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From Connections to Actions: When Do Government Ties Matter to Nonprofit Organizational Performance?

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ABSTRACT

Nonprofit organizations are essential for public service delivery, yet the value of their government ties is contested. This study examines the mechanism that translates these connections into tangible results. We propose that political networking—the deliberate cultivation and use of official relationships—is the critical catalyst. Based on survey data from Chinese social service nonprofits, our findings are decisive. Government ties alone do not predict enhanced organizational performance. Only when combined with high levels of political networking do these connections become a significant driver of superior outcomes. This research demonstrates that government ties are latent assets. Their potential is only unlocked through strategic agency. For public administration and development practice, this means fostering the relational capabilities of nonprofits is as crucial as facilitating their access to the state.

1 | Introduction

Over the last several decades, the close interweaving of government and nonprofit organizations has become a notable feature of contemporary public administration (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff 2002; Osborne 2010; Salamon 1995; Young 2000). Reflecting broader trends in public administration, the role of nonprofits in development partnerships has evolved significantly since the 1990s. As Elliott et al. (2024) summarized, nonprofits have moved from being peripheral service providers to "central actors." Their role has expanded beyond service delivery to encompass policy advocacy and functioning as watchdogs, solidifying their position as defined partners in the development process. As governments grapple with increasing social complexities and fiscal constraints, nonprofits provide specialized expertise, grassroots connections, and innovative solutions. At the same time, many nonprofits rely on government resources, regulatory support, and policy collaboration to sustain and expand their operations. This partnership has attracted growing scholarly interest, with researchers examining the implications of government-nonprofit interactions for public policy, governance, and organizational outcomes (e.g., Bi et al. 2025; Cheng and Wu 2021; Jing and Hu 2017; Marwell and Calabrese 2015; Moldavanova et al. 2023).

As nonprofits play a more prominent role in public administration, a key question arises: How do their ties to government—formal or informal connections with government entities—influence nonprofit organizational performance? (Wei et al. 2023)[1] From a public administration standpoint, understanding these dynamics can help cultivate effective government–nonprofit partnerships that support service delivery and policy implementation. From a nonprofit management perspective, these relationships matter for financial sustainability, strategic positioning, and mission alignment. Often conceptualized as a form of political capital, government ties may yield benefits such

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as resource access, organizational legitimacy, contracting opportunities, and policy influence (Lu 2015; Nee and Opper 2010; Wei et al. 2023; Zhan and Tang 2016), yet they can also introduce risks, including reduced autonomy, bureaucratic constraints, and mission drift (Smith and Lipsky 1993; Sun et al. 2016). Despite substantial research, findings on how government ties affect nonprofit organizational performance remain mixed, partly because many studies assess only specific facets of performance (e.g., Guo 2023; Ni and Zhan 2017; Provan 1980; Wang 2022; Zhang 2018). This variation underscores the need for further investigation. In this study, we define organizational performance as a multidimensional outcome capturing how well a nonprofit functions and advances its mission, including governance and management quality, program execution, and stakeholder support. Our focus is on internal organizational outcomes rather than external client or community impacts.

We build on this line of research by examining how government ties are associated with nonprofit organizational performance in mainland China, an authoritarian context in which the state plays a central role in public affairs and nonprofit sector development (Ma 2006; Teets 2014). Taking a contingency approach (Donaldson 2001), we argue that the relevance of government ties depends not merely on their existence but on the extent to which nonprofits engage with government actors. In other words, the benefits of these ties may hinge on the depth of political networking, as passive affiliations alone may not yield meaningful advantages. Without active involvement in political processes and government interactions, nonprofits may fail to capitalize on the potential benefits of their government ties.

To explore these ideas, we use survey data from a nationwide sample of Chinese social service nonprofit organizations (private non-enterprise organizations). The results suggest that government ties alone are not associated with higher nonprofit organizational performance. Their association with performance appears contingent on political networking. When nonprofits report more active cultivation and use of political relationships, government ties are more likely to coincide with stronger organizational outcomes. This pattern points to the importance of strategic engagement and suggests that political networking can serve as a catalyst that transforms government ties from a passive association into an active driver of organizational performance.

By moving beyond a simple presence–absence view of government ties, this study offers a more nuanced account of when such ties may align with stronger organizational performance. The findings not only add to theoretical discussions of government ties and political embeddedness but also offer practical implications for nonprofit leaders on how to strategically manage government relationships in ways that may support organizational performance.

The manuscript proceeds as follows. Section 2 synthesizes the relevant literature and develops the hypotheses. Section 3 describes the research context, with particular attention to government–nonprofit relations in China. Section 4 outlines the data, measurement strategy, and variable construction. Section 5 reports the empirical results. Section 6 concludes by interpreting the findings, highlighting theoretical and practical implications, and noting key limitations.

2 | Literature Review

2.1 | Nonprofit Organizational Performance

Organizational performance in the nonprofit sector captures how well an organization functions and advances its mission (Berman 2006). It spans what the organization achieves, how effectively it is governed and managed, how well programs operate, and how stakeholders support it (Carman 2009; Martin and Kettner 2009). Unlike for-profits that can lean on profitability or return measures, nonprofits pursue public value, so performance cannot be reduced to a single financial indicator. It reflects mission attainment, operational capacity, resource mobilization, and legitimacy with funders and communities (Kaplan 2001; Lee and Nowell 2015).

