



A new type of charity has emerged in China that is able to sidestep some of the controls that the government places on NGOs. By basing themselves on the Internet, these new charities can more easily engage Chinese citizens, raise funds, and tackle politically sensitive issues.

The Emergence of Subversive Charities in China

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China has undergone dramatic and largely positive changes in the last three decades, including profound economic expansion, wealth accumulation, and global connectivity. The Chinese government's economic growth model, with its focus on attracting foreign technology, building infrastructure, and encouraging exports, has received much of the credit. But the changes in China have come with attending social problems that the government has either failed to put on the agenda or struggled to solve. Pernicious environmental pollution, food safety scandals, and migrant worker suicides have shaken public trust and are daily reminders of the public sector's shortcomings. Moreover, traditional civil society models that deal with these issues in other countries, such as NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and GONGOS (government-organized NGOs that act similarly to NGOs), have not been able to muster an adequate response; instead, they've been criticized for being irresponsible and bureaucratic at best, corrupt and scandal-ridden at worst.

Increasingly dissatisfied with the status quo, China's rising middle class is demanding a bigger say in how society operates. Yet given the restrictive political environment surrounding any type of collective organizing, people find their options limited. In the past few years, however, a new form of social media-driven charitable giving campaign has emerged as an innovative and effective channel for Chinese citizens seeking to make a difference on social issues and to present political appeals. We call these campaigns "subversive

Deng Fei's Free Lunch campaign serves more than 70,000 low-income schoolchildren living in rural China daily.



PHOTOGRAPH BY ZHUI YING/IMAGINECHINA

charities,” a new model of civil society activism in a society rife with political constraints on collective action and public fundraising.

Neither NGO nor GONGO, subversive charities are a breed unto themselves. These social media-driven initiatives are not considered permanent; they’re technically charitable “projects” rather than organizations. As such, they sidestep the government regulations regarding nonprofits, and their activities are seen as politically safe. Nonetheless, distinct from online petitions or fundraising campaigns in the United States, subversive charities in China, on the surface purporting only to raise money, are actually politically oriented: micro-donations—made online—cast “votes” of support for the cause at hand and are a cover for an implicit rebuke of the government.

Prominent examples of subversive charities—including Deng Fei’s “Free Lunch,” Rou Tangseng’s “Food Delivery Party,” and Wang Keqin’s “Love Save Pneumoconiosis”—have already been remarkably successful, sparking an outpouring of support and raising millions of renminbi (RMB) for the causes they back. (See “Three Subversive Charities” on page 44.) These campaigns are distinguished by innovative fundraising and advocacy techniques, public calls for accountability and transparency, and mechanisms to engage ordinary Chinese citizens. The Internet is the principal mobilization and diffusion tool that drives membership in these programs, and through the Internet, these campaigns have evolved beyond being simple charity projects into outlets for democratic exercise and citizen empowerment.



CONSTRAINTS ON TRADITIONAL CHARITIES

Traditional nonprofit models have not been well suited to China. In most countries, NGOs frequently receive significant government support and also rely on many small donations from large numbers of people. But in China, that traditional approach faces a number of operational obstacles, largely due to the Chinese government's restrictive policies. China prohibits NGOs of all kinds from soliciting money directly from the public without government endorsement, and the sources of donations and grants are monitored by the government, particularly if the funds come from overseas. The government strictly limits the activities that NGOs can get involved in to non-politically sensitive activities and also limits the geographic areas where these activities can take place.

In China there are two types of NGOs: traditional, established "top-down" NGOs, and "bottom-up" grassroots NGOs. Top-down NGOs, despite being called "non-governmental," are in fact initiated, sponsored, and directed by the government; the government typically assigns government officials as executives of the organizations. They were established to help the government manage social resources, and they tend to enjoy preferential policies and financial support, not only from the government, but also from the media (as publicity), and corporations (as corporate donations). These NGOs, however, are hindered by complex bureaucratic processes and are often unable to respond effectively to emerging issues if they do not perfectly align with the government's agenda.

