

# **Knowledge Generation and Policy: Baha'i perspectives and emerging cross-sector knowledge communities in China**

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## **Abstract**

How do citizen groups influence policy, particularly in political contexts thought to have difficulty channeling 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. Baha'i texts emphasize the centrality of knowledge to collective life and to the advancement of civilization, and the global Baha'i community has been accumulating experience with the local generation of knowledge. Indeed, many Baha'i development efforts are based on the idea that the generation and application of knowledge, rather than economic activity, is the central process propelling human advancement.

This lecture applies recent advances in scholarship, as well as the Baha'i teachings and global experience, to examine how knowledge communities impact policy and governance. To do so, it draws on a study of China's grassroots NGOs and social policy, presenting three cases of knowledge communities and their interaction with the broader policy environment. In these cases, epistemic communities or communities of practice comprised of combinations of NGO staff, villagers, academics and officials interact around specific policy issues. By educating local populations and generating knowledge at the grassroots, by connecting local knowledge with scientific and technical expertise from outside the community, NGOs interact with a specific policy environment in ways that enable new knowledge from the grassroots to enter into the policy process. In this way, it becomes possible to identify mechanisms by which knowledge intersects with power structures and is then diffused.

These findings on how grassroots actors are able to influence policy are relevant to so-called 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.

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Thank you to the University of Haifa for hosting this event.

I value this opportunity to explore with you all some ideas I have been working through in my own research, within the field of political science. My general interest has always been understanding: how do citizen initiatives and state policy and practice interact? What are ways in which small groups acting to improve local conditions can influence governments, and what governance practices foster citizen engagement?

I study these dynamics primarily in what are known in the field of political science as ‘authoritarian’ or ‘nondemocratic’ regimes. These are, of course, value-laden terms that carry a certain worldview and belie specific assumptions about the way a people should be governed. Setting aside issues with the terminology for the moment, I focus on social contexts that do not so much fit the mold of western liberal democratic systems, for two reasons. First, an increasing proportion of the world’s population—recently over half—live in non-democracies. A third of these reside in authoritarian regimes. Of the 48 percent of global population that live in a democracy of some sort, only 5.7% reside in what is called a ‘full democracy.’ While a great deal of scholarly work is conducted on political dynamics in standard democratic settings, comparatively little serious research is carried out on other political contexts, especially research that is not geared towards understanding (or bringing about) democratic transitions in these contexts. It seems appropriate, therefore, that effort should be made to understand how state and society interact in these regimes, as they stand and in their own terms.

The second reason that so-called nondemocratic political contexts are useful to study is that they allow for the discovery of alternate channels of political participation. These systems are generally thought to lack traditional democratic channels. Scholars of authoritarian regimes have thoroughly detailed the obstacles to political participation and forms of contentious politics in these systems (protests, civil disobedience). Their citizens are, thus, often assumed to be confined to roles either as victims or dissenters. Important channels through which citizens across a range of regime types contribute to policy change are often overlooked and little understood. Where you may not have traditional means of participation using the institutional channels of representative government, and contentious politics has proved costly and limited in achieving lasting change, can other forms of political participation be observed? The obstruction of traditional channels allows for observation of new ways in which the will of the people to have a voice in development and governance finds expression. This becomes even more salient as, around the world, the efficacy of traditional democratic channels is increasingly called into question.

Within this broad area of state-society interaction, one of the dynamics I am interested in is how citizens influence policy using the power of knowledge. First, I will introduce knowledge as a factor in political decision making. I will then discuss what the Baha’i Writings and the Baha’i community’s experience have to say about the role of knowledge in collective life. Then we will turn to the scholarly literature on knowledge communities as ‘carriers of knowledge.’ I will briefly discuss the context of policymaking in China, and initial work that looks at the role of knowledge in that process. I will present the field study on which this analysis draws, and then outline three cases of knowledge communities, each of which illustrates different conceptualizations of knowledge communities, expertise and knowledge generation itself.

## **Explaining political decision making**

Within the global scholarship, there is a growing appreciation among social scientists of the role knowledge plays in social processes. As we are aware, interest-based explanations for

individual and state action have come to dominate many academic fields, sometimes obscuring a rich array of human motivation. My academic field, political science, tends primarily to explain political behavior and decision making through a process of calculating rationally formulated state preferences. Other theories have been proposed to complement this approach, focusing how constructed identities and socialization, political legacies and 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,’<sup>1</sup> scholars of political science were reminded in the 1990s that ‘along with traditional interests and institutions there was a third ‘I’. Ideas also matter in explaining political decision-making.’<sup>2</sup> This ‘ideational turn’ does not neglect material power, identities and political legacies in the analysis, the emphasis is on decision-makers as ‘sentient agents.’<sup>3</sup> Public policy ‘emerges from new ways of thinking, beliefs, rhetoric and discourse.’<sup>4</sup> In this conception, ‘politics becomes a process of learning about the world.’<sup>5</sup>

## **Bahá’í Perspectives on Knowledge**

### *The centrality of knowledge to social progress*

The Bahá’í discourse has always emphasized the key role knowledge plays in social progress. Bahá’u’lláh refers to knowledge as ‘**one of the wondrous gifts of God,**’ and states that ‘**it is incumbent upon everyone to acquire it.**’<sup>6</sup> However, He cautions that knowledge is to be used to promote human welfare: ‘**True learning is that which is conducive to the well-being of the world, not to pride and self-conceit, or to tyranny, violence and pillage.**’<sup>7</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá unequivocally places knowledge at the heart of development. He states that science ‘**is the very foundation of all individual and national development. Without this basis of investigation, development is impossible.**’ Bahá’í discourse and development initiatives therefore emphasize that it is the process of generating and applying knowledge—not economic activity—that lies at the heart of social progress.<sup>8</sup> ‘**The man of science ...studies the human body politic, understands social problems and weaves the web and texture of civilization.**’<sup>9</sup> Economic, social and political change all flow from the generation and application of knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> Radaelli 1995

