



# NGOs and the success paradox: Gay activism 'after' HIV/AIDS in China

Working Paper 01-18

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**To cite this paper:**

Hildebrandt, T (2018), NGOs and the success paradox: Gay activism 'after' HIV/AIDS in China, *Social Policy Working Paper 01-18, London: LSE Department of Social Policy*.

## Abstract

What happens to NGOs when they succeed in meeting key goals, when the issues around which activists mobilize are no longer of interest to those granting them economic and political opportunities? How do they deal with success? This paper presents the case of gay activism in China, which has risen largely because of HIV/AIDS. While the virus persists, international interest has waned, resulting in fewer opportunities for gay activists in the country. The paper draws upon insights of gay activists' responses in the US and Europe and formulates hypotheses for how Chinese gay activism might navigate the success paradox. It explores potential adaptive techniques by viewing them through a political economy lens of gay activism in China, demonstrating how context-specific conditions might limit the options for NGOs dealing with success. In doing so, it contains important insights for NGOs and civil society beyond China and LGBT rights.

**Keywords:** NGOs, LGBT, HIV/AIDS, China, development, aid

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Dr Timothy Hildebrandt is Associate Professor of Social Policy and Development in the Department of Social Policy at LSE. His research examines how social policies affect marginalised populations (such as LGBT people), in sometimes unintended and often disproportionately negative ways; it explores how actors in states, markets, and societies address the inequalities that arise from these policies (including NGOs, GONGOs, social enterprises, and MNCs); and, at a more conceptual and theoretical level, attempts to make sense of the increasingly blurred lines between the state, market, and society and those organisations that move between and/or transcend sectoral boundaries. His research has been published in journals such as *Development and Change*, *Journal of Homosexuality*, *Voluntas*, *Review of International Studies*, and *China Quarterly*. His book *Social Organization and the Authoritarian State* was published by Cambridge University Press in 2013. An internationally-recognised expert on various issues pertaining to LGBT people, he frequently appears in media outlets such as the BBC, CNN, *The Guardian*, and *South China Morning Post*. More can be found on his website, [www.timothyhildebrandt.com](http://www.timothyhildebrandt.com) Email: [t.r.hildebrandt@lse.ac.uk](mailto:t.r.hildebrandt@lse.ac.uk).

## Acknowledgements

The author thanks Jessica Ng, Karen Fisher, Carolyn Hsu, and Hakan Seckinelgin for helpful comments on previous drafts; and the interviewees over the last ten years who made this research possible. An earlier version of this article was presented at the New Developments in Chinese Civil Society conference held at the University of Hong Kong in 2013.

## Introduction

Success is surprisingly vexing for activists (and the scholars who study them): who defines it, how is it measured, and how is it best achieved? Moreover, success can be a double-edged sword, carrying with it unintended consequences: meeting goals can mean the loss of attention, funding, and even death for an NGO. This is, in essence, the 'success paradox' for NGOs (see Audia *et al.* 2000): in doing their job well, activists can put themselves out of work. But the paradox remains poorly understood and under-theorized (Helmig *et al.* 2014): what happens when NGOs meet their main goals, when the issues around which activists mobilize are no longer of interest to governments who grant political opportunities and donors who provide economic resources? How do they deal with success, not just failure?

The case of gay activism in China is well-suited for exploring these questions. Government recognition of HIV/AIDS has been instrumental in the growth of gay organizations throughout China. HIV/AIDS created political opportunities for gay activists insofar as they are able to reach a high-risk group that the state cannot and offered previously unavailable economic opportunities through international donors supporting HIV/AIDS prevention. Although HIV/AIDS is far from solved, in some respects gay activists are already confronting a success paradox. China has controlled the virus well enough to diminish attention to the problem. Moreover, China's economy has developed such that the international community believes it is now capable of solving its own problems. Related, the donor community is decamping from China and HIV/AIDS, moving to other regions and issues.

As such, this paper examines how gay activism has both 'lived by the sword' of HIV/AIDS and might die from it as well. But the story might not be all gloom and doom. The success paradox can force activists to adapt in ways that could ensure longer-term sustainability. Drawing upon insights from successful gay movements elsewhere, I hypothesize on how Chinese gay activists might exist without the opportunities key in their emergence. But I do so keeping in mind my analytical framework—a political economy of gay activism—which highlights the unique political and economy factors crucial in the emergence of LGBT NGOs in China. Such political economy is important for both understanding emergence in China, and the possibilities of transformation. Ultimately, I argue that the shadow of this political economy is large and gay organizations in China are restricted in how they will navigate the success paradox.

This paper draws upon insights drawn from data collected in several of larger projects and ongoing research over the last ten years (citations omitted); in Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu and Kunming, I conducted semi-structured interviews with gay activists and NGO leaders both at the peak of donor and government interest in HIV/AIDS prevention from 2007 to 2008, and soon after the announced withdrawal of major donors in 2015. But rather than re-present this interview data here, I extrapolate from it and draw upon recent cases of policy successes elsewhere to engage in hypothesis formulation. Although this paper does not seek to generalize outside the China case, I argue that there is still much that gay activists can learn from how others have dealt with success, and quite possibly, vice versa.

This paper proceeds as follows: first, I explore theoretical understandings of success and organizational survival and adaptation. Next, I posit a political economy of gay activism, the

context within which NGOs emerged. The fourth section presents illustrative examples from successful gay activism elsewhere. In the fifth section I propose a series of hypotheses on potential adaptations for gay activism in China, analyzing them through the analytical framework. Finally, I discuss what the success paradox means for civil society, activism and gay rights in China, and beyond.

