THINKING STRATEGICALLY
ABOUT CIVIL SOCIETY ASSISTANCE IN CHINA

China’s first independent public charitable fundraising
organisation provides disaster relief, children’s
welfare, and contributes to philanthropy development

An interview with Li Hong
Deputy Director General
One Foundation
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Dr Andreas Fulda is an academic practitioner with an interest in social change, organisational development and documentary filmmaking.

During the past ten years Dr Fulda has helped design and implement three major capacity building initiatives for Chinese CSOs: the Participatory Urban Governance Programme for Migrant Integration (2006-07), the Social Policy Advocacy Coalition for Healthy and Sustainable Communities (2009-11) and the EU-China Civil Society Dialogue Programme on Participatory Public Policy (2011-14).

Dr Fulda is also the editor of the book Civil Society Contributions to Policy Innovation in the PR China (Palgrave Macmillan, April 2015).

Contact: a_fulda@yahoo.com uk.linkedin.com/in/andreasfulda/
The One Foundation’s Board of Directors provides both strategic and management ideas from their management perspectives. They also help to raise funds through the platforms of their enterprises, such as Alibaba, Tencent and China Merchants Bank, and mobilize the public to participate. This is even more important for One Foundation’s vision of "It Starts with One" than making enterprise donations.

The One Foundation was the first private fundraising foundation to become an independent public charitable fundraising organisation in China. In this pioneering process the One Foundation received a lot of attention from the public, the academia, the media, and the government.

The One Foundation’s traditional focus of supporting disaster relief, children’s welfare, and philanthropy development has seen some changes. While in the past three years the funding ratio in the three fields was 5:3:2, more recently the percentage in disaster relief is getting bigger. In this year's budget, it stands at around 80% to 90%.

Support for grassroots NGOs has been an important part of the One Foundation’s work. About 600 grassroots NGOs were supported each year from 2011 to 2013. The foundation also supports GONGO. Different fields have different needs and choosing suitable and professional partners is very important in order to deliver better and more professional services to the beneficiaries.

Since 2011 the One Foundation has been pursuing a new three dimensional strategy, which means that the same funding strategy is being used with all of its selected partners in the three fields. The One Foundation integrates with the organisations in the field and discusses their strategies and action plans together.

Li Hong does not think the concept of civil society matters that much. Instead the One Foundation considers it more important to see the actual effects of social organisations and public interest organisations. At different stages, these organisations should play different roles. At the current stage, it is vital that these organisations take the role of actors and enhance professional capacity and the development of the sector.

The One Foundation designs its programmes together with its partners. One of the foundation’s strategies is that besides rescuing and responding to the needs of the community residents, it works on public education and designs advocacy activities together with its partners.

This interview was conducted by Dr Andreas Fulda on 21 July 2014 through Skype. Translated by Sujing Xu and Andreas Fulda.
AF: I understand that One Foundation founder Jet Li visited the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation in Taiwan before he set up the Red Cross Society of China Jet Li One Foundation Project in 2007. Media reports suggest that he was inspired by his visit to Tzu Chi. Because of this background, do you feel if there is anything in common between the One Foundation that was registered in Shenzhen in 2010 and the Tzu Chi Foundation?

LH: I am sorry but I am not that familiar with the Tzu Chi Foundation. Therefore, I am not able to answer your first question.

AF: I noticed the board of directors of One Foundation are all famous Chinese entrepreneurs. As a member of the secretariat how would you describe what kind of suggestions and contributions these members have made towards the development of the One Foundation?

LH: As the most successful entrepreneurs in China, one of the biggest contributions our board of directors have made is to provide both strategic and management ideas from their management perspectives, which give clear direction to the organisation. Besides contributing their own wisdom and capacities, our board members also help to raise funds through the platforms of their enterprises, such as Alibaba, Tencent and China Merchants Bank, and mobilize the public to participate. This is even more important for One Foundation’s vision of "It Starts with One" than making enterprise donations.

AF: What was the biggest challenge One Foundation has encountered, turning from a private foundation to an independent public charitable fundraising organisation in China?

LH: The biggest challenge was that One Foundation, as a pioneer in this field, there was no precedent, no experience to learn from. We received a lot of attention from the public, the academia, the media, and the government. There were some expectations and some doubts. Allowing the One Foundation to be registered as a public charitable fundraising organisation in China itself was a big reform in China’s development process. It was a microcosm not only of the philanthropy sector, but also of China’s social development as a whole. In a way it resembled the situation 30 years ago, when China was just opened up and started to develop its market economy. To be the pioneer meant that we had to face more pressure.

AF: Your main supporting fields in the past included disaster relief, children’s welfare, and philanthropy development. What was the proportion of the financial support towards the three fields?

LH: In the past three years the ratio was 5:3:2.
**AF:** Are you going to continue supporting these three fields? Are there any changes in terms of the proportion of your funding?

**LH:** The percentage in disaster relief is getting bigger in this year’s budget, which stands at around 80% to 90%. We will continue supporting the other two fields though.

**AF:** Can this shift be explained because there have been so many earthquake disasters in recent years?

**LH:** It was partly because we got a lot of donations for Ya’an earthquake last year. Also, our board have made the decision to focus more on disaster relief.

**AF:** Do you support more GONGOs (Government organisation of non-government organisation) or grassroots NGOs in disaster relief?