<sup>2</sup> Dunlop 2012 p3

<sup>3</sup> Schmidt 2010

<sup>4</sup> Dunlop 2012 p3

<sup>5</sup> Dunlop 2012 p3

<sup>6</sup> “Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas” (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1988), p. 39

<sup>7</sup> Bahá’u’lláh From a Tablet, translated from the Persian

<sup>8</sup> External Affairs Strategy, 19 September 1994, prepared by an Ad Hoc Committee and approved by the Universal House of Justice, page 4

<sup>9</sup> “The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912” (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 50

Participating in this process is the sacred bounty of every Bahá'í. At the level of the individual, the act of acquiring and generating knowledge is imbued with sacredness and divine purpose:

**‘All blessings are divine in origin, but none can be compared with this power of intellectual investigation and research, which is an eternal gift producing fruits of unending delight. Man is ever partaking of these fruits. All other blessings are temporary; this is an everlasting possession. Even sovereignty has its limitations and overthrow; this is a kingship and dominion which none may usurp or destroy. Briefly, it is an eternal blessing and divine bestowal, the supreme gift of God to man. Therefore, you should put forward your most earnest efforts toward the acquisition of science and arts. The greater your attainment, the higher your standard in the divine purpose.’<sup>10</sup>**

We are clearly living in an era characterized by the rapid expansion of knowledge. Knowledge can propel the development efforts of governments and international agencies, as well as efforts at the grassroots. However, despite the extraordinary rate at which the body of human knowledge is growing, and the vast global network of universities, research centers, industries, government and private agencies responsible for generating and diffusing knowledge in the natural and social sciences, basic and widespread problems facing the majority of the global population remain to be solved. To bring the power of knowledge to bear on social advancement, the Bahá'í community is learning that certain weaknesses in how knowledge is generated and applied need to be remedied.

First, the organization of knowledge into disciplines that tend towards specialization has particular implications for development efforts. Fragmented knowledge is applied to highly complex problems at the grassroots, often by experts or specialists from different fields. Solutions of this sort often do not apply to the challenges facing a population. This is particularly the case when science and religion, two complementary systems of knowledge and practice, are not utilized in an integrated manner. Reality is one, and integrating these systems would allow ‘the insights and skills that represent scientific accomplishment’ are appropriately applied in line with ‘the force of spiritual commitment and moral principle.’<sup>11</sup>

Another weakness has to do with access to knowledge. Current arrangements place responsibility for research and ownership of knowledge within a few guarded institutions, and assign to the majority of humanity the task of using the products of science and technology. Particularly in rural areas, beyond basic education, further training is only provided to teach rural inhabitants to engage in some economic activity. Youth seeking jobs or higher education migrate to cities and begin to receive access to knowledge in the sciences or humanities, but tend to remain in social and economic spheres that do not allow them to become resources to work for the development of their home communities.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Bahá'í International Community, *Valuing Spirituality in Development: Initial Considerations Regarding the Creation of Spiritually Based Indicators for Development*. A concept paper written for the World Faiths and Development Dialogue, Lambeth Palace, London, 18-19 February 1998.

While sophisticated centers for high-level research and development are necessary, the generation and application of knowledge can and should also occur at the grassroots. Even when 'knowledge transfer' goes smoothly and existing knowledge is diffused and applied at the grassroots, it is generally accompanied by the generation of new knowledge, which often takes the form of insights gained through experience. Advances in new knowledge, then, occur 'not necessarily in the forefront of modern science and technology, but in areas where the natural and social sciences must together tackle specific problems of specific people.'<sup>12</sup> Thus, the application of knowledge in the development process should go beyond the training and delivery of services, as 'the application of knowledge for the purpose of transforming complex social realities requires the generation of new knowledge through dynamic and effective research and the participation of an ever-greater diversity of minds.'<sup>13</sup> This is facilitated by the promotion of a scientific culture at the grassroots, which helps people apply the methods and concepts of science to their reality.

Finally, a pervasive tension between traditional, local knowledge and modern knowledge also hampers sustainable development. People indigenous to an area often already possess considerable knowledge about health, agriculture and the environment which can become a valuable resource for development. Unfortunately, many development efforts bring with them a certain conception of modernization in which traditional knowledge is discarded and modern knowledge and technology are unthinkingly adopted. Such an approach is, ironically, against the ideal of science itself. As a response to the destruction of local knowledge systems, alternative approaches romanticize traditional knowledge and block the introduction of modern science and technology, hindering local populations from accessing the frontiers of knowledge and even participating in its application and generation.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, knowledge production is often equated with formal documents produced by high-status experts. In referring to knowledge, however, Bahá'u'lláh refers to the contributions of both '**scientists and craftsmen**' as a '**veritable treasure for man**,' suggesting a conception of knowledge that encompasses both abstract and practice based components. Whatever its source, however, it is clear that such knowledge should be used to '**profit the peoples of the earth**,' and avoid fields '**which begin with words and end with words**.'<sup>15</sup>

### ***Bringing the power of knowledge to bear on collective decision-making***

We have seen the importance of knowledge to individual and collective life, and discussed some weaknesses in the conceptualization of knowledge which the Baha'i discourse seeks to remedy.

