

Civic Freedom Monitor: China

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Recent Developments

The latest legislative agenda issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs in June 2026 left out any mention of the Draft Regulation for Registration and Management of Social Organizations issued back in 2018 for public comment. The omission indicates that the Draft Regulation is not a priority for adoption and may cause uncertainty over whether China will revise the regulatory framework for domestic social organizations in the near future. Please see the Pending Regulatory Initiatives section below for additional details.

While we aim to maintain information that is as current as possible, we realize that situations can rapidly change. If you are aware of any additional information or inaccuracies on this page, please keep us informed; write to ICNL at ngomonitor@icnl.org.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, civil society in China—and the legal framework that governs it—has grown considerably more complex. The number and diversity of nonprofit, philanthropic, and other social organizations (collectively referred to here as civil society organizations, or CSOs) have expanded rapidly. These organizations now operate across a wide range of sectors and increasingly engage in partnerships with government and business. Once situated on the margins, many CSOs are gradually becoming part of the mainstream of Chinese social and economic life.

While management of the emerging civil society sector by the Communist Party and state agencies is restrictive, regulatory systems have struggled to keep pace with the sector's expansion. As noted by Yu Keping, a well-known scholar on civil society, the actual space for CSOs in China is much larger than the institutional space formally granted by laws and regulations. [1]

The degree of state control varies widely. CSOs focused on social service delivery or other state-endorsed functions tend to face fewer restrictions. In contrast, groups engaged in advocacy, legal aid, labor rights, or religion are often perceived as threats to the state and therefore more closely monitored by Party and state authorities. Many of these organizations have been harassed or forcibly closed, and numerous civil society actors—including lawyers, journalists, academics, and bloggers—have been detained, tried, and imprisoned for their peaceful activities.

The legal foundation of this differentiated system of state control traces back to China's 1982 Constitution and have evolved through an array of regulations introduced since the late 1980s. These regulations govern the full range of legally-registered NPOs which are referred to in China as "social organizations" (social organizations and NPOs are used interchangeably to refer to legally-registered CSOs throughout this Note).

[1] Yu Keping, "Civil Society in China: Concepts, Classification and Institutional Environment" in Deng Zhenglai, ed., *State and Civil Society: The Chinese Perspective* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2011)

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Civic Freedoms at a Glance

<p>Organizational Forms</p>	<p>Social Associations (SAs, shehui tuanti), which are the equivalent of membership associations; Social Service Organizations (SSOs, shehui fuwu jigou, formerly known as Civil Non-Enterprise Institutions or minban fei qiye danwei); and Foundations (jijinhui). In addition, there are many different types of informal CSOs: those registered as businesses; those attached to a legal organization; small community-based organizations; rural cooperatives; religious organizations; and networks.</p>
<p>Registration Body</p>	<p>Ministry of Civil Affairs and local Civil Affairs Bureaus (for social organizations) and Provincial Public Security Departments (for overseas NGOs)</p>
<p>Barriers to Formation</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. System of “dual registration” for all social organizations 2. Extensive legal compliance and documentation requirements; 3. New requirements for Communist Party supervision in social organizations; 4. Broad informal prohibitions on fields of activity such as advocacy, labor, gender and sexuality, religion, and ethnic minority affairs; 5. Extensive discretion to deny registration.
<p>Barriers to Operations</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. All foreign NGO activities in China must be filed with the Public Security office for compliance with the Overseas NGO Law 2. Broad government discretion to intervene in internal affairs of the organization; 3. Burdensome reporting requirements; 4. Invasive government monitoring and inspections. 5. Requirement for Chinese social organizations to report international contacts to authorities and to seek approval for visits, international cooperation, foreign donations, etc.
<p>Barriers to Resources</p>	<p>With the passage of the Charity Law and Overseas NGO Law, a clear distinction can be made between domestic and foreign resources. The Overseas NGO Law raises barriers for Chinese CSOs (particularly unregistered groups) seeking foreign funding and collaboration. On the other hand, the Charity Law and the revised registration and management regulations for Foundations and other social organizations makes it somewhat easier for registered Chinese NPOs to access domestic resources by lowering barriers to fundraising and provide greater tax incentives for donations to public benefit and charitable organizations and activities. Unregistered Chinese CSOs face increasing difficulty accessing both domestic and international resources.</p>
<p>Barriers to Expression</p>	<p>The Government has discretion to limit speech and advocacy for specific organizations and types of organizations and for specific cases that might be seen to negatively impact national security.</p>
<p>Barriers to Assembly</p>	<p>The Assembly Law and Implementing Measures contain vague and restrictive provisions, including 5 days advance notification requirement; a prohibition on spontaneous assemblies; onerous obligations and liabilities on organizers; and excessive time, place, and manner restrictions.</p>

Legal Overview

This section provides a brief overview of China's legal framework for the promotion and protection of civic freedoms. Click a subheading for more, or [click here to expand all subheadings](#).

RATIFICATION OF INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS

Key International Agreements	Ratification*
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)	No
Optional Protocol to ICCPR (ICCPR-OP1)	No
International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)	2001
Optional Protocol to ICESCR (Op-ICESCR)	No
International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD)	1981
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)	1980
Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women	No
Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)	1992
International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (ICRMW)	No
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)	2008

* Category includes ratification, accession, or succession to the treaty

CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

[The Constitution of the People's Republic of China](#) (1982, as amended) includes the following relevant provisions which relate to the nonprofit, charitable and philanthropic sector:

Article 1

The People's Republic of China is a socialist state under the people's democratic dictatorship led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants.

The socialist system is the basic system of the People's Republic of China. Disruption of the socialist system by any organization or individual is prohibited.

Article 2

All power in the People's Republic of China belongs to the people.

The National People's Congress and the local people's congresses at various levels are the organs through which the people exercise state power.

The people administer state affairs and manage economic, cultural and social affairs through various channels and in various ways in accordance with the law.

Article 5

The People's Republic of China governs the country according to law and makes it a socialist country ruled by law.

The state upholds the uniformity and dignity of the socialist legal system.

No laws or administrative or local rules and regulations may contravene the Constitution.

All state organs, the armed forces, all political parties and public organizations and all enterprises and institutions must abide by the Constitution and the law. All acts in violation of the Constitution or the law must be investigated.

No organization or individual is privileged to be beyond the Constitution or the law.

Article 28

The state maintains public order and suppresses treasonable and other criminal activities that endanger state security; it penalizes criminal activities that endanger public security and disrupt the socialist economy, as well as other criminal activities; and it punishes and reforms criminals.

Article 33

All persons holding the nationality of the People's Republic of China are citizens of the People's Republic of China.

All citizens of the People's Republic of China are equal before the law.

The state respects and guarantees human rights.

Every citizen is entitled to the rights and at the same time must perform the duties prescribed by the Constitution and the law.

Article 35

Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration.

Article 36

Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief.

No state organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion.

The state protects normal religious activities. No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the state.

Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination.

Article 50

The People's Republic of China protects the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese nationals residing abroad and protects the lawful rights and interests of returned overseas Chinese and of the family members of Chinese nationals residing abroad.

Article 51

Citizens of the People's Republic of China, in exercising their freedoms and rights, may not infringe upon the interests of the state, of society or of the collective, or upon the lawful freedoms and rights of other citizens.

Article 52

It is the duty of citizens of the People's Republic of China to safeguard the unification of the country and the unity of all its ethnic groups.

Article 53

Citizens of the People's Republic of China must abide by the Constitution and the law, keep state secrets, protect public property, observe labor discipline and public order and respect social ethics.

Article 54

It is the duty of citizens of the People's Republic of China to safeguard the security, honor and interests of the motherland; they must not commit acts detrimental to the security, honor and interests of the motherland.

