THE WOUNDED DRAGON

AMERICAN NGOS AT WORK IN CHINA

By Ethan Cramer-Flood

"Our frontiers of today are economic, not geographic. Our enemies of today are the forces of privilege and greed within our own borders."
—*Franklin D. Roosevelt, January 8, 1936*

Open a newspaper or news magazine any day of the week, and China will likely feature in any number of stories. Staggering economic expansion, pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, record poverty reduction, poisonous exports, human-rights violations, and the great-power political maneuvering between Beijing and Washington all receive daily coverage in some form or another. China's transformation into an international power, both economically and politically, has been nothing short of remarkable in its speed and breadth. The Middle Kingdom is sometimes presented as a land of unmatched power, wealth, and business acumen, with unlimited potential for global domination.

The truth, of course, is much more complicated, and China is in no way as powerful or accomplished as many believe. Although the US is economically reliant on China's purchases of Treasury bills to fund US debt—and it's true that neither country could survive without the other—in many ways China remains a dangerously unfinished product. This danger manifests itself most visibly through China's inability to control the pollution caused by its runaway industrial development, and its failure (or unwillingness) to curb its greenhouse gas emissions.

China also exhibits flaws through its inability to provide for the health and education of half of its own people. "[There is a] gap left between the days of Communism when work units took care of even poor families' basic expenses, and the new freewheeling Chinese cash economy, with its blatant divisions between rich urban dwellers and the poor still left in the countryside," writes Brecken Chinn Swartz, a visiting professor of communication at the University of Maryland, in a 2008 article for the campus faculty magazine. Swartz found her day job because of her PhD in international mass communication, but her true passion lies with Handreach, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) she co-founded in 2002.

Handreach began as a provider of microgrants to resource-poor rural schools in China, and later expanded into a healthcare-oriented project focused on helping catastrophically disfigured young burn victims across the country. It began morphing into its current form after Swartz—a fluent speaker of Mandarin—had a chance encounter with 12-year-old burn victim, Zhou Lin, begging with her family on the streets of Beijing in 2004. A faulty propane tank had exploded and horribly disfigured Zhou Lin from the waist down leaving her unable to walk on her own. Expenses associated with the accident had impoverished the family to the point where the parents could no longer afford school fees for their children. And so they had traveled to Beijing in a futile attempt to seek justice against the corrupt propane company and redress for Zhou Lin's burn injuries.

Meeting the family outside the iconic CCTV state television building, where many poor, sick, or homeless had gathered in the hopes that the media would publicize their plight, Swartz's brief conversation with Zhou Lin had a profound effect—one that Swartz talks about today in spiritual terms. Vowing that afternoon to do whatever it took to help the girl reclaim a normal life, that first encounter led to a two-year journey culminating in Swartz's adoption of Zhou Lin, the girl's recovery in America, and the formulation of Handreach's current identity.

HANDREACH

The prototypical example of an NGO trying to mitigate one of the harmful effects of China's transition to cowboy capitalism, Handreach operates across China but mainly in and around Sichuan Province, a remote and rural area in western China that was home to a devastating earthquake in 2008 that killed nearly 100,000 people. Working primarily with children burned so severely that a normal life is impossible and orthopedic surgery and prosthetics are a necessity, Handreach's zone of operations includes an abundance of illegal fireworks manufacturing facilities where regulations are lax or nonexistent and child labor is common. A lit cigarette carelessly dropped too close to unsecured explosive chemicals can leave many horribly scarred or disfigured. Most are too poor to afford the kind of medical care that could at the very least provide them with a functional life.

When Swartz first spent time in China, she wasn't expecting to start an NGO. But as a teacher in Beijing from 1997 to 1998 she found herself building powerful bonds with many of her students. They invited her to their hometowns, giving her the opportunity to see a different side of the emerging economic juggernaut. "[My students] were on a mission to educate me about China beyond the stereotypes," says Swartz. "I saw some of the extreme condi-

LAURA MADDEN

LUO WENLONG, SUFFERING FROM SEVERE BURNS OVER 75 PERCENT OF HIS BODY, IS ATTENDED BY HIS PARENTS AT A HOSPITAL IN HUNAN PROVINCE. THE AMERICAN NGO HANDREACH DONATED FUNDING TO PAY FOR SKIN GRAFTING AND OTHER TREATMENTS FOR THE YOUNG BOY.

tions and I started to make my own small donations in my own way." When she returned to the US and entered graduate school at Maryland, she found herself in frequent conversations with colleagues about the conditions she had seen. "We had been inspired by the Zhang Yimou film *Not One Less* [about a resourceful young teacher in rural China]—and how a little money can go so far in transforming lives. So we decided that we would create a small organization, within the scope of our ability, to offer microgrants mostly to Chinese graduate students here in the US, to encourage them to remember their hometowns and to do educational development work there."

