground.

The construction of the "good NGO work" in China has been fraught with tension and mediated by differing standards of valuation, the process of working in each project, as well as the level of precarity/risk associated with the social reproduction of respective NGOs to continue their work on a daily basis. The contradictory nature of what is deemed morally superior, legally abiding, and competitive in the philanthropic funding complex creates confusion, tension, and splits within the NGO sector. Such construction of "good NGO work" works in tandem with the mechanism of triple erasure of the labor precarity of feminist and LGBT NGO activist workers by the Chinese party-state, domestic and transnational NGO funding complex. The next chapter will focus on the ways in which the social reproduction of the NGOs and activist workers is rendered invisible, devalued and/or erased by the party-state and the non-profit funding complex, by characterizing them as moral, illegal, and/or unprofessional work.

Chapter Four

Mechanisms of Triple Erasure: Labor Precarity of Chinese Feminist and LGBT NGO Activism

Vignette 1. "We cannot even survive, let alone development!" Wang Xingjuan, a hard-core feminist in her eighties, told me in my visit to her apartment in the summer of 2018 in Beijing. Granny Wang founded the first women's NGO in 1988, seven years before the well-known Beijing UN Women Conference which facilitated the burgeoning of Chinese feminist and LGBT NGOs in the two decades that follow. Like herself, the generation of feminist leaders from the 95-Women-Conference have retired and are invested in taking care of their grandchildren. Even though she has retired years ago, she still takes an active part in feminist advocacy by writing, publishing, giving speeches and attending discussions. Granny Wang talked about the gaps in feminist organizing strategies between generations, as well as the shifting political and economic domains that feminist groups have been situated in the past thirty years. She reckoned on the increasingly de-radicalizing strategies adopted by China's largest women's organization affiliated with the government, the Women's Federation, by comparing many of the achievements on the feminist liberation front that the Women's Federation facilitated by collaborating with other women's groups in the first decade of the economic reform. However, as feminism has almost become a taboo to talk about in this political juncture in China due to its transnational connections, the economic precarity of these NGOs is coupled with intensifying political censorship and control, said Granny Wang.

Vignette 2. "In our field, we are paid in passion[12] (*yong ai fa dian*, 用爱发电), but what if we use up all our love? NGO workers are also a vulnerable group and how can we solve social problems if we become the social problem"? A young queer NGO worker raised the question in a salon event that my friend and I organized to discuss NGO work in the summer of 2019 in Guangzhou. Participants laughed at her remarks bitterly, as more than half of them work in NGOs. What she said points to a long-standing predicament in the NGO sector as workers are poorly paid without sufficient social security coverage, and are vulnerable to labor abuse, let alone the surmounting political pressure on rights-based activism in recent years[13]. While passion and commitment to social justice has attracted generations of Chinese people into NGO work, the precarity of NGO activism and NGO activist workers is the cruel reality that confronts them. The above two vignettes from my field work foreground the shifting landscape for feminist and LGBT NGO activism in the past three decades.

This chapter provides three important theoretical contributions: (1) Feminist and LGBT NGOs' social reproductive value is absorbed and exploited by the party-state as it outsources its welfare responsibilities while containing their political influence. (2) State- and market- orchestrated processes of moralization, illegalization and professionalization condition feminist and LGBT NGO activist workers as low-skilled, illegal and/or unprofessional workers in China's postsocialist

[12] Originally used in the Taiwanese environmentalist movement, it was a campaign slogan to urge the government to care for the safety of the citizens and denuclearize Taiwan.

[13] In the 2019 report on the social and economic security of NGO workers by Yibao (a social enterprise established to provide affordable social security products for NGO workers and low-income individuals), 66 percent of surveyed NGO workers received a monthly income of 4,000 RMB (580 USD) and more than 60 percent of the workers' savings were below the national average of urban employees. 20 percent of surveyed NGO workers were not covered by basic social security or any other commercial insurance.

political economic landscape. (3) In the dynamic relationship with the state and the domestic and transnational NGO funding complex, and in their struggles to survive and thrive, these NGO workers display the contradiction and interplay of agency and conformity whereby they reshape, revise or reinforce norms associated with gender, sexuality and neoliberal standards of productivity and efficiency. With ethnographic observation in three grassroots NGOs, the next section focuses on the ways in which the gendered social reproductive labor of the activist workers is rendered invisible, devalued and/or erased by way of moralization, illegalization and professionalization orchestrated by the Chinese party-state, domestic and transnational NGO funding complex.

Labor Precarity and Mechanism of Triple Erasure

Moralization

Who deserves saving? ---Moralized discourse of "good socialist womanhood"

Green Flower was initially founded by and for sex workers. The adding of the category of migrant by its founder Lily was a strategy to include the organization in the category recognized by the Chinese charity laws and to register as a non-profit in China in the early 2010s. Being legally registered, the NGO can solicit funding from the government and civil affairs bureau. Lily's move was forward looking as no one could have predicted that in a few years to come, unregistered international funding would be blocked by the Foreign NGO Management Law in 2017. In fact, the NGO got rid of any indication of their work related to sex workers by naming their beneficiaries in Chinese *Liudong funv* (流动妇女), meaning mobile and migrant women. In one of my research trips to visit the NGO in the summer of 2018, I was amazed to see the endorsement of the local women's federation of their organization. They got a triple-A social organization rating in the city,

with five-A being the highest rating. The local women's federation assumes responsibility alongside the Party, and they are intended to provide service and maintain stability control of the areas where the Party could not reach. As the women's federation is short of staff, they are reliant on the labor of local women's NGOs to facilitate their work. Therefore, the women's federation (WF) acquiesced them being a sex worker organization and their symbiotic relationship makes room for the work of Lily's organization. Lily explained to me, the local WF often keeps a blind eye to some of their activities. With the 30,000 RMB (4,300 USD) for a year from the WF, she has been able to maintain a grantor-grantee relationship with them and continue her work. However, when I began my year-long fieldwork in the organization in May 2020, the NGO was left with only one full-time staff (Lily), and two parttime staffs (sister Gao and sister Huang) due to the losing of international funding and a limited amount of domestic funding from the local women's federation and civil affairs bureau.

The moralization of sex workers as migrant women who suffer from the bifurcation of the urban and rural divide in China's fast-growing economy since the economic reform in the 1980s has proven a practical strategy for the sex worker rights organization. Even though there is some overlap between these two categories as many sex workers are also migrants from less economically developed cities, counties and villages, the deliberate naming of the NGO targeting migrant women means the organization could tap into a whole readily available programs on poverty elimination, rural revitalization and specific funding streams on migrant women issues. In a joking manner, Lily explained to me,

> We started around 2008 with funding from an international NGO. Over the years it has become crystal clear that we would never be able to apply for domestic funding for our work on sex worker rights. Using the name of migrant women center is *gua yang tou mai*

> *gou rou*（挂羊头卖狗肉 -meaning false advertising in Chinese）. But that's our strategy to survive! We are an eye candy to the women's federation, or more appropriately, chicken ribs (*ji lei* 鸡肋). Because by funding a migrant women center, the local women's federation gets credit for their work on migrant women, but they don't really care about what we do.

By moralizing and re-presenting their beneficiaries as migrant women who perform hard labor at the factories and shoulder household responsibilities - the organization reinforces norms of "good socialist womanhood" and defines who deserves help. As a result, the NGO has to include migrant factory women as their beneficiaries. However, mixing these two groups of women also presented challenges.

> Our programs used to be solely sex-worker centered. For the women's federation projects, we tried to invite both groups of women to trainings and activities. The factory migrant women were quick to identify sex workers because they held strong prejudice against women who dressed up in a particular manner. They also felt threatened by the presence of the sex workers for the fear that their husbands who were also migrant workers in the city would be seduced by the sex workers.

In fact, Lily has spent a great amount of time to attend to these internal misunderstandings and discrimination. Sister Gao (*Gao jie* 高姐) was hired to specifically focus on programs and activities related to migrant factory women. As a dorm keeper for migrant women in a factory, sister Gao can reach many migrant women and facilitate their participation in NGO activities. In one of our casual grilled fish lunch one day, sister Gao told me how she came to understand sex work through her work in the NGO.

> I'm a very traditional person in my fifties. It took me quite some time to accept that the NGO also serves sex workers. Lily keeps trying to *shentou* (渗透/infiltrate) ideas of sex work to me and I came to know sex workers are actually everywhere which I had no idea before (with an exclamatory smile)! Now I come to think that sex workers are better than those who have extra-marital affairs – at least they (sex workers) don't destroy our families!

The deliberate choice of Green Flower to guise their work as a migrant women NGO in order to survive, shows the impact of the Chinese party-state deliberately taming the influence of the NGO sector through moralized discourse of "helping the socially marginalized groups" (帮助弱势群体), and the state-orchestrated politics of "good socialist womanhood". Nevertheless, it preserves the sex hierarchy which discriminates against those who provide sexual and intimate labor for money (Rubin, 1984). At the same time, the NGO subtly challenges these norms on gender and sexuality by mixing migrant factory women workers and migrant sex workers together and tried to facilitate understanding and solidarity among them, e.g., organizing anti-domestic violence training and talks, hosting festive celebrations such as making dumplings for the new year, and providing essential support to them during the Covid pandemic. In these shared activities, they hope to debunk the myth of sex work as dirty and easy work.

Laboring in passion: the moralization of gendered reproductive labor

Sun Rise offers gender awareness training and grant money to village sisters (*nongcun jiemei*, 农村姐妹 is what the NGO prefers to address the rural women as it sounds more equal and intimate) to organize in their villages. Northern village sisters typically organize activities such as the most popular dancing and public speech competition, while village sisters in the South take part in designing sex education for youth, as well as family education and environment preservation. The

fund is allocated differently in different villages, it could be spent on paying a parttime organizer, and purchasing the materials for the events etc. Village sisters are encouraged to step out of their immediate families and organize for bettering the village life, and to change the gender culture in the village. It gives them a sense of greater purpose other than their household chores and other reproductive work which might not be valued as much within their households. The grant officer suggested that liaising with an NGO in the city and organizing in the village also symbolically granted the village sisters with more authority and agency, and it has been observed that it helped promote their family status.

In one of the work trips that I paid to visit two villages in northern China with the grant officer, we met with the local women's groups. During our meeting with more than twenty village sisters in the office building funded by the local women's federation in X village, a senior sister spoke with a humble and timid smile:

> We are very happy that we can help! Whatever Hong (the local rural women group leader) asks, we will try to contribute what we can, even without any money. So many other villagers questioned us and saying we must be doing this for money. But we don't care about the money. Now some of us are given the opportunity to travel to big cities like Beijing to attend trainings (pointing to another village sister), and we can go to the city for important occasions such as joining the award ceremony for the "Bearers of the March 8th Red Flag" (an award to model working class women on the International Women's Day). It was such an unforgettable experience for me!

To my surprise, many village sisters echoed what the senior sister said and emphasized that they were willing to continue their work with passion. Addressing rural women as "sisters" is not only an attempt by Sun Rise to debunk the urban and rural distinction between NGO workers and village

sisters, but it also creates quasi-kin relationships that facilitate and smooth the implementation of NGO projects in the villages. The local women's group is more than an organizing committee, but also a community of friends and families which they can rely on for advice and information sharing. Meanwhile, these quasi-kin relationships rationalize the use of village sisters' free labor for the local women's groups and Sun Rise. In a way, by extending kin-based relations, village sisters extend their unpaid reproductive responsibilities to the greater women's group and the village. The moralization works both ways. On the one hand, village sisters are convinced that their primary duty as a woman is to care for their families and friends and they shoulder almost all unpaid reproductive work within their households. On the other hand, by stressing that they work for free, they are proud to showcase their "good socialist womanhood". However, such moralization inhibits a positive evaluation of village sisters' socially valued gender reproductive labor both in and outside of their homes. The value of their labor is subsumed in the "unproductive" matrix, further reifying the market and civil society binary, and making it easy targets of co-optation by the state agencies.

Over an informal dinner conversation in a restaurant near their village, the two leaders of the local women's group in X village complained to us about the local women's federation (WF). The women's federation awarded their group for their work around the village with a promised 200,000 RMB, but they only received some bookshelves and desks. We found the bookshelves and desks idled with a thick layer of dust during our tour of their office because they did not really need them in the first place. Besides these top-down arrangements, they were more concerned about the health of their co-worker, Hong, who founded the women's group. In order to maintain favorable relationship with the local women's federation, she voluntarily undertook a lot of WF's work including writing speech drafts and articles for them.

> We are worried about her. She is exhausted. She has one fulltime job in Beijing, comes back every weekend to our village to organize with us, and she manages three Wechat public accounts. It is often the case that because the WF wants the article first thing in the morning, she works until very late at night just writing and writing. She even writes on the train back to our village! Poor Hong!

They were also dismayed at how the WF jeopardized the events they organized and took the credit as their political achievements. Even though village men who worked as migrant workers in other cities could only come back for a few days for the group wedding ceremony event organized by the women's group, the WF ordered them to change the date and staged it for government inspection and publicity purpose. As a result, many missed the event. Despite these seemingly unfair treatments, they were clear that WF's endorsement provided the space for the work they wanted to do. Therefore, the "exchange" made sense to them as long as they were granted with access and resources in return for their free labor. In this case, Hong's unpaid work is necessary for the socially valued work of the women's federation. Just as Sun Rise organizes in villages by relying on local village sisters' unpaid gendered reproductive labor, the local women's federation takes advantage of the moralized discourse of "good socialist womanhood" and exploits their free labor. However, this time, the village sisters felt being used.

Moralization occurs on multiple levels. With narratives of altruism and self-sacrifice, it further impedes a positive evaluation of the value of NGO work. Most of the NGO programs known to the public are GONGO (government organized NGOs) programs. These charity projects typically engage in sporadic gift-giving activities and one-off money donation, which leaves the impression that such work requires little skill, thus is of little market exchange value. The large concentration of women in NGO spaces reinforces the stereotypical assumption that these are women's low paid

jobs. At the same time, volunteers are a significant component of NGO work because NGOs depend on volunteer work due to shortage of funding and personnel. Thus, the general public tend to consider working in NGOs acts of volunteerism as volunteers contribute their free labor for community service with moral reasons, or at least it should be paid minimally. Lily, the director of the Green Flower NGO found herself in the kind of quandary of being misunderstood by her family, friends, as well as the sex worker beneficiaries.

> I did not reveal to my husband or my peers about the organization working for sex workers. There is still so much stigmatization towards sex work. Anyhow, they don't consider working in social organization a real job, compared to those government and business jobs. That was not the most upsetting thing if I had the support from the sex worker community. They (the beneficiaries) only demand things from us. They think philanthropy should be free.

Lily was disheartened by the fact that her labor was not valued by the community she fought so hard to serve. NGO work is conflated with volunteerism by her family, friends, and even the sex worker beneficiaries. In philanthropy, volunteer work is not recognized as socially valued labor with market exchange value as it is particularly placed in the moral realm instead of the economic realm. The conflation reinforces the binary framework of productive vs. unproductive and serves to invisiblize and devalue both volunteer labor and NGO labor. The twin processes of moralization, by configuring moralized subjects who deserve saving, and moralizing gendered reproductive labor, obscure the fact that NGO labor, as well as volunteer labor are socially valued labor outside of the capitalist market exchange systems.

Illegalization

Divide and conquer by way of illegalization

The increasing precarity of the NGO sector is a result of the China's postsocialist statecraft and modes of governance aiming to discipline and co-opt the sector by instilling the language of legality and compliance. With the demise of the "civil society" narrative, the language of rights is forbidden and directly associated with Western-style liberal activism. It is regarded as imperialist attempts to endanger the sovereignty of the party-state.

The passing of the 2016 Charity Law and the 2017 Foreign NGO Management Law is one example of how legality could be utilized to disempower certain NGOs in China, particularly the rights-based groups. The Charity Law promises to smooth how non-profits (which are called private non-enterprise units in the Law) could register and raise funds, but in reality, non-profits struggle to find a governing unit to represent them and register, in the corporatist top-down model in China. For rights-based NGOs, their "illegal" status raises grave concern for them because domestic or international foundations could not fund unregistered organizations in China under the Foreign NGO Management Law. It becomes a vicious cycle when these groups continue to receive funding from overseas organizations unregistered in China and thus remain "illegal". On Jan 9th, 2019, the Guangzhou Civil Affairs Bureau released an announcement on "illegal organizations" that are banned in Guangzhou, with no official reasons given. For the first time in China, two organizations working on LGBT issues were listed, including the Guangzhou University Rainbow Group and the Guangzhou Gender and Sexuality Education Center.

