

## Knowledge communities and policy influence in China

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### ABSTRACT

How do citizen groups influence policy, particularly in political contexts thought to lack grassroots inputs into the policymaking process? Predominant explanations focus on bargaining and mobilization around interests and identities, neglecting the role of ideas. Emerging scholarship shows how knowledge—or epistemic power—shapes political decision making. This paper applies these advances to the Chinese context to uncover how knowledge communities impact policy and governance. The paper draws on extensive longitudinal field research embracing Chinese NGOs, local officials, and policy research bodies. It presents three cases of cross-sector collective knowledge generation within the Chinese context. In these cases, communities comprised of combinations of NGO staff, villagers, academics and officials interact around specific policy issues, generating knowledge and spurring policy innovations. The cases highlight the porous nature of sectoral boundaries that enable the formation of cross-sector communities, suggest an expanded notion of epistemic expertise and a broader conceptualization of knowledge production. In this way, the paper identifies mechanisms by which knowledge about development intersects with power structures and is then diffused.

Keywords: Knowledge, policy, NGOs, China, epistemic communities, communities of practice

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Even within authoritarian systems, knowledge communities can generate, capture and diffuse knowledge about development into policymaking.
- In cross-sector knowledge communities, NGOs to generate knowledge about development in concert with officials, citizens and academics.
- NGOs impact policy by leveraging their ability to provide grounded knowledge of underrepresented interests and conditions at the grassroots.
- NGOs can serve as localized centers for knowledge generation by connecting local knowledge with outside expertise.
- Knowledge generation by NGOs includes not only crafted policy documents but takes a variety of forms that should not be overlooked by policymakers.

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## INTRODUCTION

In an era of unprecedented access to information and multiplying means of communication, what role does knowledge have in the policy making process, particularly knowledge generated by citizen groups and grassroots organizations? How does knowledge intersect with structures of power and governance, and how is it diffused? How do citizen groups influence policy, particularly in political contexts thought to lack grassroots inputs into the policymaking process? Emerging research that explores these questions often centers on knowledge communities as carriers of knowledge to policy.

China provides a useful context case for studying the deployment of knowledge in policymaking because it is seen to be both bureaucratically strong and relatively closed to social inputs, but also receptive to innovative ideas and expertise. While this may make it easier for elite expertise to influence political decision making, it is less clear the extent to which social actors--such as NGOs— are involved in knowledge generation and policy influence. We explore this question by drawing on two models of knowledge communities--epistemic communities and communities of practice—that attempt to account for knowledge generation by and with social actors. Initial studies have attempted to identify and evaluate such communities in contemporary China, particularly in its growing NGO sector.

This paper builds on the extant research on policy networks, incorporating in-depth longitudinal research on Chinese NGOs, local government agencies and policy research bodies into the analysis, to explore whether knowledge communities apply to the Chinese context and represent a means by which knowledge generated by grassroots actors can be channeled to policy makers. We find that the contribution of knowledge communities to policymaking can be observed by drawing on strands of the epistemic communities literature that embrace varied forms of expertise, of knowledge production, and membership constituted by actors *across* the public-private divide. These communities are facilitated by specific characteristics of China's policy process that are nonetheless present across a range of political contexts. Three cases of emerging knowledge communities comprised of combinations of NGO staff, villagers, academics and officials interacting around specific policy issues, generating knowledge and spurring policy innovations, are studied.

Each case illustrates the expansion of key theoretical constructs within the literature on knowledge communities. The first case highlights the porous nature of sectoral boundaries in China and the resultant cross-sector communities that influence policy. The second suggests an expansion of the types of expertise constituting knowledge communities to include non-scientific sources of authority and reliable information about conditions at the grassroots, and the third invites a broadening of knowledge production beyond 'crafted policy documents' to encompass the generation of knowledge in a variety of forms and by a range of actors. In this way, the paper identifies mechanisms by which knowledge intersects with power structures and is then diffused. These findings on how grassroots actors are able to influence policy through knowledge communities are relevant to authoritarian

systems perceived to lack the traditional channels for political participation, but also to political contexts in which channels for articulating the will of the people are not functioning as intended.

### **Diversifying sources of policy change in authoritarian China**

In a range of regime types, but particularly in authoritarian regimes, policy change is generally thought to result from shifts in political and economic elite interests (Boix & Svobik, 2013). In China, incremental policy change has traditionally been explained by bureaucratic bargaining or clientelistic politics. A range of studies show that pluralistic exchange theories, coalition politics, and--to a more limited extent--clientelism play a role in policy change in China (Lieberthal & Lampton 1988; Kennedy, 2009; Ma & Lin, 2012; Zhang, 2018). However, historically, little attention has been paid to the power of persuasive ideas. Still less are potentially persuasive ideas thought to originate in society or grassroots participation (Teets, 2018). Any grassroots inputs to policy are generally seen through the lens of contentious politics, most often when protestors or civil society groups seek to block potential harmful state actions, despite significant evidence showing that the response to such contentious approaches tends to be individual concessions rather than real policy change (Hasmath & Hsu, 2015; Teets, 2014).

However, recent research is beginning to challenge this picture. Scholarship on 'consultative governance' draws attention to networks of market or civil society actors that consult with local government officials to provide societal information that can improve authoritarian governance (Hasmath & Pomeroy, 2017; Teets, 2014). Ho and Edmonds (2017) find that China's environmental groups are able to approach and influence relevant government departments with policy suggestions despite a lack of institutionalized policy channels. Mertha (2011) demonstrates how a range of actors representing media, NGOs, academic institutions and government bureaus are diversifying sources of influence in policymaking, and evidence suggests that even small, grassroots NGOs are able to influence policy at the local level (Farid, 2019). Teets (2018) shows how policy networks constituted by civil society organizations and managing government departments can shape policy, while Farid and Hui (2020) find that reciprocal engagement between NGOs and government agencies facilitates policy influence. Knowledge communities may play an even more important role during periods of political tightening and structural disincentives to innovation. Lewis et al. (2021) find that persistent policy innovation under disincentives is explained by specific personality traits in policymakers. For example, citizen-oriented leaders that value citizen feedback, social support and input into the policy process were more likely to continue to innovate even under structural disincentives, in contrast to prior explanations that emphasized the personality profile of risk-acceptant policy entrepreneurs.

These studies draw on a number of models from the global literature on policy influence, such as Richardson's (1995) policy communities, Sabatier's (1993) policy advocacy coalitions, as well as a significant literature on policy entrepreneurship (Mintrom & Norman, 2009). Several of these models have been used to describe dimensions of the Chinese policy process, and have aptly highlighted the role that networks of diverse actors can play in transmitting innovations into policymaking in

China (Li & Wong, 2020; Han et al, 2014; Teets, 2018; Zhu, 2013; Hammond, 2013). What distinguishes epistemic communities from these networks, however, is their focus on the production of knowledge and the deployment of epistemic power.

### **Knowledge and policy**

The field of politics has generally sought to explain political decision-making through a process of calculating rationally formulated state preferences. Other theories have been proposed to complement this approach, focusing on how constructed identities, socialization, political legacies, history, or discourses shape policymaking.