Over the past decades, scholars have proposed many approaches to assess nonprofit performance, including financial ratios and revenue growth, program outputs and outcomes, goal-attainment self-ratings, board and management effectiveness scales, stakeholder or funder assessments, and balanced multicriteria scorecards (e.g., Bagnoli and Megali 2011; Brown et al. 2016; Kaplan 2001; Liket and Maas 2015; Shumate et al. 2017). Each illuminates part of the picture yet leaves gaps. A broad consensus now holds that nonprofit performance is multidimensional and should be assessed with multiple indicators to reflect this complexity, since single proxies can mislead by capturing activity rather than effectiveness or one-off financial shocks rather than organizational health (Herman and Renz 2008; Lee and Nowell 2015; Penna 2011).

Guided by this view, we focus on internal organizational performance: how well a nonprofit is governed, managed, and able to convert resources into effective programs while sustaining strong stakeholder relationships. This construct is important because it shapes a nonprofit's capacity to fulfill its mission, respond to changes in policy and funding, and sustain credibility with funders and partners. It is inherently multifaceted, including mission progress, governance quality, managerial capacity, program execution, and external support. We operationalize this perspective with a brief multi-item index, with item wording, scaling, and reliability described in the Methods section.

2.2 | Government Ties and Organizational Performance

Under the new governance paradigm, governments increasingly collaborate with nonprofits, involving them extensively in public service provision, policy implementation, and social welfare programs (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff 2002; Osborne 2010; Salamon 1995). Nonprofits are valued as partners because of their specialized expertise, grassroots connections, and capacity for innovation. These attributes enable governments to enhance responsiveness and effectiveness in addressing complex social

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issues (Jing and Chen 2012; Smith and Lipsky 1993), and in some contexts, nonprofits can even serve a bridging role between divided public administrations in conflict-ridden states (Elayah et al. 2024). At the same time, nonprofits often rely on government resources, regulatory support, and legitimacy to sustain and scale their operations (Malatesta and Smith 2014). This interdependence between governments and nonprofits raises important questions about whether and how government ties shape nonprofit organizational performance.

In organizational studies, government ties refer to linkages that organizations maintain with governmental entities, often facilitated by individuals with public sector backgrounds or work experience (see Wei et al. 2023 for a review). In the context of Chinese nonprofits, these ties commonly manifest through the inclusion of such individuals on governing boards or management teams (Haveman et al. 2017; Tihanyi et al. 2019; Wang 2022). As (Pfeffer and Salancik (1978), 145) observed, "prestigious or legitimate persons or organizations represented on the focal organization's board provide confirmation to the rest of the world of the value and worth of the organization." As a result, government ties can shape organizational strategies and performance.

The benefits of such connections can be explained from multiple theoretical lenses. For example, resource dependence theory suggests that cultivating government ties enables organizations to secure essential resources and mitigate environmental uncertainty, resulting in more stable and diversified funding sources, reduced reliance on a single source of support, and advanced warning of policy changes (Hillman et al. 2004; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). Similarly, institutional theory emphasizes that alignment with influential government entities bolsters organizational legitimacy and credibility, which in turn attracts donors, partners, and community support, while facilitating acceptance within the broader institutional field (Baum and Oliver 1991; Suchman 1995). Meanwhile, network theory underscores the structural advantages of government ties, as these boundary-spanning connections enhance access to timely information, foster collaborative opportunities, and help form political alliances that amplify an organization's influence (Uzzi 1997). Together, these perspectives illustrate that government ties offer multidimensional benefits that are crucial for enhancing organizational stability, growth, and strategic positioning.

In the Chinese context, where the state wields significant regulatory authority and cultural norms emphasize guanxi (personal connections), government ties can support nonprofit organizational performance (Xin and Pearce 1996). Close relationships with public officials may not only yield stable funding, streamlined administrative processes, and valuable policy insights that reduce uncertainty and boost operational efficiency, but also provide pathways to state-controlled resources and opportunities (Peng and Luo 2000; Sheng et al. 2011). Moreover, partnerships with government entities can enhance an organization's reputation, lending it legitimacy and fostering stakeholder trust, thereby expanding network reach and creating new avenues for collaboration and information exchange (Hildebrandt 2011; Hsu and Hasmath 2014; Moran 2005). For example, Bi et al. (2025) showed that charitable donations operate as a mediating channel through which government funding improves nonprofit performance, including service delivery and policy engagement. Taken together, government ties can enhance nonprofits' mission delivery by channeling resources, legitimacy, and policy information that strengthen governance, improve management, support program execution, and stabilize funder relations.

At the same time, government ties can carry risks for nonprofit organizational performance. Organizations that rely heavily on these connections may experience limits on autonomy as they navigate political agendas and comply with strict regulations. This pressure can lead to mission drift, as nonprofits gradually shift focus to align with governmental priorities at the expense of core objectives and values (Eikenberry and Kluver 2004; Marwell and Calabrese 2015). Close affiliations with government entities can also raise concerns about independence and credibility among stakeholders, potentially undermining trust and support (O'Regan and Oster 2002; Smith and Lipsky 1993). Further, political shifts and leadership changes can abruptly alter the terms of government support, exposing nonprofits to sudden funding cuts and policy reversals (Peng and Lu 2021). These dynamics create a management challenge: while government ties can offer resources and legitimacy, they may also constrain strategic flexibility and undermine long-term performance.

