

Government profiles as perceived by governments' NPO partners in Chinese social service delivery

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Abstract

Social services in China nowadays are increasingly coproduced by both government and non-profit organizations (NPOs). However, we still know little about how NPOs perceive their government partners in social service delivery. Using a Q methodology, this study remedies this gap and identifies three profiles – namely, government as a distant facilitator, government as a hands-off collaborator, and government as a prudent principal. Also, it has been found that two conditions – namely, NPOs' development stage and funding resources – influence their perceptions on government in social service delivery. These three profiles provide new insights into NPOs' perceptions of their government partners in social service delivery, and they add new building blocks to existing literature, specifically on the government–NPO relationship in China.

Keywords: government profile; non-profit organizations (NPOs); Q methodology; social service delivery; China

Introduction

Governing non-profit organizations (NPOs) present are a relatively new issue for Chinese governments. Since the emergence of NPOs in the 1990s, many scholars have followed the tradition of Western democracies and used the NPO concept (Saich, 2000).¹ Initially, their emergence resulted in substantial debates among scholars and practitioners around China (Hsu *et al.*, 2017), and the state generally undermined NPOs' legitimate status through registration control, legal sanctions, and supervision systems (Jing, 2015). Since 2000, the number of NPOs has increased explosively. By 2017, over 762,000 NPOs were officially registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA, 2017). Meanwhile,

the state acknowledged the difficulty of delivering satisfactory social services to citizens, and it started recognizing NPOs' potential to assist it in this endeavor. Following this, NPO legitimacy improved, and a large number of NPOs were engaged in the delivery of different types of social services, such as elder care, youth care, disability care, health, education, poverty alleviation, community construction, and environment protection (Hsu *et al.*, 2017). Most notably, NPOs were allowed to deliver social services through an outsourcing approach (Zhao *et al.*, 2016). Social services delivered by NPOs have proved mostly effective, and some authors contend that arguably a collaborative government–NPO relationship is emerging (Jing, 2015).

To date, a large number of studies have been conducted to examine Chinese governments' strategies, positions, and perceptions in governing NPOs (Jing, 2015; Kang and Heng, 2008; Saich, 2000). However, little is known about the perceptions held by NPOs about their government partners in social service delivery. NPOs' perceptions determine their strategies in interacting with governments. Some studies have provided insights into the perceptions held by NGOs in interacting with governments in social service delivery (Ho, 2007; Hsu *et al.*, 2017; Saich, 2000; Spires, 2019). However, these understandings are generally unsystematic and fragmented. This raises an interesting question: *How do Chinese NPOs perceive their government partners in delivering social services?* We apply a Q methodology to answer this question, thereby enabling us to understand NPOs' subjective perceptions of their government partners in delivering social services. Our study contributes to current literature through adding new building blocks to the government–NPO relationship specifically from the perspective of NPOs. It also provides insights for governments to achieve better outcomes in governing NPOs.

The remainder of this study is structured as follows. Relevant theories related to the government–NPO relationship are presented first. Then, case details regarding the engagement of NPOs in social service delivery are introduced. Following that, the analysis process and the analysis result are elaborated. Finally, conclusions and discussions are presented.

The relationship between government and NPOs

Various concepts have been developed by authors to characterize the government–NPO relationship in China. Among them, the civil society and the corporatist model are the two best known ones (Kang and Heng, 2008). However, both models have their limitations in comprehensively characterizing the government–NPO relationship in Chinese social service delivery. Moreover, other models have been proposed for studying the government–NPO relationship in China. Kang and Heng (2008), for instance, have developed a system of graduated control for managing the government–NPO relationship; this means that

governments apply a differential control strategy in governing NPOs based on their capacities to challenge the state and the values of the social services that they deliver. This model implicitly suggests that governments and NPOs have a unidirectional resource dependence relationship, and the former have sufficient discretion to take unilateral action, whereas NPOs play primarily a supplementary “odds and ends” role (Kang and Heng, 2008, p. 51). However, some scholars disagree with this and argue that governments and NPOs in China coexist with each other in a form of contingent symbiosis, entailing a mutually beneficial relationship (Spires, 2019).

Many scholars contend that the strategies applied by Chinese governments have evolved from direct involvement to indirect control (Hsu and Jiang, 2015). They suggest that governments increasingly apply various softer and incentive-based approaches to govern NPOs in the field of social service delivery (Jing, 2015). However, criticisms and doubts have been expressed by some authors. They argue that the state’s political suspicion of NPOs has not changed radically over the past few decades, and its newly developed rules are essentially a political tool for repressing rather than facilitating the growth of NPOs (Spires, 2019). Moreover, the state always tends to unilaterally impose its decisions on NPOs, making meaningful government–NPO collaboration highly unlikely.

Furthermore, some studies provide insights into the strategies applied by NPOs in coping with government interventions in China (Hsu *et al.*, 2017; Saich, 2000). Ho (2007) has acknowledged embeddedness as a potential strategy applied by NPOs; this implies that they mostly take non-confrontable actions in interactions with governments. Moreover, NPOs in China often have limited resources to support their survival and growth, and they have to spend most of their time garnering resources through organizing fundraising campaigns, writing grant applications, fostering trust relationships with government agencies, cooperating with local agents, and recruiting volunteers (Hsu and Jiang, 2015). Generally, they have no intention of weakening or replacing the state. Rather, they mainly aim to help it to better assume its responsibilities. In other words, they are more interested in establishing collaboration relationships with the state than in maintaining their organizational autonomy. Likewise, it has been found that charitable NPOs resist a dominant power, but this, however, has little relation with governments’ regulation systems. Instead, such NPOs highlight individual, cultural aspects and challenge neoliberal discourses on NPOs that emphasize efficiency, accountability, and professionalism. Furthermore, some scholars argue that NPOs have their own tactics to evade tight government controls, and they can apply a negotiation strategy to interact with governments to gain extra space for their survival and growth (Saich, 2000). One example is that, for their survival, they strategically exploit the differences of opinion among various levels of governments.

