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Chinese Civil Society in the Netherlands and Europe

Trends, Influences, and Challenges

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Executive summary

This report examines the emergence, structure, networks, impact, and challenges of new Chinese civil society organizations (CCSOs) in Europe, with a primary focus on the Netherlands. It explores how these organizations—distinct from traditional Chinese diaspora associations—have developed since the 2010s in response to shifting migration patterns, political pressures, and digital infrastructure. Based on 32 in-depth interviews with CCSO initiators and participants, this study provides a grounded account of the civic landscape shaped by Mainland Chinese migrants in contemporary Europe.

Key findings

1. Emergence and motivations:
New CCSOs have emerged amid the rising mobility of middle-class Chinese migrants—including students, professionals, and cultural workers—who seek civic space for expression, support, and advocacy. Motivations span four main domains: interpersonal connection, adaptation to European systems, intercultural communication, and transnational advocacy.

2. Structural and operational features:
These organizations vary widely in scale and formality, from officially registered NGOs to informal, volunteer-based groups. Despite their diversity, CCSOs tend to operate through decentralized, horizontal structures and emphasize flexibility, care, and internal trust over bureaucratic growth.

3. Networking:
CCSOs form dense interpersonal and transnational networks through multi-role participation, shared activities, and digital platforms. Algorithmic exposure also plays a growing role in outreach. Digital media are both enabling tools and sources of risk, shaping how organizations build visibility while managing security concerns.

4. Civic impact:
CCSOs contribute to social integration, civic education, and the well-being of Chinese migrants. They also reshape European perceptions of Chinese communities and participate in international human rights advocacy. Their impact extends beyond ethnic enclaves into broader civic and transnational spaces.

5. Challenges:
Key barriers include limited access to funding, high turnover, political risks, difficulty navigating European institutional systems, and a shrinking civic space in increasingly nationalist host societies.

Recommendations for Dutch and European policymakers

1. Enhance funding access:
Lower entry barriers for immigrant-led and unregistered groups by offering flexible, operational, and small-scale funding opportunities tailored to CCSOs.

2. Promote organizational continuity:
Support capacity-building in volunteer management, hybrid staffing models, and civic infrastructure development.

3. Improve legal and digital security protections:
Address the specific needs of civic actors from authoritarian regimes by safeguarding personal privacy, resisting unnecessary surveillance, and fostering safe environments for expression.

4. Bridge administrative knowledge gaps:
Develop bilingual, community-based resources and training on legal registration, tax compliance, and public participation for new migrant groups.

5. Affirm civic inclusion:
Recognize CCSOs as integral to integration and diversity policy, and resist securitizing Chinese civic engagement based on geopolitical tensions.

6. Support translocal solidarity:
Facilitate cross-community partnerships and co-designed platforms for civic engagement, dialogue, and mutual learning between migrant and host-society actors.

7. Address structural misrecognition:
Acknowledge the internal diversity of the Chinese diaspora and avoid essentializing or Cold War-style framings of Chinese communities and activism.

1. Introduction

1.1 "New" CCSOs in the Netherlands and Europe

In recent years, new forms of Chinese civil society organizations (CCSOs) have emerged across Europe, marking a shift in both the composition of Chinese migrant communities and the modalities of civic engagement among them.

Traditionally, Chinese organizations in the diaspora were structured around native-place associations, kinship ties (e.g., clan associations), religious networks, occupational affiliations, Chinese-language education (e.g., weekend schools), shared leisure interests (e.g., martial arts or dragon boat clubs), and demographic groups (e.g., women, youth, or senior citizens) (Liu 1998; Li 2019; Pieke 2021). They often centered on the practical needs of Chinese migrants (e.g., employment, housing, schooling for children, or elderly care) (Liu 1998; Hatziprokopiou & Montagna 2012; Pieke 2021). Many were later incorporated into the Chinese state's overseas influence apparatus, with leaders receiving symbolic recognition from Chinese government agencies (Liu 1998; Ding 2015; Chen 2016; Tran & Chuang 2020; Ceccagno & Thunø 2023).

Since the 2010s, a new group of middle-class Chinese migrants has begun to reshape the landscape of civil society organizing. This cohort—comprising students, young professionals, and cultural workers (Hatziprokopiou & Montagna 2012; Ding 2015; Nyíri & Beck 2020; Tran & Chuang 2020; Pieke 2021; Zhao 2021; Beck & Nyíri 2022; Liu 2022; Zhang 2022; Beck & Gaspar 2024; Leung 2025)—has initiated diverse forms of collective action, ranging from officially registered NGOs to loosely organized networks and discussion groups. Unlike earlier generations of diaspora organizations, these "new" CCSOs focus on broader civic issues such as feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, social justice, as well as the everyday struggles of migration. Most of these organizations are independent of the Chinese state and do not maintain formal ties to its institutions, while generally avoiding direct confrontation with the Chinese state. Their strategic orientations vary—some adopt explicitly political approaches, while others deliberately maintain an apolitical stance. They frequently operate in hybrid spaces—both online and offline—where alternative narratives and underrepresented voices can circulate, and their operational methods are adaptive to both transnational dynamics and European regulatory contexts.

Increasingly, such CCSOs are supported by local infrastructures, including public venues such as community centers and university classrooms, access to local funding schemes, and networks of sympathetic allies—ranging from media professionals to academics and activists—who help amplify their visibility and facilitate collaboration within European civic spaces. These emerging organizations represent a distinct phenomenon and carve out civic spaces for dialogue, cultural expression, advocacy, and social support.

Despite their growing visibility and evolving impact, academic attention to these organizations remains limited. Existing scholarship has largely focused either on Chinese migrants at the

individual level—examining how they build networks or engage in everyday forms of organizing (Ding 2015; Montagna 2016; Tran & Chuang 2020; Cao 2022)—or on politicized diasporic activism, particularly in response to events in China (Chen 2014; Ding 2015; Chen 2016; Tran & Chuang 2020; Zhao 2021; Cao 2022). What remains underexplored is CCSOs as organizations: how they are internally structured, how they function on a day-to-day basis, how they navigate complex sociopolitical environments in Europe, and how they contribute to civil society both within and beyond Chinese communities.

This research project seeks to address these gaps by examining the structure, operations, challenges, and impact of CCSOs in the Netherlands and Europe, with a particular focus on organizations that are registered in or actively operating from the Netherlands. It is important to note that this study focuses specifically on these "new" forms of CCSOs. It does not cover the more "traditional" Chinese diaspora organizations that primarily address migrants' practical needs through native-place ties, business networks, or cultural-religious associations. Nor does it include other newly established Chinese associations that focus on professional networking, business development, or cultural exchange without civic aims.

1.2 Research foci

This research project investigates the evolving landscape of new CCSOs, with particular attention to five areas of inquiry:

(1) The emergence and development of CCSOs: how do CCSOs come into being and what factors have shaped their trajectories over time?
(2) The structure and operation of CCSOs: how are CCSOs formed, organized, and operated within the institutional and social environments of the Netherlands and Europe?
(3) The networks and connections of CCSOs: How do organizations and individuals locate one another, establish ties, and mobilize resources both within and beyond the Chinese diaspora?
(4) The impact of CCSOs in Europe and beyond: How do these organizations influence local Chinese communities, European societies, and transnational civil society?
(5) The challenges faced by CCSOs: What are their primary challenges?

Together, these five foci constitute an effort to understand the complex and transnational nature of contemporary CCSOs and their role within Chinese civil society in the Netherlands and Europe.

1.3 Concepts and definitions

Chinese Civil society organizations (CSOs) in this report are defined as non-governmental entities that operates in the social, cultural, or political spheres to represent the interests, rights, and welfare of Chinese in the Europe. CCSOs are independent of the government and typically work to promote social causes, influence public policy, and advocate for the needs of Chinese communities or groups. While the term NGO is often associated with formally

registered, professionalized institutions and widely used in international development and aid discourses, CSO encompasses a broader category that includes NGO but also grassroots movements, informal groups, community-based organizations, student groups, and advocacy collectives. It emphasizes the location within civil society (Lewis 2002; Edwards 2009). Many CSOs are volunteer-based or community-led and may operate outside formal recognition.

Organization in this project refers to relatively stable and sustained collective of individuals who coordinate actions, share resources, and pursue common goals—whether formally registered or informally constituted. Organizations may vary widely in scale, structure, and legal status, encompassing NGOs, informal networks, advocacy collectives, community-based associations, and online groups. What binds these diverse forms together is the existence of some form of internal coordination (e.g., task division, decision-making norms, communication channels) and a shared identity or purpose oriented toward representing, supporting, or mobilizing Chinese individuals and communities in Europe.

In the interviews conducted for this project, participants frequently used a range of overlapping terms to refer to CSOs, including “organization”, “group”, “institution”, “platform” and “network”—corresponding to the Chinese terms “组织”, “小组”, “机构” ,“平台” and “网络”. These terms were often used interchangeably in the interviews, but also carried different connotations. Institution (机构) was typically the most formal, used to refer to CSOs that are officially registered and possess a defined structure and set of regulations. Organization (组织) was slightly less formal, used to describe entities that may not be legally registered but demonstrate organizational capacity through clear workflows and internal division of labor. Group (小组), platform(平台), and network (网络) were generally more informal. Participants used “group” to emphasize small size and tightly-knit interpersonal ties; “platform” to highlight openness, fluid membership, and flat structure; and “network” to describe transnational or transregional CSOs characterized by geographically dispersed membership and cross-border collaboration. Among these, “organization” and “group” were the most frequently used terms and often appeared interchangeably.

For the purposes of this project, **China** in this report refers specifically to Mainland China. Accordingly, the term **Chinese** primarily denotes individuals who were born in, and resided in, Mainland China prior to their migration to Europe. This project focuses on CSOs concerned with the interests, experiences, and identities of this demographic, and does not include groups oriented toward migrants from other Sinophone regions such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, or overseas Chinese communities outside China.

Europe in this project refers to a broad geographical and sociopolitical region encompassing both European Union (EU) member states and non-EU countries where CCSOs are active. This includes countries such as the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and Serbia, alongside EU countries. The use of “Europe” in this report does not adhere strictly to a single institutional definition (e.g., the EU), but instead reflects the regional diversity of Chinese migrant civil society activity across the continent.

1.4 Methodology

1.4.1 Methods and data

Several research methods were used in this study, combining online ethnography, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews to explore the emergence, structure, operations, and impact of CCSOs in Europe, with a focus on the Netherlands.

The study began with the compilation of a dataset containing 533 Chinese organizations and collectives identified across the Netherlands and Europe. While not exhaustive, this dataset provides a broad, exploratory mapping of Chinese organizational activity in Europe, including both long-standing and newly emerging forms. Of these 533 Chinese organizations, 454 could be broadly categorized as traditional organizations that are either China-aligned, focused on maintaining community ties and providing practical support to migrants, or both. 72 were identified as "new" CCSOs, characterized by their focus on broader civic concerns (e.g., gender, labor, social justice) and their relative autonomy from Chinese state institutions. The remaining seven organizations could not be reliably classified due to limited or ambiguous public-facing information. In terms of legal status, 237 organizations were formally registered entities (e.g., stichtingen, associations, or nonprofit foundations), while the rest appeared to operate informally, without clear legal registration or with insufficient data to verify their legal standing.