### (Mis) Understanding Success

Understanding the effect of success on activism in China is tricky because most scholarly attention on NGOs is paid to their emergence and struggles in achieving key goals. But interest in these organizations in China, and elsewhere, often wanes once goals have been achieved. Notable exceptions are Dennis Chong (1991) and Benit Roth (1998) who underscore how policy successes for civil rights and women's movements in the US meant the premature end to some activism; they make clear that these policy victories, while important steps for both movements, were not always in the best interest of civil society, activism, or even the constituents they represent in the long term.

Conversations about success might seem premature when discussing Chinese NGOs. The emergence and growth of these organizations remains a relatively new phenomenon; for most, their goals are far from being achieved. Indeed, using a narrow definition of success leads us to conclude that Chinese NGOs are years from confronting the success paradox. But an analytical problem remains: would we know success for activism when we saw it? *What is success?* Gamson offers a useful definition of social movement success, suggesting that it can be identified when a movement is accepted as a full participant in governance and it is extended new advantages and benefits (1998). Recent same-sex marriage victories in several American states represent a good example of this understanding of success: groups have engaged in public debates, pushed for legislature action and popular votes at the state level, having secured this new key right in nearly 20 states.

When applying Gamson's definition of success to China, most NGO activism falls short. This does not mean, however, that a discussion about the success paradox is premature. Instead, we can think of success in a broader sense, one that is largely an *exogenous* condition. First, NGOs can do 'well enough' in addressing their areas of concern such that both global and local urgency drops considerably. In China, this has begun to occur on HIV/AIDS, with international donors retreating as the problem has been controlled to the point that, in their estimation, domestic actors can address it alone. Second, activists can face the success paradox when the larger environment in which they operate has changed. In China, economic success has created the image of a nation on the move, one no longer needing international assistance. Some of the most productive environmental NGOs depend not only on grants from international NGOs, foundations and corporations, but also bilateral aid from countries like Japan and Germany. Increased public acknowledgement of China's economic success and a growing perception that bilateral aid is subsidizing this growth, have led donors to cut their funding of environmental work in China, hurting environmental NGOs as domestic sources of financial support are limited.

For these donors, activists and organizations are a means to an end. But after that end is reached, what happens to activism? And why should we care? For some, success might not present a paradox at all. A breast cancer charity, for example, surely wants to see the day that they close because the disease has been eliminated. However, organizations, and those who work for them, are driven by more than goal attainment. Involvement in social organizations can provide a number of tangible (e.g., jobs) and intangible (e.g., psychic rewards) benefits that can lead activists to keep an NGO alive (see Handy et al. 2002). For NGOs that have emerged because of one problem (i.e., HIV/AIDS) but have many other concerns (i.e., gay rights), even the *perception* of success can be problematic.

### *Theories of Organizational Adaptation*

Questions of organizational success necessarily engage those of survival and therefore adaptation. Organizational studies offers a theoretical basis for examining organizational survival and adaptation within an environment of constraint. In particular, three major bodies of theory are most relevant here, which Hannan and Freeman (1984) group together within a rational adaptation school of organizational thought: contingency, resource dependence, and institutional theories.

Contingency theories stress structure-environment pairs, arguing that organizations operate in environments which favor specific structural attributes (Hannan & Freeman, 1984). Organizations adapt their forms accordingly in order to fit their environment (Drazin & Van de Ven, 1985; Tucker, 2010; Hannan & Freeman, 1984). Fundamentally, the idea of equilibrium underlies this notion of structure-environment fit. But as scholars have rightly observed, an organization that is structurally ‘congruent’ with its environment does not necessarily mean an organization that is harmonious in itself, or that there are no tensions in this relationship (Mayntz, 1999). As some contingency theorists have noted, questions of organization-environment fit are complicated by the existence of multiple, conflicting contingencies in the environment – the adaptation to which may cause incoherence within the organization (Drazin & Van de Ven, 1985; Ford & Slocum, 1977).

Organizations, moreover, operate in dynamic environments in which the characteristics of the optimal structure-environment pair are constantly shifting – organizational change and environmental change are interdependent and thus organizations and their environments evolve in relation to one another (Rodrigues & Child, 2008).

Resource dependence theories similarly highlight the adaptive capacities of organizations in relation to constraint-heavy environments. Organizations are conceived of as coalitions of resources which operate in a competitive environment (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). The primary organizational objective is survival, and organizations seek to strategically adapt to neutralize external threats within the environment (Hannan & Freeman, 1984). Resource dependence theorists emphasize organizational agency via the internal decision-making processes which underlie adaptation, and the capacity of organizations to alter the environment in which they are situated by mobilizing resources such as political connections (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Boies & Prechel, 2002; Zald, 1970). Similar to contingency theories, organizations ultimately reach a level of congruency with the environment through ensured survival; just short of an equilibrium conceptualization, resource dependence theories envision the stabilization of the organization-

environment dynamic (Aldrich & Pfeffer, 1976). Though as some scholars have noted, resource dependence theories potentially overemphasize adaptation and organizational learning, and downplay the role of structural constraints (Hannan & Freeman, 1977).

