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Resistance through Accommodation: A Citizenship Approach to Migrant Worker NGOs in China

Małgorzata Jakimów

University of Sheffield, UK

ABSTRACT

Based on ethnographic fieldwork among migrant worker NGOs conducted between 2011 and 2016, this article employs critical theories of citizenship to illustrate how migrant worker NGOs use a strategy of ‘resistance through accommodation’ to re-shape the citizenship regime and discourse in China. The dominant literature on labour activism tends to discount the potential for migrant worker NGOs to undertake resistance, on account of their dependency upon the state and the market. The article contends that while NGOs must engage in relations with the state and the market to ensure their own survival, their activism does not ultimately centre on either resisting or accommodating these actors directly, but rather upon a broader engagement process aimed at the strategic purpose of ‘citizenship transformation’.

Introduction

China’s economic growth has long been predicated upon the availability of an easily controlled, disposable and docile labour force of migrant workers. This has been facilitated by the legal, material and social inequality between rural-to-urban migrants and urban *hukou* holders. Yet, in the past decade or so, an increasing number of migrant workers have sought to resist mistreatment in workplaces by suing their employers or launching strikes. While these forms of civic activism have gained prominence in the literature, the forms of activism which go beyond labour claims, and which are undertaken by grassroots, non-governmental organisations (NGOs)¹ set up by migrant workers remain under-studied. It is commonly understood that the potential for these organisations to undertake resistance or bring about political change is severely limited, due to their low capacity and dependence on both the state and the market.² In particular, the state-corporatist and neo-Gramscian approaches to civil society deployed in the studies of migrant worker NGOs tend to question their capability to introduce broader political change.

CONTACT Małgorzata Jakimów  m.jakimow@sheffield.ac.uk

¹Most literature refers to these organisations as ‘labour NGOs’. However, in order to distinguish the NGOs set up by migrant workers in this study from those which are set up by external actors as well as migrant workers, and in order to reflect their engagement with issues going beyond labour, they are referred to as ‘migrant worker NGOs’ in this article.

²Ivan Franceschini, ‘Labour NGOs in China: a real force for political change?’, *The China Quarterly* 218, (2014), pp. 474–492; Ching Kwan Lee and Yuan Shen, ‘The anti-solidarity machine?: labour nongovernmental organisations in China’, in Sarosh Kuruvilla et al., eds., *From Iron Rice Bowl to Informalization. Markets, Workers and the State in a Changing China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), pp. 173–187; Jude Howell, ‘Shall we dance? Welfare incorporation and the politics of state-labour NGO relations in China’, *The China Quarterly* 223, (2015), pp. 702–723; Chloé Froissart, ‘Using the law as ‘harmonious weapon’: the ambiguities of legal activism in favour of migrant workers in China’, *Journal of Civil Society* 10(3), (2014), pp. 255–272.

This article aims to problematise this conventional approach to the study of NGO resistance in China by linking the civic activism of migrant worker NGOs to a wider process of 'citizenship transformation'. Through a detailed investigation of the discursive and performative methods used by NGOs to meet their wider social and individual goals, the article argues that while NGOs rely upon the resources provided by the state and the market for their survival, they can simultaneously use these resources to resist the contemporary formulation of citizenship in China. Drawing upon the critical theories of citizenship, and particularly the approaches to activist citizenship as a way of contesting the status of underprivileged groups, the article proposes that 'resistance through accommodation' represents a key strategy in the process of 'citizenship transformation' in China. An analysis of fieldwork investigations conducted among 18 migrant worker NGOs in four provinces in China in the years 2011–2016 reveals that NGOs adapt official discourses and utilise channels of the state and the market strategically to enable their own survival and to meet the goals of social change for migrant workers, which has the potential to bring about a wider transformation of citizenship in China.

This strategy challenges the argument that migrant worker NGOs are not a catalyst of political change in China, by making visible the incremental process of citizenship transformation within which 'resistance through accommodation' plays an indispensable part. However, 'citizenship transformation' is a process of social and political change in which resistance is not necessarily aligned against the state or the market, and accommodation does not have to equate to a wholesale co-option to the demands of both. Instead, resistance is aligned predominantly against the structural characteristics of citizenship (various forms of citizenship discrimination, limits to citizenship rights, as well as neoliberal discourse of citizenship justifying capitalist forms of exploitation), and only targets the state (covertly) when it is seen as responsible for such mistreatment. In that context, accommodation, that is the utilisation of the state- or market-defined language and channels, facilitates, rather than prevents, resistance.

Current Approaches to Migrant Worker NGOs' Activism in China

The existing studies on labour NGOs tend to approach these organisations from a civil society or labour studies perspective. The majority of studies discussing labour NGOs in the context of civil society formation in China tend to employ state-corporatism³ or neo-Gramscian approaches,⁴ as opposed to the liberal civil society theory prominent in the scholarship of the 1990s. State-corporatism and neo-Gramscian theories provide a structuralist approach which centres its enquiry on understanding the conditions for activism, rather than the organisations' potential for bringing social change.⁵ On the one hand, state-corporatism treats civil society in China as co-opted to the state, and therefore it sees the liberal civil society theory which clearly separates civil society and the state as inadequate to explain the conditions for civil society formation in China.⁶ On the other hand, studies on labour NGOs which employ the neo-Gramscian approach view civil society not as a sphere of freedom, where particular groups' interests are represented independently, but rather as a site for the reproduction of capitalism, given the reliance of NGOs upon market-based fund-raising.⁷ In the case of labour NGOs, proponents of this approach view the NGOs' struggle for survival as necessarily taking priority over their proclaimed values

³In Chinese studies this approach was adopted under the label of 'socialist corporatism', 'agency corporatism', 'semi-civil society' and 'state-led society'. Shawn Shieh, 'Beyond corporatism and civil society. Three modes of state-NGO interactions in China' in Jonathan Schwartz et al., eds., *State and Society Responses to Social Welfare Needs in China. Serving the people* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 22–42.

⁴Jude Howell uses this categorisation in her work, for instance in 'Civil Society, Corporatism and Capitalism', *Journal of Comparative Asian Development* 11(2), (2012), pp. 271–297.

⁵Timothy Hildebrandt, *Social Organisations and the Authoritarian State in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 8.

⁶For examples of such scholarship with reference to labour NGOs see Jennifer Hsu, 'A state creation? Civil society and migrant organizations' in Reza Hasmath et al., eds., *China in an Era of Transition: Understanding Contemporary State and Society Actors* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 127–144; Jennifer Hsu and Reza Hasmath, 'The local corporatist state and NGO relations in China', *Journal of Contemporary China* 23 (87), (2014), pp. 1–17.