Given these potential benefits and risks, a substantial body of empirical work has assessed how government ties relate to nonprofit organizational performance in China. These studies emphasize different facets of internal performance and report mixed results. When performance is indexed by government grant receipt, some studies find that political ties facilitate awards (Ni and Zhan 2017; Dong and Lu 2021), whereas others report no effect (Wang 2022). When measured by private donations, findings are again mixed: Johnson and Ni (2015) detected no association between politically connected executives and donations, and Cheng and Wu (2021) showed that political connections increase donations for foundations whose transparency meets a minimum threshold. Using total revenue as the metric, Wei (2020) found no clear association. When performance is reflected in advocacy engagement, Zhan and Tang (2013) and Zhang (2018) found no effect, while Guo (2023) reported higher advocacy among politically connected nonprofits. Taken together, these findings are inconclusive and do not show a consistent pattern in which government ties always improve organizational performance. To probe this relationship further, we continue to test:

H1. *Government ties are positively associated with nonprofit organizational performance.*

2.3 | Political Networking as a Moderating Factor

The inconsistent findings in previous research underscore a contingency perspective: the effect of government ties on nonprofit performance is neither consistently positive nor consistently negative, but depends on other contextual and organizational conditions (Cheng and Wu 2021; Donaldson 2001). This perspective suggests that government ties alone do not

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automatically confer benefits; their value is not inherent but hinges on how nonprofits actively manage and leverage these connections. This view is further reinforced by a broader understanding of organizational embeddedness. As Uphoff and Krishna (2004) argued, the efficacy of nonprofits is not solely a function of their internal capabilities or their relationship with the state alone, but depends quite centrally upon the quality of linkages between nonprofits and these other sectors. In fact, without robust connections to a wider ecosystem of supporting institutions, nonprofits may fail to achieve significant impact (Uphoff and Krishna 2004). Therefore, we propose that the mere existence of government ties is insufficient; it is the strategic agency exercised by the nonprofit that unlocks their potential. We identify political networking—the deliberate cultivation, maintenance, and strategic utilization of relationships with government officials (Li and Atuahene-Gima 2001; Li and Zhang 2007)—as the key moderating factor that translates dormant government ties into tangible performance gains.

Political networking moderates the value of government ties when viewed through several theoretical lenses. From a resource-dependence view, active cultivation turns latent access into usable budgets, contracts, and flexibility, improving a nonprofit's capacity to plan, execute programs, and sustain operations. Institutional theory suggests networking converts nominal connections into recognized legitimacy and procedural conformity, which supports board effectiveness, managerial credibility, and funder relations. Network theory highlights that networking deepens tie strength and brokering capacity across agencies, improving information quality and coordination that underpin program performance. Together, these mechanisms imply that the performance benefits of government ties grow as nonprofits more actively build, maintain, and leverage their political relationships.

Through political networking, nonprofits convert passive and potentially superficial affiliations into purposeful collaborations. Active engagement improves access to funding and contracting opportunities, provides timely policy information, and facilitates administrative support. It also enhances legitimacy with governmental stakeholders and external funders. These activated ties help nonprofits navigate regulatory requirements, stabilize operations, and strengthen governance and managerial processes, positioning them to achieve stronger organizational performance.

Conversely, if government ties are not actively maintained and strategically mobilized, their potential advantages may fade or even become burdensome. Inert ties can impose administrative demands without commensurate benefits, constrain autonomy, and divert attention from core goals, which undermines governance quality, managerial effectiveness, and program execution. Passive reliance on affiliations raises the risk of bureaucratic entanglements and mission drift, limiting the organization's ability to respond to shifting policy and funder expectations. By contrast, nonprofits that invest in political networking can mitigate these risks and turn government ties into strategic resources that support stronger organizational performance.

Empirical work aligns with this view. Li and Zhang (2007) demonstrated that new ventures in China led by managers who cultivate political relationships secure greater resources and operate more effectively, indicating that political networking compensates for institutional weaknesses and supports better organizational outcomes. Similarly, Nederhand's (2021) research on government–nonprofit collaborations in the Netherlands finds that political networking significantly shapes nonprofit performance and strategic responses, enabling organizations to achieve greater effectiveness and resilience, even without formal government partnerships. Therefore, we test:

H2. *Political networking strengthens the positive relationship between government ties and nonprofit organizational performance, such that nonprofits with higher levels of political networking experience greater performance gains from their government ties than those with lower levels.*

3 | Research Context

We draw on the Chinese nonprofit sector as our empirical setting, given its ongoing evolution from a state-centric model toward one marked by greater organizational diversity and autonomy (Teets 2014). Since the early 1980s, the Chinese government has been a key architect of the nonprofit sector, using policies and regulations that both restrict and facilitate nonprofit activities (Kang and Han 2008; Saich 2000). The government maintains extensive oversight through both formal institutional frameworks, such as registration procedures, funding regulations, and compliance mandates, and informal mechanisms involving political expectations and informal scrutiny (Heurlin 2010; Spires 2020). As a result, Chinese nonprofits operate within a structured environment where supervision coexists with opportunities for cooperation and support (Ho 2001; Ma 2006; Teets 2014). This mix of oversight and potential partnership creates conditions in which organizations must navigate state requirements while seeking to leverage government relationships to advance their goals (Zhang and Guo 2021).