These entities were documented through a multi-platform process of online searching, drawing on both Chinese and international platforms. Search strategies included queries on major search engines—Baidu and Google—as well as targeted searches on Chinese social media platforms such as WeChat and Xiaohongshu, and international platforms including Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter). This multi-platform approach reflects the "multi-platformness" characteristic of many CCSOs, which often operate across different digital ecosystems. These organizations tend to deploy a range of platforms to reach different audiences, disseminate information, promote visibility, and manage exposure to risk (Cao 2022; Wang 2022; Ceccagno & Thunø 2023; Thunø & Wang 2024). This dynamic will be elaborated in the later section on media and communication practices. In addition, the research employed social media linkage analysis, activity-based source tracing (e.g., identifying organizers and collaborators mentioned in event announcements or reports), and scans of Chinese-language news coverage in local European media outlets.

Any organization that appeared online—regardless of whether it was currently active or dormant—was included if its name, stated mission, or activities indicated a focus on Mainland China or Chinese migrants or communities in Europe. It is important to note that this dataset is not intended as a comprehensive census of Chinese diaspora organizations. Prior research, such as Li Minghuan's works in the 1990s, in 2019 and the data she cited from The European Federation of Chinese Organization, suggests significantly higher numbers (e.g., 1,345 organizations across Europe in 2012, with 97 in the Netherlands) (Li 1999, 2019). Due to the lack of access to those proprietary databases and the limited online visibility of many "traditional" Chinese organizations—especially those that operate primarily through offline communication

and closed online discussion groups—this dataset should be interpreted as a rough, exploratory mapping—a preliminary scan rather than a statistical representation.

Furthermore, the research also drew on participant observation conducted at various public events and community activities organized by CCSOs across different European contexts. These included advocacy events, public discussions, and cultural workshops, which allowed for direct observation of how CCSOs engage their communities, navigate host-country institutions, and position themselves publicly. These settings also offered informal opportunities for follow-up conversations with organizational members and attendees. Such field-based engagement enabled the researcher to observe the discursive and affective dimensions of civil society organizing in practice.

In-depth qualitative data were collected through observations and interviews. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin, except for one. A total of 32 individuals were interviewed between October 2024 and January 2025, including 24 initiators or core members, and eight volunteers, participants, or observers. Geographically, 20 interview participants were based in the Netherlands, all located in major cities such as Amsterdam, The Hague, and Rotterdam. An additional ten interviewees were based in other European countries, while two were involved in transnational CCSO networks operating across national borders. These interview participants represented 17 different organizations, including 11 based in the Netherlands and one transnational organization operating across European countries.

Interview participant selection followed a purposive and theoretically driven sampling strategy focused exclusively on “new” CCSOs, as defined earlier in this report. In the Netherlands, all 11 new CCSOs identified in the mapping were included in the interview sample, along with one additional transnational organization. For other regions, the sample was designed to reflect variation across key dimensions: mission focus, issue areas, organizational structures (e.g., registered, informal), composition and leadership (e.g., student-led, professional-led), and activity forms.

It is important to note that this sample does not aim to represent the broader landscape of Chinese organizations in Europe, nor the full range of motivations and positionalities within Chinese migrant populations. Rather, it reflects the diversity and complexity within the specific subset of new CCSOs that have emerged from Mainland Chinese migrant communities since the 2010s. Given the nature of the sample—and the focus on organizations with a public-facing or civic orientation—there is an inherent selection bias toward individuals who are more actively involved and willing to participate in public dialogue.

In addition to online ethnography, participant observation and interviews, the research also incorporated dialogic engagement through a public symposium organized by the research team in March 2025. The two-hour event brought together scholars, government officials, civil society practitioners, and interested members of the public. The first half of the symposium featured a presentation of the project's preliminary findings, followed by an open Q&A session. The second

half included narrative sharing and public discussion led by three invited activists representing different CCSOs in Europe. These dialogues offered valuable feedback on the research's early insights and created a space for participants to reflect on their own organizational practices, constraints, and hopes. The interaction and exchange during the symposium helped refine the analysis and prompted new lines of inquiry.

For the purposes of this study, CCSOs are defined narrowly as collectives whose public-facing identity-such as names, mission, or activities-suggests a focus on concerns pertaining to Mainland China or Chinese migrants or communities in Europe. Groups focusing on migrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan, or other Sinophone regions were not included in the scope of this study.

Table 1: Interview participant profile

Name	Country	Self-identity	Occupation	Host-country registration status	Founding year
Dong	Other country	initiators or core members	Student	Registered	2022
Song	Netherlands	initiators or core members	Professional	Unregistered	2021
Huang	Netherlands	volunteers or observers	Professional	Registered	2015
Han	Netherlands	initiators or core members	Professional	Registered	2019
Hu	Other country	initiators or core members	Professional	Registered	2017
Bi	Other country	initiators or core members	Student	Unregistered	2023
Wu	Netherlands	initiators or core members	Professional	Unregistered	2020
He	Netherlands	volunteers or observers	Professional	NA	NA
Li	Other country	initiators or core members	Student	Registered	2017
Qian	Netherlands	volunteers or observers	Professional	NA	NA

Yang	Other country	initiators or core members	Professional	Registered	2017
Ma	Other country	initiators or core members	Professional	Registered	2017
Wei	Other country	initiators or core members	Professional	Registered	2018
Chen	Other country	initiators or core members	Professional	Unregistered	2021
Jiang	Other country	initiators or core members	Professional	Unregistered	2022
Wang	Netherlands	initiators or core members	Student	Registered	2023
Gao	Netherlands	initiators or core members	Student	Unregistered	2022
Sun	Other country	initiators or core members	Student	Registered	2022
Ling	Netherlands	volunteers or observers	Professional	Registered	2019
Luo	Netherlands	initiators or core members	Professional	Unregistered	2023
Cao	Netherlands	volunteers or observers	Professional	Unregistered	2023
Zhao	Netherlands	initiators or core members	Professional	Unregistered	2022
Feng	Netherlands	initiators or core members	Professional	Registered	2015
Ai	Other country	initiators or core members	Professional	Registered	2020

Gu	Netherlands	initiators or core members	Student	Registered	2015
Peng	Other country	initiators or core members	Student	Unregistered	2020
Qi	Netherlands	volunteers or observers	Student	NA	NA
Xie	Netherlands	initiators or core members	Professional	Registered	2023
Zhang	Netherlands	volunteers or observers	Professional	Registered	2023
Tang	Netherlands	initiators or core members	Student	Registered	2024
Liu	Netherlands	volunteers or observers	Professional	NA	NA
Lai	Netherlands	initiators or core members	Professional	Unregistered	2023

Note: All participant names are pseudonyms derived from common Chinese surnames.

1.4.2 Research ethics

This research adheres to rigorous ethical standards to ensure the protection, safety, and autonomy of all participants involved. Given the political sensitivity and potential risks associated with Chinese civil society organizing—particularly in transnational contexts—the study places special emphasis on confidentiality, informed consent, and the prevention of harm.

(1) Informed consent and voluntary participation

All participants were informed of the research purpose, scope, and methodology prior to data collection. For both online and offline fieldwork (including interviews, observations, and online ethnography), informed consent was obtained either in writing or verbally. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. This process was conducted in a transparent, accessible manner to ensure participants understood the research context and implications.

(2) Anonymity and data protection

To protect the identities of individuals and the integrity of the organizations involved, all names of people, organizations, events, platforms, and locations have been anonymized in this report. This includes not only personal names but also organization names, activity titles, platform

names, city names, and country names (except for the Netherlands). In cases where participants explicitly granted permission to use real names, such permissions were documented and respected.

The decision to anonymize a broad range of identifiers was made in close consultation with interview participants. This approach reflects collective concerns about privacy, risk, and the potential sensitivity of certain information in transnational contexts. Anonymization was not applied as a blanket rule, but negotiated case by case: where participants explicitly consented to the use of real names or identifiers, these were retained with their approval.

(3) Data confidentiality and access

All primary data—including interview transcripts, observation notes, and the original organizational dataset—will not be made publicly available. However, researchers may share aggregated statistics or analytical conclusions upon request, provided that such disclosures pose no risk to participants or their organizations. All such requests will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis in consultation with the research team.

(4) Sensitivity and reflexivity

Given the political sensitivity of Chinese civil society organizing in Europe, this research was conducted with heightened caution regarding the protection of individuals, organizations, and networks involved. The research team adopted a participant-centered approach to information security and interpretive accuracy.

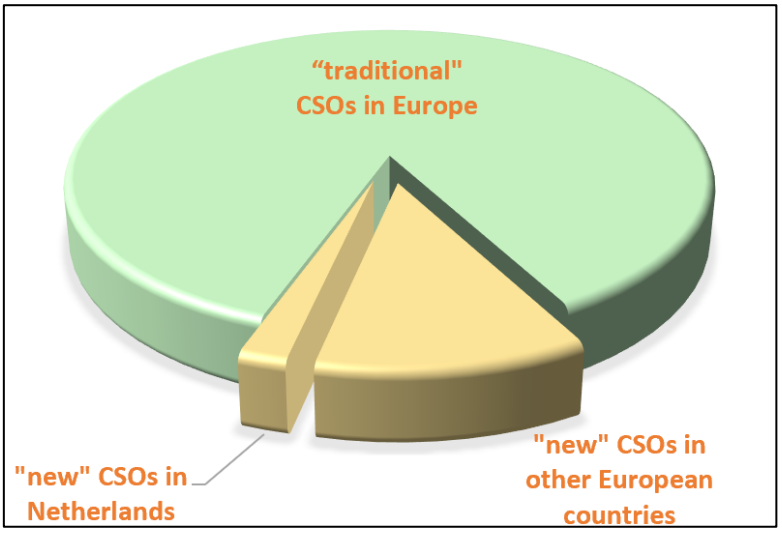
A full draft of the project report was shared with all interview participants prior to its public release. This allowed participants to review how their narratives and organizations were represented, assess the accuracy of interpretation, and flag any information they considered sensitive, misleading, or potentially harmful. The research team carefully reviewed all feedback and made corresponding revisions to the report to ensure the safety, fairness, and contextual integrity of the final version.

This collaborative review process not only enhanced the ethical accountability of the research but also recognized participants as co-interpreters of their own experiences, rather than passive subjects of observation.

2. The emergence and development of CCSOs

Based on the dataset of 533 Chinese organizations and groups identified through online sources, this study recognizes 72 as new CCSOs, founded between 2009 and 2024. Among them, 12 are located in the Netherlands, including one transnational organization currently based in the country.

Figure 1: The new CCSOs in Europe



The emergence of this group of new CCSOs are not incidental. Rather, they reflect broader structural transformations in the composition, motivations, and sociopolitical contexts of Chinese migrants, combined with critical triggering events that catalyzed collective action. This section examines both the long-term factors and short-term catalysts that have shaped the emergence and trajectory of these organizations.