Furthermore, a recent stream of corruption scandals involving misappropriation of funds by one of China's most prominent top-down NGOs, the Red Cross China, has seriously damaged the credibility of that organization, and other traditional top-down charities by extension. According to "The Report on 2012 China Charitable Donations,"¹ released by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, total donation amounts had dropped for the second year in a row, and donations received by the Red Cross shrank by nearly a quarter. People have become increasingly skeptical of the larger, more bureaucratic charity

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groups, questioning their transparency, efficiency, and execution.

Smaller grassroots NGOs operate outside of the government's agenda, but they face a number of formidable challenges. A critical issue for these organizations is the Chinese government's long-standing suspicion of collective action of all kinds. Governmental authorities continue to monitor certain groups, including advocacy, religious, and policy-oriented organizations, watching for any signs that the groups are drawing attention to government inaction or inadequacy. Even direct service organizations are subject to scrutiny. These groups exist in a perpetual state of uncertainty, facing an uphill climb year after year to maintain their license to operate.

Many civil society organizations—trying to avoid the government's restrictive policies—do not even register as NGOs. The NGO Research Institute at Tsinghua University has estimated that more than half of the one million NGOs on the mainland are not registered. They operate underground or in legal gray zones. Instead of referring to themselves as NGOs, they claim to be "informal groups" and have trouble fundraising through traditional channels. Subversive charities, by their very nature, defy all of these restrictions.

THE INTERNET AS A REVOLUTIONARY PLATFORM

The Internet is the key to the power of the subversive charity. Often called the 21st-century platform for revolutionary action, it has the potential to help democratize society by making it easy and inexpensive to create and distribute information and ideas.

In China, where in December 2013 an estimated 618 million people were Internet users, that potential is equally real.² The ability

Three Subversive Charities

Here are three of the leading charitable initiatives that have harnessed social media to create unique grassroots campaigns to raise awareness, support, and funding for overlooked causes.

FREE LUNCH

FOUNDER:	YEAR FOUNDED:	AMOUNT RAISED:
Deng Fei	2011	73 million RMB¹⁰

Deng Fei, a former journalist, founded Free Lunch after seeing schoolchildren in poor rural areas going without lunch. The widely popular campaign now covers five provinces and has directly guided a 16 billion RMB government program to expand the service. Free Lunch has provided more than 10 billion lunches since its inception, and lunches are now available to between 70,000 and 80,000 rural schoolchildren every day.

FOOD DELIVERY PARTY

FOUNDER:	YEAR FOUNDED:	AMOUNT RAISED:
Rou Tangseng	2011	3 million RMB

Rou Tangseng, a former journalist, founded the Food Delivery Party to solicit donations for the families of jailed dissidents, many of whom were struggling to get by. Because of its sensitive nature, Rou has been detained and questioned numerous times regarding his activities. In all, the Food Delivery Party has supported more than one dozen families and engaged more than 10,000 people.

LOVE SAVE PNEUMOCONIOSIS

FOUNDER:	YEAR FOUNDED:	AMOUNT RAISED:
Wang Keqin	2011	13 million RMB¹¹

Love Save Pneumoconiosis was started by Wang Keqin to generate donations to support miners living with pneumoconiosis (also known as black lung disease) and their families. The Chinese government has been reluctant to provide occupational disability benefits, and many miners live in poverty once they are no longer able to work. The campaign has generated a huge wave of criticism of the occupational health system.

to move information to many people in real time has transformed China's media from a tightly closed system to a relatively open one, which serves as the primary site of political and civic discourse in China. China's diverse Internet-based communication channels—including bulletin boards, online forums, online chat rooms, social network sites (such as Renren, Douban), Sina Weibo, and the more recent Tencent Weixin—have improved the survival rate of new information produced and circulated by Chinese citizens under a persistently high level of state censorship.