Institutional theories emphasize the impact of state, societal, and normative pressures on organizational adaptation in response to environmental constraints (Oliver, 1991). Subject to the same institutional (i.e. regulatory and normative) constraints, organizations which operate in the same organizational field gradually begin to adopt similar structural characteristics and behaviors (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Scholars underscoring regulatory pressures explain this process of isomorphism in coercive terms: organizations defer to direct or indirect pressures by the institutions that they work with or are regulated by to adopt shared norms, standards, and expectations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Alvare, 2010). Other scholars identify the source of these norms as societal or cultural, arguing that organizational behavior and adaptation are embedded in broader social processes (Granovetter, 1985; Zukin & DiMaggio, 1990). Institutional theories have been critiqued for overplaying structural constraints (Oliver, 1991; Batley & Rose, 2011). However, more recent institutional theorists have opened up new avenues for theorizing the role of organizational agency within organization-institution interactions. Batley and Rose (2011: 237), for instance, highlight the strategic capacity of organizations—a ‘calculated isomorphism’—by which organizations adopt institutional norms and practices in order to become insiders to these institutions to open up opportunities within constrained environments.

These scholars highlight that organizations do not operate in a vacuum, but rather are sensitive to structural constraints that make some adaptation strategies unviable and others more likely to succeed. Indeed, the constraints in China for activism and NGO organizing are significant and can make adaptation difficult (Hsu et al. 2017; Hsu 2006). For gay activists, the opportunities for organizing and adapting are especially narrow. As such, it is important to draw attention to the particular political economy of gay activism, borrowing insights from social movement theories.

### A Political Economy of Gay Activism in China

HIV/AIDS, and the attention paid to it by key domestic and international actors, has been crucial for gay mobilization in the country. For activism to emerge and be successful there must be some demand for it. Suffice it to say, even though the Communist Party came to power under the banner of equal rights for all, not everyone enjoys them today. Although homosexuality has never been explicitly illegal since the founding of the PRC—with supreme court decisions having been handed down in 1957, reaffirmed in 1993, and remaining legal loopholes used to prosecute male same-sex behavior closed in 1997—gays remain second class citizens (Zhang and Chu 2005). With no explicit law to protect them from discrimination, activism is needed to promote Chinese LGBT rights. But demand, while a necessary condition, is not sufficient for emergence. There must also be a supply of political opportunities and financial resources. This supply appeared with the spread of HIV/AIDS, and the accompanying recognition of problem by international donors and the Chinese government.

Studies of gay activism in Western, liberal democracies have noted that HIV/AIDS played a

significant role in shaping activities of many gay activists and organizations (Darsey 1991). More recent work on Asian authoritarian contexts similarly shows a tight relationship between the outbreak of HIV/AIDS and the emergence and/or strengthening of gay activism (Chua 2012, 2014). In explaining the relationship between the health crisis and activism, particularly in closed polities such as China, it is imperative to understand the role of political opportunities and economic resources (Yu 2017).

Collective organizing and activism is never easy in authoritarian regimes (Bourdreau 2009, O'Brien and Li 2006, Schock 1999). However, the political process school of social movement studies offers two particularly helpful theoretical frameworks that allow me to posit a political economy of NGOs in China broadly and, for the purposes of this paper, gay activism specifically (see Armstrong and Bernstein 2008). McAdam notes that the decline of state repression, increase of political access, and friendlier political environment can equate actionable political opportunities for social movements to emerge (1982). At the same time, a political opportunity can exist in times of government inaction (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996).

In China, political opportunities exist as a combination of open political environs and government inaction: the number of HIV/AIDS cases surged amidst the economic reform of the 1990s that included a significant downsizing of the state apparatus. Under this "small state, big society" formulation, the regime enlisted the help of NGOs to deliver services that it lacked the political will, resources, expertise or access to provide itself. With the state now welcoming some gay groups into governance, gay activism moved out of the shadows, seizing the disease as a cover, with less fear of state retaliation (see also Altman 1994, Thayer 1997, Terto 1999, Weiss 2005). To be sure, even at the height of HIV/AIDS there was no 'golden age' of gay activism. Gay NGOs have had to be perhaps more careful and restrained; emergence and sustainability has usually been ensured only when they use strategies and engage in activities that the state accept as legitimate (Spires 2011a; see also Thayer 1997, Long 1999, Gruszczynska 2009, Gevisser 1995, Palmberg 1999, Brown 1999, Graff 2006, Blackwood 2007).

The second component of a political economy of gay activism is the role of economic resources. Scholars in the political process school have long emphasized how funds are crucial for the emergence, sustainability, and success of social movements (McCarthy and Zald 1977, Jenkins and Perrow 1977, Oberschall 1978, Tilly 1978). Especially when resources are scarce, NGOs partner with a wider variety of actors, including governments (Gazley and Budney 2007). In China, the growing HIV/AIDS problem motivated the international community to devote significant economic resources to prevent its spread. The World Health Organization and UNICEF led the charge in 1993 and 1994, respectively. While these donors directed funds neither to civil society groups nor gay activists, the next wave of funding identified gay men as a high-risk group and activists and NGOs working with them as the main avenue for reaching the community. Notable donors included the China-UK AIDS Project in 1999, the Global Fund in 2003, DFID (the UK development Agency) in 2005 and the Gates Foundation in 2008 (Wu et al. 2011).