To harness the power of knowledge to drive social progress, an indispensable prerequisite is institutional capacity. The Bahá'í International Community states that "The

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<sup>12</sup> Harper, S. (Ed.). (2000). *The lab, the temple, and the market: Reflections at the intersection of science, religion, and development*. IDRC, p.206.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 162.

<sup>14</sup> Arbab, Farzam, G. Correa, and F. de Valcácel. "FUNDAEC: Its principles and its activities." *Cali: CELATER* (1988).

<sup>15</sup> "Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas", pp. 51–52

transformation of complex social realities will require the development of institutional capacity within local populations to create and apply knowledge in ways that address the specific needs of that population.’ Therefore, they add, the ‘question of institutional capacity (e.g. the establishment of regional centers of research and training) constitutes a major challenge to sustainable development.’<sup>16</sup> This implies that organizations concerned with the generation and application of knowledge at the grassroots, often in the form of nongovernmental or nonprofit organizations, play a key role. These institutions channel knowledge and enable its diffusion: **‘Apart from the creation of programs that make the required education available to all who are able to benefit from it, such reorganization will require the establishment of viable centers of learning throughout the world, institutions that will enhance the capability of the world’s peoples to participate in the generation and application of knowledge.’**<sup>17</sup> As we will see later on, these organizations are also key participants in knowledge communities that influence policy.

The Bahá’í Writings indicate that knowledge should be used to shape public opinion, inform policy and guide governing institutions, from Baha’i administrative bodies to states.

Bahá’í governing institutions, such as Spiritual Assemblies, are to be guided by scientific and expert knowledge in solving local problems. The Universal House of Justice states that as Bahá’í institutional life develops, **‘Assemblies will draw increasingly upon scientific and expert knowledge—whether of Bahá’ís or of non-Bahá’ís—to assist in solving the problems of their communities. In time great Bahá’í institutions of learning, great international and national projects for the betterment of human life will be inaugurated and flourish.’**<sup>18</sup>

‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains how knowledge production can guide public opinion and a society’s leadership:

**‘It is therefore urgent that beneficial articles and books be written, clearly and definitely establishing what the present-day requirements of the people are, and what will conduce to the happiness and advancement of society. These should be published and spread throughout the nation, so that at least the leaders among the people should become, to some degree, awakened, and arise to exert themselves along those lines which will lead to their abiding honour.’**

‘Abdu’l-Bahá further discusses link between thought, or the realm of ideas, and progress as follows **‘The publication of high thoughts is the dynamic power in the arteries of life; it is the very soul of the world. Thoughts are boundless sea, and the effects and varying conditions of existence are as the separate forms and individual limits of the waves; not until the sea boils up will the waves rise and scatter their pearls of knowledge on the shore of life....’**<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Bahá’í International Community, *Rethinking Prosperity: Forging Alternatives to a Culture of Consumerism*, 2010

<sup>17</sup> The Prosperity of Humankind

<sup>18</sup> 21 August 1977 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer

<sup>19</sup> “The Secret of Divine Civilization”, pp. 109–110; pp. 111–112

But how is the power of knowledge brought to bear on the state? ‘Abdu’l-Bahá suggests that the strength and endurance of the state depends on infusing political decision making with a broad range of expertise and knowledge. He discusses at length the various kinds of knowledge that should shape public decision making, including **‘knowledge of the sacred Scriptures and the entire field of divine and natural science, of religious jurisprudence and the arts of government and the varied learning of the time and the great events of history.’**<sup>20</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá suggests that a body, or community, of individuals possessing different dimensions of requisite knowledge can guide political decision making.

**The state is, moreover, based upon two potent forces, the legislative and the executive ... The focal centre of the ... legislative is the learned--and if this latter great support and pillar should prove defective, how is it conceivable that the state should stand? In view of the fact that at the present time such fully developed and comprehensively learned individuals are hard to come by, and the government and people are in dire need of order and direction, it is essential to establish a body of scholars the various groups of whose membership would each be expert in one of the aforementioned branches of knowledge. This body should with the greatest energy and vigour deliberate as to all present and future requirements, and bring about equilibrium and order.**<sup>21</sup>

At the grassroots level, too, the Bahá’í community similarly relies the collective generation and application of knowledge. It draws on the model of a dialogical community as one way to transcend the Cartesian anxiety—the perennial tension between objectivism and relativism that plagues current efforts to make full use of the fruits of science. Through participation in a community of experts and practitioners in dialogue, it is, in the words of the Universal House of Justice, **‘possible for decision making to benefit from a diversity of perspectives through a consultative process which, understood as the collective investigation of reality, promotes detachment from personal views, gives due importance to valid empirical information, does not raise mere opinion to the status of fact or define truth as the compromise between opposing interest groups.’**<sup>22</sup>

I have mentioned just a few of the ideas contained in the Bahá’í Writings about the role of knowledge in social progress and political decision making. Now we will turn our attention to how thinking about knowledge and policy has progressed in the wider discourse. As we will see, some of the advances in scholarship mirror what the Bahá’í community is learning in this respect and can also be a source of insight in efforts to use knowledge to influence policy.