Fund-raising emerged as Handreach's greatest challenge. "We would spend all of our time raising these little bits of money, a dollar at a time—we were selling bottles of water and literally asking for coins," says Swartz. The goal initially was to raise at least $1,000 per year, in order to empower local Chinese students to run their own projects back home. Swartz and her team encouraged the grant recipients to be as creative as possible in finding the best way to help their local schools. "We didn't have a pattern or a recommendation or an agenda for how that money should be spent," she recalls. Any reasonable application was acceptable, as long as the person had a real connection to China and could prove that 100 percent of the grant would go where it was promised, and that the recipient would provide absolute transparency. Receipts, photos, thank-you letters and other documentation were a requirement. From 2002 until 2004, Handreach was primarily concerned with education, and it continued offering microgrants until 2007. However, after Swartz's encounter with Zhou Lin, the organization expanded its mission.

FILLING A NEED

Swartz spent two years continually reaching out to Zhou Lin's family after their introduction outside the CCTV building in 2004. She had provided a $200 Handreach educational grant during their first meeting to ensure Zhou Lin and her sister could return to school, but serious medical care was financially out of reach at that point. However, thanks to Swartz's efforts, within two years she was able to secure enough funding to bring the girl to America for treatment. Eventually, Swartz found herself sharing a room with Zhou Lin in the Shriners Hospital in Boston, where Swartz had procured free surgical care for the little girl. As Zhou Lin struggled through round after round of surgeries, Swartz had another important encounter.

"There were a couple of young people from Indonesia who were there with their little cousin who had been burned by a stove in Baza Aceh [Indonesia]," says Swartz. "We were sitting there in the playroom with these little tiny chairs around this children's-sized table. They were medical students and they said. 'You know what? There are a lot of kids that cannot go to school, cannot function, cannot find jobs, because their bodies are deformed by these fires, and by traumatic amputations.'" It dawned on the group that Shriners had empty beds, tremendous spare capacity, expertise for treating burn victims, and the will to help. Swartz and Indonesian medical students brainstormed and came up with the Children's Healing Initiative (CHI), which would eventually emerge as Handreach's central project.

The initial funding for CHI came from *The Hope CD* (2006, Handreach), an album made up of donated songs from local Boston musicians. Swartz and her team sold copies for $20 each to help launch the initiative. "The hope was to find a way to create a connection between Shriners and hospitals in Asia that were trying to provide burn care for kids but either didn't have the technological know-how or just didn't have the funds to do this very, very expensive care," says Swartz. Factoring in the surgeries, miscellaneous procedures, bandages, special ointments, physical therapy, medication, and prosthetics, burn care is one of the most expensive forms of treatment in the world. "We realized that Shriners has the capacity to be able to really help not only the children but the hospitals in China and eventually Indonesia, India—we've got someone in Sierra Leone that wants to work with us. We'd like to be able to spread to other countries as well," says Swartz. "But we're trying to get it off the ground in China, which as you know is challenging because of working with the government."

MANEUVERING WITHIN THE DRAGON

Beijing remains unflinchingly intolerant of politically oriented NGOs—especially those concerned with human rights. However, according to the Institute for Asian and African Studies, the government has expanded its tolerance of "service-provider" NGOs over the past decade. This suits the agendas of party officials, who find these organizations useful in assisting the Chinese people in uncontroversial sectors where there is an established need that the government is presently unable to address. As long as the NGOs refrain from criticizing the Communist Party system or stepping on the wrong political toes—and main-

tain what Professor Shui Yan Tang of the USC School of Policy, Planning, and Development calls "a nonoppositional stance"—they present obvious value in their ability to support a restless and underserved population. The German Development Institute reports that China has learned to recognize and tolerate the efforts of environmental NGOs in particular, and Chen Jie, writing in *China Perspectives*, suggests it has also loosened the reins on gender, public health, poverty, and education-oriented charitable groups.

Handreach is slowly finding its niche in this new space. Thanks to the efforts of a haphazard array of supporters at home and abroad, Swartz's group is growing in reach and scope. "As we shed light on this problem, as we pull up the clothing that had been covering this wound, amazing people—lawyers, doctors, fundraisers, people that can contribute different things—have been coming forward," says Swartz. "So we get different connections, people find us through the media and their own connections, and we wind up coming upon resources that we didn't know were there."