The past two decades have seen a resurgence of interest in another complementary framework, one that centers on the role that knowledge plays in the policy process. As part of a wider 'renaissance of knowledge,' (Radaelli, 1995) scholars in political science were reminded in the 1990s that ideas, along with traditional interests and institutions, matter in explaining political decision-making (Dunlop, 2012 p. 3). This 'ideational turn' does not neglect material power, identities and political legacies, but emphasizes decision-makers as 'sentient agents' (Schmidt 2010). In this conception, public policy develops from new ways of thinking, beliefs, rhetoric and discourse, and 'politics becomes a process of learning about the world' (Dunlop, 2012 p. 3).

### ***Knowledge communities***

Scholars observing how knowledge shapes political outcomes have turned their attention to 'carriers' of knowledge (Haas, 1992), often in the form of communities of individuals that circulate causal ideas and associated normative beliefs, which help to create state interests and preferences (Cross, 2013). Such communities generate knowledge and seek to 'speak truth to power' (Haas, 1992 p. 3).

### **Epistemic communities**

One such knowledge community is the epistemic community, which Haas defines as 'a network of professionals with recognised expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area' (Haas, 1992 p. 3).

Originating in Fleck's (1979) idea of the 'thought collective' and Foucault's (1973) interpretation of the Greek concept of *episteme*, the concept of the epistemic community has been linked to Kuhn's (1962) scientific community, a group of scientists who pursue research around a shared paradigm. Holzer (1972) employed the concept in sociology, while Ernst Haas (1977) applied it to international relations research. Ruggie broadened the scope of Kuhn's scientific community idea, arguing that epistemic communities can arise from 'bureaucratic position, technocratic training, similarities in scientific outlook and shared disciplinary paradigms' (1975, p.570).

Early research on epistemic communities tended to focus on transnational networks of scientists seeking to influence government policy in environment, bank-

ing, or other specific policy areas. More recent scholarship has sought to broaden the empirical scope of the concept to enhance both utility and explanatory power. For example, Cross argues that epistemic communities can be composed of governmental, non-governmental, scientific or non-scientific actors, and may seek to persuade both states and *non-state* actors, targeting not only specific government policies, but shaping *governance* more broadly' (2013). Antoniadis (2003) conceptualizes epistemic communities as thought communities made up of socially recognized knowledge-based networks that seek to translate their beliefs into social discourse and practice. Application of the epistemic communities lens of analysis to a broader range of actors and political contexts provides insight into agency in politics and policy formation.

### Communities of Practice

Conceptually closely related to epistemic communities, communities of practice are constituted by members, characterized by mutual engagement, collective learning, a joint enterprise or domain, and a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1999). They are organizational units that exist beyond the formal structure of an organization. Instead, they can be conceived of as a group of people whose ongoing interaction around a shared concern, a set of problems, or a particular topic, deepens their knowledge and expertise (Wenger et al, 2002). Communities of practice differ from epistemic communities in the extent to which they hold shared motivations or specific policy goals. Epistemic communities necessarily deliberate, coordinate, or self-identify, while communities of practice may not (Cross, 2013).

These models enable observation of 'the development and diffusion of knowledge for policy and politics' (Haas, 2001). What distinguishes knowledge communities from other agents such as interest groups or advocacy coalitions is their concern with authoritative knowledge—though such knowledge can be spacio-temporally specific (Antoniadis, 2003). Studies of environmental policy change in the Chinese context have therefore supplemented the advocacy coalition framework with the notion of epistemic communities, because it can uniquely 'draw attention to the interplay of policy ideas within an informed, small group of public and private actors' (Scott, 2012). In a similar way, we suggest that knowledge communities are an important complement to policy networks and advocacy coalitions approaches in the Chinese context, because they can account for 1) cases in which the production of knowledge is a central concern and 2) mechanisms by which social actors--such as grassroots NGOs—that do not have access to clientelistic ties, political coalitions or resources to exchange for influence—can transmit knowledge into policymaking.

### ***Observing knowledge communities in China***

Authoritarian regimes are not thought to provide particularly fertile ground for epistemic communities. Haas predicts the emergence of epistemic communities in rich democracies, where 'the knowledge enterprise is independent of the state, and yet the state has the resources to access and support science' (2001). He also suggests, however, that epistemic communities will emerge in countries with well-established institutional capacities for public administration, science and technology, characteristics which fit a number of authoritarian regimes, including China, particularly well. A

knowledge-based approach is also consistent with the pragmatic Chinese notion of 'seeking truth from facts' and 'scientific concept of development' espoused by the Chinese state. To what extent can it be said, then, that epistemic communities of some form are part of the policymaking process in China?

Initial explorations conducted into whether epistemic communities and communities of practice are emerging in China have primarily focused on the NGO sector, and have generally concluded that China's empirical reality does not meet the criteria for the existence of such knowledge communities. This finding, in turn, is thought to be indicative of the maturity and strength of the sector.

Hasmath and Hsu (2014) conclude that Chinese NGOs 'lack the professionalism and expertise' to be considered epistemic communities and do not act as a coherent group of experts seeking to inform and impact policy and policymakers. They suggest that Chinese NGOs emphasize developing relations with the government rather than strengthening the NGO sector by sharing of knowledge and information. In this sense, they conclude, Chinese NGOs are not yet mature and, in the near future at least, are unlikely to significantly impact policy that will substantially shape their sector of work.

Communities of practice are similarly thought to be absent in China's NGO sector. Hsu and Hasmath (2017) propose that this is due to the small staff size and high staff turnover of Chinese NGOs. They also suggest that Chinese NGOs see themselves as implementers of projects, while they perceive the responsibility for producing new knowledge to be in the hands of the government, which is staffed by experts who are seen to play a more passive role in social advancement. NGOs themselves, it seems, are more preoccupied with tactical learning than strategic learning due to factors such as funding requirements and distrust amongst NGOs. Hsu and Hasmath do, however, see potential for the emergence of communities of practice in the growing networks of volunteers being mobilized by these groups.

In this paper, we build on these initial studies, but use an expanded notion of knowledge communities. While we expect to observe the key features of epistemic communities as defined by Haas: 1) shared normative and principled beliefs, 2) shared causal beliefs (that become increasingly consistent over time) 3) shared notions about the validity of knowledge or expertise and 4) a common policy enterprise, the way these features are defined incorporates expansion of the concepts of knowledge validity, expertise and membership from the global literature on epistemic communities. These expanded features are highlighted by our case studies and discussed below.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

The cases and data presented in this paper are drawn from three sources. The first is a comparative study of state-NGO relations across six sites across Hebei Province, Yunnan Province and Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, carried out between 2009 and 2012. These provinces were selected based on variation in economic development, ethnic makeup and associational experience and included NGOs working in urban, semi-urban, and rural contexts. The study included 122 semi-structured interviews with grassroots NGOs and local government officials; original survey data; a

review of NGO materials, relevant bureaucratic documents; government websites, newspapers, national statistical yearbooks and attendance at government and NGO conferences.<sup>3</sup>

Second, a new round of 44 interviews and several visits were conducted in 2018-19 with a number of NGOs and government officials included in the original study. Many of these interviews followed the same NGO practitioners and officials, and visits were made to the same localities as in the original study. This allowed for longitudinal observation of knowledge communities and policy learning discussed in this paper.