## **Knowledge communities**

As I mentioned earlier, scholars of politics have begun to supplement interest-based explanations for political decision making with observations of how knowledge impacts

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<sup>20</sup> Abdu’l-Bahá, Secret of Divine Civilization p.36

<sup>21</sup> Abdu’l-Bahá, Secret of Divine Civilization, p.38

<sup>22</sup> Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of Iran, 2 March 2013, para. 10

policy. Scholars observing how knowledge shapes political outcomes have turned their attention to ‘carriers’ of knowledge,<sup>23</sup> often in the form of communities of individuals that circulate ‘causal ideas and some associated normative beliefs,’ ‘thus helping to create state interests and preferences.’<sup>24</sup> Such communities generate knowledge and seek to ‘speak truth to power.’<sup>25</sup>

### *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.’<sup>26</sup>

Originating in Fleck’s idea of the ‘thought collective’ and Foucault’s interpretation of the Greek concept of *episteme*,<sup>27</sup> the concept of the epistemic community has been linked to Kuhn’s scientific community, a group of scientists who pursue research around a shared paradigm.<sup>28</sup> Holzer employed the concept in sociology, while Ernst Haas applied it to international relations research.<sup>29</sup> 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’<sup>30</sup>

Early research on epistemic communities tended to focus on transnational networks of scientists seeking to influence government policy in environment, banking, economics 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 ‘the actors that comprise epistemic communities can be governmental or non-governmental, scientific or non-scientific.’ They seek not only to persuade states, ‘but also a wide variety of *non-state* actors.’ They target not only specific government policies, ‘but are shaping *governance* more broadly.’<sup>31</sup> Application of the epistemic communities lens of analysis to a broader range of actors and political contexts is particularly important, as it ‘provides a way to understand agency in politics and policy formation.’<sup>32</sup>

### *Communities of Practice*

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<sup>23</sup> Haas 1992.

<sup>24</sup> Cross 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Haas 2004.

<sup>26</sup> Haas 1992, p.3.

<sup>27</sup> Fleck 2012; Foucault 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Kuhn 1962.

<sup>29</sup> Holzner 1972; Haas, Haas, Williams, and Babai 1977.

<sup>30</sup> Ruggie 1975p. 570.

<sup>31</sup> Cross 2013, p2.

<sup>32</sup> Haas 2001.

Conceptually closely related to epistemic communities, communities of practice are constituted by members, characterized by mutual engagement, a joint enterprise or domain, and a shared repertoire. They 'engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems...'<sup>33</sup> Such communities are organizational units that exist beyond the formal structure of an organization. Instead, they can be conceived of as 'a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.'<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup>

Epistemic communities and communities of practice are two among a number of models that aim to discover how knowledge flows across sectors and administrative levels to act on the policy process. These include Richardson's policy communities, Reinicke's global policy networks, Sabatier's policy advocacy coalitions, as well as a significant literature on policy entrepreneurship.<sup>36</sup> These complementary notions, however, focus on either shared causal beliefs within the community or the changing and diverse membership of groups. The epistemic communities model, by contrast, with its 'focus on agency and the shared beliefs of a community that shares a common policy activity over time, provide the leverage for generating social science knowledge about the development and diffusion of knowledge for policy and politics.'<sup>37</sup> This is perhaps why studies of environmental policy change in the Chinese context have supplemented the advocacy coalition framework with the notion of epistemic communities, in order to 'draw attention to the interplay of policy ideas within an informed, small group of public and private actors.'<sup>38</sup>

### **Knowledge and policy in China's institutional context**

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.'<sup>39</sup> In China, incremental policy change is thought to occur through bureaucratic bargaining or clientelistic politics, rather than through the power of persuasive ideas.

Still less are potentially persuasive ideas thought to originate in society or grassroots participation.<sup>40</sup> 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

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<sup>33</sup> Wenger 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002.

<sup>35</sup> Cross 2013.

<sup>36</sup> Haas 2001.

<sup>37</sup> Haas 2001.

<sup>38</sup> Scott 2012.

<sup>39</sup> Teets 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Teets 2018.

response to such contentious approaches tends to be individual concessions rather than real policy change.<sup>41</sup>

However, recent scholarship is beginning to challenge this picture of the sources of policy change. Ho and Edmonds find that 'even without institutionalized channels for participation, China's environmental groups find ways, albeit incremental and ad hoc, to approach and influence relevant government departments with policy suggestions.'<sup>42</sup> Mertha demonstrates how a range of actors representing media, NGOs, academic institutions and government bureaus are diversifying sources of influence in policymaking.<sup>43</sup> Teets shows how policy networks constituted by civil society organizations and managing government departments can shape policy.<sup>44</sup> Evidence also suggests that even small, grassroots NGOs are able to influence policy at the local level.<sup>45</sup>

Authoritarian regimes are also not thought to be particularly fertile grounds 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.'<sup>46</sup> He also suggests, however, that epistemic communities are 'most likely to emerge in countries with well-established institutional capacities for public administration, and 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 Chinese NGO sector.<sup>47</sup>

Hasmath and Hsu conclude that Chinese NGOs 'lack the professionalism and expertise' to be considered as epistemic communities and are not 'part of a community of experts that act as a coherent group in which they seek to inform and impact policy and policymakers.' Chinese NGOs could potentially 'adapt their organizational focus to be part of an epistemic community where emphasis is on the production of knowledge.' They also suggest that 'within the institutional context of China, Chinese NGOs place greater emphasis on developing relations with the government than on strengthening the NGO sector through the sharing of knowledge and information.' Thus, they conclude, 'Chinese NGOs are yet to mature and thus are currently unlikely to make any significant impact on policy which will shape their sector of work in any substantial way in the near future.'

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<sup>41</sup> Hasmath and Hsu 2015; Teets 2014.

<sup>42</sup> Ho and Edmonds 2007, p.27.

<sup>43</sup> Mertha 2009.

<sup>44</sup> Teets 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Farid 2019.