One of the most prominent forces for change has been the Sina Weibo service. Since its launch in 2009, Weibo has established itself as the Chinese citizenry's go-to source for live news, gossip, memes, and discussion of hot-button topics. Though Weibo enjoys a good relationship with the government and employs multiple layers of self-censorship, including blocking searches and deleting posts, the platform has nevertheless been able to foster candid public engagement.

A number of high-profile incidents have shown Weibo's power as a means for people to push back against the agendas of institutionalized powers: its Wenzhou train crash coverage of 2011 challenged state media's official version of events; food safety scandals have gone viral, with huge financial consequences for misbehaving companies (for example, the dairy company Sanlu Group, which was involved in an adulterated powdered milk scandal and was forced to halt production); and evidence of government corruption (for example, widely circulated photographs of local government officials wearing luxury watches costing hundreds of times their salaries) have brought down many government officials. Some scholars have posited that Weibo creates a public dynamic akin to Michel Foucault's theory of "surrounding gaze,"³ whereby widespread and decentralized observations amount to a forceful form of public expression, one that encourages collaboration and sanctions bad behavior.

More recently, crowdfunding (in the Western sense) has also taken root on the Chinese Internet. Websites like DemoHour and Musikid allow people to fund concerts, avant-garde films, and other projects that might otherwise be economically unfeasible.⁴ The World Bank predicts that the Chinese crowdfunding market could grow to \$50 billion by 2025.⁵ Crowdfunding is popular in other countries (via vehicles such as GoFundMe, IndieGoGo, and Kickstarter in the United States), but Chinese Internet-driven crowdfunding has opened a new channel for collaborative engagement. During the past 30 years Chinese citizens were introduced to economic choice; crowdfunding has now introduced the idea that these choices do not have to be individual.

Is it any wonder, then, that the collective power of crowdfunding eventually met the political sensibilities of Weibo, creating a new mechanism for civic action, with decentralized grassroots participation at its heart? Although labor actions, land disputes, and NIMBY (not in my back yard) environmental protests are all common occurrences in China today, the protests have mostly been confined to small geographic areas and are generally ad hoc. At the national level, few causes have been able to unite and galvanize large segments of the general public. This has been by design; as recent studies have shown, Chinese Internet censorship is not geared toward shutting down criticism of the government, as is commonly thought, but rather toward preventing collective action.⁶ But all that is changing, in large part because of the development of the new subversive charities.

SUBVERSIVE CHARITIES AS MASS MOVEMENTS

The new civil society models are a critical development for the Chinese people. Subversive charities allow for the alleviation of previously unaddressed social ills in China. Wang's campaign, for example, broadcast through Weibo the interests of coal miners, whose "voice was severely suppressed by factory managers and local governments."⁷ These charities also potentially represent the future of civil society organizing. Without the legacy of an entrenched NGO sector, social entrepreneurs in China today have in some ways been able to leapfrog old models. Deng has referred to his efforts as "performance art," a phrase that aptly captures the essence of these new forms of civil society. They are experimental, and like performance art, they rely on spectatorship.

In the subversive charity model, the Internet serves not only as a resource mobilization tool, but more important, also as a diffusion and advocacy tool. This latter function is the key to understanding how contentions unfold and evolve into publicly recognized social movements in China. Social movement theory predicts that a successful movement will rely heavily on pre-existing social structure and internal social networks, particularly organizational backbones. The Internet, however, compensates for the absence of the aforementioned elements in the Chinese political process and successfully raises the general public's awareness of public engagement.

Subversive charities also provide an outlet for ordinary Chinese to participate in a democratic exercise. The nature of giving embraced by these campaigns—tiny individual contributions—means that contributions can also be understood as signatures on a petition, or even votes. In a departure from most fundraising campaigns, the total amount raised, although certainly important to beneficiaries, is almost secondary to the number of people mobilized. Even though on the surface subversive charities undertake the relatively innocuous goal of raising money, these campaigns aren't simply charities but a new type of mass movement.