2.1 Structural factors: shifting grounds for CCSOs

2.1.1 Changing composition and motivations of Chinese migrants

The socio-economic profile of Chinese migrants in Europe has undergone a substantial shift over the past two decades. Earlier waves were dominated by low-skilled laborers and small entrepreneurs in sectors such as catering and garment manufacturing (Hatziprokopiou & Montagna 2012; Lem 2013; Montagna 2016; Chuang & Le Bail 2020; Nyíri & Beck 2020; Tran & Chuang 2020; Pieke 2021; Krause & Li 2022). Today, migration flows include a growing proportion of students, highly skilled professionals, and middle-class families seeking not only educational and career opportunities but also a reprieve from political and social pressures in China (Ding 2015; Tran & Chuang 2020; Pieke 2021; Zhao 2021; Beck & Nyíri 2022; Krause & Li 2022; Liu 2022; Zhang 2022; Beck & Gaspar 2024; Leung 2025).

This transformation stems in part from China's rapid economic rise and global integration, which has increased the mobility of its middle class. Many of the new migrants—especially in countries like the Netherlands—are drawn by English-medium higher education, cosmopolitan lifestyles, and opportunities created through the globalization of Chinese corporations (Ding 2015; Leung 2015; Chen 2016; Nyíri & Beck 2020; Tran & Chuang 2020; Pieke 2021; Liu 2022; Zhang 2022; Beck & Gaspar 2024; Leung 2025). Interview participants also frequently cited motivations such as escaping rigid gender norms, oppressive expectations of career/family success, and growing political repression.

These shifting demographics have directly influenced the orientation of new CCSOs-particularly those led by younger migrants with a strong interest in civic engagement. Rather than solely addressing migrants' immediate material needs (housing, jobs, elderly care), many of these organizations now focus on fostering intellectual exchange, cultural participation, and social justice. For instance, one group founded by university graduates described its goal as creating "*a Chinese-speaking community space not only about work and money, but about books, identity, and the future*" (Chen).

2.1.2 Political constraints and diaspora governance

The political environment in both China and Europe has added further complexity. On one hand, European countries have responded to the 2008 financial crisis and the 2015 refugee crisis by tightening immigration regimes—while simultaneously encouraging the entry of international students, investors, and professionals (Nyíri & Beck 2020; Zhang 2022; Leung 2025). Chinese migrants thus often enter under conditions of selective inclusion, facing both opportunity and marginalization (Lem 2013; Montagna 2016; Chuang & Le Bail 2020; Nyíri & Beck 2020; Tran & Chuang 2020; Pieke 2021; Beck & Nyíri 2022; Krause & Li 2022; Beck & Gaspar 2024; Leung 2025). At the same time, Chinese migrants in Europe face growing political suspicion-many decision-makers view them as potential agents of the Chinese state (Hatziprokopiou & Montagna 2012; Chen 2014; Ding 2015; Tran & Chuang 2020; Pieke 2021; Leung 2025).

Meanwhile, the Chinese state has intensified its transnational governance over overseas citizens. Surveillance technologies, pressure on family members in China, and expanding networks of "united front" institutions have fostered an atmosphere of caution among migrants (Chen 2014; Ding 2015; Chen 2016; Liu & Van Dongen 2016; Tran & Chuang 2020; Pieke 2021; Zhao 2021; Krause & Li 2022; Liu 2022; Zhang 2022; Ceccagno & Thunø 2023; Wang 2023; Thunø & Wang 2024; Leung 2025). Sun described how the group underwent a significant transformation in its organizational structure and working methods following external pressure and investigative actions from the Chinese government. This moment marked a critical turning point not only in the institutional development of the group, which shifted from a decentralized collective to a more structured and security-conscious organization, but also in his personal role—from peripheral participant to a central figure responsible for decision-making, communication, and safeguarding sensitive information.

"It kind of forced the organization to confront a problem. So now, gradually, we've realized that we need to narrow the scope of what we share with people around us. Everyone pulled back a bit, and internally, we also needed more secure digital systems. Back then, we started using things like access controls, switching everything over to encrypted communication platforms... There had to be clear permissions and hierarchies—like who could access what information, who could operate the system... So I think that was a turning point where we were pushed into becoming more organized—and also a turning point for me personally, in terms of my role."

This dual pressure—from exclusion in host societies and control from the home state—has paradoxically pushed some migrants toward civic organizing as a means of claiming voice, safety, and community in uncertain political terrain.

2.1.3 Technological Infrastructure

The development of digital communication tools has played a pivotal role in facilitating new forms of organizing. Social media platforms (e.g., WeChat, Whatsapp), online collaboration tools, and video conferencing technologies have significantly reduced the costs of coordination. These tools enable geographically dispersed individuals to form temporary collectives or sustained networks based on shared interests, values, or identities (Chen 2014; Chen 2016; Chuang & Le Bail 2020; Tran & Chuang 2020; Beck & Nyíri 2022; Cao 2022; Krause & Li 2022). Importantly, many CCSOs adopt a multi-platform approach to communication—often operating simultaneously across Chinese and international platforms to reach diverse audiences, adapt to platform-specific constraints, and manage visibility and security risks. The specific platforms used and the rationale behind their selection are discussed in greater detail in the later section on media and communication platforms.

However, digital infrastructure also introduces new vulnerabilities. Surveillance, data leaks, and content moderation on Chinese-owned platforms have raised concerns. One interview participant (Gao) from a media collective described the need to migrate all internal discussions to encrypted channels after facing cyber threats during the 2022 protests. Another organizer explained how online pseudonymity enabled their group to maintain operations without formally registering, but also created obstacles to trust and continuity (Luo).

Beyond state-linked risks, CCSOs' dependence on social media platforms also exposes them to reputational and relational vulnerabilities. Public accusations, internal conflicts, or interpersonal grievances—when aired on widely followed platforms—can quickly escalate into organizational crises. At the time of writing, one influential media collective faced mass backlash after a former member publicly accused it of exploitative practices, resulting in the loss of over 10,000 followers despite the organization's prompt formal response. Such episodes demonstrate how social media visibility—vital for outreach and legitimacy—can also become a source of precarity, especially when organizational reputation is closely tied to individual narratives and public trust. These dynamics are not always state-driven, but they can nonetheless be exploited or amplified within broader geopolitical tensions.

In brief, the emergence and development of CCSOs in Europe is shaped by the interplay of three interrelated structural shifts: the diversification of migration patterns and motivations, the intensification of politicized transnational governance, and the expansion of digital infrastructures. First, the changing profile of Chinese migrants—including younger, more educated, and politically aware individuals—has introduced new forms of human capital and civic orientation into diasporic communities, shaping who is migrating and why. Second, both host and home states exert influence on migrant lives, though in divergent and often contradictory ways. While the Chinese state has expanded its transnational reach through surveillance and united front strategies, many European states have simultaneously adopted increasingly restrictive immigration policies and securitized discourses. In this environment, political expression and collective organizing—especially on issues relating to China—can provoke suspicion and discrimination, complicating migrants' ability to participate in civic life. Third, digital technologies offer new tools for connection and participation, allowing dispersed individuals to form networks, share information, and mobilize across borders.

2.2 Key events as triggers and catalysts

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic marked a major turning point in the formation and increase of new CCSOs. As countries across Europe imposed prolonged lockdowns, many Chinese migrants—especially students and single professionals—experienced intense isolation and anxiety. Online spaces thus became essential for emotional support, logistical coordination (e.g., mask distribution), and community building.

Numerous WeChat groups, digital reading circles, and informal forums were formed during this period. One participant described the period as a "social awakening," where "*Chinese people who had never spoken to each other began sharing fears, frustrations, and dreams*" (Wei). Several interview participants also recounted how their participation in casual online communities during the pandemic laid the groundwork for more structured initiatives later on (Ai; Liu; Qian; Wu).

Some of these informal initiatives eventually became registered associations or foundations. Others transformed into ongoing, semi-structured networks around shared themes such as feminist reading groups, mental health support, or art collectives.

The second major trigger came in late 2022, when a series of high-profile incidents in China—including the Sitong Bridge protest[1], the Urumqi fire[2], and the White Paper Protests[3]—sparked a wave of overseas demonstrations. Rallies and protest art events were rapidly organized in multiple European cities, often by individuals with no prior activism experience.

These moments of collective dissent—unprecedented in scale for the Chinese diaspora—led to the creation of transnational online networks. One of the interview participants (Sun) shared some statistics he had collected back in 2022:

> "*In 2022, Citizen Daily actually compiled some data on the poster campaign in support of the Sitong Bridge protest. According to their count, students from 397 universities around the world participated by putting up posters. And in Europe specifically, during the entire White Paper Protests, we recorded activities in 17 countries and 57 cities across the broader European region. The UK alone had events in 15 cities, and Germany had 16 cities with a total of 27 events. In the UK, there were 31 events across those 15 cities. And beyond that, there were 15 other countries and dozens more cities where actions took place.*"

Yet, as several interview participants pointed out, the mobilization was often emotional and ad hoc. "It wasn't a movement with structure or strategy," said one participant. "It was grief, anger, solidarity. Then people went back to their lives" (Jiang). Many groups disbanded within months. One interview participant (Sun) estimated that only 10% of the groups formed during that period remain active today.

For a subset of participants, the events catalyzed longer-term commitments. Some individuals became more radical, aligning with human rights advocacy. Others transitioned toward localized, apolitical community-building. Since 2023, many new CCSOs have shifted from reactive mobilization to strategic planning. A few have received funding from local cultural institutions or NGOs. Others continue to rely on volunteers, but have built more stable organizational routines—assigning roles, holding regular meetings, and developing content calendars. Groups have also diversified their thematic scope. One formerly protest-focused group now hosts monthly discussions over cultural topics. Another expanded from a student-

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[1] On October 13, 2022, a protest occurred on Beijing's Sitong Bridge in which banners were displayed criticizing pandemic policies and calling for political change. The incident was quickly censored online but circulated widely on international platforms.
English source: BBC. "China protest: Mystery Beijing demonstrator sparks online hunt and tributes" https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-63252559 (retrieved on 18 April 2025)

[2] On November 25, 2022, a fire broke out in a residential building in Urumqi, Xinjiang, resulting in multiple fatalities. The incident drew public attention both within and outside China due to concerns about lockdown conditions.
Chinese source: CCTV. "Urumqi holds press conference on the "11·24" fire incident" https://news.cctv.com/2022/11/26/ARTIaIIWA4iGP5EjWJzrF2DX221126.shtml (retrieved on 18 April 2025)
English source: Reuters. "Apartment fire in China's Xinjiang region kills 10" https://www.reuters.com/world/china/apartment-fire-chinas-xinjiang-region-kills-10-2022-11-26/ (retrieved on 18 April 2025)

[3] In late November 2022, a series of demonstrations took place in various Chinese cities and overseas communities. Participants held blank sheets of paper, which became a widely recognized symbol associated with expressions of discontent.
English source: AP. "China lockdown protests pause as police flood city streets" https://apnews.com/article/health-china-beijing-xi-jinping-shanghai-8d0cbd9eb026f46b24316c573df2e3a2 (retrieved on 18 April 2025)

led Telegram channel created during the White Paper Protests into a decentralized platform for sharing legal information, emotional support, and political updates across cities.