<sup>46</sup> Haas 2001.

<sup>47</sup> Hasmath and Hsu 2014.

Communities of practice are similarly thought to be absent in China's NGO sector. Hasmath and Hsu 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.<sup>48</sup> 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.

Based on access to data at two levels— central government policy research and policy process, and the grassroots level where NGOs generate knowledge, this study identifies emerging knowledge communities that cross sectoral boundaries and influence policy.

## **Data and Methods**

The cases and data presented here are drawn two 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.<sup>49</sup> 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. Follow-up interviews and observations were carried out in 2018-19 with a number of NGOs and government officials include in the original study. This allowed for longitudinal observation of knowledge communities and policy learning discussed in this paper.

Second, findings presented here are also informed by over a decade of ethnographic research and participant observation among grassroots NGOs and in government policy research in China.

Comparative case research is combined with political ethnography. In this way, subnational cases that enable the construction of controlled comparisons are enriched with 'thick description'<sup>50</sup> and compensate for incomplete information gained through interviews and surveys.

## **Findings and Discussion**

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<sup>48</sup> Hsu and Hasmath 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Provinces were selected based on variation in economic development, ethnic makeup and associational experience. Selected sites included one major urban center and one municipality covering a large county apart from urban centers so that the sample of NGOs would represent organizations working in urban, semi-urban, and rural realities.

<sup>50</sup> Geertz 1973

This section illustrates 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 to emerging knowledge communities. 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.

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.

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

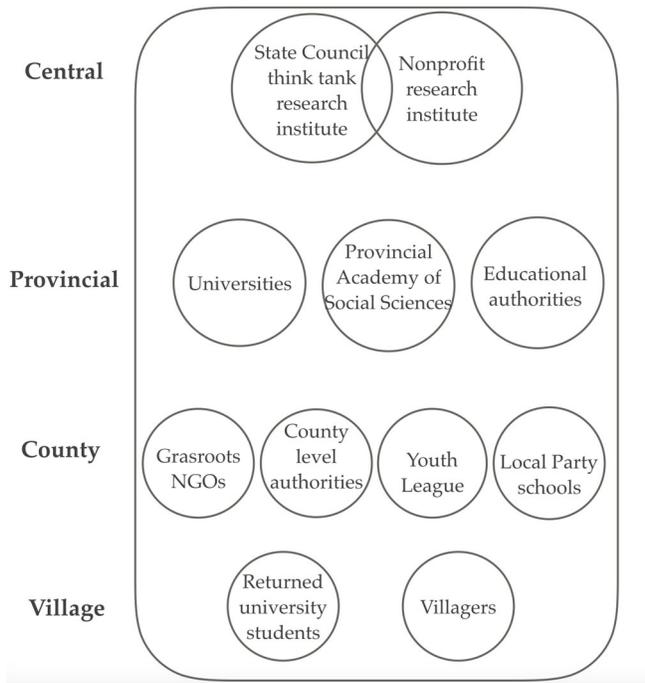
Perhaps closest in form to the traditional formulation of an epistemic community, Case A depicts a cross-sector knowledge community concerned with generating knowledge about education for sustainable development, with a view to improving education policy in ethnic minority regions. The catalyst for this community was a collaborative research project between a central government think-tank and a nonprofit 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>51</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>52</sup> Staff of the nonprofit research organization and the government think-tank’s research institute refined research questions and 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. 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.

Knowledge generation in the project was ongoing and occurred at all levels. At the central level, more familiar forms of knowledge production occurred, in the form of comprehensive research reports which were circulated in Beijing and elsewhere.<sup>53</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.



<sup>51</sup> Interview with Institute Director, Beijing, November, 2011.

<sup>52</sup> Participant observation, Beijing, November, 2011.

<sup>53</sup> Internal research reports, on file with author.

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.' This makes it problematic to identify a clearly defined epistemic community of actors 'out there' in society and evaluate their efforts to shift thinking and policy 'inside' the state apparatus. However, such interlinkages can strengthen the impact of grassroots groups, such as environmental activists: Contradictorily, this context is conducive to green activism...'<sup>54</sup>

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.

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<sup>54</sup> Ho and Edmonds 2007

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>55</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>56</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>57</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>58</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.'<sup>59</sup>

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 notes, 'is dependent, not simply on their epistemic resources but also on their political acumen.' If their consensual knowledge is to persuade decision makers, they must 'successfully navigate the machinery of government by insinuating themselves into bureaucratic positions.'<sup>60</sup> In authoritarian settings, in particular, scholars find that policy change is often successful when policymakers are embedded in social networks.<sup>61</sup> Cross notes that while governments 'may be better at crafting policy' they can 'take advantage of synergies with intersecting communities of experts. She also highlights that in some cases epistemic communities are 'located within government structures, although they continue to exercise independent agency.' This 'may afford them greater access to decision processes.' Cross argues that 'in light of these possibilities, if our analysis is to be comprehensive, we must be willing to look broadly when identifying epistemic communities. It does not matter whether members of an epistemic community come together organically, are spurred to action by an NGO, or are brought together by governments to form an advisory committee. This has little inherent impact on how the group behaves or what it does once its members come together – i.e. whether or not it grows into an epistemic community with the intense interaction and emergent values that

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<sup>55</sup> Interview H164, NGO founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

<sup>56</sup> Interview H165, NGO founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

<sup>57</sup> Interview YN91, NGO, Government, Academic, deputy director and director. Yunnan, April 2011.

<sup>58</sup> Interview Y134, NGO director of external relations. Yunnan, May 2010.