NPOs in Chinese social service delivery

NPO engagement in social service delivery

Nowadays, NPOs function in a broad range of fields in China, and two notable examples are social service organizations and policy advocacy by environmental NPOs (Ho, 2007; Jing, 2015). In this study, we are interested mainly in social service organizations. In the following, NPOs refer primarily to them. It is estimated that social service organizations account for half of all NPOs in China (Zhao *et al.*, 2016). They deliver social services mostly through an outsourcing approach. As early as 1995, Shanghai municipality piloted the outsourcing approach, following which Beijing and Nanjing joined that trend. Since the late 2000s, outsourcing has become a popular social service provision approach around China. In 2012, central government invested over 0.2 bn RMB to fund the outsourcing of social services. In 2013, the State Council issued the *Guideline on Governments to Purchase Social Services to NPOs*. Since then, more and more local governments have implemented the outsourcing approach in social service delivery.

The governance of NPOs in China

In the 1990s, the Chinese state imposed strict regulations on NPOs with the aim of avoiding potential political instability. At that stage, the democratic claims of NPOs were strictly controlled (Kang and Heng, 2008). In 1998, the *Regulation on the Registration and Management of NPOs* clearly decreed that all NPOs in China had to register with government agencies and that they had to have a supervisory agency (*zhuguan danwei*) (Saich, 2000). This agency supervised the NPOs' day-to-day functions and ensured that no illegal activities took place. This approach was widely known as a *dual administrative system*, which demanded that NPOs establish connections with government agencies for their registration, and a negative consequence is that the number of NPOs has been significantly reduced (Teets, 2014). However, the situation changed in 2000. The state withdrew from its previously dominant role in social service delivery, and it now expects NPOs to function as its *helpful assistants* in social service delivery. Moreover, the resolution of various complex societal issues, such as poverty, education, elder care, environmental protection, and domestic immigration, requires governments to assume more responsibilities, and governments pragmatically use NPOs to help them to address these issues (Saich, 2000). In 2006, central government recognized the importance of NPOs and further strengthened their functions in providing social services. In 2007, it established social construction (*shehui jianshe*) as a government task equal in importance to political, economic, and cultural construction. The state has thereby explicitly indicated that NPOs should play a much more active role in social service delivery. In 2013, the state further emphasized the importance

of NPOs' role by proposing that NPOs should work with political and administrative organizations to advance deliberative democracy. Meanwhile, central government abolished the dual administrative system for certain types of NPOs (such as charitable organizations and community service organizations). This implies that many NPOs can register directly with government and do not need to be affiliated to a supervisory agency. However, NPO development in China is still highly reliant on the government, especially for fundraising and reputational support.

Method

In this study, a Q methodology is applied to analyze the perceptions held by NPOs about their government partners in delivering social services. This method has been widely applied by scholars to study the subjective perceptions of various actors involved in governance processes (Jeffares and Skelcher, 2011; Klijn *et al.*, 2016; Li and Qiu, 2020). In short, it asks respondents to sort a set of statements (a Q set) into a distribution of preference (a Q sort). Statistically significant factors can be identified in this distribution, and they are interpreted by authors (Watts and Stenner, 2012). It combines the advantages of both the qualitative approach and the quantitative approach, and enables researchers to identify emergent discourses related to a topic, as in-depth interviews do. A key advantage compared to in-depth interviews is that it allows researchers to conduct a structured factor analysis, and the analysis process is transparent and could be replicated by other researchers. A potential limitation is that its conclusions might not be generalizable to other contexts. In this study, we aim to systematically examine NPOs' perceptions of their government partners in delivering social services. The use of Q methodology in this study follows four steps based on McKeown and Thomas's (2013) suggestions.

Q set

Q methodology requires researchers to present a set of statements about a specific topic – in this case, Chinese NPOs' perceptions of their government partners in social service delivery. These statements are called a Q set, which should capture the diversity of the debate and cover a topic's whole spectrum (Jeffares and Skelcher, 2011). A Q set is derived from the concourse of debate in relation to a topic, and it can be established through different approaches, such as interviews, focus groups, or academic discourse (Watts and Stenner, 2012). In this study, we developed our Q set through two approaches: a literature review and a focus group. We first intensively reviewed relevant literature about the government–NPO relationship, the governance of NPOs, and strategies applied by NPOs to cope with government interventions.

In September 2019, we organized a focus group, attended by five managers of NPOs involved in social services in Yuhua district. We identified these five respondents through an earlier connection who worked in a service center that specifically provides consultation, training, and incubation services for NPOs in Yuhua district. Of the five respondents, three are from relatively well-developed NPOs that provide a range of social services, such as consultation, training, elder care, community development, and program design, and two are from under-developed NPOs that primarily provide elder care services. These five respondents all have at least three years' working experience, and they have many opportunities to interact with officials in social service delivery. They were therefore able to provide substantial valuable insights into governments. In this focus group, we asked them to openly express their opinions and perceptions regarding their motivations to participate in NPOs, their tasks and responsibilities in their daily work, their interactions with governments, and their ambitions and future plans. This focus group lasted over two hours and the process was recorded and transcribed.