⁷Catherine Goetze, 'Whose civil society is it anyway?' in Yongnian Zheng et al., eds., *China's Opening Society: The Non-State Sector and Governance* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 36–53.

and idealised social aims.⁸ However, while state-corporatism explains the behaviour of the Chinese authoritarian regime, it fails to capture the subtleties of the state-society relations, and particularly ignores forms of resistance among the 'co-opted' organisations.⁹ Similarly, while the neo-Grasmanian approach justly points to the importance of funding, it understates the potential of labour NGOs to become a site of resistance, because it overlooks the agency of NGOs in their relationship with the market actors.

In a similar vein, the labour studies scholars tend to recognise labour NGOs as actors able to resist social and political order only if these undertake collective bargaining and contribute to the formation of the labour movement.¹⁰ Some labour studies scholars, similarly to the state-corporatist framework, consider NGOs the 'transmission belts' of state discourses and policies. By working within the ramifications of legal frameworks imposed by the state, these organisations are viewed as perpetuating the state's 'rule by law', supporting its control over society, and therefore lacking resistance qualities.¹¹ These studies adopt a common understanding of resistance as being aligned against the state (the many levels of the state and the many forms in which it deploys its powers, including the law).

The civil society approaches and labour studies both focus on relations between the state, market and society. However, this focus obfuscates the NGOs' own disinterest in resisting the state or the market and it deemphasises the migrant NGOs' self-proclaimed *raison d'être*: supporting migrant workers in their struggle to become included, rightful, justly remunerated and respected citizens. As the material from the fieldwork will illustrate, in order to meet that goal, some migrant NGOs do undertake a form of resistance, but one that does not necessarily target the state. Instead, it is more often deployed against the many forms of mistreatment of migrant workers, and it only rarely targets the state as the cause of such mistreatment. Moreover, neither state nor market is a uniform entity; while NGOs might cooperate with some actors within the state and the market, they might resist some others, further complicating the idea of resistance.¹² It is precisely this flexibility, changeability and juggling of strategies of resistance and accommodation which characterise migrant worker NGOs' behaviour in China and create a chance for wider change.

Understanding NGOs' Activism through Critical Theories of Citizenship

This article introduces the notion of 'resistance through accommodation' in order to overcome the limitations of existing studies discussed above. Resistance is understood as the instance of challenging some aspects of the system which sustains the inferior and vulnerable position of migrant workers in China. Accommodation is understood as the adoption of the discourses and tools offered by the state and the market that can be seen as useful in attaining NGOs' goals of both survival and resistance (as defined above).

Similar strategies of working within the system to create change 'from within' in China have been presented before, under different names and in various contexts. Some authors view the adoption of state-placating methods as an effective technique of pushing for change in China.¹³ Such discursive

⁸Ching Kwan Lee and Yuan Shen, 'The anti-solidarity'; Ivan Franceschini, 'Labour NGOs'.

⁹Shawn Shieh, 'Beyond corporatism'; Howell, 'Civil society'.

¹⁰Yi Xu, 'Labour non-governmental organizations in China: mobilizing rural migrant workers', *Journal of Industrial Studies* 55(2), (2013), pp. 243–259; Diana Fu, 'Disguised collective action in China', *Comparative Political Studies* 50(4), (2016), pp. 1–29, doi: 10.1177/0010414015626437; Kris King-Chi Chan, 'Class or citizenship? Debating workplace conflict in China', *Journal of Comparative Asia* 42(2), (2012), pp. 308–327; Eli Friedman and Ching Kwan Lee, 'Remaking the world of Chinese labour: a 30-year retrospective', *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 48(3), (2010), pp. 523–524.

¹¹Eli Friedman and Ching Kwan Lee, 'Remaking the world', p. 523; Ching Kwan Lee and Yuan Shen, 'The anti-solidarity'; Chloé Froissart, 'Using the law', p. 257; Ivan Franceschini, 'Labour NGOs', p. 482.

¹²This was also noted by other studies, such as Ivan Franceschini, 'Labour NGOs'; Jude Howell, 'Shall we dance', pp.14–15; and with reference to rural plaintiffs Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹³See strategies of 'embedded social activism', 'self-imposed censorship' and 'depoliticization' in Peter Ho, 'Self-imposed censorship and de-politicized politics in China: green activism or a color revolution?' in Peter Ho et al., eds., *China's Embedded Activism: Opportunities and Constraints of a Social Movement* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 36–37.

strategies of depoliticisation have also been noted in relation to labour NGOs.¹⁴ Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li observe how atomised civic actors launch forms of 'rightful resistance', that is resistance to the power elites (usually at a local level) who have failed to implement the existing law or did not meet a promise.¹⁵

'Resistance through accommodation' differs from these approaches, as it does not necessarily take the state, either local or central, as its target; the target of resistance is dispersed and not clearly articulated. It is usually labelled as 'the social system' (*shehui zhidu*) by migrant worker NGOs, and might, depending on the context, refer to the state's polices, capitalist exploitation or popular derogatory discourses on migrant workers. Such 'resistance through accommodation' often takes the form of seemingly 'apolitical' acts, such as cultural productions, discursive strategies or use of legal channels, rather than overt protests. Moreover, in contrast to these existing approaches of 'change from within', this article seeks to highlight how 'resistance through accommodation' does not aim to oppose the political regime, but rather serves as an important strategy in negotiating citizenship in China.

Among these studies which acknowledge labour NGOs' resistance qualities, only very few link them to the quest for 'citizenship'. Huang Yan is the only scholar who has engaged with citizenship theories to assess labour NGOs' contribution to the promotion of citizenship rights, and particularly industrial citizenship among migrant workers.¹⁶ Ching Kwan Lee's¹⁷ approach employs Marshallian liberal theory understanding of citizenship (where citizenship is understood as rights-endowed membership in a nation-state) without accounting for non-legalistic aspects of citizenship,¹⁸ such as identity and discourse, or for organised actors such as NGOs. On the other hand, while O'Brien and Li recognise citizenship as a process in the making,¹⁹ the citizenship aspect of their 'rightful resistance' theory only engages with citizenship theories marginally and refers to atomised rural plaintiffs.

This article aims to expand further the theoretical understanding of the relationship between strategies of 'change from within' and citizenship focus initiated by the above studies. I propose that the notion of 'resistance through accommodation' is to be embedded within the citizenship studies in order to overcome the limitations of the approaches to civil society and resistance presented in the previous section, and in order to direct the enquiry towards the much under-studied 'citizenship transformation' aspect of migrant worker NGOs' activism.