A political economy explanation of gay activism might not seem provocative without emphasizing that political opportunities were unlikely to emerge without the disease. More importantly, the

economic resources upon which they grew in size and number (and, likely, influence) have been almost solely related to HIV/AIDS. This is because fundraising for social organizations in China remains onerous. Social organizations must register to gain tax-exempt status, but registration is difficult or impossible for many groups (Hildebrandt 2011). Thus, this political economy is not just a fortunate convergence of interests between HIV/AIDS-related donors and gay activists. For gay activism in China, HIV/AIDS was the *only* way to attract the kinds of economic resources (and enjoy the political space) that could bring them from outside the shadows and become visible members of China's nascent civil society (Spires 2011a, Hsu 2012).

Limited political openings have indeed been conditional. Activists are careful to ensure that their work does not stray too far from 'safe' activities of public health and into 'unsafe' activities of rights advocacy. Similarly, economic resources are also conditional. Gay activists have difficulty engaging in work that strays too far from the interests of their donors. When funds are received for HIV/AIDS-related work, more traditional gay advocacy work (even if allowed by the state) could be frowned upon by the donor (see also Spires 2011b).

#### *After AIDS (funding) and the success paradox*

Having explained how gay activism emerged in the last decade, and understanding its tight link to the HIV/AIDS crisis in China, we can now examine how gay activists might confront a success paradox. International aid is not designed to be given indefinitely and global priorities change. Given the finite amount of resources, international donors, whether inter-governmental (like the Global Fund) or private (such as Gates Foundation), have to make difficult decisions about moving resources from one country to another and from one longer-standing social problem to a newly emerging one. China first experienced this new reality when, in 2011, the Global Fund—the largest outside donor for HIV/AIDS prevention—temporarily froze funds in a dispute over how the Chinese government chose civil society organizations as funding recipients. Although funds were eventually 'unfrozen' the Global Fund has now permanently cease funding to 'less needy' recipient countries, such as Argentina, Mexico and China.<sup>i</sup> Round 11 funds, that were to have been dispensed in 2014 were slashed, and even Round 10 funds that had already been awarded (but not delivered) were cut. Its leadership blames inadequate donations from countries that had generously donated to the fund in the past.

The withdrawal of the Global Fund in China is not an isolated incident. The Gates Foundation has already announced that an end to HIV/AIDS activities in India in 2013 and is following suit in China soon after. Bilateral donors (e.g., Japan, Canada, the Netherlands) in other areas (e.g., environmental protection and poverty alleviation) have cited China's economic rise as reason enough to diminish funding. The global financial crisis has placed economic strains on private and public donors, forcing significant cuts. Such financial concerns can lead to organizational crisis or death. Chambré and Fatt (2002) argue that American HIV/AIDS NGOs primarily close due to an inability to raise adequate funds. Early analysis of China 'post Global Fund' offers similarly negative predictions (Huang and Ping 2014).

With HIV/AIDS economic opportunities drying up in China, the strong relations many gay activists

have with government officials will likely weaken. Because funding from outside China was funneled through the state and then onto civil society groups, there was an economic incentive for government officials to build relationships with gay activists, and likewise for these activists to cultivate positive relationships with these officials (Hildebrandt 2011). Moreover, the political space afforded to gay activists because they have been engaged in HIV/AIDS activities could close. Allowing gay activists to organize throughout China has always been a calculated risk for the state. During the peak of the pandemic—and at the height of outside funding—the benefits outweighed the costs. But without such benefits, it is unlikely that the state will risk incurring the cost of widespread activism, especially under the banner of human rights and anti-discrimination, as we might expect from gay activists traditionally.

### Drawing Lessons from Outside China

Despite progress in prevention, and growing promise for a cure, HIV/AIDS continues to ravage vulnerable populations globally. But the conditions that facilitated the rise of gay activism are changing. Because gay activism is new in China, we must draw lessons from other countries to speculate on how activists will respond to a success paradox. Until recently, global gay movements, while achieving policy changes at the margins, rarely achieved ‘pinnacle’ rights like same-sex marriage. But in a short period of time, policy successes exploded in number, spreading around the world. Recent policy victories are one useful way of thinking about what success might mean for gay activism more generally. The way in which activists navigated this success paradox varies. In this section I draw upon instances of adaptation after key policy victories like same-sex marriage and the legalization of military service for LGBT people in the US, UK and Europe.

Where same-sex marriage campaigns have been successful, activists have generally taken two paths: declaring victory and ceasing operations; or reinventing themselves, repurposing their institution to fight for more rights. As an example of this first path: after being the first U.S. state to legalize same-sex marriage, some gay groups leading the charge in Massachusetts opted to cease activities. The Religious Coalition for the Freedom to Marry in Massachusetts, for instance, closed even though it acknowledged that significant barriers to gays and lesbians remained. This response to success can be seen outside the U.S. as well. Upon the Netherlands’ passage of same-sex marriage in 2000—making it the first country in the world to do so—the gay rights movement essentially collapsed, despite remaining problems such as discrimination and bullying. In 2006, Czech Republic adopted a new policy allowing registered partnerships for same-sex couples. Although not ‘marriage’, it extended the same rights and privileges granted to opposite sex couples in state-sanctioned unions. The Gay Initiative group that pushed for the policy over nearly two decades relished the victory. While acknowledging other goals were still not met, the group believed its overall priorities had been achieved, and months after the policy change the group shut its doors. The group’s leader explained that the policy was ‘the logical conclusion of [its] activities’.<sup>ii</sup>