Political and economic reforms over the last several decades have widened opportunities for nonprofits, even within a tightly regulated landscape. Market-oriented reforms have generated diverse social needs that the government alone is increasingly unable to address, prompting policymakers to rely more heavily on nonprofits for policy implementation and service provision (Chen et al. 2022; Jing and Hu 2017; Lu and Dong 2018). This shift mirrors a broader global trend wherein nonprofits assume critical roles in delivering public services and addressing societal issues (Young 2000). Chinese nonprofits now actively help fill service gaps across areas including education, environmental protection, disaster relief, healthcare, elderly care, and poverty alleviation, thereby complementing and supporting government initiatives (Ho 2001; Liu et al. 2022; Tu 2021). Ma (2006) highlighted that while the government has historically guided nonprofit sector development, it has gradually stepped back from some direct service roles, creating room for nonprofit

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activities. Yet this transition has been neither uniform nor absolute, with the degree of autonomy varying significantly across policy areas, service domains, and geographical regions. Institutional reforms and evolving public expectations have further enabled nonprofits to engage with policymakers and influence policy outcomes, though always within carefully delineated limits (Ho and Edmonds 2008; Mertha 2009). Consequently, the government–nonprofit relations in China reflect a complex blend of regulatory oversight, selective empowerment, and strategic collaboration.

In light of the government's central role, many Chinese nonprofits seek to develop and maintain relationships with public agencies and officials, a strategy that can offer political and economic advantages (Park and Luo 2001; Xin and Pearce 1996). Such ties may enable nonprofits to secure more consistent funding, enhance their legitimacy, gain timely policy information, and potentially participate in government-led initiatives (Bi et al. 2025; Haveman et al. 2017; Ni and Zhan 2017). They can also help nonprofits navigate bureaucratic procedures, obtain necessary regulatory approvals, and access certain government-controlled resources (Cheng and Wu 2021; Dong and Lu 2021). At the same time, benefits are not automatic and depend on how relationships are managed. Heavy reliance on government ties may limit organizational autonomy, increase bureaucratic burden, and risk mission drift, complicating nonprofits' pursuit of their core objectives (Li and Wang 2020; Sun et al. 2016). Thus, nonprofits must strategically balance the potential benefits of government connections against their associated risks and limitations.

Taken together, these institutional features make the Chinese nonprofit sector a suitable context for examining how government ties relate to nonprofit organizational performance. Exploring the nuanced dynamics of government-nonprofit interactions in China can shed light on how political connections and strategic networking shape organizational outcomes in settings with significant state involvement.

4 | Methods

4.1 | Data Collection

We gathered data via a self-administered national survey of social service nonprofit organizations (i.e., private non-enterprise organizations) in mainland China.[2] Owing to the absence of a comprehensive public registry of Chinese nonprofits for academic use, we used the NGO Directory maintained by China Development Brief (CDB) as our primary sampling frame (http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.cn/directory). Established in 2005 and continuously updated, the CDB Directory now features nearly 7000 active nonprofits spanning a wide range of service areas.[3] Inclusion is voluntary, as organizations either self-register or join in response to CDB invitations. Prior studies have affirmed the directory's reliability (e.g., Dong and Lu 2021; Zhan and Tang 2016), making it a credible source for studying nonprofits and their activities.

In June 2020, we obtained the CDB Directory dataset, which listed 7077 organizations. We refined the sampling frame by removing duplicate listings, excluding organizations based outside mainland China, dropping for-profit entities, and focusing on service-providing nonprofits by omitting associations and foundations. After applying these criteria, the sampling frame comprised 2003 eligible organizations. From the 2003 eligible organizations, we randomly selected 700 to receive the survey, or about one-third of the sampling frame. This proportion was determined based on practical considerations related to the feasibility of contacting and maintaining communication with each organization throughout the survey process. Detailed information about the geographical distribution of these organizations is provided in Appendix 1.

Prior to fielding the main survey, we pilot-tested the instrument with three Beijing-based nonprofits in July 2020. This pilot phase was instrumental in refining the questionnaire and improving survey logistics. Following the pilot, the final questionnaire was integrated into an online survey platform. In August 2020, we launched the survey by contacting executive directors (or comparable senior leaders) of sampled organizations through email and social media invitations. The survey aimed to collect comprehensive information on the operations and attributes of these nonprofits during 2019. To enhance participation rates, we implemented a multi-channel engagement strategy that included landline and mobile phone outreach, email follow-ups, and three rounds of reminders over a 6-week period. By mid-September 2020, we had collected 336 valid responses, achieving a response rate of 48%.

4.2 | Variable Measurements

As noted above, *nonprofit organizational performance* is multidimensional, spanning a nonprofit's effectiveness, capacity, and impact. Prior studies often use single proxies such as total revenue, government grants, donations, or advocacy activity that capture only parts of performance. Guided by recent work (e.g., Brown et al. 2016; Shumate et al. 2017), we assessed performance across five internal dimensions: mission attainment, board governance effectiveness, internal management effectiveness, program and service performance, and relationships with funders. Each dimension taps a key facet of how nonprofits function and pursue their goals. Considered together, these indicators offer a broader, more balanced view of organizational performance and better reflect variation across core organizational functions and stakeholder relationships.

