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“WEILE ZHENGYI” (“STRIVE FOR JUSTICE”):
THE ROLE AND IMPACT OF CHINESE NGOs IN
LEGAL AID PROVISION AND THE PROTECTION OF
MIGRANT WORKERS’ RIGHTS

Carl Hooks

Mentor: Zhao Ma

This original study explores how non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in China provide and advance legal aid services for rural-to-urban migrants. Discriminatory rules in China’s state-sponsored legal aid system continue to prevent millions of vulnerable migrant workers from receiving needed legal aid. Zhicheng Public Interest Lawyers (Zhicheng), a preeminent legal NGO headquartered in Beijing, provides a rich case study of how Chinese NGOs protect migrant workers’ rights and compensate for gaps in government services. By analyzing eight weeks of qualitative research conducted at Zhicheng in the summer of 2016—consisting of interviews with numerous lawyers, participant observation, and collection of NGO documents—this study argues that Chinese legal NGOs both function as important supplements to official legal aid centers and offer superior services for migrant workers. Depending on organizational factors, NGOs may even exert positive influence on labor rights legislation. These findings may help scholars conceptualize symbiotic models of interaction between legal NGOs and the Chinese government. They also offer insights into the national evolution of legal aid and civil society in modern China. Going forward, broader empirical investigations of legal NGOs that account for China’s recent NGO laws will be necessary to overcome the inherent limitations of a case study.