Transnational Civil Society and the National Identity Question in East Asia

Baogang He

The institutions of civil society play diverse roles in developing and maintaining democracy—that is, the process of democratization—and perform different functions in relation to the national identity/boundary question.¹ A growing literature testifies to the emerging importance of civil society in defining the boundaries of political communities,² such that the participation by ordinary people and the institutions of civil society in defining these boundaries give rise to a democratic approach to the national identity/boundary issue and new forms of associated global governance. In this article, I attempt to develop a transnational civil society approach to studying the range of interactions that occur across national borders in the context of national identity politics.³ Specifically, I consider the relevance of the transnational civil society approach to the national identity question in East Asia. In so doing, I examine the role international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) play in defining the boundaries of political communities and empowering small ethnic groups in the region to pursue their cause for self-determination. To this end, in seeking to explain why INGOs are able to exert influence on this issue, I outline the necessary conditions for effective INGOs and the existing problems associated with them.

For the purposes of this article, INGOs are defined not only as subjects of international law, but also as active participants in the shaping of such law. In other words, they are understood as shapers of international opinion and autonomous actors in competition with states. Their membership is international and their activities take place across national borders.⁴ The national identity/boundary problem refers to the phenomenon whereby certain sections of a national population, who do not identify with the nation-state in which they live, endeavor to create their own political identity by reconstructing cultural and ethnic identities. It also refers to a unification process whereby two separate states or political entities express a desire to merge on the basis of shared
cultural identity or history. In addition, this problem incorporates the issue of control over territories and resources and the redrawing of national boundaries.

**Some Basic Information About INGOs**

Tables 1 and 2 denote the existence of a large number of INGOs and offer a breakdown of their different types. Precisely, Table 1 shows that of the total number of INGOs, 37 are federations of international organizations, which constitute only 0.58 percent; 475 are universal membership organizations, making up 7.47 percent; and 4,782 are regionally oriented membership organizations, constituting the majority of 75.23 percent. It should be noted that a further 3,834 organizations are dissolved or apparently inactive. These figures also demonstrate that the transnational activities of INGOs are more or less geographically limited to one region of the world.5

Among the selected countries in Table 3, the United States has the highest participation rate in categories A, B and C, whereas the UK has the largest number in category D. The East Asian countries with the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Federations of international organizations</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Universal membership organizations</td>
<td>475</td>
<td>7.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Intercontinental membership organizations</td>
<td>1,063</td>
<td>16.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Regionally oriented membership organization</td>
<td>4,782</td>
<td>75.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6,357</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>397</td>
<td>427</td>
<td>437</td>
<td>486</td>
<td>485</td>
<td>483</td>
<td>484</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>796</td>
<td>773</td>
<td>783</td>
<td>1,001</td>
<td>997</td>
<td>1,074</td>
<td>1,057</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>3,440</td>
<td>3,381</td>
<td>3,571</td>
<td>3,596</td>
<td>4,064</td>
<td>4,172</td>
<td>4,247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>832</td>
<td>1,470</td>
<td>2,173</td>
<td>4,676</td>
<td>4,620</td>
<td>4,830</td>
<td>5,121</td>
<td>5,585</td>
<td>5,766</td>
<td>5,825</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

exception of Japan are clearly much less involved in INGO activity. In Table 4, a majority of INGOs in categories B and C are headquartered in the United States, whereas the UK ranks number one as a host country for categories A and D. We can conclude from this that the primary influence on INGOs involved in East Asia is predominantly Western in orientation.

