

## *When Transnational Advocacy Meets China: INGO's Strategic Norm Adaptation\**

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### *Abstract*

How do international norms diffuse in culturally heterogeneous and politically conservative environments? This article examines the norm adaptation strategies of international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) in China. Through in-depth interviews with INGO representatives operating in the HIV/AIDS, LGBT, labor, animal rights, and gender-related fields in China, we find that INGOs have developed various norm adaptation strategies in response to local social and political barriers. First, INGOs working with new or low-consensus norms would strategically disregard those norms by not mentioning them during operation to avoid resistance from domestic society. Second, INGOs advocating norms that are inconsistent with the regime often adopt a norm containment approach, limiting the norm's degree and scope in exchange for operating space to achieve domestic compliance and meet international expectations. Third, INGOs advocating norms consistent with the ruling regime might adopt a norm

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signaling approach to obtain authorities' recognition and government support. This article contributes to our understanding of the recent Overseas NGOs Law and its influence on INGOs' transnational advocacy work in China, and enriches our knowledge of the dynamic norm adaptation process.

Right after then U.S. president Donald Trump signed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act into law on 20 November 2019, the Chinese government publicly denounced five U.S.-backed international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs)—the National Endowment for Democracy, National Democratic Institute, International Republican Institute, Human Rights Watch, and Freedom House. Hua Chunying (華春瑩), the spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, criticized these INGOs for “providing resources, equipment, finances, and training for the disruptions and protests in Hong Kong.” She continued, “These U.S.-backed INGOs should be imposed with punitive sanctions, and they need to pay their price for their actions in China.”<sup>1</sup> This episode highlighted not only the embarrassing position of INGOs operating in China under the constant intensity of international relations, but also the norm and ideology gap that puts the future of INGOs operating in China at risk.

INGOs are transnational civic actors conducting advocacy, delivering services, building allies and networks, and engaging in other activities across traditional nation-state borders.<sup>2</sup> In this article, we focus on those INGOs that (1) promote international norms such as human rights, gender equality, and environmental protection; (2) empower civil society; and (3) influence targeted governments for desired policy outcomes. Norms are fundamental for such civil society empowerment and policy changes.<sup>3</sup> The conventional wisdom posits that INGOs as norm entrepreneurs can stimulate pressure through consensus making or empowering local civil society to push the target states to take action—or, as Lisbeth Zimmermann expressed it, these organizations “diffuse norms” to the target states.<sup>4</sup>

Extant studies focus on how target states internalize or socialize international norms;<sup>5</sup> however, few have examined how these norms are adjusted and shaped by the target states in turn. Anthropologists have found gaps between cosmopolitan awareness of norms and local socio-cultural understanding of norms,<sup>6</sup> resulting in INGOs facing intense