In order to do so, this article employs the Engin Isin and Grieg Nielsen 'acts of citizenship' approach, as this theory deemphasises the structuralist focus, such as 'political opportunity structure', which dominates current studies of NGOs in China. Instead, it privileges the focus on how agents can shape and transform structure, even if they are 'illegal', marginalised, excluded and weak. State-corporatist theory privileges the state's agency, and deems citizens marginal to the process of civil society formation in China, as it views them as too weak to affect the structure. Yet if we read history through 'rupture', 'discontinuity' and through marginalised voices against which the dominant discourses have been formed, we can find that the excluded groups have played an important, if not crucial, role in the formation of citizenship.²⁰

¹⁴Marielle Stigum Gleiss, 'How Chinese labour NGOs legitimize their identity and voice', *China Information* 28(3), (2014), pp.362–381; Ivan Franceschini, 'Labour NGOs', pp. 483 and 487; Jennifer Hsu, 'Quietly, quietly, quietly: Beijing's migrant civil society organisations' in Melissa Butcher and Selvaraj Velayutham, eds., *Dissent and Cultural Resistance in Asia's Cities* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 53–71.

¹⁵Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance*, p. 2.

¹⁶Huang Yan, 'Chuangxin gongminquan: laogong NGO de nihe celüe' ['Innovating citizenship: labour NGOs' mixed strategy'], *Guojia xingzheng xueyuan xuebao* [Journal of Chinese Academy of Governance] 14, (2012), pp. 100–106.

¹⁷Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law: Labour Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

¹⁸Taihui Guo, 'Rights in action: the impact of Chinese migrant workers' resistance on citizenship rights', *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 19(4), (2014), p. 422.

¹⁹Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance*, p. 120.

²⁰Engin Isin, *Being Political: Genealogies of Citizenship* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 4.

In the structuralist, liberal approach, citizenship is understood as a state-defined structure of legal rights (citizenship status) and established practices of citizenship.²¹ Authors, such as Solinger, have long focused on citizenship through the prism of legal inequality between migrant workers and the urban *hukou*-holders. The 'acts of citizenship' framework transgresses the structural understanding of citizenship as status and practices, and instead defines citizenship as a process in the making, which is being actively shaped by citizens themselves. According to the 'acts of citizenship' framework, even underprivileged actors can resist, and ultimately influence and reshape their underprivileged position by 'acting as citizens'. A citizen is somebody who puts claims forward as a political subject, and who, through performing 'acts of citizenship', that is acts which go beyond existing laws, borders and conventions, shapes citizenship status, practice and/or discourse more widely.²² 'Acts of citizenship' theory differs from the existing approaches to civil society in China, because it decentres the structuralist focus on state-society relations, by directing attention to agent-driven negotiation of political participation.

However, the strategy of 'resistance through accommodation' points to the need to expand the theory itself to successfully account for the authoritarian state's context. The 'acts of citizenship' framework was originally created to account for the ability of illegal migrants in democratic states to ascertain their political agency. The authors viewed the transformative power of 'acts of citizenship' for the existing citizenship regimes and discourses as only possible if the actors performing these acts 'call law into question or even break it'.²³ However, this article argues that in an authoritarian context, such as China, acts of citizenship do not have to resist the state directly—indeed, they can be more transformative of citizenship status and established practices if they take a non-confrontational form. Moreover, appealing to state language and using state-defined channels does not make these acts less 'political'. Appealing directly to politics in post-1989 China is not only a risky strategy, it often falls on deaf ears due to apathetic attitudes to political activism of the post-1980s generation.²⁴ Moreover, in order to spread and be effective under the stringent censorship of social media in China, these acts have to be presented in a depoliticised way, one that accommodates rather than resists the state-prescribed discourses and channels. Indeed, acts of citizenship can be a more effective form of political contestation if they employ a strategy of 'resistance through accommodation'. As the examples below will illustrate, in a state where free expression is blocked, open grievances unwelcomed and politics a taboo word, the state laws and discourses become a fluid site of citizenship contestation, and while engagement with them can reinforce the existing regime, as so much literature argues, it can also help to transform it.

Fieldwork Investigations

This article is based on fieldwork conducted from 2011 to 2016 among 18 migrant-worker-oriented NGOs located in Zhejiang, Beijing, Guangdong and Hubei. The majority of studies on migrant NGOs focus on one location only (Guangdong).²⁵ While this article bases its findings on fieldwork among all these organisations, the majority of vignettes come from fieldwork with seven NGOs set up by migrant workers with their own experiences of *dagong* (see Table 1). The focus on NGOs set up by migrant workers for migrant workers is crucial, because it allows the treatment of NGOs' activities as a form of migrant workers' civic activism.²⁶

²¹Such as Dorothy Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China. Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law*; Merle Goldman, *From comrade to citizen: The struggle for political rights in China*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

²²Engin Isin, 'Theorizing acts of citizenship' in Engin Isin et al., eds., *Acts of Citizenship* (London: Zed Books, 2008), pp. 15–43. For an application of the theory in the Chinese context see Małgorzata Jakimów, 'Understanding citizenship beyond the *hukou* system: the role of migrant worker NGOs in transformation of citizenship in China' in Zhonghua Guo et al., eds., *Theorizing Chinese Citizenship* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), pp. 111–132.

²³Engin Isin, 'Theorizing acts', p. 39.

²⁴Stanley Rosen, 'Contemporary Chinese youth and the state', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 68(20), (2009) pp. 364–366.

²⁵Exception to this are studies by Jennifer Hsu and Reza Hasmath, 'Local corporatist state'; Ching Kwan Lee and Yuan Shen, 'The anti-solidarity'; Jude Howell, 'Shall we dance' and Ivan Franceschini, 'Labour NGOs'.

²⁶This angle differs from the majority of existing studies on labour NGOs, which do not pay attention to this distinction.



Table 1. Some of the grassroots NGOs set up by migrants in the sample.

Name	Location	Active from	Main activities	Source of funding	Formal registration with MOCA	Relationship with the government	Suffered in 2012–16 crackdown
NGO A	Hangzhou, ZJ	2006	CA, LA&T	D	N, but supported by ACFTU	Formalised through relationship with trade union	N
NGO B	Beijing	2002	CA, EA, LA&T	D + F	N	Under strain at the time of the research	Y
NGO C	Beijing	1999	LDR, LA&T	F	N	Good at the time of the research, currently increasingly bad	Y
NGO D	Shiyao, HB	2008	LDR, LA&T, LA	D	N	Informal	N
NGO E	Shenzhen, GD	2003	CA, LDR, LA&T	F	N	Bad prior to 2014, but improving since 2014	Y
NGO F	Foshan, GD	2012	CA, LA&T, EA	D + F	Y	Neutral at the time of the research, currently bad	Y
NGO G	Shenzhen, GD	2006	LDR, LA&T, LA, CBA	F	N	Bad	Y

Note: ZJ, Zhejiang; HB, Hubei; GD, Guangdong; CA, cultural events and community building; LA&T, legal advice and training; EA, educational activities; LDR, labour dispute resolution; LA, legal advocacy; CBA, collective bargaining assistance; D, domestic; F, foreign; N, no; Y, yes; MOCA, Ministry of Civil Affairs.