INGOs focus especially on human rights, women’s rights, environmental concerns, development, and ethnic issues (see Table 5). However, in East Asia, it is clear that INGOs are also involved in the politics

### Table 3 Selected Country Participation in International Nongovernmental Organizations by Type, 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>443</td>
<td>863</td>
<td>969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Timor</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong–China</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>334</td>
<td>403</td>
<td>418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>724</td>
<td>617</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>337</td>
<td>356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea DPR</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea Republic</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>397</td>
<td>495</td>
<td>468</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>323</td>
<td>386</td>
<td>388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan-China</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>446</td>
<td>822</td>
<td>948</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>934</td>
<td>1,443</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>429</td>
<td>931</td>
<td>2,209</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Table 4 Selected Countries in Which International Nongovernmental Organization Secretariats Are Located

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Timor</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea DPR</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea Republic</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan-China</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>483</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

of national identity. There are two main groups of such organizations. Although the first group does not openly and directly support independence and secessionism, its concern with human rights and humanitarian issues has had an impact on the politics of national identity. Included in this group are Amnesty International; Caritas International; Human Rights Fund for Indigenous Peoples; Human Rights Watch; Tapol; International Commission of Jurists; Minority Rights Group International; and World Council of Indigenous Peoples.

The second group expresses its commitment to self-determination through direct and open support for independence or secessionism. Prominent in this group are International Campaign for Tibet; the International Committee of Lawyers for Tibet; International Federation for East Timor; and International Forum for Aceh. It should be noted that the International Commission of Jurists and the World Council of Indigenous Peoples have a consultative or observer status, which helps them gain access to the UN and to exercise their influence through formal international channels.

### Activities of INGOs in Addressing the National Identity Problem

Given their diversity, INGOs organize through a variety of strategies and diverse activities that have differing and even conflicting effects. I provide

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**Table 5: Issue Focus of Transnational Social Movement Organizations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue Focus</th>
<th>1983 (N=348; %)</th>
<th>1993 (N=685; %)</th>
<th>2000 (N=840; %)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Human rights</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World order/law/language</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s rights</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi: global justice/peace/environmental sustainability</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self determination/ethnic unity</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right-wing</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-issue organization</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Jackie Smith, “Transnational Social Movement Organizations and Global Democracy,” paper presented at the International Workshop on Transnational Activism and Problem of Democracy in East and Southeast Asia, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies and Department of Political Science, Soderton University College, Stockholm, Sweden, 14–15 September 2001. However, the number of INGOs involved in self-determination and ethnic unity is underestimated.*
here examples of INGO activity in East Asia that highlight the role of NGOs in addressing the national identity question.

**Challenging the State’s Monopoly**

Through their various interventions, INGOs have directly challenged the state’s monopoly of the national identity issue. By forming global social and communicative networks, they have exerted great pressure on states and contributed to the constitution of new global norms that act as restraints on state power. Thus, states themselves cannot be said to be fully in control of transnational movements that are concerned with the national identity issue. For example, as part of its crackdown on independence movements, the Indonesian government closed down three news weeklies in 1992—*Tempo, Editor*, and *DeTik*—as well as a small leftist group and thirty nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including the Legal Aid Institute and the unofficial Indonesian Prosperous Workers’ Union, which was closed in 1994. In the face of this censorship, and despite the pressure brought to bear by the Indonesian government, a number of INGOs held a conference in Manila in early June 1994 to discuss the situation in East Timor. Although it barred foreigners from participating in the conference, the Philippine government was ultimately unable to prevent it from taking place. This was the first time that the issue of East Timor was seriously debated within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region.

**Challenging National Laws**

Frequently INGOs pose a challenge to national laws. Take the case of South Korea, where the National Security Law (NSL) largely restricts the activities of national NGOs. The NSL not only prohibits South Korean citizens from visiting North Korea without government approval, but also punishes those who offer ideological support to the North and those who either belong to an “antistate” organization or simply align themselves with such activities.10

Amnesty International (AI) is a good example of an INGO that has engaged indirectly with the questions of national unity and identity in South Korea, continuing to defend freedom of speech, which guarantees the right to express dissident views on such issues. For many years, it has criticized the NSL, in its annual reports, for restricting people’s contacts and movements between the two Koreas. Opposition parties and various NGOs draw on AI for moral support. For example, opposition parties and various NGOs, such as Amnesty International Korea, a national
branch of AI that has about thirty groups and 2,300 registered members, and Hanchongyon, the South Korean Federation of University Student Councils, have protested against the NSL. In May 1991, the Roh Tae-woo government was forced to amend the NSL, thereby permitting contact with communist organizations, except those that allegedly have links with North Korea or that engage in shows of overt support for North Korea. In 1993, the government of Kim Young-sam initially expressed a willingness to amend the NSL but after taking office reversed its position. In recent years, AI together with other NGOs have continued their protest against NSL. Reportedly, on 16 June 2000, a Democratic Worker’s Party of South Korea commentary called for the repeal of the NSL.

