

THINKING STRATEGICALLY ABOUT CIVIL SOCIETY ASSISTANCE IN CHINA



How China Vision helps disabled people in China to articulate their own authentic voices

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CHINA
DEVELOPMENT
BRIEF



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Highlights from the interview

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I knew very little about disability in China at that time but having a visual impairment myself, a progressive visual disability, having come from working on documentaries for many years and having a deep interest in China, and having been around China since 1980 this suddenly made sense to me. It connected a lot of my own experience of social exclusion in China, having made documentaries with quite marginalized groups, such as rural women, people with disabilities, and with other groups around the country, including minorities. But I actually began to understand that disabled people were a very large excluded group, not a community, because they were not cohesive in that sense, but a group without a voice and very often being ignored in the whole discourse of human rights in China.

We certainly try to engage with a multitude of partners. Initially we were working with one particular group, because our own background is in visual disability. But now we are working across pan-disability. The longest-term partner we have is Beijing One Plus One, which is an organisation set up by disabled people, many of whom have a visual disability but are now working with people across the disability community. So we are drawing from our experience and their experience of using media and being very innovative in using social media and other means to reach a very large audience. So that I would say is our most solid long-term partner. We have also been working with a mixture of smaller organisations, small new start-up NGOs, some of whom are now registered as non-profits, and some of whom have gone down the corporate registration route.

Those organisations that I have seen that are most successful have had very strong leaders, but not overly authoritarian leaders. They have a perception that part of the bentuhua — the nativisation process — is also inclusion, is including different voices and listening to their staff. The organisations that have often fallen apart are those that maybe have a strong leader with a strong strategy but who are not listening to their community. You need to bring the two together.

This interview was conducted by Dr Andreas Fulda in Nottingham, UK on 25 September 2014.



Interview transcript | Stephen Hallett

Andreas Fulda (AF): What motivated you and your co-founders to establish the UK-based charity China Vision in 1999?

Stephen Hallett (SH): China Vision was set up first in London. It was inspired by a talk given at the Great Britain-China Centre by Mr Xu Bailun, who set up the Golden Key Foundation in Beijing. He was talking specifically about the problem of access to schooling for visually impaired children in various parts of China, particularly in Inner Mongolia and Guangxi. What Golden Key was doing was trying to find ways to integrate children at the most basic level within primary schools. I knew very little about disability in China at that time but having a visual impairment myself, a progressive visual disability, having come from working on documentaries for many years and having a deep interest in China, and having been around China since 1980 this suddenly made sense to me. It connected a lot of my own experience of social exclusion in China, having made documentaries with quite marginalized groups, such as rural women, people with disabilities, and with other groups around the country, including minorities. But I actually began to understand that disabled people were a very large excluded group, not a community, because they were not cohesive in that sense, but a group without a voice and very often being ignored in the whole discourse of human rights in China.

Disabled people

I attended that lecture together with four other people, some of who I knew at the time and some of who I did not. One or two were from the BBC Chinese service, for example Paul Crook, who is one of our own trustees now who had grown up in China himself and who worked for the BBC for many years. Also Sue Walker, another of our trustees, who came from a special education needs background and who had taught for many years in schools for the blind in the UK. She had also worked in developing countries, but not in China. Chris McMillan, who herself has a visual disability, was also very interested in China. There were also several other people who attended that first meeting. At the end of the talk I was very moved by it and very impressed. I stood up and said “If there is anybody else here who is interested in lending some support to what Mr Xu is doing, we would like to set up some kind of support group in the UK”. That is how it began. A few months later we registered China Vision, which is the English name we collectively agreed upon. We set up the organisation at that time, with a very simple intention to support educational opportunities for people with visual disabilities in China.

Over the last fifteen years I guess we sort of metamorphosed in various ways. We have broadened our remit. We initially did not run projects. The initial work we did was raising small scholarship funding for individual Chinese blind teachers to come over and study in the UK. We had very modest intentions to begin with. I was still working in the media in the field of documentary making and radio. But China Vision absorbed more and more of my time and we still have the original caucus of people, the original founders. Most of them are still our trustees. But we have expanded to people with other backgrounds and other disciplines, who are now part of our board of trustees. We are still UK-based. We are fully non-profit. Ninety-eight percent or more of the revenue we raise around the world goes directly into projects in China, all

Modest intentions

of which are small to medium-size projects. But these projects are quite impactful. The model which we use is quite unusual in a sense since we do not have running costs in this country.