ESSENTIAL FEATURES OF SUBVERSIVE CHARITIES

Subversive charities have several distinct attributes.

Pioneer innovative fundraising techniques | In contrast to traditional Chinese charities, subversive charities have devised creative ways to use the Internet as a fundraising tool. At a subversive charity, "fundraising" sometimes comes under the guise of selling something. Consider how Deng's Free Lunch campaign made use of Taobao auctions in which people were invited to purchase "essays" for 1 RMB apiece. (Taobao is the largest consumer e-commerce platform in China, operated by Alibaba Group.) The text of the essay simply read "thank you." Rou's Food Delivery Party has come up with many other Taobao "products" to auction, such as dinner with respected civil rights scholars and activists. He is also encouraging Taobao sellers to sell goods in the Food Delivery Party Taobao Shop at a premium price (with a portion of proceeds going as a donation to the Food Delivery Party) and hosting donation-based raffles.

Though auctions, lotteries, raffles, and donated sales are commonly used in Western charitable fundraising, the combination of social media and e-commerce is unique to China and is an effective way to get around restrictions on NGO fundraising.

With subversive charities, of course, "fundraising" can also come under the guise of publicity. "We had a hard time broadcasting 'Love

Save Pneumoconiosis’ until I turned to Weibo,” Wang recounts. “A key tipping point for our campaign was when Chen Yao, known as the ‘Weibo Queen’ [for having upward of 70 million Weibo followers] forwarded our Weibo post and other celebrities forwarded hers afterwards. Donations we received shot up in the following two days.”⁸ The level of public engagement is enabled by the popularity of the social entrepreneurs who founded them, all journalists who had sizable followings that they were able to harness in service to their causes.

Enable participation, advocacy, and democracy | Micro-donations are more than financial contributions. They should be understood as votes of support for the cause, which is often sensitive or unpopular with the government. The fundraising acts as a cover for the implicit criticism. Most donations are small. What is impressive is the number of people donating, not the size of the donations. Deng said the Free Lunch campaign has raised close to 2 million individual donations; the average donation is about 35 RMB, or approximately \$6.

The small donation size and Weibo’s visibility help lower both the financial and the political barriers to participation, because there is solidarity and safety in numbers. Furthermore, the small donation size presents a more level playing field than in the offline NGO world. The success of a particular campaign has more to do with marketing skill and emotional resonance than alignment with government agendas.

As Deng recounts, the goal in the early days of his campaign was “to attract official and social attention to this matter.” Wang put the midterm goal of “Love Save Pneumoconiosis” as “integrating civil society resources to push policy makers to promulgate regulatory stipulations and to establish social assistance systems.” Rou echoes this sentiment: “By definition, my campaigns are surely civil activity. The common thing they have is not to financially support specific people but to gain social capital and strengthen organizing bonds between people. Therefore, to be more accurate, these campaigns should be called social movements.”

Create accountability and transparency | The campaigns’ genesis from Weibo and direct connection to the public require them to provide clear visibility into the use of funds. “At the very beginning, it was volunteers who donated and organized assistance activities. Fund management was crude and disordered,” Wang remembers, “then I cooperated with a professional fund management team. We follow strict rules and keep all expenses transparent. Transparency is key to a nonprofit organization.” Free Lunch campaign has a strict set of internal controls: schools receiving donations must post how the money is being used on their own Weibo accounts, and Free Lunch employs third-party independent financial auditing and IT support. In some cases, there are even video cameras installed in cafeterias of schools that receive funds.