**Overcoming the National Limits of Civil Society**

In many cases, national NGOs are limited in their ability to confront the national identity question. In China, for instance, it is difficult for most members of NGOs to support secessionist movements in Tibet and Xinjiang because they are restricted by the principles of national sovereignty and the absence of genuine freedom of speech. In contrast, INGOs are not controlled by the Chinese government and are better able to consider the justice of national boundaries in the context of the national identity question.

A good example is the New York–based organization, Human Rights in China (HRIC), which is able to pressure the Chinese government to improve its human rights record by engaging with other INGOs, the media, other governments, and intergovernmental bodies, such as UN human rights organizations. In so doing, it is able to transcend the boundaries of Chinese national sovereignty through its support for Tibetan self-determination. By asserting that the issue of Chinese national sovereignty is not superior to that of human rights, it continues to draw attention to the plight of Tibet and undermines the cause of Chinese national sovereignty. As part of this strategy, the HRIC has published James Seymour’s articles that support the right to self-determination and argue that non-Han nationalities, like the Tibetans, can maintain their identities even in the face of widespread Han migration and Beijing’s homogenizing policies. It has also publicized evidence of the Chinese government’s abuse of human rights in Tibet and its nuclear mismanagement on the Tibetan plateau, which has resulted in deaths and injuries among the Tibetan people. This demonstrates that the HRIC is concerned with the issue of human rights rather than Chinese national sovereignty.
Shaping International Opinion

INGOs have played a key role in shaping world culture and international opinion. Both the International Committee of Lawyers for Tibet and the International Commission of Jurists have confirmed that, under international law, Tibet was classified as a state during the period 1913–1950. The International Commission of Jurists has called on the UN General Assembly to resume its debate on the question of Tibet based on its resolutions of 1959, 1961, and 1965. It has also urged the UN Commission on Human Rights to appoint a special rapporteur to investigate the situation of human rights in Tibet and has appealed to the UN secretary-general to appoint a special envoy to promote peaceful settlement on the Tibetan question through a UN-supervised referendum to ascertain the wishes of the Tibetan people.

Encouragingly, a number of resolutions were adopted by the Third International Supporting Tibet Conference, which was held in Berlin on 12–15 May 2000 and attended by 282 delegates from 52 countries, representing 370 Tibet-supporting NGOs. The resolutions were that pro-Tibet organizations be established and strengthened in Africa and South America; that the Tibetan government in exile should consider the option of independence if there was no substantial progress in negotiations with Beijing over the next three years; and that a global organization be established to coordinate the activities of pro-Tibet NGOs all over the world.

Advocating Democratic Solutions to the National Identity Question

The International Commission of Jurists recognizes Tibetans as a “people under alien subjugation,” entitled under international law to the right to self-determination. It has recommended that a UN-supervised referendum be held in Tibet to ascertain the Tibetan people’s wishes. Those eligible to vote in such a referendum would be Tibetans and other persons resident in Tibet before 1950 and their descendants, as well as Tibetan refugees and their descendants. It is proposed that the referendum be held not only in the contiguous territories in which ethnic Tibetans have historically constituted a majority, but also among the exiled community. The exercise of this right to self-determination could result in the establishment of an independent state, a form of genuine internal self-government, the continuation of Tibet’s current status within China, or any other status freely determined by the Tibetan people.

In the case of Aceh, a mass rally organized by numerous NGOs was held on 8 November 1999 in which 2 million people participated,
demanding a referendum on the question of independence. NGOs such as Central Information for Aceh Referendum; Aceh Student Action Front for Reform; Student Solidarity for the Peoples; Coalition for Reform Action of Acehnese Students; and Human Rights Forum were in close touch with INGOs, which included Human Rights Watch–Asia; Amnesty International; Tapol International; Indonesian Human Rights Network; Campaign Against Arms Trade; World Development Movement; Article 19; Forum-Asia; and Global Exchange, from whom they received substantial support.