Source: Author.

The methodology is based upon qualitative methods consisting of participant observation and interviews. The participant observation was conducted among four NGOs, two of which are based in Beijing (including a three-month-long internship with one NGO) and two in Hangzhou. The interviews consisted of 46 formal interviews (in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the NGOs' staff, their donors, the international organisations' staff and Chinese academics) and many informal interviews (I spoke to an additional 35 NGO staff, volunteers and migrant workers coming for advice to NGOs). This in-depth, ethnographic approach was chosen, as the efforts to transform citizenship can be best accounted for through the observation of everyday activities, interactions with migrant workers, and the study of both migrant- and NGO-authored texts published by organisations.

Migrant worker NGOs in this study come from four different provinces in China, and these different geographical contexts define and determine a lot of their work, due to the differences in local authorities' attitudes and the availability of funding. Prior to 2012, the Beijing-based NGOs in this study (such as NGO B and NGO C included in the table), for instance, had only been able to undertake work that was comparatively less 'sensitive' than that of NGOs from Guangdong (NGO E and NGO G from Shenzhen and NGO F from Foshan). While Shenzhen-based NGOs have been able²⁷ to represent migrants in courts, educate them on sources of inequality and even advise striking workers and coach future leaders, the Beijing-based organisations focus on cultural performance, community-building, education on labour laws, research and, under exceptional circumstances, labour mediation. The experiences of NGOs from other parts of China, such as NGO A from Hangzhou in Zhejiang province and NGO D from Shiyan in Hubei province, vary further. NGO A, set up in 2007, was gradually co-opted by the state through an official relationship with the local trade union. Yet, despite this, it continues to challenge the discriminative attitudes and policies towards migrant workers and negotiate their position in Hangzhou, mainly through publications, discussions and cultural activities. NGO D was set up in 2007 by a migrant worker, self-educated in law, with 20 years of *dagong* experience. NGO D takes on difficult legal cases of injured and deceased miners and construction workers, an exceptional and solitary experience for an NGO based outside Guangdong province.

These organisations belong to one of the most vulnerable types of NGOs in China, which has become even more fragile with the sustained crackdown on labour NGOs since 2012. The small number of labour NGOs in China (50–80 according to the author's interlocutors), as compared to around 3,500 environmental NGOs for instance,²⁸ points to the difficulties in operating and sustaining these types of organisations. This is related to their area of activism: social injustice, rights of migrant workers, labour exploitation, strike support and legal advocacy, all of which are regarded as sensitive, 'political' issues. Given the context of their formation, their focus and the activities these NGOs perform, the traditional notion of 'resistance' as performed against the state is a limited way to look at their forms of activism; in many cases the struggle to simply form and operate these kinds of NGOs could be considered a form of resistance in itself.

The analysis below illustrates how the 'resistance through accommodation' strategy works in practice and what it can offer to our understanding of the role of civil society actors in the shaping of citizenship in China. I focus on two ways in which NGOs deploy the 'resistance through accommodation' strategy: through the embracing of state-promoted language and through partaking in the state-designed legal framework. The evidence from fieldwork presented below highlights how, by utilising this twin tool, the NGOs shape citizenship in China.

²⁷Some of these activities have been restricted and suppressed since 2012, and in consequence some organisations changed to 'less sensitive' work (ex. NGO E, Interview No. 46 with NGO E staff, 15 July 2016, Shenzhen).

²⁸Sha Liu, 'Environmental NGOs grow across China but still struggle for support.' Global Times, (12 June 2012), available at: <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/714,330.shtml>

'Resistance through Accommodation' Strategy and the Quest for 'Citizenship Transformation'

The Use of Discursive Channels: The Socialist and Confucian Slogans

The first type of the officially promoted narratives that the NGOs adopt in order to progress their goals are the 'socialist' and Confucian slogans. Both have a particular impact on citizenship discourse and practices in China. The socialist slogans officially uphold the working class, among which NGOs include migrant workers, as the 'masters' of the country. However, due to their rural *hukou*, material exclusion and the purported 'lack of culture' and 'civilisation', migrant workers are excluded, both discursively and legally, from membership in the official 'working class' and deemed as second-class citizens in urban China.²⁹ Similarly, the Confucian slogans uphold the value of family, hierarchy and fatherly state as important pillars of Chinese society. The Confucian slogans help to sustain the paternalistic state-society relations, entrenching class hierarchies and power relations, delegitimising protests and emphasising the importance of citizen obedience as a traditional Chinese and Confucian value.

Located in the middle of a migrant village in the outskirts of the Chaoyang district in Beijing, NGO B is a prime example of an organisation which uses these official narratives to resist the discrimination and marginalisation of migrant workers, and in effect to transform their citizenship position in China. Arguably, the organisation's most original contribution lies in the creation of various platforms for migrant workers to express themselves. The NGO designs and performs theatrical plays, addressed to migrant workers, city residents, and even Party officials. It enables migrant workers' self-expression via the annual Festival of Migrant Workers' Poetry and Culture, publications and training in the use of new technologies. The organisation-run museum aims to bring the history and experience of migration out of obscurity in order to 'restore the rightful place of migrant workers' among the citizens of China. The museum exhibits and theatrical plays are good examples of how NGO B deploys the 'resistance through accommodation' strategy to reshape citizenship discourse around migrant workers in China.

The NGO's cultural outputs are steeped in socialist language. For instance, the visitors to the NGO's museum are welcomed by a big quotation 'Respecting the value of labour is the fundamental principle of a nation'³⁰ from Wen Jiabao, the former prime minister, famous for his socialist inclinations and sympathy towards workers. Similarly, expanding on such Wen-Hu socialist sympathies, the NGO replaced the neoliberal Deng-era slogan of 'Getting rich is glorious' with the one referring to socialist values—'Labour is the most glorious.'³¹

Yet, underneath the surface of what might look like state-accommodating language, NGO B uses the 'socialist discourse' as a tool of critique. Actually, the NGO sees the official promotion of socialist values as unsubstantiated in the state's actions, and it points this out in its satirical theatrical performances. In 2010 the NGO wrote a play entitled 'Village in the city', which is based on authentic experiences of migrant workers as recorded in an NGO-conducted survey. This play highlights the tensions between the official language and the reality of migrant workers' lives. In one of the scenes, which takes place in a vocational school preparing rural youth to work in Shenzhen factories, we see a teacher lecturing soon-to-be migrant workers:

Teacher: 'One should be proud to be a worker. The working class is the ruling class of our country'

Student: 'Professor, have you taken your medicines today? There is nothing proud about being a worker! Maybe the working class is the foundation of China, yes, but surely the working class does not rule China!'