Empirically, there is no single, objective performance metric applicable to all Chinese nonprofits, given the sector's diversity in missions, legal forms, and reporting practices. In this context, self-reported assessments by organizational leaders, structured around multiple validated dimensions, offer a practical and informative alternative. Respondents rated their agreement with each item on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”): (1) the extent to which the organization's mission is well served, (2) the effectiveness of

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board governance, (3) the effectiveness of internal management, (4) the performance of programs and services, and (5) the strength of relationships with various funders. We created a composite performance index by summing the five items, where larger totals reflect better organizational performance.[4]

The independent variable, *government ties*, as noted above, is commonly operationalized in organizational studies through board members' prior or current government service (Wei et al. 2023; Tihanyi et al. 2019). We captured this construct with two measures. Our main measure is the share of board members who currently serve, or previously served, in the party-state apparatus (e.g., Dong and Lu 2021; Haveman et al. 2017), which captures the relative prominence of these ties within the board. As a robustness check, we also used the count of such board members (e.g., Johnson and Ni 2015; Wei 2020). Using both indicators allows us to verify that results are not sensitive to how government ties are operationalized.

The moderating variable, *political networking*, was measured with a parsimonious two-item measure, drawing on and adapting instruments from Xin and Pearce (1996), Li and Zhang (2007), and Sheng et al. (2011). This brevity reflects the need to balance construct coverage with respondent burden and political sensitivity. The first item assesses whether an organization invests significant effort in building and cultivating personal connections with government officials, while the second evaluates whether the organization allocates substantial resources to maintaining strong relationships and actively engaging with government officials. For each indicator, respondents selected a response on a five-point agreement scale (1 = "strongly disagree," 5 = "strongly agree"). We constructed the political networking measure by summing the two items, so higher totals indicate more active political networking. The two-item scale showed acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.7801$).

In addition, we incorporated several control variables into our analysis. We operationalized *professionalization* as the ratio of full-time equivalent staff to volunteers, with larger values indicating greater managerial and service capacity. *Board size* was measured as the number of directors, capturing the potential for broader expertise and external linkages. We measured *organizational age* using the founding year, reflecting accumulated experience and organizational stability. *Organizational size* was measured as the log of total revenue to proxy overall resources and capacity.

To capture differences in the local *resource environment*, we controlled for the log of per capita GDP in each nonprofit's prefectural city. We obtained these data by first asking respondents to report their operating city and then matching each city to GDP and population figures from the relevant provincial Statistical Yearbooks. This adjustment helps account for regional economic conditions that may shape nonprofit performance.

Finally, we controlled for *service area*, recognizing that operating conditions and resource access vary across fields. Because China lacks a standardized classification system for nonprofit service areas, we asked respondents to identify their primary service domain and then mapped responses to the International Classification of Non-profit and Third Sector Organizations (ICNP/TSO). Table 1 reports the distribution of service areas in

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics ($N = 336$).

Variable	Mean	S.D.	Min	Max
Organizational performance	17.76	3.31	5	25
Political connection (ratio)	0.04	0.12	0	1
Political connection (count)	0.29	0.90	0	7
Political networking	7.24	1.69	2	10
Professionalization	3.56	36.75	0	666
Board size	5.74	3.29	0	33
Organizational size (log)	13.50	2.66	0	18.42
Organizational age	7.59	4.40	1	29
Resource environment (log)	11.47	0.55	9.43	12.60
Service area (%)				
Culture, communication and recreation activities	0.90			
Education services	6.34			
Human health services	2.15			
Social services	30.72			
Environmental protection and animal welfare activities	8.16			
Community and economic development, and housing activities	31.32			
Professional, scientific, accounting and administrative services	3.18			
Others	17.22			

Note: The service-area figures report the percentage distribution of organizations across service fields in the final sample. We classified service areas using the International Classification of Non-profit and Third Sector Organizations (ICNP/TSO).

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the sample, along with descriptive statistics for all study variables.[5] The correlation matrix is presented in Appendix 2.

5 | Results

Table 2 reports a series of OLS models assessing how government ties and political networking relate to nonprofit performance. Because the performance measure is continuous, OLS is appropriate for estimating these associations. Models 1 and 2 operationalize government ties as the share of board members with government experience, while Models 3 and 4 use the count of such board members as a robustness check. Across specifications, Models 1 and 3 include only the main effect of government ties, and Models 2 and 4 add political networking and its interaction with government ties to test the moderating relationship.

Model 1, which examines the direct relationship between government ties and nonprofit organizational performance, shows no statistically significant association between government ties and nonprofit organizational performance ($\beta = 1.56$, $p > 0.1$). This suggests that merely having board members with government experience does not automatically translate into improved organizational outcomes. While government ties may offer access to resources and legitimacy, this finding implies that they do not inherently enhance performance.