AF: You mention that you raise funds globally. Over the years, in terms of the sources of funding, how much actually came from government funding and how much from private foundations? And have you also tried to access corporate funding? How much is the ratio?

SH: The ratio is about 85% to 90% foundation funding. We have had money from the Big Lottery Fund. We have worked in collaboration with other groups, working with the EU. We have had some EU funding. We have had and we still have some individual donations. We have worked with some US-based funders. It's mainly foundation funding. In terms of corporates we had very minimal corporate funding. But it is an area which we are developing now. Because one of the problems is that there are projects which do not fit any clear remit of the foundations. This is one of the issues: in order to broaden our own remit and to meet the needs which have been identified by our associates in Chinese civil society we need to broaden our base. We need to be more flexible so that we can work beyond the remit of some of the foundation funders.

Funding sources

AF: What you seem to be suggesting is that only very little government funding is being provided for the work that you are doing. Would you consider UK and EU funding for civil society work in China adequate?

SH: Let me put it this way. I think for the EU firstly, the whole process of applying for EU funding, especially for a very small organisation like us, is very difficult. Where we have worked with EU funding and EU money it has been in a collaborative way with other organisations. We have actually tried in the past to apply individually for EU funding but it seems that we are being perceived of not having the capacity to manage projects on that scale. So that is a problem for small organisations. And I would say that part of that is the model which I referred to earlier. We are determined that with the funding that we do raise, however large or modest, that most of it is seen to be put directly into work on the ground in China with our partners. We have such minimal costs.

EU funding

There is a sort of chicken and egg thing here. If we were to grow our administration so that we had greater capacity to take on larger EU-based projects, things like that, we would have to change our modus operandi. I think all of our trustees feel that this would be breaking a certain mold. We are very comfortable with the way we operate in a rather modest way. The model that we use, and coming back to the question you asked me about both corporate and government funding, it is relatively small funding with a degree of flexibility built in which is often not available through EU or government funding. But big impact is possible. Put in very simple terms: we can train ten blind radio producers in China, but they are reaching possibly a hundred million people. So the simplest way, working through the media, through social attitude change, by capacity building for a small number of people, we can have quite a big impact.

AF: When you work with your associates in China, do you work with individuals, for example one particular organisation, or do you try to also connect some of the Chinese partners to each other? To rephrase my question slightly, is your cooperation with China based on a single-entry model where you work with one partner or do you also try to engage with a multitude of partners at the same time?

Partners

SH: We certainly try to engage with a multitude of partners. Initially we were working with one particular group, because our own background is in visual disability. But now we are working across pan-disability. The longest-term partner we have is Beijing One Plus One, which is an organisation set up by disabled people, many of whom have a visual disability but are now working with people across the disability community. So we are drawing from our experience and their experience of using media and being very innovative in using social media and other means to reach a very large audience. So that I would say is our most solid long-term partner. We have also been working with a mixture of smaller organisations, small new start-up NGOs, some of whom are now registered as non-profits, and some of whom have gone down the corporate registration route.

Rong Ai Rong Le

One group, for example, is Rong Ai Rong Le, a parents-based group who work to provide supported employment for people with intellectual disabilities. For example young people with autism or with Down syndrome who would like to integrate more in the community, but who would have no real employment prospects. They have been using models of supported employment which have been learned from Malaysia, from Japan, from Taiwan and also from the West. It is a very interesting development. We have been working with Rong Ai Rong Le for two years now. The work they are doing is very path-breaking. They are a fully-fledged non-profit, fully registered and they are a growing organisation.