For those hoping same-sex marriage successes could be parlayed into policy victories in other areas of importance to gays, the illustration offered above is disheartening. But another pathway exists. We can observe especially rapid activist re-invention in one of the more recent same-sex

marriage successes: Minnesotans United was initially founded in 2012 to defeat a proposed state constitutional amendment that would define marriage as between one man and one woman, making same-sex marriage unconstitutional. Their founding goal was not to legalize same-sex marriage; the organization used language emphasizing that the constitution should not be changed to diminish rights. Their strategy proved successful in November 2012 when the measure was defeated in a state-wide popular vote. Having built an effective institution, the organization was able to pivot quickly and sought to have same-sex marriage actually legalized through the legislative process. Seven months later their efforts proved successful when a bill passed the state legislature. The organization has reinvented itself once more. Days after passage, Minnesotans United announced that it would become a political action committee supporting legislators who took electorally risky positions in supporting the same-sex marriage bill; they specifically identified the need to help in upcoming reelection campaigns of some Republican lawmaker allies (who often representing socially conservative constituents not typically supporters of same-sex marriage).<sup>iii</sup>

Although not driven by one particular same-sex marriage victory, GLAAD in the U.S. is another example of how gay activism can re-invent itself. This national organization's evolution reveals a sometimes tacit, and other times explicit, acknowledgement that even beyond an issue like same-sex marriage, success in achieving gay rights in the country has demanded that they revisit their charge – and their name. Until March 2013 GLAAD was an acronym for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation. The organization dropped its full name in favor of the acronym alone having identified trans-rights as the next area requiring significant attention.<sup>iv</sup> The case of GLAAD reminds us that same-sex marriage is not necessarily the 'end of history' for gay rights—that is at least the hope of organizations like GLAAD that believe their job continues, provided it identifies under-addressed issues and successfully adapts to deal with them. This move to bring trans-issues into gay activists' portfolio has been controversial. While some welcome the inclusion, others see sexual orientation and gender identity as incompatible for one coalition; some trans people also fear being overshadowed by the larger LGBT movement.<sup>v</sup>

Another adaptation is demonstrated by the Human Rights Campaign (HRC). Buoyed by a string of state- and national-level victories for same-sex marriage, the organization has set its sights on improving the lives of LGBT individuals outside the US. HRC has most recently attempted to use its growing political clout to place pressure on the International Olympic Committee to take a more public role in criticizing the Russian government's recent passage of anti-gay laws in the run-up to the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi and protecting gay athletes and citizens alike. HRC's international focus has had mixed reviews. While some laud the attention to global LGBT discrimination, others fear the group ignores local contexts making the lives of LGBT people worse.<sup>vi</sup> UK-based Kaleidoscope Trust has similarly placed pressure on the British government to improve LGBT rights in other Commonwealth countries. In entering the realm of international politics, these NGOs display a 'boomerang model' of transnational activism, using other governments and organizations to pressure human rights violations (Keck & Sikkink 1998). Beyond the goal of protecting gay rights globally, these efforts represent new opportunities to fundraise, which is particularly important in light of the success paradox. Gay rights organizations are not alone in their international turn. Some evangelical Christian organizations with a strong anti-gay platform have devoted

considerable time and attention to furthering their cause in Africa—perhaps, in this case, due to their long string of loses at home—to the point where they have been identified as key players in the formulation and passage of anti-gay legislation in Uganda (Anderson 2011).

Both navigations of the success paradox noted above suggest that activists made clear and thoughtful choices as to their next move. But operating in this environment can also force activists and their organizations onto routes they would rather not choose. In many cases, gay activists—particularly when organized around one single, identifiable, and achievable goal—have painted themselves into a corner with no option but to close once they have reached their goal. Such was the situation for some organizations founded in the United States to combat laws that forbid openly gay and lesbian individuals from serving in the military. Opposing the 1994 ‘Don’t Ask Don’t Tell’ legislation, organizations like OutServe and the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network (SLDN) sought to repeal the law and create an environment that would allow gay and lesbians to openly serve in the U.S. military. By late 2010, a Democratic Party-controlled Congress repealed the ban—and in an instant, the goal around which these two organizations were founded was met. Having recognized that success might demand reinvention, the boards of both organizations voted to merge in July 2012. But this union has been tumultuous, with fundraising remaining a difficult task. Apparent victims of a success paradox, the merged organization has apparently been unable to pay its bills from summer 2013.<sup>vii</sup>

The success paradox is indeed problematic for the financial wellbeing of NGOs. The National Stonewall Democrats announced in early 2013 that they would be going ‘on hiatus’ in light of the fact that they were essentially bankrupt.<sup>viii</sup> Although this occurred before the success of the Supreme Court decision that was viewed as a partial victory for same-sex marriage advocates in the U.S., the organization’s executive director noted that its problems stemmed in part from the small pool of money from which all gay organizations’ draw, and its difficulty in getting enough of it. He pointed to the successful campaign to elect the U.S.’s first out lesbian to the Senate was drawing funds that they might otherwise receive.<sup>ix</sup> Like gay organizations in the U.S., it was difficult for Canadian gay organizations to raise funds after same-sex marriage was legalized in 2004; officials reported a drop of 30 to 40 percent in donations after the success.<sup>x</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, gay organizations in America built almost solely around HIV/AIDS are feeling financial pressures, not unlike their Chinese counterparts. Even just the perception of success has placed great stress on groups like the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC), which was a pioneer in addressing HIV/AIDs upon its emergence and has been instrumental in promoting gay rights and advocacy more generally.<sup>xi</sup>

### Hypothesizing Responses to the Success Paradox

Taking into account how gay activism emerged in China, and having considered the illustrative examples above, I now posit a series hypotheses on how gay activism might respond to the success paradox. These adaptations are not necessarily mutually exclusive and, for some gay organizations (namely those that primarily represent lesbian women) none of these hypotheses will apply as they never received any HIV/AIDS money (citation omitted). Some explore what issues gay activists might focus on and others on how they might go about doing it. While we can learn

from other gay activists' experiences with the success paradox, as I will show in this section, we must keep in mind the political economy of gay activism in China to understand the most likely path for these NGOs.