As with the appropriation of socialist slogans, we can see that the NGO is not limited by official narratives. Rather, it uses them to resist the condescending approaches towards migrant workers and labour.

²⁹Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law*.

³⁰*Zunzhong laodong, zunzhong laodong de jiazhi, zhe shi yige minzu zui jiben de daode.*

³¹In 2015 in Beijing, the author witnessed government slogans with an inscription 'labour is the most glorious' (*laodong zui guangrong*), testifying to the continuous use of socialist-values language under Xi Jinping.

Furthermore, we can see here that the NGO uses the space created by the official appraisal of socialism to question the lack of real implementation of the socialist values.

Yet, the NGO adapts to the changes in the state ideology, and it equally keenly adopts Confucian narratives in its strategies to contest the status quo. An example of this can be found in the painting which adorns the entrance to the NGO. The picture, painted in the Communist-style red on white stripes, presents migrant workers sitting around the scene with a music band performing (representing the NGO B itself) surrounded by construction cranes in the background. The overarching inscription in the painting reads 'All workers under heaven are one family' (*Tianxia dagong shi yi jia*). The concept visibly takes its inspiration from the Communist slogan 'proletariat of all countries unite' and the traditional concepts of '*tianxia*' and '*jia*', both heavily used in the state Confucian rhetoric. Here, by using Confucian concepts intermixed with communist aesthetics, NGO B advances its objectives of class solidarity and unionisation among migrant workers, which, as was reinforced in the interview, is a tool for forging a new kind of citizenship participation among migrant workers:

The biggest problem for migrant workers now is the lack of migrant workers' own organisations in the city. The problem of the lack of fair dialogue with capitalists (*zifang*) [...] So when such problems arise, the workers have to take extreme measures to resolve it. [...] The best way is to have the real representation through their own trade union.³² Although we have trade unions nowadays, they do not represent workers. Recently there have been many strikes in the south; their aim is to establish workers' own trade unions [...] [This] requires a change of the government's policy regarding independent trade unions. The development of labour NGOs is an important factor and it might lead to independent unions.³³

The desire for NGOs to become workers' representatives and the pressure for change in state laws regarding trade unions is an important aspect of the reshaping of migrant workers' status in China. This pressure addresses the lack of access to adequate representation when migrants' rights are violated, appealing to extend citizenship rights.

We can see in the above examples that the NGO cleverly navigates the soft line between criticising the Party and adopting the narratives set by it. While on the one hand the NGO mocks the Party's official line that 'workers are masters of the country', on the other hand, it criticises the 'market forces', such as foreign transnational companies and developers for the mistreatment of migrant workers. Ultimately though, the NGO uses the accommodating techniques in order to smuggle in a critique of the inferior citizenship status of migrant workers in the cities and their lack of access to industrial citizenship.

The Use of Discursive Channels: The 'Integration into the City' (*rongru chengshi*) Slogan

Another government narrative especially intensively deployed in relation to migrant workers is 'integration into the city'. While the concept is only vaguely defined by the government, most migrant worker NGOs understand the official message to be one encouraging the education of migrant workers on how to cope in the city and how to become a 'civilised' urban citizen. Indeed, the idea of 'integration into the city' clearly carries the undertones of a 'civilising mission'. As such, the slogan reinforces the dominant citizenship discourse, which ultimately seeks to transform migrant workers into 'proper' citizens: urban, modern and 'civilised' (*wenming*).³⁴ Examples of this citizenship discourse are visible in the state-produced educational materials forwarded to migrant worker NGOs. For instance, the leaflet entitled 'Promote Beijing spirit: Make a civilised, polite Beijinger' forwarded by the Beijing Propaganda Bureau to NGO C (see Figure 1) depicts the 'three civilised phrases' ('thank you', 'I am sorry' and 'hello') and 'four civilised acts' ('politeness', 'helping the elderly', 'queuing' and 'recycling') that each migrant

³²The NGOs avoid using the phrase 'independent trade unions' (*duli gonghui*); instead they prefer to call them 'own trade unions' (*ziji de gonghui*).

³³Interview No. 5 with NGO B co-founder, 13 April 2012, Beijing.

³⁴For further discussion, see Małgorzata Jakimów, 'Understanding citizenship'; Małgorzata Jakimów, 'Chinese citizenship "after" Orientalism. Academic narratives on internal migrants in China', *Citizenship Studies* 16(5&6), (2012), pp. 657–671; and Małgorzata Jakimów and Elena Barabantseva, "'Othering" in the construction of Chinese citizenship' in Lion König and Bidish Chaudhuri, eds., *The Politics of the 'Other': Western Concepts in Non-Western Contexts* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 167–178.



Figure 1. 'Promote Beijing Spirit; Make a Civilised, Polite Beijinger'. Source: Beijing Propaganda Bureau.

worker should adopt to behave like a 'civilised, polite Beijinger'. The message of the leaflet clearly targets migrant workers, since the leaflet was given to NGO C with the intention that it would then redistribute it further among its clientele.

The idea behind the 'integration into the city' slogan serves to forge Chinese cities into globally competitive organisms and thus the motors of economic growth.³⁵ Migrant workers, as a disposable and cheap labour force, serve a crucial role in this process, but despite that they are continuously seen as 'polluting' the image of China's metropolises and as a source of possible social unrest. In order to address this challenge, the government encourages 'integration into the city' training, which can help migrants to find a job or learn about the city's resources. However, while this concept aims to turn migrants into self-sufficient, productive and modern urban 'citizens', it does not actually encourage material, legal or identity-based forms of attachment to the city. In fact, by emphasising the cultural aspects of integration, rather than the legal (the availability of the urban *hukou*), material (the provision of affordable housing) and social (the change in local urban population attitudes), the concept of 'integration into the city' does not endorse forms of sustainable livelihood for migrants in urban China.

NGOs are encouraged to play a part in this project by embracing the narratives and by supplying the 'integration into the city' training. And indeed, the 'integration into the city' slogan has been gladly embraced by NGOs as a catch-all phrase legitimising various activities, but, as with other concepts, its actual application has varied widely among NGOs.