Finally, findings presented here are also informed by over a decade of ethnographic research and participant observation among NGOs and in central government policy research in China, therefore incorporating actors in Beijing into the analysis.

While the three provinces in which the bulk of field research took place are not representative of China's highly diverse NGO sector, they do, in some sense, capture its breadth. Cases studied include both projects initiated at the central level and ones initiated at the grassroots. Selected provinces demonstrate significant variation with respect to levels of economic development, proportion of ethnic minority population and political sensitivity, as well as the size and strength of the NGO sector in the province. NGOs in these provinces are likely to find it more difficult than NGOs in Beijing, Shanghai, or Guangdong to have their voices heard by political elites. NGOs in more economically developed regions enjoy greater financial and political resources, and may therefore tend to bypass knowledge communities to access policymakers directly. At the same time, they may enjoy broader access to a range of actors likely to participate in knowledge communities, such as researchers, activists and issue-centered bureaucrats that tend to be concentrated in major urban centers. The three provinces included in this study therefore provide insight into a limited—but significant—range of localized civil society-policy interactions. Yet, given China's practice of policy development through local experimentation, they represent a potentially significant node through which knowledge intersects with policy.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This section draws on the experiences of NGOs in our study to illustrate how Chinese NGOs engage in knowledge production and how that knowledge is diffused to policy makers. It presents three cases of emerging knowledge communities interacting with policymakers in the Chinese institutional context. While in all three cases, NGOs play a central role in catalyzing collective knowledge generation, the cases illustrate different paths of development. In the first, the process is initiated at the central level and grows to incorporate actors at the provincial and subprovincial levels. In the second, knowledge generation is initiated locally but draws on national collaborators, while the third case showcases the boundary spanning function of a locally emerging knowledge community that incorporates grassroots actors.

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<sup>3</sup> NGOs selected for inclusion in this initial study were exclusively Chinese domestic grassroots organizations rooted in local communities, carrying out concrete programs. For additional information on sample selection and methodology, see Farid, 2019.

Each case also illustrates a reconceptualization of specific assumptions and theoretical constructs within the classic literature on knowledge communities. The first case highlights the porous nature of sectoral boundaries; actors often hold overlapping identities that open channels to policy influence. Knowledge communities constituted by state and non-state actors thus can and do form around policy issues that cross sectoral boundaries to address complex problems. The second case suggests an expansion of the types of expertise constituting knowledge communities to include non-scientific sources of authority and reliable information about conditions at the grassroots. The final case invites a broadening of knowledge production beyond 'crafted policy documents' to encompass the generation of knowledge in a variety of forms and by a range of actors. All three of these 'expanded boundaries' in the definition of epistemic communities are supported by strands in the global epistemic community literature, and the cases show how they apply to authoritarian policymaking.

### ***Case A: Education for sustainable development***

Perhaps closest in form to the traditional formulation of an epistemic community, Case A depicts a cross-sector knowledge community concerned with generating knowledge about education for sustainable development, with a view to improving education policy in ethnic minority regions. The catalyst for this community was a collaborative research project between a central government think-tank and a non-profit research institute. A research institute under the think-tank, widely considered to be China's leading and most official state-sponsored think tank, spearheaded a four-year research project that eventually incorporated nonprofit organizations, academics and a range of government agencies at the provincial and county levels.

The project was characterized by an open-ended exploration of the realities of education in ethnic minority regions and how to design educational interventions and policy to better respond to this reality. In an exploratory meeting, the director of the research institute posed the problematic as follows: 'We do research on minority education in the western areas, because this is a big question, especially with respect to bilingual education. For example, the government wants to collect a lot of the minority students into one school separate from society and pay for everything, and educate them, but then they go back and they can't do the farm work and raise animals, their education is disconnected from society...and then it is hard for them to find jobs when they graduate...Now ethnic minority education is very important, higher education and so on. Because a lot of social issues originate in this.'<sup>4</sup> In a meeting to launch the research project, the director outlined the approach to be taken: [the team] 'will need to find an entry point...talk to the local Academy of Social Sciences, the educational authorities, principals of middle and primary schools, and hold a seminar, start a conversation and get to know each other.'<sup>5</sup> Staff of the nonprofit research organization and the government think-tank's research institute refined research questions and

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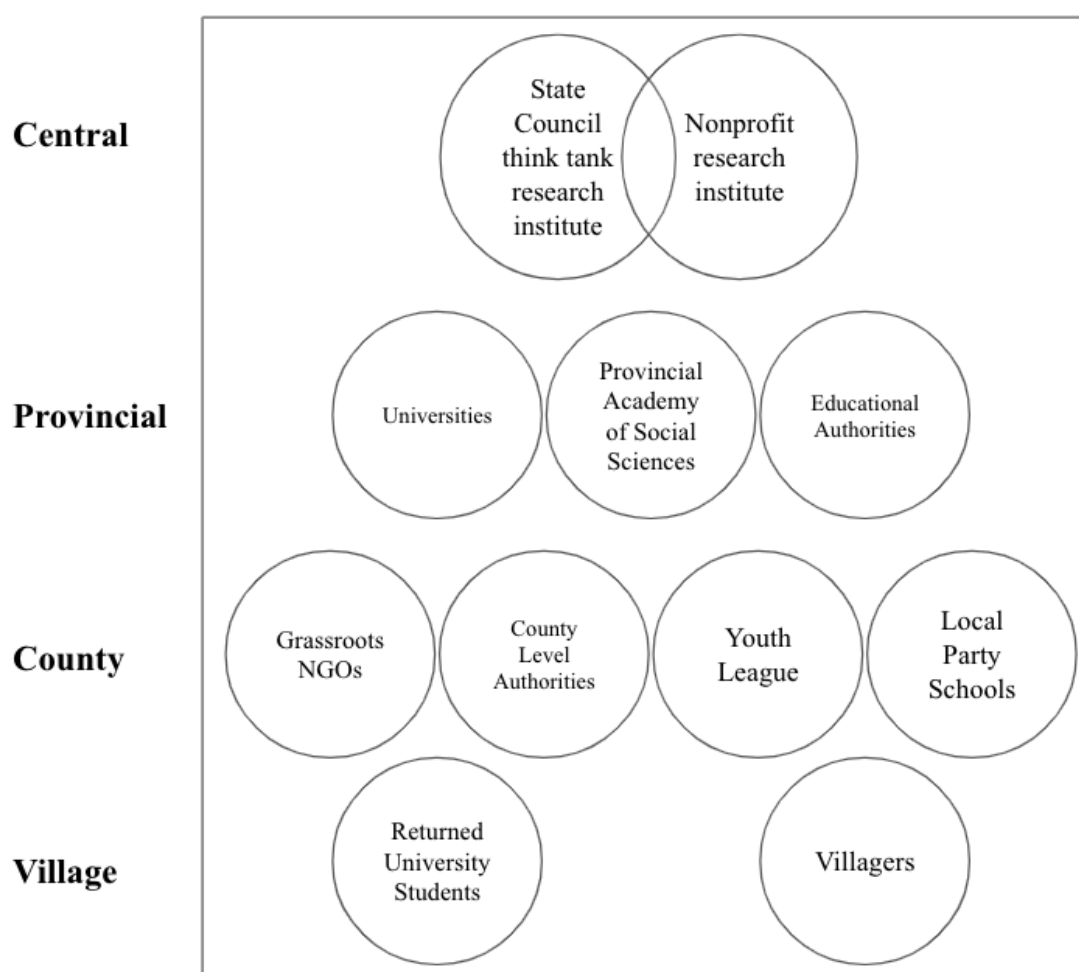
<sup>4</sup> Interview with Institute Director, Beijing, November, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Participant observation, Beijing, November, 2011.



outlined a number of steps, including conferences, seminars and workshops, as well as action-research projects in a number of localities.