Gay activists currently working on HIV/AIDS overwhelming expressed a desire to move away from these activities and towards work centered more generally on gay rights (citation omitted). But given that new cases of HIV/AIDS will inevitably emerge and many continue to live with the virus, some organizations will remain focused on HIV/AIDS. Assuming other groups adapt or die, there might well be enough space and limited resources for these activists to continue their work relatively unabated. Thus, *H0: a limited number of organizations will not change, or close, but continue working on HIV/AIDS in the gay community.*

The first set of hypotheses explore how activists might change the issues around which they organize. In an environment where HIV/AIDS was the only politically accepted rationale for organizing and one of the few limited opportunities to raise funds, some gay organizations fully embraced public health, moving away from gay advocacy and effectively 'de-pinked' (Weiss 2005; Chua and Hildebrandt 2014). Conversely, the first potential adaptation is best articulated as 're-pinking.' Having addressed the narrow issue of HIV/AIDS within the gay community, activists could work on a broader array of issues concerning the LGBT community, such as non-discrimination or adoption rights. Inside the gay sector, the example of GLAAD seems to embody this hypothesis well; the mission has been broadened to ensure the institution can live on to fight new battles. Outside of the gay sector, the March of Dimes is instructive. Founded to fight the spread of polio, the organization broadened its work after the eradication of the disease and lives on today as an NGO combating a childhood diseases broadly. Likewise, to expand its scope, Doctors Without Borders (MSF) engaged issues beyond its original mission of emergency response to HIV/AIDS and mental health (Redfield 2010). Thus, *H1: Gay activists who, due to funding requirements previously spent most of their time working on HIV/AIDS, will work more deeply on a broader array of gay rights issues.*

But given that past activities were also contingent upon the political space afforded them by dealing with the pandemic, it is unclear if activists could enjoy enough political opportunities to make such a switch. Indeed, in this success paradox the state's rationale for granting groups space no longer exists. The government might be less willing to incur the potential costs of allowing this activism, particularly when their main activity could be on issues more threatening to the state such as human rights. At a recent charity fair in Shenzhen, gay groups were banned from participating by local officials.<sup>xii</sup> A gay rights activist in Changsha was arrested for illegally protesting in May 2013. The protest of just over 10 activists called for an end to homophobia and discrimination. Interestingly, police allowed a similar protest to occur last year.<sup>xiii</sup> In May 2014 nine gay activists were detained before a planned gay rights conference in Beijing.<sup>xiv</sup> And in 2016 as part of a large morality campaign, the Chinese government has passed the first explicitly anti-gay policy in banning the depiction of LGBT people in television.<sup>xv</sup> While there are a number of reasons to explain the uneven enforcement, it is reasonable to suggest that changing state interests might foretell an ominous future for gay groups that previously enjoyed political opportunities.

Alternatively, activists might completely re-invent themselves. Hoffer suggested that the continued sustainability of an activist movement is often contingent upon reinvention; success, or in some cases failure, is best dealt with by the organization and those leading a movement to replace it with another (1951: 27). Thus, *H2: Gay activists might parlay their expertise into activism on issues far different from HIV/AIDS or gay rights.* It was common during the period of growth amongst HIV/AIDS groups in China for activists in waning sectors, such as environmental protection, to move into this area, as it provided the political and economic resources, even if different from their previous activity. But in addition to the general limitations of political opportunities in China, another problem with this approach remains: the longer an activist is known for a particular area of work, the harder it may be for he or she to change course. In that sense, overly institutionalized, or deeply entrenched activists might find significant evolution difficult. That said, gay activism might be new enough to China that few individuals will have this problem, for better or worse.

In light of negative state responses, gay activists might employ an 'exit' strategy rather than 'voice' (Hirschman 1970). *H3: gay activists passionate about LGBT issues, but concerned about political space at home, might move their work outside China.* Chinese NGOs in other sectors have begun operating outside the country. There is a precedent for this activity amongst LGBT groups elsewhere. After its own marriage victory in Argentina, the country's LGBT Federation has promoted marriage equality in other South American countries.<sup>xvi</sup> As noted above, HRC in the US has devoted more attention to supporting gay rights outside the country. Perhaps then Chinese gay organizations can work on improving the environment for gay individuals outside their own national borders, particularly if they have diminished political space to do so. They might also be able to attract a new set of funding that is interested in gay activism and LGBT rights in a transnational context.

But it remains to be seen how easily NGOs and activists based in China can operate elsewhere. Gay activists have been reluctant to link up with their international counterparts for fears of creating tension with their government partners in China (citation omitted). Research suggests that most of this activity is being done in conjunction with the government as its 'Go Out' development program (Hsu, Hildebrandt and Hasmath 2016); these organizations are often engaged in international work at the behest, and with the primary financial support, of the state. In that respect, their activities, though geographically distant from Beijing, might still be tightly constrained by the government. Contrary to the Chinese idiom, the mountains may not be *that* high and the emperor not so far away.