³⁵For in-depth analysis on turning Chinese cities into 'global cities' see Yulong Shi and Chris Hamnett, 'The potential and prospect for global cities in China: in the context of the world system', *Geoforum* 33, (2002), pp.121–135, and Ilya Chubarov and Daniel Brooker, 'Multiple pathways to global city formation: a functional approach and review of recent evidence in China', *Cities* 35, (2013), pp. 181–189.

NGO C is an example of an organisation which adopts the state-promoted 'civilisation mission' of turning migrants into 'proper' citizens and promotes, to an extent, the idea of a paternalistic state. Apart from forwarding the state's propaganda materials to migrant workers, NGO C also produces its own materials such as the 2011 'Integration into the City Manual', handed regularly to the migrants visiting the NGO premises and to rural newcomers at the Beijing Railway Station. While the manual adopts the state's narratives of 'cultural integration', such as the information on how to use public toilets and how to behave correctly in the subway, the NGO's advice should also be seen as providing migrant workers with resources to resist their inferior position. The manual provides advice to migrant workers on available organisations and resources in the city which can facilitate their access to justice, such as labour NGOs and the local labour bureaus, and the text encourages migrants to become self-reliant, informed citizens. Indeed, the frustration of the NGO founder about how the 'integration into the city' campaign has been mishandled by the state resurfaced in the interview:

They [migrant workers] need NGOs like ours to help them, to provide training...but also the government should provide training to them [...] so that they are able to rely on themselves (*kao ziji*). It is very tough for them to constantly go through the ordeal by themselves; it takes a lot of time to become self-reliant. So they really need some external help ... but the government evidently has not done anything like this.³⁶

We see that though the NGO is adopting the state discourse, it does not agree with the way the 'integration into the city' has been handled by the government. The frustration stems from the perceived lack of support for the NGO in its activities and from the inactivity of the state in the wider context of supporting migrant workers to face their hardships in the city. Therefore, while the NGO does not officially question the discourse, it nevertheless seeks to prompt the government to acknowledge the need to provide greater help to migrant workers and to change their attitudes towards the grassroots organisations, seeking to transform the attitudes towards citizen-led organisations. At the same time, it seeks to turn migrant workers into better-informed and self-sufficient citizens, and it questions the ability of the government policies to do so.

Some NGOs go even further, and use the concept of 'integration into the city' to critique the current inequality between migrant workers and 'urban citizens' (*shimin*). NGO A is a Hangzhou-based organisation created in 2007 by a Jiangxi migrant worker. The organisation closely cooperates with the local branch of the ACFTU (the official trade union). Despite this, it manages to carve space for a discussion on and ultimately contestation of the concept of 'integration into the city'. This is visible in the content of the NGO-published magazines directed at migrant workers. In some articles and migrant letters published in the magazine, the NGO and migrant workers clearly question the one-dimensional way in which 'integration into the city' has been equated with 'acculturation', and the related inadequacy of city policies:

The 'New Hangzhouers' has become a popular name for us these past years [...] But what price do we have to pay to be treated equally to the city residents? This decision is not ours to make, but we keep on fighting for it. [...] Our organisation is aiming to create this model of how new (urban) citizens (*xinshimin*) can integrate into the city [...] But from your words and letters, we feel that the dream to 'integrate into the city' is still far from coming true, that you don't even dare to think it can be possible [...] And the city, is the city ready for us? What attitude does the city have towards us? Does it understand us, care for us, help us, support us? Is it ready to provide us with justice?³⁷

One migrant worker further challenges the state-imposed idea of 'integration' in an open letter sent to the same magazine, where he points to another obstacle to successful integration: the lack of material and legal security for migrant workers in the city.

'Integrating into the city', for me, is a very distant [possibility]. Everybody wants to 'integrate into the city', but it is not so easy. Concretely speaking, one has to at least have a stable job; otherwise life in the city is too hard. When it comes to adaptation to the city life, this is possible with one's own effort. But to think of putting down roots (*zhagen*) in Hangzhou, at present, I don't even dare to think about it. Let alone to buy a flat. [...] Integrating into the city is indeed a very far-fetched dream.³⁸

³⁶Interview No. 4 with NGO C founder, 29 March 2012, Beijing.

³⁷NGO A magazine published in September 2011.

³⁸*Ibid.*

It is clear, from the above quotations, that the NGO and the migrant workers associated with it recognise that the social, material and legal discrimination against migrant workers in the cities hinders the 'integration' process. It is crucial to see that while NGO A adopts the government-promoted concepts, it expands on the original message behind the slogan in ways that disagree with the existing treatment of migrant workers. By emphasising the importance of the city policies and the local population's attitudes to the 'integration' process, NGO A goes further in its critique than NGO C, as it resists the representation of integration as a responsibility of migrants and points to the need for change in the legal and material framework of integration. Indeed, the NGO's understanding of integration as only possible when built upon material, social and legal equality contests the current political and economic make-up upon which the development of China's cities has been founded. The example of NGO A reveals, therefore, that migrant NGOs can resist government narratives and put forward claims for 'citizenship transformation', even if their relations with state organisations are indeed quite close, and even if they are doing so while using state-prescribed narratives.

The Use of Legal Channels: 'Rights Defence' (weiquan) and 'Stability Maintenance' (weiwen)

The final example of how NGOs deploy the 'resistance through accommodation' strategy in the process of NGO-led 'citizenship transformation' is their use of the language of legalism. Legalism is deployed through slogans such as 'defending migrant workers' rights' (*weiquan*) and 'maintaining stability' (*weiwen*), as well as through formal legal channels. While the 'defending rights' narrative figured especially prominently under the Hu-Wen administration as a state strategy for dealing with social discontent, it has now been replaced by the narrative of 'stability maintenance' under Xi.³⁹ The NGOs, particularly the legal-action-oriented organisations, have been commonly adopting the 'rights defence' narratives in their everyday language and publications. However, concomitantly, these organisations have been justifying their 'rights defence' activities as catering for the 'stability maintenance' objective.⁴⁰ Below I discuss three examples of how NGOs adopt *weiquan/weiwen* narratives, and the legal channels associated with them, in order to produce a wider social change.

The first example of such usage of these narratives is the instances of mediation in workplaces and arbitration in courts performed by NGOs. NGO C and NGO D are two organisations which employed state-abiding vocabulary in order to gain precedential rights to mediate (NGO C) and arbitrate/litigate (NGO D) disputes on behalf of migrant workers as independent non-governmental and non-lawyer representatives. While the non-lawyer representation (*gongmin daili*) is permitted by the Procedural Law in China,⁴¹ from the fieldwork I conducted with NGOs it emerged that the de facto ability of NGOs to represent workers in courts depends on the consent from the local authorities (including local public security bureaus, labour bureaus, government and particular judges). However, what also emerged from the fieldwork was that apart from in Guangdong, a province with comparatively liberal attitudes towards the non-lawyer representation of migrant workers in courts, this practice is rarely permitted in other parts of China. Therefore, the instances of securing permission to mediate, arbitrate and litigate on behalf of migrants by NGO C and NGO D, both located outside Guangdong, are examples of using the state-approved rhetoric to stretch and negotiate the role of migrant workers and of civic grassroots organisations in the citizenship regime in China.