**Supporting Independence**

The sustained determination of the East Timorese, a change of the government in Jakarta, pressure from Western governments, and UN intervention have all helped to solve the East Timor issue. INGOs also made a significant contribution. Numerous INGOs have offered support—material, spiritual, and cultural—to the East Timor independence movement. These include seventeen East Timorese organizations in the diaspora; eleven INGOs, among them the International Federation for East Timor and the Asia-Pacific Coalition for East Timor; and fourteen Australian NGOs.

INGOs have supported independence movements in various ways. By dealing directly with secessionists they have accorded legitimacy to their movement. Through appeals for funds to help starving or displaced refugees they have helped promote the secessionist cause to the outside world. “Much of the work of keeping the [East Timor] issue alive has been carried out by NGOs.”21 INGOs organized senate hearings in the 1970s, tabled motions in both houses, and sent letters of protests to successive U.S. secretaries of state in the 1980s.

INGOs placed pressure on Australian prime minister John Howard. On 19 December 1998, Howard wrote a personal letter to Indonesian president B. J. Habibie, calling for a free and fair referendum. Habibie used the letter to instruct his ministers to consider new options. He was fed up with continued international condemnation, including criticism from INGOs, and was willing to conduct a referendum.22

Members of INGOs have joined the UN Volunteers as district electoral officers. The Carter Center and the International Federation for East Timor (IFET) have played a role. As one UN official acknowledges, INGOs informed voters, helped the East Timorese to overcome intimidation, pressured the Indonesian government to stop the violence and intimidation before the August 1999 referendum, and argued that East Timorese living outside the territory and East Timorese political
prisoners should be allowed to campaign inside the territory. INGOs were also international observers during the process of voting and played a role in ensuring that the referendum was fair. It can be argued that had INGOs not taken any action prior to the referendum in East Timor, the Indonesian government would have orchestrated a referendum that would have resulted in, as John Taylor worried, a vote for integration.

After the paramilitaries had devastated East Timor, killed thousands, and removed a quarter of the population to West Timor, IFET was forced to leave East Timor on 7 September 1999. It continued to demand that international action be mounted against the Indonesian military to freeze all military and economic cooperation, IMF and World Bank support, and other financial assistance until Indonesia brought the militias under control. UN international peacekeeping forces played a crucial role in restoring order. If INGOs together with the UN, United States, European Union, and Australia had not taken action after the referendum, Megawati Sukarnoputri, leader of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, and Wiranto, commander of the armed forces and defense minister, would not have honored the referendum result. From the start, they had rejected the idea of a referendum.

**Necessary Conditions for Effective INGOs**

The impact of the activities of INGOs varies in different situations. The actual effects are the product of interactions between different actors, including state actors. In this section, I explore the range of conditions, both favorable and unfavorable, under which it is possible for INGOs to contribute effectively to the resolution or management of the national identity/boundary issue.

*Links with Government Elites*

Effective INGOs rely on close networks and links with political elites and the active lobbying of government. The nature of this link tends to determine the level of access they are able to secure to the crucial figures in, for example, the U.S. government and the UN.

*Transnational Alliances*

The effectiveness of INGOs also depends largely on whether they are able to build both transnational coalitions and attract grassroot support. Where it is possible to form a coalition with national NGOs on the issue
in question, INGOs can become a powerful force. Certainly in the case of East Timor, there was a wide international coalition of support during the crucial period in 1999. By contrast, such a transnational alliance did not develop in support of Aceh until 1998, with the formation in New York of the International Forum for Aceh. Even then it was not registered in the Yearbook of International Organizations and did not have any consultative status. It is still difficult for a coalition to develop between those NGOs that desire a referendum in Aceh and those that focus on reconciliation with Jakarta. In the case of Tibet, Chinese government control prevents the development of alliances with indigenous organizations within Tibet despite the existence of transnational networks. Clearly then, INGOs are less likely to be effective where they lack grassroots support.

