

Beyond Control: Why Can Some Chinese Nonprofits Maintain Autonomy When Collaborating with the Government While Others Cannot?

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Abstract

Past research assumes that in highly restrictive institutional environments such as China, nonprofits are likely to lose autonomy when collaborating with the government. We challenge this assumption by developing a multi-factor theoretical framework (resource dependency, political connections, cooperation specificity, and organizational reputation) to explain the conditions under which nonprofits would maintain autonomy. We further test this framework using a fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis of 20 government-nonprofit partnerships in China. Results show that all four factors combine to contribute to autonomy. The absence of cooperation specificity is necessary for high autonomy, and three configurations are identified for high and low autonomy. The findings indicate how weaker nonprofits strategically use diverse sources of inter-organizational power to gain autonomy when facing significant power imbalances, and reveals the government's intricate and indirect control tactics, offering insights for building more effective government-nonprofit partnerships in public services delivery.

Introduction

The rise of new public governance theory indicates increasing concerns related to the complexity and plurality in the design, provision, and management of public service (Osborne, 2009; Salamon & Toepler, 2015). As an important part of multiple participants in these processes, nonprofit organizations can bring significant public service delivery strengths, including flexibility, diversity, and innovation (Salamon & Toepler, 2015). Government-nonprofit collaboration has become one of the leading solutions to address governance challenges (Salamon, 1995; Selsky & Parker, 2005; Young, 2000). Despite the push for more collaboration between the government and nonprofits, there are increasing discussion and concerns about the government's adverse effects on nonprofit autonomy due to the imbalance of power between those sectors (e.g., Furneaux & Ryan, 2014; Guo, 2007; Hodgson, 2004; Nikolic & Koontz, 2008; Verschuere & De Corte, 2014). This power imbalance becomes further exaggerated in a more restrictive institutional context like China, where the nonprofit sector is a relatively new phenomenon and the state holds extensive power to fund and regulate nonprofit activities (Cheng & Wu, 2021; Zhang & Guo, 2021).

Given the importance of autonomy in maintaining nonprofits' organizational identity and comparative advantages (Brinkerhoff, 2002; Mcloughlin, 2011; Verschuere & De Corte, 2014), it is imperative to consider alternative ways of maintaining nonprofit autonomy while embracing government-nonprofit collaboration. Situated in the context of 20 government-nonprofit partnerships in China, the present study fills this knowledge gap by addressing why nonprofits have different degrees of autonomy when collaborating with the government. This study also identifies the main configurations of conditions leading to both high and low levels of nonprofit autonomy.

The study advances existing research in three ways. First, drawing upon literature from multiple disciplines, this study proposes a theoretical framework to explore the factors that may influence nonprofit autonomy. While previous scholars have emphasized the dominant role of the institutional environment in explaining nonprofit autonomy, it is insufficient to explain the variations on the ground about why some nonprofits can maintain autonomy in government-nonprofit collaboration while others cannot (Batley & Rose, 2010; Gleiss & Sæther, 2017; Huang & Ji, 2014; Jing, 2015; Kang & Han, 2008). This body of literature needs a more nuanced understanding of nonprofit autonomy based on the specific interactions between the government and nonprofits that extends beyond the general institutional explanations, which assume nonprofits in a specific institutional context present a highly similar pattern of interactions with the government.

Second, since the effects of one factor may be balanced by others, and nonprofits with the same level of autonomy may adopt quite different strategies and tactics, this study applies fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) to explore the multiple combinative causal relationships of these factors on autonomy and identify various pathways to the different levels of autonomy. Using fsQCA complements prior studies that aim to explain nonprofit autonomy vis-à-vis government, yet focus exclusively on a single factor (e.g. Song et al., 2015; Verschuere & De Corte, 2014), and also contributes to the literature on nonprofit autonomy by exploring joint effects of factors through a configurational perspective (e.g. Xu & Kim, 2021).

Third, situated in the context of China, where there is (1) a restrictive institutional environment for nonprofits and (2) substantial power imbalances between the government and nonprofits, this study advances our understanding of government-

nonprofit relationships in non-western and non-democratic countries. Taken this least-likely case approach, we also provide a more nuanced understanding of how nonprofits may gain autonomy even in contexts where the government holds significantly more power over the nonprofit sector (Wang & Cheng, 2021).

A Framework for Nonprofit Autonomy vis-à-vis the Government

Autonomy is “a matter of degree... can refer to an optimum measure of discretion in organizational decision making” (Kramer, 1994). It is a mean to best achieve organizations’ goals while avoiding unwanted external interference. Autonomy is often defined as an organization’s freedom from constraints imposed by potential linkage partners to make independent decisions on self-determined matters such as internal resource allocation and planning (Oliver, 1991; Stainton, 1994; Verhoest, et al., 2004). Based on these studies, we define nonprofit autonomy in government-nonprofit relationships as the freedom of nonprofits to make decisions on self-determined matters when pursuing their goals, without reference to government constraints. It is the outcome of whether the government can control nonprofits and whether nonprofits can resist such control, as determined by their relative inter-organizational power.

Thus, inter-organizational power, a central issue in government-nonprofit relations, provides a new analytical framework for investigating the mechanisms of nonprofit autonomy (Coston, 1998; Furneaux & Ryan, 2014). It reflects an organization’s capacity to influence, control, or resist others’ actions in their relationships, often serving as a means to meet their control needs or to ensure partners’ actions and collaborative outcomes align with their intentions (Huxham & Beech, 2009).