Talang

But we also work in different ways with individuals, some of whom are registered in the most basic way as *getihu*, as self-employed individuals, in areas like Inner Mongolia, but who have established their own networks of self-advocates, people with particular skills. For example one group we work with is called Talang. Talang was set up by an individual, Ye Zijie, in Inner Mongolia. He has some English skills. He was one of our grantees who came to study in the UK for six months. He is a teacher in a school for the blind. He is now using his language and translation skills to set up a magazine which has been running since 2008 and has developed a network of individuals around the country, some of whom are blind and some of whom have other disabilities. They are also very interested in honing in their translation skills. So they are providing their services and they are paid a very modest amount of money for their work translating large amounts of information from around the world on disability, how inclusive education is conducted in Cameroon, for example. It might be on very progressive models of social inclusion in America or in Europe and the UK. It is a window on the discourse of disability around the world. It is reaching a very large number of readers through the internet and through social media. So that is a different kind of model. It is not a big organisation. It is an individual who is doing remarkable work.

AF: It is very interesting that you mention these developments. Have you seen in the past five years that there are significant changes in the way foreign organisations like China Vision, which is primarily UK-based, and domestic organisations how they communicate and cooperate with one another? Do you feel that there are changes occurring?

SH: I think that there are very interesting changes. We know that there are large numbers of organisations like China Vision that work in collaboration with Chinese partners who have a legal status. For example One Plus One is registered both as a company and as a non-profit. So it stands on two legs, which is a very effective model. But the fact that One Plus One is legitimately registered means that it has a bank account and all of that. This means that we can work in collaboration. We have not gone down the registration route in China for China Vision. Organisations like Save the Children took many years to register as non-profits in China, or to register as foundations. There are all sorts of questions about that. Handicap International which has been operating in China for many years now is registered in affiliation with the China Disabled Persons' Federation, the CDPF. The whole question of registration is a complex and interesting one, as you know better than I do. But we found that since we want to channel our resources directly to our partners in China, it has not really been part of our planning to go down the registration route. I think that a lot of organisations are doing this.

One Plus One

I think the other side of this is something happening in the disability world. Organisations that do have some real official status in China, or who operate openly in offices there for many years, like Handicap International or Save the Children, in the past could do so thanks to their close affiliation with government-based organisations like the CDPF or the Ministry of Health or other organisations like that. Now they are beginning to branch out. A lot of the projects that Save the Children is running are run directly with small Chinese NGOs. This is happening particularly in the disability world. One reason for that - and this applies to Handicap International too - is that they recognise the limitations of working with a quango or a GONGO. Now there are different types of GONGOs, and there are different ministries and they will retain their affiliation with government ministries for a number of reasons. At the same time there are individual, autonomous projects with a different range of funders, which have no government affiliation. I think that is a change, a very interesting one.

Chinese NGOs

AF: There are these changes happening. In terms of China Vision, do you have an organisational view of civil society? If that is the case, how would you describe it? If not, who is framing the discourse about civil society in your organisation and how? Because this will also inform your operations to a certain extent.

SH: This is very interesting. If we have an organisational view it is something that has developed organically over time. It reflects some of the changes in China. I think initially we had a very pragmatic view. It was simply a question of supporting a group of individuals or supporting people where the need was—finding tools and strategies together with our partners in China which had a practical application. There was no broader concept of us doing something meaningful within Chinese civil society.

Civil society

I think as an organisation we now have a much clearer view that firstly within the area of disability there is a certain freedom or opportunity to explore new approaches in civil society which may not exist within all areas of activity. That is partly because disabled people are seen as a highly marginalized group, possibly as less threatening to the government. There are a number of political reasons, that is true. But it is also because some of the organisations of disabled people have been highly strategic in the way that they operate. They may have a rights-based agenda, but it can be framed in terms of service provision; it can be framed in a way which is more acceptable to the powers that be. That is one aspect.

Community building

In terms of civil society more broadly, what I think we have discovered is that civil society can be characterised in many ways. In a sense the official identity of organisations - whether they are registered as non-profits or as companies, or whatever - is actually much less important. It is the way they relate to their constituency. It is about community building. I think that the organisations within the disability field that have been most effective are firstly those that have found multiple sources of funding. So that is the way they relate to the international funding community. But they also have some form of sustainability within China. So that might relate to social enterprise. And that is difficult, but it is something that is developing. But they also have a very strong footprint within their community and a great community loyalty. So they are identified as serving a particular constituency.