In contrast, Model 2, which includes political networking as a moderating factor, reveals a significant positive association between government ties and nonprofit organizational performance ($\beta = 12.35$, $p < 0.01$). Moreover, the interaction between government ties and political networking is also significant and positive ($\beta = 1.37$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that the impact of government ties is conditional on the extent to which nonprofits actively invest in political networking. This finding adds that government ties alone are insufficient; nonprofits need to cultivate and leverage these connections to realize performance gains. The significance of political networking itself ($\beta = 0.80$, $p < 0.01$) further reiterates its crucial role in shaping organizational outcomes.

Figure 1 illustrates the interaction by plotting predicted performance across levels of government ties at different levels of political networking. The figure shows predicted performance across the observed range of government ties, with political networking set at low (5th percentile), medium (50th percentile), and high (95th percentile) levels. The lines diverge as

TABLE 2 | Regression results.

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Government ties (ratio)	1.56 (2.23)	12.35*** (4.52)	—	—	1.86 (2.29)	12.76*** (4.67)
Government ties (count)	—	—	0.26 (0.27)	1.49** (0.72)	—	—
Political networking	—	0.80*** (0.15)	—	0.81*** (0.15)	—	0.80*** (0.16)
Government ties × political networking	—	1.37** (0.54)	—	0.39*** (0.09)	—	1.44** (0.57)
Professionalization	0.23*** (0.08)	0.00*** (0.00)	0.23*** (0.08)	0.00** (0.00)	0.21** (0.09)	0.00** (0.00)
Board size	0.04 (0.05)	0.13* (0.07)	0.06 (0.06)	0.09* (0.05)	0.05 (0.06)	0.07 (0.05)
Organization age	0.03 (0.04)	0.06 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.06 (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)	0.07* (0.04)
Organization size	−0.06 (0.08)	−0.02 (0.08)	−0.06 (0.08)	−0.01 (0.08)	−0.04 (0.08)	−0.02 (0.08)
Resource environment	−0.40 (0.32)	−0.22 (0.29)	−0.40 (0.32)	−0.21 (0.29)	−0.39 (0.31)	−0.19 (0.29)
Region dummies (reference = East China)						
North China	—	—	—	—	0.08 (0.64)	0.67 (0.59)
Northeast	—	—	—	—	2.46* (1.12)	1.82* (1.01)
Central-South	—	—	—	—	0.09 (0.73)	−0.02 (0.69)
Southwest	—	—	—	—	0.17 (0.55)	0.27 (0.53)
Northwest	—	—	—	—	0.11 (0.67)	0.38 (0.61)
Service area	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	23.56*** (3.88)	15.95*** (3.63)	23.38*** (3.81)	15.57*** (3.58)	23.71*** (3.72)	15.66*** (3.75)
Observations	336	336	336	336	336	336
F	1.67**	5.83***	1.73**	5.84***	1.26**	4.86***
R^2	5.02%	20.28%	5.08%	20.08%	5.52%	21.55%

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.
***$p < 0.01$.
**$p < 0.05$.
*$p < 0.1$.

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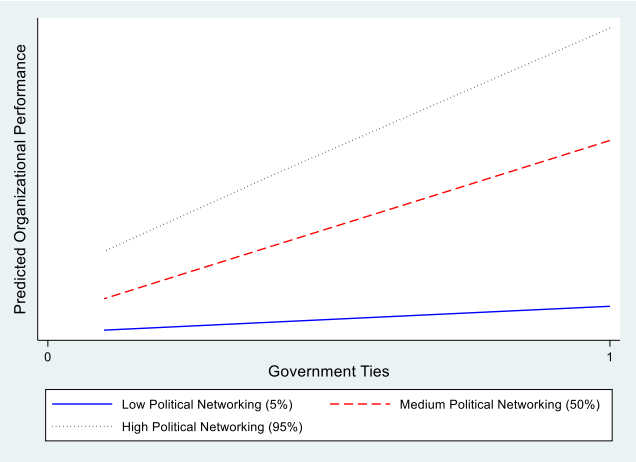

FIGURE 1 | Predicted nonprofit organizational performance by government ties.

political networking increases. At low networking, the slope for government ties is flat and not statistically distinguishable from zero. At medium networking, the slope becomes positive. At high networking, government ties show the steepest positive relationship with performance.

As a robustness check, Models 3 and 4 replace the share of government-affiliated board members with the count measure and yield results consistent with Models 1 and 2. In Model 3, government ties remain not significant ($p > 0.1$), indicating that the mere presence of such board members does not, by itself, improve performance. In Model 4, adding the interaction term makes government ties significant ($p < 0.05$), and the interaction between government ties and political networking is also significant ($p < 0.01$). We further address unobserved spatial heterogeneity (i.e., systematic differences across places in policy, economy, or administrative practice that may affect performance) by adding regional fixed effects using the six-region scheme (East, North, Northeast, Northwest, South Central, Southwest). Appendix 3 reports the sample distribution across the six regions. Models 5 and 6 add regional indicators while retaining the same set of covariates used in Models 1 and 2. The findings are largely unchanged, and the interaction between government ties and political networking remains positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$).

Overall, the findings highlight the contingent nature of government ties in government-nonprofit relations. While government ties alone do not guarantee improved organizational performance, their benefits materialize when nonprofits engage in active political networking. This emphasizes the importance of not only establishing government connections but also strategically managing and leveraging them to enhance organizational effectiveness.