The emergence and development of new CCSOs in Europe reflect broader structural transformations, including shifting migration patterns, evolving modes of political engagement within diaspora communities, and the infrastructural affordances of digital technology. These developments are also shaped by crisis-driven mobilizations, particularly during moments of acute political or social rupture. Rather than conforming to the long-standing binary between pro-China associations and exiled dissident groups, many CCSOs occupy a complex grey zone. They are independent yet cautious, critical yet pragmatic, idealistic yet adaptive. Their numbers, organizational forms, and thematic focuses remain fluid, continually shaped by the evolving socio-political conditions under which overseas Chinese civic engagement unfolds.

2.3 Founding Motivations

Based on interviews, this research identifies four primary types of motivations for civic organizing – connection, adaptation, communication and advocacy. Rather than being fixed or mutually exclusive, these motivations represent CCSOs' diverse and evolving engagements with different layers of social life — from close-knit community settings to broader societal and international arenas. A single CCSO may be driven by multiple motivations simultaneously, often pursuing them through various activities or projects. Moreover, these motivations may shift over time, as CCSOs respond to changing community needs, evolving social conditions, or political environments.

1. **Connection**: Some CCSOs were established to offer cultural and interpersonal bonding, aiming to create emotionally sustaining spaces for Chinese migrants who feel socially isolated or disoriented in their new environments. Through both online and in-person gatherings, these organizations provide vital social and affective support, cultivating a sense of belonging that is foundational to civic life.

> Chen: "*What we mainly wanted was to create a Chinese-language environment and space where the community could interact and have meaningful exchanges. On the one hand, we wanted to connect with them, but on the other hand, as immigrants, having a space where we can talk in our mother tongue is really important—it gives us more freedom to express ourselves and communicate openly. It's not that using our second language is bad or anything, but our original intention was to create more spaces where we ourselves could feel comfortable. So being able to communicate in Chinese—our native language—is really important to us.*"
>
> Cao: "*Our goal for the community is really to connect with women around us who share similar values. We wanted to create a space where people can make friends and have meaningful conversations with each other.*"

2. **Adaptation**: Some CCSOs focus on facilitating Chinese migrants' adaptation to Dutch and European society. Rather than simply providing information, they create opportunities for members to engage in discussions and participate in activities that help them navigate language barriers, understand local systems, and engage more confidently with public life.

> Wu: "*Our core purpose is really about… reducing barriers, right? One part of that is the social and cultural barriers. And then there's also, you know, how the whole system here actually works. A lot of things just aren't clearly explained.*"
>
> Ling: "*Maybe we just didn't have enough information or didn't understand things well enough… Like, this is supposed to be a fully democratic society, right? But we didn't know that. They (VVE) would send you a notice about some kind of meeting, and of course I'd just throw it away—I had no idea what it was really about or how I was supposed to participate. But honestly, this kind of thing can be changed, at least to some extent.*"

3. **Communication**: Some CCSOs aim to bridge the gap between the Chinese community and the broader Dutch or European society, including government bodies, academic circles and other public actors. By fostering dialogue and mutual understanding, these organizations seek to counteract political suspicion and racial prejudice.

> Ma: "*They (the German society) really have no understanding of China or Chinese people at all… So we're also trying to set up ways to communicate—some kind of mechanism—to help them understand our situation and where we're coming from.*"
>
> Song: "*I really hope that the things we're doing—these events and activities—can eventually take one step further, you know? Like, be shown to the Dutch community. I hope everything we do can be something that Dutch people, or even Europeans more broadly, can see and understand.*"

4. **Advocacy**: Within the interview sample, a smaller number of CCSOs engage in advocacy work on a transnational scale. They aim to present the concerns and perspectives of the Chinese diaspora in global forums, and in some cases, to support civil society development in China by mobilizing resources and building transnational networks.

> Gu: "*Advocacy, for us, is directed toward the international community—it's about getting continued support for advocates inside China, supporting Chinese civil society, and also putting some pressure on the Chinese government.*"
>
> Feng: "*Especially at the UN level, we think advocacy is really necessary. Of course, there's always the question of whether the advocacy we're doing from overseas actually helps people inside China… but at the very least, we feel like it does have some impact—it can push China to respond in some way, like when we write those UN reports and submissions.*"

This typology of CCSOs' founding motivations offers a grounded understanding of how Chinese migrants initiate civil society organizing. These efforts respond not only to the practical and

emotional needs within Chinese communities, but also to the broader socio-political contexts they inhabit—ranging from challenges of integration and misrecognition, to transnational concerns and the desire for political expression.

2.4 Generational and Chinese migrant group divides

Beyond the motivations for organizing, the dynamics of how different segments of the Chinese diaspora relate to one another—across lines of generation, migration background, and social class—further shape the possibilities and limitations of CCSO development.

Intergenerational and intergroup interactions within Chinese migrant communities in Europe reveal a persistent pattern of fragmentation. While there are occasional instances of complementarity between older and younger generations, such cases are relatively rare. In one German example, Hu observed that earlier generations of migrants often possess valuable local resources and social capital, whereas the younger generation contributes new ideas, organizational methods, and mobilization capacity. Under specific conditions—particularly when mutual needs and complementary capacities align—such arrangements can lead to collaborative models where older actors enable younger ones to pursue more publicly oriented and progressive forms of civic activism. Although limited in scale, these examples point to the possibility of intergenerational cooperation within Chinese civil society abroad.

However, the majority of interview participants highlighted persistent generational disconnection and mutual distrust. According to Wu, earlier waves of migrants—often engaged in commercial or family-based associations—rarely interact with the newer cohorts composed primarily of students and professionals. The two groups differ significantly in terms of language use, lived experiences, value orientations, and organizational goals. In some cases, older migrants actively distance themselves from newer groups' agendas or withdraw from initiatives they perceive as irrelevant or overly politicized.

In addition to generational cleavages, distinct boundaries exist between migrants from different regions and socio-economic backgrounds. For instance, long-standing communities from Zhejiang or Guangdong often maintain insular networks grounded in dialect, kinship, and locality. As Song noted, these groups typically operate in self-contained circles and have minimal engagement with Mandarin-speaking newcomers. Such linguistic, social, and institutional segmentation leads to mutual invisibility and further limits opportunities for collective action.

Even within the newer generation of migrants, variations in thematic priorities and organizational approaches create additional barriers to collaboration. Some organizers, such as Feng, have expressed a desire to build connections with other diaspora communities, including those from Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang. Yet political divergences, differential access to resources, and uneven levels of organizational experience make sustained cooperation difficult.

In other cases, interview participants described a conscious decision to avoid collaboration altogether.

Taken together, the organizational ecology of Chinese migrant civic actors in Europe is marked by diversity, fragmentation, and structural disconnection. Although there are pockets of generational exchange and intergroup learning, these remain exceptions within a broader context characterized by mistrust, limited communication, and divergent strategies. These dynamics reflect not only differing social positions and identity formations but also the broader structural constraints shaping diasporic activism.

It is important to emphasize that these findings are based on 32 interviews and the researcher's field observation. They provide valuable insights but should not be taken as fully representative of the entire Chinese migrant population or civic landscape in Europe. Further empirical research is needed to explore these dynamics in a more comprehensive and comparative manner.

3. The structure and operation of CCSOs

This section focuses on the organizational structure and everyday operation of CCSOs in the Netherlands. Drawing on interviews with twelve CCSOs, we examine how these groups are organized, how they manage their work, and the strategies they use to navigate challenges and ensure continuity. The analysis highlights the diversity and informality that characterize many of these CCSOs. It is divided into nine key areas: (1) key personnel, (2) workload distribution, (3) funding sources, (4) organizational models, (5) decision-making processes, (6) forms of activity, (7) media and communication platforms, (8) security practices, and (9) organizational sustainability.

3.1 Key personnel

All 12 CCSOs in the Netherlands that we interviewed operate on a relatively small scale, typically consisting of two to five core members. Larger CCSOs can be found in other European countries, where the number of core members ranges from two to seven. CCSOs are generally run by a small group of core members, supported by a broader and flexible network of volunteers who assist with specific events or activities.

A notable feature of CCSOs is the high turnover of participants, particularly among volunteers. Engagement levels often fluctuate, and group composition frequently changes over time. Several factors contribute to this fluidity: the initial appeal of participation may decline as activities become routine; personal circumstances such as relocation, employment, or family responsibilities can interrupt sustained involvement; and the limited number of active members can result in overwhelming workloads, which may lead to burnout. In some cases, internal disagreements or interpersonal tensions have also led to members withdrawing from the organization.

Another structural factor contributing to this instability is the visa status of participants. Founders and organizers of two CCSOs specifically noted that many members, including both core members and volunteers, are young individuals who must dedicate considerable time and energy to securing legal residency in Europe. Many remain in what Zhao described as “a survival-oriented mode” of engagement, with students facing intense pressure to find employment that can sponsor their visas upon graduation. Zhao also observed that a significant portion of CCSO participants come from humanities and social sciences backgrounds, which makes the job search particularly difficult. Without a stable job, participants are often forced to disengage from organizational activities entirely.

Even those who have entered the labor market experience heightened constraints: for individuals whose residency depends on their employment, the stakes of losing a job are significantly higher. As a result, they are more likely to accept longer hours, heavier workloads, or unfavorable conditions, and less likely to leave unsatisfactory positions, all of which reduce their time, energy, and flexibility for civic participation. As Han noted, the question of “how long

one can stay" remains a persistent concern. Some members even expressed anxieties about the future validity of permanent residency, given the increasingly conservative and inward-looking political climate across Europe. These visa-related uncertainties fundamentally shape the level and stability of participation in CCSOs, contributing to persistent volatility in both membership and leadership structures.

3.2 Workload distribution

In most CCSOs, the division of work follows two main principles: availability and expertise. Tasks are generally taken on by those who have the time—or are willing to make time—and those with the relevant skills. For instance, work that requires technical expertise, such as graphic design, translation, or social media management, is usually assigned to members with prior experience in those areas. Other duties, such as event logistics, outreach, or internal coordination, are distributed more flexibly according to willingness and availability. In a few organizations, members take turns to informally assumes a coordinating role to manage workflows and keep the team aligned, although such roles are rarely formalized.

Most core members are not full-time staff; they have other full-time jobs, are students, or are engaged in multiple part-time roles. This significantly limits the time and energy they can dedicate to the CCSO's work, contributing to fluctuating participation and high turnover. As several interview participants pointed out, when team members are already navigating busy personal or professional lives, it becomes difficult to sustain long-term commitment to volunteer-based organizing.

Despite the challenges, many CCSOs adopt a pragmatic and flexible approach to distributing work. This includes rotating responsibilities, coordinating through online platforms, and establishing task flows around event cycles. Some organizations also noted that while the division of work is often uneven and shaped by informal dynamics, members try to maintain a basic sense of mutual support and accountability. In general, work remains flexible and collaborative—but also vulnerable to burnout, inefficiencies, and coordination gaps.