Strategy

The organisations - and I don't want to name names here - that are rather flagging or finding it very difficult are those that have taken a very strong rights-based approach but without necessarily being embedded to the same extent in their communities. They may also be less strategic in the way they frame their rights-based argument. I will say this in general. On the organisational side, strategy is number one. I am very impressed with how some organisations have developed their relationships with their communities and with the government. They are spanning these two areas. The other aspect of it is capacity building. The organisations that have been the most sustainable and most effective are those that actually operate with professional values, that can do the accounts, that can do the reports, that have a well-trained staff. That is very important.

AF: In a way you suggest the best way for NGOs is to both professionalise but also build up their constituency, something that I understand is often seen in the Chinese discourse as mutually exclusive. So you either nativise or professionalise, but actually these two things are not mutually exclusive.

SH: I agree. I think that very often that depends on leadership. Those organisations that I have seen that are most successful have had very strong leaders, but not overly authoritarian leaders. They have a perception that part of the bentuhua—the nativisation process—is also inclusion, is including different voices and listening to their staff. The organisations that have often fallen apart are those that maybe have a strong leader with a strong strategy but who are not listening to their community. You need to bring the two together. But there also has to be an ear to the broader political context. I think that is one of the concerns at the moment, because the political context is very changeable. The role of NGOs, even under the new guidelines as far as

registration for non-profits is concerned, is still very variable. It is very regional; there is a huge disparity between different areas, and the degree of tolerance given to them. There is also almost a day-to-day change in the way the government is monitoring and perceiving NGOs. This leads to people feeling nervous. That heightens the need for a strategic approach.

AF: What does that actually mean in terms of your own hopes and dreams but also maybe fears for civil society in the next five to ten years? I know that it is very hard to make predictions, but you do have your finger on the pulse and have a good idea what is currently happening in China. So maybe you could extract a little bit from the developments you see on the ground and make an informed guess?

SH: My feeling is that there are two almost conflicting energies around this. One is at the power level where there are many interest groups. For example in the disability world you have the special education sector. There are very strong interests. They have been highly privileged in many ways over many years. Many special needs teachers have been trained by the government. A lot of policy initiatives and energy have gone into that. The world community and even many people in China within education are saying that is all wrong. We should go for full inclusion which immediately negates a lot of the earlier policies. So you have this interest group and it is very difficult to break it. To some extent they are holding up policy change and progressive moves. The way civil society relates to that is by firstly listening to the community - but not challenging the government directly on these issues - and coming to some informed conclusion.

Interest groups

We always say amongst the group of partners that we are working with in China that professionalism is also very important, but we always have to be at least two steps ahead of the government in our understanding of the discourse of disability. Now that is not trying to criticize the government, it is simply saying that we are part of the much bigger discourse that goes beyond China. The Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD) is a convention which China has signed up to. So it is a very useful tool. The way that civil society can operate most effectively is not by challenging the government head on these issues. It is by saying that we have solutions. Now these solutions may be very practical. They may be informed by the discourse of the CRPD. They may be informed by an anxiety that there are these big interest groups that are trying to hold back change. But at the same time this is the other power or force in Chinese officialdom, in Chinese society, which is promoting change. So we have the interest groups, which are holding back change, and we have the force of solving problems and social contradictions. One reaction is to clamp down on social progress - the knee-jerk reaction. But the other is to try and find real solutions to social contradictions. My optimism, as far as it goes, largely comes from the feeling that at many levels Chinese officials, certainly people within the Chinese professional world, within education, and people within civil society, have a common objective in trying to find solutions to some very intractable problems. Now we have seen this in the past in the question of rural management and rural taxation—the abolition of agricultural tax, issues which were identified by civil society. PM 2.5 and the issue of urban pollution was again raised by civil society and the government eventually responded to these demands in various ways.