We further sorted the statements into a 3×3 grid. This procedure reduced the number of statements, thereby allowing respondents to sort them in a relatively easy way. Moreover, this enabled us to safeguard the diversity of debate. Our study follows the statement-sampling approach originally developed by Dryzek and Berejikian (1993), which has later been applied by many other researchers, such as Jeffares and Skelcher (2011), Li and Qiu (2020), and Klijn *et al.* (2016). On the horizontal axis, the grid includes three types of statements: motivations, tasks/ambitions, and relationships. On the vertical axis, the grid covers three types of statement: designative, evaluative, and advocative. We retained three statements in each cell, and we finally had 27 statements. Details of the statements are shown in Table 1.

P sample

Once the Q set is established, it is then necessary to choose respondents to sort the statements. The main aim of the Q methodology is to characterize the diversity of perceptions in a given population rather than the “demographic correlates of such opinions” (McKeown and Thomas, 2013, p. 32). Often, the number of respondents ranges from 25 to 40 (Watts and Stenner, 2012).

In this study, we focus on social service organizations in Yuhua district in Nanjing city primarily due to three reasons. First, Yuhua district is reputable for its good quality of local governance. In 2014, it has already been established as the “National Community Governance and Service Innovation Experiment Zone” by the Ministry of Civil Affairs. This award was widely regarded as the most reputable and prestigious award in Chinese local governance. In 2018, it was granted that award for a second time, which further showed that Yuhua district has played a leading role in Chinese local governance. The

TABLE 1. The 27 statements regarding the perceptions of NPOs on their government partners in social service delivery

	Motivations	Tasks/ambitions	Relationships
Designative	1. Working here enables us to develop many skills. 2. Feeling of love is an important reason for us to join in NPOs. 3. We come here because the worldviews of NPOs attract us.	4. It is government's (not our) responsibilities to provide social services to its citizens. 5. NPOs could fill in the gaps left by government. 6. Our daily work is overly under-paid.	7. We have to establish a good relationship with governments for our survival. 8. Too many government agencies are involved in managing NPOs. 9. Governments do not have a clear orientation about NPOs' future development.
Evaluative	10. NPO is a promising field. 11. Survival is our first priority. 12. It is a concern that many younger people are reluctant to join us.	13. Governments need us to help them to fulfill their responsibilities. 14. We could judge the performance of government. 15. We assume too many extra tasks that should not be taken by us.	16. The power relationship between governments and NPOs is highly asymmetric. 17. NPOs in China are congenitally deficient since they are outputs of government designs. 18. Developing a strong social organization still has a long way to go.
Advocative	19. Governments should provide more support (especially funding) to us. 20. We need more autonomy and discretions for better development. 21. The sustainability of NPOs should be treated seriously.	22. NPOs should diversify their funding resources. 23. Transforming into social enterprises is our main goal. 24. Social service marketization is a trend we are supposed to support.	25. Governments and NPOs should collaborate with each other to deliver satisfactory social services. 26. More institutions should be developed to protect our rights and interests. 27. Governments and citizens should respect us.

collaboration between governments and NPOs in social service delivery is an important feature of Chinese local governance, and this means that local government in Yuhua district has developed a stable relationship with NPOs. Social service organizations are often registered social service units with some political connections with Yuhua district governments. They as such are a good option for us to investigate NPOs' perspectives on governments. Second, Yuhua district has the largest number of NPOs in delivering social services compared to other districts in Nanjing. In Yuhua district, the number of registered NPOs has increased from 200 in 2016 to 1010 in 2018. It has been proposed that there would be 2000 registered NPOs in 2020, and every individual residential community would contain at least 15 registered NPOs in 2020. Among them, social service organizations would account for 30-40 percent of all registered NPOs. As such, it is possible for us to choose NPOs that provide different types of social services and investigate their perceptions on governments. Third, many NPOs have experiences to collaborate with Yuhua district government to provide social services. Every year, Yuhua district government invested over 5 million RMB for funding outsourcing social services. NPOs were actively engaged in service bidding, and the services they provide range from elder care, youth care, psychological counselling, disability care, social worker training, to community construction. Hence, this would allow us to understand the perspectives of various types of NPOs on their government partners in social service delivery.

Our Q sample consists of 33 respondents. Details regarding the selection of respondents are presented in the following section. Among the 33 respondents, 17 have over 4 years' experience working in NPOs, and they are all currently engaged in the delivery of social services in Yuhua district. The services that they provide include elder care, youth care and education, community development, and poverty alleviation. Moreover, 13 of the studied NPOs provide different types of social services. The details regarding the types of social services provided by NPOs investigated in this study are presented in Figure 1.