**Consensus on the National Identity Question**

The effectiveness of INGOs depends on their capacity to develop a consensus on the national identity question. It is this very consensus that makes INGOs effective participants in the national identity issue. In this respect then, it seems that Craig Calhoun, in his conclusion about the contribution made by civil society to the questions of unity and identity, fails to make a distinction between civil societies that hold an overlapping consensus on the identity question and those that lack such consensus.26

**Timing**

Timing is a key aspect in the effectiveness of INGOs. It could be argued, for instance, that East Timor was able to gain international support for its independence in the wake of international intervention in Kosovo. The success of this intervention offered East Timor a golden opportunity to capitalize on international support and sympathy for like causes. In contrast, Aceh, in the wake of Indonesia’s democratization, was unable to garner the same level of support because the general election reinforced the Indonesian government’s authority. Moreover, America’s war against terrorism offers the Indonesian government further opportunities to depict Aceh’s independence activists as terrorists.

**Strategy**

According to the frame theory, the success of NGOs and social movements depends a great deal on how an issue is framed.27 This theory is born out in the case of East Timor, where INGOs were able to increase their influence indirectly by adjusting their strategies on key human
rights issues. Rather than pressing directly for independence, they called for an end to human rights violations. In other words, the East Timor question was framed in terms of a human rights problem that embraced the right to self-determination. Examples of this strategic framing include AI’s 1985 publication of the first comprehensive report on human rights violations in East Timor and the international media coverage of the 1991 Dili massacre.

Similarly, the Indonesian government was successful in dealing with the Aceh question by framing the issue of its independence in terms of a revival of Islamic fundamentalism. This was made possible because the leadership of the independence movement, GAM, tended to focus on armed struggle in its efforts to gain diplomatic support. Now the International Forum for Aceh has taken a different approach, focusing on human rights issues and seeking to establish contact with many other human rights organizations. In so doing, it frames the issue as one concerning the violation of human rights, thus linking it to the identity question, armed conflict, and communal violence in Aceh.28

Unfortunately, when INGOs have tried to frame the Tibet and Taiwan questions as human rights and democracy issues, the issue of independence has tended to be smuggled in as a hidden agenda, thereby arousing the Chinese government’s suspicion of human rights activists. Thus, it must be questioned whether the strategies employed in East Timor and being attempted in Aceh could work in China and, if they were implemented, whether they might impact negatively on the cause of human rights.

Taking State Power Seriously

The problem with the frame theory is its tendency to overemphasize the role of ideology and underplay the role of state power. The idea that INGOs are able to compete against or even constrain state powers needs to be qualified by pointing out that the effectiveness of INGOs depends a great deal on the nature and strength of the state with which they are dealing and on the status they hold in the UN.29 Thus, it can be argued that the approach taken by Michael Freeman, who rejects the state-centric model, is too simplistic.30 What is required is a more complex analysis that takes into account the various interactions between civil society and state power.

During the Cold War, the governments of the United States and Australia supported Indonesia in their fight against communists in East Timor. Since the end of the Cold War, their policies have changed. In the case of Australia, it could be argued that the government and people
felt a sense of guilt about their implicit support of the Indonesian invasion of East Timor and that this affected their policy stance, thereby opening a critical space in which INGOs were able to exercise their influence. Within this space, the aims of INGOs became aligned with those of the U.S. and Australian governments. Thus, they were able to gain support from their host governments and attract resources to enable them to operate effectively. Moreover, because the Indonesian state was weakened by the prevailing economic crisis and the move toward democratization, its restrictions on INGOs were correspondingly weakened. This series of events provided the conditions of possibility for INGOs to function effectively in East Timor in 1999.