NGO C started mediation with employers on behalf of workers without local government knowledge in 2004. When, soon after, it was approached by the local public security bureau about its activities, the

³⁹Jonathan Benney, *Defending Rights in Contemporary China* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 35–72; Jonathan Benney, 'Stability maintenance at the grassroots: China's *weiwen* apparatus as a form of conflict resolution', Working Paper no. 8, (2013), pp. 1–28.

⁴⁰As discussed earlier, assisting the state in 'maintaining stability' is often seen in the literature as a proof of the lack of resistance qualities in these organisations.

⁴¹Chloé Froissart, 'Using the law', p. 263; Alex Jingwei He and Genghua Huang, 'Fighting for migrant labour rights in the world's factory: legitimacy, resource constraints and strategies of grassroots labor NGOs in South China', *Journal of Contemporary China* 24(93), (2014), p. 479.

NGO presented these as supporting the government's objective of 'maintaining stability' and 'social harmony', since mediation helps dissipate labour conflicts between employers and migrant workers. The authorities recognised the contribution of the NGO's work to the state's objectives and the local district Bureau of Justice issued it with an official certificate formally allowing it to conduct mediation, which was an unprecedented concession among migrant worker NGOs outside Guangdong at the time. While for many scholars mediation lacks 'resistance' and 'empowerment' qualities,⁴² having observed parts of the mediation process in the NGO's office and having consulted the mediation reports produced by the organisation it is clear that mediation did help migrant workers to retrieve at least part of their salary (and often, their dignity), something they would not have had a chance to secure otherwise. Moreover, the official support enabled the NGO to negotiate more effectively, since it helped to legitimise the NGO in the eyes of both workers and employers.⁴³ According to the NGO, in the years 2004–2011 alone, the organisation had benefited 27,588 migrant workers, mediating a total sum of RMB 91.884 million (approximately US\$14 million) of withheld wages.⁴⁴ These numbers indicate that in the absence of access to arbitration and litigation channels, the availability of a migrant-sympathising mediator is a much-needed alternative. As such, although accommodating to the state prerogative of 'maintaining stability', mediation should also be seen as having 'resisting' qualities. This is because it challenges workplace abuse and creates precedence for a non-state actor to act like a citizen representative, creating new forms of citizenship practice in China.

NGO D's experience is yet another example of how NGOs use the state-approved channels to enable migrant worker NGOs to participate in the process of 'rights defence'. NGO D, a Shiyan, Hubei-based organisation, has been negotiating the possibility of representing migrants in courts with the local authorities since its beginnings in 2007. Despite the initial lack of success, it was finally granted 'power of attorney' (*dailiquan*) by the local labour bureau in 2009, allowing it to represent migrants in courts upon the discretion of the judge responsible for the particular case.⁴⁵ The NGO's ability to represent migrant cases in courts, regarded as a more institutionalised access to justice than mediation, decreases the normal costs of arbitration,⁴⁶ and enables wider access to justice for migrant workers. Moreover, it set a precedent for the NGO being able to represent migrant workers in courts outside Guangdong province, therefore stretching the practice of law and institutionalising citizen-led forms of representation in China.

Yet another case study of how 'defending rights' can help migrant workers resist the exploitation and injustice they suffer while accommodating to the state rhetoric is the training in law supplied by Guangdong province-based NGO E and NGO F. Both NGOs educate migrants in laws related to their cases, conduct mock court hearings for migrants to practise self-litigation skills and finally take them to real courts to observe the hearings.⁴⁷ They do it in order to prepare migrants to represent their own cases in courts:

Our eventual aim of helping worker-friends (*gongyou*) with the court cases is to enable them to have the ability, through their own hard work, to stand up for themselves. We will train them on the order of the proceedings, and let them observe other workers' lawsuits, so that they can see that it is all really quite simple. Through this kind of training we actually enable them to have courage to go to the court by themselves. [...] We hope that this way we can make a collective change.⁴⁸

⁴²Mediation is the most encouraged method of workplace conflict resolution by the state, but it is criticised as disadvantaging workers, because employers are prioritised in the process, and migrants rarely receive 'legal' levels of compensation. Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law*, pp. 177, 180.

⁴³Similar findings in Ivan Franceschini, 'Labour NGOs', p. 486.

⁴⁴These numbers were supplied by NGO C in May 2012 and were not confirmed by external audit.

⁴⁵Personal communication with NGO D founder in April 2012, in Chinese.

⁴⁶NGOs either charge nothing or less than certified lawyers would for the court representation and are keener to take on difficult cases. Another organisation, NGO G from Shenzhen, provides access to public-good lawyers who charge half the regular lawyers' charges. For instance, in 2012 the NGO charged 1,000–2,000 yuan for a case that would otherwise cost 3,000–5,000 yuan. Interview No. 18 with the head of NGO G, 16 January 2013, Shenzhen.

⁴⁷Interview No. 19 with NGO E employee, 17 January 2013, and Interview No. 20 with NGO F employee, 18 January 2013.

⁴⁸Interview No. 19.

This empowering process has a potential to indeed bring a long-term change to the position of migrant workers in China by increasing their ability to gain awareness of the opportunities for rights defence and knowledge of their citizenship rights, therefore remaking citizenship practices among migrant workers.

Most research maintains that the accommodation of NGOs to the channels of law reinforces the state regime, because they strengthen the legalism mechanism of dispute resolution, and divert the negotiations away from collective actions and extra-legal measures,⁴⁹ which are often seen as the 'true' form of resistance and a motor for wider social and political change.⁵⁰ However, the mere act of negotiating the right for a non-governmental and non-certified actor to represent migrant workers should be seen as an act of citizenship as it enables and institutionalises the role of citizen-led representation of migrant workers. The training of migrants in laws and litigation skills promotes civic consciousness among migrants, and can therefore reshape citizens' impact on law implementation in the long run. Law, criticised for being predominantly a state weapon of control, can become an opportunity structure for NGOs to bring on a wider social change for both civic organisations and migrant workers. Such forms of resistance to the current citizenship regime in China are brought about in compliance with the legal channels and in the language which appeals to the state. While such 'accommodation' to the state goes against the understanding of resistance promoted by the civil society literature, it remains clearly a citizen-driven form of activism reshaping citizenship practices.