As these activities were carried out, a range of other actors entered the community and began to participate in a process of collective inquiry (Figure 1). These included, at the provincial level, university deans and professors, researchers at the provincial academy of social sciences, and provincial educational authorities. Eventually, grassroots NGOs and county level authorities with expertise in education, agriculture and local economy were incorporated, as were heads of local Party Schools and Youth Leagues. Two sub-projects were initiated, one focused on the question of higher education and career aspirations of minority students, and another on local structures that could potentially incorporate new graduates.



**Figure 1: Case A Knowledge Community Membership and Structure**

Knowledge generation in the project was ongoing and occurred at all levels. At the central level, more familiar forms of knowledge production occurred, including

comprehensive research reports which were circulated in Beijing and elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> But the process of knowledge generation went much further—at the provincial level, universities prepared research reports and edited volumes, several masters' students centered their theses on the research projects undertaken as part of the project, as did dozens of undergraduate students. At the municipal and county levels, grassroots NGOs and local officials held seminars and workshops, and representatives of the central research institute and nonprofit organization participated in action-research projects in collaboration with local leaders. Knowledge was generated not only through formal research, but also through structured and regular reflection at each stage of the process. Knowledge generation as the primary goal of the project was made explicit at all levels, with officials and university students self-identifying as 'action-researchers' producing knowledge about development.

Research results and insights were communicated most directly to central policymakers through the government think-tank itself, most immediately through the director of the research institute. But ideas and policy suggestions generated by the project also openly circulated in diverse fora constituted by representatives of the academic-government policy apparatus. It is also reasonable to assume that they made their way to a broad array of bureaucrats through informal social networks. Finally, through workshops and projects involving hundreds of undergraduate and graduate university students in minority areas, new approaches and ways of conceptualizing sustainable development, ethnic minority education and governance were diffused.

Even initially, members of this knowledge community held shared conceptualizations of relevant issues and key beliefs about the education and development. But as the process of knowledge generation advanced, these shared conceptualizations and beliefs crystalized and became more refined, increasing cohesiveness among the actors, as well as diffusing to others. Similarly, the goal of exerting policy influence was present at the outset, though the means to effecting it and possible pathways to change evolved and multiplied over the lifetime of the project. Finally, it is of note that while the process of knowledge generation and policy advocacy around this question would likely have continued, shifts in the political climate and institutional changes impacting key actors brought the project to a close in 2016, at least in its formal dimensions.

### **The porous nature of sectoral boundaries**

This case highlights that recognition of the blurred boundaries separating the state and society, NGOs and officials, is critical to studying knowledge communities. Much of the epistemic communities literature assumes clear boundaries between epistemic communities and the objects of their influence, usually states. However, it is not uncommon, particularly in the Chinese context, for the state-society divide to be quite blurred and porous. Ho and Edmonds note how 'the semi-authoritarian context has created an environment in which the divide between civic organizations, state, and Party is extremely blurred' (2007 p. 3) This makes it problematic to identify a clearly defined epistemic community of actors 'out there' in society and evaluate their efforts

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<sup>6</sup> Internal research reports, on file with author.

to shift thinking and policy 'inside' the state apparatus. However, such interlinkages can contradictorily strengthen the impact of grassroots groups, such as environmental activists (Ho, 2007).

Fieldwork revealed many instances of overlapping identities, many of which opened channels for knowledge to inform policy. For example, local officials sometimes wear multiple hats, and can be simultaneously involved in educational institutions, industry associations or social organizations, acting as board members or advisors. These overlapping identities can provide officials with alternate spheres of experience, ownership and participation, socialize them in alternate norms and values, in such a way that these are passed on to other spheres of political engagement. Similarly, the involvement of NGO leaders in formal political and academic spheres can facilitate the flow of influence in the opposite direction.

For instance, one environmental NGO leader also functions as the managing director of the government-organized Provincial Environmental Protection Union. The Union meetings provide important opportunities to engage with local officials on environmental policy issues.<sup>7</sup> Another environmental NGO founder is also a university professor, vice-president of the provincial and municipal Environmental Protection Union, and a CPPCC member for his municipality. He sees these various roles as enabling his NGO work: 'Why can I do this? Because I am in government, media and I can affect the public.....Also I can have an effect and give work to the students I teach....When we have meetings with government, sometimes I participate as an expert, sometimes as an NGO representative.'<sup>8</sup>

Relationships with academic institutions, often semi-governmental, are also important channels through which policy recommendations and more informal forms of influence flow. One development NGO was founded by two close friends, both scholars of the Provincial Academy of Social Sciences. Each took on different responsibilities in these two interconnected organizations: 'On this side, I'm the head, on that side, he's the head.'<sup>9</sup> A Yunnan environmental NGO highlighted the key role played by another academic in his successful petition to the provincial government to reform microfinance policy.<sup>10</sup> Scott points to broader 'evidence that policy brokers are important in the environmental policy marketplace in the transmission of ideas from outside government to the policy makers and in liaising with NGOs and other actors in the society'(2012 p. 29).

Even in western democracies, where the majority of research on epistemic communities has been carried out, scholars find complex and overlapping relationships between such communities and governments. The success of epistemic communities, Dunlop points out, depends on both epistemic resources and political acumen. If their consensual knowledge is to persuade decision makers, they must 'successfully

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<sup>7</sup> Interview H164, NGO founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Interview H165, NGO founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Interview YN91, NGO, Government, Academic, deputy director and director. Yunnan, April 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Interview Y134, NGO director of external relations. Yunnan, May 2010.

navigate the machinery of government by insinuating themselves into bureaucratic positions' (Dunlop, 2012 p. 3). In authoritarian settings, in particular, scholars find that policy change is often successful when policymakers are embedded in social networks (Evans, 1995; O'Brien, 1994). Cross (2013) notes that in some cases epistemic communities are located within government structures, although they continue to exercise independent agency, possibly enhancing access to decision making processes. Antonaides similarly conceptualizes epistemic communities being constituted by members or representatives of governments as well as social actors. Indeed, he notes that securing bureaucratic positions 'is one of the most effective methods for diffusing epistemic communities' ideas in society' (2003 p. 32).

We draw on these strands of the epistemic communities literature to suggest that, in the Chinese case at least, epistemic communities can include members across the public-private divide. In addressing specific governance challenges and social issues, individuals from NGOs and local government agencies, as well as other actors, such as academics, community leaders and so on, engage in dialogue and common practice to generate knowledge around a particular issue.

This reconceptualization modifies Hsu and Hasmath's suggestion that within the Chinese context NGOs predominantly focus on their relationships with government rather than knowledge exchange, such that 'there is little incentive to foster, grow and strengthen an epistemic community with the goal of influencing government policy' (2017 p. 14). Rather than direct access being used to influence the state and effectively making the question of epistemic communities moot, we observe knowledge communities constituted by state and nonstate around policy issues.