NATIONAL LAWS, POLICIES, AND REGULATIONS

Many of the key national laws and regulations affecting the sector are as follows, although this list is not exhaustive. For additional information, see [Ministry of Civil Affairs](#) and [U.S. International Grantmaking](#).

- [Constitution of the People's Republic of China](#) (1982, as amended, see selected provisions above)
- Law of the Red Cross Society of the People's Republic of China (adopted by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, October 31, 1993)
- [Interim Regulations on the Registration and Administration of Civil Non-Enterprise Institutions](#) (adopted by the State Council October 25, 1998)
- [Interim Regulations on the Registration and Administration of Public Institutions](#) (adopted by the State Council October 25, 1998)
- [Public Welfare Donations Law](#) (adopted by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress June 28, 1999)
- Law of the People's Republic of China on Individual Income Tax and Detailed Rules for the Implementation of the Individual Income Tax Law of the People's Republic of China (as enacted in 1999 and later amended)
- Provisional Measures Regarding the Management of Social Welfare Organizations (issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, April 10, 2000)
- [Trust Law of People's Republic of China](#) (adopted by the Standing Committee of the Ninth National People's Congress April 28, 2001)
- Non-State Education Promotion Law of the People's Republic of China (adopted by the Standing Committee of the Ninth National People's Congress December 28, 2002)
- Circular of the Ministry of Finance on the Relevant Issues Concerning the Preferential Taxation Policies for the Poverty-Relief and Charity Donation Materials Imported for the Purpose of School Education. (issued by the Ministry of Finance, March 10, 2003)
- Regulations on the Management of Foundations (adopted by the State Council March 8, 2004, currently in revision)
- Regulations on the Administration of Names of Foundations (issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs June 23, 2004)
- Accounting System for Nonprofit Organizations (issued by the Ministry of Finance September 2004)
- Reply of the State Administration of Taxation on Tax Exemption of 33 Permanent Representative Offices of Foreign Enterprises, such as the Beijing Representative Office of the Ford Foundation (issued by the State Administration of Taxation June 11, 2004)
- Measures for the Information Disclosure of Foundations and Measures for Annual Inspection of Foundations (issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs January 12, 2006)
- [Enterprise Income Tax Law of the People's Republic of China](#); Provisional Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Enterprise Income Tax and Detailed Rules for the Implementation of

the Provisional Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Enterprise Income Tax (as enacted in 2007 and as amended)

- Notice of the State Administration of Foreign Exchange on Issues concerning the Administration of Foreign Exchange Donated to or by Domestic Institutions (issued by the State Administration of Foreign Exchange December 25, 2009): [English translation](#)
- [National Security Law](#) (adopted in July 2015)
- [Counterterrorism Law](#) (反恐法, sometimes translated as the Anti-Terrorism or Counterespionage Law) (approved December 2015 and went into effect on January 1, 2016)
- Charity Law (慈善法) (promulgated March 16, 2016 , goes into effect on September 1, 2016): [English translation](#)
- Law on the Management of Overseas NGOs' Activities in Mainland China, (境外非政府组织境内活动管理法) (promulgated April 28, 2016, goes into effect on January 1, 2017): [English Translation](#); [Official Chinese Version](#)
- [Trial Regulations on Admonishment Meetings for Social Organizations by Registration Management Organs and Administrative Law Enforcement](#)(March 16, 2016) (社会组织登记管理机关行政处罚程序规定)
- [Trial Notice on Registration Management Organs' Acceptance of Complaints and Reports about Social Organizations](#)(August 15, 2016) (社会组织登记管理机关投诉举报处理办法)
- [Central Committee and State Council Opinion on the Reform of the Social Organization Management System and Promotion of the Healthy and Orderly Development of Social Organizations](#) (August 2016) ([Original in Chinese](#); [Original in English](#)) (中共中央、国务院关于社会组织登记管理体制改革和促进社会组织健康有序发展的意见)
- [Measures for the Designation of Charitable Organizations](#) (September 1, 2016) (《慈善组织认定办法》)
- [Measures on the Administration of Public Fundraising by Charitable Organizations](#) (September 1, 2016) (《慈善组织公开募捐管理办法》)
- [Notice on Social Organizations Initiating Party Construction Work During Registration](#) (September 18, 2016) (《社会组织在登记注册中开展党建工作指导意见》)
- Regulation on the Annual Expenditures and Management Expenses of Charitable Organizations Carrying Out Charitable Activities (《慈善组织年度支出和管理费用控制办法》) (October 2016): [English Translation](#)
- Measure for the Management of Charitable Trusts (《慈善信托管理办法》) (July 2017): [Chinese](#)
- Volunteer Service Regulations (《志愿服务条例》), August 22, 2017 ([original in Chinese](#)), which China's first-ever regulation governing volunteers.
- Regulation on Social Organisation Credit Information Management (《社会组织信用信息管理办法》). (January 24, 2018): [Chinese](#); [English Translation](#)
- [Measure for Charitable Organizations' Information Disclosure](#)(《慈善组织信息公开办法》) (August 6, 2018): [English Translation](#)
- [Provisional Measures for Investment Activities of Charitable Organizations for Capital Preservation and Appreciation](#)(《慈善组织保值增值投资活动管理暂行办法》) (October 25, 2018): [Chinese](#)

- Measure on Management of Government Procurement of Services, January 3, 2020 ([Original in Chinese](#)) regulates government procurement of services from enterprises and social organizations.
- Announcement on Matters Concerning the Pre-tax Deduction of Public Welfare Donations (国家税务总局公告2020年第10号)(May 21, 2020): [Chinese](#)
- Notice on Eliminating the Breeding Grounds for Illegal Social Organizations and Cleansing the Ecological Space for Social Organizations, March 20, 2021 ([original in Chinese](#), [English translation](#))
- Provisions on the Administrative Punishment Procedures of the Registration and Management Organs of Domestic Social Organizations, September 17, 2021 ([original in Chinese](#))
- 14th Five Year Plan for the Development of Social Organizations, October 8, 2021 ([original in Chinese](#)), which is the first time the Ministry of Civil Affairs has issued a Five Year Plan (2021-25) for social organizations
- Regulations on the Management of the Evaluation of Domestic Social Organizations, December 2, 2021 ([original in Chinese](#), [English translation](#)), which includes Ministry of Civil Affairs regulations for standardizing the management of the evaluation process for Chinese social organizations.
- Charity Law (慈善法) (2023 Amendment), promulgated on December 29, 2023 and entering into force on September 5, 2024 ([bilingual version](#))
- Administrative Measures on the Counter-Terrorism-Financing of Social Organizations, effective May 1, 2025 ([Chinese text](#), an [English text](#) is available through the Peking University's law database subscription service)
- [Regulations on the Registration and Management of Social Groups](#) (adopted by the State Council October 25, 1998)
- [Regulations on the Registration and Management of Social Groups](#) (revised March 12, 2026)

In addition to the laws above that directly regulate the sector, there are a number of other laws and regulations in other sectors that are relevant because they were drafted with input from civil society groups and have important implications for civil society groups. Below are two examples:

The [Anti-Domestic Violence Law](#) (反家庭暴力法, also translated as the Domestic Violence Law) went into effect on March 1, 2016. The law is one of the few pieces of legislation in which we can see the contribution of civil society groups, which pushed for this law. Its passage makes an issue that was long viewed as a private matter a responsibility of the state

The Environmental Law took effect in 2015. It lowered the barrier for NGOs to file public interest lawsuits. A previous draft had only allowed a few NGOs to file public interest lawsuits, but the final draft contained more liberal language that allowed any NGO registered with Civil Affairs at the city level or above to file a public interest lawsuit. That interpretation was later [affirmed by the Supreme People's Court](#)

(Note: English-language translations of these laws can be found either on [ChinaLawTranslate](#) or [China Development Brief's website](#)).