The most successful NGOs in China regard themselves as partners of the federal government, especially in terms of environmental protection and corruption monitoring. Dr. Renee Yuen-Jan Hsia of Harvard University and Lynn T. White III of Princeton University, writing in *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, believe that foreign NGOs operating inside China would do well to emulate this model—and many do. Their utility from Beijing's perspective is their ability to play watchdog to local industries and officials that take liberties above and beyond what is acceptable to the federal authorities. These NGOs, both native and foreign, are also adept at raising awareness of environmental and climate change issues among the population at large, a development Beijing does not necessarily oppose as it shifts official policy in favor of greater conservation. Elizabeth Economy, the Council on Foreign Relations' in-house China guru, wrote in her seminal 2007 *Foreign Affairs* article "The Great Leap Backward" that Chinese NGOs "have become central actors in the country's bid to rescue its environment," along with the media and international advocacy groups. Economy credits homegrown activists for leading the charge, but reiterates that the penalties for crossing the wrong political boundaries can be severe. So far, no government authority has tapped Handreach on the shoulder, but there is no guarantee none will in the future.

The philanthropists and humanitarians helping Handreach have mostly been American up to this point, by necessity, but favorable Chinese media coverage and the group's connections are slowly building a base of interested supporters inside China. For now, most of Handreach's funding is coming from the American Buddhist community and from American churches. "The major hands-on care—taking care of the actual children and providing hosting, translation, and that very labor-intensive care—has come from churches," says Swartz. "Many have banded together to provide hosting. They're very well organized and they have the institutional resources to provide long-term support. Churches and religious people have been very, very helpful to us."

According to Michael Busgen of the Institute of Social Studies, the safest way for an NGO to stay in the good graces of government regulators is to focus on the immediate needs of its constituents, whether they're undereducated kids, sick peasants, or battered women, and avoid becoming what he calls "a mechanism for representing and pursuing the interests of these constituencies toward the state." If a child is sick or injured and an NGO wants to help them, Beijing will acquiesce. The trouble only starts if the NGO mentions that the child's illness is due to lax regulation on the part of the government or negligence by a favored industry.

However, NGOs can be seen as helpful policy consultants in China, as long as they tread lightly and use an inoffensive vocabulary when suggesting change. "The Chinese state uses NGOs as objects of consultation for improving its policymaking in the same way it consults mass organizations and official professional associations to obtain specialist information," writes Taru Salmenkari in a recent analysis for the Institute for Asian and African Studies. Beijing genuinely wishes to mitigate the plight of its people, as long as its own power is not threatened in the process. Thus, there is space for an NGO to prevent harm to other children in the future—as long as it doesn't place blame or seek justice.

WORKING AROUND THE SYSTEM

A vital decision that each NGO must make is whether to officially register with the government, or to remain underground and hope that the authorities choose not to bother them. The regulatory structure governing authorized NGOs in China is burdensome, the registration process is unreasonable by any measure, and once an NGO is official the oversight is so overbearing that it can seriously constrain the NGO's original purpose. The roadblocks are overwhelming to the point that many groups prefer to operate underground. According to a study by the German Development Institute, "about 2,000 registered environmental NGOs exist in China, but it is estimated that there are about 100,000 environmental groups that refer to themselves as nonprofit enterprises or university student environmental groups to avoid the tedious NGO registration process."

In their book *China's Embedded Activism* (Routledge, 2007), Peter Ho and Richard Louis Edmonds vividly outline the official NGO registration process. Envision, if you will, a kindhearted group of native Chinese or Western humanitarians who simply want to provide free medical services to children inside China. In order to register their organization as an officially licensed NGO, they have to sign up at the Ministry of Civil Affairs—or a local civil affairs office if the NGO's geographic reach is regional or local. The NGO is then reviewed and supervised by both a civil affairs office and the NGO's so-called "sponsor"—a state-authorized supervisory organization that specializes in sponsoring NGOs and monitoring their activities (the NGO must find its own supervisory sponsor willing to take it on before it can begin to register). Only one NGO may work on any given set of issues in any given administrative area. Establishing regional chapters is not allowed, even for NGOs with permission to operate nationally. There are minimum funding requirements, which serve as a deterrent for many small-scale operations. After an NGO is approved, supervision measures are extensive and frequent, and reporting requirements are highly burdensome. Violations can result in all the predictable coercive measures, up to and including fines, suspension of activities, replacement of leaders, seizure of financial assets, and, ultimately, revocation of the registration. Every step of this process involves China's institutionalized resistance to civil society operations, as well as untold fees, delays, arbitrary decisions, and local corruption.

Handreach remains unofficial, and plans to stay that way for the time being. When asked if she feared the government might eventually interfere its operations if they remained unlicensed, Swartz dismissed the danger. "Everyone knows that what we're doing here is trying to help kids and that it's a good thing," she says. "We haven't had any direct problems with the government. Nobody wants to prevent health care for kids." However, there are benefits to registering with the government. At this time, Chinese donors cannot legally provide Handreach with funding, and Swartz can only recruit from Chinese nationals in the US or overseas. "We're really not doing much fundraising in China at all," says Swartz. "I think we should, and I would like to, but we'd like to have a very legitimate way for people to give money. We've been told that we have to register in China under a civil agency like Sichuan Charitable Funds, but I've been warned against that because it becomes so bureaucratic and so much money disappears [due to fees and corruption]." Following China's rules could also entail the loss of Handreach's institutional control over its own accounting and transparency and since Handreach prides itself on spending 100 percent of its donations on the intended recipient, Swartz fears losing the ability to continue that guarantee to her benefactors.