Most prior studies on government-nonprofit relationships have implicitly assumed that the government invariably occupies a dominant position (Hummel and Kusumasari,

2024; Gleiss & Sæther, 2017; Jing, 2015; Kang & Han, 2008). However, at the micro-level of organizational relations, the power structure between government and nonprofits is more dynamic and complex. Two key dimensions contributing to this are the multiplicity of sources from which inter-organizational power is derived and how the power operates dynamically.

On one hand, power is embedded in dependency and can be recalibrated by adjusting interdependence between organizations (Emerson, 1962). The principal sources of power include resources and the relative importance of cooperation (Huxham & Beech, 2009). Given diverse power sources, the government is not always the power-dominant party; nonprofits can strategically leverage these sources to adjust their relative power positions and gain more autonomous space. On the other hand, although power structures derived from various sources are relatively stable, power can be modified and shared by forming inter-organizational alliances or influencing the stronger partner's control intentions, thereby affecting autonomy (Huxham & Beech, 2009; Drees & Heugens, 2013; Provan, 1984).

Thus, examining the sources and dynamics of inter-organizational power provides a new framework to investigate the causal conditions of nonprofit autonomy. While prior studies have identified several factors related to the sources of power like resource dependence, few have systematically analyzed this topic from the perspective of inter-organizational power. Our study develops a framework grounded in inter-organizational power analysis to explore the factors influencing autonomy more systematically. Based on the two dimensions of inter-organizational power mentioned above—the sources of power and the dynamics of power—we identify four factors affecting nonprofit autonomy in government-nonprofit relationships, as shown in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 near here]

From the power source dimension, the first factor is resource dependency between the government and nonprofits, which has been identified in past research (e.g. Jung & Moon, 2007; Verschuere & De Corte, 2014). Such imbalanced resource interdependence produces constraints on organizations and limits their autonomy (Emerson, 1962; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003).

The second factor involves “mismatches in the importance of a collaborative relationship to the partners” (Huxham & Beech, 2009, p. 9). Here, we apply the concept of asset specificity (Tadelis & Williamson, 2012) and propose the concept of cooperation specificity to measure these mismatches. This indicates a partner’s possibility of exiting the relationship or seeking strategic alternatives, thereby determining how much latitude it will have to change the level of decision-making constraints imposed by this relationship (Oliver, 1991).

From the power dynamics dimension, the first factor is political connection, identified as another factor that may affect autonomy in literature. The structure of inter-organizational power can be modified through inter-organizational alliances (Drees & Heugens, 2013; Provan, 1984). Political connection helps nonprofits adjust power relationships with focal government partners through governmental alliances, thereby benefitting their autonomy (McCloughlin, 2011; Song et al., 2015; Yan & Chang, 2018; Zaheer et al., 2010).

The second factor concerns the influence on the stronger partner’s intention to control, thereby changing the power structure (Huxham & Beech, 2009). We posit that a nonprofit’s organizational reputation is the key factor affecting government control interest. Organizational reputation can send strong signals about the partner’s

competence and reliability, indicating low empowerment risks and benefiting the partners' trust-building, thereby facilitating power sharing and promoting autonomy (Carpenter & Krause, 2012; Malay & Fairholm, 2020).

In the following section, we analyse each factor in detail and offer corresponding research propositions.

Resource Dependence

Resource dependence is the predominant inter-organizational power source identified in academia and produces external constraints (Huxham & Beech, 2009). Inter-organizational power derives from an organization's imbalanced interdependence of resources on others, producing constraints on the organization and limiting its autonomy (Emerson, 1962; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). The related body of work explains the adverse effects of government funding on nonprofit autonomy from the perspective of resource dependence, including the constraints and intervention on nonprofits' finances, board members, or target groups (e.g. Guo, 2007; Jung & Moon, 2007; Verschuere & De Corte, 2014).

The relation between resource dependence and autonomy is not linear. In government-nonprofit relationships, some research suggests that diversified revenue is not equivalent to high autonomy, while high dependence on government funding does not indicate low autonomy (e.g. Chaves et al., 2004; Kramer, 1994; Nikolic & Koontz, 2008). Due to unique political culture and history, some Chinese nonprofits depend heavily on government resource but still have significant de facto autonomy (Ma, 2002). Other research shows that nonprofits may respond to resource dependency by engaging in new inter-organizational arrangements to strengthen autonomy (Drees & Heugens, 2013; Provan, 1984), indicating that the focal government's influence is also

shaped by other external pressures beyond it. Thus, resource dependence's impact on nonprofit autonomy may depend on some other conditions.

Cooperation Specificity

Resource dependence is not the only source of inter-organizational power (Casciaro & Piskorski, 2005). Inter-organizational power structures also relate to “mismatches in the importance of a collaborative relationship to the partners” (Huxham & Beech, 2009, p. 9). If a relationship is less crucial to an organization than to its partner, or if the organization has alternative partners, it holds a stronger power position in the relationship (Casciaro & Piskorski, 2005; Yan & Gray, 1994). Consequently, the organization may have more latitude to change the level of decision-making constraints imposed by this relationship (Oliver, 1991). Conversely, if an organization works specifically for its partner— such as when a nonprofit was established to work for a particular government department (as seen in some Chinese nonprofits with a government background), or if that government department holds a strategically central position in the nonprofit's development, or if the nonprofit has heavily invested its resources in the relationship—it is highly unlikely for the nonprofit to disengage from this relationship (Peng et al., 2020). As a result, the nonprofit becomes more passive with less bargaining power to resist potential constraints from its partner.