Q sorting

The Q sorting process asks respondents to sort the 27 statements into seven piles that represent seven degrees ranging from *most agree* (+3) to *least agree* (-3). Our respondents were requested to place a certain number of statements in each pile; the response grid is presented in Appendix 1. At the end of the survey, respondents could give reflections on why they had chosen specific statements with which they agreed most and least. Their comments were all recorded and used in the interpretation of the analysis result. In this study, our Q sorting process had two stages. In the first stage, in October 2019, the Civil Affairs Bureau of Yuhua district organized a one-day workshop for staff working in NPOs who provide social services in Yuhua district, and our second author was invited to give a lecture there.² We were allowed to submit our paper survey

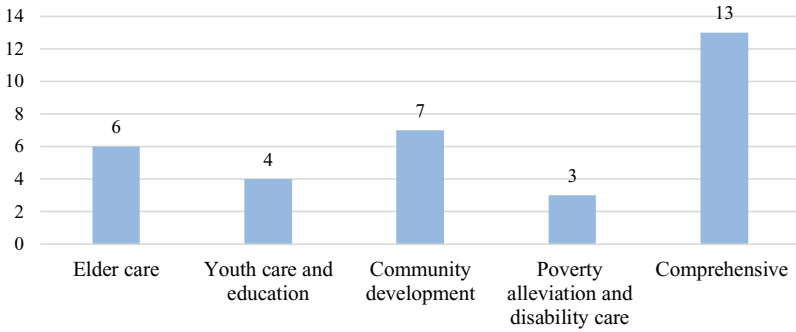


FIGURE 1. Service fields of participant NPOs

face-to-face to those attendees. About 30 respondents attended this workshop, and we finally collected 22 valid Q sorts. Some respondents failed to complete the survey or numbers were repeated in their sorting grid. We conducted our second round of data collection between February and March 2020 through the best-known social media, WeChat. We first contacted one of our earlier connections. She is a manager of an influential NPO registered in Yuhua district that is responsible for providing consultation, education, and training services for over 60 NPOs. She is familiar with NPOs that provide social services in Yuhua district. We asked her to intentionally select NPOs that deliver different types of social services. Over 25 respondents were invited by her to finish our survey. Sixteen of them completed it, but 5 were invalid. In the end, we had a total of 33 valid Q sorts.

Q sort analysis

After collecting the Q sorts, the researchers conduct the Q sort analysis. In short, the Q sorts are analysed through a by-person factor analysis (Watts and Stenner, 2012). The Q sort analysis in this study was conducted through the qmethod package (Zabala, 2014). The package first correlates all the sortings and clusters respondents who have sorted the statements similarly. After that, it indicates the Q sorts that load significantly on a certain factor. The magnitude of the factor loading in the Q methodology determines the degree to which respondents are associated with each factor. Two criteria are used to establish the participants who are flagged for a varimax rotation in order to maximize the loading in each factor. The first is that the loading has to be significantly high, and the significance threshold for a p-value $<.05$ is established. The second is that a factor's square loading should be higher than the sum of the square loadings for all other factors (Zabala, 2014). The details of the participants' loading by factor are presented in Appendix 2. Finally, researchers have to identify the number of factors for rotation. Several criteria are taken into account in determining the number of factors, such as the variability explained, correlation

TABLE 2. The detailed statistical information of three government profiles in social service delivery

	Profile 1	Profile 2	Profile 3
Average reliability coefficient	0.8	0.8	0.8
Number of loading Q-sorts	13	10	6
Eigenvalues	7.3	7.2	4.6
Percentage of explained variance	22	22	14
Composite reliability	0.98	0.98	0.96

between factors, and explanatory power (Watts and Stenner, 2012). We selected three factors for rotation, and they all satisfy the widely accepted criteria: eigenvalues exceeding one, and two or more respondents loading significantly on each factor (Watts and Stenner, 2012). Moreover, the fourth factor does not increase the number of loading Q sorts. Of the 33 respondents, 29 had a loading on one of the three factors.

Results

The detailed statistical information for the three factors is presented in Table 2. It can be seen that the eigenvalues of the three factors are 7.3, 7.2, and 4.6, respectively, and the total explained variance is 58. This means that over 50% of studied variances have been explained, and this meets the common criteria of studies using the Q methodology (Zabala, 2014). The three factors that emerged in our analysis represent three different types of government profiles formulated by NPOs in social service delivery. They are: government as a distant facilitator, government as a hands-off collaborator, and government as a prudent principal. Details of three government profiles are elaborated below.

Profile 1: Government as a distant facilitator

We label the first government profile as a distant facilitator. Thirteen respondents load on this profile. It implies that governments primarily play a metagovernor role in social service delivery and focus their attention on providing a facilitative and enabling environment for the development of NPOs. NPOs do not have a clear vision for their development and they mostly follow government interventions.

Respondents with this profile recognize that NPOs are in their early development stage and still face many difficulties (S.18; S.21).³ They disagree that the marketization of social services is an appropriate option for NPOs to achieve their development (S.23; S.24). As respondent 2 stated, “the marketization (of social services) is not a feasible strategy for the development of NPOs as it would damage their charity natures.” Often, respondents seem to be confused

about the future development of NPOs in the Chinese context, as they fail to develop clear visions on it. As argued by respondent 16, “NPOs in China face many constraints and we still do not know how to achieve better development”.

Moreover, respondents with this profile believe that NPOs do not necessarily please governments because they are mutually dependent (S.7; S.25). Two respondents agreed that NPOs, government, and private organizations are essentially three different types of organizational forms. They should be collaborative, equal, and mutually dependent (respondent 22; respondent 33). Similarly, respondent 24 insisted on the differences between NPOs and governments, maintaining that “NPOs have their own missions and worldviews. They should assume their own responsibilities in societal development.” She suggested the complementary nature of NPOs in social service delivery and stressed that “we NPOs own professional knowledge and skills, and we are helpful in providing citizens with tailor-made social services Because we can provide highly professional social services, we are able to close the relationship between governments and citizens.”