<sup>59</sup> Scott 2012.

<sup>60</sup> Dunlop 2012.

<sup>61</sup> Evans 1995; O'Brien 1994.

this entails. Epistemic communities may sometimes be difficult to differentiate from regular bureaucratic groups, but a close look at internal dynamics will distinguish them.’<sup>62</sup>

Thus, we take Cross’ expansion of the original conception of epistemic communities one step further 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 place greater emphasis on developing relations with the government than on strengthening the NGO sector through the sharing of knowledge and information’ such that ‘there is little incentive to foster, grow and strengthen an epistemic community with the goal of influencing government policy.’<sup>63</sup> Rather than direct access to the state being used to influence the state and effectively making the question of epistemic communities moot, as suggested by Hsu and Hasmath, this study suggests that knowledge communities constituted by state and nonstate actors can and do form 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.’<sup>64</sup> In this sense, such communities may be closer to Hasmath and Hsu’s ‘loose nebulous networks’ than to the formalized and deliberate structures described in the 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

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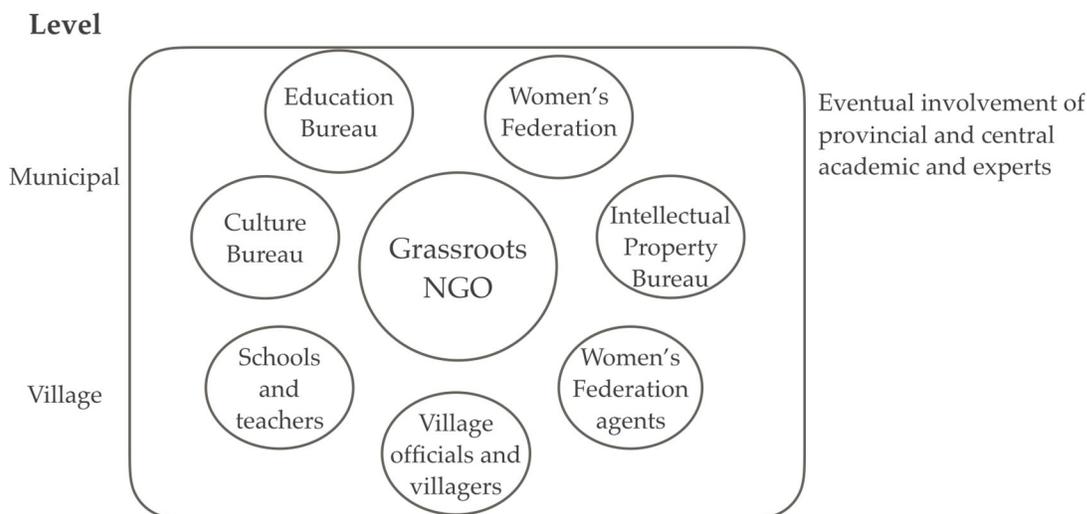
<sup>62</sup> Cross 2013.

<sup>63</sup> Hsu and Hasmath 2017.

<sup>64</sup> Casciaro and Lobo 2005, p.92.

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>65</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.



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

<sup>65</sup> Interview Y158, NGO director. Yunnan, July 2010.

the political elite.<sup>66</sup> 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 of individuals engaged in collective learning about a shared domain of endeavor.<sup>67</sup> 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 ‘epistemic communities need not be made up of natural scientists or of professionals applying the same methodology as natural scientists. What bonds members of an epistemic community is their shared belief or faith in the verity and the applicability of particular forms of knowledge or specific truths.’<sup>68</sup> However, he notes that ‘for governments to defer to new knowledge, the presumptive knowledge claim must be regarded as authoritative. Authoritative knowledge comes from groups that command legitimacy and authority in society. Epistemic communities’ reputation for authority rests on their expertise as well as their reputation for impartiality.’ As discussed earlier, this has led to rather narrow definitional parameters based on certain assumptions about what constitutes ‘authority’ and ‘expertise.’ For many scholars, 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”.’<sup>69</sup> 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 just as much of a claim to authoritative knowledge as scientists.’<sup>70</sup> These groups, similar to scientists, ‘(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.’ Therefore, ‘professionalism, rather than science, is the glue that holds epistemic communities together, facilitates consensus, and enables persuasion.’<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> S. Thøgersen 2000 p.136.

<sup>67</sup> Wenger 2011.

<sup>68</sup> Haas 1992.

<sup>69</sup> Drake and Nicolaidis 1992. See also Gough and Shackley 2001.

<sup>70</sup> Cross 2013.

<sup>71</sup> Cross 2013.

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.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, their influence results from the recognition and legitimation that society confers on them.<sup>73</sup> 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. While some scholars have suggested that Chinese NGOs lack the professionalism to function as credible sources of expertise as a sector,<sup>74</sup> other scholars have observed that Chinese NGOs indeed function as sources of expertise for policymakers.<sup>75</sup>

For Lang, four possible sources of legitimacy 'make NGOs legitimate players 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 she argues that 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.' 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.<sup>76</sup>

In line with Lang's argument, this study found that grassroots NGOs possess grounded knowledge of underrepresented interests, which is particularly valuable in a

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<sup>72</sup> Haas 2004.

<sup>73</sup> Cross 2013.

<sup>74</sup> Hasmath and Hsu 2014.

<sup>75</sup> Ho 2001 and Teets 2014.

<sup>76</sup> Lang 2012, p.2.