This study applies the concept of asset specificity (Tadelis & Williamson, 2012) and proposes a second factor influencing nonprofit autonomy: cooperation specificity. In government-nonprofit relationships, cooperation specificity refers to the extent to which a nonprofit works specifically for a particular government department. It measures the imbalance in the needs for the relationship and indicates the nonprofit's possibility of exiting the relationship (Huxham & Beech, 2009) or seeking strategic

governmental alternatives (Oliver, 1991).

The effects of cooperation specificity on nonprofit autonomy are pronounced in some nonprofits with a government background (GONGOs). For instance, a foundation founded in 2011 primarily focuses on women and children's development. It has diversified revenue, including private enterprise donations, online fundraising, and intermediary foundation funds. However, it works specifically for a particular government authority. Though not dependent on government funding, it still needs official approval for expenditures and recruitment (as in case HBF E in Table 2). Similarly, cooperation specificity may also affect some grassroots nonprofits. When the relationship is more critical for the grassroots nonprofit than for its government partner, or when the nonprofit invests significant specific assets into the relationship (as in case YZY in Table 2), there will be high cooperation specificity and the nonprofit has low bargaining power to resist governmental constraints—even if it was not established for specific government departments. Thus, this study deduces that cooperation specificity has adverse effects on nonprofit autonomy.

Political Connections

An organization may respond to resource dependence constraints by forming inter-organizational interlocks or alliances to modify its power relationships (Drees & Heugens, 2013; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003; Provan, 1984). Nonprofits may build various political connections with the government to moderate the imbalanced power position in government-nonprofit relationships, helping them adapt to changing environments and advance their development (Cheng, 2019; Ni & Zhan, 2017; Wang, 2022). An organization is politically connected when “at least one of its large shareholders or top officers is a member of parliament, a minister, or is closely related to a top politician or

party” (Faccio, 2006, p. 370). When a nonprofit’s prominent board members have or had political positions in government (e.g., as parliament members) or have strong informal relationships with government agents, the nonprofit has a notably different inter-organizational power position with its focal government partner.

The literature describes the dual effects of political connections on nonprofit autonomy. Some scholars argue that interlocking boards with a powerful government may decrease autonomy (e.g. Selznick, 1949). However, other researchers suggest that a nonprofit’s political network beyond its leading government partner may influence the control from the focal partner, thereby benefiting its autonomy (Mcloughlin, 2011; Song et al., 2015; Yan & Chang, 2018; Zaheer et al., 2010; Lu, 2007). In such cases, the nonprofit’s political connections represent its political capital to resist constraints from the focal government partner. Thus, this study proposes that the focal government partner’s control may be modified by the nonprofit’s political connections with other government departments or other levels of government, thereby strengthening nonprofit autonomy.

Organizational Reputation

Inter-organizational power can be modified by affecting the more powerful partner’s intention to control (Huxham & Beech, 2009). This study proposes the fourth factor affecting nonprofit autonomy: organizational reputation. A nonprofit with a high organizational reputation weakens the government’s intention to control by signalling its competence and reliability, especially when the government holds more substantial power.

Organizational reputation is “a set of beliefs about an organization’s capacities, intentions, history, and mission that are embedded in a network of multiple audiences”

(Carpenter & Krause 2012, p. 26). It comprises four dimensions: performative reputation shows the organization's competence or efficiency in task completion; moral reputation represents its honesty and reliability; procedural reputation demonstrates its likelihood of following established rules; finally, technical reputation illustrates its capacity and skill in managing turbulent environments (Carpenter & Krause, 2012, p. 27). These multiple facets of organizational reputation release rich signals to the organization's partner about its competence and reliability. A high organizational reputation indicates a low risk of empowerment and fosters trust, promoting the possibility of gaining more autonomy for nonprofits.

Empirical research shows that capacity-based reputation helps obtain organizational autonomy from external authorities (Carpenter, 2010; Carpenter & Krause, 2012; Malay & Fairholm, 2020). However, some nonprofits with high reputations have low autonomy levels. This study proposes that while organizational reputation positively impacts nonprofit autonomy, the de facto level of autonomy depends on the combined effects of organizational reputation and other factors.

Based on the analysis above, we propose that the various levels of nonprofit autonomy are joint effects of the four factors rather than any single factor alone. Additionally, we deduce that, in the conjoint effects on nonprofit autonomy, resource dependency and cooperation specificity have negative effects, and political connections and organizational reputation have positive effects.