Illegalization is at once material and symbolic. By making NGOs who do not comply with state-sanctioned mandates illegal, the state sends a strong signal to the rest of the civil society of the boundary of its rule. This conquer and divide strategy, works well to further disaggregate and demoralise the solidarity of the NGO community. NGOs become hesitant to voice oppositional opinions or organize collectively when other organizations face danger or police harassment. Ting, the director of the Guangzhou Gender and Sexuality Education Center told me,

> We were still in shock when we were notified that our organization had been listed as one of the illegal organizations. Many of our work partners called and consoled us. And they told me that they had to stop our collaborative events and programs so that their organization can cut the ties and stay safe. I totally understood them, but I was disheartened, nonetheless.

Due to the tightening censorship on public forums and conferences which gather NGO activist workers to discuss and strategize, many of these initiatives have turned to private gatherings. The information is shared via trusted circles of friends and through encrypted messages over secure sites. As the Chinese state adapts to these new technologies adopted by activist workers, it enhanced censorship by making these sites accessible only through a VPN (virtual private network), as well as making laws to convict those who purchase and use VPNs for individual private purposes. Feminist and LGBT activist workers have learnt to be technologically-savvy and work their ways around to bypass censorship and unstable VPN connection through always trying out new apps, secure websites and email handles.

The making and unmaking of "illegal workers"

Illegalization turns rights-based NGOs into "undesirables" in China's postsocialist state governance. In this way, the labor of these NGO workers is not only devalued, but in fact demonized and cast away. They are regarded as "Western style activism" that follow imperialistic agendas to encroach China. By way of illegalization, the state dismisses the economic and labor issue of NGOs, making it a mere political crisis. Illegalization reaffirms feminist and LGBT NGO activist workers that their work is not lawful work that is recognized by the Chinese state, therefore their worker rights is reasonably compromised. It was a common practice in feminist and LGBT NGOs to convince the workers to waive their entitlements to social security by exchanging the equivalent amount payable by the NGOs as cash. The cash adds to the sum of the worker's monthly income. The Chinese social security program includes five benefits: pension fund, medical insurance, maternity insurance, unemployment insurance, work injury insurance and the housing fund. These are important social reproduction programs mandated by the state to maintain life and reproduce labor power. Both the NGO and the worker are responsible for paying to enroll in the social security. However, if they choose to enroll, they will not receive the cash payable by the organization, and they also have to pay their part from their salary. Most NGO workers working in feminist and LGBT NGOs are between the age of twenty to forty. On the one hand, few of them have desired a heteronormative lifestyle in the future which revolves around bearing and rearing children, purchasing an apartment etc. Thus, they do not want to invest a part of their already minimal income as sunk cost for an unfathomable future. On the other hand, intentionally or unintentionally, many NGO leaders/directors bypass their responsibility to protect the labor rights of their employees and provide for the social reproduction cost by utilizing the illegalization rhetoric. A young gay NGO worker in an established LGBT NGO told me their voluntary opting

out of social security program was a strategy to protect the NGO which received "illegal" international funding, explained by the NGO director on his first day of work.

> It is an explicit understanding between us and the NGO. The director told me if they paid for our social security, the account flow would indicate that we have a working relationship. How do we explain the money we have for our operation in China? So, the safest way is to just pay us cash, leaving no traces to be found on the part of the NGO.

Insufficient labor protection in NGOs is a sector-wide issue, and it is even more pronounced in feminist and LGBT NGOs as they face the imminent threat of being illegalized in China. It could also be understood as NGO workers' moral decisions to protect the organization. However, NGO workers are the ones who bear the brunt of the consequences of illegalization, as well as the cost of social reproduction by "voluntarily" compromising their labor rights and welfare protection in the name of organization survival. The lack of labor rights protection and the self-recognition as "illegal" workers reveals the cruel consequences of the devaluation and erasure of the socially valued labor of feminist and LGBT NGO workers.

Meanwhile, NGOs actively maneuver spaces for survival with various strategies, in order to avoid becoming "illegal" in China. Several LGBT groups and women's rights NGOs have completely altered their mission and work, and successfully turned themselves into social work organizations working on adolescent issues and community services. These social work organizations are a critical component of China's social reproduction and stability control programs: by funding and establishing social work organizations that aim at resolving societal tensions and offer specific services to socially marginalized communities, the state also gain the upper hand in identifying and suppressing potential social discontent. Local governments take

advantage of NGOs' fear and their desire to survive, turning them into apolitical entities and fulfilling social reproduction services at a low cost. These mainstream topics enable them to apply for government funding and programs. Altering their mission has been painstaking, but their ultimate plan is to secretly integrate concepts of gender diversity in the work they do. However, the path to be recognized by local governments and gain registration status is full of obstacles, as the director of an NGO for disability and women's rights told me in an informal conversation:

> There is no formal mechanism to guide you through the registration process. For us, the most important thing is to be acknowledged by the local government. This means to establish connection and show them what you're capable of. That's why we've gone out of our way to work for the local government. We have voluntarily shouldered many service responsibilities for the local civil affairs bureau.

They were given a test period of a year and 25,000 RMB (3,600 USD) in total to deliver a series of projects. She laughed bitterly, "25,000 RMB is not even enough for a staff salary for six months with a below average income in first-tier cities"! NGO work is greatly devalued by the local government as they expect these organizations perform to the fullest with the least amount of monetary compensation. Even under these kinds of conditions, NGOs strategically abide because they regard it as the first step to have access to rich government resources. As the political spaces keep shrinking in China, these tactics are being re-evaluated by their fellow activists. Instead of suggesting that these organizations have been co-opted by the government, their strategies seem to be the few viable paths to survival in China. Along with examples of LGBT NGOs mobilized to confront the party-state and provided people in need during the Covid lockdown in the introduction chapter, these kinds of tacit knowledges, of moving within the systems, are of critical

significance to the social reproduction of NGOs. However, they are also at risk of being lost with the crackdown on NGOs by the Chinese state.

The post-2012 Chinese civil society is marked by sustained moralization, increasing government intervention, and at the same time dampening ideological shifts towards market logics. While these three sets of forces do seem to contradict each other, in fact they work in tandem to foster a new environment for NGOs to operate, and shape how NGOs strategize and evaluate their projects. The defining characteristics of the market logics is the professionalization narrative, which is what I will turn to next.

Professionalization

In mid-October in 2019, I embarked on a brief work trip with the grant officer and village project staff of Sun Rise to project villages in northern provinces. The agenda was to visit local women's groups funded by the NGO and evaluate the effectiveness of the current funding scheme. The project cycle was three years, and the program manager, Xing, was a bit disappointed by the fact that most of these groups had not lived up to their goals stated in project proposals. Xing expected an increased level of professionalization for these local women's groups, which include a high degree of institutionalization, e.g., to register as a non-profit, as well as developing the capacity to apply for funding and sustain the organization without the support of Sun Rise. However, the local women's groups remained small and unregistered, and there was no structure in place to train the volunteers and ensure the sustainability of these groups, once the dominant leaders were gone. In our re-cap session in our hotel in the city skirt close to the village, we talked about the different realities for the NGO and the local women's groups.

> I was also born and raised in a village in the south, and I understand the realities for the village sisters. In our meeting with them over two hours last night, they spoke about their multiple identities in the village: being a farmer, a wife, a mother, a daughter-in-law, and a women's group leader/volunteers. Their life is just too occupied with farming and daily chores, and few of them would prioritize organizing over their family. This is what I saw, but I also understood the expectation for them to grow stronger and more independent, from our organization's perspective. After all, I do believe the future for these groups in *zhuan ye hua* (专业化).They should be paid for their work, other than just volunteer their free labor.

Zhuan ye hua, with its closest translation as professionalization, has been deemed as an increasingly urgent demand for NGOs, activist groups, and even volunteer groups in China. As the grant officer herself, Xing believed in developing a replicable career path for organizers in these women's groups and NGOs. She also believed in their capacity to organize and fund for themselves, even though the reality presented quite a bit challenge. However, the parttime village project staff Chen jie (sister Chen) thought otherwise.

> Being one of the village sisters myself, I think just having this platform (the support from the NGO) to showcase themselves and organize activities they like is a blessing. Look at how happy they are when they organize dancing competition in the village! They have gained so much from it, outside of their village farm life.

Indeed, for the village sisters, their immediate concern was not to professionalize and earn money like Xing and sister Chen because that was not their realities. The contradiction between the NGO's push for these groups to professionalize, and local village sister's desire to remain small, voluntary

reflect the uneasy negotiation between market-oriented and people-centered approach in the NGO sector.

Torn between these contradicting discourses, Chinese NGOs not only have to comply with stringent legislations and provide free labor to state agencies in exchange for space and survival, but they are also struggling with the professionalization discourse which pushes them to be efficient, market-oriented and outcome-driven. There are two schools of thoughts in the professionalization discourse, one is *zhuan ye hua*, which advocates for a high degree of NGOization, whereby "social movements professionalise, institutionalise, and bureaucratise in vertically structured, policy-outcome–oriented organizations that focus on generating issue-specific and, to some degree, marketable expert knowledge or services" (Lang, 2013:64). The other discourse, the "commercialization of philanthropy" (*gong yi shang ye hua* 公益商业化) is regarded as a complete re-definition of NGO work by introducing the business model as a superior framework. The "commercialization of philanthropy" was a recent initiative by a leading Chinese philanthropist Xu Yongguang, to revitalize the so-called rigid NGO sector dictated by the state (Xu, 2017). Xu argued that the Chinese state monopolized the grassroots charitable initiatives and resources mushroomed since the 1980s, hijacking the development of civil society in China (Xu, 2014). Overseen by the government or GONGOs, the charity projects were fulfilling the duties of the government and were mostly carried out top-down. Xu suggested that the current inefficient non-profit projects of poor quality must be contested by market standards. By professionalizing and competing with other NGO projects, as well as business products with social objectives, the commercialization of philanthropy discourse embraces market values despite the nature of philanthropic capital, be it state-owned or private. The ultimate aim for Xu, is to develop a full-blown industry of social enterprises in China, a concept originated from England. Social

enterprises apply commercial strategies in solving social problems and generate revenues on their own without relying on any third-party funding. While theories of NGOization focuses on how such process compromises NGO's engagement in the public sphere in Western civil societies, the "commercialization of philanthropy" advocated by Xu is in fact an attempt to counter the increasing government influence and co-optation over the non-profit sector in China by introducing the market as an arbitrator for good philanthropic projects. By promoting the standardization and professionalization of NGO work, this market approach sets an alternative to government-funded programs which are complained often about their bureaucracy, and the lack of actual framework and guiding mechanisms to do projects better. While both the *zhuan ye hua* and the "commercialization of philanthropy" discourse are useful attempts to valorize the value of NGO work by debunking the productive vs. unproductive dichotomy, it also brings challenges to NGO workers who do not define and constrain the scope of their work in the capitalist market value of productivity and profits.

Albeit with strong resistance in the beginning, these few years do see the growing acceptance of such "survival of the strongest" NGO market logics. Advocates pushed for standardized evaluation of NGO projects and promoted the "best practices" as models. The social enterprise model is hailed as the future for Chinese NGOs by advocates. Because doing business seems to be the only viable path to thrive in China without treading into the political terrain. Unable to register as an NGO by the Chinese Charity Law, many rights-based organizations are in fact already registered as a business in China, so as the LGBT NGO Fierce Love. The business status and their track records had allowed them to receive international funding in the past. Fully recognizing the predicament of continuing rights and policy advocacy in China, Fierce Love opted for the approach to transition into a social enterprise. In the year of 2018 and 2019, the NGO invited a business

consulting firm and a non-profit consulting institute to conduct strategic planning with them. After consultation, the organization decided to turn their mental health counselling service and programs into marketable products, tapping into the niche market of LGBT-friendly counselling and therapist training programs. With this being the ultimate goal, they also started to experiment with a business program by providing business enterprises with expertise and service on LGBT-related issues, for example giving talks and trainings on SOGI (sexual orientation and gender identity), gender and sexual discrimination, and workplace diversity. The business program came out as a direct response to the illegalization of international funding and was inspired by the Stonewall workplace program in the UK. Kai, who used to intern in Stonewall when he finished his master's program in the UK, brought back his experiences to Fierce Love, hoping to open up a new source of revenue for the organization. However, the first step to engage with the business world has been painstaking for the project manager Ying.

> I feel really split up by this business program, honestly. I'm in two different worlds at the same time and I cannot convince myself that they go together. In fact, I think the whole logics behind non-profit and business are completely contradictory. Capital is just so overpowering, and we are not on an equal footing to negotiate with them. We are simply following their orders, for most of the times.

Ying's remarks reveal an even more challenging tasks to NGO workers who are pushed to professionalize and to step into a business world. While the market logic emphasizes efficiency and quantifiable output, it simultaneously undervalues the process-oriented and people-centered participatory approach at the heart of many NGO collaborative projects. It further devalues the gendered social reproductive labor which is inherent in NGO work, e.g., communicative labor, emotional labor and affective labor. As these are more of a cost to capital rather than a gain and

the focus is paid on the maximization of profits rather than the growth of the beneficiaries. The market-centered approach turns a blind eye to the affects of joy, excitement, inspiration, sadness, and even hopelessness in the everyday working in an NGO. Rather than enjoying the dancing activities organized by village sisters, the market-oriented professionalization approach is more concerned with the number of dancing activities held, the number of people attended, and to diversify the kinds of activities the local women's groups can offer which will necessarily require a greater number of paid staff and volunteers.

In October 2021, Fierce Love officially launched its mental health counselling online platform, making it the first-ever LGBT-centered and -friendly mental health service program in China. It is an online appointment scheduling site to match individuals who seek counselling service from a variety of experienced therapists. However, Kai, Ying and four other NGO workers in the organization have already left due to sustained pressure, scenarios of burnouts and the lack of prospects in their jobs. Meanwhile, Sun Rise is still grappling with the professionalization of local women's groups. The three-year funding scheme ended as a result of mismatched expectations and unsatisfactory level of professionalization. *Zhuan ye hua* or transitioning into a social enterprise appears to be a hopeful but daunting task to many feminist and LGBT NGOs as they are adapting to a neoliberal and professionalized framework that is in stark contradiction to their values and principals in many ways. NGO workers are the ones who bear the brunt of these struggles and carry with them the unresolved conflicts even as they leave the organization.

Discussion and Conclusion

As Granny Wang has suggested in the beginning vignette, the value of social activism lies in its radical potential of challenging norms and conventions of gender and sexuality, as well as

providing care and support to those socially marginalized groups. With history progressing into a time of precarity and censorship, feminist and LGBT NGO activism encounters not only an issue of legitimacy but is also challenged to prove its value under neoliberal logics of productivity and efficiency. The findings from this chapter suggests that current evaluation of the NGO sector needs to go beyond an economistic model of assessing value based on capitalist market standards. Instead of reifying the distinction between the productive vs. unproductive, this chapter brings in a significant insight from social reproduction theories to understand how the Chinese party-state absorbs the social reproductive functions of these NGO, while containing their political influence, by rendering them as moral, illegal, and/or unprofessional work. In particular, I highlight the gendered social reproductive labor that is central to feminist and LGBT NGOs but is subjected to different degrees of devaluation and erasure in the processes of moralization, illegalization and professionalization to contain these NGOs. In addition, I draw out the complexities of doing NGO work and the dynamic consequences of NGO workers interacting with state mechanisms and the domestic and transnational NGO funding complex, which reshape, revise or reinforce norms associated with gender, sexuality and neoliberal standards of productivity and efficiency. This chapter valorizes the connections between the labor precarity of NGO activist workers and precarious social movements, and calls for attention to the social security, protection and well-being of NGO workers. Instead of being regarded only instrumental or morally superior, I suggest that NGO activist workers are the most integral part of civil society organizing and collective movements.

Such processes transfer the cost of social reproduction, one being the party-state welfare responsibilities, and the other being the social reproduction of NGOs, onto the bodies of NGO workers, interns and volunteers. In order to reproduce the organization, NGO workers, interns and

volunteers work overtime with below average income and insufficient labor protections. They are prone to experience burnout, depression and trauma under stringent economic conditions and political insecurity. The next two chapter discuss the affective stakes and struggles of feminist and LGBT NGO activism, as well as the social reproduction of activist workers. I suggest that these affective states are in fact the embodied effects of the very contradictions of state-NGO relations.

Chapter Five

Cruel Activism: Affective Struggles in the NGO World

A Gay Activist's Funeral and Fleeting Feelings

In the summer of 2018, I went to a memorial service for a fellow gay activist in Beijing. In the torrid heat of Beijing summer days in mid-August, I traveled for more than one hour via shared bike and subway from where I temporally resided in the fifth ring of Beijing, to get to the second ring *Xintiandi* (literal translation as "new spaces"), the office building that was famously nicknamed "the gay building of Beijing" where it once housed important LGBT and feminist organizations. Like many of us in the queer community in China, Liang Ma was a self-chosen name for the deceased gay activist. As we formulate our new identities in the queer community, legal names given by our parents were regarded as a past one eager to bury and forget.