The case of Tibet offers a contrast. Bill Clinton, during his 1992 election campaign for the presidency, expressed strong support for Tibet. Subsequently, International Lawyers for Tibet (ILFT) was formed, but because Clinton changed his policy after he was elected, the ILFT was unable to exert any significant influence over the issue. Their impotence with regard to Tibet was exacerbated by the strength of the Chinese government, which severely restricted INGO activity. For example, after financing the establishment of the Tibetan Parliamentary Research Center and sponsoring an international conference on the Tibetan question during the 1990s, the Beijing offices of the Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung Foundation were closed down by the Chinese government. This explains why some INGOs operating in China opt for a more pragmatic and cautious approach that emphasizes humanitarian issues, such as Future Generations, a U.S.-based NGO that initiated a project to improve local livelihoods and reduce the environmental impact of tourism.

Explaining the Impact of INGOs

Borrowing and extending Kenneth Andrews’s four models that explain the impact social movements have on policy, I examine in this section some of the reasons why INGOs are able to impact the national identity question and influence relevant policy changes.

Disruption Effect

An important characteristic of INGOs is that they are able to adopt specific tactics that effectively disrupt institutions and political leaders and their policies. For example, INGOs have organized protests against the Australian government’s policy toward East Timor and arguably influenced
the policymakers, who were caught off guard by the protests, to change their policy.32

*Third-Party Effect*

INGOs mount advocacy campaigns seeking to generate support from politicians within governments who are sympathetic to a particular cause. Alternatively, they try to involve third parties in an implicit or explicit bargaining process that favors protesters and allows political representatives to act on these louder and clearer signals. For example, IFET urged the UN to send armed peacekeeping troops into East Timor, preferably with the cooperation of the Indonesian authorities. As noted earlier, when forced to leave East Timor in September 1999, IFET demanded international action be taken against the Indonesian military and that all military and economic cooperation, IMF and World Bank support, and other financial assistance be frozen until Jakarta brought the militias under control.33

*Access-Influence Model*

A further characteristic of INGOs is their capacity to exert a substantial, long-term impact on policy by securing insider status and/or legitimate participation in the political process. For example, IFET has associations with the Department of Public Information (DPI) of the UN; and the International Commission of Jurists enjoys consultative and observer status with respect to a number of intergovernmental organizations. Recently, the International Campaign for Tibet was given official accreditation at the 2001 World Conference Against Racism, held in Durban, South Africa.34

A peculiar type of access is that represented by the World Parliamentary Convention, a uniquely structured organization whose nature and functions lie somewhere between those of governments and NGOs. Its membership is drawn from national legislatures, including the Congress of the United States, the Australian Federal Parliament, and the German and European Parliaments. Although it has exercised substantial influence on national governments and their people, it does not represent the opinions of government executives. In the case of Tibet, for instance, national governments are sometimes reluctant to become actively involved because of pressure—political, economic, and otherwise—exerted by the People’s Republic of China (PRC). By contrast, subnational governments, such as the New South Wales Parliament in Australia, has passed a number of resolutions concerning Tibet. Individual members of
parliament are also able to raise the issue of Tibet and the rights of its people and so stimulate action. Individual legislators have raised many Tibetan issues, such as those concerning environmental protection, the dumping of nuclear waste, ethnic policies, human rights, and self-determination, in their national parliaments. While their suggestions and proposals frequently are not acted on, they do succeed in attracting media coverage and stimulating debate, which sometimes leads to changes in government policy.

Infrastructure Model

The impact INGOs have on policy is largely related to the level of resources they possess and the type of infrastructure they are able to create, especially the number of informal ties that span geographic and social communities. Since the financial and labor sources that INGOs are able to deploy rely on member contributions rather than government largesse, they are able to operate with greater autonomy and flexibility. For example, Care International is a relief agency, with a budget of U.S.$400 million, which is larger than that of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization. Similarly, the UN Commission on Human Rights has a smaller budget than AI.35

The Interaction Model

A further feature of INGOs is their ability to exert influence through their interactions with the UN, other INGOs, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), domestic governments, and domestic NGOs. In some cases, the level of interaction is such that significant policy changes result. The Howard government’s policy on East Timor, or the Habibie government’s policy on the Timor referendum are prominent examples. In some cases, INGOs are able to exert a moral influence that can lead to changes on the part of domestic governments so that they recognize newly independent states. In both Aceh and Tibet, INGOs have been instrumental in persuading secessionists to use nonviolent strategies. This is a particularly useful check on younger Tibetans in exile who tend to resort to violence as an outlet for their frustration.