3.3 Funding sources

Funding structures across the CCSOs we studied are small in scale but take on a variety of forms. We identified three main models:

1. No funding (one CCSO):
One organization operates entirely without external funding or income, relying solely on volunteer efforts and minimal-cost activities.

2. No funding + event-based income (seven CCSOs):
These groups cover basic operational costs through small-scale income generated from community events, such as ticket sales. While the amounts are limited, these revenues help

cover essential expenses—like venue rentals, refreshments, or digital tool subscriptions—without relying on formal grants.

3. Small project-based funding (four CCSOs):
A smaller number of organizations have received project-based grants, usually tied to specific activities. In most cases, the grants are modest and short-term, but they enable the group to offer small payments to designers, editors, or other contributors.

Despite the limited scale, funding plays a significant role in shaping how organizations operate. In some cases, access to funding allows groups to subsidize essential work that would otherwise be done on a purely volunteer basis. As one interview participant explained, "*We first raised a bit of money—just enough to at least cover the writing fees and pay for the design work. And then later on, maybe some of the printing and publishing costs... the idea was to cover those basic expenses first*" (Dong). Small payments for logistics, design, or facilitation are seen not just as practical support, but also as a gesture of respect for time and labor.

At the same time, funding also introduces internal shifts in responsibility and authority. Members who take charge of grant applications or financial coordination may gain more influence in the group, while others may step back if expectations become more formalized. In this way, the presence or absence of funding has a direct impact on how roles, commitments, and decision-making processes evolve.

Importantly, many CCSOs remain cautious in their engagement with institutional funding. Even when funding is available, groups may hesitate to apply unless they feel the source aligns with their values and preserves their autonomy. Some are particularly wary of project-based logic that pressures them to frame their work around funder-defined outcomes. As one interview participant emphasized: "*we don't want to create projects just to apply for funding—we apply for support because we want to do something.*" (Huang) Others expressed a preference for local, small-scale funding sources that align with their values and operational style.

3.4 Organizational models

Among the 12 CCSOs in the Netherlands we studied, seven operate without official registration, while five have registered as formal entities. These different models reflect distinct strategic considerations, shaped by resource needs, administrative capacity, and risk assessment.

For CCSOs that chose to register, the primary motivation is access to institutional funding. Registration enables them to apply for grants, receive donations legally, and in some cases, benefit from government or civil society infrastructure—such as free venues or subsidized services. However, this route comes with increased bureaucratic responsibilities, including financial reporting and legal compliance, which can be burdensome for small, volunteer-driven groups.

In contrast, some CCSOs deliberately remain unregistered. For these groups, formal status is not essential: they do not rely on external funding and are able to sustain their work through voluntary effort or event-based income. Staying informal allows for more flexibility, less administrative overhead, and greater protection of personal privacy. As one organizer noted, registration often requires disclosing the real names and personal details of core members—something some groups consider risky, especially when working on politically sensitive issues or in environments where public visibility may bring unwanted attention.

3.5 Decision-making processes

Most CCSOs in the Netherlands and Europe adopt non-hierarchical structures that emphasize collective participation and shared responsibility. Their decision-making processes can be characterized by two key features: decentralization and flat structures.

Decentralization means that decisions often emerge from open, consensus-based discussions among members, rather than being dictated by a central authority. In many organizations, members participate equally in setting agendas and determining the direction of projects. Several interview participants noted that the researcher's request for an interview had to be brought back to the group for discussion—and could only proceed once all core members agreed, underscoring the norm of shared authority.

Flat structures are reflected in the absence of formal hierarchies. Instead of centralized leadership or formal boards, CCSOs often rely on collective voting mechanisms or consensus for making major decisions. Rotating or ad hoc coordinators may facilitate workflows, but these roles are usually informal and non-authoritative. This flatness reflects an intentional effort to move away from rigid hierarchies and build horizontal models of collaboration.

This emphasis on decentralization contrasts with earlier literature on NGOs in China or overseas Chinese associations. For instance, Spires (2024) observes that, among NGOs in China, decision-making processes are often dominated by strong central figures or 老大, reflecting clearly hierarchical and authoritarian organizational structures (Spires, 2024). A number of studies have documented the hierarchical power structures that characterize many overseas Chinese associations in Europe. Liu (1998) highlights the presence of financially powerful and committed leaders as a key internal feature of these organizations. Pieke (2004) describe association leaders as public figures whose organizational roles serve as pathways into elite circles, often reinforced through participation in high-profile events in China. Similarly, Christiansen (2005) emphasize how official recognition from both Chinese and local authorities enhances leaders' status, enabling them to represent community interests and compete for political connections.

In contrast, our findings suggest that newer CCSOs are actively experimenting with leaderless or de-centered organizational models. This divergence may reflect generational change, political context, or evolving values among overseas civic actors.

However, such structures are not without challenges. Internal conflicts do arise—most often from differences in working styles rather than ideological divisions or overt power struggles. As one interview participant explained, "*the main conflicts I've seen are about different ways of doing things—I think we should do it this way, you think we should do it that way.*" (Qi) Because these organizations tend to be small and flat, there are few formal mechanisms for resolving disputes. As a result, disagreements frequently lead to quiet exits. It's not just volunteers who step away—founders and core members have also withdrawn from groups due to unresolved tensions.

3.6 Forms of activity

CCSOs initiate and carry out a wide range of activities, reflecting both their diverse missions and the creative energies of their members. These activities span from virtual gatherings, reading groups, and public discussions to community events, street protests, international advocacy, public exhibitions, and media outreach. Some organizations maintain community spaces or facilitate resource exchange, while others focus on research and knowledge-sharing. These initiatives combine both online and offline formats. While online activities often transcend geographic boundaries, offline events—whether in the Netherlands or other European countries—are typically concentrated in larger cities. This urban focus reflects the demographic reality that Chinese migrant communities and international students are disproportionately concentrated in major urban centers.

This richness and diversity in activities is partly driven by the backgrounds of their members. Among the 12 organizations interviewed, five have core members with prior experience in civil society movements, whether in China or other countries. This experience contributes not only to the variety of activities undertaken but also to their ability to adapt civic practices across cultural and political contexts.

3.7 Media and communication platforms

CCSOs use a variety of media and communication platforms to reach different audiences and navigate varying levels of surveillance risk. Among the 12 organizations interviewed, seven operate on both Chinese and international platforms (where Chinese platforms refer to those owned and operated by Chinese enterprises, such as Weibo, WeChat, QQ, and Xiaohongshu), while five rely exclusively on international platforms. The choice of platforms is shaped primarily by two factors: the target community and security considerations. Many organizations continue to use WeChat despite its known surveillance risks, largely because it remains the dominant communication tool among Chinese-speaking communities—a situation that several interview participants described as a form of "*path dependency*".

At the same time, there is growing diversification, as groups adopt platforms like Instagram, Telegram, WhatsApp, Signal, and LinkedIn to engage less Chinese-speaking audiences and to enhance the security of internal communications and information dissemination. Several

organizations have encountered censorship, particularly on WeChat and Xiaohongshu, prompting them to experiment with new strategies to balance visibility and safety. In this balancing act, broader reach can invite increased digital scrutiny, while stronger security practices often come at the cost of limiting audience engagement and mobilization.

In addition to online platforms, CCSOs also make use of offline communication strategies—such as printed flyers, zines, and posters—especially during demonstrations and public events. Despite the fragmented and ever-changing media landscape, these various tools form the connective tissue of CCSO organizing. They enable the circulation of information, the coordination of actions, and the maintenance of community across geographic and linguistic boundaries.

3.8 Security practices

Besides the precautions taken on online platforms, CCSOs in Europe adopt a range of security practices to protect organizations' safety and members' privacy against surveillance. These measures reflect both the organizations' sensitivity to geopolitical risk and their experiences navigating surveillance in transnational contexts.

Security protocols vary depending on the nature of each activity. Organizations typically begin with an assessment of potential risks—first by evaluating the political sensitivity of the topic, and then by considering individual-level risks. As one interview participant explained, "*Some risks aren't about the event itself, but about the person—like if the topic is fine, but someone involved might be under watch*" (Zhang) Based on these assessments, CCSOs make decisions about location, participant vetting, recording permissions, and publicity levels.

Anonymity is a cornerstone of CCSO safety strategies. Members commonly use pseudonyms or nicknames in both internal and external communication, and sensitive event materials—photos, zines, or fundraising pages—are designed to obscure identifying details. In certain cases, core team members do not even know one another's legal names. As one interview participant recounted, "*I had worked with someone for years before I realized I didn't know their real name*" (Zhao).

Financial and legal precautions are also part of the security infrastructure. Some groups avoid formal registration to reduce exposure, while others use shell entities or affiliate with more neutral organizations. Online payments are made cautiously, avoiding personal accounts and real-name-linked services like PayPal. Communications involving sensitive funds or internal strategy are often conducted through encrypted platforms.

The use of Chinese-owned platforms (e.g., WeChat, Xiaohongshu) comes with its own logic of what one interview participant called "heightened information safety"—not because these platforms are secure, but because users practice strict self-censorship. Sensitive topics are

avoided entirely, with only sanitized or apolitical messages posted. In contrast, more open discussions are reserved for secure, encrypted channels or in-person meetings.

Risk awareness also extends to physical gatherings. Flyers and posters are often distributed anonymously and discreetly. Event participants are briefed on safety protocols, such as not recording or photographing others, or turning off phones. In one group, members devised a system of "safety buddies" to provide mutual protection and check-ins. For larger events, some teams designate safety coordinators to manage potential risks on site.

Trust is a fragile but essential part of these security practices. Because most CCSOs operate through informal and decentralized structures, internal trust is maintained through mutual endorsements, slow vetting processes, and shared histories. As one organizer noted, "*We stopped recruiting publicly. Every new member now comes through personal referrals and multiple layers of vouching*" (Peng)

Rather than treating security as a one-size-fits-all checklist, many CCSOs see it as a continuous process of negotiation and consent. A common phrase used by one collective is "*more-safe rather than (all) safe*", indicating that complete protection is impossible—but collective effort can reduce harm. This ethos of shared responsibility highlights the deeply affective and relational nature of security within CCSOs, where the goal is not only to avoid surveillance, but also to sustain spaces of care, trust, and community resilience under pressure.

3.9 Organizational continuity

Despite operating with limited resources and relying primarily on volunteer effort, most CCSOs have found ways to maintain continuity and organizational sustainability over time. Rather than aspiring to scale up, many groups focus on sustaining their current level of activity with a small, stable core team. As one interview participant put it, "*We just want to keep things going—not grow bigger, just keep doing the work.*" This emphasis on continuity over expansion reflects a pragmatic response to limited capacity and the ever-changing environment.

For many CCSOs, continuity is rooted in flexibility. The absence of external funding and formal donor accountability allows for adaptive and low-overhead operational models. Without bureaucratic pressure to grow or report outcomes, groups can adjust pace and priorities in line with members' availability and energy. This elasticity is key to organizational survival amid uncertain political and personal conditions.