Professionalism

Within the field of disability we have seen similar things. I will give you an example. I mentioned earlier an organisation called Rong Ai Rong Le that works to empower people with learning disabilities. They aim to bring people into employment, real employment. Supported employment is a technique which has been developed around the world, which provides a transition. Someone with a disability can be given the training. The employer can be trained and worked with. There can be a bridge between rehabilitation, education and employment. It is often very successful. I was in Taiwan recently and learned about what they call the *zhuanxian gongcheng* or *zhuanxian shouduan*. In English we call these transitional methods. It might be the transition between pre-school and mainstream primary school. So you have a child with disability who needs help in primary school. There is a huge amount of manpower in China. People need more training. In some areas, in Guangzhou for example, and now in Changsha local authorities are listening to NGOs like Rong Ai Rong Le who are coming in and saying ninety-eight percent of people with learning disabilities have no employment opportunities. And this is a social problem. These kids have nowhere to go. Parents can't work. People are forced into poverty. You have potential social instability, all of these issues. But a solution can be found. There are very good tools out there. So with something as very specific as that gradually - and this is very new - some local authorities are responding. They are putting money into training what they call job coaches, *jiuye fudaoyuan*. It creates a new area of employment, a new profession within social work. Job coaches can fulfill a very important role. That can also be applied in very few cases, in Guangzhou for example, and in Zhengzhou to some extent, to children with disabilities entering mainstream schools. They would need classroom assistants, they would need accessibility. There would be support given to them so that they can integrate into the mainstream. You tick your box. If you do that you are meeting the needs of the CRPD. You are ticking a lot of boxes. You are also solving a lot of social contradictions. What we need is less hyperbole. We need less top-down ideology, both from the West and from China. We need more basic groundwork, solutions which civil society can provide, but informed by these broad values. So that is how I perceive the growth of civil society in China.

AF: In a sense your answer outlines your philosophy of change. Is that correct? Or is there anything you would like to add from China Vision's point of view? How can people who are not Chinese—but who want to assist in these kinds of processes of problem solving and innovating—how can they make sustainable and useful contributions to these processes?

'Chinese uniqueness'

SH: Number one, most of the issues that come up in disability in China are universal. So the notion of 'Chinese uniqueness' I take great issue with. I think that there are certain issues which have to do with Chinese history and to do with attitudes. But I think that most of the issues we find in disability, and I suspect in most areas of social life, we can find universals around the world. The solutions which have been developed in many countries - for example in the West over many generations, and in many other developing countries - are relevant to China. They simply have not been applied and they have not been thought of. Particularly the solutions which have been filtered through, for example, societies like Taiwan and Japan and other Eastern societies which may come from a similar philosophy. These experiences are extremely

valuable. And Chinese people within civil society and also within various professions and within the government are now looking to Taiwan, for example, for some of these practical solutions. Transitional measures are one example of that. So from China Vision's point of view what we would like to do and what we would advise to anybody outside who is interested in interacting with this process, is for people to draw from the very practical skills they have.

For example, in the UK we have a huge body of retired or prematurely redundant Special Education Needs teachers, and sadly many of these are not employed effectively in this country because of cut-backs. Now this is a huge resource which could be applied in many other areas. They have very useful practical skills. I would like to see people particularly from Western societies, where there has been a long history of development, but also from other countries like Malaysia, where there has been more recent application of these methodologies, to engage with NGOs and also with professionals in China. I think it can often happen on a very small-scale, grassroots basis. You establish one model which becomes the basis for application. It does not have to be big and grand: I think very often this is where projects have failed, and there are some examples of that. It would be very interesting to see, for example, how effective the inclusive education projects of Save the Children in southwest China will be. My worry about it - and this is no criticism of the project, it is simply an anxiety - is that the scale and the vested interests makes it very hard to succeed. The big scale and the vested interests will most likely make it unsustainable. This is my worry. Whereas I think very small, focused projects often can be made to be sustainable and can be made to inspire social change in other areas. That is very much our approach. Small input, big impact.

Practical skills

AF: I find it fascinating when you talk about China potentially benefiting from closer regional integration and exchange. I have this idea of organizing a cross-straits civil society roundtable next year or the year thereafter. My feeling is that people can learn a lot from each other. There are less linguistic barriers and also as you mention culturally there is more similarity. Based on your observations, to what extent are mainland Chinese scholars and civil society practitioners engaging with their Taiwanese counterparts and vice versa?