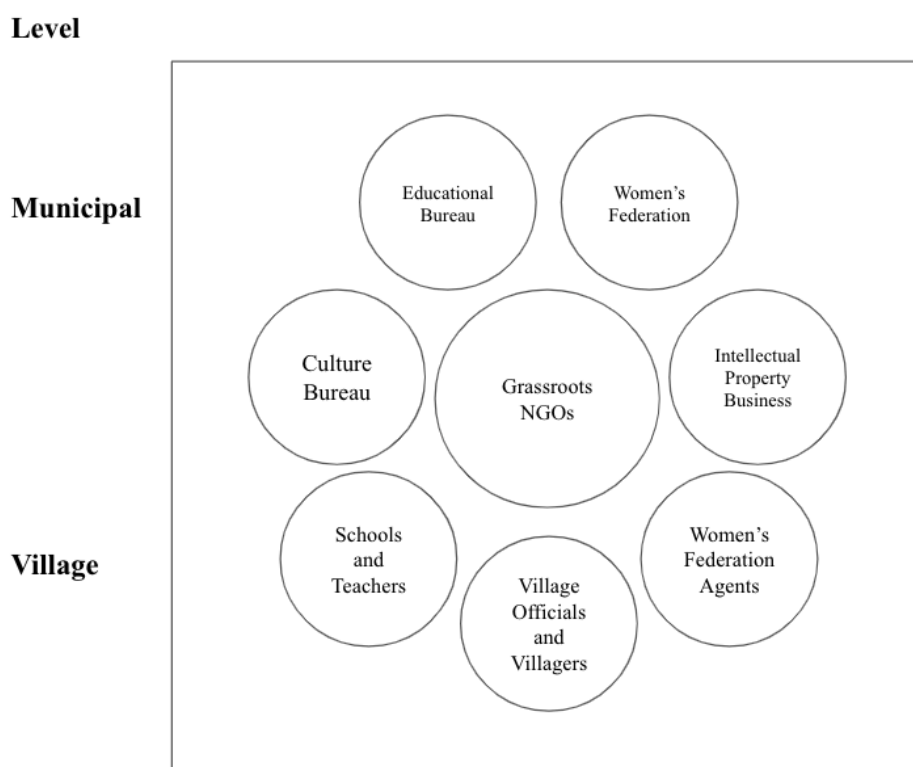
These cross-sector knowledge communities may function as 'boundary spanners' that build relationships across sectoral boundaries to address complex problems. Extending across borders—whether such borders delineate disciplines or the public-private divide—can build relationships to address complex problems, counteracting the tendency to fragment 'into silos of specialized knowledge and activity'(Casciaro & Lobo, 2005 p. 92). In this sense, such communities may be closer to Hasmath and Hsu's (2015) loose 'nebulous networks' than to the formalized and deliberate structures described in the majority of literature on epistemic communities. These informal groupings are nonetheless sustained over time and despite shifts in formal identity or institutional affiliation of members.

### ***Case B: Protecting minority culture***

A second example of a knowledge community emerging to influence policy demonstrates how a local problematic can draw local organizations, central authorities and academics into a collective process of investigation and policy advocacy. This effort was initiated by a grassroots NGO in Yunnan province concerned with the protection of ethnic minority culture. The group had spent significant energy and resources on collecting and recording traditional folk songs belonging to the local ethnic minority, particularly in languages in danger of being lost, and transmitting them to younger generations through education. While the issue was of great concern to a range of government and nonprofit actors, bureaucratic capacity and expertise to address it did not exist:

We think that...if we didn't do [this project], the Ministry of Culture is supposed to do it, but they don't have the time and energy. But our organization has culture specialists, language specialists, and teachers, so we achieve good results and are able to focus. For example, [this] issue, everyone sees that it is a problem and it is a great pity, but what to do about it, how to solve it? It is very difficult for one or two government departments. But for us, we can draw on a lot of different resources and bring different government officials to work on it.<sup>11</sup>

The complex and multi-disciplinary nature of this project meant that it required cooperation with a number of government departments. For example, the collection and recording of folksongs in surrounding villages by NGO staff, together with local government officials, involved coordination with Women's Federation agents at the grassroots, as well as county, township and village governments. With respect to content, the project involved the support of the Bureau of Culture and the Women's Federation. The Education Bureau was enlisted to help with dissemination of the recorded folksongs to schools and to train teachers to use produced materials. Finally, the question of how to secure the support and give due credit to ethnic minority community members and elders involved dialogue with the Intellectual Property Bureau. The NGO was able to involve officials of different levels and backgrounds in the project (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Case B Knowledge Community Membership and Structure**

<sup>11</sup> Interview Y158, NGO director. Yunnan, July 2010.

Especially in a fragmented bureaucracy, it can be challenging to achieve consensus around a policy issue and coordination between different government departments at the local level. It seems to be extremely difficult for horizontal linkages and coordination between government departments to occur without the intervention of a higher authority, even with a pressing and recognized issue such as the loss of ethnic minority culture. The resulting paralysis in this case could have been broken by a top-down mandate from the municipal or provincial government, but this was not forthcoming, perhaps because 'how to relate to the variety of cultural activities which are neither organized from above nor primarily driven by market forces' presents 'the largest cultural-ideological quandary facing the political elite' (Thøgerson, 2000 p. 136). The involvement of an NGO, bringing in financial resources as well as subject specialists to take the lead can be useful in legitimizing such 'folk culture.'

In this case, while the local NGO took the lead, and local officials became key members of the knowledge community, provincial and central academics and experts were also involved. Over time, through research and project implementation, the organization was able to construct a shared understanding of the issue and contribute to policy innovation.

### **Expertise and professionalism**

This second case illustrates how valuable non-scientific sources of authority can be for a state that lacks access to reliable information about conditions at the grassroots, with implications for the membership and constitution of knowledge communities.

Communities of practice are relatively broadly defined in membership, constituted by individuals engaged in collective learning about a shared domain of endeavor (Wenger, 1999). By contrast, epistemic communities, in Haas' original formulation, are more circumscribed in membership. However, while it is often assumed that epistemic communities are limited to scientific or technical groups, Haas was careful to note that what bonds epistemic communities is shared belief in the applicability of particular forms of knowledge or particular truths, not a scientific or technical profession or methodology (1992). What is critical if an epistemic community is to influence government, however, is that its presumptive knowledge is regarded as authoritative, which depends on the group's expertise as well as its reputation for impartiality (Haas, 1992). This has led to rather narrow definitional parameters based on certain assumptions about what constitutes 'authority' and 'expertise.' For some, authority is based in scientific objectivity: 'Regardless of affiliation, the members' authority derives from their articulation of causal beliefs that appear to external policymakers to be "scientifically objective"' (Drake & Nicolaidis, 1992 p. 39). Cross, however, argues for the validity of non-scientific sources of authority, suggesting that diplomats, judges, defense experts, high-ranking military officials, bankers and military lawyers, among others, all have equal claim to authoritative knowledge. Like scientists, these groups, '(1) share professional judgment on a policy issue, (2) weigh the validity of their policy goals in their area of expertise, (3) engage in a common set of practices with respect to the problem area with the goal of improving human welfare, and (4) share principled beliefs. There is no reason to assume that their shared expertise is

less reliable or influential' (2013 p. 18). For Cross, therefore, it is professionalism rather than science that holds epistemic communities together, facilitates consensus, and enables persuasion.