Data and Method

Context and Case Selection

This study investigates why nonprofits have different degrees of autonomy when collaborating with the government, situated in the context of government-nonprofit

relationships in China. Importantly, this context offers rich least-likely cases for examining the mechanisms of nonprofit autonomy (George & Bennett, 2005). When operating in a complex and relatively unfavourable institutional environment, the effects of multiple factors on autonomy and the diverse strategies adopted by nonprofits to gain autonomy are more pronounced than in other situations. In fsQCA studies, case selection should achieve “a maximum of heterogeneity over a minimum number of cases” to include sufficient diversity (Berg-Schlosser & De Meur, 2009, p. 21) and apply the principle of “Most Different, Similar Outcome” to extend external validity (Berg-Schlosser & De Meur, 2009, p. 22). Following these principles, we selected 20 cases of government-nonprofit relationships from two surveys of research programs on government-nonprofit collaboration conducted in China between November 2017 and August 2019. The researchers of this article were key participants in these programs. These 20 cases offer high diversity in both factors and outcomes, providing enough heterogeneity to explore the mechanism of autonomy (see the two truth tables in Appendix). They also reflect the existing types of government-nonprofit relationships in China. The cases span six cities across provinces: Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, Wuhan, Hangzhou, and Ningbo. Half the nonprofits are private, while the others have some governmental background. Seven provide nationwide services, while the others focus on local areas.

The data were collected using various methods. We focused on the nonprofit’s relationship with its focal government partner. Researchers conducted at least one hour of semi-structured interviews with each nonprofit’s directors and half of the governmental officers involved. Each nonprofit’s annual reports and relevant government documents were also collected from official websites as supplementary data.

Method

To explore the combinative causal relations of the four factors on nonprofit autonomy and identify the main configurations of factors leading to both high and low levels of autonomy, we employ fsQCA as the analytical method, which offers several advantages.

First, fsQCA suits this article's primary purpose of analysing the causal complexity of nonprofit autonomy, which emphasizes conjunction, equifinality and causal asymmetry (Fiss, 2011; Ragin, 2000, 2008; Furnari et al., 2021; Han & Kang, 2021). It reveals the effects of different factor combinations and helps identify various strategies nonprofits use to gain autonomy, following the methods of difference and agreement (Fiss, 2011).

Second, fsQCA combines the external validity of "large n" analysis with the deep insights of case studies to facilitate theory building (Casady, 2020; Ragin, 2000). In fsQCA, researchers need enough case "intimacy" in coding, so they can better understand nonprofit autonomy and link results with each case, thereby developing a more robust theory (Berg-Schlosser & De Meur, 2009).

Coding and Calibration

In fsQCA analysis, the data must be transformed into set data and calculated using QCA software. Each factor and outcome are coded as present or absent in the case. The process involved two steps.

First, we used a 5-point Likert scale to code the degree of the presence for each factor and outcome, based on interview data and official website data. A score of 5 indicated totally present, while a score of 1 indicated totally absent in the case. Two

researchers with an in-depth understanding of the cases coded the scores independently following the coding protocol to ensure the consistency of coding standards and enhance coding reliability. All the detail measurement of each variable and the coding method are presented in Table 1.

[Table 1 near here]

Second, the data ranging from 1 to 5 were calibrated into set scores. In fsQCA analysis, factors and outcomes must score between 0 and 1 to reflect the extent of set membership in a particular set. This study adopts a five-level fuzzy set scale of 0.05, 0.18, 0.5, 0.82, and 0.95 to indicate the set membership. A score of 0.95 represents full membership while 0.05 represents non-membership; the crossover point is 0.5. In the calibration process, variables scored 5 on the Likert scale were assigned 0.95 for full membership; those scored 1 on the Likert scale were assigned 0.05 for non-membership. A Likert score of 3 was the membership threshold crossover point. To test whether this threshold could capture key distinctions among cases, we used the soft Tosmana and found all variables fit well (Verkuilen, 2005). The calibration results are presented in Table 2.

[Table 2 near here]

Results

We performed the data analysis using QCA 3.0, which included the truth table algorithm, necessity analysis, and sufficiency analysis. This article presents the key

factors and solutions for both high and low autonomy found in the fsQCA analysis in the following parts.

Key Factors and Solutions for High Nonprofit Autonomy vis-à-vis

Government

Under what configurations can nonprofits maintain autonomy in government-nonprofit relationships? We conducted fsQCA using high autonomy as the outcome to identify key factors and primary pathways. The left part of Table 3 presents three solutions for high autonomy. The two main fsQCA parameters, consistency and coverage, score relatively high. The total solution consistency is 0.920, which is higher than the minimum requirement of consistency 0.85 in QCA analysis (Ragin, 2000). The solution coverage is 0.959, indicating the three solutions explain 95.9% of the cases. Further analysis shows that the absence of resource dependence (\sim RD), the absence of cooperation specificity (\sim CS), the presence of organizational reputation (OR), and the presence of political connections (PC) are core conditions in these solutions. They combined differently to form the configurations for high autonomy.

[Table 3 near here]

The results show that nonprofits have three main pathways to achieve high autonomy. Paths 1a and 2a indicate that the absence of cooperation specificity, combined with either low resource dependence or high organizational reputation (\sim CS* \sim RD or \sim CS*OR), is sufficient to explain the high level of autonomy. In the necessary conditions analysis (see Table 4), the absence of cooperation specificity is the only condition meeting the minimum consistency requirement for necessity (≥ 0.9 ,

Ragin, 2000). Path 3a shows that nonprofits with low resource dependence, combined with high political connections and organizational reputation ($\sim RD * PC * OR$), can achieve high autonomy.