SH: It is beginning to happen now. It is very recent. A number of our colleagues both within NGOs but also on the academic level - for example Wuhan University, Zhang Wanhong who has a very strong department working in disability law. He has been running a project funded by the Raoul Wallenberg Institute, which is working in the field of disability. But he has extended it beyond the academic field to bring in disabled self-advocates. That project is working very closely with Taiwanese universities. On that level there is a lot of cross-straits dialogue. A number of NGOs working in disability have recently paid visits to Taiwan. I have been in Taiwan myself earlier this year. What has been very interesting is how, despite any baggage of cross-straits relations in the past, it is very much easier to establish that kind of dialogue, whether it is on the academic or the governmental or the civil society level, without being put on by ideology, if you know what I mean.

Taiwan

One reason for this is that we have found that because Taiwan itself for so many years has been outside the international discourse on human rights (it has been part of it in some ways, but in other ways it is not part of the UN Conventions or CRPD, it is not part of any of the conventions; they can not be), but it has developed its own home-grown discourse. A lot of that discourse is about practical solutions. So they embrace the idea and say that social inclusion is very important, but it will not be expressed in abstract human rights terms. It will be expressed in practical action. We have seen this in many areas. People are much less hung up in Taiwan about whether or not a child goes to a special school or a mainstream school. The question is whether that child is getting the education that is best for that child. I have met many ideologues from Western countries who will say that this is irrelevant. What is relevant is that this child is in an inclusive setting. But the inclusive setting may not be providing what that child needs. Yes, of course inclusion is the ultimate aim. But how do we get there, what are the steps? And one of our worries, for example in mainland China, is if the government adopts inclusive education as a slogan, we will end up with a lot of victims.

AF: Because it does not work?

SH: It does not work at this stage. What you need is a much more comprehensive, well-thought out system which can give the child the support that it needs within any setting. But I think in China Vision we have this very practical approach. We do not necessarily see eye to eye with everybody within the international discourse on this. Because often it is framed purely in terms of inclusion or non-inclusion. I think we all agree on the desirability of inclusion. It is how we get there.

International
discourse

AF: For me it seems from my interviews that especially foundations representatives, but also some leaders of implementing organisations, consider impact on the policy level being a kind of ‘gold standard’ of their work. But then there have been others who say that it does not actually matter whether a project is big or small, what matters is that the people who are involved benefit from it. Think of scholarship schemes for example or study tours or other small initiatives which clearly benefit the individuals who are directly involved. What is your take on this? How should we measure success?

SH: I would characterise that in two main ways. I said earlier that building relationships with the community is very important. Now you can only build relations with the community if you are seen to be bringing about positive change. Individuals need to benefit. You do not need to have a lot of individuals, but you have to have examples of people who have benefited from a new approach. So it might be that one child has been given the support it needs to enter a school. Now that is already one success. Over time there are multiplier effects. Beginning with that practical approach is very useful since it helps communities. On the policy front you can only effect policy change - and obviously policy change is desirable in the long term - but you can only effect policy change if you have got the examples to show. So you need to build effective models on one level. NGOs that are not seen as threatening by the government but are doing real work for the community are key. They may not be subscribing simply to a service-based model. Their main agenda may be rights-based, but the way they perform it is seen as acceptable. That is part of the strategic approach.

On the other level, finding very clear solutions like supported employment, which provides a model for the government to consider within its policy framework, takes a long time. I would say the worst kind of policy is policy which ticks the right boxes but has no implementation potential. In other words you have got a policy framework but no relevant laws, for example no clear anti-discrimination laws, no clear advocacy, or no legal advocacy at the grassroots. There are many policies like that in China which are framed in such broad terms that, however well-intentioned, are not applicable. And we have seen that certainly with the Disabled Persons Protection Law. We have seen it with many of the education statutes that have come out over the years. And even within the Chinese Constitution, which suggests that discrimination is not acceptable and that everybody is equal before the law. But it is very hard to apply. So I feel a policy has to be informed from the bottom-up. And I guess that characterises a lot of the work as we see it in China Vision. It is about helping disabled people to articulate their own authentic voices. It is about finding a voice, so that they can identify the issues which are of most concern to them and also help to find solutions to address them, and then turning that into a kind of force for change. That's what our experience has taught us. It needs to be driven from the bottom-up. ■

Bottom-up