Address neglected niche causes | Subversive charities are drawing much-needed attention to several causes in China that desperately need support, including free lunches for poor schoolchildren in rural areas, support for the families of jailed dissidents, disability compensation for coal miners who contracted black lung disease, combating biases about AIDS, poverty reduction programs in rural China, and support for children with autism. In some cases, the issues had previously been ignored because they are politically sensitive, and in others, there had simply been no catalyst for attention.

Empower ordinary Chinese citizens | The most controversial and ambitious campaign, Rou’s Food Delivery Party, explicitly aims to put

ordinary citizens in charge of its long-term governance, randomly selecting “steering committee” members from the donor pool. But Rou wants to go even further. He gave his campaign the name Food Delivery Party because he didn’t envision it merely as a fundraiser but as an Internet-based political party. The 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square protests recently passed, highlighting a long period of ambivalence toward confrontational civil society activism such as mass protest. Chinese people, particularly the young, market-minded middle class, are unlikely to take to the streets, but they are politically aware, critical, and engaged with the world. Such netizens are much more likely to take to forms of activism that involve smartphones and Alipay than to sit-ins and hunger strikes. In Rou’s words, “We’re not doing charity work, we’re a social campaign with noticeable political orientation. As Immanuel Kant said, there are three aspects of civil rights: economics, politics, and social organization. We’ve discussed the first two a lot but neglected the right of social organization, without which we might be unable to safeguard the previous two rights.”

UNCERTAIN LONG-TERM PROSPECTS

There’s much to be celebrated in the gains of subversive charities in China, but it’s important to recognize their vulnerabilities as well as their strengths. Political sensitivity, leadership succession, and the absence of person-to-person interaction all add ambiguity and uncertainty to the long-term prospects of these campaigns.

Risk of focusing on politically sensitive issues | Subversive charity campaigns vary greatly in their relationships to the government. Some work closely with government, but many are channels for dissent. And in China, government dissent carries with it a risk, making the long-term prospects for these campaigns uncertain.

Free Lunch campaign, for example, “attached great importance to cooperation with local governments” from the beginning, says Deng. He worked with local governments to establish matching programs: for every RMB the government contributes to buying lunches, Free Lunch would match two more. The project has received plaudits from mainstream media and government leaders. Deng likens it to a sort of pilot program for the government and views the campaign’s growth and eventual adoption by the government as “a great example of how government and civil society can work together to solve social problems.”

Rou’s project supporting the families of jailed dissidents sits at the other end of the spectrum. His activities have been heavily monitored by the government and his campaign has not generated as much attention or money as Free Lunch. His Taobao shop has been shut down, and he has personally been restricted from jobs, from publishing columns and books, and from starting a business. Rou says he had predicted these outcomes. “I was curious about the possibility of making use of Internet tools to challenge autocracy,” he says. “I predicted the Taobao shop would be hammered by the government, but my plan was to find a way out. First, we needed wide participation, so we made it fun, with low barriers to entry. We were not seeking to make a ton of money from it, but rather to raise awareness and participation. According to my knowledge, there were 4,400 political prisoners. By the standard of 120,000 RMB per year for each family, we would have needed more than 500 million RMB a year to support all of them. Donations from the Taobao shop are small compared to the total amount needed. But by opening the shop, we spread our ideas.

Besides, we could test the waters, and each hammering from the government could also become a good opportunity for promotion.”

Such outcomes indicate that as novel as they are, subversive charity campaigns still face significant barriers when they take up more sensitive causes, and the campaigns that have the greatest subversive potential achieve the least success. Because the Chinese government retains censorship control over the Internet, having a nonprofit sector built around Internet mechanisms is an obvious vulnerability. In some ways, Internet-based campaigns may be even more susceptible to surveillance than traditional campaigns based on personal relationships and the printed word.