PENDING REGULATORY INITIATIVES

1. Draft Regulation for Registration and Management of Social Organizations ([Original in Chinese; English Translation](#))

In August 2018, the Ministry of Civil Affairs issued the draft Regulation for Registration and Management of Social Organizations for public comment. The draft regulation combined proposed revisions to three separate regulations that formed the core of the regulatory system governing the registration and management of China's three categories of NPOs, or "social organizations": social associations (SAs), social service organizations (SSOs), and foundations.

The draft regulation attracted significant attention among academics, practitioners, and commentators because of its potential importance. Its principal positive feature was that it would have lowered registration barriers for four categories of social organizations by allowing them to register directly with the civil affairs authorities without a professional supervisory unit (PSU) (see the Barriers to Formation section below for more details). Other provisions, however, were criticized for defining "charity" and "public welfare" too narrowly, prohibiting social organizations from engaging in "for-profit" or business activities, and failing to lower certain registration requirements that make it difficult for smaller community foundations to register.

The draft regulation also included provisions requiring social organizations to establish Communist Party organizations and carry out Party activities. Social organizations would be required to create the necessary conditions and provide a work plan for establishing such Party organizations. This language requiring Party organizations did not appear in the Charity Law or in the previous regulations governing social organizations.

2. Update on the Draft Regulation for Registration and Management of Social Organizations

Nearly seven years have passed since the Ministry of Civil Affairs issued the draft regulation for public comment in August 2018, and the reasons for the delay remain unclear. However, recent news articles and policy documents suggest that the draft regulation may have fallen out of favor with prevailing political priorities, which appear to emphasize greater supervision and control of social organizations.

As further evidence, the Ministry of Civil Affairs' annual legislative agendas since 2024 have not mentioned this draft regulation. The latest legislative agenda, issued in June 2026, mentions only a revision of the Regulation for Registration and Management of Social Groups, which had been expected to be subsumed under the broader draft regulation. This suggests that the Ministry may have reverted to its earlier 2016 plan to revise the regulations governing each of the three types of social organizations separately, rather than issuing a single umbrella regulation covering all three categories.

For a fuller discussion of the Charity Law and its implementing regulations, see [ICNL's Philanthropy Law Report](#) and accompanying resources which include FAQs about the Charity Law. For a more detailed discussion of the ONGO Law, see [ICNL's Philanthropy Law Report](#) and accompanying resources which include FAQs about the ONGO Law.

Legal Analysis

This section provides an in-depth assessment of China's legal environment for civic freedoms, including the barriers to the exercise of the freedoms of association (formation, operations, resources), expression, and peaceful assembly. Click a subheading for more, or [click here to expand all subheadings](#).

ORGANIZATIONAL FORMS

CSOs in China are officially referred to as social organizations (*shehui zuzhi*, 社会组织), and fall into three legal categories:

- Social associations (SAs, *shehui tuanti*, 社会团体) refer to non-profit organizations formed voluntarily by citizens to carry out activities in accordance with their charters to realize the common wishes of their members, such as societies, associations, and research institutes;

- Social service organizations (SSOs, *shehui fuwu jigou*, 社会服务组织), formerly civil non-enterprise institutions (CNIs, *minban fei qiye danwei*, 民办非企业单位) refer to public benefit, non-profit social organizations established using non-state-owned assets and engaged in providing social services.
- Foundations (*jijinhui*, 基金会) refer to non-profit organizations that utilize donated property for public benefit purposes.

As of the end of 2024, there were around 878,700 social organizations registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs and its local bureaus, comprising approximately 380,000 SAs, 489,000 SSOs, and 9,700 foundations. These figures indicate a slight decline in overall numbers in recent years, with the exception of foundations, whose numbers have grown slightly.

In addition to these three legal forms, the Charity Law, which went into effect on September 1, 2016, introduced two additional legal arrangements for carrying out charitable activities:

1. Charitable organization status (*cishan zuzhi*, 慈善组织): This status can be granted to any lawfully established nonprofit organization whose main purpose is “carrying out charitable activities” and that does not have a “profit making purpose” (Article 8-9). A social organization can obtain charitable organization status in two ways: 1) during the initial process of registration; or
2. By applying according to the procedures in the Measures for the Designation of Charitable Organizations issued in September 2016. At the close of 2023, only 13,600 social organizations (or about 1.5 percent of SOs) were officially accredited as charitable organizations, of which the vast majority are foundations, while the rest are SAs and SSOs.

Charitable trusts (*cishan xintuo*, 慈善信托): While charitable trusts were first recognized under the 2001 Trust Law, ambiguity around their regulation and taxation hindered their development. The 2016 Charity Law clarified the legal framework, specifying management requirements and tax provisions, which significantly boosted interest in charitable trusts. Article 45 of the Charity Law requires charitable trusts to “file documents for the record” (*bei'an*) with the Civil Affairs authorities in order to qualify for tax benefits. As a result of these reforms, the number of charitable trusts has grown quickly in number from 53 in 2019 to 1,655 by end of 2023, with a net worth of more than CNY 6.52 billion (approximately \$918.7 million).

In addition to these legal forms, a significant number of CSOs register as for-profit businesses or operate without legal registration. Some unregistered CSOs gain legal status by attaching themselves to other legal entities such as social organizations or public institutions (e.g., universities and research institutes). Although these groups are not legally classified as NPOs, in practice they function as voluntary, nongovernmental, not-for-profit, mission driven, and self-governing organizations that are founded by and governed by private individuals. Many rely on foreign funding from governments, embassies, international organizations, and foundations. To maintain credibility, they often document the not-for-profit nature of their activities in reports to donors.

Estimates of the number of such informal CSOs vary widely, ranging from a few hundred thousand to a few million, depending on the definition used. Broader estimates may include Party-controlled mass organizations, such as the Communist Youth League and Women’s Federation and their local branches, and rural cooperatives.

A substantial portion of legally registered CSOs—especially SAs and foundations—were either created by the government or maintain close ties with government agencies. These are often referred to as government-organized NGOs (GONGOs). In contrast, informal CSOs are generally more grassroots and independent from the state.

Another relevant organizational form is the public institution or public service unit (*shiye danwei*, 事业单位), which includes government-established entities such as universities, research institutes, and hospitals.

These quasi-governmental agencies are generally formed by the government and staffed with government employees. They are a legacy of China's centrally-planned system set up during the 1950s. Though not traditional CSOs, they are included in this report because they frequently receive foreign funding and are subject to some of the same tax rules as social organizations. China is currently planning to carry out a [reform of public institutions](#) by privatizing a portion of them and turning them into social organizations.

The Ministry of Civil Affairs is the primary registration body for NPOs in China. CSOs that operate as for-profit businesses register through the State Administration for Industry and Commerce. International NGOs are under the Ministry of Public Security.

For more detailed analysis, see:

- Andrew Watson, "*Civil Society in a Transitional State: The Rise of Associations in China*," in Jonathan Unger, ed., *Associations and the Chinese State* (M.E. Sharpe, 2008)
- Guosheng Deng, "*The Hidden Rules Governing China's Unregistered NGOs: Management and Consequences*," *The China Review*, 10:1 (Spring, 2010)
- ICNL's infographic, the [Universe of Chinese NGOs](#), and [graphs](#) showing the growth of foundations and social organizations.

PUBLIC BENEFIT STATUS

Chinese law distinguishes between CSOs that serve charitable or public benefit purposes and those with other aims.

Under the 2016 Charity Law and the 2023 amended Charity Law, social organizations can now apply for charitable status. To obtain charitable status, an organization must submit an application to the Civil Affairs Department, either at the national or local level. According to Article 9 of the Charity Law, a charitable organization must meet the following requirements:

- Aim to carry out charitable activities;
- Not have the goal of making a profit;
- Possess a name and address;
- Have an organizational charter;
- Have necessary financial assets;
- Have an organizational structure and person in charge in accordance with the requirements;
- Meet other conditions stipulated by laws and administrative regulations.