Contrary to common assumptions that link burnout and attrition in grassroots organizing to a chronic shortage of volunteers (Konieczny 2014; Kumar & Varkkey 2020), the interview participants rarely mentioned a lack of people willing to help. On the contrary, many emphasized that volunteers are often abundant. For instance, Hu remarked succinctly, "there are a large number of volunteers." This is not to say that burnout and attrition are absent in CCSOs—in fact, participants frequently noted the heavy workloads and high turnover typical of

these groups. However, the high turnover does not seem to fatally threaten organizational continuity. As Zhao explained, “the loss of people can be offset by new people joining in”. This apparent paradox is explained by how the term “volunteer” is understood in the context of CCSOs. While most CCSOs rely heavily on voluntary labor, “volunteers” generally refer to non-core participants who engage in tasks that do not require technical expertise or deep organizational knowledge. Although core teams may remain small and face persistent strain, the supply of general volunteers—those who help with basic tasks or participate in ad hoc events—remains robust. A notable feature of CCSOs is indeed the high turnover of such volunteers, but there is also a continuous inflow of newcomers. In other words, there appears to be a larger pool of individuals who are eager to engage in civic activities than there are organizations or platforms to absorb them at present. This dynamic helps explain why, despite challenges related to burnout and attrition, volunteer shortages are not typically cited as a key problem.

However, the informal and emergent nature of many CCSOs means that institutional memory is often underdeveloped. Most groups have no formal mechanisms for archiving, documentation, or onboarding. Shared drives, handover notes, or mentoring systems are rarely in place. This is partly because many CCSOs are relatively new, and have not yet encountered leadership transitions or scaling needs. In some cases, the very notion of institutionalization is viewed with caution, especially given concerns over legal risk and increased visibility.

Future planning varies significantly across groups. While many aim to remain small and self-sustaining, some others envision more structured development—such as eventual registration, stable funding, or expansion of language and audience scope. Yet such plans are typically approached with modesty and hesitancy, shaped more by capacity and trust than by ambition. As one interview participant put it, “*It’s better to grow slowly than to make a lot of noise and collapse in two years*” (Ma)

Organizational continuity for CCSOs is not defined by institutional expansion or long-term strategy, but by relational continuity, shared purpose, and the ability to maintain a working rhythm under constrained conditions.

3.10 Interaction with local authorities

Not all CCSOs interviewed for this study had direct experiences of engaging with local authorities in Europe. This may be due to several factors, including the relatively recent formation of many CCSOs, their small scale, and the fact that many remain unregistered. Among the 11 CCSOs based in the Netherlands, five reported having concrete interactions with Dutch government bodies. Among another six CCSOs based elsewhere in Europe or with transnational scope, two described similar experiences.

In contrast, three organizations explicitly expressed a desire to engage with Dutch institutions in the future, primarily to gain eligibility for government funding or to access capacity-building

programs for NGOs. However, among those who did not express such intentions, one respondent emphasized the high institutional cost as a major deterrent to interaction: "*Especially when you arrive in a new place… especially when dealing with these rigid institutional structures, the cost is just too high.*" (Zhao)

Zhao suggests that some CCSOs have attempted to interact with formal institutions, but withdrew due to what she calls the excessive "cost". While Zhao does not elaborate on the specific nature of these costs, another respondent, Lai, provides further detail: "*You need certain resources—especially local language skills and the kind of resources needed to deal with government institutions. So, people who have stronger local connections and better integration often become the core members.*"

Engagement with local authorities often requires significant cultural and social capital, including language proficiency, knowledge of administrative procedures, and access to local networks. Members who possess these forms of capital tend to play central roles within CCSOs, highlighting both the practical demands of institutional engagement and the uneven distribution of such capacities within migrant civil society initiatives.

In some cases, local authorities became aware of CCSOs not through direct outreach but via media coverage. Media attention can function as an important indirect pathway to institutional recognition, particularly for organizations that lack the resources, networks, or administrative capacity to proactively engage governmental bodies. One participant recounted how a news report helped draw official attention to their group and activities: "The second thing is that the event I organized was actually very important. Later, The XXXX (an international newspaper) reported on it, so it went on the media. The journalist was really nice and introduced us to many people, including some government officials from YYYY (a city in the Netherlands). That was also very meaningful." (Gao, 2025) Gao's experience illustrates how visibility through reputable media platforms can result in tangible interactions with local authorities, even in the absence of deliberate outreach. For smaller or unregistered CCSOs, such indirect exposure may play a strategic role in bridging the gap between grassroots initiatives and formal institutions.

The actual instances of interaction between CCSOs and local authorities revolve around four main domains: (1) legal registration, (2) funding applications, (3) program implementation, and (4) taxation and administrative compliance. In many cases, details of these interactions are limited, but where specific narratives are available, they shed light on the forms of engagement and the institutional challenges encountered. These narratives not only reflect CCSOs' internal learning processes but also reveal how certain features of Dutch governance—such as institutional complexity, knowledge asymmetry, and consultative policymaking—are experienced by grassroots actors.

(1) Registration
While legal registration is an aspiration among many CCSOs, our interviews did not yield detailed accounts of this process.

(2) Applying for government funding
For CCSOs aiming to secure public funding, one of the first challenges is identifying relevant opportunities and understanding the institutional procedures involved. Tang's account provides a vivid example of how navigating the funding system became a community-wide learning experience:

"*We started reaching out to the Dutch government, so we had to write proposals and fill out forms. We also asked friends how to write a proposal, and they [the government] offered some forms of support—like consulting support. For us, it was a learning process… But indeed, some of our friends failed in their applications. This was also a learning moment for our community. We didn't know before that there were such paths to access resources.*"

This narrative underscores two key points. First, knowledge of how to access public funding is not automatically available to newcomers. Whereas local actors may acquire such familiarity through education or embedded social networks, migrants must often rely on informal learning and peer support. Second, while the Dutch government does offer consulting support, this appears insufficient when it comes to more technical aspects such as proposal writing. These insights suggest that government-led capacity-building programs could benefit from being more comprehensive, practical, and tailored to the needs of under-resourced, linguistically diverse communities.

(3) Program implementation
Some CCSOs have moved beyond funding applications to engage with local authorities through programmatic or policy-related activities. Huang described one such process that began with his proactive outreach to a local government official. Drawing on her prior understanding of Dutch governance—particularly its reliance on research and consultation in policymaking—Huang initially saw an opportunity for constructive engagement:

"*I once wrote to someone at the municipality suggesting something around communication… Later, another researcher got involved, and I helped with interviews and recruiting. After the report was completed, it was presented in Dutch and discussed in a roundtable, attended by officials from other departments. We just followed the chain step by step.*"

This example offers a rare, detailed account of how grassroots civil society initiatives can enter formal dialogue with multiple levels of government. Huang's understanding of how Dutch authorities tend to operate, particularly their emphasis on evidence-based consultation with marginalized groups, initially informed her approach. As she reflected:

"*It was only then that I realized how things work in the Netherlands. Start by researching marginalized groups—framing them (marginalized groups) as ethnic, immigrant, or potentially influenced by foreign forces. Only after these studies do they (the government) take further steps. Here, it starts with research.*"

This perspective reveals both a sophisticated grasp of institutional logic and a strategic orientation toward influencing it. However, over time Huang's enthusiasm waned. As the project evolved, she increasingly felt that the CCSO was reduced to an implementing agent with little autonomy. This shift—from proactive engagement rooted in knowledge of the system, to disengagement caused by perceived loss of agency—reveals a broader risk in civil society-state collaboration. Even when institutional entry points exist, grassroots actors may not foster meaningful partnership unless they retain a voice in shaping agendas and modes of participation.

(4) Taxation and administrative procedures
Finally, several CCSOs have interacted with local authorities around routine administrative and tax compliance issues. While these engagements are less politically charged, they still expose structural barriers to institutional access. As Wang recounted:

"*You can make an appointment with the tax office if you have tax-related questions… But overall, we don't have many resources in this area. The real difficulty for us is navigating what's available at the government or NGO level. We need to learn everything from scratch—how to file taxes, how to manage these relationships.*"

Wang highlights the institutional expectation that residents—whether individual or organizational—possess baseline familiarity with administrative norms and processes. For newly established or migrant-led groups, this is often not the case. The need for accessible, step-by-step guidance in multiple languages is thus not merely a convenience, but a structural requirement for equitable participation.

While this project documents CCSOs' interactions with local authorities across four key domains—legal registration, funding applications, program implementation, and administrative compliance—it does not provide systematic insight into how different migrant groups are treated by local authorities. This question lies beyond the scope of the study, and interview participants did not offer comparative perspectives across migrant communities.

Drawing on my personal observation from attending a public event organized by Hong Kong activists in Europe, I note that this group tends to be more adept at articulating their political and civic goals in English and aligning their messaging with European policy discourse. This communicative fluency and strategic framing appear to facilitate smoother engagement with local institutions. However, their primary challenge lies in persuading European authorities that events in Hong Kong and within the Hong Kong diaspora are of direct relevance to local European societies. While this anecdotal observation is suggestive, no broader comparative analysis was conducted within the current research. Nonetheless, the differential interaction patterns between migrant groups and local institutions remain an important area for future investigation.

Emerging scholarly literature reinforces the need for such inquiry. Kirchoff et al. (2022), in a comparative study across several European cities, found that assessments of migrant needs often hinge on the personal attitudes of frontline staff, leading to inconsistent service provision and creating barriers to engagement. This uncertainty, coupled with factors such as negative experiences with service providers, language barriers, and unfamiliarity with bureaucratic procedures, disproportionately affects migrants' access to public institutions. The authors highlight the important mediating role of NGOs in helping migrants navigate these systems. Mentesoglu Tardivo (2025), studying migrant political activism in Vienna, Brussels, Berlin, and Amsterdam, demonstrates how local voting rights, perceived discrimination, and public opinion about immigrants influence migrants' willingness and ability to mobilize. Alagna (2024) further shows how civil society actors and municipal governments can form multi-scalar alliances. This suggests that the nature of civil society–state interaction is shaped not only by migrant capacities but also by the political context and motivations of municipal actors. These findings imply that local authorities' responses to migrant-led initiatives may vary depending on broader public sentiment and the legal and political standing of specific groups.

Altogether, these studies indicate that interaction with local authorities is neither automatic nor uniform. A comparative examination of how civil society organizations from different backgrounds (such as mainland Chinese, Hong Kong, or other diasporic communities) engage with European local authorities would therefore offer important insights into the evolving dynamics of migrant civil society in Europe.

4. The networks and connections of CCSOs

This section outlines five key modes through which CCSOs connect with each other and with broader publics: multi-role participation, personal networks, shared activities, online groups, and algorithmic exposure. Together, these five forms of networking constitute a hybrid infrastructure of connection—simultaneously affective and strategic, informal and digitally mediated.

4.1 Multi-role participation

A common feature of both traditional and new Chinese organizations in the diaspora is that their core members often participate in multiple initiatives or groups, enabling organic inter-organizational linkages through their personal commitment (Crissman 1967; Liu 1998; Chuang & Le Bail 2020; Pieke 2021; Krause & Li 2022; Cao 2022). Among the 32 interview participants, 12 serve as core members in at least two CCSOs, with the most active individual engaged in four different groups. Beyond formal roles, many also participate regularly in each other's events, discussions, and planning meetings. This overlapping engagement forms strong interpersonal bridges across organizations, enabling informal channels of collaboration, mutual support, and shared resource use.