This profile implies that the power disparity between governments and NPOs is taken as a given, and it is not a big issue to be addressed (S.16). Respondents generally agree that government interventions are crucially important for the development of NPOs, although these interventions should be facilitative and enabling oriented. An implication is that governments should provide the necessary resources, establish institutions, and provide funding to facilitate the development of NPOs (S.19; S.26). Two respondents emphasized the importance of institutional designs in facilitating the development of NPOs, and they hoped that governments would develop appropriate rules to clarify the boundaries between governments and NPOs (respondent 2; respondent 17). As respondent 4 suggested, “institutions are norms. Generally speaking, NPOs in China are at their early development stage. It is quite important for governments to develop [facilitative] rules and institutions to promote their stable development.” Likewise, respondent 27 complained that “many officials have little experience in collaborating with NPOs, and they are unfamiliar with governments’ functions and responsibilities [in governing NPOs]. So, it is imperative [for governments] to develop institutions to clarify governments’ roles and functions for guaranteeing the rights of NPOs.” Furthermore, this profile implies that government interventions are mostly well followed by NPOs, although it shows that too many government interventions might be problematic (S.15). Respondent 22 explicitly stated that “the contract we signed with governments has decreed that we are not allowed to use government funding to pay our staff’s salary. However, the delivery of social services requires personnel. Governments have got used to the tradition of NPOs providing social services free. The tricky issue for us is how to pay our staff’s salary for their delivery of social services?” In the same fashion, respondent 2 believed that government interventions should be

moderate, and “too many [interventions] would damage the autonomy of NPOs, which in turn might negatively influence NPOs’ effectiveness in delivering social services.”

Profile 2: Government as a hands-off partner

We label the second government profile as a hands-off partner. Ten respondents load on this profile. This profile implies that governments are essentially NPOs’ collaborators and they adopt a hands-off governance style in managing NPOs. NPOs believe that the NPO is promising and they feel it quite necessary to improve their self-reliant capabilities.

This profile shows that working in NPOs is highly beneficial (S.1). Two respondents confidently pointed out that they have learned many new skills while working in NPOs (respondent 13; respondent 25). As respondent 3 stated, “we have limited personnel, and we need to successfully manage different skills and competencies for accomplishing our tasks.” Respondent 32 agreed with this and argued that “we have to play multiple roles in providing social services. It is quite necessary for us to be familiar with related national policies and improve our professional and even research capabilities.”

At first glance, this profile seems to demonstrate conflicting positions regarding the current development of NPOs in China (S.6; S.11; S.12; S.10; S.18). However, our respondents were mostly rather positive about future NPO development (respondent 14; respondent 18). As respondent 14 explicitly stated, “related government policies on NPOs have become much more facilitative, and social recognition of NPOs is increasing. So, it is promising to work in NPOs.” Respondent 28 held a similar position, adding that “NPOs currently are at their early development stage, and many residents still do not enjoy any social services provided by them. NPOs in the future will become much more professional and they must be promising.” Moreover, respondent 3 claimed that “our organization is relatively well-developed, and survival is not our priority any more. We could design and implement new social service programs by ourselves and we have a high level of discretion. We enjoy this.”

Different from profile 1, profile 2 implies that it is not governments’ responsibility to provide facilitative conditions for the development of NPOs. Rather, it strongly emphasizes the importance of self-governing by NPOs (S.20). This suggests that governments should apply a hands-off style in governing their NPO partners and leave sufficient room for their autonomy and discretion. Interestingly, our respondents pragmatically avoided talking a lot about NPOs’ autonomy and discretion. Instead, they reframed their dominant value as self-reliance. As explicitly concluded by respondent 19, “the development and self-governing of NPOs ultimately relies on their self-reliant capabilities”. Likewise, respondent 3 stressed that “competence is an important precondition

to provide citizens with satisfactory social services. We should improve our own skills and capabilities and update our knowledge to better serve the public.”

Like profile 1, profile 2 shows that NPOs do not necessarily please governments (S.7; S.25), as they are mutually dependent, and governments currently need NPOs to better provide social services (S.13). A key difference of profile 2 from profile 1 is that the former indicates that the power disparity between governments and NPOs is an issue to be resolved. It essentially suggests that governments and NPOs are equal, and NPOs are not the subordinate of governments; they collaborate in social service delivery although their collaboration faces some challenges. As respondent 20 complained, “government generally is not a qualified collaborator, and it mostly views NPOs as its subordinate, or it even ignores us occasionally. There are few genuine government–NPO collaborations [in social service delivery].” Respondent 31 held a similar viewpoint, adding that “if governments do not change their top-down governance style in delivering social services, it will be difficult to fully exploit NPOs’ potential.”

Profile 3: Government as a prudent principal

We label the third government profile as a prudent principal. Six respondents load on this profile. It implies that governments are still the dominant player in social service delivery. They often have a low level of trust in NPOs, and they are rather prudent in promoting NPO development. NPOs are highly reliant on governments, and they tend to embed with the existing political and administrative system for their survival.