After quitting his job in the business world, Liang Ma had worked for a LGBT NGO for ten years. His sudden death at the early age of 43 shocked the entire queer community. The service was held in the NGO office where Liang Ma used to work. A color photo of him stood in the center of his desk, surrounded by a sea of warm candlelight. Incoming friends and activists had traveled from cities across the country for thousands of miles to pay their respects, as far as from Changsha city in south China. Some placed fresh flowers alongside Liang Ma's photo. The room was filled with deep solemness, affection, and intimacy. However, this unusual gathering did not linger in dreadfulness, and the atmosphere was lightened up a bit by communal sharing and just being together in a safe and intimate space.

The afternoon was spent by everyone sharing their personal and fond memories of Liang Ma. They remembered him being handsome and fashionable, who knew how to live thriftily but with style. Many of them talked about how they came to know Liang Ma through work. He traveled a lot, to different cities in China to do media training workshops with local LGBT NGO activist workers. As there are few gay role models for these young activists and workers to aspire to, Liang Ma would generously share with them his life and career advice as a senior.

It became apparent to me that Liang Ma had performed a great amount of emotional labor in his job. He was not only a professional NGO worker, but also a friend and mentor to these young queers. The affective bonds they established through movement building and collaboration go beyond the normative corporate work culture which separates work and life, public and private. To the queer people that gathered at Liang Ma's office that day, work was home, and colleagues constituted their communities. While everyone was recalling affectively their encounters with him, I was surprised to find out that Liang Ma did not share much of his personal stories with the others, other than just professional opinions and friendly advice. The act of performing emotional labor might have exhausted Liang Ma as a person who kept it to himself in the overtly affective NGO world.

Liang Ma's death was a heavy case in point for me to contemplate on the relationship between queer sociality, affects, and emotional labor in the uneven philanthropic landscape in the People's Republic of China. As young queer persons migrating from their cities of origin to join LGBT organizations in big cities like Beijing and Guangzhou, they are ambitious to remake themselves in the free new world without familial obligations and discrimination. Being gay advocates at the age of their 20s and 30s, represents "a new desiring subjectivity" in the cohort of the One Child

generation born between late 1970s and early 2010s in urban cities (Rofel, 2007). Their ideas about cosmopolitanism can no longer be satisfied by economic upward mobility and consumerism, but an active sense of engaging with the public sphere. The mentality of the generation of young LGBT NGO activist workers departs from their parents' generation who values security and economic wealth. Instead, they invest passionately in their personal growth and empowerment, and the meaning-making of their lives. Volunteering and working with altruistic causes not only fulfill these desires, and they also become cultural capital marking a person's distinctiveness in relation to the others. In China, NGOs have become the major forms through which activism take shape since the Beijing UN Women Conference in 1995 (Wang and Zhang, 2010). With the introduction of development and humanitarian projects and funding streams, many activist groups expanded and institutionalized. To this date, NGOs have become the core organizers of activism and social movement in China. It is especially the case for feminist and LGBT rights activism as most groups are unregistered legally but is inevitably structured by the transnational non-profit funding streams of the "violence against women" and the human rights agenda (Zhang, 2009). Since the late 2000s, many college graduates flocked to NGOs, with a genuine desire to realize their ideals and experience a more humane workplace culture other than the competitive business world or bureaucratic government agencies their parents desperately want them to get into. However, the cruel optimism lies in that the care and reciprocity these young queer persons, women and other socially marginalized groups so long for in these organizing spaces, are soon overshadowed by the overall precarity of the NGO sector, and an exploitation of their emotional labor in the hierarchical non-profit industrial complex. In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant suggests that the kinds of optimistic relations "become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially." (1) Likewise, noting that "the nonprofit structure actually

entrenches the very inequalities that it purports to ameliorate," (2018: 7) Myrl Beam asks a similar question in his examination of the impact of nonprofitization on LGBT social movements in the US, "why do we remain so deeply, personally invested in a system that fails over and over to achieve the results we hope for?" (8) In league with books like Myrl Beam's *Gay, Inc*., Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, and Chika Watanabe's *Becoming one*, this chapter turns toward thinking about feelings – the political economy of affect, which are built into the nonprofit structure, as a central analytic in analyzing NGO activism and social movements. Liang Ma, like many other aspiring NGO activist workers, wittingly or unwittingly, was absorbed into the violent structures sustained by state surveillance, control, and market devaluation of their labor entrenched in post-socialist neoliberal logics of professionalization and efficiency. Far from the rosy pictures of justice, equality and freedom they paint for themselves before entering the turbulent NGO world, NGO activist workers find themselves caught up in complicated webs of unequal relations: the transnational and the local (with donors), the urban and the rural (with beneficiaries), and the institutional and internal politics (with other NGO workers and volunteers). Multiple and contradictory affects of hope, cosmopolitanism, disappointment, anger, burnout and depression in NGO work tell a story of why NGO activism in China, as in many other Global South countries in the world, is cruel.

This chapter excavates undocumented and forgotten stories of feelings in the NGO world. It examines the affective dimensions of precarity as workers in feminist and LGBT rights NGOs forge affective ties with their colleagues, donors and beneficiaries that traverse liberal demarcations of public and private. I use "feelings" here in line with Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings* that emphasizes feelings' embodied, psychic, or cognitive characteristics. Feelings are not inconsequential, nor irrational. Rather, it is a lens through which we could understand the

relations and realities of a given society, as articulated in Raymond William's Marxian analysis of "structures of feelings" in the 1970s. In William's (1961) notion, feelings are spatial, temporal, and exhibit a particular relationship to power (the dominant productive group). While feelings are more inarticulate, emotions are "culturally given labels that we assign to experiences." (Robinson et al, 2006: 181) Thus, I use "emotions" as an assemblage of feelings which get actualized and concretized in the living body. Following Arlie Hochschild's (1983) foundational work on the management of feelings and emotions, this chapter investigates the emotional labor central to NGO work, which requires activist workers' active manipulation of their own feelings in order to perform effectively in the everyday relationship management with their colleagues, donors and beneficiaries, and in processes of project execution. However, as emotional labor is yet incommensurable in the current market economy and NGO project evaluations, the cost of emotional labor is entirely at the bodily and material expense of the workers. Nevertheless, the extent to which an NGO worker could perform emotional labor shifts with their embodied relationship to the affective regime that affects their work. This brings us to another useful distinction to be made here between "affect" and "emotion". While the emphasis is non-hierarchical, "affect" is conceptualized to incorporate "bodily, inarticulate, less-than-fulling conscious, sensory experience." (Gould, 2010: 26) In Wee's study of affect in linguistic landscapes, affective regime "refers to the set of conditions that govern with varying degrees of hegemonic status the ways in which particular kinds of affect can be appropriately materialized in the context of a given site." (2016: 109) In this study, the affective regime is an umbrella term to theorize the ways in which "macro" state surveillance and legal control of NGO work, while it is given lip service for the social welfare it provides, meets the complex, "micro" emotional relations of activist workers, donors and beneficiaries. This "regime" shapes the ways in which emotional labor

and the politics of care are enacted in specific, grounded instances, and is highly uneven. I argue that the contradictory affect of hope is precisely how these NGO activist workers are exploited. Using affect as an analytic, my research shows the ways in which the feelings that fuel the resistance can also serve to invisiblize and erase the workers' emotional labor, and legitimize power inequalities and disputes in NGO activism.

I follow the footsteps of feminist social scientists in excavating and unpacking the fragmented, enduring, or discontinuous, fraught feelings and emotions in NGO work. The relations of care and reciprocity NGO activist workers foster in their work, complicate the professional relationship of giving and receiving. Nevertheless, such ties are affected by different notions and standards of care, as well as economic imperatives of activist workers and their beneficiaries. I aim to demonstrate that the care and solidarity between activist workers and their colleagues, donors and beneficiaries are shaped by multiple unequal relations between the transnational and the local, the urban and the rural, and the institutional and internal politics, and can be easily compromised by affective and material constraints. In particular, I make the connection between emotional labor and the affective regimes of NGO work, parceling out the gendered ethics, standards of care that comprise the mechanics of NGO work, and its (un)intended consequences of contradictory affects. Lastly, this chapter ends on the discussion of the limitation of the politics of care in NGO activism and its possible futures.

In my interviews with NGO activist workers, I was not only interested in the mechanics of how they do their work, but I was also attentive to how they feel in the process. Often there were moments of silence when they were trying to search for the right word to describe their feelings. Sometimes there was never a right word for it. In our causal conversations during work, we

stumbled upon the nonlinguistic and fractured feelings about a particular event, a person, or a task. These fleeting and unstructured feelings and thoughts tell a richer story than a strictly structural analysis of how and why these projects work or fail.

Together, these muddying stories serve as a critique and a challenge to prioritizing economistic notions of precarity which leave out the intimate, the personal and felt experiences of precarity. I suggest, these stories of feelings and emotions connect the personal with the political, the intimate with the public. They are trivial, subtle, but indispensable. They contribute to a more vibrant understanding of the complexity of NGO work in contemporary China.

Travelling the NGO world inside and out: *guanxi* with donors and emotional labor

By the time of our second interview, Kai has quit his job as a fund-raising manager in the leading LGBT NGO in a first-tiered city in China and was awarded a fellowship to work in an international organization in Europe. We met each other in the heydays of LGBT activism around the early 2010s and have been friends ever since. We were so hopeful back then. A lot of grassroots LGBT groups in different cities were in forming with the help of international funding. Many organizing was taking place. While bigger NGOs were partaking pioneering research and/or policy advocacy, smaller city-based or campus-based queer groups were doing community outreach and gatherings. National, regional and international exchanges and conferences serve not only as information hubs, collective knowledge building spaces, but also important meetup points for NGO activist workers to establish collegial relationships and gather momentum for the next moves. The first Chinese National LGBT+ Leaders Conference took place in the year of 2012. It was a two-day conference where activists workers from across the countries were invited to organize panels, participate in discussions and strategize together. Regional conferences such as ILGA Asia

(International Lesbian and Gay Association) conference happens every two years. Ample funding, regional and international, was available to apply for attending these conferences. Being activists in these spaces was instrumental and emotional for our growth as queer persons: we were not only provided the platform and tools to speak about and analyze our predicament as LGBT persons in countries that discriminate or don't recognize same-sex relationships, but it was also the first time we felt that our stories and lives were connected and shared across nationality, race and class, and they were as important and beautiful as the others. Even though there was institutional barrier, neglect, and prevalent discrimination at that time, it was the optimism and hope that motivated us to continue. It was also when we stepped outside of China to attend these regional and international conference, and engaged voluntarily with the international discourse and funding, that we started to feel and experience the subtle tastes of inequality and hierarchy predicated by unequal relations between the Global North and the Global South. Transnational connections brought us opportunities and resources, and they also reinforced the global order of LGBT activism in which China is always in need of saving. Reflecting, these moments look almost transient for less than ten years. Being transnational and cosmopolitan is no longer the buzzword for queer organizing in China. Instead, censorship, control, and fear seem to best describe what happen to organizers on the ground nowadays.

With the recent crackdown on human rights activism and the illegalization of most foreign funding to China, the state and the domestic philanthropic sector have become the only legally viable financial sources for grassroots organizations in China (Wang, 2021). The migrant sex worker rights NGO and the LGBT rights NGO that I worked with in my long-term fieldwork, have historically associated themselves with human rights activism and have benefited from the global circulation of "violence against women" narrative and rights-based projects in the past. While

human rights narrative is heavily censored and persecuted, the lighter version of the "violence against women" rhetoric still has not gained enough traction due to its Euro-American origin (Hemment in Bernal and Grewal, 2014). Thus, the domestic donors have not yet developed a keen interest in supporting gender-related issues in China, let alone the topic of LGBTQ, especially given the intimate relationship of these two fields with the human rights framework, which the state is critical of. Gaining domestic support has been a long hard road to take for these grassroots NGOs. In fact, even though most foreign funding has become illegal, a small portion of foreign embassy funding is still available to these NGOs. In other instances, NGOs secretly receive overseas funding by undetectable means. As a result, the two rights-based grassroots organizations (the migrant sex worker rights NGO and the LGBT rights NGO) that I surveyed and worked with are the ones impacted directly and adversely by the shifting landscape and funding complex of NGO work in China. Therefore, I highlight the tensions involved in the complex emotional labor enacted by these activist workers to stay viable.

Kai and I both grew out of the promising decade of LGBT activism in China. We were well-versed in the language of fund-raising and believed in the importance of cultivating good relationship with donors. As Kai is a few years younger than me, I kind like watched him grow as a rising gay leader in the LGBT activist circles in China. Being a college-educated gay man raised in an urban city, Kai is fluent in English and is a very sociable person. He is the kind of person one would not hesitate to label a "social butterfly", though half-jokingly. And he seems to rejoice in it in numerous public settings. It was until this video interview connecting us between China and Europe, that I realized the amount of mental energy, financial cost, and emotional labor that Kai put into in his daily work as an NGO worker. For a long time, I regarded it his natural inclination to be so good at managing relationships with other activists, as well as with current and potential

donors. However, it is exactly the kind of unspoken rules and expectations for especially fund-raising and liaison staffs that justify the exploitation of their emotional labor and which lead to accumulated work stress.

> I don't particularly enjoy this (being sociable). In fact, it all comes down to acting. I'm in good terms with my European colleagues, but I can feel that they don't really understand my reality (as a Chinese gay man in a European organization). There's an Egyptian colleague that I bond very well with. We would joke in private about our way of moving around the NGO world: on the surface we are polite and entertaining, but underneath we would often swear and complain about the white supremacist and unequal condition that are often imposed on us. We are crystal clear about our role and purpose here. Because we don't have the decision-making power and resources, there is a certain emotional cost to bear if we want to accomplish our aims. For example, if we want to promote policies of, and funding streams to developing countries, we need be befriend with these European coworkers, and maybe play the role of cute little Asian gay guy, and even cry when necessary. However, our European colleagues don't need to worry about this, and they can have a work-life balance. We are more "willing" to sacrifice our private times to build informal but essential relationships to us.

The mental fatigue and exhaustion that Kai experienced in his new job exemplify the violence of the colonial, racist and neoliberal structures of the transnational non-profit industrial complex in which funding and resources flow unevenly from the Global North to the Global South (Roth, 2015). It feels more acute when activism in the Global South is heavily surveilled, censored, and persecuted, and the overseas funding becomes their only source of livelihood. Such affective regime governs how southern NGO activist workers make meanings of their positions, the way they carry themselves, as well as the amount of emotional labor one must perform in and outside

of work. As a southern activist who "climbed up the social ladder" and landed in a position in an international organization with better pay and social security, Kai was immediately confronted with a new dark reality deeply troubled by the ongoing ramifications of colonial and racist histories and uneven global development. As a result, he had to make even more effort in establishing and maintaining jovial relationships with his European colleagues. Interestingly, this was not at all unfamiliar to Kai because his job back in China was primarily in cultivating good *guanxi* with foreign embassies and international organizations.

The literature on *guanxi,* which can be loosely translated as "connections", sheds some light on the affective landscape that NGO activist workers foster at work. While *guanxi* is often negatively associated with China's rampant corruption problems and the lack of procedural justice and rule of law, others consider it to be the Chinese equivalent of personal networks, social capital, and gift economies that can be found in all societies (Gold et al, 2002). Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang (1994) describes that *guangxixue* (the art of *guanxi*) "involves…the cultivation of personal relationships and networks of mutual dependence; and the manufacturing of obligation and indebtedness." (6) The reproduction of *guanxi,* which can be understood as the maintenance of personal relationships with mutual benefits, is an important facet in the work life of NGO activist workers. These workers must put in a lot of labor in the first place to make their projects and work possible, e.g., presenting them as trust-worthy organizations, as well as maintaining relationships with their beneficiaries and donors. However, studies of *guanxi* do not center the discussion in contexts of unequal power dynamics such as the ones that southern grassroots activist workers often find themselves in, due to the lack of funding and increasing political and economic precarity. Situations like these require an intense and active manipulation of their feelings and emotions. In

making good connections and maintaining "*guanxi*", a great amount of mind work and emotional labor is going on.

