An Emerging Group Name "Gongyi": Ideational Collectivity in China's Civil Society[*]

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Abstract

Contestation and mutual influence between the state and civil society go beyond formal institutional realms, and extend into the ideational spheres of social labeling, public speech, and collective consciousness building. Based on data from a three-year research project, this article analyzes Chinese activists and nongovernmental organization (NGO) practitioners' preferences for group identity, and finds "gongyi zuzhi" (public interest organization) to be the most popular social label. The article thus argues that if there exists a collective sense of belonging among activists and NGO practitioners in China's civil society, the discursive contour of this sense of belonging is most likely to be "for public interest." The article further maps out possible associations between one's NGO-related work experience and reflections on group identity. "Gongyi" as a shared social label may not be politically inspiring to some, but it carries a straightforward message of "working for the public good" and discursive potential for meaning making. This finding suggests not only society's embeddedness and activists' pragmatism, but also maturing collective consciousness and discursive autonomy in China's civil society.

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