Overdependence on charismatic leaders | The campaigns we’ve highlighted were all founded on the personal charisma of popular Weibo micro-bloggers who had already achieved success as investigative journalists. Their reputations enabled them to win public trust quickly. They were also skilled in leveraging their personal experiences to advance their causes. That helped the campaigns gather quick support, but it also meant that they were inherently biased; supporters may have been drawn to the cause more by the personalities and stories than by the underlying causes or the organization’s effectiveness. Rou, for example, had always envisioned democratic management and decentralization as the two most important values of the Food Delivery Party. He thought that supporters understood and embraced those values as he did. As he tried to step down and pass on leadership to the committee, however, donations dropped from 13,000 RMB per day to just 1,000.

The path of Free Lunch campaign suggests that in the end, more established forms of support are necessary for long-term survival. Today, Free Lunch is run by the China Social Welfare Education Foundation under the Ministry of Civil Affairs. It receives about 30 percent of its donations from corporate sponsors such as Baidu, Volvo, and Pingan Insurance. Moreover, soon after Free Lunch took off, the State Council announced its own program, earmarking 16 billion RMB per year to feed impoverished rural students.

Of course, only certain types of initiatives can even access institutional support, and what some call sustainability, others call co-optation. “I once tried to talk [Deng] out of working too closely with the government but it didn’t work,” says Rou. “As for me, I will not give this regime any opportunity to make things better, which might consolidate its legitimacy. I reject having any kind of interaction with government at any level.” For Rou, Food Delivery Party’s long-term survival is moot; his campaign is but a stepping stone, a training device for Chinese citizens to get a taste of activism.

Lack of person-to-person interaction | Social dynamics in traditional social activism models, such as “collective effervescence” generated in crowds and strong loyalty derived from group identification, are particularly evanescent in Internet-based campaigns. Moreover, intimate social ties and support, collective solidarities, ritual actions, and rhetorical displays are absent in such campaigns. All these are crucial to sustaining any movement. Decentralized, Internet-based campaigns, by construction, lack internal group dynamics, and this deficit may prove a critical flaw in the subversive charity model that has emerged so far.

Rou draws a sharp line between himself and Deng’s and Wang’s campaigns, which he considers “public welfare without any political intention.” Still, he acknowledges, there is a benefit in people bonding together to build social capital, no matter what the cause.

Others, such as the detained activist Mo Zhixi, whose family received help from the Food Delivery Party, criticize participants of online campaigns as middle-class people concerned only with satisfying their illusion of political participation or trying to lessen their own guilt. At the end of the day, Mo says, “When keyboardism and cynicism prevail, people will be less willing to go to street to fight. Free Lunch is a good thing, but we still need to be cautious of any excessive reliance on Internet.”

IS CHINA READY FOR SUBVERSIVE CHARITIES?

Subversive charities are still in an embryonic stage. They have existed for only a few years, vary greatly in their reach, agenda, and ideology, and even resist being compared with each other. Their long-term survival strategies are potentially questionable, and it remains to be seen whether the Chinese people are ready for long-term engagement with these types of philanthropic campaigns.

Yet, as the latest report by China Charity and Donation Information Center suggests, and as we believe, they are off to a strong start. In contrast to the decline in large donations (the number of donations of more than 100 million RMB dropped from 41 in 2011 to 34 in 2012) and the decline in donations to some top-down NGOs (Red Cross China’s donations declined 23.68 percent in 2012), online micro-donations are becoming increasingly popular, to the extent that there are now online donation platforms featuring dozens of different causes.⁹

But as these campaigns become more popular and larger numbers of the general public participate, they run the risk of becoming institutionalized or coopted by the government, and consequently they lose their subversive intent. “There is a good chance of being hijacked by popularism,” says Rou. “Honestly, I’m afraid of predicting what will happen in the future. I’m just devoted to doing what we must do, with the least expectations; that’s all.”

In the coming years, the Chinese may become inundated and then inured to such movements, and the campaigns may lose their bite, fading into the background like the dozens of causes and petitions Americans encounter daily. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that at this current moment, something novel, exciting, and widely galvanizing is happening on the Chinese Internet. ■

NOTES

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