The results of several control variables are noteworthy. Professionalization is positively and statistically associated with performance across specifications, indicating that nonprofits with more full-time staffing capacity relative to volunteers (i.e., more professionalized) tend to report stronger operational outcomes. This finding indicates the importance of managerial and service capacity in enhancing efficiency, service delivery, and overall effectiveness. Additionally, board size is positively associated with nonprofit organizational performance in Models 2 and 4, indicating that having more directors may strengthen governance and strategic choices by expanding the range of expertise, resources, and external connections available to the organization.

6 | Discussion and Conclusion

Nonprofit organizations have become increasingly central to contemporary public administration, complementing government efforts in service provision, policy implementation, and social welfare. As their interactions with government deepen, understanding how government ties relate to nonprofit organizational performance becomes increasingly important. Governments provide funding, regulatory support, and policy influence, making government connections a potentially valuable asset for nonprofits. Yet the effects of these ties remain contested: some studies suggest benefits for resources and legitimacy, while others point to risks such as mission drift, bureaucratic burdens, and constraints on autonomy. The competing findings in existing research indicate that current knowledge is still inconclusive. To fill this gap, we take a contingency approach and propose that government ties do not exert a uniform effect on nonprofit performance. Instead, their performance implications hinge on how actively nonprofits pursue political networking.

Using survey data from Chinese social service nonprofits, we examine whether political networking conditions the association between government ties and organizational performance. We find that government ties, on their own, are not significantly associated with performance. However, when nonprofits report higher levels of political networking, government ties become positively associated with performance. These results point to a pattern in which passive connections are insufficient, while deliberate and ongoing engagement appears to be an important condition under which ties align with stronger internal organizational outcomes. In other words, organizations that actively cultivate and leverage their connections with government officials are better positioned to convert government ties into tangible advantages.

This study contributes to research on nonprofit–government relations, organizational performance, and political embeddedness by specifying when government ties are more likely to be beneficial. By identifying political networking as a key moderating factor, we refine existing explanations that emphasize structural connections alone and provide a more dynamic account of how nonprofits relate to government. The interactional view offered here helps reconcile mixed findings in the literature by shifting the focus from the mere presence of ties to the strategic work involved in making those ties consequential. Instead of implying that government ties are uniformly beneficial or harmful, our findings indicate that their value depends on the intensity and quality of engagement.

We also speak to work on politically constrained environments. In China, where state oversight coexists with selective support, nonprofits operate within institutional arrangements that both

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limit and enable collaboration (Heurlin 2010; Ni and Zhan 2017). Our results are consistent with this reality: engagement-oriented ties are more likely to correlate with stronger internal outcomes, whereas passive affiliations show limited association. While context-specific, these insights may inform studies in other settings where government influence is pervasive and where the benefits of political connections depend on how organizations manage them. The emphasis on engagement thus provides an additional lens for interpreting nonprofit-government interactions in environments characterized by strong regulatory presence.

For practitioners, the results underscore that government ties should be managed strategically, not assumed to yield benefits automatically. Investing in purposeful relationship-building and ongoing engagement may help organizations translate connections into improved internal governance, management, and program-related processes. This does not imply uncritical pursuit of political ties; rather, it suggests that where relationships exist, sustained and thoughtful engagement can help align them with organizational objectives. For policymakers, the findings point to the value of transparent, predictable interfaces that reduce the transaction costs of constructive engagement and allow nonprofits to participate effectively without compromising autonomy.

Several limitations warrant attention. First, the analysis is cross-sectional, which raises endogeneity concerns and prevents causal inference. The observed relationships should be interpreted as associations, not necessarily causal effects. Future research would benefit from panel designs, natural experiments, or mixed-methods approaches to investigate temporal ordering and mechanisms more rigorously. Second, our performance indicators emphasize internal/organizational dimensions (mission attainment, governance, management, program/service performance, and funder relations) rather than citizen- or client-level outcomes. Subsequent work should incorporate measures of service quality, satisfaction, equity, or wellbeing and triangulate survey-based assessments with administrative or behavioral data. Third, our reliance on survey data introduces potential response biases. Complementary qualitative approaches (e.g., case studies, interviews) could provide deeper insight into how nonprofits navigate government relationships and activate political ties. Fourth, our measure of political networking is intentionally parsimonious, using two Likert-style items adapted from prior work to balance construct coverage with respondent burden and sensitivity. We encourage further exploration of political networking and the development of richer, multidimensional measures. Future work should also triangulate survey responses with behavioral or administrative indicators and qualitative evidence to capture its depth and dynamics more fully. Fifth, while we focus on political networking as a moderator, other contingency factors, such as regulatory volatility, policy field, and regional heterogeneity, may also shape the strength and direction of associations and merit systematic exploration.

To conclude, this study advances understanding of the relationship between government ties and nonprofit organizational performance by showing that ties alone are insufficient: their association with performance depends on the extent to which nonprofits actively engage in political networking. Our results indicate that government ties are linked to stronger organizational outcomes only when nonprofits strategically cultivate and leverage these relationships, offering a more nuanced view of nonprofit–government interactions. Future research should probe causal mechanisms, track longitudinal dynamics, and examine contextual variation to deepen knowledge of these relationships across diverse political settings.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Impact Statement

This study suggests that government ties by themselves do not improve nonprofit organizational performance. Their value depends on active political networking and engagement with government, so nonprofits should strategically manage and leverage these ties rather than rely on them passively.