Others have suggested that contemporary social and environmental problems 'demand a community of all the experts, in which 'expert' is defined increasingly broadly.' Scientific knowledge can be seen as the contribution a particular social group (scientists), and not as 'an epistemologically superior understanding of the world' (Evans & Marvin, 2006 p. 1012). Scientific knowledge, while valuable, is insufficient to solve complex development challenges, and scientific framing may not be the right or only means conceptualizing those challenges. As noted by Evans and Marvin, local citizens, social movement organizations, planners and others all may have relevant and useful knowledge that could contribute to knowledge generation and should be shared. This opens up 'increasingly diverse and heterogenous forums for developing knowledge' (Evans & Marvin, 2006 p. 1012).

Haas himself noted that expertise is socially constructed. The power of epistemic communities to influence lies in their integrity and freedom from political interference (2004). Therefore, their influence results from the recognition and legitimation that society confers on them (Cross, 2013). In this sense, NGO practitioners, to the extent that they possess recognized expertise in a particular field, have the potential to join epistemic communities and seek to influence policy. Despite the observation that Chinese NGOs lack the professionalism to function as credible sources of expertise as a sector, they nonetheless seem to function as sources of expertise for policymakers (Ho, 2011; Teets, 2014).

Lang (2012) explains NGOs' valued expertise with reference to a unique source of legitimacy. She identifies four possible sources of legitimacy for NGOs in late modern public affairs: 1) a reputation of getting things done better, faster, and less bureaucratically than established institutions, 2) substantial field expertise and policy know-how that are invaluable for governance, 3) measurable management criteria of accountability and fiscal transparency, 4) legitimacy increase with representing a certain number of members. However, Lang suggests, that these are non-sufficient criteria for assessing NGO legitimacy. Instead, the most salient source of legitimacy is expertise *couched in public engagement*; that is, NGOs contribute invaluable expertise in policy arenas where governments or business lack resources or specific 'on the ground' knowledge. Critically, NGO legitimacy is therefore derived from the claim that 'without their specialized knowledge entering decision-making processes, political choices in democratic polities would be seriously limited.' Inclusion based on technical expertise alone would be insufficient: it would 'award the environmental NGO that fights greenhouse emissions the same legitimacy as a scientist working for a coal mining company' (p. 2). Instead, NGOs aim to represent not special interests, but underrepresented issues and affected constituents. Thus, NGOs' legitimacy is based not on technical issue expertise alone, but on their ability to provide grounded knowledge and voice to underrepresented interests.

In line with Lang's argument, we found that grassroots NGOs possess grounded knowledge of underrepresented interests, which is particularly valuable in a hierarchical bureaucracy that lacks reliable information about conditions at the grassroots

and values experimentation at the level of implementation. Knowledge generated at the grassroots has space to enter the Chinese policy process, making NGOs an important channel for experimentation, adaptation or localization of policy. NGOs working at the grassroots can serve as recognized expertise in this context. Such groups are familiar with needs and policy impacts on the ground in a way that higher officials may not be, or may not be well-positioned to express. They can also transmit information about how policy modifications can improve outcomes. This makes NGOs a valuable source of expertise in the Chinese context.

The expansion of expertise to include a broader range of potential constituents in epistemic communities does not imply, however, that any collective with a desired policy outcome can be considered an epistemic community. Many NGOs and activist groups are impelled by moral imperative rather than shared professional expertise (Cross, 2013), though distinguishing the two requires painstaking observation of the internal dynamics of the group and its aims. Many NGOs, for example, consider themselves charitable groups or providers of services; but groups in this study saw themselves as providers of services *in the context of* demonstrating policy alternatives to authorities, and as actors in a process of action-research or collective knowledge generation.

Part of the confusion arises from a perceived tension between passion and professionalism, which seems to exist in the discourse of Chinese NGOs themselves and which is reflected in the analysis of those who study them. NGOs, the reasoning goes, are staffed either by those immediately affected by an issue (rural women, HIV sufferers, the disabled, farmers) or by professionals. This has led to calls from the Chinese government and international NGOs that Chinese NGOs professionalize. This reasoning does not take into account the possibility that those at the front lines of an issue can and often do develop the expertise and professionalism necessary to take the organization to a higher level of functioning and to generate knowledge. This recent emphasis on professionalism in the Chinese NGO sector may have its roots central government's push to professionalize the bureaucracy at all levels. An over-emphasis on a superficial understanding of 'professionalism' also runs the risk of painting complex issues as purely technical problems that can be resolved by skilled technocrats. The concept of capacity in grassroots NGOs, in particular, can be broadened to encompass different types of capacities on which the strength of these organizations is built. As important as technocrats and experts are to the strength of the sector, there is also an argument to be made for NGO staff that can function as generalists in development, connected to local knowledge systems and power structures. This self-conception, held by a number of Chinese grassroots NGOs, calls for a broader delineation of expertise.

### ***Case C: Farmers experimenting with a new economic crop***

The final case presented here also demonstrates the boundary-spanning capacity of NGOs in initiating and furthering knowledge communities, but in this case, in addition to interdepartmental linkages, the community in question served to span state and society, incorporating social actors at the very grassroots into a process of knowledge generation.



The ability of NGOs to connect citizens and the state serves a useful function from the perspective of local government agencies. A significant portion of the workload of certain government departments involves carrying out 'investigations' (*diao cha*) of local socio-economic conditions, and, to some extent, public opinion. As administrative workloads increase, engagement with the grassroots decreases, making this difficult. Particularly for officials at administrative levels above the township, engagement with the grassroots is extremely limited. In the view of many interviewees, this is a gap that can be filled by grassroots NGOs, which can assist and empower officials. One NGO founder, for example, explained that local officials viewed their organization as an 'intermediary, a platform for government and common people' through which officials could understand the views of the common people and also promote their own work.<sup>12</sup>

In this case, a knowledge community emerged at the initiation of a local grassroots NGO that worked at the intersection of environment and women's development. The knowledge community incorporated farmers, local producers and local officials into knowledge generation around the production and processing of konjac, an economic crop new to the region.

This environmental NGO had been working in the rural areas surrounding a medium-sized city in Yunnan Province since 2007 and one particular village for several years, conducting training with local villagers and working with them to undertake collective activity to improve the environmental and economic conditions of the area. Initially, villagers chose to carry out simple, one-time activities but over time, the group's actions grew in complexity to address more challenging, long-term issues. The NGO used the idea of collectively exploring knowledge to orient the villagers' deliberations and activity, explaining that their project was about 'collectively seeking truth' about the 'path of true development.'<sup>13</sup> In this process, the NGO firmly positioned itself as a facilitator of knowledge application and generation for the community, rather than a provider of services, technological packages, or even information: 'Our program is an empowerment program, through education we aim to advance the community. So one thing we do well is that we do not tell people what to do, or give solutions to them. Instead we empower them. We are a catalyst to help them explore and think.'<sup>14</sup>

Essential to the emergence of knowledge communities is raising consciousness among participants about the role of knowledge in development. The NGO explicitly built an understanding in participants that they were able to and responsible for the generation of knowledge, rather than passive recipients of knowledge:

We will ask them within the training—is it only experts and scholars who can create knowledge? Or can we villagers do so as well? They will say 'We have no education (*wen hua*), we can't do this.' So together we will look at technical agricul-

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<sup>12</sup> Interview H260, NGO founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Interview Y229, NGO founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010

<sup>14</sup> Interview Y158, NGO founder and director. Yunnan, December 2018.

ture books and see that actually this knowledge often cannot be applied in our village. We will tell them: you have planted things in this soil for ten years, you are very clear what it is like, what grows in it. But we also connect this knowledge with knowledge from outside. We approach Agriculture Bureau and tell them that in our work we have come across such and such problem and need their help. The extension agents are very happy to come and look, they say it is red spiders and give us a certain medicine for it.

