



Pillar 3.

**INTEGRATION**

# GUANGDONG HARMONY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

## Building a sustainable community in China

- **Country:** China
- **Number of staff:** 20
- **Year of incorporation:** 2009
- **Type:** Community foundation
- **Endowment:** No
- **More info:** [gdharmonyfoundation.org](http://gdharmonyfoundation.org)

In 2009, together with a group of entrepreneurs and scholars, Liu Xiaogang and Jiangang Zhu founded the Guangdong Harmony Community Foundation (GHCF), the first Chinese community foundation recognised by the Guangdong Provincial Department of Civil Affairs. The Foundation is based in the Pearl River Delta in south China's Guangdong province – one of the most densely populated and urbanised regions in the world<sup>1</sup>. In the late 2000s, the region experienced a strong state-led effort in poverty reduction and the Foundation, also known as 'Qianhe Community Foundation', was created as a platform for promoting public welfare in the region.

GHCF is a regranting foundation and around 50% of its resources come from foundations such as the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Partnerships for Community Development, Oak Foundation, Ford Foundation, and other Chinese foundations. The other 50% of organisational resources come from individuals and corporate donors. By integrating knowledge resources and providing comprehensive funding and training support to local beneficiaries, the Foundation supports community growth and local capacity building.

<sup>1</sup> "Press release: World Bank Report Provides New Data to Help Ensure Urban Growth Benefits the Poor", World Bank, 2015, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2015/01/26/world-bank-report-provides-new-data-to-help-ensure-urban-growth-benefits-the-poor>

Liu Xiaogang, GHCF's Chairman and one of its founders, was inspired by the work of Paul S. Grogan, who she met in 2006 while studying at Harvard Kennedy School. Grogan, who was the President and CEO of The Boston Foundation, piqued Xiaogang's curiosity about whether the community foundation model would work in China.

Investigating how grassroots civil society operated in the Guangdong province, Xiaogang identified only 94 grantmaking foundations<sup>2</sup>, and even fewer supporting community projects. With local resources scarce, there was a need to build a collective platform for Chinese civil society to prosper at the community level. Xiaogang met Jianguang Zhu, a professor at Nankai University, who shared this belief and decided to help.

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*“When the community lacks water, we don't just find a construction team to dig a well in the community. Instead, we support the organisations in that community to mobilise residents and solve the issues behind well digging, through various methods such as community discussions, visits, consultations, and fundraising. The relationships in the community are gradually rebuilt, and the community becomes able to unite and strengthen their bonds to solve water issues and other public needs.”*

— LIU XIAOGANG, GHCF CHAIRMAN

## From community development to sustainable development

The journey to incorporate the climate agenda in the Foundation's work is relatively new. The Home of Xiaohe<sup>4</sup> programme is a good example of the organisation's early focus on community development issues. It was an educational programme focused on immigrant workers who were attracted to the region because of new job opportunities.

GHCF's process of integrating sustainability into its work can be seen through its projects, rather than through a transversal strategy. In its early years, the Foundation provided general support and funding to local environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to conduct their projects. Now, GHCF works more actively with partners to shape priorities and deliver more explicitly climate-relevant projects to communities.

<sup>2</sup> “Guangdong Harmony Community Foundation Chairman Message”, GHCF, 2022,

[http://www.gdharmonyfoundation.org/home/about/message/cate\\_id/3.html](http://www.gdharmonyfoundation.org/home/about/message/cate_id/3.html)

<sup>3</sup> Idem. [http://www.gdharmonyfoundation.org/home/about/message/cate\\_id/3.html](http://www.gdharmonyfoundation.org/home/about/message/cate_id/3.html)

<sup>4</sup> Home of Xiaohe, GHCF, 2022, <http://www.gdharmonyfoundation.org/home/community/cityEducation/id/29.html>

Another example of mainstreaming sustainability is the Watchmen on the Pearl River project<sup>5</sup>, which officially ended in 2021. Pearl River, China's third longest river, is highly polluted due to the country's industrialisation. The community didn't have enough data and evidence about the level of pollution in the river basin and was therefore unable to design interventions that would help solve the impact of water pollution in the community. To address this challenge, the project recruited social organisations and 'watchers' to monitor water quality and encourage local residents to participate in basin governance. During the 10-year project, GHCF boosted multi-stakeholder partnerships and community networks, providing small grants and developing public participation toolkits to strengthen the basin's governance everywhere the Pearl River flows. While the river is not completely depolluted today, community awareness about the problem has improved.