Finally, there is a need for a wider explanation of how NGOs can transform migrant workers' citizenship, despite their own survival priorities, and the related dependence on external funding. Neo-Gramscian studies view the NGOs' reliance on private funding and rent-seeking priorities as limiting civic activism. NGO C is an especially relevant example here, because 98% of its funding comes from foreign donors, yet the NGO had been very successful in their relationship with the state prior to 2014, and it has managed to undertake forms of resistance not yet discussed in this article.

Between February and May 2012 the author observed over a dozen fund-raising events organised by NGO C for its established and prospective foreign donors. In the events, NGO C adopted the strategy of 'resistance through accommodation' by using the language which was both donor-enticing and state-abiding. For instance, in its self-promotional presentations the NGO demonstrated how its mediation efforts in retrieving wage arrears prevent migrant workers from reaching for desperate or politically sensitive methods, such as crane-climbing, jumping from buildings, or strikes. To its potential donors, the NGO positioned itself as an essential actor in 'defending migrants' rights', while remaining invested in the state-desired goal of 'maintaining stability'. This strategy served the NGO well in terms of securing funds for its mediating and networking activities.

According to neo-Gramscian scholarship, the use of language that accommodates to both the state and the market is seen as the antidote to resistance and as a factor helping to maintain the status quo. But such an interpretation should be called into question, if one takes into account the wider impact of migrant worker NGOs on citizenship practices. NGO C's activism focuses on three areas: the NGO's own objectives of expansion of the organisation across China; building and improving the capacity of the network of labour NGOs; and assisting migrant workers in accessing justice, either via mediation or via training in law. Indeed, the narratives used in the presentation, in a language palatable to the government, and tailored to the tastes and objectives of foreign funders in order to procure funds, enable the advancement of these aims. While neo-Gramscian theory holds that such behaviour testifies to the accommodation to the market and the state, we can see that the NGO uses it strategically in order to carve space for activities which lead to change in both the condition of migrant workers' access to justice and the condition of migrant worker NGOs in China, both of which promote change in citizenship practices of migrant workers and their organisations in China. Indeed, the fact that the NGOs'

⁴⁹Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law*; Chloé Froissart, 'Using the law'; Mary Gallagher, 'Mobilizing the law in China: "informed disenchantment" and the development of legal consciousness', *Law & Society Review* 40(4), (2006), pp. 783–816.

⁵⁰Florian Butollo and Tobias ten Brink, 'Challenging the atomization of discontent, Patterns in migrant-worker protest in China during the series of strike in 2010', *Critical Asian Studies* 44(3), (2012), pp. 419–440; Chris Chan, 'Class or citizenship', pp. 317–318.

nation-wide labour organisations' networking activities were abruptly halted by the Public Security Bureau in 2014⁵¹ proves that the NGO's activism was indeed perceived as a form of 'resistance'.

Conclusion

The above-presented strategy of 'resistance through accommodation', which is deployed by migrant worker NGOs to meet their goals through the use of official narratives and channels, has not hitherto been clearly theorised as a part of 'citizenship transformation' process. While similar approaches have been discussed before in the Chinese context, they have not critically engaged with civil society and citizenship theories.

The 'resistance through accommodation' strategy is an important part of citizenship contestation in an authoritarian state such as China. It extends our understanding of performative citizenship in China and stretches the application of the 'acts of citizenship' framework to an authoritarian context. While 'acts of citizenship' are seen as transformative if they go beyond the existing laws, the 'resistance through accommodation' strategy shows that in authoritarian states, where open criticism of state policies is stunted, state-designated channels such as law or state language can become sites of citizenship contestation. By undertaking rights advocacy, providing legal training and empowering workers through community-building and cultural activities, migrant worker NGOs promote change in citizenship discourse, practices and status within the state-approved channels and with the use of state-promoted language. While the fieldwork revealed that there are also those migrant worker NGOs which cross the politically acceptable line and abandon the 'resistance through accommodation' strategy at times, it does not mean that the more 'co-opted' migrant NGOs do not undertake attempts to address social injustice. The citizenship approach allows us to see that the acts which use state-designed channels and do not necessarily oppose the state can be transformative, even though they are not traditionally regarded as 'resistance'.

Yet the strategy of 'resistance through accommodation' cannot be applied by all labour NGOs at all times, as the strategies of coping with the challenges posed by the state and the market change over time. The situation of NGOs interviewed initially in 2011–2013 for this study has changed dramatically since 2013. The Xi Jinping years saw a continuous crackdown on these NGOs across China. The offices of many NGOs included in this research were either moved or closed, some activities driven underground, with some of the NGOs' leaders and staff harassed, physically abused, arrested and even sentenced. At the same time, the foreign funding has been increasingly jeopardised or cut down, with the state's initiative to procure some NGOs' activities emerging and a new law halting foreign NGOs' freedom of operation in China put in place. This illustrates that while many NGOs act in compliance with and in awareness of the state's objectives, their attempts at resistance 'from within' can still be halted. The way Xi's administration is dealing with these NGOs shows that the state sees them not as easily co-optable actors, as some studies argue,⁵² but rather as undesirable and hazardous agents against the state itself. This illustrates how citizenship transformation undertaken by NGOs can be misunderstood by the state as threatening to its monopoly of power, when it is actually intended as a form of political dialogue between the state and a long-silenced portion of the population. It also demonstrates that 'resistance through accommodation' as a strategy of 'citizenship transformation' is a fine balancing act, which mostly works, but which can become less effective in the face of state crackdowns.

Yet, the question of whether the current crackdowns will drive labour NGOs to pursue more radical forms of activism, make them disappear or further co-opt them to the state is still open. This might mean that the 'resistance through accommodation' strategy will be replaced by other behaviours which might more closely adhere to the dichotomous models of confrontational state-society relations promoted by liberal civil society theory or co-optation promoted by 'corporatism'. However, it might also mean

⁵¹Interview No. 26 with NGO C staff, 29 April 2015.

⁵²Jude Howell, 'Shall we dance'; Andreas Fulda, 'Government procurement of CSO services in the PR China: doing the Party's work?', China Institute Policy Paper 2013: No. 4, (2013), Nottingham: University of Nottingham.

that the NGOs will continue adapting this strategy to new circumstances to allow new ways of pushing for 'citizenship transformation', despite the state's co-optation or repression.

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Notes on contributor

Małgorzata (Gosia) Jakimów is a lecturer (assistant professor) at the School of East Asian Studies in Sheffield, UK. Her research interests include Chinese politics, critical citizenship studies, labour studies and EU–China relations.