It's not surprising that Handreach chooses to operate under the radar, given the emerging pattern of Beijing acquiescing to the activities of noncontroversial, nonpolitical aid organizations, registered or not. However, a license can grease the wheels in other ways, unrelated to the government. Without one, agencies and organizations that would be natural allies for Handreach fear they will step on the wrong political toes and bring heat on themselves if they work with the group, so they demure. "What we have seen is a tentativeness on behalf of the hospitals, because they're nervous," says Swartz. "They don't want to receive money, they don't want to do anything, without somebody's okay. But as soon as you ask for the okay, then you have to put it through a process, and nobody knows how it's going to go." Thus, large institutional collaborations remain out of reach, because administrators fear censure from overly sensitive government regulators.

"People have never wanted to block us. But they're tentative, and hemming and hawing, especially the big hospitals," says Swartz. "We have one

very strong hospital relationship in central China where we're getting a lot of good work done, because it's a small hospital and they don't care [about the politics]. They're very pure. They just want to get the work done." But the biggest and most resource-rich hospital in Chengdu—the largest city in Sichuan—doesn't answer e-mails or respond to Handreach's requests. They know, however, that the NGO is there, because they send burned children for treatment. "They've been giving us kids that they should be treating, because they have no other way to treat them because the parents can't pay," explains Swartz. "So they send patients to us with no follow-up and no institutional support for getting follow-up care for these children."

BRIDGING THE GAP

There is a school of thought on Chinese civil society that says NGOs are now fulfilling needs that are not covered by the Chinese government but should be. Concurrently, many say, the Chinese government is starting to see NGOs as helpful service providers that can mitigate some of the harmful effects of the transition to a free-market system, and thus placate a restive population that might otherwise reject Communist Party rule. While most NGOs would be repulsed by the idea that their services may be strengthening China's authoritarian system, in the short term the win-win perception is a positive development for China's poorest.

Swartz identifies a second, less obvious, potential benefit to China from an emerging NGO sector: high-quality jobs for a growing glut of young, educated workers. NGOs could provide satisfying work for the growing number of idealistic and educated young Chinese that are interested in addressing the problems of their country. "China is going to have to employ these highly educated young people who are coming out of universities and graduate schools," says Swartz. "NGOs are excellent ways to productively engage China's best and brightest youth in solving the very complex problems with the nation; the environment, health care, education. By allowing a thriving NGO sector to flourish, the Chinese government is both addressing the needs of the issues themselves as well as the needs of the young people to be engaged meaningfully with solving those problems—without having to go through the government or the bureaucracy, and being able to be very hands-on. I think there's a lot of young college and graduate school graduates who are coming out that want to be in NGOs, that want to do issue-based work. China is very strategically situated in Asia to be able to provide leadership in tackling some of these issues, like the environment, education, and health care. I'd love to see the Chinese government harvest that potential and start to engage meaningfully and substantively with young people in solving these problems."

Every day the *Wall Street Journal* and *Bloomberg* gauge China's precarious support of US debt, fearing Beijing may pull the plug on its gargantuan purchases of Treasury bills. Talking heads expound on the new global economic order binding the US and China together. They invent words like "Chimerica" and devise ways for the two superpowers to pull the world out of the financial crisis. With no further context, a reader might envision a land filled with ambitious workers striving for American jobs, and a government that has perfected the art of capitalism to the point that the US will struggle to keep up. In reality, the Middle Kingdom has a great distance yet to go before its economic system should be admired. The Chinese people lack freedom, but equally important are the basic services—health care, quality education, a social safety net—that many are still doing without. If these failings linger, it will call into question the bravado China presents to the world.

For now, humanitarians like Brecken Chinn Swartz and her colleagues at Handreach are helping to close the gap that has emerged between the globalized China and the China that has been left behind. Thankfully, Beijing appears to be ever more tolerant of such efforts. Swartz and her dedicated team of Chinese nationals—and the Chinese expatriates and Westerners abroad supporting them—are helping to show Beijing that a committed group of individuals can make a positive difference outside of the government sphere. Swartz is just one woman, but thanks to a series of inspirational encounters, she is a living example of how one motivated person can change untold lives. Countless children in China that otherwise would be illiterate, immobile, or otherwise nonfunctional now have a chance to make something of themselves, and avoid a lifetime of depression and hopelessness. ©

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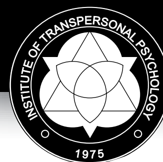

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