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“Civil society is like the soil and Harmony Foundation's work is the seed. If the soil is too poor, we could not plant a tree here.”

— HE XIN, GHCF DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROJECTS

## Following the Chinese climate politics agenda

The Foundation's engagement on climate also evolved with the Chinese government's public agenda. In 2015, the joint statement from China's president Xi Jinping and US president Barack Obama, which paved the way for the Paris Agreement<sup>6</sup>, moved China's domestic climate policy agenda. There was substantive growth in environmental discussions in China, from an approach focused on pollution issues to a broader conversation on climate change. Through its Sustainable Community Strategy, GHCF initiated a climate change programme in 2017.

The programme conducted research on how community members perceive climate change and its impacts. GHCF presented the results in the *Report on Climate Cognition of Community Residents in the Pearl River Delta Region*<sup>7</sup>, which gained national media attention. The project team realised that it was urgent to develop emergency coping mechanisms to respond to the perceived climate risks. They developed a climate education toolkit, organised workshops, and gave small grants to improve the community's ability to identify climate risks, build a governance mechanism and implement climate actions. In addition, GHCF held a climate change seminar with climate experts, scientific institutions and representatives of social organisations to discuss how

<sup>5</sup> Watchmen on the Pearl River (historical project), GHCF, 2022,

[http://www.gdharmonyfoundation.org/home/community/rhPlanDetail/cate\\_id/19.html](http://www.gdharmonyfoundation.org/home/community/rhPlanDetail/cate_id/19.html)

<sup>6</sup> “Reaction: US-China climate pledge”, China Dialogue, 2014, <https://chinadialogue.net/en/climate/7489-reaction-us-china-climate-pledge/>

<sup>7</sup> “The survey report on climate awareness of community residents in the Pearl River Delta was officially released”, GHCF, 2021,

<http://www.gdharmonyfoundation.org/Home/Community/detail/id/54.html>

civil society could best participate in addressing climate change under the *Chinese National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy 2035*<sup>8</sup>.

One of the challenges of undertaking climate-related work at a community level was that the Foundation could not find NGOs or other partners working on climate issues in the region. They commissioned climate research from academic partners and, based on the results, decided to launch the Climate Pioneers - Climate Adaptation Awareness Programme for Urban Community Residents in the PRD Region<sup>9</sup> in 2021, in partnership with Vanke Foundation. Aiming to increase community climate awareness through building local climate adaptation capacities, community gardens were selected to pilot the project in the urban communities of Guangzhou, Foshan and Shenzhen. For one year, community climate pioneers were identified and trained to respond to climate risks such as floods and droughts and their impacts both in agriculture and urban settings. Since the beginning of the project, 56 community tree planting sessions and 24 educational activities that explained climate science concepts related to people's daily lives were carried out.

After Xi Jinping made a public pledge in 2021 that China would peak carbon dioxide emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060<sup>10</sup>, many civil society organisations began to pay more attention to climate change. Even though GHCF has still not made a public call for climate grants, it now funds and collaborates with organisations already in its network to help them transition to a green and low-carbon economy and to develop robust climate adaptation projects like, the climate change network for rural communities launched in 2022. The Foundation's climate journey is just starting, but there is a strong commitment to understanding the impacts climate change has on the community and empowering them to tackle them effectively.

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<sup>8</sup> "Climate Change Adaptation Strategy of the People's Republic of China", Asian Development Bank, 2022, <https://development.asia/summary/climate-change-adaptation-strategy-peoples-republic-china>

<sup>9</sup> "Starting Point for Building Resilient Urban Communities: Pura Climate Pioneers", GHCF, 2022, <http://www.gdharmonyfoundation.org/Home/Community/detail/id/67.html>

<sup>10</sup> "China headed towards carbon neutrality by 2060; President Xi Jinping vows to halt new coal plants abroad", UN Affairs, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1100642>

<sup>11</sup> "Rural community response to climate change network project approved", GHCF, 2022, <http://www.gdharmonyfoundation.org/Home/Community/detail/id/59.html>