We ask the villagers: when we are sick where do we go? To the hospital. When our crops are sick where do we go? There is something called the Agriculture Bureau that has resources that can help us when our crops are diseased. How about when our animals are sick? We can go to the Animal Husbandry Bureau. This process helps villagers build confidence in their own knowledge and abilities, but also instills the habit of approaching the right departments to access resources and knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

On this basis, the NGO worked with villagers to identify new areas of development for the village. During one of the group's meetings in 2010, a villager shared her experience planting and harvesting a few konjac plants, which she sold for a high price in the local market. The other villagers showed enthusiasm about the idea, but as no one in the area had produced this new crop on large plots, a host of questions needed to be answered: where to buy seeds, how to plant, how to sell, how processing occurs, and how to manage this process. The NGO chose not to simply pass on results of their own online research. Instead, they encouraged everyone to think about how to solve the problems they had identified, thereby building the capacity of the villagers to identify the needs of the community and actively participate in planning and implementation. After considerable effort, the group found a konjac processing factory in the city, and selected 4 women representatives to visit the factory, consult with the factory director, and negotiate the price.<sup>16</sup> This visit catalyzed ongoing collaboration with the factory director and technicians, who provided free illustrated manuals about planting konjac, offered to conduct initial soil testing, and consulted with the women from time to time for troubleshooting. The NGO assisted the producers to meticulously record inputs and yields, in order to analyze these initial experiments in producing konjac.

Twelve villagers formed the initial group that decided to produce konjac. After a year and a half, a second group of villagers wanted to join and a seed-returning scheme was established to assist new producers. The NGO noted that the knowledge generated was diffused to an ever-widening circle of villagers.<sup>17</sup>

By 2016, fully 60% of the inhabitants of the village (about 105 households) were producing konjac and the women's collective exploration of a path toward eco-

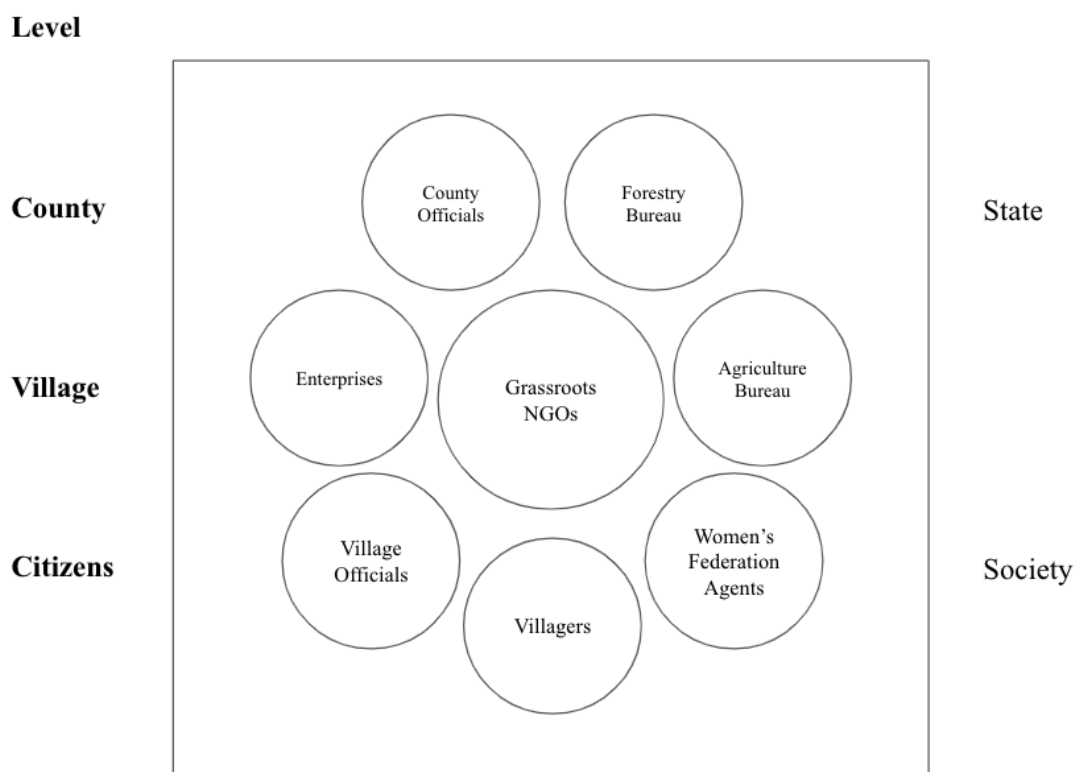
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<sup>15</sup> Interview Y158, NGO founder and director. Yunnan, December 2018.

<sup>16</sup> NGO internal report (2017), on file with author.

<sup>17</sup> NGO internal report (2017), on file with author.

conomic development had led the village to transition from monocultures of traditional crops to a diversified planting system incorporating economic crops such as konjac.<sup>18</sup> This widening community of practice grew to embrace not only the grassroots NGO and villagers, but also konjac processing plants, farmers from other villages, and eventually, local officials (see Figure 3). The knowledge applied and generated by this community surpassed that provided by any particular government agency. For example, while the Agriculture Bureau was able to provide general information and troubleshooting about agriculture, they lacked knowledge about the suitability of local conditions to certain crops and were unable to provide assistance with selling, distribution, or management. Specialized associations or collectives were not organized enough to provide assistance. Local government departments lacked knowledge of local conditions and interaction with villagers. The NGO founder explained that the NGO was able to integrate available resources (*zhenghe ziyuan*), enabling the various government departments and social organizations in the village to actually serve the villagers.<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 3: Case C Knowledge Community Membership and Structure**

<sup>18</sup> NGO internal report (2017), on file with author.

<sup>19</sup> Interview Y158, NGO founder and director. Yunnan, December 2018.

Thus, the integration of knowledge from different sources and its generation in response to local conditions was one of the functions carried out by the grassroots NGO and emerging knowledge community. Through demonstration effects, knowledge about the production and processing of new economic crops, as well as innovative approaches to rural development were diffused to local officials within and beyond the locality. While this case perhaps represents a knowledge community in its most loosely constructed and defined sense, it is useful in observing the diverse forms that knowledge generation and policy advocacy can take.

### **Knowledge generation**

In this case, the process of knowledge generation around a specific policy concern is illustrated and avenues for its diffusion into policy suggested. The role that NGOs play in catalyzing this process is also showcased.

