It is not easy to set up non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in China. They have to register with the government and, for a long time, the government subjected them to a complicated qualification system. They could not register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MoCA) directly. They had to get sponsorship from a suitable ‘business supervision unit’ within the government (‘业务主管单位’) and only then, once they had a sponsor, were they allowed to register with MoCA. Many NGOs were unable to find a suitable sponsor, so could not register with the government. This double filter definitely impeded the development of NGOs in China. They had to turn into underground organizations without any legal status, but they still functioned.

This situation has changed, though not necessarily to a more favourable one for labour NGOs. On 1 January 2012, the Guangzhou municipal government removed a major administrative hurdle for eight types of NGO seeking official registration. The government extended its so-called ‘deregulation of social organizations’ to Guangdong province on 1 July 2012 and now labour NGOs can register directly with MoCA without seeking the sponsorship of a ‘business supervision bureau’. Undoubtedly, this facilitated government supervision of NGOs, but then most labour NGOs also wish to ‘come out from underground’. Nonetheless, while society is relieved that the government has adopted a more open attitude towards NGOs, there are some signs that the government is failing to meet the expectations of society.

This chapter is about labour NGOs in China and the struggles they faced in July and August 2012. The main focus is on the crashing down of labour NGOs in the southern industrialized cities of Guangzhou and Shenzhen. Theoretically, I start with the ongoing debate about whether or
not there is a civil society in China. I then go on to look at the role of labour NGOs in Chinese society. My aim is to paint a clear picture of how labour NGOs interact with three parties – the Chinese government (both local and central), the workers and their funders.

Introduction

It is important to note the difference in China between NGOs and labour NGOs, they are different phenomena; labour NGOs are dedicated to improving conditions for workers in China.

Why, one might ask, do labour NGOs still exist in the society if they cannot get legal status? My answer, which I derive from the founders of labour NGOs, is because the society needs them. However, we have to be cautious about society’s needs, for when labour NGOs were forced to move out of their offices in the summer of 2012, the workers put up little resistance to the local authorities’ clamp-down on their labour NGOs.

Many of the founders of labour NGOs in China were workers who had experienced unjust treatment in factories. Mr Huang (interview S1) told me in August 2011 that he had been a labourer in a factory but then lost two of his fingers in an accident at work. When the owner, who did not want to compensate him properly, fired him, he set about studying the relevant regulations and then sued the factory (successfully) for proper compensation. After this successful experience, Mr Huang established a small centre to serve his fellow workers. However, he did not have enough funds to work unpaid for long. The government was not happy with what he was doing and, without a proper office, he was unable to convince foreign foundations to invest in his venture.

Though Mr Huang’s centre was unfortunately closed down, according to Lee and Shen, there are 30 labour NGOs in the major cities in China. Labour NGOs mainly focus on helping workers with legal information and providing them with cultural entertainment. Since most of them cannot register with the government under their real names, they either use other titles to register their organizations or else not register and remain on the government’s ‘black list’. ‘Workers need us’, Mr Zhang (interview S2), another founder of a labour organization said: ‘we visit injured workers in hospital, provide them with places to go after their working lives have ended, give them computers to get on-line, or broadcast some movies. We are not doing anything illegal.’

By February 2012, some labour NGOs were already starting to feel pressure from the government. Their landlords cut off the electricity and water supplies to their rented offices and, as a result, some labour NGOs