Endnotes

[1] In this manuscript, government or political ties are used synonymously with government/political connections and government/political embeddedness.

[2] In China, nonprofits are classified into three main categories based on their registration status and organizational structure: associations, foundations, and private non-enterprise organizations. The last category refers to service-oriented entities created by individuals or institutions to deliver direct social services. Under the 2016 Charity Law, these organizations are referred to as social service nonprofits.

[3] While precise statistics are unavailable, most organizations listed in the CDB Directory are widely understood to be grassroots nonprofits, rather than government-organized institutions.

[4] To assess construct validity, we estimated an exploratory factor model by first computing a polychoric correlation matrix and then extracting principal-component factors with a parallel-analysis decision rule. Results indicated a single factor (eigenvalue ≈ 3.91; ≈ 78% variance explained), with strong loadings across all five items (≈ 0.85–0.92) and high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.8998), supporting use of a unidimensional organizational performance index.

[5] Because all focal measures were obtained from the same survey, we took several steps, following Podsakoff et al. (2012), to reduce the risk of common source bias. We used concise and clearly worded items, varied scale formats where feasible, and phrased questions to limit social desirability pressures. We also drew one key control variable capturing the local resource environment from an external data source. These procedural and design choices, combined with evidence from Harman's single-factor test showing that the first factor accounted for less than 50% of the variance, reduce concerns about common source bias.

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Appendix 1: Geographic Distributions of Nonprofit Organizations

	Sampling frame		Random sample		Final sample	
Provincial divisions	***N***	**%**	***N***	**%**	***N***	**%**
Anhui	33	1.65%	15	2.14%	6	1.79%
Beijing	352	17.57%	129	18.43%	45	13.39%
Chongqing	46	2.30%	14	2.00%	9	2.68%
Fujian	52	2.60%	19	2.71%	11	3.27%
Gansu	51	2.55%	16	2.29%	7	2.08%
Guangdong	356	17.77%	133	19.00%	42	12.50%
Guangxi	17	0.85%	6	0.86%	5	1.49%
Guizhou	35	1.75%	11	1.57%	4	1.19%
Hainan	16	0.80%	7	1.00%	4	1.19%
Hebei	12	0.60%	3	0.43%	1	0.30%
Heilongjiang	4	0.20%	1	0.14%	1	0.30%
Henan	38	1.90%	15	2.14%	7	2.08%
Hubei	37	1.85%	15	2.14%	3	0.89%
Hunan	52	2.60%	22	3.14%	16	4.76%
Jiangsu	95	4.74%	28	4.00%	20	5.95%
Jiangxi	20	1.00%	6	0.86%	6	1.79%
Jilin	9	0.45%	3	0.43%	2	0.60%
Liaoning	18	0.90%	9	1.29%	7	2.08%
Neimenggu	7	0.35%	2	0.29%	2	0.60%
Ningxia	19	0.95%	7	1.00%	6	1.79%
Qinghai	9	0.45%	4	0.57%	2	0.60%
Shandong	49	2.45%	18	2.57%	7	2.08%
Shaanxi	86	4.29%	30	4.29%	24	7.14%
Shanghai	178	8.89%	51	7.29%	18	5.36%
Shanxi	10	0.50%	2	0.29%	2	0.60%
Sichuan	226	11.28%	72	10.29%	40	11.90%
Tianjin	22	1.10%	7	1.00%	4	1.19%
Xinjiang	10	0.50%	4	0.57%	4	1.19%
Xizang	2	0.10%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Yunnan	63	3.15%	25	3.57%	17	5.06%
Zhejiang	79	3.94%	26	3.71%	14	4.17%
Total	2003	100.00%	700	100.00%	336	100.00%

Note: Geographic distributions are based on nonprofits' registration locations.

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Appendix 2: Correlation Table ($N = 336$)

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
(1) Organizational performance	1.000								
(2) Government ties (ratio)	0.013	1.000							
(3) Government ties (count)	0.001	0.810	1.000						
(4) Political networking	0.215	0.090	0.077	1.000					
(5) Professionalization	0.023	−0.013	−0.019	0.027	1.000				
(6) Board size	0.052	0.151	0.493	−0.029	−0.032	1.000			
(7) Organization age	0.056	−0.050	0.047	−0.091	−0.002	0.205	1.000		
(8) Organization size	−0.015	−0.038	−0.003	−0.080	0.046	0.157	0.208	1.000	
(9) Resource environment	−0.069	−0.066	−0.029	−0.107	0.084	0.050	0.085	0.115	1.000

Note: Indicators for service areas are included in the models but omitted from the table.

Appendix 3: Sample Distribution by Six Regions

Region	Provinces included	Count	%
North China	Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei, Shanxi, Inner Mongolia	54	16.1%
Northeast	Liaoning, Jilin, Heilongjiang	10	3.0%
East China	Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Anhui, Fujian, Jiangxi, Shandong	82	24.4%
Central–South	Henan, Hubei, Hunan, Guangdong, Guangxi, Hainan	77	22.9%
Southwest	Chongqing, Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Tibet	70	20.8%
Northwest	Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia, Xinjiang	43	12.8%
Total		336	100%

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