This profile shows that NPOs are underpaid (S.6), and survival is their first priority (S.11). Also, the marketization of services and the transformation toward social enterprises might not be helpful for them to resolve their survival issue (S.24; S.25). Hence, this profile does not imply that NPO is a promising field (S.10). Respondent 23 stated that “NPOs nowadays face many difficulties for their survival, and many of them have ceased. Incubating an NPO demands substantial investment, and it is a waste of resources if so many NPOs close down. If there is no room for the sustainable development of NPOs, the whole [NPO] industry will be destined to fail.” Similarly, respondent 29 suggested that “social services provided by NPOs nowadays are very underpaid. Because they have little funding, they thus face difficulties in attracting talented and competent persons to work [in NPOs]. So, no survival, no charity. Although an explosive number of NPOs have emerged in China, few of them could sustain.” Respondent 30 held an identical viewpoint, further adding that “NPOs are helpful for governments in resolving societal challenges, and if they could not survive, they would not have any opportunities to resolve them”.

Although this profile implies that NPOs have the potential to remedy the gaps left by governments in delivering social services, they play mainly supporting roles (S.5; S.14). Different from profile 2, this profile seems to show that

power disparity is not an issue to be addressed, and embeddedness is regarded as a strategy applied by NPOs in dealing with this. As respondent 5 pointed out, “NPOs are [too] weak, and they could only be engaged in it [delivering social services]. They could not play deterministic roles [in designing and planning social service programs] and could play only supporting roles. They have to maintain a good relationship with governments.”

Moreover, this profile implies that existing institutional designs do not provide a facilitative environment for the development of NPOs (S.26). As several of our respondents contended, governments often have a rather prudent attitude to NPOs, and they are mostly hesitant to promote the development of NPOs (respondent 8; respondent 12; respondent 29). Respondent 29 suggested that “for a long period of time, governments in China seem to be reluctant to support the growth of NPOs, and many institutional constraints have been developed to regulate them. The potentials of NPOs could not be fully exploited. Governments should learn to accept the development and growth of NPOs, and learn to trust them.”

Discussion

The factor scores of the 27 statements for the three government profiles are presented in Appendix 3, and the correlations of the three government profiles are presented in Appendix 4. Their z-scores are presented in Figure 2. A key similarity of the three government profiles is that they all imply that NPOs have a pragmatic attitude toward the Chinese state – that is, they avoid challenging governments’ positions. This corresponds well with the conclusions of many authors (Jing, 2015; Kang and Heng, 2008; Saich, 2000). The key differences in the three government profiles are presented in Table 3. It is noted that the dominant values for NPOs – a functional relationship with government, strategies for coping with government interventions, attitudes on the development of NPOs, and attitudes on power disparity – are the key dimensions that characterize a certain government profile. For instance, regarding the relationship between government as a distant facilitator and the confusion about the development of NPOs, the former is the discourse that we identified, and the latter is the dimension that characterizes it. This implies that, when NPOs view their government partner as a distant facilitator, they feel confused about their development. Likewise, the relationship between a hands-off partner and promising and self-reliant NPOs is also highly related. This implies that, when NPOs view government as a hands-off partner, they see NPOs as a promising field and believe that NPOs should improve their self-reliant capabilities.

Moreover, we further discussed three points. First, our study has found that reframing has been strategically applied by Chinese NPOs to gain some room for negotiating with governments. Some NPOs studied have learned to use

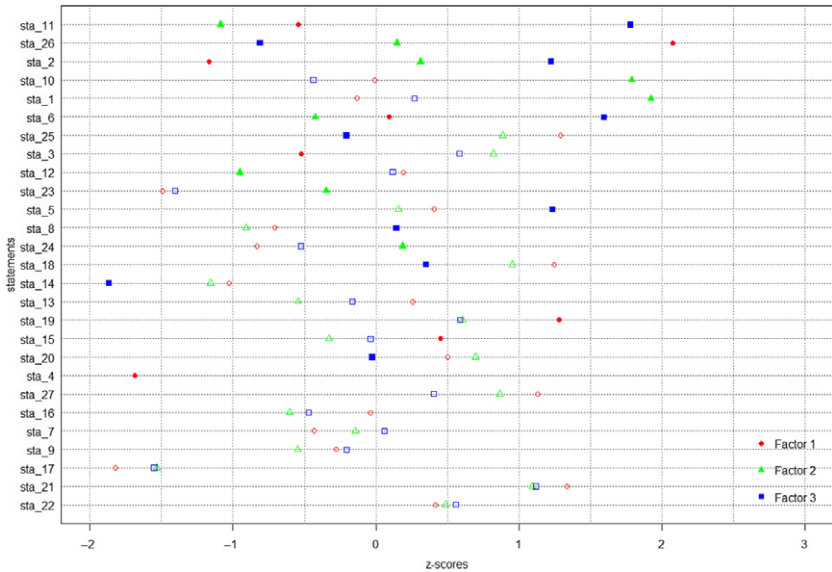


FIGURE 2. The z-scores of 27 statements for three government profiles

framing as a strategy in interacting with governments, and they reframe their goal of seeking autonomy as seeking self-reliance. This strategy has a strong connection with the second government profile identified in this study, hands-off partner. The NPOs that view their government partner as a hands-off collaborator always face difficulties in establishing an equal collaborative relationship with that government. Seeking self-reliance makes it possible for them to put themselves in a politically safe position to achieve autonomy.