Feminist theorizations of emotional labor are grounded on the commodification of the service industry in the new international division of labor since the 1970s (Federici, 2012). The influential work by Arlie Hochschild of "The Managed Heart" (1983) discusses the gendered aspects of service work, which, produces affect by increasingly standardized management of workers' own emotions and feelings, in order to make the consumers feel good. Such estrangement of emotions presented a new form of alienation of workers in the Marxian sense. Not only the labor power of workers is alienated from the products they produce, their feelings and emotions become the products that are no longer their own. With the increasing proliferation of the service industry, the management of emotions and the emphasis of affective relations with customers has become a standard practice and protocol for service workers. Bolstered by the professionalization discourse, the NGO sector is similar to the service industry as NGO's relationship to their "consumers" (i.e., beneficiaries) has been increasingly characterized by the quality of their services and projects. While beneficiaries do not pay for these services, NGO project evaluation and assessment in turn communicates with the transnational and domestic philanthropic funding complex in investment, re-investment, or withdrawal. One of the most essential components of NGO work is fund raising, as it ensures the sustainability of the work itself. NGO activist workers have to court potential donors in buying their services and projects. In "the market for projects" coined by Monika Krauss (2014), donors behave as consumers shopping for good projects, which consequentially influence how NGOs carry out their work, which population is in need of "saving" while others are not, and the kinds of standards for evaluation of NGO performances (Feldman, 2018; Lang, 2013; Suchland, 2015).

In the previous job that Kai had in the LGBT NGO, he was responsible to liaison with the organization's corporate partners and foreign embassies. It was common for him to work non-stop for more than a week. In our previous interview, Kai told me that he had worked for two weeks non-stop.

> You might think all I do is to socialize with people, but it is more than that. I have to show up in all of the events that our donors and potential donors organize, for example on Saturday night there is this party organized by the Brits, and Sunday night there is this Swiss donor's birthday celebration event. Being present in these events is crucial to our continual collaboration because we establish relationships beyond work, and we show our gratitude and sincerity to work with them.

For events that took place in high-end bars and clubs, which were often the case for Kai's working partners, the minimum charge for a glass of alcohol or beverage amounted to 100 RMB (15 USD). Because these events usually took place after working hours and on weekends, participating in the events was not strictly working, even though Kai's primary motivation to go there was work-related. In the end, Kai had to pay for the expenses himself. "If an event lasted until 2 a.m. in the morning and there would be no public transportation, it was also me who paid for the taxi fees home." There was no formal discussion on whether such work-related activities could be categorized as work and details of reimbursement on the part of the NGO. In our interview, Kai sounded a bit frustrated by the fact that he not only had to perform a great deal of emotional labor after working hours, and he also had to bear the financial cost himself. For an NGO worker with a relative high salary (8,000 RMB, 1250 USD) compared to the others in smaller organizations, Kai felt that the emotional and financial cost of his job took a toll on him. Interestingly, as Kai

embarked on his new journey to work for international LGBT organizations, these relationships he cultivated in his old job proved to be useful in his future career path.

The reproduction of *guanxi* relies on emotional, affective, as well as communicative labor that is immaterial, e.g., not producing material products, but tangible relationships. As with the several work trips that I made with Kai to visit other organizations, he was very skilled in presenting the work of the NGO, even though mainstreaming the work of LGBT rights in China has not been an easy task. He could always find common grounds for other NGOs to connect to the work of the organization. For instance, he pointed out the lack of gender and sexual diversity content in the sex education program of a migrant workers and children NGO and suggested ways to collaborate, such as inviting the volunteers of the LGBT NGO to visit and teach the migrant school children in the city suburbs.

NGO activist workers perform a range of communicative and emotional labor in maintaining *guanxi* with their donors, be it the state or the philanthropic funding complex, as well as other working partners and beneficiaries. The reproduction of *guanxi* is crucial in their everyday doing of NGO work as it engenders and maintains positive feelings about their work, which fuels potential future collaborations or investment in their projects. At the same time, the alienation of activist workers' own feelings in their workplace is invisiblized by portraying activist workers as authentically caring, self-sacrificing collectives that is highly gendered. Such invisiblization serves to erase the immaterial labor NGO activist workers perform in their work and thus legitimates the devaluation of their labor. Besides processes of erasure, the imposition of certain standards of care ethics onto NGO activist workers is in tension with their (in)ability to perform care work.

Incentivized to help: the dialectics of the "helping" *(bangzhu)* and the "being helped" *(bei bangzhu)*

> They (the beneficiaries) only demand things from us. They think it's our obligation to *bangzhu* them and philanthropy should be free. I'm so disheartened that many of them left and did not contact us anymore after their needs have been met.

Bangzhu is used primarily as a verb meaning "to help and to support" in Chinese. In fact, "*bang*" and "*zhu*" emphasizes different aspects of the "help" whereas the former means to help, and the latter is to support. They combine to accentuate the positive and giving aspects of the term. In those long commutes to visit migrant sex workers in city outskirts and the local Center for Disease Control, Lily, the founder and the director of the migrant sex worker rights organization, explained to me her troubled feelings and sense of despair towards her job. The organization works with former and present migrant sex workers, and they conduct reproductive health and anti-domestic violence awareness raising outreach programs in the city. In her twelve years of organizing and working for the NGO, Lily has worked with many sex workers, and some sex workers later became their volunteers. They have established a working relationship between the NGO, local Center for Disease Control (CDC), and the migrant sex workers. The NGO organizes programs and activities to *bangzhu* the sex workers. At times, the sex workers also benefit from the free HIV and STD (sexually transmitted disease) tests, free condoms, and lubricants Lily solicit from local CDC. They return the *bangzhu* to Lily by taking anonymous tests on their customers. The test results are collected by Lily to send to the CDC office for disease control and prevention purposes. As a result, the NGO continues to collaborate with local CDC and receives grants from them. Being a former sex worker herself, she has always hoped that she could find someone as motivated as herself to continue the enterprise together. To broaden the sex workers' horizons, Lily brought them to

national and international meetings and trainings and giving them opportunities to run projects. She expected more *bangzhu* from the sex workers in return to the organization, helping her shoulder administrative labor and expand their projects. To her disappointment, the sex worker volunteers left the organizing, one by one. Some of those departures were filled with "mutual distrust, betrayal and mental breakdown," in her words. In a half-joking manner, Lily exclaimed,

> It's better for me this way (working individually). I don't know how to deal with people. I give them all I could, but they return me nothing but disappointment. I want them to see how vast the world is, but all they care about is the money they earn and the time they lost because of volunteering.

She was referring to the financial conflicts that have reoccurred many times in the NGO in the past years. Volunteers who conduct outreach work were compensated by the organization with a stipend of 200 RMB (30 dollars) each time. Usually, outreach takes about half a day, which adds up to four to five hours. The sex worker volunteers were especially dissatisfied with the amount of monetary compensation. Indeed, they could earn at least 100 RMB (15 dollars) for an hour of sex work, in the least favorable circumstances. For those with great skills, they could earn up to 1,000 RMB (150 dollars) each time. The varied feelings and contradictions result from their different understandings of *bangzhu*. Lily considers volunteering for the NGO a great way to build support network for sex workers, and as learning opportunities for the sex workers on project management and implementation. However, the sex worker volunteers regard these tasks as favors Lily asked of them and they emphasized on the money compensation they could receive per outreach work. For most sex workers, including the volunteers, the best *bangzhu* Lily's NGO could offer them, is money. It is apparent that the vision that Lily has for sex workers in the city and the organization, is not the same with those sex worker volunteers. In the many visits we paid to sex

workers who worked in rented apartment buildings in the city, or in the "urban village" in city outskirt surrounded by construction sites and workers, many of them stressed their desire for more customers, and the dire situation they were in because of the COVID-19 pandemic and police intervention. Few of them discussed about the possibility of strengthening the network and what they could do to contribute to the organizing. In fact, many of the migrant sex workers are oblivious to the nature of the NGO and the work Lily wishes to achieve.

The discrepancies in their understanding of *bangzhu* does not only come from their different understandings about NGO work and philanthropy, but is deeply rooted in the material conditions they are in. Mostly migrants themselves from poorer regions in northeastern and northwestern China, the sex workers seem to be preoccupied by their material realities. For many, what motivated them to go into sex work in the first place, was making money for their families. They would save up the earnings to send back home, and many of them have been supporting their children to school with implicit consent from their husbands. As work became scarcer, some sex workers would agree to unprotected sex with the customers. Living in confined and unhygienic spaces, and having to deal with demanding customers and violent police crackdown which happened from time to time, most of the sex workers we visited were struggling to earn more in the city and they were dreaming the good life in the future. Compared with the sex workers, Lily owned an apartment and a car in the city. In her forties, she did not have urgent financial needs as her husband also brought paycheck home. Despite the political and economic precarity of the organization, she lived a relatively comfortable life compared to her beneficiaries. The contrasting economic positionalities and visions for the future between the sex workers and Lily, determine their varied responses to their concepts of *bangzhu*. *Bangzhu* is not only affective and emotional, but it is material in the sense that is intersected with economic imperatives of the beneficiaries.

The case of the migrant sex worker rights NGO illustrates the troubled relationship between the "helping" (NGO workers) and the "being helped" (beneficiaries), which is predicated on political, affective, and material constraints. On the one hand, the reproduction of the NGOs is reliant on the emotional and material labor of NGO activist workers. On the other hand, the reproduction of NGO projects relies on the precarious labor of those they serve. All the three NGOs that I worked with rely heavily on the work of the interns and volunteers. With less than ten workers, the NGOs would not be able to implement their projects only by their staff members. The internship and volunteering are hailed as opportunities for the interns and volunteers to socialize and learn things, especially when most of them are also women and sexual minorities looking for safe spaces. Nevertheless, the stipends compensating their labor are low. When I was working as an intern for the rural women NGO, I was paid 1,800 RMB (260 USD) a month for working five days at the NGO from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. For the interns at the LGBT NGO, the pay was 650 RMB (94 USD) a month for two days at the office. While the rural women NGO only hires interns, the LGBT NGO recruit interns and a large group of volunteers. The interns at the LGBT NGO work with their project managers to facilitate the design and implementation of the projects, and volunteers are recruited project or event based. In my interview with the staff member who oversaw community organizing and volunteer management in the LGBT NGO, she suggested that volunteers had not been properly incentivized, rather, they are "used" instrumentally whenever the NGO need more *bangzhu*. Without a clear and holistic understanding of the projects, volunteers could barely learn much from their participation. Instead, their energy quickly drained after one or two events. However, most NGOs keep recruiting new volunteers to replace the previous batch. In the long term, these practices not only exploit the free labor of the volunteers without offering

them much in return, and they also fail to foster sustainable relationship between the NGO and the communities which they claim to serve.

The affective regime that surrounds NGO work is configurated by the particular national rendering of philanthropy as an occupation incentivized by compassion (*qing huai*), processes of moralization (as discussed in chapter three), and the professionalized discourse of providing *bangzhu*. NGO activist workers are often caught in the tension between standards of care, their (in)ability to perform caring labor and the beneficiaries' varied notions of care. In the case of the migrant sex workers NGO, it is the mutual desire for *bangzhu*. I use *care* here as an umbrella term to describe the various practices of caring, helping, and supporting which are essential in NGO projects. When NGO activist workers feel that their labor is not recognized and appreciated by their beneficiaries, it creates hurt and disappointment. This is especially true to workers who does not only treat NGO work as an occupation, but as a form in which social movement can take place, and their life-long pursuit. These affects experienced by activist workers could also lead to scenarios of burnout, depression and trauma. On the contrary, the beneficiaries also experience hurt and disappointment if their ideas of "being helped" have not been realized.

The fraught relationship between NGO activist workers and their beneficiaries has been widely discussed especially in recent scholarship on development projects and humanitarian efforts. In "Life Lived in Relief", Ilana Feldman (2018) explores "politics of life" - "the governance of bodies and populations in the management of aid delivery," and a "politics of living" of how "people survive and strive within humanitarian spaces" in Palestinian refugee camps (4). In particular, by foregrounding the messy and conflicted relations between refugees and humanitarian workers many of whom were once refugees themselves, Feldman argues that

humanitarian apparatus is at once fractured, and punctuated by the temporal politics of living and being of different actors. The development discourse, as well as the humanitarian and human rights apparatuses, are called into question of its violence at the heart of these liberal forms of political care that determine deservingness (who deserves help), as well as its limited politics of compassion that can only function by grasping human life as "bare life", excluding them from the political realm (Ticktin, 2006, 2011). At the same time, an emerging scholarship has paid attention to the connection between these development, humanitarian and rights-based projects and subjectivities shaped by these projects. "Who is the Developed Woman?" by Rebecca Klenk (2004) critically interrogates how development discourse are appropriated by those constituted as beneficiaries of development. Through the reflection of how development is understood differently by aid workers and NGO beneficiaries, Klenk complicates development theories not only by valorizing the contradictions inherent in economic development projects, but also theorizes the formation of new subjectivities under these grand-scale processes. Building upon these works, this section tries to meditate on both the structural critiques, and the micro-level analysis of subjectivity in negotiation with grand discourse. It reveals the interdependent, interactive and dynamic relations between structure and subjectivity. In particular, it parcels out the complex notions, standards and practices of *bangzhu* and caring labor which condition and/or alter the relationships between feminist and LGBT rights NGO activist workers and their beneficiaries.

There are multiple and even contrasting definitions of care, *bangzhu* and solidarity, from the point of view of activist workers and the beneficiaries in NGO projects. A sense of commitment to social justice felt by activist workers could be understood differently by beneficiaries as exploitation of their labor. To these workers, their devotion is a labor of love, sustained by their commitment to social justice work. They cultivate relationships with their beneficiaries beyond

the one-way giving and receiving in traditional charity projects. On the one hand, NGO activist workers have a strong conviction of how an ideal society should be, based on their training and experiences. On the other hand, their beneficiaries may not share their commitment and they define their needs differently from NGO projects. From this perspective, care and solidarity between NGO activist workers and their beneficiaries can be easily compromised by affective and material constraints, as the success of NGO projects is heavily dependent on the labor and bodies of NGO beneficiaries. Such calculation of needs and care reveals the inherent contradiction and hierarchies of NGO projects in development and human rights discourse, which does not address the political and material inequalities that structure the beneficiaries as "people needed saving" in the first place. At the same time, by only doing time-bound NGO projects directed by the donors' shifting interests and funding, NGO activist workers struggle to negotiate between the donors' expectation and the needs of their beneficiaries. The constant juggling, and the precarious state of working and living without the recognition and acknowledgement of the community, could lead to disappointment, frustration, and even burnout. The next section recounts stories of burnout, depression, and trauma caused by internal conflicts in NGO activism.

Unveiling internal politics: states of burnout, depression and trauma

I still vividly remember the excitement and nervousness from the election day for the steering committee of the regional lala organization. Founded by several Chinese and Taiwanese lesbian women in North America, the regional lala organization was a membership-based alliance network across mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan. I was pretty much "raised" as a feminist queer activist by the lala camps organized by the regional lala NGO. The lala camps were held yearly in different cities in China since 2008. They attracted promising young queer women across

mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan (though more than fifty percent of the participants were from mainland China) who were eager to organize around and work on issues related to sexuality. The lala camps served multiply important purposes. First, it was an incubator for more local grassroots LBT (lesbian, bisexual and transgender women) groups as it provided training and mentorship programs to young queer women. Second, in the annual members meetings in the lala camps, member groups got to discuss and vote on important procedural and personnel changes via democratic processes mandated by the founding members of the organization. These activist spaces were magnetic. They were filled with excitements, curiosity and ambition. As many of us were closeted lesbian and bisexual women at the time, just to have a space packed with queer women was phenomenal to us. It felt cool, because we were doing something bigger than ourselves. It also felt intimate, because a myriad of feelings including camaraderie and erotica floated around these spaces. I met other bisexual activists in previous lala camps. In 2013, we decided to co-found the first national bisexual group to combat both social and community discrimination against bisexual persons. Naturally, our bisexual group also joined in as a member of the regional NGO, and we were so excited to learn from other grassroots LBT groups.

The regional NGO was comprised of three administrative and decision-making bodies: the steering committee, the secretariat, and the advising committee. The steering committee was selected by all the member groups in annual members meetings. Usually consisted of six persons, candidates for the steering committee had to make a speech before the official voting procedure. While the steering committee was responsible for decision making, the secretariat worked to implement the decisions. The advising committee of three senior activists oversaw these processes and they worked to make sure everything was by the book. In the lala camp held in a southern city

in China in 2014, I decided to run for the steering committee. The primary motivation for me to do this was that candidates would be sponsored by the NGO, and we did not have to pay for the travel expenses. One of my colleagues in the bisexual group already took the group sponsorship place so the two of us could participate in the lala camp together. I was young and ambitious, but I also knew that I did not have much of an advantage to the race because I was relatively inexperienced compared to other candidates. Another candidate Ting, who was my very good friend, was more hopeful in winning. By the time of the lala camp, she had worked in several LGBT NGOs and feminist initiatives, including as a parttime staff for the regional lala NGO. Although I was nervous in competing with my friend, I was happy to see two bisexual women showing up in the race, which was quite uncommon in a majority-lesbian-led spaces.