The question of knowledge generation is central to the idea of knowledge communities and to the role of NGOs. For Gough and Shackley (2001), knowledge construction constitutes one of three broad areas of activity NGOs engage in, the other two being developing creative policy solutions and lobbying. Knowledge construction, for them, includes writing and producing research reports to shed light on new evidence. In this way, NGOs have the ability to bridge the 'lay-expert, activist-professional and local-global divides' (Hsu & Hasmath, 2017 p.13).

Knowledge production may also be a particularly important strategy for NGOs in the political context of China, due to the Party-state's emphasis on evidence-based policy making, espoused by Deng Xiaoping's 'seeking truth from facts' within a system of policy experimentation under hierarchy (Heilmann, 2008). Many NGOs use knowledge production and educating local authorities and the public about an issue to form strategic partnerships with the state. Educating authorities can include information dissemination or inviting officials to NGO workshops or training sessions, as well as research and knowledge production (Farid, 2019).

Nonetheless, as discussed earlier, initial explorations into the existence of communities of practice among Chinese NGOs have not found sufficient evidence to conclude that such communities exist, due largely to the perceived inability of such groups to generate knowledge. We suggest that observing knowledge communities and their role in policy can be facilitated by clarifying concepts central to understanding the diffusion and generation of knowledge in the Chinese context.

First, within the context of NGOs, knowledge generated to inform practice and knowledge produced to inform policy cannot be artificially separated. Globally, communities of practice and epistemic communities are both thought to generate knowledge, though they differ in the ways that knowledge production is organized (Cohendet et al., 2001). In epistemic communities, the emphasis is on the production of knowledge and its deliberate deployment in influencing policy. Epistemic communities are 'structured in order to deliberately produce new knowledge', while communities of practice are not. Communities of practice, on the other hand, develop new knowledge through actions 'and co-ordinate activities of individuals and groups in doing their real work as it is informed a particular organizational or group context' (Cook & Brown, 1999 p.386). In communities of practice, it is thought that

the focus is more on knowledge sharing that serves to then inform individual and collective practice. In the context of China, however, knowledge generated by NGOs, particularly grassroots NGOs, addresses both functions simultaneously. Knowledge that is produced is always shared and used to inform practice, but it is also shared more broadly, with publics and governments, in the hopes of effecting broader change.<sup>20</sup>

Second, how knowledge is theorized is closely linked to observations of knowledge production occurring around NGOs. Some effort has been made in the literature to expand the idea of epistemic communities beyond formal scientific communities to embrace professional knowledge or 'recognized authority', and truths of different forms, but the focus remains on 'high-status experts'. The underlying—valid—concern is to avoid equating all experience or opinion with 'knowledge'.

But information that can be useful to policymakers includes not only technical knowledge about the extent of real-world problems or about possible policy solutions, both of which are scarce under authoritarian rule, but also information about the political feasibility of policy solutions (Kingdon, 1984). Given the constraining role of collective action and protest for authoritarian regimes, scarce information about public receptivity to proposed policies, as well as information about conditions on the ground can prove valuable to policymakers.

Much of the literature on knowledge production by epistemic communities or in the service of policy influence by NGOs theorizes knowledge being produced in the form of written research reports or 'crafted policy documents.' By contrast, Subramaniam (2007) argues that knowledge construction is closely tied to the provision of resources and thus reinforces donor hegemony and Western notions of 'knowledge.' Indeed, the field of development studies has long embraced a broader conception of knowledge that includes not only reified modern, western, 'scientific' knowledge, but also indigenous knowledge, traditional knowledge, and knowledge generated at the grassroots by communities of individuals as they take action to address specific problems (Agrawal, 1995). At the same time, important critiques have been raised about dichotomously classifying knowledge into such categories as 'scientific' versus 'indigenous,' even in attempts to valorize both (Agrawal, 2002). Attempts by philosophers of science to definitively distinguish science from nonscience have largely failed (Kulka, 1977). Knowledge, is, after all, knowledge; it is generally the product of acting on the world and observation, generated by a community of minds, and subject to truth-tests. Therefore, this paper suggests a broader conception of knowledge production to include written documents aiming to influence policy, structured systems of knowledge that inform practice, experience transmitted orally and in written form through program materials or training documents, and insights and learning expressed in academic, government and community fora. Although the difference between knowledge production and knowledge generation deserves more exploration, we will use the term knowledge production to refer to the production of research reports and policy documents as generally conceptualized in the literature. Knowledge

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<sup>20</sup> See Farid, 2019 for discussion of the integration of service delivery and policy advocacy functions of NGOs.

generation, by contrast, has been used in a broader sense to encompass the generation of knowledge in a variety of forms and by a range of actors.

In this broader sense, our data shows that grassroots NGOs are very much engaged in knowledge generation. They discover and capture real knowledge on the ground, about how policies and practices interact with local reality. As the above case demonstrates, many grassroots NGOs engage in knowledge generation explicitly, consciously seeing themselves as centers of learning about the development of the community.

## CONCLUSION

Knowledge communities have the potential to shape policy and governance. They represent a model by which people can share, learn, and collaborate to generate knowledge, and through which that knowledge can be channeled to inform policy. Further, they represent an approach to policy advocacy that 'shift policymakers ideas underlying their conceptualization of a problem' rather than shifting their interests (Teets, 2018). Such an approach may be particularly relevant to political systems that lack formalized channels for political participation and to those in which those channels exist but do not function as intended.

This paper revisits the possibility that knowledge communities can be found in China and that they can play a role in policymaking. By drawing on strands of existing epistemic communities literature that expand the boundaries of what constitutes expertise and knowledge production and that recognize knowledge communities constituted by actors *across* the public-private divide, emerging knowledge communities can be observed in the three case studies examined. These three cases present knowledge communities of distinct forms. Such communities may be comprised of combinations of NGO staff, villagers, academics, and officials who interact around specific policy issues, generate knowledge and spur policy innovations. Within this context, NGOs have the ability to play an important role as localized centers for knowledge generation by connecting local knowledge with scientific and technical expertise from outside the community and by organizing and educating local populations. These cases highlight the porous nature of state-society boundaries, new forms of expertise and of knowledge generation. Examination of the three cases further shows that, although in all cases NGOs played significant roles in the generation of knowledge, the mechanisms by which these knowledge communities emerged and grew varied.

No conclusions can be drawn about the general prevalence of knowledge communities in China based on only three examples located in provinces that may be distinctive in local dynamics of policy making and the space available to grassroots NGOs to contribute to this process. The varied emergence mechanisms observed in the three cases, however, and the differing settings suggest a the need for further research both with regard to the prevalence of such knowledge communities, their impact on policy and the conditions that lead to their emergence.

Further, while these three case studies findings are grounded in the unique Chinese sociopolitical environment, the characteristics identified are found in a variety of political contexts and regime types. While much more extensive research

would be necessary to draw definitive conclusions, they suggest the possibility that, even in countries perceived not to have established channels for political participation, knowledge communities may provide a means whereby knowledge generated by grassroots actors can inform policy and 'speak truth to power.' A more accurate understanding of how knowledge about development is generated and how it interacts with power structures might widen the scope for participation and ownership by broader range of actors into shaping development policy.

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