Article 3 of the Charity Law defines "charitable activities" as public interest activities voluntarily carried out by natural persons, legal persons, and other organizations through the donation of property. These activities include:

- Other public interest activities in accordance with this law.
- Helping the poor and the needy;

- Assisting the elderly, orphans, the ill, the disabled, and providing special care;
- Alleviating losses incurred by natural disasters, accidents, public health incidents, and other emergencies;
- Promoting the development of education, science, culture, health, sports, and other causes;
- Preventing and alleviating pollution and other public hazards, protecting and improving the eco-environment; and
- Other public interest activities in accordance with this law.

BARRIERS TO FORMATION

CSOs in China face extensive barriers to entry based in policy, practice, and regulation. While the 2016 Charity Law and its implementing regulations, and revised drafts of registration and management regulations for social organizations which have yet to be promulgated, eased some restrictions, they also introduced new constraints. For more resources on the Charity Law, see [ICNL's Philanthropy Law Report](#) and accompanying resources, which include an FAQ about the Charity Law.

Registration procedures for CSOs remain complex and cumbersome, with extensive documentation and approval requirements. Many organizations were in the past required to operate under a “dual management” system, requiring sponsorship from a “professional supervising unit,” such as a government ministry or provincial government agency, before seeking registration and approval from the Ministry of Civil Affairs in Beijing or a local civil affairs bureau. Obtaining such sponsorship was difficult, particularly for groups without strong connections in the government that are operating in sensitive sectors such as advocacy, legal aid, labor, religion, and ethnic minority affairs.

Over the last 15 years, local governments piloted reforms aimed at lowering barriers to entry by reforming the dual management system for certain categories of social organizations. In most cases, this reform involves doing away with the requirement for social organizations to obtain the sponsorship of a PSU. These reforms have informed national policy and led to a relaxation of the dual management system. Under the 2018 draft registration and management regulation for SAs, SSOs, and foundations that are still awaiting approval, the “dual management system” will be removed for four categories of social organizations: trade associations and chambers of commerce, science and technology associations, public benefit and charitable organizations, and urban and rural community organizations. These types of organizations will be able to register directly with, and be sponsored by, the Ministry of Civil Affairs without having to find another PSU to sponsor them.

Other regulations further constrain entry. Broad legal clauses in the Charity Law bar the registration of groups perceived to oppose the state and/or Party. For example:

- Article 4 mandates that charitable activities must be lawful, voluntary, honest, and non-profit, and must not violate social morality, endanger national security, or harm societal public interests or the lawful rights and interests of other persons.
- Article 5 indicates that the government encourages and supports natural persons, legal persons, and other organizations in legally carrying out charitable activities that represent the core values of socialism and promote the traditional morals of the Chinese nation.

Under the Regulations on the Registration and Management of Social Associations (1999), applicant organizations must have:

- A minimum of 50 individual or 30 institutional members;

- A fixed location;
- Staff with appropriate qualifications; and
- Minimum assets of CNY 100,000 (currently \$9,500) for national organizations and CNY 30,000 (\$2,800) for local organizations.

To apply for legal status, organizations must submit a wide array of organizational documents to the registration and management agency.

Government agencies may also rely on a wide array of reasons to deny registration. The Regulations on the Registration and Management of Social Associations (1999) and the Interim Regulations on the Registration and Administration of Civil Non-Enterprise Institutions (CNIs) (1998) both stipulate that SAs and CNIs (e.g. SSOs) cannot establish branch organizations or offices in other regions. The revisions of these regulations that are currently awaiting approval will relax some of these requirements, but not do away with them completely.

After registration, an organization must navigate separate approval processes to obtain an official seal, open a bank account, establish a branch or subsidiary; modify its registration or amend its charter; or change its legal representative, among other actions. The government also has broad discretionary authority to shut down social organizations under the Interim Measures for Banning Illegal Non-Governmental Organizations (2000). Given these challenges—the dual management system, complicated registration and approval processes, onerous reporting requirements, and the opportunity for frequent government intrusion into organizational matters—many groups in the past chose to register as for-profit businesses or operate without formal registration. According to the Interim Measures for Banning Illegal Non-Governmental Organizations, however, unregistered CSOs are considered illegal, making them especially vulnerable to state control. Registering as a legal social organization also became the only pathway to receiving foreign funding after the passage of the 2016 Overseas NGO Law prohibited overseas NGOs from funding or partnering with unregistered CSOs.

BARRIERS TO OPERATIONS

Operational barriers for CSOs in China vary, largely depending on how the activities are viewed by the party-state. Generally, CSOs engaged in social services and charitable work are viewed more favorably than those engaged in advocacy and rights-based activism.

The regulatory framework also allows for significant government intervention and interference. Government intervention in operational matters can take many forms, including:

- Raising questions about the appointment of directors, trustees, or senior staff;
- Restricting allowable activities based on the government-approved organizational application or charter;
- Micromanaging banking arrangements;
- Using tax laws to undertake investigations of operational activities and terminate organizational activities;
- Harassing organizations by exerting pressure through the organization's landlord or utility company;
- Burdensome reporting requirements; and
- Intensive monitoring of activities that are considered sensitive by the party and state by security

forces, including the Ministry of Public Security and the Ministry of State Security.

Under President Xi Jinping’s administration (2013 – present), civil society experienced a sharp upturn in repression by the police and security forces. Many independent CSOs and law firms have been harassed and forced to close, and their staff and leaders interrogated, detained, and sometimes imprisoned. One decade into his administration, in April 2023, Xu Zhiyong and Ding Jiayi were sentenced to 14 years and 12 years respectively for “subversion of state power” for organizing a 2019 meeting where China’s democratic future was discussed (Source: [Human Rights Watch](#)). In a case of transnational repression, Chinese human rights lawyer Lu Siwei was detained in Laos on his way to Thailand in July 2023 and returned to China where he was sentenced to 11 months in prison.

In addition to these enforcement actions, additional regulations have been issued to further restrict CSO operations:

- 2016 regulations require social organizations to initiate [Communist] “party construction work” and require them to submit to supervision by Communist Party groups.
- 2018 regulations incorporate social organizations into the credit management system. Nonprofits that have poor credit records may be included on a blacklist that could lead to greater supervision and deny them opportunities to apply for financial support.
- In March 2021, a Notice on Eliminating the Breeding Grounds for Illegal Social Organizations and Cleansing the Ecological Space for Social Organizations (see Section 8) was issued. This policy calls on public and private actors—including companies, public institutions, social organizations, media organizations, internet platforms, financial institutions, party members, and the public—not to associate with unregistered or “illegal” CSOs.
- In March 2023, the Communist Party of China’s Central Committee and the State Council [announced a plan](#) to create a Central Social Affairs Department to supervise party construction work within both private sector entities and social organizations. This signals continued centralization of control over civil society actors.

Foreign NGOs Operating in China

The Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Administration of Activities of Overseas Nongovernmental Organizations in the Mainland of China (commonly referred to as the Overseas NGO Law or ONGO Law) established a stringent legal framework for foreign NGOs operating in mainland China. The law, which came into effect on January 1, 2017, defines overseas NGOs (ONGOs) as nonprofit, non-governmental social organizations legally established outside of mainland China—including in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau.

The law introduces significant barriers to cooperation between ONGOs and Chinese entities. Most notably, it shifts regulatory authority from the Ministry of Civil Affairs to the Ministry of Public Security—China’s principal internal security agency—marking a shift from administrative oversight to a security-oriented approach.

Under the ONGO Law, foreign NGOs may legally operate in China through only two channels:

1. Registering a representative office in China; or
2. Filing “documentation for the record” (bei’an) to carry out “temporary activities” in mainland China lasting no longer than one year. This requires an ONGO to have a Chinese partner and file materials about their collaboration and any necessary approvals with the Public Security office. They are also required to file reports on their activities to Public Security.