**LH:** We started supporting grassroots NGOs in 2007, which has been an important part of our work. We also support GONGOs. Different fields have different needs and choosing suitable and professional partners is very important in order to deliver better and more professional services to the beneficiaries. We have supported about 600 grassroots organisations each year from 2011 to 2013.

**AF:** In terms of funding, do you provide both management costs as well as activity costs? I heard that many many foundations in China have a slogan of zero management cost. What is it like with your organisation?

**LH:** We provide both the activity costs and management costs.

**AF:** In terms of collaboration model, how do you square the circle of donorship as the funder and ownership of grantees as implementation organisations?

**LH:** In 2011, after the founding of Shenzhen One Foundation, we developed a new three dimensional strategy. We used the same funding strategy with all of our selected partners in the three fields. We integrated with the organisations in the field and discussed their strategies and action plans together. Take the NGOs in the field of autism rehabilitation for example. We sat down with more than ten partners in the western and middle part of China, to discuss the issues we faced and what strategies and plans should be adopted. We then provided funding, training, capacity building and technical support.

**AF:** Do you prefer a particular type of partnership model over another, e.g. a single entry partnership model of a maximum of two organisations over a multi-entry partnership model of two or more partners?

**LH:** Let me explain this with an example. Take autism or disaster relief for example: we think that this kind of topic requires public participation. The more people
participate the better. Therefore we adopted the strategy of building networks and providing a platform to have more organisations getting involved and taking action together, to have more volunteers supporting the local organisations and providing services to beneficiaries.

**AF: Do you have an organisational view of Chinese civil society? If yes, how would you describe it? If not, what kind of discourse does your organisation adopt?**

**LH:** We do not think this concept matters that much. Instead we think it is more important to see the roles of social organisations and public interest organisations. At different stages, these organisations should play different roles. At the current stage, it is vital that these organisations take the role of actors and enhance the professional capacity and the development of the sector. For instance, in two of our projects, the Ocean Heaven Plan and the Corporate Disaster Relief Platform, our role should be to promote the development of autism rehabilitation as well as the development of disaster relief. What is more, our role is to enhance professional development as well as the technical development in the sector. There is an urgent need for technical and professional development and contribution of this sector, the form is not that relevant. We want to provide real help to autism groups and offer practical support in disaster prevention or mitigation. Therefore, what we have been trying to do is to provide technical support and capacity building.

**AF: Currently many NGOs in China are service providers. Where do you see China’s NGO sector in 5-10 years?**

**LH:** I hope that at least in these areas that we have been working there will be more and more public organisations getting involved, for example in disaster relief, disaster prevention, and disaster mitigation. I hope they can assume a greater role, can help more people, engage with the wider community, and will be able to effectively deal with disasters. We hope that we all have made great progress in terms of professionalism and numbers.

**AF: What conclusions do you draw when you realise that the anticipated change has not been achieved by the civil society initiative supported by your organisation?**

**LH:** We have a very clear positioning of our programmes. On the one hand, we support NGOs to provide services in disaster relief and rescue operation; on the other hand, our programmes provide a hatching and nurturing opportunity for these NGOs to grow. Apart from trainings in the process of relief operations, to ensure the integrity of the programmes and the achievement of the goals, we also pay a lot of attention to nurture the growth of the NGOs. We have not got any case that our outcomes were not achieved. In the past three years, we have supported many organisations from scratch, teaching them basic skills in disaster relief. During the process, we discussed with them the needs and made a more accurate analysis of the issues to develop a more targeted plan. Through this way, we have avoided the problem you inquired about.
**AF:** What do you consider the realistic outreach goals for public interest initiatives funded by your organisation?

**LH:** For our projects, we have an action mechanism, which is the emergency rescue mechanism. We have local NGO partners spread out in more than ten provinces in China. In every province, we cooperate with local NGOs to develop an action mechanism. Once the action mechanism is established, we provide relief supplies, support funds, and a preparatory warehouse, etc. This way, the local organisations can react quickly when facing a disaster. We standardise the procedure and make it a model that can be copied in other provinces, especially in terms of the methods and tools used. Fifteen provincial level NGOs have adopted this model and formed a disaster relief co-operate.

**AF:** If the model you mentioned can be copied, it means other foundations can learn from your model too.

**LH:** Some foundations have been learning from us and have adopted a similar method to fund, though we did not promote it.

**AF:** My last question is related to impact monitoring. Do you require applicants to include social impact design and an evaluation strategy in their funding bids? If yes, can you provide specific examples?

**LH:** We design our programmes with our partners and when we set the programme outcomes, we also include the evaluation of social impact. Take disaster relief and mitigation for instance. Apart from the affected community residents, there is another issue behind that should not be ignored: the degree of socialisation of disaster relief and mitigation is not enough. In other words, disaster relief and mitigation has not become the mainstream. Therefore one of our strategies is that besides rescuing and responding to the needs of the community residents, we work on public education and design advocacy activities together with our partners. For instance we did an online and offline campaign on *Everyone Participates in Mitigation*, to promote the topic in the public and social realms in order to let more people understand and be aware of the importance of disaster mitigation. In a way, we have developed this programme together with our partners at the initial stage. We do not simply ask our applicants to design an initiative, rather we make a proposal together. Afterwards, the One Foundation works on financing and funding, and our partners implement.

**AF:** You mean the beneficiaries make the final evaluation?

**LH:** Yes. On the one hand, we report to our community beneficiaries, mainly children and schools. On the other hand, we report the progress of our programmes to our donors.