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,<sup>77</sup> 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 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,

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<sup>77</sup> Cross 2013, p.20.

incorporating social actors at the very grassroots into a process of knowledge generation. It therefore provides insight into questions surrounding 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' (*diaocha*) of local socio-economic conditions, and, to some extent, public opinion. Increased administrative workloads and less engagement with the grassroots can make this difficult, allowing NGOs to step in. One NGO founder described how local officials view the organization's contribution:

It will promote their work. They are on top and don't come down to the grassroots. We are at the grassroots and know their situation. So we are like an intermediary, a platform for government and common people, so that the Women's Federation can promote some of their work through this platform, or the aspirations and life situation of the common people can be reflected to the Women's Federation. For example if they want to do an investigation, they can find out about the general situation [of the common people].<sup>78</sup>

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, and can assist and empower officials:

For government, it will help them because they are very busy, and I have time to serve the villagers, and they will have time to do other things. They can't come down to the villages, but I can. I can tell them the reaction of the villagers, and pass on the individual and agricultural information to them. Because I talk directly to the villagers, they aren't with the villagers every day.<sup>79</sup>

In this case, a knowledge community emerged at the initiation of, and with participation 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. It had been working in 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 such as village cleaning or cultural activities. Over time, under the guidance of the local NGO, 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:

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<sup>78</sup> Interview H260, NGO founder and director. Hebei, August 2010.

<sup>79</sup> Interview Y229, NGO founder and director. Yunnan, May 2010.

[The project] is about "collectively seeking truth." This "truth" is the "path of true development" in the perspective of community development. How can we make our village better and how can the villagers live a happier life? The improvement of material life plays an important role, and how to better exert collective strength in this process and enhance the material development of unity through brainstorming is the next thing that X Village needs to explore.<sup>80</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. When we first begin to work in a village, many people don't initially come to us because there is nothing they could immediately get from us. We don't provide goods, we are not teachers, just facilitators to help them do what they want to do. And then help them take more people along with them. If they have similar ideas, they will cooperate happily with us and eagerly help those around them. They won't see our NGO as responsible for how things go, for example if their agricultural project is unsuccessful and they lose money, they won't ask us to compensate, or say that they have participated in order to give [the NGO] face.<sup>81</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 (*wenhua*), we can't do this.' So together we will look at technical agriculture 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

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<sup>80</sup> NGO internal report (2017), on file with author.

<sup>81</sup> Interview Y158, NGO founder and director. Yunnan, December 2018.

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>82</sup>

Thus, the NGO simultaneously assists villagers to understand their role in generating new knowledge, while remaining open to outside knowledge. Among many of these grassroots organizations, it is well recognized that outside knowledge can only benefit the local community and be applied in an appropriate fashion when local knowledge systems are consolidated and strengthened.

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, one villager shared her experience planting and harvesting a few konjac plants, and told the others that she was able to sell this crop for a high price in the local market. The other villagers showed enthusiasm about the idea, but no one knew anything about producing konjac. As no one in the area had tried producing 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 director shared that 'at first no one knew anything about how to plant konjac. But we had internet and I looked up everything I could about it.'<sup>83</sup> However, the NGO chose not to simply pass this information on to the villagers. An internal report notes:

As a development project, the environmental construction project aims to encourage villagers to identify the needs of the community and participate in the planning and implementation process, rather than passively participating. Therefore, after understanding the needs of the people, the organization did not directly provide the information, concepts and materials found online directly to them, rather we encouraged everyone to think about how to solve the problems they had identified. After some consultations, after 114 telephone enquiries and an online search, they were fortunate to find a konjac processing factory in [the city]. The participants jointly selected 4 women representatives to visit the konjac processing factory. [The NGO] contacted the local konjac processing factory in advance, and then four women representatives [who had prepared questions in advance] accompanied the NGO director to visit the factory and consult with the person in charge and negotiate the price. Although everyone has no experience, they are not afraid and want to explore together.<sup>84</sup>

According to the NGO director, the plant director was moved by this visit of rural women and provided free illustrated manuals about planting konjac, and offered to send a truck to the village to conduct initial soil testing. After they had purchased the agreed upon amount from the plant, they also contacted the plant technicians 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.

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<sup>82</sup> Interview Y158, NGO founder and director. Yunnan, December 2018.

<sup>83</sup> Interview Y158, NGO founder and director. Yunnan, December 2018.

<sup>84</sup> NGO internal report (2017), on file with author.

Twelve villagers formed the initial group that decided to produce konjac. Their crop gave good yields and provided a substantial income boost to these families. After a year and a half, a second group of villagers wanted to join the konjac producers. However, the seeds were prohibitively expensive to these new families. The NGO consulted with the initial twelve producers and was able to secure small funding to set up a seed-returning scheme whereby the initial cost of seeds was covered, but producers were responsible to return a certain number of seeds after two years of production. These new seeds would be used to assist new producers. The NGO also noted the way the knowledge that had been generated was diffused to an ever-widening circle of villagers: 'after the first group had produced, the second group could go to them for help because they already knew the way. They had already explored it and no longer had to be afraid. Everyone was united.'<sup>85</sup>

By 2016, fully 60% of the inhabitants of the village (about 105 households) were producing konjac. According to the NGO report:

From the single planting structure based on traditional crops, X Village has transitioned to diversified planting including economic crops such as konjac after the women's students collectively explored possible ways of economic development.<sup>86</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. 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 of local conditions and suitability to certain crops. They were also unable to provide assistance with regard to selling and distribution, or management. Specialized associations or collectives were not cohesive or organized enough to provide assistance. Local government departments lacked knowledge of local conditions and interaction with villagers:

There are already many government departments and social organizations working in that village. But they don't actually do anything and are unable to connect to local

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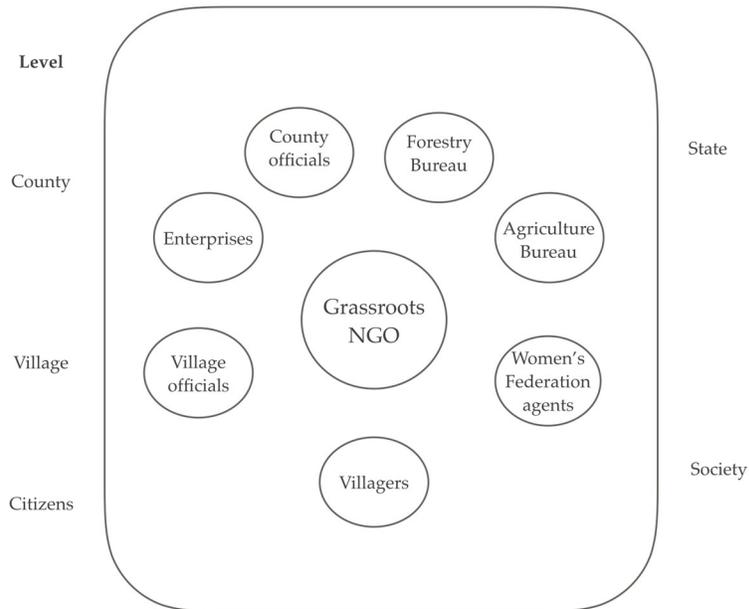
<sup>85</sup> NGO internal report (2017), on file with author.

<sup>86</sup> NGO internal report (2017), on file with author.

conditions. So we actually integrate these resources (*zhenghe ziyuan*), helping these different forces come into play and use their resources to actually serve the villagers.<sup>87</sup>

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, knowledge construction constitutes one of three broad areas of activity NGOs engage in, the other two being developing creative policy solutions and lobbying.<sup>88</sup> 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.'<sup>89</sup> For Jennifer Hsu, 'knowledge production is crucial to an NGO's work precisely because it allows the transmission of knowledge from one arena to another. This knowledge can then be shared and used to inform new practices.'<sup>90</sup> Under these conditions,

<sup>87</sup> Interview Y158, NGO founder and director. Yunnan, December 2018.

<sup>88</sup> Gough and Shackley 2001.

<sup>89</sup> Hsu and Hasmath 2017, p.13.

<sup>90</sup> Hsu 2015, p.9.

'NGOs can be innovators and at the forefront of social, political and economic issues.'<sup>91</sup>

It has also been argued that knowledge production is a particularly important strategy for NGOs in the political context of China, 'where evidence-based policy making has become part of the Party-state's development mantra, espoused by Deng Xiaoping's 'seeking truth from facts'.<sup>92</sup> 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.<sup>93</sup>

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 they are organized to produce knowledge.'<sup>94</sup> 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.'<sup>95</sup> 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>96</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'.

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 argues that knowledge construction is closely tied to the provision of resources and thus

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<sup>91</sup> Hsu 2015, p.3.

<sup>92</sup> Hsu 2015, p.3.

<sup>93</sup> Farid 2019; Hsu 2015.

<sup>94</sup> Cohendet, Creplet, and Dupouet 2001.

<sup>95</sup> Cook and Brown 1999.

<sup>96</sup> See Farid 2019 for discussion of the integration of service delivery and policy advocacy functions of NGOs.

reinforces donor hegemony and Western notions of 'knowledge.'<sup>97</sup> 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.<sup>98</sup> 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.<sup>99</sup> Attempts by philosophers of science to definitively distinguish science from nonscience have largely failed.<sup>100</sup> 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 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

I have mentioned some ideas in both the Baha'i writings and discourse, and in the scholarly literature, that touch on the question of knowledge and the role it plays in guiding political decision making.

Knowledge communities act as carriers of this knowledge, and have the potential to shape policy and governance in important ways. While initial studies did not identify epistemic communities nor communities of practice in the context of China, this study shows that by reexamining conceptions of knowledge, the nature of expertise, and the porous nature of state-society boundaries, it becomes possible to identify emerging knowledge communities in the Chinese context. These 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

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<sup>97</sup> Subramaniam 2007.

<sup>98</sup> Agrawal 1995.

<sup>99</sup> Agrawal 2002.

<sup>100</sup> Kulka 1977.

populations. Examination of 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.

While these findings are grounded in the unique Chinese sociopolitical environment, a broader understanding of knowledge generation and recognition of multiple mechanisms for the emergence of knowledge communities has implications for how they are understood in other contexts. Since they represent an approach to policy advocacy that 'shift policymakers ideas underlying their conceptualization of a problem' rather than shifting their interests, the ability to identify knowledge communities allows us to envision new paths to public participation in policymaking across a range of regime types.

Bio:

May Farid is a Lecturer in the Department of Social Work and Social Welfare at the University of Hong Kong. Her research centers on the interplay between citizen initiatives and state policy and practice, as well as the implications of this dynamic for development and governance. She explores this dynamic as a comparative political scientist, primarily through the lens of state-society relations, with a focus on contemporary China. She holds a doctorate (DPhil) from the University of Oxford, where she explored reciprocal engagement between grassroots groups and governmental authorities and during which she carried out extensive fieldwork in rural China. Her academic research and teaching is supplemented by seven years of experience in institutional capacity building for grassroots NGOs in China. Before joining HKU, she concluded a four-year research project on behalf of China's leading government policy think-tank.

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