The next set of hypotheses focus on how organizations might attract new sources of funding. As suggested above, lost financial resources upon which activists once heavily relied requires adaptation for organizational sustainability. The most straightforward solution is also the one that is least likely for most activist organizations: *H4: instead of seeking international funding for HIV/AIDS work, organizations could tap the international donors willing to support LGBT-specific work in China.* While there are a handful of donors based in Hong Kong, the United States, and Europe, these opportunities are few and far between. Open Society Institute funds some LGBT activism in China, but given the governments discomfort (or disdain) for this 'democracy promoting' organization, gay activists drawing from this source are putting their political

opportunities in jeopardy.<sup>xvii</sup> Given China's rising middle class, perhaps domestic sources might be another option. *H5: gay activists might draw upon donations from a growing cosmopolitan citizenry, with disposable income, to support LGBT-specific work in China.* Although the supply might exist, institutional barriers remain that make domestic fundraising difficult; as noted in section three, since most gay organizations are not registered they are unable to open bank accounts and fundraise as freely as their Western counterparts. If domestic fundraising were easier, it is unlikely that gay activists would have relied heavily on HIV/AIDS funding and thus this current success paradox would not be so acute.

Without economic resources offered by donors to engage in HIV/AIDS work, activists must find new ways to sustain their activities. Gay activists made strategic choices (albeit from a constrained range of options) to deal with the influx in economic resources, as well as the interest of governments both nationally and internationally. It is not a stretch to assume that if they have dealt well with the *influx* of resources, they might similarly use strategic approaches to deal with the *outflow* of funds as well. Thus, *H6: Activist organizations might evolve into social enterprises, adopt more economic orientations, engage in work devoted more fully to gay rights, and do so in a more effective way.* Organizations might draw upon successful business strategies like government lobbying and social marketing to do so. Chinese NGOs have increasingly embraced more strategic, economic orientations signaling the rise of social entrepreneurship. Due in part to the difficult of raising funds domestically, organizations have moved toward more for-profit models of management; activist groups have evolved into consulting firms, for-profit online websites and marketplaces, and even bars. Still, adapting into a social enterprise can carry with it costs, not the least of which being activist organizations can stray far away from their original socially-minded goals; Hoffer goes further, warning that 'every great cause begins as a movement, becomes a business, and eventually degenerates into a racket' (1967).

Aside from recreating themselves as social enterprises, activist groups might also opt for consolidation. Thus, *H7: Gay NGOs may merge with like-minded organizations.* But as the case of OutServe/SLDN demonstrates, mergers are not a panacea; new organizations might still struggle to raise enough money to stay afloat. More likely than consolidation by choice is contraction by nature. *H8: With fewer economic resources available, some organizations will diminish in capacity and eventually cease operations.* Some groups, like the Stonewall Democrats, will close due to its inability to raise enough funds. The recent financial woes of GMHC foreshadows difficulty for Chinese gay activists that have been almost exclusively engaged in HIV/AIDS work. The rise and fall of a gay group in Yunnan province illustrates the debilitating effect that success can have on Chinese NGOs and activism. With the help of China-UK AIDS, this group received a large amount of core funding at its inception in 2002. During the four-year funding cycle, it began the province's first AIDS hotline and created a large gay activity center. But after funding ceased in 2006, it quickly declined. Leaders and staff left in search of more stable and lucrative employment, shrinking its personnel from over ten full-time paid employees to one and a half. Once housed in the activity center, the group's offices were relegated to a one-bedroom apartment with no semblance of activity, existing as an organization more in name than in function.

While these hypotheses sound disheartening, it is important to note that shuttered organizations do not necessarily mean that gay activism generally will suffer amidst success. Just as it is inappropriate to measure the strength of civil society by counting up the number of NGOs, so too is it misleading to assume that fewer gay activist organizations means there is a general weakening of gay activism in China. While we will most certainly see fewer gay organizations, those that survive will be the strongest and best equipped to make the kinds of adaptations noted above, navigating shifting and narrow political opportunities in the closed political environment. Initially, it might not just be the strongest who survive but also the most passionate. Such activists might be less careful as they make a push for gay rights. With political opportunities closing this would put them at greater risk and is a less sustainable response. Another potential result of contraction is that the larger LGBT activist sector might reconcile after years of division, which was one result of the influx of HIV/AIDS funds that excluded lesbian women. If both gay men and lesbian women have limited resources, they might foresee cooperation as the best way forward in pursuit of broadly relevant issues, like nondiscrimination, same-sex marriage, and adoption rights.

The final set of hypotheses represent success avoidance strategies. Assuming activists are strategic and well-aware of how the success paradox could end their current activist career, *H9: Gay activists might take 'half-deals' with policymakers, that achieve enough to keep their supporters happy, but not too much to reach the success that could shutter their organizations completely* (see Siebel 1999; Meyer and Zucker 1989). This adaptive strategy requires that activists have strong linkages with the state or, more accurately, individual government officials. Such *guanxi* can be effective in the short term, but because it is not based upon institutional bonds, the relationship (and adaptive strategy) might not survive the loss (by promotion, demotion, retirement, etc.) of the official.