The election night took an unexpected turn. Prior to the first day of the lala camp, Ting told me she canceled her ticket because the police wanted to investigate her on some projects she was doing. She immediately informed the advising committee and the secretariat. As the founding members were acutely concerned with the political safety of the lala camps because of the sensitivity related to cross-strait relations with Taiwan, they were fearful that the police would follow Ting to where the lala camp was, force stop the camp and the subsequent operation of the NGO in mainland China. Thus, they encouraged her to participate the election via skype, saying it would be the same. I was disappointed that Ting could not come. But I was more nervous about my speech and was anxious about the election.

It was my first time to participate in a voting process. These democratic procedures were among the many pioneering political experiments about equality, freedom and justice in mainland China. They were also one of the firsts in Chinese feminist and queer organizing. It was not

surprising that it was the Taiwanese feminist queer activists who took the lead in instilling these values and protocols in the regional lala NGO. Taiwan, the regional hotbed for civil society organizing and democracy in East Asia, was the dream place for many Chinese NGO activist workers to observe and learn from the practices and challenges of democracy on the ground. In fact, the regional lala camp organized activist tours to send young queer activists from the People's Republic of China to Taiwan, giving them a full transnational exposure of the pride marches, internship in prominent LGBT organizations etc. Interestingly, Ting was the staff-in-charge in organizing these exchange tours. During the skype speech, looking tired but excited, Ting was dressed in pink and sitting on a couch in a hotel room in a remote second-tiered city. She was traveling for work when she received the call from the police and she chose neither coming for the election, nor returning to the city where she lived. She wanted to stay away for a while, in order to avoid immediate contact with the police. Of course, she talked about her organizing experience with the lala NGO and was quite confident that she would be capable for the position of the steering committee member. I did my speech too, though I was less confident about it. I was eager to be seen by the other LBT activists and wanted to get as close as I could to the center of organizing.

After each of our speech, a senior activist of our choice would go onto the stage and make a speech to endorse our candidacy. Ting and I chose two different members in the current steering committee. Leaning against the backdoor of the conference room, I was a bit distracted after my sponsor finished her speech. When Ting's sponsor began to speak, a friend poked me with her elbow, alarming me to pay attention to what she spoke. I immediately noticed other activists were looking at each other, with the look of confusion and surprise. When I started to listen carefully what she had to say, I was shocked. After a short summary of Ting's work, the sponsor began to talk about the security challenges the regional lala NGO was facing. She highlighted the turbulent

relations between the PRC and Taiwan, and the risk of the NGO facilitating cross strait activist exchanges and bringing Taiwanese activists to the PRC. She also emphasized that it was the highest priority for our member groups to safeguard the security of the NGO and make sure it could continue to organize and benefit LBT groups on the ground. All of us listening knew what she meant because we had known what happened to Ting. Even though she did not explicitly argue against Ting's candidacy, it was apparent that Ting's sponsor did not want member groups to vote for her. I was in shock, and the shock very soon transferred to furiousness. I later learnt that the administrative team had an emergency meeting regarding Ting's incidence. Since Ting did not opt out for the race, they had to do something to stop her from being elected. So went her sponsor's carefully worded but to me a threatening speech.

Predictably, Ting was not elected, and she had no idea of what happened after her speech because the internet disconnected, and it was hard for her to hear what everyone was speaking in a distance to the laptop. She was disappointed to learn that she failed the race. I lost the race too, in a place second to Ting. I was disappointed and sad and could not make up my mind of whether I should tell Ting about the speech because I had a hard time processing what had happened. Does democracy look like this? This was among the many questions that popped up in my head. I was just beginning to comprehend what an election and voting could look like in practice when earlier one of the candidates "bribed" the voters with her deliciously home-made cookies, then the speech happened. The magnetic field suddenly lost all the attraction. I was too new to understand all the organizational politics and I even felt a great relief that I had lost the race, so I did not have to work under such complex terrain. I did not say anything about that night with Ting for a long time. I was only later to find out that when someone on the scene of the election night revealed to Ting of what exactly happened, her disappointment turned into shock and hurt. In my conversation with

Ting a few years later, she told me she was very traumatized by what happened that night. She felt betrayed and abandoned by the organization, and she also felt excluded from the LBT movement in which the NGO was an important actor. The closed-door discussions and their manipulation of the supposedly "democratic" voting process sounded contradictory to democratic principles and values. What was even more disheartening to us was that all these were done in the name of safeguarding the security of the NGO, while disregarding the safety and wellness of individual activists. A person became disposable when she endangered the organization, therefore was discarded and relegated as an outsider to the organization. A few years later, Ting recounted the lingering feelings of frustration and despair about the election night on her social media account, without pointing out the specific details of the event.

> I experienced what we call now "social movement trauma" some years ago. I felt abandoned by my trusted comrades. It became a knot in my heart. When I talked about this with a senior activist, they said, "when people are afraid, they will desert many principles they believe in." I've been feeling depressed lately, along with a sense of powerlessness and sadness. In such a perverted society, trauma is everywhere. We are too fragile, fearful, and irritable. The space for calmness and reflection has been largely missing and benevolence and empathy are so scarce…this is the deeply subtle, personal, and unnoticeable influence of the oppressive structures. We cannot stand closer to each other anymore because we want to avoid the exposure of our pain and anger. There are only wounded soldiers without any nurse in this battleground.

Ting connected her embodied experience of trauma with oppressive political structures. While fear is a psychological reaction to external threats, it is also a catalyst in generating friction and intensifying antagonism within social movement. In her writing, political oppression manifested

in bodily sensations of powerlessness, sadness, pain, and anger. She used "wounded soldiers" as an analogy of traumatized NGO activist workers in the battle for freedom, equality and justice. While many activists dismissed the idea of "self-care" and emphasized collective movement tactics, she paid attention to the vulnerability of social movement as it was consisted of fragile individuals who have been differentially impacted by political and economic structures. Internal conflicts can take a huge toll on the organization when activist workers are unreceptive to conflicts and try to eliminate conflicts by replicating oppressive structures without active communication and reflection.

A year later, Ting was among the five feminist activists who were arrested and detained for thirty-seven days by the police for their planned activity to advocate against sexual harassment in public spaces on the international women's day in March 2015. Unlike what happened to her a year ago, the LGBT NGO Ting worked for fulltime reacted very quickly to advocate for her release, along with many other feminist activists in and outside of the PRC. I was part of the local team for coordination and rescue for their release. Within a week, petition letters, flash mob actions and transnational rallies were organized by feminists around the world. Their arrests immediately gained international attention and they were released after thirty-seven days without evidence for conviction. Having experienced dehumanized treatments and non-stop police interrogation in the detention center, Ting developed PTSD (posttraumatic stress disorder) symptoms. Nevertheless, she continued to organize and shifted a part of her focus to psychological health, therapy and healing practices. In a casual conversation between Ting and me in her place in the summer of 2020, we mentioned again what happened years ago in the election day. Having been through police harassment, investigation and detention, Ting still struggled from its aftermath of being easily triggered by the heavy knocking on the door or knowing friends and colleagues experiencing

similar ordeals. Despite these posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms related to being detained, Ting referred to the election night, the split between the lala NGO and her, what hurt the most.

NGO activist workers experience states of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. Such stress stems from the inability to sustain the organization due to political and economic pressure, as well as frequent overtime work, voluntary or involuntary exploitation of their labor and free time in the name of social justice work. However, in *Mutual Aid*, Dean Spade describes "burnout as more than exhaustion that comes from working too hard," but "is the combination of resentment, exhaustion, shame, and frustration that make us lose connection to pleasure and passion in the work and instead encounter difficult feelings like avoidance, compulsion, control, and anxiety." (2020: 67) It is often a result of painful conflict within the group they were working, and people were hurt and unsatisfied by how it turned out. Ting was disappointed and frustrated at how the lala NGO handled her security issues and disposed her immediately to protect the organization's safety. The sense of betrayal, loss of camaraderie and feeling disposable in the movement she so committed, has gradually worsened her states of burnout to political depression and posttraumatic stress disorder. Burnout, depression, and trauma are material, as they are embodied states of mental collapsing resulted from accumulated stress and engendered by the precarious state of working and living. They are also affective, as they often occur when the presumed camaraderie, solidarity and care between the fellow NGO activist workers is being compromised by political, economic and emotional distress.

Recent feminist scholarship and activist discussion on political depression and trauma shed light on ruminating the cause and effect of these mental states as a political, psychological, as well as embodied states of mind (Burstow, 2003; Cvetkovich, 2009; Freyd, 1996; Griffiths, 2018;

Herman, 1992; Root, 1992). They highlight the subjects' sense of inability to act, and the feelings of powerlessness. Connecting the political with the personal, political depression is "the sense that customary forms of political response, including direct action and critical analysis, are no longer working either to change the world or to make us feel better." (Cvetkovich, 2009: 1) In China's context, the increasing violent and coercive repression on activism, as well as the tightening control and censorship on the freedom of speech, create a culture of fear, making existing forms of activism and action targets of political suppression. Such political suppression not only generates fear, but it is also depressing and traumatizing for those who are directly or indirectly affected by it. It is a viscous cycle when political depression generates heightened sense of insecurity with regard to external environments, which in turn creates an atmosphere of distrust within the organization, leading to internal splits and conflicts.

Over the past ten years, I witnessed many internal splits within NGOs and organizing collectives. The stories of internal conflicts and emotional turmoil are most often silenced due to power imbalance and the grand narrative of protecting the movement. Upholding the priority in organizational survival and reproduction, such fractures could destabilize and endanger the organization in the eyes of NGO leaders. A social media post by Dan, a former feminist and queer activist who had quit her organization several years ago due to an internal conflict comes up to my mind every now and then. It reads,

> I am disappointed at NGOs. The pay is minimal. I contributed all my savings and have been living in poverty without much dignity. To make matters worse, I'm facing political persecution within the NGO. The attack does not come from the government, but from the fellow activists that I used to trust the most. It destroys my faith in the movement. I've been an activist for seven years and I never quit under pressure. It is ironic to me that I feel

> so hurt in the boring organizational politics. My friend said it is just office politics, and it is not about the movement. After a month of reflection, I must admit that this is the most traumatizing thing that's happened to me in the movement, because I have lost trust in my colleagues. How can I still be in this movement when I cannot trust anyone? I don't want to respond to the rumors because I look down upon these cheap political tricks. I simply despise them.

Without ever knowing what exactly happened, the conflict ended with Dan quitting the NGO and leaving the movement altogether. Dan was burned out and traumatized by the "betrayal" of her colleagues. Her remarks were filled with anger and frustration. These kinds of intense emotions of hurt, trauma, and anger are often the last straw that break the camel's back in the NGO world.

In *Depression, A Public Feeling*, Cvetkovich (2012:6) discusses a holistic approach to political depression, a more receptive methodology to look at resistance, survival and movement's vulnerability: "discussions of political depression emerge from the necessity of finding ways to survive disappointment and to remind ourselves of the persistence of radical visions and ways of living." Cvetkovich's remarks elucidate a reparative framework to burnout, depression, and trauma. It is receptive in the sense that it does not shy away from failure and conflicts. Rather, it regards such affective states as opportunities to understand the problems and stakes of activism. This receptive methodology invites the "losers" to have a voice in narrating their stories, by sharing their traumatic experiences, and most importantly, how they feel about the movement. Ting's writings and her subsequent work can also be interpreted as her way of documenting the missing voices in the movement, and a step towards healing and rebuilding the community. She talked about the three stages of healing informed by Judith Herman's work on "*Trauma and Recovery*." The first stage is to reestablish the sense of security, by taking control of one's own body and the

surrounding environment, supported by a reliable personal network. The second stage is to recount, recover and reflect about the traumatic events and memories. This approach connects the past and the present, allowing the individuals to understand trauma systematically and structurally. The last step is to reestablish connection with the others and the society, as care and solidarity from the community are crucial elements in the processes of healing and recovery. In addition, inspired by many mutual aid projects across the globe, Dean Spade provides several practical ways to prevent or lessen burnout in collective movement work, which is to foster a working environment that values connection, transparency, rest, mutual appreciation, and to develop skills for giving and receiving feedback, as well as generating a more balanced relationship to work and overwork (2020: 67).

Conclusion

In *On the desire for the political*, Berlant suggests that modes of orientation and having feelings about the political "confirm our attachment to the system and thereby confirm the system and the legitimacy of the affects that make one feel bound to it, even if the manifest content of the binding has the negative force of cynicism or the dark attenuation of political depression." (2011: 227) The optimistic relations NGO activist workers attach to their work initially are what sustain them during economic precarity and political oppression. This desire also confirms their investment in NGO activism even though they are soon overwhelmed by multiple threads of unequal relations and a mixture of affective experiences. These optimistic attachments, once being tested and changed, create a "permanent crack in the available genres" (2011: 48) of their survival. As such, internal conflicts which shatter activist workers' belief in activism contribute the most to burnout, depression and trauma in activism.

To conclude, this chapter explores the inarticulate and unspoken feelings and emotions in the NGO world, as they bear weight in excavating the complexity of NGO work traversing between the transnational and the local (with donors), the urban and the rural (with beneficiaries), and the institutional and internal politics (with other NGO workers and volunteers). These feelings and emotions would otherwise be elided and erased by grand structural and strategic narratives on NGO activism and social movements. I highlight the significance to foreground the emotional labor of NGO activist workers in relation to the affective regimes governing NGO work. I also examine the vulnerability of care, *bangzhu*, and solidarity between activist workers and their beneficiaries in time-bounded NGO projects, shaped by various material and affective constraints. I suggest that the disruptions in care affect the reproduction of the labor of activist workers daily. By analyzing the multitude of affective states of hope, cosmopolitanism, fatigue, exhaustion, disappointment, hurt, anger, burnout, depression, and trauma, I hope to draw the attention to the affective stakes of NGO activism and affective dimensions of the precarity of NGO activist workers. Lastly, I meditate on a brief discussion of a reparative and/or restorative approach to understand the temporariness of NGO politics.

The writings of feminist and queer theorists and activists such as Cvetkovich confront the messy, complicated, and under-theorized feelings, emotions, and relationships in social movements. They are critical, and empathetic and generous. A reparative or restorative approach to burnout, depression and trauma cautions against neither eliding or erasing the personal emotions or rationalizing harm in the binary framework of the powerful and the powerless, or resorting to structural analysis that dismisses the unspoken and inarticulate feelings. Rather, it is grounded in a critical interrogation of the relationship between the personal and the political, and a generative understanding of conflicts and splits within movement groups. Most crucially, it does not reside

on romanticizing activism. Instead, it recognizes the temporalities of the politics of care in NGO activism and social movements.

Chapter Six

Managing "Unproductive Workers": Ableism, Depression and NGO Labor Disputes

Ableism and the Political/Relational Model of Disability

"How do you determine that she is depressed? I think she's capable of making up things." These are the exact words spoken by a core member of the lala organization that I worked for in an emergency meeting regarding a worker with depression and the termination of her contract.

Zoe, the worker with depression, was a young lala who suffered from major depressive disorder. She was considered incompetent in her one-year contract with the lala NGO. Organization leadership notified Zoe the termination of her contract and provided only 3,000 RMB (around 457 USD) as the severance pay. Angered and frustrated by the decision of the NGO and the rampant ableist remarks in the workplace which worsened her mental state, Zoe wrote an email addressed to the general secretary of the organization along with the rest of the members in the secretariat, members of the committee, and the advisory board and consultants of the NGO. I also was copied in the email because I was one of the committee members at the time. Having gained the permission of the author, I share part of the email[14] without any alteration below.

[14] This email was written in English by Zoe. Relocated to China to work in the lala NGO after seven years of living in the US, Zoe found herself resorting to English as her main medium of communication. However, this created some tension within the organization as some of the colleagues do not read English. Later, Zoe translated her email into Chinese upon the request of a former committee member.

I agree with your point that there are "differences in the expectations we have for each other." I am aware that I have not met "normal" expectations of a typical Chinese employee in China. However, while self-aware of my shortcomings in my nearly one-year employment, I feel that I could have been better supported by my employer and colleagues to help me succeed as the editor of X magazine.

For one, as you have once said in an email that you would like the relationships between all staffs in this organization/business to be "comrades", instead of employers vs. employees. However, it was difficult for me to come to terms with the ironic reality, which is that while there have been explicit as well as implicit expectations of me to report and obey like a subordinate, to submit to the organizational hierarchy and seniority, and to accept top-down patronization and condescension as the norm in this organization/business, little care and support, as implied in the term "comrade", was received in my end. Moreover, given that I was overseas for seven years for undergraduate studies and that this was my first job in China, my work performance and morale would have benefited tremendously with more direct mentorship and show of care. In hindsight, a simple inquiry into my week outside of work or how I am coping with living in G city (an alienating city) would have been sufficient. But, it would have been better if more time could have been allocated to sitting down with me to chart out a plan for career growth.

