

## **Is the voice of nonprofit organizations muted in a time of crisis? Evidence from WeChat in Shenzhen, China.**

*Nonprofit organizations are facing unprecedented challenges presented by the uncertainties of a global pandemic. Contrary to the praises that grassroots self-organizing in China received during the pandemic, the work of formal nonprofit organizations combating the disease seems more muted in mainstream media. To make matters worse, a lack of both transparency and efficiency of large nonprofits sparked public outrage in China at the early stages of the battle. Can this negative image of selected nonprofit organizations mar the sector overall? As part of a longitudinal research project to understand the evolving role of nonprofits in global cities, we have been closely tracking the activities of nonprofit organizations in Shenzhen, China via their social media outlets ever since the virus outbreak. So what can we learn from the digital response of nonprofit organizations to the crisis about their actual role and impact in the city's successful fight against COVID-19?*

Shenzhen, like other metropolitan regions, is at great risk in a global pandemic: the city has more than 12 million residents, approximately 8 million are migrants. Moreover, the size of government in Shenzhen is much smaller than the average Chinese city. Each government employee serves around 260 residents, for instance, compared to one serving four people in Shanghai. The relatively small size of the government and the large migrant population create a considerable gap between the availability of public services and the demands of the urban population - a gap that more than 9,000 nonprofit organizations in Shenzhen endeavor to fill.

On January 20, Shenzhen had its first reported COVID-19 case. Three months later, on April 28, due in part to the draconian nationwide lockdowns in China, Shenzhen has confirmed a total of 462 cases and only 3 deaths have been reported. Since early February, the Civic Life of Cities Lab (link to <https://pacscenter.stanford.edu/research/civic-life-of-cities-lab/>) has been tracking Shenzhen's nonprofit organizations via their WeChat public accounts. These public-facing posts give us new perspectives on the activities of the city's registered nonprofits during the COVID crisis.

At the first glance, most nonprofits have responded to the pandemic. Among the 137 nonprofits that we studied that have public WeChat accounts, over 70% have posted Covid-related articles. We have drawn a random sample of organizations from the registry of Shenzhen nonprofits and conducted 2-7 hour interviews with their executive directors. Approximately, 60% of these nonprofits have active WeChat accounts. Among the variety of nonprofits, social service organizations, industry and business associations, educational organizations, art and culture groups and health-related organizations are the most active. More importantly, the content of the posts reflect that nonprofits not only responded to but have actively participated in the fight against the spread of the virus. Only three organizations announced suspending their activities during the pandemic. The majority of the organizations' COVID-related posts reported their activities on the ground.

How have these organizations responded to public health challenges? We focus particularly on 1) the supporting role of nonprofits in the state-led battle against COVID-19 and subsequent recovery plans; 2) how technology facilitates nonprofits in Shenzhen to fulfill this supporting role; 3) how public platforms like WeChat have provided space for organizations to express discontent and resistance.

### **State-Nonprofit Collaboration**

Like civil society organizations elsewhere, nonprofits in Shenzhen actively work at supporting official efforts to fight the disease. Many organizations have repurposed their activities for pandemic use: they collect donations (footnote: public fundraising was illegal for organizations without certain credentials, but we see several unqualified orgs collecting donations during the pandemic), send protective gear and supplies to frontline healthcare providers, help health authorities communicate information about COVID-19 and promote preventative measures such as social distancing, hand washing and mask wearing.

In addition, Shenzhen nonprofits, especially social service organizations, played an indispensable role in the “grid-based” community efforts to curb the spread of the disease. Residential communities are divided into small grids, in which social workers, community healthcare providers, police, property management staff and volunteers collaborate with grassroots officials to implement strict mobility control policies. Social service nonprofits have mobilized their affiliated social workers and volunteers both online and offline to fulfill the tasks in the closed-off communities. For instance, WeChat posts of a community service organization detail how their social workers approached every single resident daily to record their health status and travel history. Another membership organization reached out to every member who returned from the pandemic epicenter - Hubei province - and provided social and health guidance during their mandatory quarantine.

One of the largest nonprofit organizations in the city mobilizes more than ten thousand volunteers to participate in fighting the pandemic. Its WeChat account attracted the largest number of followers among our sample organizations. On average, each post has two to eight thousand views. These volunteers were assigned by the association to 668 communities citywide to support community work (Shenzhen has around 700 residential communities in total). The public-facing social media posts frequently utilize wartime rhetoric to induce citizens’ understanding and encourage support of the government’s strict measures of containing the virus. On February 13, for example, the municipal government required mandatory tests for all residents returning to Shenzhen from other places. Nonprofits informed their constituents via WeChat about the intrusive measures and asked them to “stay calm and collaborate” - “the pandemic is the order, collaboration is your duty”.