The most common and low-cost form of collaboration occurs when individuals who serve as core members in multiple CCSOs circulate information about one organization's activities within another. This type of informal information sharing builds inter-organizational visibility and supports broader participation with minimal coordination. In contrast, a more structured and resource-intensive form of collaboration involves individuals strategically leveraging their roles across organizations to integrate complementary resources—such as combining the event-organizing capacity of Organization A with the networking strengths of Organization B—to co-host joint initiatives. These collaborative events are sometimes further amplified through the media platforms or outreach channels of a third organization, such as Organization C.

4.2 Personal networks

Personal networks remain central to CCSO formation and connection, especially in early stages. New members are often introduced through trusted friends or long-standing acquaintances.

> Sun: "*In about 85% of cases, it's through referrals from people we know... It's almost never like someone just sends a cold email or DM saying, "Hi, I'd like to get to know you.*"

These personal network-based connections offer two key advantages. First, they foster trust and a sense of security. Beyond pre-existing relationships between individuals, when a new connection is facilitated by a mutual acquaintance, that intermediary effectively serves as a latent guarantor or informal endorser of the relationship. This process enables trust to circulate and scale within the network, thereby extending its reach. Second, such networks enhance the

likelihood of successful collaboration and reduce communication and coordination costs. As Cao observed: "*When it comes to building partnerships, it's a bit more complicated. Usually, we first ask around about the organization's reputation, the credibility of the people involved, and whether working with them might bring any risks. Only after that do we decide whether to reach out and start a conversation*". Here, "risk" refers not to personal or political security, but to the potential inefficiencies or disappointments in collaboration—namely, whether the invested effort might fail to produce the desired outcomes due to the partner's limited capacity or poor communication.

Moreover, in the case of the Chinese diaspora, such personal networks are often transnational in nature. As Dong recalled:

> "*Before I came to this country, a friend back in China introduced me to this artist who had been living here for quite a while. Around the end of the year, that artist friend invited me to a New Year's Eve gathering, and at that party, I met a few other girls. Later on, we ended up starting a feminist group together.*"

Conventionally, personal relationships within civil society organizations have been perceived as limited in scale and slow-growing, primarily due to their reliance on face-to-face interactions and localized networks (Fine 1989; Fine and Harrington, 2004). However, this understanding is being redefined. CCSOs are increasingly integrating personal ties with digital tools to establish trust-based, secure connections that transcend national boundaries. This strategic combination will be explored in a later section.

4.3 Shared activities

Participating in shared activities—whether reading groups, workshops or protests—serves as a key mechanism for generating new social ties and strengthening collaborative relationships. Such encounters are not merely episodic; they often catalyze the emergence of durable networks and collective initiatives. As one participant reflected, "*The people who are working in this group now actually all met during that protest.*" (Bi)

Another interview participant also recounted how connections formed during a protest organically evolved into more sustained organizing efforts: "*After that protest, those girls got together and started a local feminist group.*" (Dong)

These moments of co-presence thus function as affective and political nodes within an expanding mesh of translocal networks, where shared emotional resonance and commitment translate into new forms of civic infrastructure.

4.4 Online groups

Digital platforms play a pivotal role in facilitating global connections among Chinese communities, enabling geographically dispersed individuals to find one another and coalesce

around shared concerns. Telegram groups, WhatsApp chats, Instagram stories, and WeChat groups function as dynamic spaces where information is exchanged, resources are circulated, and collective activities are organized. These platforms often serve as the initial point of contact, which then transitions into more secure and trust-based communication. As one interview participant recalled, "*At first, it was just through Instagram—maybe they saw the community pop up there... Then later, as they got more familiar, they exchanged more personal contact info*." (Bi)

What begins as digital visibility can, through shared values and continued interaction, evolve into durable transnational ties. Notably, these online encounters often intersect with pre-existing or intermediary personal relationships, reinforcing the sense of safety and mutual accountability. The strategic use of encrypted communication tools adds an additional layer of security, crucial for those engaged in sensitive or activist work. As one organizer emphasized: "*We usually talk in A—we don't need to use B or C accounts, since those are pretty risky*." (Lai)

Rather than replacing personal networks, these platforms amplify and transform them, as well as generate some new personal relationships. They allow small-scale, trust-based connections to be reproduced and scaled across borders, forming an infrastructure for transnational civic engagement that is both resilient and responsive.

Sun's recall portrays the trajectory from participating an online group to generating a new transnational collective: "*Back in 2020, I was actually doing an exchange overseas. At the time, I joined an online group called Citizen Daily. They had a big group chat, and from that, a few sub-groups branched out—focused on civic education and current affairs, like sharing images and files*. "

This decentralized infrastructure enabled rapid mobilization around flashpoint events. Sun: "*I saw a post they made, forwarding a poster campaign in support of the Sitong Bridge protest. And I thought, wow, we really need to do something. So, I joined the local version of that poster campaign—printed out posters myself and put them up around the area."*

A dynamic cycle was simultaneously formed, whereby decentralized actions were channeled into centralized information flows, subsequently inspiring new waves of local mobilization. Sun: *"Later on, Citizen Daily launched something called the "Online Democracy Wall." The idea was that their backend had received submissions—photos and messages—from over 390 universities, showing that students were participating in the campaign on their campuses."*

Then, the transnational information flows served as the groundwork for new local or regional formations. Sun: "*So they used that info to create regional group chats, and started with just five "Online Democracy Wall" groups—like one for Toronto, one for California, Southern California, the UK, and so on. ... But at that time, there was no group for Europe—nothing for Germany, France, Italy, etc. ... So I thought, well, if all these other regions have their own groups, then shouldn't we have one for Europe too? So I just went ahead and started one myself—a big*

Europe group. The idea was really simple: since other regions had places where people could connect and meet up offline, we in Europe should have something like that too." When Sun noticed the absence of a Europe-based group and took the initiative to fill that gap, a new cross-European CCSO was established. Although inspired by a broader transnational campaign, this emergent collective began to develop its own mission, organizational structure, and strategies.

In brief, these organizations can foster expansive, transnational networks with digital platforms that facilitate collaborative initiatives and broader collective action—marking a significant shift in how Chinese civil society operates in diaspora contexts and digital era.

4.5 Algorithmic exposure

Some participants find new friends, groups, events, or causes through algorithmic pathways rather than interpersonal ties or joint experiences. These digital encounters—facilitated by platform recommendation systems such as Instagram suggestions, YouTube autoplay, or Xiaohongshu trending topics—often generate what Granovetter (1973) terms "weak ties", which can nonetheless evolve into meaningful connections. As one participant noted: "*After I did that, of course I started paying a lot of attention… and then the algorithm just kept pushing more and more related stuff to me.*" (Wang)

This kind of serendipitous exposure plays a particularly important role for newcomers or individuals outside the core activist circles. For example, several interview participants recalled discovering marches, community activities, or digital zines after repeatedly engaging with related content on social media, which in turn prompted the platforms to surface more relevant posts. One participant shared how watching a documentary on Chinese protest art on YouTube led them into a sequence of autoplayed videos covering diaspora activism in various cities, eventually directing them to a Telegram group they would later join.

In another case, a participant described how Xiaohongshu's algorithm began recommending posts about public activities and art exhibitions in the Netherlands or Europe after they had interacted with posts related to women's rights in China. Though these recommendations were not the result of direct invitations, they functioned as informal onramps into activist communities.

While such algorithmically mediated pathways may lack the built-in trust of personal referrals, they expand the visibility and accessibility of civic spaces. They are especially significant for dispersed individuals who may not yet have close contacts in activist networks but are politically curious or emotionally motivated. In this way, social media algorithms unintentionally serve as infrastructural actors, shaping the topology of diasporic civil society by connecting individuals to initiatives that might otherwise remain invisible.

The network ecology of CCSOs in Europe is characterized by a mixture of familiarity and innovation. On the surface, their connectivity strategies seem rooted in well-worn practices of

personal networking and informal introductions. However, closer analysis reveals a shifting logic: while traditional networks remain small and trust-based, digital technologies—especially messaging platforms, social media algorithms, and transnational chat groups—have restructured how connections are formed, maintained, and scaled. These changes not only expand the reach of CCSOs but also enhance their flexibility and security. Networking has thus become not only a logistical function but also a protective and strategic tool.

5. The impact of CCSOs in Europe and beyond

This section examines the impact of CCSOs across three dimensions: (1) their influence within Chinese communities in Europe, (2) their broader societal impact beyond Chinese communities in European contexts, and (3) their transnational effects beyond Europe. It is important to distinguish between "impact" and "work outcomes": while the latter refers to planned or intended achievements, "impact" also encompasses unintended consequences, side effects, and longer-term influences that often emerge through retrospective reflection. Such retrospective insights were frequently offered by interview participants, revealing how the effects of civic engagement often extend beyond the scope of initial intentions.

5.1 The impact of CCSOs within the Chinese community in Europe

CCSOs in Europe play a significant role in fostering a sense of belonging, providing practical support, and facilitating the civic empowerment of Chinese migrants. Their impact is particularly salient in addressing the initial challenges of adaptation and integration, especially for newcomers unfamiliar with local systems and norms.

First, these organizations serve as informal safety nets that reduce social isolation and offer culturally and linguistically accessible resources. As one interview participant noted, "*The existence of these communities helps new migrants establish a foothold, lowering social barriers and making it easier for them to find support systems*" (Xie). Such support often extends beyond emotional solidarity to include access to essential information, particularly for vulnerable groups. For example, a CCSO organizer working with Chinese women shared, "*We help Chinese women understand the local police and judicial systems, such as what to do in cases of domestic violence*" (Zhao) Through this work, CCSOs become critical intermediaries that translate institutional systems and mediate trust between migrants and host-country institutions.

Second, CCSOs contribute to the civic empowerment of Chinese communities by demystifying local governance and encouraging participation in everyday forms of public life. Migrants often arrive with limited experience of democratic procedures and community-level decision-making. One participant reflected, "*Many Chinese people only learn how to participate in community governance after coming to Europe, such as how to voice their opinions in a building management committee*" (Ling). In this way, CCSOs function not only as service providers but also as platforms for political socialization, enabling individuals to engage with local institutions and gradually claim space in the civic sphere of their host societies.