Two, given that I had clearly revealed my mental health condition (medically referred to as "major depressive disorder" or MDD) in my application for the editor position and later "came out" in person to my colleagues about it, the organization/business did nothing to acknowledge my condition, and created an ableist environment that made it very difficult for me to talk about the basic health needs as well as the unique struggles I have as a person living with chronic mental illnesses. Furthermore, this organization/business choose to invalidate my experiences. One example of invalidating my experiences is my employer,

in my presence, casually suggesting to another colleague to "fake depression" so that she could use it to game the system for her personal gain. In another example, after "coming out" in person about my MDD to a colleague, she interrogated me with questions such as "many people have low moods, how do you know you have THE depression," "what were your symptoms," "Why do you think your symptoms mean depression, not other things," and remained unconvinced until I revealed to her that I had been diagnosed several times with MDD by psychiatrists in the U.S over the course of three years, along with diagnoses of other psychiatric disorders, which qualified me for disability. She then stopped the questioning and said "So you WERE diagnosed." These examples asides, there have been more instances where insensitive and blatantly ableist remarks were unfiltered and uttered during work correspondences. Moreover, micro-aggression and bullying behaviors from colleagues at workplace were not only condoned, but also to some degree endorsed by the leader/employer. All of this demonstrate how toxic the work environment has been for me in the nearly one-year of employment.

Three, my "coming out" about my mental illnesses would have presented a great opportunity for this organization/business, who is committed to the movement for social justice for ALL queer women in China, to address the issues at the intersection of queer and mental illness, and to raise awareness for the marginalized within the queer women's community. Instead of doing so and creating a nurturing and inclusive space for marginalized young queer women within the movement, this organization/business has continually used the same capitalist/productivist logic to judge and exclude a young queer woman with an invisible disability. The exploitative capitalist work culture that this organization/business has adopted – emphasizing the model of "incessant-work/performance-as-an-assessment/justification-of-your-value-and-salary", valuing people only for their efficiency and outputs, and seeing people with disabilities as

> unproductive/inconvenient/disposable – is not only ableist and unsustainable, but also perpetuates discrimination and oppression. In doing so, my colleagues and this organization/business, and, by extension, this movement, failed to examine their own able-bodied privileges, contended themselves with poorly practiced intersectional politics, and showed complacency with ableist and capitalist status quo. Needless to say, I am very concerned and skeptical about this movement's claim and ability to serve ALL queer women in China.
>
> I further accept your proposal to terminate my employment due to clear violations of China's Labor Law during my trial period of two months and violations of China's Labor Contract Law during the duration of my employment. Unlike what you had indicated in your email, we did not sign the legally required labor contract even after multiple requests from me to do so. Furthermore, in addition to the benefits package, the personal accident insurance and supplementary commercial medical insurance, which were stipulated in the labor contract, were never fully met – of the three, only the benefits package was fulfilled.
>
> Therefore, I will not accept the 3,000 RMB as severance pay for the termination of my "contract", but will accept back pay for non-compliance with the law.
>
> To conclude, there are dysfunctionalities, discriminations, exploitation, and violations of China's labor laws within this organization/business that I have experienced and do not want to continue to be associated with.

From Zoe's letter, the termination of the contract was the last straw that broke the camel's back. She decided to resort to legal means to seek reparation for the implicit and explicit exploitation during her employment with the lala NGO. Unfortunately, this incidence was understood as an organizational crisis and Zoe's attempt to destroy the lala movement. As Zoe

later recounted for me, in a meeting between her, the general secretary and the lawyer representing the NGO, she was reminded repeatedly that her legal actions might endanger the NGO's operation in China, as well as the safety of the legal person representing the NGO, who was Zoe's former colleague. In the subsequent emergency meetings with the core members of the NGO, only security concerns about the organization were raised and discussed. Not only did core members of the NGO indicate their distrust toward Zoe and her experience of depression and deeming it as her revenge on the organization during the emergency meetings aimed at solving the "problem" she had brought, they also did not express any sympathy or concern about her mental health over the course of the dispute.

Being educated in the US and critically informed by feminist, postcolonial, and disability theories, Zoe was well-versed with the language of diversity, able-bodism, and accessibility. It was not a surprise to me that she put it so eloquently and addressed her needs and concerns so well in her email. Yet, the language barrier to some of the colleagues in the organization created another layer of miscommunication. While Zoe's labor grievance reflected the power dynamics between her and the NGO, the use of English and her mastery of the diversity and disability discourse cast a different dimension of tension, coded the "West" versus China. In the eyes of the colleagues in the lala NGO, Zoe represented the Western and White Euro-American world which defy the norms and rules of the Chinese workplace, and intentionally or not, they projected a common sentiment critical of the colonizing and imperialist West to her.

The lala NGO was registered as a business enterprise in China. Due to the politically sensitive nature of their work around the region, it was near impossible to register as a non-profit in China, as they could find no supervisory unit to represent them, and registration also meant full disclosure

of their work. The fear that Zoe's lawsuit would endanger the NGO was not unfounded in hindsight, given the recent labor arbitration case between a grassroots women worker NGO and its transgender worker, Hai, in the year of 2020. The labor complaint filed by the worker was said to have invited police surveillance and a crackdown on the organization. Many activists and onlookers blamed Hai for her damaging actions that destroyed the NGO. A wide array of articles circulated over the internet including those written by Hai, as well as the NGO's supporters, accusing each other based on different reasons. Hai's experience was in some ways similar to Zoe's. They were regarded as unproductive and incompetent within their job descriptions, and the fact that both organizations fail to sign an official labor contract with the employees speaks to the current state of labor rights protection in Chinese grassroots NGOs.

Grounded in recent labor disputes in gender equality and LGBT NGOs, this chapter examines how NGOs manage unproductive workers, including workers with depression. It highlights able-bodied and able-minded practices in NGOs and interrogates the non-profit sector which internalizes the logics of the market and neoliberal governance by valorizing standards of ableism, competence, and productivity. By drawing the connection between productivity and ableism, I seek to foreground labor disputes in NGOs which are oftentimes dismissed as the cost and consequences of activism under political pressure. The displacement of labor rights issue with the fear of political suppression works to justify oppressive violations of the Labor Law and anti-feminist work ethics around the workplace, and thus rendered these disputes as inconsequential and random episodes of a growing movement. Conventional studies of labor disputes have neither looked at labor disputes in NGOs, nor have they paid close attention to labor disputes concerning workers with mental disabilities. These are important theoretical as well as empirical questions that beg critical research and interrogation. Why do most NGO labor disputes remain invisible and

private? How do NGOs promote equality and equity for its constituents when they replicate unfair and stereotypical treatments to persons with different abilities? Lastly, how can disabled NGO workers reproduce themselves when their survival is placed after the survival of the organization?

These questions are situated at the intersection of disability studies, labor studies, and queer and feminist political economic theory. In Robert McRuer's (2006) foundational texts on queerness and disability, he draws the interconnection between heterosexuality and able-bodied identity, and considers how and why the order of things is constructed and naturalized. "Crip theory" is developed in relation to LGBT identity politics and notions of access and coming out. Compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness is institutionalized and secured in neoliberal capitalism while producing and containing "abnormalities" such as queerness and disability. McRuer particularly cautions against the normalization and disciplining of disability in ways that uphold the interests of global economic orders. This line of scholarship explores how capitalism is contingent upon the reproduction of heterosexual able-bodiedness and the continuing subordination of disabled bodies. Conventional Marxian analysis of disability examines how disabled persons are excluded in the productive cycles of capitalism and relegated as dependent and inferior subjects. "Peripheral everywhere" by James Charlton (2010) focuses on the capitalistic labor value of exchange which subordinates disabled persons in the peripheries of the political economy of a given society.

In "Feminist, Crip, Queer" by Alison Kafer, she argues for a political/relational model to understand disability over other prevalent social and medical models. In the medical model, disability is defined in terms of individual problems which requires medial intervention "imbued with ideological biases about what constitutes normalcy and deviance" (6). The social model is

predicated on the bifurcation of impairment as physical or mental limitation, and disability as the social exclusions based on the impairment. To point out that impairment is also social, Kafer calls for attending to the disabling effects of social environments, as they "overlooks the often-disabling effects of our bodies" (7), excluding certain kinds of people outside the category of impairment, such as people with chronic illness, pain, and fatigue. "Feminist, Crip, Queer" advances the medial and the social model, to argue for "increased recognition of the political nature of a medical framing of disability" (6), and to understand the shifting connotations of impairing conditions socially, physically and mentally. A political/relational model of disability offers expansive interpretations of what it means to be disabled. Kafer further illustrates,

> [N]ot only does disability exist in relation to able-bodiedness/able-mindedness, such that disabled and abled form a constitutive binary, but also, to move to a different register of analysis, disability is experienced in and through relationships; it does not occur in isolation…my articulation of a political framing of disability is a direct refusal of the widespread depoliticization of disability (8) …[it] makes room for more activist responses, seeing "disability" as a potential site for collective reimagining. (9)

Building upon Alison Kafer's political/relational model of disability, this chapter looks to understand the disabling work environment and work ethics in the NGO sector that are saturated by the professionalization discourse of productivity and efficiency. I argue that the management of "unproductive workers" and labor disputes is conditioned by NGO's political and economic resources and organizational politics of caring. The exploitative work environment is further worsened by the political and economic insecurity and precarity, which alienates NGO activist workers from understanding and caring for each other.

By theorizing depression as mental work injury, this chapter suggests that the often-trivialized affective dimension of NGO labor disputes is as significant as the material dimension, even though it is often buried under one-sided accusations, legal clauses and movement talks. I also pay close attention to practices that resist able-bodied practices and able-minded mentality, despite how difficult and fleeting they are. Lastly, I call for a feminist political economic grounded method that can allow flourishing lives by advocating for equal labor protections for all workers with different abilities. It values gendered and racialized social reproductive labor that is crucial for the delivering of philanthropic and social justice work and is incompliant with professionalized and market-oriented evaluation matrixes.

Professionalization, labor disputes and the temporal politics of queer living

Since the economic reform in 1978, labor disputes with new characteristics in a market economy have been at the center of scholarly inquiry of political science, legal and labor scholars of China. A rich array of scholarship has looked at the nature and incidence of disputes, as well as the mechanisms for addressing disputes (Chen and Kang, 2016; Tong, 2009; Zhan and Ming, 2017). In the Chinese state-led project of "legal society", trade union independence and representation are lacking, and the regulatory regime on labor is based on individual rights granted by the state (Friedman, 2014). The state's manipulation of trade unions and the strong influence of global capital on labor policies deter workers' collective bargaining (Chan and Hui, 2014). The individualization of labor rights is backed by the institutionalization of labor disputes resolution mechanisms such as formalized arbitration process in order to quell potential conflicts (Fox et al, 2005). These studies reveal highly dynamic interactions between workers with grievances, employers and the local officials. However, they have not looked at the iterations of labor relations

in NGOs, nor have they attended to labor disputes with workers with mental disabilities. Informed by this line of scholarship, I am particularly interested in how labor disputes are addressed in NGOs, where the lines between employers and employees are blurred by ideals and passions of activism, invisible hierarchies, and the professionalizing NGO sector.

For most NGOs, the first step to professionalize is to register as a legal entity in China. Most of the registered feminist and LGBT rights NGOs chose to register as business enterprises due to the stringent non-profit requirements. The 2016 report on "Policy friendliness to civil society organizations" by NGOCN[15] was aimed at evaluating the impact of the Charity Law on NGOs. The report suggests three primary reasons for NGOs failing to register; 1) the inability to find a supervising unit and 2) to qualify as experts in the field, as well as 3) the legal constraints to the allowed activities of NGOs. For those who chose not to register, their concerns were the high time and financial cost, the difficulty of finding a supervising unit, and the fear of reducing the flexibility of their work and increasing the risks associated with foreign funding once registered. On the one hand, the fear that registration would allow more state intervention is well-grounded. On the other hand, the inability to register as a non-profit organization in China works counter-productively by opening up leeway for grassroots NGOs to not to comply with the Labor Law.

The second step in professionalizing the NGO is to formalize their labor contracts with the employees, as well as ensuring the benefits package, the personal accident insurance and supplementary commercial medical insurance for the workers. However, due to the lack of funding

[15] NGOCN is a non-profit organization dedicated at journalism and research of Chinese civil society, on issues such as environmental, education, gender and sexuality and mental health.

and legal awareness, most organizations fail to address some or all of the above legal requirements. One of the dominant features of the labor dispute cases that I've examined so far is the non-compliance of the leaders of the NGO in neither signing the legal labor contract with the workers nor providing them with full benefits and insurance plans. In Zoe's case, the NGO had not signed an official labor contract with her by the time the leader decided to terminate her employment. Additionally, they had not provided Zoe with one-year personal accident insurance and supplementary commercial medical insurance, which were specified in the draft labor contract. Many NGOs would alternatively offer the workers the cash amount of the insurance plan to avoid the administrative cost and bureaucracies in dealing with social security department and insurance companies. And the provided cash amount of the social security and insurance plan is often equivalent to the lowest required amount in these respective programs. As most workers in feminist and LGBT rights NGOs are young migrants in the city, they tend to accept the cash compensation of the benefits package and insurance plans.

"The pay is already minimal. To get hold on the cash feels right than to let them sit in my social security account. I am young, I'm less probable to get sick so the insurance plan would go to waste." A 23-year-old gay NGO worker Sen explained to me his decision of opting out of the social security program and insurance plan. What was not mentioned in his response but had repeatedly surfaced in the interviews with other queer NGO activist workers, was their disinterest and inability to imagine a foreseeable future in the heteronormative reproductive timeline. Queer persons migrate to big cities for work in order to maintain distance from their natal families, to avoid confrontation and pressure to marry. However, being migrants put them in a disadvantage compared to locals who are entitled to more benefits with their local hukou. Their minimal income and the lack of social security and insurance protections further render them precarious. For one,

they face potential political persecution because their work is associated with overseas donors and organizations. In addition, with no social security and insurance coverage, they would face skyrocketing health care costs if they have any major illness.

In fact, opting out of the social security and insurance programs in exchange for cash is an unspoken rule in many grassroots NGOs. It saves money and administrative labor for the NGO leaders, and intentionally or not, it also sends a signal to the employees that their health and well-being are not the top concern for the NGOs. In this way, the "choice" of the employees is in reality conditioned by the organizations' funding and labor policies. The temporal politics of living, especially for many queer NGO workers, is both affective and material. On the one hand, they do not desire a heteronormative lifestyle that is punctuated on the so-called "life phases", which is to get a job, get married, have kids and buy a car/house at the given time of one's life. On the other hand, they do not have sufficient material resources and healthcare backup for them to picture their lives in a long run. This reflects the impossibility of social reproduction daily and over time in the NGOs bounded by limited funding.

Queer NGO workers are disinterested in forging a "livable future" predicated on standards of heteronormativity and reproduction, but instead focus on the present satisfaction and fulfillment. In "Precariousness and the queer politics of imagination in China" by Ana Huang (2017), she critically points out the inadequacy of mainstream LGBT activism in China which pursues social tolerance/acceptance and access to homonormative institutions and lifestyles.

> LGBT subjects' attempt to overcome precariousness through mainstreaming same-sex relationships appears rather counterproductive because it depends on an optimistic belief in the security and desirability of heterosexual institutions… Furthermore, cruel optimism

> for queers in contemporary China entails the promise of a 'good life' with a lifelong same-sex partner, the blessings of family and friends, in a positive social environment that mimics the LGBT-friendly cultures of the perceived West, where troubles are no more. Not only does this narrative of progress fall in line with the values of development-oriented international foundations working in China, it also syncs up with the 'Chinese Dream' campaign promoted by the Chinese government, with its promises of material prosperity, social stability and national advancement, all resting on the continued rule of the Central Community Party (CCP). (228)

Huang suggests that the utopian vision for Chinese LGBT activism which departs from developmentalist narratives, recognition and normalcy, rests on revolutionalizing LGBT reformist strategies, defying the power of precarious realities and embracing alternative possibilities. She argues for more expansive political method that could "allow for fully flourishing lives while also addressing the affective needs of the lala community" (226). Huang's vision is radical in that it serves as a strong critique of the dominant institutions complicit with the developmentalist state and compulsory heterosexuality and able-bodiedness. While she advocates for a futuristic response to lalas' affective experience of precariousness, she does not specify or lay out the current funding constraints and political climate in China, one of surveillance, threat and policing by the state on queer subjectivities. This political economic analysis could pave the way for reconceptualizing fully flourishing queer lives in contemporary China's market economy where queer people labor at the bifurcated urban and rural system, as well as under the auspices of the state and the capital. What is missing in the analysis is the discussion of the temporality and ephemerality of the queer lives structured by precarious labor protections and unsustainable living, foregrounded in the case of queer NGO workers. How are we going to keep on daydreaming if we cannot even protect ourselves from labor rights violation, pay our rent and healthcare bills?