Article 9 of the ONGO Law explicitly prohibits ONGOs from engaging in activities—directly or indirectly—without going through one of the two authorized legal channels:

“ONGOs that do neither of these are not allowed to carry out activities either openly or covertly, or to authorize, fund or covertly authorize any Chinese work unit or individual to carry out activities.”

While the law does legitimize the status of ONGOs in China and establishes a formal channel between ONGOs and the government, it is highly restrictive and effectively bars Chinese organizations and individuals from cooperating with unregistered ONGOs.

For more resources for understanding the ONGO Law, see [ICNL’s Philanthropy Law Report](#) and accompanying resources which include FAQs about the ONGO Law.

In addition to these legal barriers, a number of extra-legal barriers restrict international contact. Chinese CSOs have generally been required to report international contacts to authorities and, in some cases, obtain prior approval for certain kinds of visits, international cooperation, foreign donations, and other contact with foreign organizations or donors. Moreover, Chinese CSOs that collaborate with or receive funding from foreign organizations are monitored closely and sometimes harassed. The State Security Ministry established an office several years ago to monitor both domestic and international NGO affairs. Foreign NGOs are regularly accused by Chinese media of supporting activities that undermine social stability and national security.

While the ONGO Law is the single greatest barrier to international NGOs carrying out activities in China, two recent trends pose additional challenges.

First, nationalism and authoritarianism have risen under the current leader, Xi Jinping. One manifestation of this is the National People’s Congress’ passage on June 30, 2020, of the [National Security Law \(NSL\)](#) for Hong Kong, which imposes criminal penalties for collusion with foreign powers or external elements that endanger national security. In March 2024, Hong Kong’s legislature passed its own Safeguarding National Security Ordinance (otherwise known as Article 23) which essentially expands on the NSL, increases police powers and broadens the definition of state secrets and external inference and espionage. Second, tensions between China and the United States and other Western countries have grown in response to China’s hardline response to its Uyghur ethnic minority population in the province of Xinjiang and protests in Hong Kong.

BARRIERS TO RESOURCES

Two major pieces of legislation passed in 2016 – the Charity Law and ONGO Law – gave rise to two opposing trends that have continued into the 2020s: expanding opportunities for domestic fundraising, and growing restrictions on foreign funding for Chinese CSOs.

On the domestic fundraising front, the 2016 Charity Law, along with other measures incentivizing CSOs to register as legal NPOs, expanded the pool of groups that can engage in public fundraising and encouraged philanthropy through tax incentives. In the past, public fundraising—understood to include funding appeals through the media, in public spaces, and online—was restricted to a small number of organizations generally with close ties to the government. These included government agencies, such as the Ministry of Civil Affairs; officially designated organizations such as the Chinese Red Cross and China Charity Federation; and public fundraising foundations. Other organizations, including non-public fundraising foundations, SAs, and SSOs, were not allowed to engage in public fundraising.

Under the Charity Law, there will be no distinction between public and non-public fundraising foundations, and all legally-registered NPOs, including SAs and SSOs, will be allowed to apply for public fundraising status after two years of operation. In addition, the Charity Law calls for more generous tax incentives to encourage charitable giving.

Another notable policy shift came with the May 21, 2020, “Announcement on Matters Concerning the Pre-Tax Deduction of Public Welfare Donations,” issued jointly by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, Ministry of

Finance, and the State Administration of Taxation. The Announcement created a more streamlined process for social organizations to qualify for tax deductions on public welfare donations. Tax deductibility will also be valid for three years, instead of just one, and will be recognized nationwide. To qualify, social organizations need to maintain at least a 3A rating (with the highest rating being 5A) in their evaluation and comply with the provisions on expenditures and management fees specified in the Charity Law.

The rapid growth of [online fundraising/crowdsourcing platforms](#) over the last few years has also opened up new channels for Chinese CSOs to access resources. As of 2021, there were 20 online platforms certified by the Ministry of Civil Affairs. In 2018 alone, these platforms raised more than CNY 3.17 billion (about \$461 million) for 1,400 charitable organizations. The vast majority of funds were raised through three platforms owned by major tech companies: Tencent Charity, Ant Financial, and Alibaba Charity. In 2022, ten new online fundraising platforms were certified, including charity platforms established by major companies such as ByteDance, Xiaomi, Bilibili, China Mobile, Ctrip, and Ping An. To regulate this emerging sector, the Ministry of Civil Affairs has issued two industry standards: the “Charity Organizations’ Internet Public Fundraising Platform Basic Management Rules” and the “Charity Organizations’ Internet Public Fundraising Platform Basic Technological Rules.”

Regulation of foreign funding for CSOs, in contrast, has tightened significantly. These regulatory changes have been accompanied by official rhetoric and media messaging that cast foreign-funded CSOs as potential threats to national security and social stability.

The Overseas NGO Law, which went into effect on January 1, 2017, imposed high barriers to foreign resources. It requires all foreign NGOs operating in China to report on their Chinese partners, funding sources, and project activities to the public security apparatus. This requirement disproportionately affects grassroots organizations, many of which are unregistered or registered as businesses, and are thus ineligible to receive foreign funding under the law. As a result, numerous foreign NGOs have confirmed that they are no longer able to legally collaborate with or fund such partners.

BARRIERS TO EXPRESSION

Legal, administrative, and political barriers increasingly inhibit meaningful public expression and participation in China. A gap between constitutional guarantees of fundamental freedoms and the application of special regulations enables the state to exercise broad discretion in limiting speech, assembly, and advocacy by specific organizations and types of organizations—particularly when these activities are seen as harmful to national security.

These restrictions are enforced through a combination of legal tools including administrative decrees, such as the regulations governing social organizations and other kinds of groups. Additional regulatory barriers may restrict nonprofit organizations from engaging in policy advocacy, either by favoring government-affiliated groups or interpreting such activities as outside the scope of their officially approved activities or organizational charter. Barriers to organizational activity, such as those discussed above, may also restrict speech, assembly and advocacy.

Under President Xi Jinping, restrictions on freedom of expression have intensified. Human rights lawyers, civil society advocates, and bloggers who engage in public-interest advocacy have been subject to increasing surveillance, detention, and criminal charges. Universities, traditional media, social media platforms, and CSOs have all come under tighter ideological control.

One of the most visible crackdowns occurred in late 2018, when scores of workers protesting their dismissal from Jasic Technology Company in Shenzhen were detained along with university graduates who supported their cause.

CSOs and universities have also had to submit to greater Communist Party supervision and control and demonstrate their loyalty to the Party through party-building activities. In September 2022, the Ministry of Civil Affairs held its [first training session for leaders of national social organizations](#). The session emphasized the importance of aligning their activities with state priorities and enhancing political loyalty. An official leading the session explicitly instructed participants to ensure their work supported

government objectives.

These trends have had a chilling effect on civil society. They have discouraged rights-based advocacy, silenced critical voices, and created a climate of self-censorship among CSOs, intellectuals, and activists.

BARRIERS TO ASSEMBLY

Vague Provisions

China's legal framework for public assembly is rooted in the Assembly Law and its accompanying Implementing Measures, both of which contain vague and restrictive provisions. This vagueness gives authorities a great deal of authority and discretion to permit or deny assemblies. For example, Article 12 of the Assembly Law prohibits assemblies that might "oppose cardinal principles in the Constitution," without clarifying what these principles entail. Clauses barring assemblies that may threaten "public security and public order"—without specific definitions—create further ambiguity and leave space for subjective interpretation by law enforcement and local officials. Assemblies related to territorial and ethnic minority issues are particularly vulnerable to restrictions.