Less controversially, but with similar effect, *H10: NGOs may articulate goals they know are unreachable* (Siebel 1999; Meyer and Zucker 1989). This strategy is best exemplified by the newest ad campaign for Stonewall, the UK's largest gay advocacy NGO. The advertisements, the organization presents a long list its policy successes, including bringing same-sex marriage to England and Wales in 2014. It shows photos of two individuals with the tagline "One is gay. If that bothers people, our work continues." Although the campaign includes identifiable goals like diminishing bullying and stopping workplace discrimination, its loftier (and probably unattainable) goal is loudly proclaimed: as long as there are some who do not like gays, the organization should continue to exist. To some, this is self-defeating behavior. Alternatively, it is probably best understood as 'self-limiting' behavior common for Chinese NGOs generally that is necessary for organizational survival in the country. Just as activists are careful to not reach too far, they be mindful of achieving too much.

### Call for Future Research

In this paper, I have moved the lens of analysis away from how NGOs can be successful, to how they *deal* with success. I have argued that in understanding success, it is helpful to see it as an exogenous condition; when the donors and governments instrumental in the rise of NGOs withdrawal their support, these organizations are faced with a kind of success (even if not self-

declared). These outside forces are part of the constrained environment within which these NGOs emerge, what I have called the political economy of gay activism.

Drawing upon recent prominent cases of gay activist victories elsewhere, I explored a number of hypotheses to anticipate how gay NGOs in China might navigate the success paradox. But I did so while keeping in mind the particular political economy within which they emerged. And while lessons can be learned from other contexts, the political economy of gay activism in China underscores the difficulty for activists to navigate success. Making the move from HIV/AIDS to gay rights advocacy, for example, will be easier said than done. As gay activists become more settled into this ‘post-HIV’ environment, larger empirical research should put these hypotheses to the test.

This paper has focused on the China case. But while the convergence of political and economic factors may be unique to China, it transcends this particular empirical case in at least three important ways, with important insights for NGOs, donors, and policymakers:

First, it suggests that political economy matters in seeing how organizations navigate success – there is no uniform path but wherever they go, it is deeply affected by exogenous conditions, which is, as I also suggest, crucial for understanding the very notion of success. For those interested in civil society building, setting up NGOs does not ensure they will last and bring about political change – and quite surprisingly, the most successful might well die. Success amongst NGOs can actually be destructive for civil society building, if success means that the NGO can find difficulty in securing new political and economic opportunities to survive this success. This seems to transcend political context, as I show in highlighting the case of activism in the United States – but it is more acute in China and other closed polities where the political economy of gay activism has a much longer shadow.

Second, because NGOs in both developed and developing countries are so heavily dependent upon outside funding, success is itself exogenously defined. Donors must understand that policy successes do not ensure that NGOs will live, but can actually mean they might die. And if they do survive, we need to anticipate they will look differently. At the very least, it requires that donors better prepare their NGO partners for the ‘endgame’ not just when they fail but when they succeed.

Finally, those who believe activists form the basis of a fully functioning civil society, and in authoritarian contexts can hasten political change, might see why an activist’s ‘job well done’ complicates civil society building, itself another success paradox. If NGOs cannot survive beyond periods of great success, the long-term fate of a strong and vibrant civil society might be put in peril. Related, it underscores the point that tackling effectively social issues is not necessarily compatible with civil society building in service of democratization.

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<sup>i</sup> See <http://www.irinnews.org/report/94293/hiv-aids-global-fund-cancels-funding>

<sup>ii</sup> 'New Era for Gay Rights Movement', *The Prague Post*, January 10, 2007.

<sup>iii</sup> Available at <http://mnunited.org/news/minnesotans-united-political-action-committee-formed/#.UZOsoQWVF0s.twitter>

<sup>iv</sup> From the GLAAD website. Available at <http://www.glaad.org/blog/glaad-affirms-commitment-trans-people-lgbt-community-and-allies-melissa-harris-perry-show>

<sup>v</sup>

<http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2013/10/15/are-trans-rights-and-gay-rights-still-allies>

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.buzzfeed.com/lesterfeder/human-rights-campaigns-move-into-international-work-puts-glo>

<sup>vii</sup> See <http://americanblog.com/2013/07/outserve-sldn-closes-headquarters-reveals-organization-bankrupt.html>

<sup>viii</sup> Amidst growing success of pro-gay organizations, there are limited, but notable, cases in which anti-gay organizations have admitted defeat and shutdown. Exodus International, part of the self-described 'ex-gay movement,' ceased operations in June 2013 after nearly three decades of promoting 'straight conversion therapy' for gay men and women. See <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2013/june/alan-chambers-apologizes-to-gay-community-exodus.html?paging=off>

<sup>ix</sup> <http://www.dallasvoice.com/national-stonewall-democrat-hiatus-10136064.html>

<sup>x</sup> <http://www.buzzfeed.com/lesterfeder/could-a-win-on-marriage-weakens-lgbt-organizations>

<sup>xi</sup> <http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20131030/chelsea/struggling-gmhc-plans-break-lease-leave-expensive-offices>

<sup>xii</sup> See <http://www.scmp.com/news/china-insider/article/1316638/chinas-gay-rights-groups-asked-pull-out-shenzhen-charity-fair>

<sup>xiii</sup> See

<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1241780/gay-rights-activist-arrested-after-protest-changsha>

<sup>xiv</sup> See

<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/859069.shtml>

<sup>xv</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/mar/04/china-bans-gay-people-television-clampdown-xi-jinping-censorship>

<sup>xvi</sup> From the LGBT Federation website. Available at <http://www.lgbt.org.ar/home.php>

<sup>xvii</sup> An article in a government-published Chinese newsmagazine implicated OSI and other donors in politically-distributive behavior throughout the world. "Investigation: America's Fake Think Tanks" [in Chinese] *Globe*, December 16, 2007.