Problems Associated with INGOs

Having assessed the various ways in which INGOs have been able to influence the national identity problem, I now consider a number of
problems associated with INGO activity. These include the fact that regional rather than global organizations are overwhelmingly dominant (see Table 1); that those located in the North far outnumber those in the South (see Tables 3 and 4); and that because they are dependent on donor contributions for financial liquidity, they are susceptible to international power politics. Four of the major problems I examine here raise doubts about the existing literature that charts the emergence of global civil society.

First, despite the participation of INGOs in a number of UN-sponsored world conferences on the environment, women, and human rights—which demonstrates the existence of global civil society and the trend toward a global civil society36—it is possible to challenge the claims made by some INGOs to be a part of a global civil society. It is the case, for instance, that in certain circumstances where INGOs support the efforts of groups to establish a new state, such activities paradoxically serve to strengthen the centrality of national boundaries and reinforce the nation-state system. So although their actions and intentions may be directed toward the global, their consequences may in fact serve the reverse purpose of strengthening national borders and national identity and bolstering nationalist ideology. In such cases, the role INGOs can play in establishing a genuine global civil society is severely restricted, and this exposes the limits to global civil society posed by state sovereignty. Moreover, some INGOs are clearly influenced by their donor state, as is the case with the International Committee of Lawyers for Tibet, which has been heavily influenced by the United States and the Tibetan government in exile. Consequently, they cannot be seen either as purely independent actors or as global actors who exist beyond the nation-state system. Thus, as Richard Falk points out, the Western NGO approach tends, by and large, to share the statist view on the question of human rights.37

Second, some INGOs have difficulty in meeting the conditions of so-called global civil society. To act in a “civil fashion” within preestablished rules necessitates, among other things, compromise and non-violence, which are two indicators of the degree of civility within the range of precivil (non-civil, or uncivil) to truly civil. Thus, if an uncompromising group rejects the rule of law, opting instead for violence, it can hardly be regarded as civil. There are, for instance, in Indonesia a number of Islamic groups that, despite establishing transnational links and networks, support violence. Such groups are more likely to undermine civil society through their violent approach to the national identity question and make it very difficult for the issue to be managed peacefully. Therefore, what is urgently required are democratic civility, a
democratic approach to conflict resolution, and the regulation of the relationships between states and INGOs.

Third, some INGOs lack an empirical basis on which to claim membership in a so-called global civil society. This is especially true for those transnational groups that have only a handful of members, lack grassroots support, and are interested only in attracting international funding. (To overcome this problem, democratic mechanisms must be built into the INGO system to exclude those who merely seek funding and who contain authoritarian and violent elements.) Such groups can be dangerous because, in trying to meet the requirements of funding agents, they actually compromise local values and needs so that while they may be autonomous from domestic governments, they do not enjoy a similar status with respect to their international donors. One cynical view holds that some INGOs are used by Western countries as a front through which to advance a new form of Western imperialism or to facilitate a sophisticated, postcolonial intervention into other countries under a new moral disguise.38

Fourth, and finally, the involvement of INGOs in the national identity question raises the issue of representation. Can INGOs legitimately represent the people they care for? Can INGOs legitimately express the voice of the people of other countries with regard to the issues of national identity and international interference? Who has the moral authority to represent? Moreover, now that the distinction between governmental and private organizations is blurred, with some INGOs being incorporated into a system of international governance, what is the consequence with regard to the issue of representation? To ensure true representation, it is recommended that no INGO be permitted to claim a monopoly on representativeness. In other words, it may be useful to set down some conditions about representation so that an outsider group can represent the views of insiders only if those insiders are suppressed by an authoritarian regime, and then only if such representations can be confirmed by insiders.39

Conclusion

INGOs have become one of the major international forces influencing the politics of national identity. Clearly, by becoming involved in the national identity question INGOs constitute a new powerful force that helps redefine the political conditions of contemporary societies. For instance, INGOs in Indonesia, South Korea, and Taiwan have successfully mobilized people and organized collective activity that serves to
challenge and to breakdown the government’s monopoly of the national identity/boundary issue. It can be argued that some INGOs have made a significant, albeit not decisive, contribution to helping solve the national identity question in the case of East Timor. Hence, the increasingly important role played by INGOs in the national boundary issue in East Asia cannot be dismissed.