Maximum Numbers of Participants

The Assembly Law does not stipulate a maximum number of participants for public assemblies. However, local authorities may impose such limits through separate regulations or informal practices. In Beijing, CSOs have reported hearing of participant limits of 50 or 200 individuals, though they have not been able to identify any publicly available regulations containing those limits.

According to a 2002 Human Rights Watch report, *Dangerous Meditation: China's Campaign Against Falun Gong*, the Ministry of Public Security issued rules on November 24, 1999, that prohibited gatherings of 200 or more individuals for mass cultural or sporting events—such as concerts, sports meets, or public exercise (e.g., qigong)—unless prior approval was obtained from police authorities. This was reportedly based on a *BBC Worldwide Monitoring* article titled "China to regulate mass gatherings."

It is important to note, however, that Article 2 of the Assembly Law explicitly states that the law does not apply to "recreational or sports activities, normal religious activities, or traditional folk events." This suggests that there may be additional regulations issued at the local level by Public Security offices concerning other types of assembly.

Notification

Article 8 of the Assembly Law mandates that organizers submit a written application to the relevant authorities five days in advance of the planned event. According to Article 9, authorities are required to respond at least two days before the scheduled date of the event. If no response is issued, permission is legally presumed to be granted.

In cases of "unexpected occurrences," last-minute applications are permitted, and authorities are obligated to review and decide immediately.

The law does not address counter-demonstrations. However, spontaneous assemblies—those not pre-approved—are strictly prohibited. Article 29 criminalizes unauthorized gatherings and allows organizers and participants to be investigated under Article 158 of the Criminal Law if public order is deemed to be seriously undermined.

Obligations of Organizers

The Assembly Law imposes substantial obligations and liabilities on organizers of assemblies. Article 25 requires organizers to maintain order and prevent unauthorized participants from joining. Organizers may be required to appoint special personnel to assist the police, who must wear identifying marks.

Organizers can face penalties for administrative violations. Article 28 authorizes police to issue warnings

or detain organizers for up to 15 days if an assembly deviates from the approved time, location, route, or messaging—or is held without approval.

Restrictions on Participants

Participants are also subject to penalties. Article 30 allows police to detain individuals for up to 15 days for disrupting a lawful assembly. In more severe cases, criminal prosecution may follow. Article 15 prohibits residents of one city from organizing or participating in assemblies in another city, while Article 34 requires foreigners to obtain approval from relevant authorities to participate in assemblies organized by Chinese citizens.

Time, Place, and Manner Restrictions

The law places strict limits on when and where assemblies can occur:

- Article 23 bans assemblies within 10 to 300 meters of critical sites such as government offices, military installations, transportation hubs, and locations housing state guests.
- Article 24 restricts the timing of public assemblies to the hours between 6:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m., unless special permission is granted.
- Article 12 bans assemblies that “harm the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state.” This provision is used to discourage assemblies related to ethnic minority issues—particularly in regions such as Tibet or Xinjiang where there has been vocal dissatisfaction with Communist Party governance

Enforcement

China has a history of using force to suppress assemblies. The most infamous example remains the Tiananmen Square crackdown of 1989, where an unknown number of civilians were killed. The government has never provided an official death toll.

In 1999, a peaceful vigil by Falun Gong practitioners near Zhongnanhai (the government compound in Beijing) notoriously prompted a wide-ranging crackdown. Human rights organizations report that Falun Gong adherents have since been subject to arbitrary detention, forced labor, torture, and psychiatric abuse.

More recently, the state has used force to break up demonstrations over land seizures and corruption in rural areas. For example, July 2025 marked the eighth anniversary of what is now known as the “709” crackdown, when, on July 9, 2015, authorities across China launched a large-scale, coordinated assault on human rights lawyers and rule of law activists. Police targeted more than 300 lawyers and activists, many of whom were disappeared or arbitrarily detained in the following months. However, even today the Chinese government has continued to [silence](#) lawyers who challenge official abuses.

Other issues

Many CSO representatives report that they would not apply for permits to hold assemblies knowing that their requests would almost certainly be denied. In addition, filing an application can draw attention from public security, placing organizers at risk of surveillance or reprisal.

Nevertheless, some demonstrations do occur—typically those aligned with government interests or conducted in partnership with government-affiliated organizations. In October 2012, large anti-Japanese demonstrations were held in Beijing and a few other cities. Though it remains unclear who organized them, many observers believe the demonstrations had tacit state support. That same month, a Beijing-based gay rights CSO held an AIDS walk along a section of the Great Wall that involved hundreds of participants. No formal application was submitted, but the event was organized in cooperation with a

government-run AIDS foundation.

Additional Resources

This section contains links to external reports and news reports relevant to civic freedoms. The Historical Notes section contains links to past developments which ICNL has reported on. Click a subheading for more, or [click here to expand all subheadings](#).

Global Index Rankings

Ranking Body	Rank	Ranking Scale (best - worst possible)
UN Human Development Index	78 (2023)	1 - 193
World Justice Project Rule of Law Index	95 (2024)	1 - 142
Transparency International	76 (2024)	1 - 180
Fund for Peace Fragile States Index	99 (2024)	179 - 1
Freedom House: Freedom in the World	Status: Not Free Political Rights: -2 Civil Liberties: 11 (2024)	Free/Partly Free/Not Free 40 - 0 60 - 0
Civicus Monitor	Status: Closed (2025)	closed, repressed, obstructed, narrowed or open

Reports

UN Universal Periodic Review Reports	China UPR page
UN Human Rights Reports	China
Council on Foundations Country Notes	China report
U.S. State Department	2024 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: China
Fund for Peace Fragile States Index Reports	China
IMF Country Reports	China and the IMF
ICNL Philanthropy Law Report	China
ICNL Online Library	China

In 2018, ICNL published a China Philanthropy Law Report, and accompanying resources (infographics, graphs, timelines, factsheets and FAQs) for understanding the philanthropy and civil society sector in China that can be found [here](#).

News of importance to the nonprofit sector will be updated on a continual basis on [China Development Brief](#), China's only bilingual platform covering the sector.

Regular updates and monitoring of the Overseas NGO Law can be found at [ChinaFile's China NGO Project](#).

Regular analysis and reflections on Chinese civil society can be found on Shawn Shieh's [NGOs in China blog](#).

While we aim to maintain information that is as current as possible, we realize that situations can rapidly change. If you are aware of any additional information or inaccuracies on this page, please keep us informed; write to ICNL at ngomonitor@icnl.org.

News

[China critic Jimmy Lai sentenced to 20 years in jail after landmark Hong Kong trial](#) (February 2026)

Hong Kong's most vocal China critic, media tycoon Jimmy Lai, was sentenced to 20 years in jail, ending the city's biggest national security case that has fueled global concerns about Beijing's clampdown on freedoms in the ex-British colony. Lai's sentence on two counts of conspiracy to collude with foreign forces and one for publishing seditious materials ends a legal saga that has lasted nearly five years.

[Authorities seek to levy national security charges on churchgoers](#) (January 2026)

On January 6, Sichuan police detained at least ten people associated with the Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu from their homes or the church premises in a coordinated raid. Six remain in custody and have been criminally detained on suspicion of "inciting subversion of state power" at Deyang City Detention Center. Four other church members seized in the January 6 raid were released after hours of questioning.

[Chinese rights lawyer Lu Siwei sentenced to 11 months in prison](#) (April 2025)

Prominent Chinese rights lawyer Lu Siwei, who was arrested and deported from Laos in 2023, was sentenced behind closed doors in China to 11 months in prison. Lu, 52, who was accused of illegal border crossing, plans to appeal the sentence by the Chenghua District Court in Chengdu. An insurance attorney by profession, Lu is well known for taking on many politically sensitive cases, including defending one of the 12 Hong Kong activists jailed in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong after they were caught fleeing by boat to Taiwan in 2020.