[Table 4 near here]

Nonprofits in these three configurations have a relatively balanced power structure with the focal government departments. For example, in path 1a ($\sim CS * \sim RD$), the nonprofit has both low resource dependence and cooperation specificity. This configuration indicates the nonprofit is less imbalanced on resource interdependence with the government and can find alternative partners beyond the focal government. The nonprofit has a low degree of embedment with the government, meaning the government is not its main stakeholder. Other, more essential stakeholders can reduce external pressure from the government.

Key Factors and Solutions for Low Nonprofit Autonomy Vis-À-Vis

Government

This study also explores pathways of low nonprofit autonomy in government-nonprofit relationships. The right part of Table 3 presents three pathways consistent with low autonomy in sufficiency analysis. The overall consistency is 0.922, and the solution coverage score is 0.825. Resource dependence (RD), cooperation specificity (CS), absence of political connections ($\sim PC$), and absence of organizational reputation ($\sim OR$) are central conditions in these solutions. Necessity analysis shows no single condition can be the necessary condition for low autonomy (see Table 4).

The results highlight the configuration of path 1b (RD*~PC*~OR), which has the highest unique coverage in all solutions. It means resource dependence, combined with both the absence of political connections and organizational reputation, leads to low autonomy. Nonprofits in this configuration have the weakest inter-organizational power position because they depend on government resources but have low political connections or social impacts to resist government interference. Consequently, they are more easily intervened by the government in operations and strategic decision-making, and are more likely to comply with the government's intentions when a conflict exists.

For path 2b (CS* ~PC* OR) and path 3b (RD* CS* OR), because the absence of organizational reputation is the core condition in the analysis (marked in bold in Table 3), we propose that nonprofits in these paths only with high organizational reputation cannot be free from government control. The other two factors deduce the effects of organizational reputation. Additionally, path 2b shows that nonprofits collaborating mainly with their focal government but lacking political capital to bargain with the government will have low autonomy. This path is quite common among some GONGOs, implying that for such nonprofits with high cooperation specificity, the political connections may be essential to gain autonomy.

The analysis of both high and low autonomy reveals several key findings. First, the results confirm the expectation of the framework that nonprofit autonomy depends on combinations of the four factors rather than any single factor on its own. While the four factors are central conditions in the solutions for high and low autonomy, none alone determines nonprofit autonomy. It is the combined effects of different configurations of these factors. For example, the data show that the absence of resource dependence alone cannot lead to high autonomy (see path 1a and 3a in Table 3), and the presence of resource dependence cannot lead to low autonomy separately (see path 1b and 3b in

Table 3). Additionally, nonprofits lacking cooperation specificity can achieve high autonomy if they have a high organizational reputation, regardless of whether resource dependence exists (see path 2a in Table 3). The data also confirm the deduction that resource dependence affects autonomy jointly with other conditions. Its effects depend on whether other conditions exist. So as to political connections (see path 3a in Table 3).

Second, the results confirm the negative effects of resource dependence and cooperation specificity, and the positive effects of political connections and organizational reputation. Cooperation specificity and organizational reputation significantly affect nonprofit autonomy (see path 2a and 1b in Table 3), yet have not been examined sufficiently before. Additionally, the analysis reveals that nonprofits at the same autonomy level can have notably different paths. The data identified three equifinal configurations for nonprofits to gain their autonomy ($\sim CS^* \sim RD$, $\sim CS^* OR$, or $\sim RD^* PC^* OR$), and three configurations that the government controls nonprofits ($RD^* \sim PC^* \sim OR$, $RD^* CS^* OR$ or $CS^* \sim PC^* OR$).

Discussion

This article focuses on why some nonprofits can maintain autonomy in government-nonprofit collaboration while others cannot. Drawing upon the literature from multiple disciplines, we develop a multi-factor theoretical framework by analysing inter-organizational power between the government and nonprofits. Based on the fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis of 20 government-nonprofit cases in China, the findings contribute to the literature in several ways.

First, the findings show how weaker nonprofits realize effective participation in delivering public services when imbalanced power commonly exists in government-

nonprofit relationships. As new public governance theory proposed, when multiple interdependent actors contribute to the design, provision, and management of public service, inter-organizational relationship governance is crucial for public service outcomes (Osborne, 2009; Salamon & Toepler, 2015). Due to power imbalances between the government and nonprofits, it is difficult for nonprofits to maintain enough autonomy to realize effective participation in public services delivery. Without mutuality and equality, government-nonprofit collaboration is more like contractual and government-controlled relationships rather than true partnerships (Brinkerhoff, 2002; Furneaux & Ryan, 2014; Gazley & Brudney, 2007).

Our research adds to the discussion on this issue by developing a theoretical framework from the perspective of inter-organizational power. The findings identify various strategies used by nonprofits to gain autonomy and balance power position under restrictive, authoritarian contexts like China, where the government has a dominant role in shaping the government-nonprofit relationship (Jing, 2015; Kang & Han, 2008). The findings confirm that nonprofits do not passively respond to the institutional environment and structural contracts led by the government but proactive in constructing more equal and benign relationships with the government (Arvidson & Linde, 2021; Fyall, 2016; Mcloughlin, 2011; Najam, 2000; Ramanath, 2009). Through different sources of inter-organizational power, nonprofits manage to overcome government constraints and effectively participate in service delivery as independent participants.