When nationwide resources are mobilized to handle a public health challenge, nonprofits have yet another essential function: taking care of their own beneficiaries. Many organizations we studied are serving the most vulnerable population, who have been hit the hardest in the crisis. These are people with chronic illness, rare diseases, disabilities and seniors. Nonprofits serving

them are the most active in posting health-related information, advocating for their interests and gathering and filtering necessary information, including medication supplies and available health care services amid the shutdown. Other non-health related organizations use the crisis as a chance to promote their own missions. For example, an environmental protection group emphasizes that global warming might be the culprit of the new virus, because wildlife is forced to be in contact with humans due to their lost habitat. A women's welfare group launched an online campaign to increase public awareness of domestic violence because the stay-at-home order exposes the seriousness of the problem.

One advantage formal nonprofits have over spontaneous grassroots organizing are established cross-sector and cross-regional organization networks. Intermediary nonprofits are collaborating with public foundations, financial institutions and corporations to mobilize and allocate resources across the nation. One of the largest government-organized nonprofits in Shenzhen, for instance, has been collaborating with its brother association in Hubei province and a national delivery services company to allocate large amounts of medical resources directly to hospitals in need. Civic Affairs Bureaus have simplified the regular reporting procedures of new programs for organizations with strong government affiliations for fast emergency responses.

Tracing the changes of public WeChat posts over the three-months time, strategic planning regarding the pandemic is increasingly important for nonprofits in Shenzhen. When the main tasks transitioned from emergency response to reconstruction, more organizations started to plan for longer terms. The director of a large nonprofit said in a post that the organization is proactively approaching large donors during COVID-19 and encouraging them to set up charitable trusts or engage in impact investment to "maximize the impact of their resources for the next phase of fighting the pandemic, that is, reconstruction." With their high level of managerialism, industrial and business associations are the most active in preparing their members for reopening the economy. Using online platforms, these organizations act as both the spokesperson and the supervisor for the business communities. On the one hand, they conduct surveys to understand their beneficiaries' needs and negotiate better policies with state authorities, providing online courses for digital transformation and financial capacity building, and navigate state resources and interpret state policies. On the other hand, they are also monitoring members to conform to state requirements, channeling grievances and encouraging high-performing members to sacrifice for "overall stability" such as reducing rent and price control.

### **Digital Solutions for Nonprofits amid COVID-19**

Shenzhen is known as the Silicon Valley of China and its advanced use of technology undoubtedly plays a crucial role for the city's nonprofits supporting the fight against COVID-19. On January 29, the Ministry of Civil Affairs issued a formal notice to all registered nonprofits nationwide, encouraging the use of "community WeChat groups, APPs and other digital tools to guide, mobilize, inspect, monitor, assist residents and publicize organization's activities." Since then, many nonprofits have expanded or repurposed their existing digital infrastructure for pandemic use.

For example, an environmental nonprofit has created a pandemic map at the community-level, based on their existing GIS technology. Several educational institutions rapidly moved courses online and developed virtual learning platforms. Industrial and business associations promoted an integrated digital platform, where small businesses can find most updated information and resources on finance, taxation, export, social security and emergency-related policies. Numerous “small programs” on the nonprofits’ WeChat accounts are providing live maps of confirmed cases in the city, online medical and psychological consultation, and purchasing channels for protective gear. One of the most innovative technology uses is promoted by a drone technology association, in which drones are dispatched to spray disinfectant and to assist vehicle registration.

### **Whispers of Resistance**

Despite the strong state capacity to coordinate and standardize formal nonprofits’ responses, there is still space for discontent and resistance in the organizations’ public outlets. A cultural organization is collecting stories of common people during the crisis: these personal narratives contain feelings of entrapment, panic, anxiety and boredom, in sharp contrast to the victorious and glorified tone of the majority of the posts. “I’m tired of chanting slogans,” says one post, “I’m feeling inexplicably panicked. And now after so long, I feel numbed.” Another post says, “during the pandemic, I retweeted many WeChat posts and I feel increasingly puzzled... I don’t know if the truth I hold onto today is still true tomorrow.” These voices of discordance are buried amidst many more stories about sacrifices of frontline workers and a united nation.

A few organizations have mentioned “whistle blowers” in their WeChat posts. One alumni organization has posted photos of Dr. Li Wenliang (ref) and the letter of admonition issued by police accusing him of “spreading rumors” about COVID-19. The post asks readers to “memorize his honesty and kindness, his professionalism, positivism and independent thinking.” It ends with a quote from Dr. Li himself “there should be more than one voice in a healthy society.” Similarly, a cultural organization has posted an article titled “the superior doctors rescue nation” and explains “the best doctors not only treat diseases of people, they also treat diseases of a nation.” The article directly accuses the authorities of covering up evidence warning a serious epidemic.

Even state-affiliated nonprofits are not uniformly praising the government's efforts in handling the crisis. One post by the director of a large nonprofit expresses his discontent with the Red Cross, saying “inefficiency is just another way of wasting resources.” He comments that the public trust crisis with many large state nonprofits could only be solved by “introducing the power of the market” because nonprofits overall lack the infrastructure and the ability to handle emergencies.

By following the digital life of nonprofits on WeChat, we find the participation of formal nonprofit organizations vital to the success of pandemic responses. The participation reflects a complicated relationship between state and nonprofits in Shenzhen: we see an organizational

society in which nonprofits are not only tethered to the state, but also supplementing and, at times, questioning the government's role in a time of crisis.