I argue that the utopian politics of imagination of LGBT activism in China must be grounded on a feminist political economic analysis which does not dismiss the intersections between gender, sexuality, race and class. By only centering discussions on the radicality of politics without engaging with class analysis, utopianism offers mere self-gratifying remarks regardless of the materiality of queer lives that is temporal, ephemeral and yet hoping for a future. The contradiction between the over-investment on public discussions of movement strategies and the NGOs' pragmatic desire to survive also help explain the dismissal of labor rights violations in LGBT activism by NGO leaders and peers. Labor disputes are invisible unless the parties involved expose them or they would remain "private family business" undeserving any public attention. I will next turn to the affective dimension of labor disputes in gender equality and LGBT rights NGOs. I suggest that this is the most crucial but seldom addressed element in questions concerning labor disputes in the NGO circles.

The affective dimension of labor disputes

Activists tend not to categorize their relations with their fellow activists in terms of pure labor relations, even though they are in fact embedded in factual or contractual employment relationships. Activist work and philanthropy are attached with moral conviction, personal sacrifice and commitment. In Zoe's email to her colleagues, she first expressed her disappointment in coming to terms with the ironic reality where the supposed relationship of camaraderie was indeed bounded by organizational hierarchy. She was expected to obey like a subordinate to her superior, with little support and care in return. It was evident that the frustration and disillusionment were directly related to Zoe's supposedly "failing" in her job duties. The same

kind of frustration can be found in the article written by Hai with regard to her termination of employment with the grassroots women worker NGO.

> It must be my stroke of luck to be working in this NGO. A friend told me, "for us, XX (the NGO) is where the revolution is" …. I used to interview workers with pneumoconiosis and couldn't help shedding tears. I listened to his physical pain, and the inequality he encountered. Would this world be better? I used to wonder.
>
> However, this world is not going to be better. I was shocked to find out that I have encountered the same fate as numerous workers did.

The disappointment and shock intensified when they learnt that they had been illegally fired, and in Zoe's case, with multiple violations of the Labor Law. While Zoe acknowledged her "incompetence" at work was related to her worsening depression, the transgender worker Hai fought fiercely against the organization leaders' definition of productivity and efficiency. Hai wrote a series of articles disclosing the labor disputes and published them online. She gathered evidence proving her competence at work, as well as evidence directed at the NGO leaders' unlawful behaviors. Her articles instigated an overwhelming wave of heated debate between the pro-NGO community and pro- Hai circles. The NGO leaders and friends with the NGO also responded with counter-narratives suggesting that Hai was indeed uncapable of doing her job. Several of these articles engaged in personal attacks such as denying Hai's transgender identity and referring to her as Mr. Hai.

Some of my activist friends questioned Hai's disclosure and attack on the NGO as acts that would polarize the already precarious NGO community. They consider these internal splits private and emphasize that organizational crisis should be best dealt with from within the NGO. However,

what is evident from these online articles published by Hai and the NGO leaders is the apparent ineffectiveness of the internal communications. For the leaders, Hai was an outsider to their close-knit circles in the NGO. Thus, what they did was just firing a worker who had not reached their expectations. For Hai, she regarded herself to be part of the revolutionizing community but was discarded as soon as she was considered "worthless" and expensive human capital cost to the NGO. The discrepancies in the understanding of their relationship gave rise to conflicted emotions which finally erupted in the subsequent labor disputes and resulted in mutual attacks online.

Unlike Hai, Zoe did not choose to go public. What she did was to raise the issue to everyone involved in the organization, including the secretariat, the steering committee, the advisors and the editors of the magazine the NGO produced. She expected to have a fair and honest conversation with the managerial team but was frustrated to learn that the NGO treated her as a threat rather than a comrade who had fought together. After the meeting with the general secretary and the lawyer, and several email exchanges with the managerial team, Zoe quickly realized that the simple apology to the mistreatment to a worker with depression, and acknowledgement of the unfiltered discriminatory remarks towards mental disability that she demanded were impossible to obtain. The general secretary gave a final offer of 7,000 RMB as the severance pay for Zoe. It was significantly smaller than the amount that Zoe demanded according to the Labor Law. Zoe was also notified by the general secretary that the magazine the NGO produced would cease publication for at least half a year, and the lease of the office would not be renewed. Finally, she was told that the business registration of the NGO would very likely be canceled in the near future.

What became apparent to Zoe was that her demands of the reparation and correction to the disabling work environment and the violation of her labor rights were not received by the

managerial team the way she intended. The advisors of the NGO asked to join the emergency meeting and specifically stressed the meeting's priority should be discussing the legal risks associated with Zoe's demands. Upon seeing the email, Zoe replied,

> Thank you all for taking time to discuss the problems I raised in my former email. However, you seem to be only responding to the legal issues while avoiding other problems. Thus, I want to remind you all that I talked about two issues in my email, the first one being ableist discrimination, unfriendly work environment and micro aggression. And labor dispute comes second. I hope you could spend equal time in the discussion of the two issues, rather than overlooking the discrimination issue.

Unfortunately, in the meeting later that night, no one was interested in addressing the ableist discrimination Zoe had mentioned. Being the facilitator that night, I tried to direct the attention to Zoe's first demand but was immediately dismissed as inconsequential. The discourse of workplace discrimination in terms of mental health issues was still relatively new in China. Even for organizations working for gender and sexual justice, ableism had never been seriously discussed and made aware of, not to mention any reparation policies or procedures. I came to the realization that few people really regarded workplace discrimination as something that needed to be conferred and dealt with, especially when it was entangled with the labor dispute which might endanger the NGO's survival. It was frustrating for me to hear the able-minded remarks made by my fellow colleagues disregarding the reality that Zoe was fighting against.

Zoe was disappointed, frustrated, depressed and traumatized by the reactions of her former colleagues. The rest of the managerial team, especially the general secretary, was angered by Zoe attempting to go to the legal means and became fearful of the potential prospect of the

organization's demise. These streams of emotions circulate in the private conversations between the managerial team, the several emergency meetings called for resolving this problem, as well as the email exchanges between Zoe and the managerial team. From a hindsight, these emotions were never valorized by both parties but were instead buried under one-sided accusations, legal clauses and movement talks. There were also other emotions which I could not register back then, but I definitely felt that something was twisted in this labor dispute scenario, and I could not live with this distortion. I quit the organization a few days after the series of emergency meetings which turned into chaotic accusations against the steering committee by the senior members of the NGO for no valid reasons.

Zoe did not accept the final offer made by the general secretary, nor did she continue with the legal resort to her case because her depression had worsened. The NGO did cancel their business registration and, in the end, collapsed a year later, due to the internal splits and distrust between the core members triggered by Zoe's labor dispute. I still remember vividly in one of those emergency meetings, when one of the senior members recollected memories of when they first founded the NGO with great sadness, and exclaimed, "how many ten more years could we have"? I was dumbfounded by the ironies and absurdities of how things turned out. The senior members were so concerned about the potential of the dispute to destroy the NGO they founded that they dehumanized Zoe as an outside threat to be tackled with and fought against. To me, the simplest resolution to this labor dispute was to acknowledge Zoe's feelings and actively discuss potential solutions, rather than to treat the dispute as a mere legal risk. As a junior member in the highly hierarchical NGO based on age and seniority, I did not have any say in the final decisions. The lack of empathy of the managerial team to workers with mental disability, and the lack of

awareness of the able-bodied and able-minded practices of the workplace, almost set the fate of the outcome of the labor dispute.

In Zoe and Hai's labor dispute cases, both parties involved were traumatized by the internal splits and disagreement. The affective dimensions of the labor disputes were compromised by the heightened fear of political insecurity, organizational survival, as well as the legal aspects of the dispute. With no internal consensus and external support, these disputes add to NGO workers' potential burnout, depression, and traumatizing experiences. To clarify, the displacement of labor injustice with political precarity is by no means the NGO's fault on its own. Rather, the resolution of NGO labor disputes and their treatment of "unproductive workers", is constrained by NGOs' political and economic resources, and their organizational politics of caring.

Depression as mental work injury and organizational caring ethics

Work injury often accounts for physical accidents and illnesses caused by the workplace. While most of the work-related injuries have a physical aspect, these incidences also have longer term mental effects even after the injury or illness has been cured. The psychological effects such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or the less intense mental depletion after long hours of working, has been invisiblized and overlooked by most workplace policies, and in the context of this research, NGO organizing spaces. Based on case studies of three workplace mental work injuries, this section theorizes depression as a form of mental work injury and seeks to understand the ways in which mental work injury can be addressed by organizational caring politics. Furthermore, it discusses how organizational caring ethics are bounded by political and economic constraints.

Hong was diagnosed with major depressive disorder and was hospitalized after a work-related incidence. Being a project manager in the rural and children NGO, Hong was working closely with the village women. She had two corporate jobs before she decided to work for philanthropic causes.

> I was a very competitive person. My experiences in the corporate world have trained me to be efficient and goal oriented. However, I've always had an idyllic dream of living in the rural area and being close to nature. I resigned my job as an accountant in the company and joined an environmental NGO working in the villages on ecological projects. This is my second philanthropic job. They were hiring for a fund-raising staff, and I took it as an opportunity to learn new things and to move closer to my dreams. Although there are significant differences between corporate work and philanthropy, for me working in the fund-raising department for the rural and children NGO, it later turned out, my routine work is no different than what I used to do in my former job. I am a perfectionist and I had to learn many new things such as marketing with social media, but without any guidance at all. I often worked overtime voluntarily to catch up and it was so stressful.
>
> Fund-raising is unlike doing projects on the ground, and I had no chance to work with village women. Instead, I had to interact with our corporate donors and such. It was absolutely draining for me because I had little interest in personnel liaison and all the business stuff. That was why I quit my former jobs! Without any self-awareness, I became more and more depressed at work, and I chose to bury my feelings and did not reveal anything to my colleagues.

As days went by, the emotional and communicative labor of Hong's work took a toll on her mental health. Being a fund-raiser, Hong worked extra hard to not only excel in fund-raising, and she also actively sought opportunities to involve with projects on the ground. Naturally, it added extra

burden to her as well. Before her mental breakdown, she was following closely with a project and helped organize a three-day workshop in a village.

To everyone's shock, one of the village women died in a car accident one day after the workshop. Hong was profoundly traumatized because she had become a good friend to the woman who had just died. Upon hearing the sad news, Hong did not talk to anyone and immediately asked for leave from work. In fact, her depression had worsened, and she became suicidal after the village woman's death. It was her sense of perfectionism that saved her, half-jokingly, said Hong. She organized all her work files and left a copy to her colleagues because she did not want to leave them the impression of being irresponsible. Fortunately, one of the colleagues who had been living with depression noticed Hong's unusual behavior and informed everyone in the organization to intervene.

The colleagues contacted Hong's friends and family and sent her to be hospitalized almost by force. When retelling this important scenario in her life, Hong was very thankful to their colleagues even though they almost "forced" her to the mental facility. With medication and regular psychological therapy, Hong was able to come to terms with her chronic depressive symptoms which started as early as in her college years. Being an ambitious woman, she chose to ignore her feelings and armed herself with professionalism and perfectionism. It was all the more reasonable to treat Hong's mental breakdown as work injury. This incidence also triggered an organization-wide review and reflection of the well-being of their workers, however painstakingly.

When I started working in the rural women and children NGO in the summer of 2019, I was excited to discover that they ran a monthly gathering event to celebrate the birthdays of the colleagues in that month. They'd go out to dine in a good restaurant together, for Sichuan hotpot,

or Cantonese dishes. In the afternoon, the admin staff would order a birthday cake, and everyone gathers in the meeting room to share the cake. Sometimes other colleagues would also bring home-made desert to share. Before eating the birthday cake, we would sing a happy birthday song together. The first week I got in, I got to eat a birthday cake and enjoyed the celebration of this event. It was very heart-warming for me. It was only months later that I learnt this birthday celebration event was one of the reforms the NGO initiated with regard to the mental breakdown of Hong. Another one was establishing a non-work-related chatroom on Wechat[16] for all the colleagues, including the interns, to share their life and thoughts.

> These initiatives (the birthday celebration and chatroom) were put forward in the meeting to review and reflect on Hong's incidence. Hong expressed that her accumulated stress which led to her final breakdown was induced by the overwhelming work pressure, as well as the boundaryless work environment which encroached her own space by the management. Indeed, we were all very crazy about work and we even discussed work after work in our work chatroom. Hong's breakdown alarmed us that we should do something to change the toxic work environment. We made an agreement to learn about non-violence communication, and not to talk about work anymore after work. We also tried to actively construct a non-work-related space such as the birthday celebration and the "having fun" chatroom to enjoy each other as persons rather than just co-workers. Even though we didn't want what happened to Hong, but I guess these are some of the positive changes that her incidence brought to the organization.

[16] An instance messaging platform in China.

From the above remarks made by Ji, another colleague in the NGO, it is apparent that the organization adopted a positive approach to enhance the well-being of the workers and started to reform its hierarchical and stressful style of organizational management. The NGO also provided Hong a six-month paid leave for her to receive treatment while not having to worry about her survival as a migrant worker in the city. As a median-sized NGO, this definitely added up to its already tight financial budget, but they chose to protect its worker as the priority.

Compared with what happened to Zoe and Hai, Hong was very fortunate. The key differences lie in these organizations' capacity in risk management and the practice of work ethics in social justice work. The rural women and children NGO has official registration status as a non-profit in China. It also has relatively rich resources and is well-connected because the founder is a successful businesswoman. The lala NGO and the grassroots women worker NGO were registered as business enterprises and were potential targets of surveillance and control of the local government. The NGOs' heightened political and economic precarity made them risk-prone and risk-sensitive, especially when their workers intended to resort to the legal means, which could invite direct state intervention. In Hong's case, the incidence was settled internally by offering her a six-month paid leave and a positive organizational reform therefore no legal dispute was ever sought for.

At first sight, the rural women and children NGO is more caring than the lala NGO and the grassroots women worker NGO. They are more resourceful than the other two organizations in offering sufficient monetary and mental support to the worker with depression. At the same time, the material constraints implicated by different levels of political and economic precarity shapes the contrasting strategies NGOs adopt in mitigating risks and sustaining their work. Certainly, the

disposal of workers with depression, or "unproductive workers" in order to save budget and increase productivity runs against the organization's social justice mission, and at worst, destroys the public faith towards the NGOs and their reputation. Deeply entrenched in the hierarchical NGO industry and subjected to heightened political and economic precarity, how could social justice organizations commit to their founding missions while negotiating with the sweeping professionalization discourse?

The social reproduction of activism

The devaluation of "unproductive workers" in NGOs is complicit with the professionalization discourse prevalent in the transnational and domestic NGO sector. Able-bodied and able-minded practices are the other side of the same coin of professionalization. In order to compete with other NGOs, NGOs must strike a balance between being professional and caring, and most often the times, concerns about professionalization outrun its organizational politics of caring. It is believed by many NGO activist workers that the reproduction of the organization is the top priority to continue and sustain the movement. Thus, when potential labor disputes endanger the survival of the NGO, it becomes paramount for its core members to protect the organization even if it is at the cost of the reproduction of certain individuals who used to be a part of the organization. In "The revolution will not be funded", Andrea Smith (2007) specifically discusses the role of non-profits. Instead of becoming an end to the movement, non-profits should serve as buffers that protect autonomous movements from government suppression, and the focus is not organizational (or career) preservation, but on "furthering the movement of which an organization is a part" (15). However, in reality, the contrary is true for most NGOs in China.

As pioneers in feminist and LGBT activism, gender equality and LGBT rights NGOs are key players in the field since the 1990s. The NGO form which heavily shaped how Chinese activists perceive social movement and practice activism paves the way for developing feminist and LGBT activism in China. It also unquestionably equates NGOs with social movement for many people. The government suppression on and elimination of grassroots mass activism which is oftentimes organized by NGOs reinforce the discursive precariousness of social movements dominated by NGOs.

In the recent "commercialization of philanthropy" framework, NGOs take the center stage as actors of social change. The mass production of projects aimed at solving social issues are evaluated by the maximum number of recipients reached, and respective indexes following national guidelines such as the poverty alleviation standards, as well as the professional execution of the projects by NGO workers. The reproduction of NGOs becomes the priority because they are where philanthropic resources are secured and reinvested for more revenues.

In both the activism and the "commercialization of philanthropy" discourse, the reproduction of NGOs overrides other less material concerns. Therefore, workers who are competitive and skillful are more desirable in the eyes of NGOs leaders. In order to conduct meaningful work with the least amount of resource and organizational cost, "unproductive workers" would be dismissed when they show no sign of improvement in a given period of time. For workers with depression, they are not encouraged to even join grassroots NGOs in the first place.