[Key points of China's amended Charity Law](#) (January 2024)

China's amended Charity Law, which will enter into force on September 5, 2024, includes a new chapter on the role of charitable organizations in responding to emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and provides more guidance and standards for online charitable fundraising platforms as well as charitable trusts, both of which have grown rapidly in recent years. In line with recent high-level policy directives emphasizing the leadership role of the Communist Party in all walks of life, the law stipulates that charity work comes under the leadership of the Communist Party. Several key changes in the amended law generally contravene the recommendations made by more independent NGOs, such as Zhicheng Public Interest Law, to give charitable organizations more autonomy, remove limits on spending and management fees, and simplify the process for non-profit organizations to gain charitable organization status.

[Proposed changes to the Amended China's Charity Law](#) (December 2023)

During the public submission period for the draft amended Charity Law, one of China's more independent NGOs published their recommendations, which emphasized more autonomy and less regulation for charitable organizations.

[The 14th Five Year Plan for Social Organizations and the future of civil society in China](#) (January 2022)

In October 2021, the Ministry of Civil Affairs issued its 14th Five Year Plan (FYP) for the Development of Social Organizations. The FYP is the first of its kind for the social organization sector and is must reading

for anyone interested in understanding how the Chinese government intends to reshape the future of China's nonprofit sector. It puts forth a grim blueprint for the sector's development over the next five years drawing on high level policy documents and major laws and regulations issued over the last few years.

[The 14th Five Year Plan for Social Organizations: Opportunities for NGOs](#) (January 2022)

In my last blogpost, I wrote about the 14th Five Year Plan (FYP) for Social Organizations released in October 2021 and its blueprint for imposing greater controls and supervision over Chinese social organizations in an effort to create a "high-quality" social organization sector. While the FYP instills little optimism for the development of an independent civil society, it does identify areas in which NGOs in China can contribute to the development of the sector, and to sustainable and inclusive development in China and globally.

Archived News

[Will There Be a Civil Society in the Xi Jinping Era?](#) (July 2021)

[The 14th Five-Year Plan Outlines Policies for Social Organizations](#) (July 2021)

[Altering the Approach to Non-State-Approved Social Organisations](#) (April 2021)

[China Tightens Political Security Operations Against 'Potential' Dissent](#) (December 2020)

[To Fight the Next Pandemic, the World Needs Chinese Activists](#) (November 2020)

[How and why the Charity Law could be amended](#) (October 2020)

[Shenzhen Gives Green Light for Legal Action to Stop Environmental Destruction](#) (September 2020)

[Reckoning with Hong Kong's National Security Law](#) (July 2020)

[92.72% of social organisations in Beijing impacted by COVID-19](#) (July 2020)

[CDB conducts survey on needs of Chinese charities during the pandemic](#) (June 2020)

[Is HK about to Get Its Own Foreign NGO Law in the Name of 'National Security'?](#) (June 2020)

[The remarkable online volunteers of the COVID-19 Outbreak](#) (March 2020)

[China Alters Civil Society Rules](#) (March 2020)

[Civil society finds new paths in Wuhan](#) (February 2020)

[Coronavirus in China: International NGOs' response](#) (February 2020)

[Report Released on Online Fundraising in China in 2018](#) (May 2019)

[Second "Silk Road NGO Cooperation Network Forum" in Beijing](#) (April 2019)

[Citing Foreign NGO Law Requirements, NGO Opts out of China Summit](#) (March 2019)

[Eight highlights of the 2019 Government Work Report](#) (March 2019)

[China's social credit system takes on fake charities](#) (February 2019)

[Inside China's crackdown on young Marxists](#) (February 2019)

[Shenzhen labour activists formally arrested](#) (February 2019)

[Young Activists Go Missing in China, Raising Fears of Crackdown](#) (November 2018)

[Law professors respond to the “Social Organization Regulations” draft](#) (August 2018)

[The new draft on the registration of social organisations](#) (August 2018)

[How China’s new individual income tax amendment affects charitable donations](#) (September 2018)

[Remaking China’s Civil Society in the Xi Jinping Era, by Shawn Shieh](#) (August 2018)

[242 overseas NGOs register in China](#) (November 2017)

[China NGO Law Still Hazy](#) (June 2017)

[The Origins of China’s New Law on Foreign NGOs](#) (January 2017)

[Implementing the Overseas NGO Law: 26 NGOs Register in Beijing and Guangdong](#) (January 2017)

[Implementing the Overseas NGO Law: Six NGOs Register in Shanghai](#) (January 2017)

[More FAQs on the Overseas NGO Law: Reading the Fine Print](#) (January 2017)

[Follow up on the Overseas NGO Law : The List of Professional Supervising Units Has Been Issued](#) (December 2016)

[Draft Guidelines for the Overseas NGO Law Announced at a Shanghai Forum](#) (October 2016)

[Some Insights from a Q&A with the Ministry of Public Security on the Overseas NGO Law](#) (September 2016)

[China’s first Charity Law takes effect to upgrade industry](#) (September 2016)

[A new dawn for China’s charity sector](#) (September 2016)

[Charity overhaul in China, but only with government approval](#) (September 2016)

[A Hokey-Cokey in State Intervention or a Breakthrough for Chinese NGOs?](#) (August 2016)

[China’s new NGO rules call for organisations to adhere to party leadership](#) (August 2016)

[How Should Global Stakeholders Respond to China’s New NGO Management Law?](#) (May 2016)

[How Foreign Nonprofit Organizations Should Respond to China’s New Overseas NGO Law](#) (May 2016)

[Clampdown in China Restricts 7,000 Foreign Organizations](#) (April 2016)

[China Passes Law on Security Controls on Foreign NGOs](#) (April 2016)

[It Just Got Harder to Make a Difference in China](#) (April 2016)

[The Good—and Bad—About China’s Charity Law](#) (March 2016)

[The Pros and Cons of China’s NGO Laws](#) (March 2016)

[China Adopts Charity Law](#) (March 2016)

[Is China’s New Overseas NGO Management Law Sounding the Death Knell for Civil Society? Maybe Not](#) (February 2016)

[Charges Against Chinese Rights Lawyers Draw Foreign Criticism](#) (January 2016)

[China Passes Controversial Counter-Terrorism Law](#) (December 2015)

[China's Latest Crackdown on Workers Is Unprecedented](#) (December 2015)

[Grassroots NGOs Win Landmark Environmental Public Interest Lawsuit](#) (November 2015)

[China's Xi Defends Censorship Amid Support For Embattled Rights Community](#) (September 2015)

[White House sends tough message on NGOs as Chinese President visits](#) (September 2015)

[Draft anti-terrorism law should be revised](#) (January 2015)

[Guangzhou OKs foreign cash for NGOs](#) (November 2014)

[China Approves Security Law Emphasizing Counterespionage](#) (November 2014)

[New Signs that China is Scrutinizing Foreign NGOs](#) (June 2014)

[People Power in the People's Republic of China](#) (June 2014)

[Pray for Gao Zhisheng on Easter](#) (April 2014)

[Government Must End Reprisals Against Activists Demanding Participation in UPR](#) (August 2013)

[Social Media in China Fuel Citizen Response to Quake](#) (May 2013)

[The changing face of service society](#) (May 2013)

['Spring' in the air for NGOs?](#) (April 2013)

[Government's NGO funding peaks in 2012](#) (February 2013)

[NGOs praised for role in fighting HIV/AIDS](#) (November 2012)

[State to tighten oversight of international NGOs](#) (September 2012)

[Activist and artist Ai Weiwei loses appeal on tax evasion charges](#) (September 2012)

[China's door "wide open" to foreign NGOs](#) (September 2012)

[Chinese turn to microblogs for donations instead of government charities](#) (August 2012)

[NGOs get boost from Shenzhen register reforms](#) (August 2012)

[Government wants more transparency, which means more control over NGOs](#) (August 2012)