Second, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of how nonprofits gain autonomy through a configurational perspective. The findings confirm the effects of resource dependence and political connections (Song et al., 2015; Verschuere & De Corte, 2014; Wang, 2022). However, neither can be regarded as sufficient or necessary

conditions alone to autonomy. Instead, our study supports the views that both effects of resource dependence and political connections vary with different types of nonprofits in the context of China (Cheng & Wu, 2021; Li et al., 2017). For resource dependence, existing research emphasizes its adverse effects on the activity of nonprofits (Furneaux & Ryan, 2014; Knutsen, 2017; Nikolic & Koontz, 2008; Verschuere & De Corte, 2014). However, the effects may be exaggerated (Ferris, 1993; Mcloughlin, 2011), warranting further examined under what conditions the effects will be strengthened or weakened. Our study advances the understanding of the complex effects of resource dependence by exploring why some nonprofits maintain their autonomy while mainly rely on government funding. For political connection, earlier studies emphasize its crucial role in sustaining nonprofit autonomy. Our research adds to the discussion by exploring under what conditions political connections can enhance autonomy and identify alternative paths to gain autonomy besides political connections, especially when the political connections are harder for nonprofits to network.

Moreover, our study highlights the effects of organizational reputation—based on the capacities, performance, and reliability of nonprofits—and cooperation specificity, which demonstrates the possibility to find alternative partnerships for nonprofits in the environment. An absence of cooperation specificity is the necessary condition for nonprofits to gain autonomy. This validates scholars' view that multilateral dependence with different government authorities is positive about maintaining autonomy (Huang & Ji, 2014; Salamon & Toepler, 2015). In general, the four factors proposed in this study suggest the importance of a configurational perspective when studying government-nonprofit relationships.

Third, this study advances our understanding of government-nonprofit relationships in non-western and non-democratic countries. The findings indicate that,

although Chinese nonprofits have increasing opportunities to collaborate with the government, they are controlled through more sophisticated and indirect tactics by the Chinese government, which supports the theory of consultative authoritarianism (Teets, 2013). The results identify three paths under which the government controls nonprofits from the perspective of inter-organizational power—the government controls nonprofits indirectly by using resource dependence and cooperation specificity. As the strategies of resource dependence have been identified in earlier research (Jing, 2015), our research adds to the literature by identifying the role of cooperation specificity. Specifically, the extent to which the government opens the space for nonprofits' participation is another implicit way to control nonprofits. Cooperation specificity determines whether nonprofits must relinquish autonomy to gain the opportunities to cooperate with the government in areas with limited participation. Additionally, cooperation specificity implies the government's control of the nonprofit is affected by the improvement of the ecologic environment for the nonprofit sector. The latter provides a greater choice of partnerships for nonprofits besides the government and emphasizes the importance of building multilateral relationships to gain autonomy.

Conclusion

This article examines the conditions under which nonprofits can maintain autonomy. We develop a multi-factor theoretical framework by analysing inter-organizational power between the government and nonprofits and further test it using fsQCA and data from 20 cases of government-nonprofit relationships in China. We explore the multiple combinative causal relationships of the four factors (resource dependency, political connections, cooperation specificity, and organizational reputation) on autonomy and identify the main configurations of conditions that lead to both high and low levels of

nonprofit autonomy. Our findings indicate how weaker nonprofits act proactively to gain autonomy through different sources of inter-organizational power, which will benefit their effective participation in the delivery of public services, and also explore the sophisticated and indirect tactics used by the government to control nonprofits. Our research offers a more nuanced understanding of nonprofit autonomy and highlights the importance of a configurational perspective when studying government-nonprofit relationships.

There are some limitations to this study. First, this study limits the cases in the nonprofits that are politically inactive and professionally capable. Their autonomy may be easily lost if there is some political risk exists. Further research is needed to explore nonprofit autonomy mechanisms when nonprofits mainly focus on advocacy and other political activities. Second, this study focuses exclusively on the autonomy of nonprofits to their focal government partners. Their relationships with other governmental actors may vary depending on the nature and scope of those partnerships. However, the mechanism discovered in this article can help predict the new relationship.

Despite these limitations, our study has some important implications for public management theory and practice. For public management scholars, our research provides a multi-factor theoretical framework for nonprofit autonomy and adds a configurational perspective to the discussion. For nonprofit practitioners, this study will help them adopt appropriate strategies in practice to establish more benign and effective partnerships in collaboration with the government, especially in institutional contexts where there are huge power imbalances between the government and the nonprofit sector.

Declarations

Conflict of interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval: All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with the institutional and national ethical standards.

Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews were conducted.

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Table 1 Coding protocol of causal and outcome variables.

Variable	Measurement(s)	Principles guiding the calibration	Data source(s)
Resource dependence	1. Government funds account for a significant proportion of nonprofit revenue.	1. Scores are based on the proportion of government funding. 2. Qualitative interview data are used to adjust and verify the scores. For example, nonprofits stating in interviews that the government was pivotal to their fundraising received higher scores.	1. Nonprofit's annual report 2. Interview data
Political connections	1. Nonprofit's board members have key political positions or have strong informal relationships with government agents.	1. Scores are mainly based on the political positions of nonprofit's board members. 2. Scores are given for political connections showing active engagement in inter-organizational governance, using qualitative interview data.	1. Nonprofit's annual report 2. Interview data 3. Official website of the government and nonprofit
Cooperation specificity	1. The nonprofit's possibility to leave its collaboration with specific government departments is very limited.	1. Scores are mainly based on the nonprofit's possibility to leave a specific government partner, using interview data. 2. Nonprofits receive a higher score if they state a mission or purpose to work for a specific government department, or if significant resources are invested in such collaborations.	1. Interview data 2. Official website of nonprofit

(Continued)

Table 1 (Continued).