Second, the three government profiles vary in the degree of government intervention. The first government profile, distant facilitator, favors limited and 'soft' government interventions. It essentially suggests that government should maintain some distance from NPOs and that government should intervene only when needed. The second government profile, hands-off collaborator, demands as little government intervention as possible and suggests leaving sufficient room for the self-organizing and autonomy of NPOs. The third government profile, prudent principal, favors a hands-on governance style, implying that governments should maintain a close eye on the operations and growth of NPOs.

Third, our study has shown that the governance of NPOs in China is shaped primarily by two institutional logics: promotion and control. On the one hand, Chinese governments use NPOs instrumentally as their partners to achieve better social service delivery, thereby implicitly promoting the expansion of NPOs. In our study, we have found that all three government profiles agree that NPOs could play some roles (supplementary or complementary) in social service delivery. On the other hand, control of NPOs is highly emphasized in China;

TABLE 3. Key differences of three government profiles in Chinese social service delivery

	Profile 1	Profile 2	Profile 3
Perspective on government	Distant facilitator	Hands-off collaborator	Prudent principal
Dominant values for NPOs	Development	Self-reliant	Survival
Functional relationship with government	Complement	Complement	Supplement
Strategies in coping with government intervention	Following	Reframing	Embedding
Attitudes on development of NPOs	Confusing	Promising	Gloomy
Attitudes on power disparity	Not a big issue	An issue	Not an issue at all

governments often use direct or indirect control mechanisms to guide NPOs to return to a more service-oriented path and away from political activities (Kang and Heng, 2008). Control will always be a priority for Chinese governments in governing NPOs, although their styles differ. NPOs, however, have different positions on the use of government control in social service delivery. Some view it as not a problem, whereas others may view it as an issue to be handled. We argue that these two institutional logics – namely, promotion and control – are key determinants that shape the development of NPOs in China (Anheier and Salamon, 2006).

Conclusions

Although many studies have been conducted to analyze strategies, governance styles, and perceptions of the Chinese state in governing NPOs, we still know little about how NPOs perceive their government partners in delivering social services. In this study, we apply a Q methodology to investigate this issue, and we finally identify three government profiles perceived by NPOs. The first profile is that of government as a distant facilitator. This means that NPOs believe that governments primarily provide necessary resources and develop a facilitative environment for NPOs' development. In our case, several respondents agree that government interventions are necessary, but they must be maintained at a moderate level. The second profile is that of government as a hands-off collaborator. This means that government and NPOs are mutually dependent, and governments leave sufficient room for NPOs' autonomy and discretion. Interestingly, our respondents pragmatically reframed their dominant value as self-reliance given the potential political risks involved in seeking autonomy and self-governance. The third profile is that of government as a prudent principal. This means that governments dominate public service delivery, and they are often hesitant to authentically promote the development of NPOs. In our case, several respondents complained that governments always closely monitor the development of NPOs and they tend to limit this through institutional designs. NPOs try their best to embed into existing political and administrations systems and spend substantial time and energy developing a good relationship with governments for their survival.

In general, our study has shown that social service NPOs hold mostly a cooperative position on Chinese governments and focus their attention on providing high quality social services. This may differ from practices in many Western democracies (such as North America or Europe), where NPOs assume not only a service provider role, but also a polity role as civil society builders (Anheier and Salamon, 2006). NPOs in many Western democracies may act confrontationally with the aim of changing government policies or promoting democratization (Lee and Haque, 2006). Practices in countries and regions with strong state traditions may also differ from those pertaining in China. In

Singapore for instance, social services are provided predominantly by government-funded NPOs. NPOs view governments mostly as distant facilitators that are responsible for providing guidelines and developing frameworks to regulate and monitor the conduct of NPOs. In Hong Kong, welfare NPOs funded by government focus mainly on service delivery nowadays. They have seldom practiced policy advocacy and interest articulation since the subsidy system reform in the 2000s. Both a hands-off collaborator perspective and a distant facilitator perspective may prevail there.

Moreover, the literature has suggested that various conditions may exert an influence on NPOs' perceptions on their government partners in social service delivery, such as the policy design of welfare contracting, social origin, connections of the founders with governments, and financial sources (Anheier and Salamon 2006; Hsu and Jiang, 2015; Wen, 2017; Zhao *et al.*, 2016). Although many authors have implicitly shown that all these conditions may influence NGOs' perceptions of their government partners, they fail to clearly develop theoretical arguments and assumptions. In other words, we still do not know in what ways these conditions shape NPOs' perceptions of their government partners. In our study, we have remedied this limitation; we not only identify two relevant conditions, but also establish theoretical assumptions between two conditions and NPOs' perceptions of governments. The first relates to the development stage of NPOs. When NPOs are well developed, they tend to expect their government partners to maintain a distance from them and leave some room for their self-organization. They are thus more likely to have a distant facilitator or a hands-off collaborator perception. However, some NPOs are under-developed. They have to embed themselves with governments for survival and tend to view government as prudent principals. The second reason relates to NPOs' funding resources. When NPOs have many different funding resources, they have a low level of reliance on government. They ask for fewer interventions from government and attempt to achieve self-reliance. A hands-off collaborator perspective or a distant facilitator perspective thus may dominate. If NPOs have limited funding resources, they tend to view government as a prudent principal. To sum up, our study has shown that NPOs in a well-developed stage and with diverse funding resources tend to view their government partners as distant facilitators or hands-off collaborators. When they are not well developed and have limited funding resources, they tend to view their government partners as prudent principals.