[New regulations on the management of charitable foundations issued](#) (July 2012)

[Changing climate for religious NGOs?](#) (July 2012)

[Clinton comments on human rights blocked in China](#) (July 2012)

[Eric Schmidt: The Great Firewall of China will fall](#) (July 2012)

[Charity Law submitted to State Council](#) (June 2012)

[Environmental NGOs grow across China but struggle for support](#) (June 2012)

[Corporate-NGO Partnerships in China: Fostering Employee Volunteer Programs](#) (June 2012)

[China keen to scale down EU human rights talks](#) (June 2012)

[Law to give new start to embattled charities](#) (June 2012)

[China tells Tibetan NGOs to register or else face closure](#) (May 2012)

[Will pressure make Chinese aid more transparent?](#) (March 2012)

[Revisions of law to ensure human rights related to detention, arrest and surveillance](#) (March 2012)

[Charities open to religious groups](#) (March 2012)

[Political advisers argue that legislation on the charity law is “vital” for the NGO sector to grow](#) (March 2012)

[China develops law on philanthropy](#) (October 2011)

[Social groups may get right for litigation](#) (October 2011)

[China human rights group blocked from EU-China dialogue](#) (September 2011)

[China jails veteran democracy activist](#) (September 2011)

[Breakthrough judicial interpretation of freedom of information regulations](#) (August 2011)

[New breakthrough for grassroots charity groups](#) (August 2011)

[Chinese civilian NGOs seek charity legislation](#) (August 2011)

[Calls for greater transparency, supervision in philanthropy](#) (July 2011)

[Carefully cultivating NGOs](#) (July 2011)

[China to ease NGO registration policy](#) (July 2011)

[Amnesty International accuses China of silencing human rights lawyers](#) (June 2011)

[China seeks to expand modern philanthropy](#) (May 2011)

[Labor question threatens China’s social compact, divides ruling party](#) (May 2011)

[China creates new agency for patrolling the Internet](#) (May 2011)

[Biden, Clinton lecture China on human rights](#) (May 2011)

[Fears in China as another human rights lawyer disappear](#) (May 2011)

[Teng Biao, Chinese human rights lawyer, released after detention](#) (April 2011)

[West needs more ‘muscular’ approach to defending China’s dissidents](#) (April 2011)

[End the silence on Ai Weiwei](#) (April 2011)

[China’s human rights crackdown – interactive guide](#) (April 2011)

[EU and US urge China to free Ai Weiwei](#) (April 2011)

[Investigate police assaults against foreign journalists](#) (March 2011)

[Crack down on Egypt-inspired protests in China](#) (February 2011)

[Experts assess the progress of civil society in China](#) (February 2011)

Historical Notes

In the late 2000s, the Chinese government began revising the legal framework governing CSOs,

charitable donations, and fundraising. These efforts were partly intended to improve regulatory capacity and coordination between the state and CSOs. Local governments were encouraged to pilot reforms—such as easing registration procedures, contracting social services to CSOs, and developing support and incubation platforms—that would later inform national policy.

The concept of “social management innovation” [shehui guanli chuangxin] was a focal point of the 12th Five Year Plan (2011 to 2015). It referred to improving the party-state’s ability to manage and coordinate with a range of CSOs and other non-state actors to address common goals. From 2009 to 2013, numerous local governments launched initiatives to support this agenda, including lowering barriers to CSO registration, contracting social services to CSOs, building programs and platforms to coordinate, support and incubate CSOs, and creating more detailed regulations and standards to guide the development of the CSO sector.

The administration of Xi Jinping, who became president in March 2013, reaffirmed these reforms in November 2013 at the Third Plenum Decision of the 18th Central Committee. The final language in the Decision used the term “social governance” rather than social management—a term that civil society actors initially welcomed as it implied a more collaborative model of state–society relations.

Starting in 2013, authorities also launched a wide-ranging crackdown on certain segments of civil society, particularly those engaged in rights-based advocacy, ethnic minority issues, religion, and other politically sensitive areas. This dual-track strategy signaled that reform efforts were intended primarily for state-aligned CSOs—such as charitable, social service, and professional associations—while critical or independent groups would remain tightly controlled.

Notable early cases politicians or CSO staff interrogated, detained, imprisoned, or otherwise pressured since 2013 included:

- the arrest in 2013 of Xu Zhiyong, founder of the Open Constitution Initiative (Gongmeng) and one of the leaders of the New Citizens’ Movement
- closure in 2014-15 of the offices of Yirenping, one of China’s foremost anti-discrimination CSOs;
- crackdowns on a number of labor rights groups in South China from 2015-2020;
- closure in 2016 of Zhongzhe Women’s Legal Counseling Center, founded by Guo Jianmei, one of China’s best-known women’s rights advocates, for accepting foreign funds;
- the detention in 2016 of Peter Dahlin, a Swedish national and director of a legal aid CSO who was forced to confess on state television before being deported;
- a raid in 2018 on a large underground church in Chengdu;
- and other cases which have been documented by Chinese Human Rights Defenders (CHRD) and Human Rights in China (HRIC)

Developments since 2013 have occurred alongside a broader campaign to consolidate the party-state’s authority and legitimacy. Thus, the Xi administration also launched an unprecedented anti-corruption campaign that targeted many high-level leaders; a campaign to encourage ideological orthodoxy in state agencies, universities, the media and the blogosphere; and a rule-of-law campaign emphasizing greater adherence to rules both inside and outside of the Party. These campaigns were infused with a renewed emphasis on national sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity, reflecting both China’s rising global stature and its internal concerns about unrest, dissent, and external influence—particularly in Xinjiang, Tibet, the South China Sea, and Hong Kong.

Within this broader context, Chinese CSOs have found themselves entangled in the state’s efforts to

reassert control over civil society. These developments constitute a major top-down effort by the party-state to mold a “civil society with Chinese characteristics”—one that aligns with Party priorities and rejects what officials describe as Western-style rights discourse. This vision has been codified through a series of landmark laws and regulations, including the Charity Law (2016), the Overseas NGO Law (2017), and a unified Regulation for the Registration and Management of Social Organizations.

Together, these reforms represented a regulatory “Great Leap Forward” for the sector—constituting the most ambitious legal overhaul of nonprofit government in the People’s Republic of China to date. These legislative developments have been accompanied by substantial state investment in CSOs working in the priority areas of poverty alleviation, education, disaster relief, child and elder care, and community services.

Tensions between China and the United States and other Western countries have grown in response to China’s hardline response to its Uyghur ethnic minority population in the province of Xinjiang and protests in Hong Kong, especially in 2019. For example:

- In April 2019, the party-state’s mouthpiece, the *People’s Daily*, published an [article](#) detailing the case of two foreign NGOs that posed threats to China’s “political security.”
- In July 2019, an [article](#) appeared in a party-run paper in Shanghai accusing several U.S. NGOs of being behind the massive protests taking place in Hong Kong against a controversial extradition law.
- After President Trump signed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act in November 2019, the Chinese government announced that it would impose sanctions on five U.S. NGOs with offices in Hong Kong: Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, National Endowment for Democracy, International Republican Institute, and National Democratic Institute. Soon after, the [Chinese Foreign Ministry announced](#) the first investigation and penalty directed at a U.S.-based NGO, Asia Catalyst, for violating the Overseas NGO Law.

The period from 2016 to 2021 marked a decisive turning point for civil society in China—arguably the most consequential since the 1989 democracy movement. This period saw an unprecedented cascade of top-down policy and regulatory initiatives aimed at remaking the nonprofit sector. While observers differ on whether there is still meaningful space for civil society to operate, few dispute the state’s intent. As outlined in the 14th Five-Year Plan for the Development of Social Organizations, the party-state’s vision for civil society is now clear: a managed, state-aligned nonprofit sector that complements rather than challenges official policy, and that exists within firm political boundaries.

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