Variable	Measurement(s)	Principles guiding the calibration	Data source(s)
Organizational reputation	1. High rating in the Chinese Social Organizations Rating System (CSORS) regulated by the Ministry of Civil Affairs.	1. Scores are mainly based on the rating in CSORS, which signifies nonprofits' considerable public reputation and influence. 2. Nonprofits received higher scores for additional honors such as receiving the China Charity Award or achieving high scores in the Foundation Transparency Index.	1. Nonprofit's annual report 2. Official website of government and nonprofit 3. Interview data
Outcome: nonprofit's autonomous decision-making	1. The degree of nonprofits' self-decision making in organizational operations or holding an equal position in strategic decision making with governmental partners.	1. Scores are mainly based on the nonprofit's actual autonomous decision-making levels with its focal government. 2. Nonprofits' operations include finance and human resource. 3. Nonprofits' strategic decision making in collaborations includes defining their mission, determining governance structure and service delivery methods, identifying primary project implementation areas and target beneficiaries.	1. Interview data

Table 2 Calibration results.

Case	Outcome		Conditions			
	High autonomy	Resource dependence (RD)	Political connections (PC)	Cooperation specificity (CS)	Organizational reputation (OR)	
WH	0.05	0.95	0.05	0.95	0.05	0.05
JJ	0.82	0.82	0.95	0.18	0.18	0.95
DH	0.82	0.05	0.18	0.05	0.05	0.95
GX	0.82	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.95
SQL	0.82	0.05	0.95	0.05	0.05	0.95
YC	0.82	0.05	0.95	0.05	0.05	0.95
LY	0.82	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.95
LQ	0.95	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.95
EC	0.82	0.05	0.95	0.05	0.05	0.95
SY	0.82	0.05	0.95	0.18	0.18	0.95
YZF	0.95	0.05	0.95	0.95	0.95	0.95
JY	0.82	0.18	0.18	0.18	0.18	0.18
YJ	0.95	0.18	0.82	0.05	0.05	0.18
YZSF	0.05	0.95	0.05	0.95	0.95	0.82
HSSF	0.18	0.95	0.95	0.95	0.95	0.95
YZY	0.05	0.95	0.05	0.05	0.95	0.82
HBFE	0.05	0.18	0.05	0.05	0.82	0.95
JA	0.82	0.95	0.95	0.18	0.18	0.95
YC	0.95	0.82	0.18	0.05	0.05	0.82
SY	0.18	0.95	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.05

Table 3 Pathways for the high and low levels of nonprofit autonomy vis-à-vis focal government.

	Outcome: high autonomy			Outcome: low autonomy		
	Path 1a	Path 2a	Path 3a	Path 1b	Path 2b	Path 3b
Configurations→	~ CS* ~ RD	~ CS* OR	~ RD * PC* OR	RD* ~ PC* ~ OR	CS* ~ PC* OR	RD* CS* OR
Consistency	0.909	0.916	0.915	0.887	1	0.967
Raw coverage	0.724	0.785	0.448	0.411	0.462	0.515
Unique coverage	0.102	0.163	0.072	0.224	0.086	0.138
Overall solution consistency		0.920			0.922	
Overall solution coverage		0.959			0.825	