It also seems clear that the national identity question cannot be decided solely by states. Nation-states cannot simply deny or ignore the roles played by institutions of transnational civil society in this issue. Those who do so—ignoring the people and civil society institutions—run the risk of precipitating a legitimacy crisis. Instead, governments need to think carefully about how to work creatively with and through civil associations, as some governments have already recognized, by supporting INGOs. As a result, government-funded NGOs are beginning to emerge in West and East Asia. The Taiwan government increasingly uses INGOs as an alternative channel to win international support and to promote its national identity profile. The Chinese government has also supported and sponsored INGOs. It does so to promote reunification with Taiwan. For example, one NGO organized an international conference at which former president Bill Clinton was reportedly paid U.S. $300,000 to speak in Sydney on 25 February 2001. Thus it can be argued that a new battle for moral authority and material resources is occurring that will transform world politics and create a new politics of national identity.

The national identity question is a product of the international system and a crucial issue in international relations. Naturally, all players tend to look to various quarters for international support for their causes. In this respect, IGOs and INGOs have clearly taken different approaches to the national identity question. It is usually the case that IGOs are averse to, or indifferent toward, secessionist movements. The Organization of African Unity and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, for instance, are firmly committed to existing national boundaries, regarding any redrawing of African and Asian boundaries as totally unacceptable.

By contrast, and as we have seen in this article, INGOs are not averse to involving themselves in secessionist situations. Some have lobbied in support of secessionists, whereas others express subtle partisan support. Some initiate contacts and still others act as mediators or supportive consultants. They play a particularly important role in addressing the national identity issue when national NGOs are suppressed by an authoritarian regime.

In this context, the UN is clearly positioned between the conservative forces of nation-states that seek to maintain existing national boundaries
and the progressive forces of some INGOs who address the justice issues associated with the national identity/boundary problem. The UN is hesitant to alter national boundaries, intervening only in selected national identity/boundary disputes, such as that in East Timor. Nevertheless, the cooperation between the UN and various INGOs in settling the East Timor question indicates the emergence of a new form of global governance, one whose significance and potential require further study.41

Notes

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5. John Boli and George M. Thomas estimated that INGOs have proliferated from about 200 active organizations in 1900 to about 800 in 1930, over

6. Tapol is the Indonesia Human Rights Campaign, established in London to expose human rights violations in Indonesia, East Timor, West Papua, and Aceh. From 15 February 1999 to August 2001, it has issued sixteen statements and news reports about Aceh and human rights violations there.

7. Founded in 1988, it aims at promoting human rights, democratic freedom, and self-determination for Tibetans and has members from sixty-seven countries.

8. Founded in 1989, at the request of the Tibetan government-in-exile, it aims at promoting self-determination for the Tibetan people, with 1,000 members from fourteen countries.


15. Boli and Thomas, “World Culture in the World Polity.”


23. Ibid., p. 56.


25. For example, Ian Martin, head of the UN Mission in East Timor in 1999, was secretary-general of Amnesty International and special representative of the secretary-general for the East Timor Population Consultation.


29. Elsewhere I have discussed the role of international community, in particular, cosmopolitan democracy in addressing the national identity question. See Baogang He, “Cosmopolitan Democracy and the National Identity Question in Europe and East Asia,” *International Relations of the Asia Pacific* 2, no. 1: 47–68.

30. Freeman, “Democrat and Dynamite.”


33. See IFET’s website, at http://www.etan.org/ifet.


39. For skepticism about world citizenship, see Baogang He, “World Citizenship and Transnational Activism,” pp. 87–88.