> We don't hire people with depression. In fact, they are not encouraged to apply. Our work is so demanding and stressful, and it will certainly make their conditions worse. We do this in order to protect them from worsening depression.

A friend of mine who is the leader of an NGO made the above remark when we were discussing recent labor disputes related to workers with depression. Their organization works with minority issues and advocates for the rights of the marginal. The remark struck me as a painful acknowledgement of the inadequacy of social justice work in the present. This contention is being conditioned by the contradiction between the material constraints surrounding the NGO and its founding missions. My ensuing questions are, how do NGOs promote equality and equity for its constituents when they replicate unfair and stereotypical treatments to persons with different abilities? How could they claim to work for social justice cause while discriminating other marginal communities without intersectional perspectives? Lastly, how can disabled NGO workers reproduce themselves when their survival is placed after the survival of the organization?

Zoe spent three years living with worsening major depressive disorder, unable to get out of bed and find any job. She was dependent on her partner for three years and was very much isolated from the rest of the society and lala community. In our latest discussion about the labor dispute four years ago, she recollected memories related to how other co-workers downplayed her unemployment.

> They were saying that I'd be ok because I have a partner and I'm being taken care of. They thought it was ok to not pay me any severance money because my partner has income, and she would be able to support me. I think this is very anti-feminist. They let me be stuck in an economic disempowerment so that I have to be financially dependent on my partner for three years. In this way, my autonomy and agency are compromised in my intimate relationship.

The recollection reaffirms Zoe's belief in many of the anti-feminist approaches the organization adopted concerning her dismissal. Even though Zoe has been gradually recovering from severe depression, the trauma sticks with her and with no outlet for reconciliation in the near future. In Zoe's cover letter applying for the job in the lala NGO five years ago, she traced her painful trajectory of becoming a feminist and reconciling with her sexuality in a religious and patriarchal family, and her firm belief in the intersectionality theory and intersectional social justice work. She was greatly impressed by the intersectional articles in the magazine the NGO produced and wanted to be a part of the queer community here. Zoe also revealed her history of depression in the cover letter for a full disclosure of her conditions. She was confident that the organization was aware of the intersection between sexuality, religiosity and disability. What happened to her a year later shattered her faith in gender and sexuality social justice work and took a greater emotional toll on her more than any other common labor disputes.

The emotional exhaustion and trauma are intensified by NGO worker's precarious existence as migrants and/or their other minoritarian identities (queer and disabled) in the city, without sufficient social security protection and insurance coverage, which are supposed to be provided by the NGOs. The vicious cycle of reproducing the organization at the expense of individual workers is thus sustained by political suppression, and the three mechanisms of illegalization, moralization and professionalization to devalue NGO activist workers' social reproductive labor as analyzed in chapter two, and unreflexively able-bodied and able-minded practices within the NGOs.

Discussion: a political/relational model of NGO work

As Alison Kafer argues, that disability is experienced in and through relationships, a relational model of understanding disability must situate itself in concrete relational dynamics rather than in

isolation. NGO activist workers with depression, or other "unproductive workers" in the eyes of the managerial team, are firstly not encouraged to undertake demanding work, and secondly evaluated by the same standards as other able-bodied and able-minded workers. The disabling work environment dominated by able-bodied and able-minded narratives and practices adds to the pressure disabled workers face, and the potential of affective disengagement with their work which gradually evolve into burnout and traumatic mental work injury. Labor disputes are only one typical consequence that these internal splits and conflicts could lead to.

A relational model of disability should pay attention to how feminist caring ethics are practiced in and through the day-to-day organizational management and project execution, rather than only as mottos articulated on mission statements. The deep irony exemplified by Zoe and Hai's cases raises questions about the integrity of NGO work, and urges for a reparative approach to workers with disabilities and other "unproductive workers". A reparative approach addresses the discriminatory work environment and unfiltered able-bodied practices and able-minded remarks, and values NGO activist workers' labor vis-à-vis content-based and person-based framework, rather than orient to the market. In this way, it forges a work environment conducive to the flourishing of the workers' different abilities and makes it a safe space for disabled workers. This turns to the discussion of the political model of disability which demands a structural political and economic analysis of the ableist NGO industry saturated with evaluation matrixes and quantifiable indexes.

> Disagreement pushes us to recognize and acknowledge our own assumptions and the boundaries we draw around our own work; without such disagreement, and the ways it compels us to reexamine our positions, we can too easily skim over our own exclusions and their effects… [R]ather than "expelling conflicts and suppressing their annoying

> reminders," a coalition politics that embraces dissent can begin to ask "how we can take advantage" of such conflicts. Thus, in using the language of "coalition," I am less interested in imagining coalition politics "as a process of dealing with already-constituted interests and identities"—women as discrete group working with disabled people as discrete group—than in thinking through coalitions as a process in which the interests and identities themselves are always open to contestation and debate. (Kafer, 150)

Kafer's articulation of coalitional politics is grounded in the critique of exactly "the identities, positions, and practices we name as feminist and/or as queer and/or as crip" (150). By recognizing the contentions and contradictions, it opens up room for making clarification and inviting conversations. The "taking advantage" of conflicts requires courage and patience, because people tend to avoid conflicts and regard them as threats to one's assumptions and a group's unity. In Zoe and Hai's labor disputes with the NGOs, the ways in which the organizations handled the conflicts as threats to their existence and survival are cases in point. Disable workers, or "unproductive workers" take great courage to voice out their discontent about the disabling work environment within NGOs with invisible hierarchies based on age, seniority and resources. As evident in Zoe's primary request to discuss the dysfunctionalities and discriminations in the NGO, she was not simply asking for an apology or reconciliation, rather, she was frustrated and disappointed at the organization/movement that she once so trusted and dreamed to be a part of. She wanted it to be an opportunity for the NGO to reflect on the existent policies on disability and feminist work ethics. The disagreement and contention opened up by Zoe's labor dispute, unfortunately, triggered fiercely negative reactive response from the NGO leaders and ended up in Zoe's worsened mental health and the organization's demise. It shows how the social reproduction of the NGO workers reached its limits, and so did the social reproduction of the NGO.

These labor disputes concerning disabled workers and "unproductive workers" also urges us to reconsider the rigidity of identity politics which sets discreet boundaries between categorized identities and domesticates empathies based on particular identities. As a lala NGO, the over-emphasis on the work on sexuality, while dismissing important issues such as labor rights and disability rights was shaped by the organization of movements and projects based on Euro-American identity politics. Identity politics is enabling but also disabling at the same time. It creates spaces to engage with embodied experiences of being a woman, a lesbian, a racial minority, and a disabled person, and solidifies power to claim the rights of minority groups. It is also disabling because the overall emphasis is placed on singular identities rather than a holistic understanding of a person.

Kafer rightly points out the significance to question the said identities in the first place, and she explores the intertwining relationships between disability rights and other issues. By doing so, she deconstructs the very categories that define the identities we embody. Intersectional politics demands us to see the coexistence of privileges and oppressions accompanying a person's multiple identities based on race, gender, class and etc., it also cautions against clinging onto discreet categorization of identities. The practice of intersectionality stresses the importance to work at the intersections and to examine the disparities brought along by multiple oppressions.

A relational/political model of NGO work requires us to take into account of the political and economic precariousness of NGO work, and to interrogate the political economy of transnational NGO industry, and also to move beyond Euro-American identity politics to call for cross-sectional alliances with an intersectional perspective. It is also fundamental to pay attention to the emotions and affects circulating in internal splits and organizational conflicts, and to address the need to

acknowledge them. The first step would be recognizing that labor disputes are not purely legal issues, but are registered with emotional and affective investments, especially in social justice organizing and movements.

Last but not least, the utopian politics of imagination of LGBT activism in China must be grounded in a feminist political economic analysis which foregrounds the materiality and ephemerality of queer lives at the intersections between gender, sexuality, race and class. By centering discussions on the political economic method that could allow for fully flourishing queer lives, it addresses the limitations of identity politics of tolerance and acceptance and opens up room for imagining lives beyond the heteronormative and reproductive frameworks. The feminist political economic method is expansive in that it calls for equal labor protections for not just queer NGO activist workers, but all workers with different abilities. It values unquantifiable social reproductive labor that is crucial for the delivery of social justice work, such as the mental, emotional, caring, and communicative labor, and defies professionalized and market-oriented evaluation matrixes. The social reproduction of movement work is, after all, the reproduction of every individual indispensable to the collective effort of making lives livable for everyone.

Epilogue

Two years after I conducted the fieldwork in China, many of the activist workers I interviewed and worked with left their organizations. A few of them chose to pursue a graduate degree in Europe and the US. Some of the workers embarked on a new journey in the corporate worlds. For example, Kai left the international NGO for a well-paid position in a business enterprise providing LGBT-friendly services. Few activist workers shifted their trajectory and ventured into mindfulness and spirituality. Ting transitioned into a psychological counsellor, working to empower women and sexual minorities, particularly those who experienced sexual harassment and trauma. Zoe became a certified trauma-informed mindfulness meditation and yoga instructor. Her healing practice pulled her out of severe depression and informed her life's pursuit. While some suffered from toxic relationship with the NGOs they worked in, most of the activist workers who left still maintained close connection with their former coworkers and friends.

Exiting the NGO world is not easy, especially when activist workers have invested so much of their time and emotion in their work. Many forged their habitat/community with their fellow workers. Immersing oneself in another world inevitably means cutting off some bonds and ties. It can also be guilt tripping. But who is there to blame when one's mental and physical existence is being threatened by political and economic precarity, as well as burnout and depression?

A small number of them stayed in the NGOs, despite much worsening political surveillance and censorship, as well as economic hardships compounded by the Covid pandemic. Ying, the director of Fierce Love, was diagnosed of nephritis in her tenth year of working in the organization due to chronic exhaustion and fatigue. Yet, she did not quit the NGO. In my recent interview with her, I asked what made her so persistent in her work, she remarked calmly.

> Passion isn't worth a thing (*bu zhi qian* 不值钱). Passion is not of scarcity here, because we were all inspired and motivated by passion to join organizing. However, when the external environment becomes adversary, and there's nothing that can support us, it is faith and courage that carry me through all these challenges. I used to put ninety percent of my time to work before I got ill. I've come to realize that I cannot do this anymore because my health is at risk. What really drained me in these years, was the emotional labor invested in this job and the subsequent mental depletion. There is no boundary between work and life in our organization. What I mean is, the workers and volunteers regard the organization more like a safe space and community than a workplace. They expect a more lenient and tolerant work culture in which they don't have to abide by the so-called professionalized business standards. Along with that, they have higher expectation to be cared for in NGOs and are easier to have emotional disputes between the coworkers. I've dealt with so many of these disputes over the years and it has taken a huge toll on me as well.

Ying and I are close friends and we have debated similar topics over the years. I could clearly sense her frustration and was able to come to an understanding from her perspective as the director of the organization. With funding lifelines compromised by illegalization and censorship, she was under extreme pressure to raise money and support a dozen workers and interns. She expected the workers to perform efficiency and productivity and initiated a bold move to transition the NGO into a social enterprise. Ying's strategic approach was confronted with disappointment and disapproval from her coworkers, as many of them showed great distrust in the process and the business model. With Ying working as their superior and having relatively higher authority, those who disagreed eventually left the organization.

Ying's remark struck me as a perpetual moral dilemma that one needs to revisit time and time again working in these activist and NGO spaces. Whilst the activist workers in feminist and LGBT rights NGOs tend to embody the kind of feminist ethics of care and gendered affective labor, in their pursuit of social justice, gender equality, LGBT human rights, they also demand a more caring, humane, and flexible working environment in which they could thrive. However, these high expectations are being challenged as soon as these activist workers find themselves being pushed to perform and achieve in a growing organization deprived of resources and institutional support. Worse even, the safety and security of the workers and the NGOs are being jeopardized facing heightened precarity, increasing surveillance, and potential imprisonment deployed by state control and governance. Such precaritization is also intimately connected with the global politics of funding and the polarization of geopolitics in which activist workers must continually negotiate to seek whatever resources are available to them, challenge liberal narratives depicting activist workers as victims in authoritarian contexts and represent the communities they serve with the best intention.

> Besides the emotional toll of being an NGO director, the most traumatizing experience for me was my encounter with the police. It was the most humiliating experience of my life. I have been the primary target of police surveillance over the last ten years. I was once detained for over nine hours by the police. During that time, they treated me like a criminal, and I was being watched over even when I used the restroom. I could never forget the policewoman's look of disgust as if my whole existence was degrading. It was because our connection with some foreign donors. There were a lot of opportunities for us to advocate our work and raise

> money transnationally. I turned all of them down because I could not risk my security and the safety of the organization.

Ying went on to talk about her reconciliation with the high turnover rate of coworkers in the organization. With workers working for an average of one to three years in Fierce Love, it reflects a common difficulty to retain talents in the NGO world. Nonetheless, for those who have left, they find alternative ways to support the cause, for instance by donating money and volunteering. Ying showed me a much broader definition of social movement and activism which is not fixated on organization reproduction.

> This field is like a relic. But it is a relic with holy light. Many people are attracted by the holy lights and feel summoned to come here to serve their purpose. It is only when they arrive here that they realize how challenging and messy it is. It is only human that people would want to leave this relic. I have come to accept that coworkers come and leave, and it's not a bad thing. We need different talents to build this relic in different phases of reconstruction, don't we?

It reminded me of what happened to Zoe, Hai, and Hong, as their mental health status impacted their ability to work in a productivist workplace, and the varying degrees of backlash/care they encountered as they tried to defend themselves. As complicated as the turbulent terrain Chinese NGOs must traverse, when prioritizing the reproduction of the organization over individual activist worker's welfare and wellbeing, it demands a critical reconsideration and reassessment of the organizational politics and governance strategies.

I started my research with a genuine interest to understand what does work mean to people. I chose the site of Chinese feminist and LGBT rights NGOs not only because of my personal relationship to the field, but also, they are cases exemplar where the boundary of work and life are mostly blurred. In these NGO spaces, work is being given a plethora of meanings beyond the work itself and people come to search for more than just a paycheck, but also self-exploration, social justice, camaraderie, intimacy, and community. It is because of these added values of NGO work, it can sometimes justify the lack of social security, protection and compensation for the work activist workers do. In many people's eyes, NGO work is not just mundane work that reproduces capitalism, as it has the potential to liberate those who are disenfranchised and marginalized. This is where I find it most challenging to situate my work and analysis.

The multitude of affects, ranging from varying degrees of frenzies, passion, empowerment, to frustration, burnout, depression and trauma, are amplified with activist workers blurring their boundary between work and life. There is no life to be had when there is no work. This is a place of extreme vulnerability, and extreme optimism. Young activist workers tend to be attached to a romanticized version of social justice activism, which has been shaped by a continuing influence of liberal politics of visibility. Protests, public policy advocacy and flash mobs, these eye-catching and sensational events have construed an ideal imagery of working in these activist spaces between late 1990s and early 2010s. Yet, with such high hopes and expectations, activist workers become easily disillusioned once these ideals are being challenged by the in fact everyday mundane work, complicated power dynamics between the Western and state donors, workers and the communities they serve, and are especially traumatized by internal conflicts and distrust. The optimistic attachment activist workers hold on to their work, has been utilized by multiple stakeholders such as the NGO leadership, coworkers, and donors, as a generic scapegoat of undetected, invisiblized

and silenced mistreatment, harassment, and exploitation of activist workers' emotions and labor. With conflicting and binary narratives of fighting for democracy in an authoritarian state, and compromises made within the transnational non-profit industrial complex, activist workers struggle to negotiate a space where they could continue to commit to the work they do, while preserve and reproduce their economic and emotional abilities.

My aim to theorize the invisiblized gendered and racialized labor activist workers perform in their everyday work, reflects my desire to validate the significance of NGO labor in a context where such kind of labor is highly devalued. At the same time, I find myself frequently referencing to a wage-based remunerative framework, which is equally informed by an ableist and productivist ethos undergirded by market capitalism. My Marxist feminist analysis provides a materialist account in exploring NGOs as important sites of social reproduction in China and foregrounds the tension between the social reproduction of NGOs, and the social reproduction of activist workers. It valorizes the need to build a feminist, sustainable and fair-practice workplace, one that attends to the economic and emotional wellbeing of activist workers. However, as I have illustrated in the chapters, the entanglement of work and life for activist workers, requires an alternative structure to address the political, economic, and affective dimensions of NGO work, one that challenges and moves beyond the market remunerative system, and accounts for the social reproductive labor that activist workers perform and the emotional depletion of such work. This dissertation is an invitation for more dialogues, writings and research on NGO labor, precarity, and movement building in the "South" of global and regional geographies. As a feminist scholar activist, I hope to facilitate more constructive conversations that are conducive to a self-sustaining and caring activist community, one that is reflexive to the dynamics between macro political economic structures, state governance, and affective responses and struggles of individual activist workers.

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