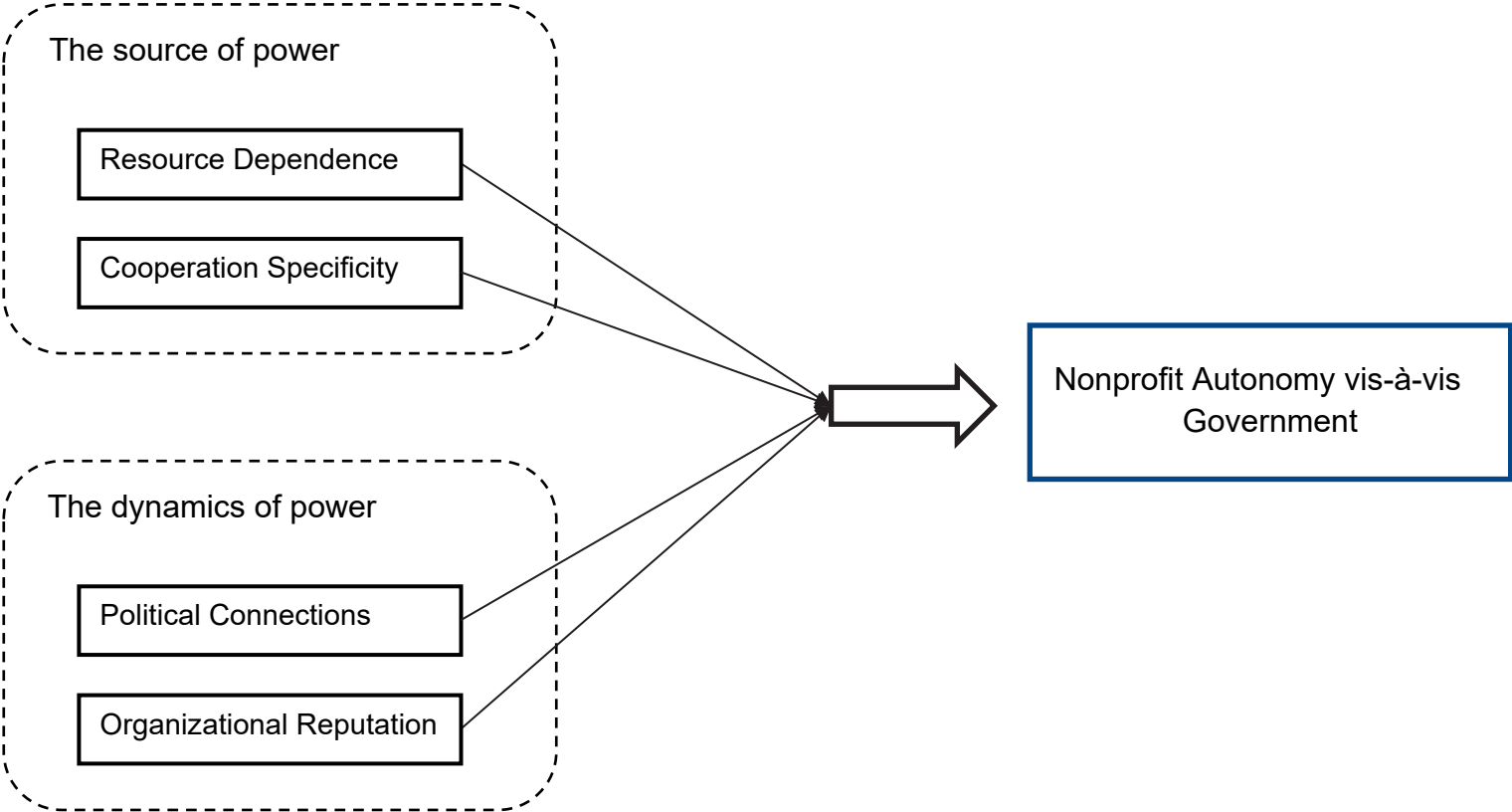
Note: 1. RD: resource dependence, ~RD: absence of resource dependence, PC: political connections, ~PC: absence of political connections, OR: organizational reputation, ~OR: absence of organizational reputation, CS: cooperation specificity, ~CS: absence of cooperation specificity.

2. Core conditions for each outcome are marked in bold.

Table 4 Analysis of necessary conditions for the high and low levels of nonprofit autonomy vis-à-vis focal government.

Condition	Outcome: high autonomy		Outcome: low autonomy	
	Consistency	Coverage	Consistency	Coverage
Resource dependence (RD)	0.305	0.460	0.774	0.691
Absence of resource dependence (~RD)	0.795	0.856	0.395	0.252
Political connections (PC)	0.622	0.834	0.378	0.300
Absence of political connections (~PC)	0.479	0.565	0.792	0.554
Cooperation specificity (CS)	0.203	0.376	0.774	0.848
Absence of cooperation specificity (~CS)	0.918	0.873	0.430	0.242
Organizational reputation (OR)	0.867	0.713	0.741	0.361
Absence of organizational reputation (~OR)	0.223	0.592	0.411	0.647

Fig. 1 A framework of nonprofit autonomy through the analysis of inter-organizational power.



Appendix

Table 1 Truth table for the outcome of high autonomy.

RD	PC	CS	OR	Number	Outcome	Raw consist.	PRI consist.	SYM consist
1	1	0	1	2	1	1.000	1.000	1.000
0	0	0	0	1	1	1.000	1.000	1.000
0	1	0	0	1	1	1.000	1.000	1.000
0	1	1	1	1	1	1.000	1.000	1.000
1	0	0	1	1	1	0.940	0.874	0.874
0	1	0	1	4	1	0.924	0.879	1.000
0	0	0	1	4	1	0.922	0.888	0.960
1	0	0	0	1	0	0.664	0.252	0.289
1	1	1	1	1	0	0.664	0.000	0.000
0	0	1	1	1	0	0.595	0.000	0.000
1	0	1	0	1	0	0.493	0.000	0.000
1	0	1	1	2	0	0.404	0.000	0.000

Note: RD: resource dependence, PC: political connections, OR: organizational reputation, CS: cooperation specificity.

Table 2 Truth table for the outcome of low autonomy

RD	PC	CS	OR	Number	Outcome	Raw consist.	PRI consist.	SYM consist
1	0	1	1	2	1	1.000	1.000	1.000
1	0	1	0	1	1	1.000	1.000	1.000
0	0	1	1	1	1	1.000	1.000	1.000
1	1	1	1	1	1	0.943	0.831	1.000
1	0	0	0	1	1	0.830	0.621	0.711
0	1	1	1	1	0	0.607	0.000	0.000
1	0	0	1	1	0	0.583	0.126	0.126
0	0	0	0	1	0	0.557	0.000	0.000
0	1	0	0	1	0	0.557	0.000	0.000
1	1	0	1	2	0	0.474	0.000	0.000
0	1	0	1	4	0	0.373	0.000	0.000
0	0	0	1	4	0	0.331	0.037	0.04

Note: RD: resource dependence, PC: political connections, OR: organizational reputation, CS: cooperation specificity.