Furthermore, our study has three practical implications for governments and NPOs. We first suggest that governments should learn to play a metagovernor role in social service delivery. Metagovernance generally requires long-distance steering and favors facilitation, serving, enabling, and sponsoring (Li and Qiu, 2020). Chinese governments should maintain a moderate level of intervention and focus their attention on developing rules, resolving conflicts, and creating a facilitative environment to guarantee NPOs' survival and development. Second, governments need to smartly reconcile the relationship between the transformation of the social

service delivery system and the development of NPOs. It is not wise for them to disproportionately emphasize the improvement of social service quality but ignore the development of NPOs. Although the number of NPOs has increased explosively over the last few decades, many of them have ceased to exist. It is necessary to design integrative institutions to achieve both the transformation of the social service system and the development of NPOs. Third, NPOs should learn to improve their own capabilities, skills, and competencies in delivering social services. Our respondents have recognized the importance of self-reliance in social service delivery, and one practical implication is that NPOs should learn to build their capacities through diversifying funding resources, professionalizing services, or transforming into social enterprises. Self-reliant NPOs would have a chance to gain respect and trust from governments, which might be helpful for the establishment of a constructive government–NPO relationship.

Last but not least, our study is the first empirical study to investigate the government–NPO relationship in social service delivery from the NPO perspective. As a next step, we suggest that other authors could use other methods, such as a quantitative approach, to examine the perceptions held by NPOs and factors that influence their perceptions. Moreover, comparative studies could be conducted to compare the perceptions of NPOs in different fields, such as social service delivery and policy advocacy (such as environmental protection), or the perceptions of NPOs from different countries (such as the US and the UK) of their government partners.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank all participants for their time. This research was funded by the funding provided by the National Philosophy and Social Science Office of China (No. 18BZZ103 and No. 20BZZ036). Additionally, the paper was improved by feedback from three reviewers and the editor of the Journal of Social Policy.

Competing interests

The author(s) declare none.

Notes

- 1 Because non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can easily mutate into anti-government organizations in the Chinese context, their use is officially prohibited (Hsu, 2010). Instead, official documents use the concept of NPOs or social organizations (*shehui zuzhi*).
- 2 Although the one-day workshop was financially supported by local government, it was implemented by a hub NPO, which coordinated the whole program. All involved NPOs were social service organizations, and they attended the program voluntarily. The topic studied was not sensitive from the government side. So, our respondents did not have many worries in publicly expressing their opinions. No government officials intervened in our data collection process, and our respondents were free to express their viewpoints.

3 S refers to statement, and the number after it refers to the number of the statement in Table 1. S.18, for instance, refers to statement 18 in Table 1.

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	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
p22	0.62*	0.38	-0.02
p23	0.25	0.37	0.53*
p24	0.57*	0.46	-0.09
p25	0.46	0.66*	0.21
p26	0.28	0.48	0.46
p27	0.78*	0.13	0.15
p28	0.44	0.41	0.38
p29	0.02	0.34	0.75*
p30	0.11	0.32	0.64*
P31	0.32	0.64*	0.28
p32	0.29	0.79*	0.16
p33	0.53*	0.37	0.38

*Refers to the participants flagged for varimax rotation.

Appendix 3. Factor scores of 27 statements for the three government profiles

	Profile 1	Profile 2	Profile 3
1. Working here enables us to develop many skills.	0	3	0
2. Feeling of love is an important reason for us to join NPOs.	-2	0	2
3. We come here because the worldviews of NPOs attract us.	-1	1	1
4. It is government's (not our) responsibility to provide social services to its citizens.	-3	-3	-3
5. NPOs could fill the gaps left by government.	1	0	2
6. Our daily work is very underpaid.	0	-1	3
7. We have to establish a good relationship with government for our survival.	-1	0	0
8. Too many government agencies are involved in managing NPOs.	-1	-1	0
9. Governments do not have a clear orientation about NPOs' future development.	0	-1	-1
10. NPO is a promising field.	0	3	-1
11. Survival is our first priority.	-1	-2	3
12. It is a concern that many younger people are reluctant to join us.	0	-2	0
13. Governments need us to help them to fulfill their responsibilities.	0	-1	0
14. We could judge the performance of government.	-2	-2	-3
15. We assume too many extra tasks that should not be undertaken by us.	1	0	0
16. The power relationship between governments and NPOs is highly asymmetric.	0	-1	-1

	Profile 1	Profile 2	Profile 3
17. NPOs in China are congenitally deficient because they are outputs of government designs.	-3	-3	-2
18. Developing a strong social organization still has a long way to go.	2	2	1
19. Governments should provide more support (especially funding) to us.	2	1	1
20. We need more autonomy and discretion for better development.	1	1	0
21. The sustainability of NPOs should be treated seriously.	3	2	2
22. NPOs should diversify their funding resources.	1	1	1
23. Transforming into social enterprises is our main goal.	-2	0	-2
24. Social service marketization is a trend that we are supposed to support.	-1	0	-1
25. Governments and NPOs should collaborate with each other to deliver satisfactory social services.	2	2	-1
26. More institutions should be developed to protect our rights and interests.	3	0	-2
27. Governments and citizens should respect us.	1	1	1

Appendix 4. The correlation of the three government profiles

	Profile 1	Profile 2	Profile 3
Profile 1	1	0.56	0.4
Profile 2	0.56	1	0.42
Profile 3	0.4	0.42	1