5.2 The impact of CCSOs beyond the Chinese community in Europe

CCSOs in Europe are not only reshaping internal diasporic dynamics but also generating visible impacts beyond their own communities. First, by actively engaging in civic life, these groups challenge prevailing stereotypes about political apathy among Chinese populations. As one

interview participant noted, "*Many Europeans assumed that Chinese people were uninterested in public affairs, but after witnessing our discussions on social issues, their perception started to change*" (Song). Through community events and advocacy efforts, CCSOs have made Chinese civic engagement more visible, leading to more nuanced understandings of Chinese identities and activism. Another participant observed that "*their [European participants'] perception of Chinese culture has shifted—through our community activities, they have come to understand the diversity of Chinese culture*" (Li)

Second, CCSOs have played a role in amplifying awareness of China-related issues in European political and civil society spaces. "*As a result of our efforts,*" one organizer recalled, "*certain European political parties and NGOs have begun to take an interest in human rights issues in China*" (Peng)

Finally, these groups also foster meaningful cross-cultural exchanges. For instance, Chinese feminist activists were invited by Italian organizations to share their lived experiences, demonstrating how such engagements open spaces for mutual understanding and solidarity: "*Feminist organizations in Italy invited us to participate in meetings, asking Chinese women to share their experiences in Italy*" (Bi) These examples illustrate the growing role of CCSOs as cultural and political interlocutors within European civil society.

5.3 The impact of CCSOs beyond Europe

CCSOs based in Europe have also begun to shape discourses and practices beyond the continent, extending their influence into global advocacy and transnational knowledge circulation.

First, these organizations act as crucial interlocutors between international actors and civil society within China. "*Many international foundations hesitate to support Chinese NGOs due to perceived risks*," one interview participant noted, "*our role is to show them that Chinese organizations are still operating and to help them find safer ways to provide support*" (Gu). By leveraging their unique position, these diaspora CCSOs help make Chinese civil society more visible and legible to the global funding and advocacy landscape.

Second, they engage in international advocacy that challenges the constraints faced by domestic actors in China. "*At the UN level, we engage in advocacy efforts,*" explained one participant. "*While Chinese organizations cannot publicly speak out, we can leverage international institutions to push the Chinese government for a response*" (Feng). Such interventions—often coupled with efforts to document social events or movements—serve to preserve collective memory and amplify suppressed voices.

Third, the transnational circulation of civic engagement skills illustrates a more subtle but significant form of impact. As one returnee shared, "*Although unable to engage in direct political advocacy upon returning to China, I still apply my knowledge in corporate social responsibility*

initiatives and nonprofit organizations" (Qi) These examples highlight how European-based CCSOs function not only as political actors abroad but also as bridges for capacity-building and knowledge transfer across borders.

6. The challenges faced by CCSOs

Despite their growing visibility and expanding influence, CCSOs operating in Europe face a range of persistent challenges that constrain their effectiveness and long-term sustainability. Based on interview data, these challenges fall into 5 key areas, listed below in order of frequency and emphasis mentioned by interview participants.

1. Funding barriers and institutional inaccessibility

Access to financial resources remains the most commonly cited challenge. Crucially, the issue is not merely one of funding scarcity, but of structural inaccessibility. First, many CCSOs lack awareness of existing funding schemes or the bureaucratic know-how to navigate application processes. Second, institutional funding often comes with stringent eligibility requirements—such as formal registration, financial reporting systems, and compliance frameworks—that emerging or informally organized groups struggle to meet. Third, the funding landscape is overwhelmingly project-based, with limited support for operational expenses such as rent, salaries, and administrative infrastructure. This funding model places additional pressure on organizations to continuously launch short-term projects to stay afloat, often at the cost of strategic development and institutional consolidation.

2. Continuity and volunteer commitment

Closely linked to funding constraints is the reliance on unpaid volunteer labor. Most CCSOs operate on what one interview participant described as being "powered by passion alone"—or “用爱发电”. While this ethos fosters commitment and solidarity in the short term, it poses serious continuity challenges. Without financial compensation, many members are unable to commit long-term, leading to high turnover, burnout, and fluctuations in organizational capacity. This volatility weakens continuity and institutional memory, making it difficult to maintain consistent programming or build strategic alliances over time.

3. Security concerns and political risk management

Security is a persistent concern for CCSOs, particularly given the expansion of China’s transnational repression apparatus. While most CCSOs are based in Europe, their members often remain connected personally or professionally to networks in China, making them vulnerable to state surveillance and intimidation. Interviewees described various forms of repression that have directly or indirectly affected them or their peers. These include cyberattacks on organizational infrastructure, interrogation or harassment of individuals returning to China, pressure on family members inside China, and threats of revoked academic credentials or visa denials for students involved in overseas activism. One interviewee recalled how a peer’s partner was questioned at a Chinese border checkpoint due to traces of their CCSO involvement found on a personal device, while another described how members’ families in China were contacted by state authorities and told to sever ties with the organization abroad. Such incidents have resulted in the withdrawal or disappearance of members, and even the dissolution of collaboration with otherwise active volunteers.

Beyond direct repression, the perception of threat, what one interviewee called a “fear of fear”, can itself generate significant psychological strain and operational consequences. This manifests in pervasive self-censorship, internal distrust, and hypervigilance about communication and affiliation. Organizations responded by implementing encrypted communication platforms, introducing information hierarchy and internal vetting procedures, and suspending public recruitment altogether, as mentioned in the section of security practices. While such security measures may protect against infiltration or exposure, they also fragment internal trust, limit external visibility, and reduce organizational capacity. As one organizer reflected, the dilemma between safety and impact was “the single greatest constraint on our growth.” These dynamics not only affect individual well-being and collective functioning but also challenge the foundational values of open civic engagement within European democracies.

4. Navigating Dutch and European institutions and everyday bureaucracy
Even for members with prior organizing experience in China, engaging with the Dutch civic and legal landscape presents novel challenges. Many interview participants described lacking “everyday know-how” about how to interact with Dutch authorities, navigate municipal procedures, or access legal and financial resources. For example, organizers are often unfamiliar with how to register associations, interact with the police, or comply with tax regulations. Without this practical knowledge, even the most committed efforts risk becoming ineffective or misaligned with local institutional norms.

5. Shifts in the global political climate
The broader political context also plays a significant role. In recent years, the rise of nationalist and conservative governments across Europe and beyond has led to increasingly inward-looking policies and reduced civic space. This shift has also influenced the behavior of civil society actors themselves. Several interview participants observed a growing tendency toward insularity, with organizations focusing more on their own communities rather than building cross-ethnic or transnational coalitions. Such fragmentation undermines the broader potential of CCSOs to participate in intersectional struggles or influence mainstream policy agendas.

In sum, while CCSOs in Europe play a vital role in supporting diaspora communities, promoting civic engagement, and engaging in international advocacy, they do so under considerable constraints. These challenges—financial, structural, political, and epistemic—highlight the need for more inclusive institutional support systems, translocal solidarities, and capacity-building initiatives tailored to the unique positionality of Chinese diaspora activists.

7. Recommendations: To the government and interest groups

Despite significant barriers, CCSOs in Europe have continued to sustain themselves and contribute meaningfully to civic life. To support their development, we propose recommendations grouped according to the 5 key challenge areas identified through fieldwork and interviews.

1. Funding accessibility

To address funding barriers, it is crucial to develop mechanisms that allow newly established and immigrant-led CCSOs to access financial support more equitably. This includes:

- Facilitating direct access to information on funding opportunities.
- Earmarking more grants that allow small or unregistered CCSOs to apply without strict institutional requirements.
- Offering more flexible funding that includes operational costs, not just project-based support.

2. Continuity and volunteer commitment

The reliance on unpaid volunteer labor threatens long-term sustainability. Recommendations include:

- Offering training on volunteer management and burnout prevention.
- Encouraging funders to support hybrid operational models (volunteer + compensated).

3. Security and political risks

CCSO members frequently cite concerns over surveillance and transnational repression. Protective measures should:

- Recognize the specific risks faced by activists from authoritarian contexts.
- Provide clearer legal frameworks around data protection and personal privacy.
- Avoid unnecessary identification procedures at public events.

4. Navigating host society systems
Many immigrant-led CCSOs struggle with unfamiliar administrative environments. To bridge this gap:

- Establish training programs on the legal and institutional frameworks of civil society in host countries.
- Provide tax, accounting, and legal aid tailored for immigrant organizations.
- Develop bilingual guides and peer-support models for onboarding new organizers.

5. Changing political climate
In an increasingly cautious and inward-looking policy environment, immigrant civic actors need explicit recognition and support. Host country governments and institutions should:

- Publicly affirm the democratic role of diaspora civil society organizations.
- Maintain inclusion of Chinese immigrant groups in integration, diversity, and civic engagement initiatives.
- Avoid securitizing Chinese civic engagement by conflating activism with diplomatic tension.

6. Other recommendations and suggestions from interview participants
In addition to the 5 domains above, interview participants offered a range of insights and proposals reflecting their lived experience and strategic reflections. These suggestions address broader structural or contextual issues relevant to host governments and civil society stakeholders:

(1) Inclusive visa and residency support
Interviewees suggest more inclusive visa schemes for cultural, media, and civil society workers from authoritarian states. For instance, consider piloting special visa schemes or fellowship programs for cultural and civil society practitioners from authoritarian contexts, modelled on existing artist/scholar-at-risk initiatives.

> "*These people come from a country like China—so is it possible to offer them some kind of special support?*" (Han)

(2) Recognize new Chinese migrant demographics
European societies should update their assumptions about Chinese migrants and recognize the diversity of values and civic engagement among newer generations. For instance, include representatives of newer Chinese migrant cohorts in diversity advisory councils and civic dialogue platforms to reflect shifting demographics.

"*If this group of people could be seen, it would really add a lot—like a huge contribution—to all the conversations about integration.*" (Yang)

(3) Recognize civil society as a policy asset

Rather than treating CCSOs as politically sensitive entities, host societies should view them as bridges between immigrant communities and public institutions, encourage partnerships between CCSOs and local governments in co-delivering community integration programs or public consultations.

"*They (CCSOs) can actually be helpful for local social stability.*" (Tang)

(4) Address information and institutional barriers

There is a need for "soft infrastructure" support: regular civic education, public briefings on electoral and legal systems, and support for newcomers navigating everyday institutional life.

"*That invisible barrier is still there… If you don't have any Dutch friends around you, it's really hard to figure things out.*" (Xie)

(5) Institutionalize capacity-building

Capacity-building should include civic education, fundraising strategies, legal compliance, and nonprofit management training—tailored to immigrant groups.

"*Help with some capacity building—like, for example, what do you need to know if you want to run a foundation here in the Netherlands?*" (Ling)

(6) Use public space strategically

More accessible, no-cost or low-cost venues—especially in weekends or holidays—would significantly increase CCSO activity.

"*It would be great if we could have access to free venues—like those public or nonprofit spaces where they don't charge any fees.*" (Liu)

(7) Facilitate equal and collaborative partnerships

Government institutions should avoid a top-down approach. Collaboration should be reciprocal, interest-based, and co-designed.

"*It's not about the government setting the agenda—it's about everyone coming together to talk and find out where we have common ground.*" (Huang)

(8) Build horizontal connections with local CCSOs

Rather than placing the burden solely on local institutions to "include" Chinese civic actors, it is important to recognize that both sides often express willingness to connect—but lack appropriate platforms for sustained interaction. Creating shared spaces, regular joint events, and co-governed initiatives can help overcome fragmentation and foster trust.

"*I think people do have the willingness, or at least the awareness that this is important… but what's lacking right now is knowing how to even get started. Yeah—like, they don't even know who to reach out to.*" (He)

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