

Stars and Rain

Author: Hu Xin, Deputy Director, Social Innovation Research Centre, Beijing
Leping Welfare Foundation

I. Social Problems and Origins

Of all the children that surround us in our daily life, one in every 110 is affected by autism. Autism is a congenital neurodevelopmental disease that is characterised by impaired social functions, communication disorders and restricted and rigid behaviours and interests. We call children affected by autism “children of the stars”. They are unmindful of the outside world, they are not attached to interpersonal relationships, they overreact or underreact and they have their own unique fixed rituals in daily life.

According to the *Analytical Report on the Status of Autistic Children in China* published by the China Philanthropy Research Institute in 2014, there are about 1.64 million autistic children in China, and childhood autism is already the most prevalent mental disease in the country. Over 75% of autistic children are not diagnosed before the age of 6, more than 90% of autistic children cannot receive a normal education, and over 65% of social groups do not have a correct understanding of autism.

Furthermore, special education is currently only taught in 11 universities in China, and none of these universities offer education or training focusing on autism. Less than 200 privately-run institutions are planning or trying to provide help for this especially vulnerable group. For this reason, most of the autistic children in China cannot receive systematic help and training. They can only stay at home, as autistic children are generally unable to get accustomed to the environment and educational methods at public schools. Under such circumstances, the greatest hope for teaching autistic children is for their parents to teach them at home, with most of the private autism training institutions being sponsored by parents of autistic children.

As the first private non-profit institution specialising in providing education services for autistic children and their families, Beijing Stars and Rain Education Institute for Autism (“Stars and Rain”) was also started by the mother of an autistic child. Tian Huiping, founder of Stars and Rain, taught for a period of time at Chongqing University after finishing her studies in Germany. In 1989, her son was diagnosed with autism before the age of 4, but at that time, there were no schools specifically set up for such children in China. Upon recovering from the trauma and pain, she came to understand that there were about 500,000 autistic children in China. As a result, she decided to set up an institution where Chinese autistic children could receive education. In 1993, she resigned from the university and established the first school for autistic children in Beijing under extremely tough conditions. The school’s name was Stars and Rain Children’s Institute. The name “Stars and Rain” has two origins: an American film named *Rain Man*, and “children of the stars”, a nickname for autistic children in Taiwan. In the beginning, Stars and Rain’s work included three aspects: therapy and education of children, training of parents, and improving public awareness so that people with autism and other disabilities may be accepted.

The establishment of Stars and Rain was full of ups and downs. When coming to Beijing in March 1993, Tian Huiping first served as a teacher in a kindergarten

where there were 6 autistic children. However, as the kindergarten belonged to a private company, and the caring of autistic children could not bring economic benefits, Tian lost her job there two months later. Then, Tian Huiping succeeded in convincing Ma, head teacher of a special education school in a western suburb of Beijing, to offer two rooms in the school as the classroom and dormitory of her Stars and Rain. At first, Stars and Rain survived through carrying out simple operations, and a certain amount of fees were collected to pay the teachers' costs and necessary board expenses. The school only lasted for three months before its relocation as a result of interference from the government education department at a higher level. In September of the same year, she moved to the China Rehabilitation and Research Centre for Deaf Children in Beijing and began to raise the money required to pay rent and buy equipment. Gradually, the school got on the right track, and Stars and Rain was officially registered in January 1994. After relocating several times, it moved to the current site in Dongxu New Village in Chaoyang District, which was bought in 1997.

II. Development of Mission and Strategy

Since Stars and Rain's establishment 21 years ago, the external environment has continued to change. The general public who once knew nothing about autism now have some understanding about it, policies have become increasingly more supportive and the concept of inclusive education has been popularised. In the beginning, the mission of Stars and Rain was to provide services and support to autistic families and autistic children. It then began to provide technical support for similar institutions, provide professional support for governmental departments and local rehabilitation centres and ultimately improve the public's awareness.

The initial mission of Stars and Rain was established by its founder Tian Huiping: "set up a bridge between autistic people and society". In 2002 and 2003, Stars and Rain participated in an OCA organisation evaluation programme launched by China NPO Network and the Capacity Building & Assessment Centre. Through two evaluations on the internal capacity of the organisation, the employees not only witnessed Stars and Rain's development achievements, but also took note of areas needing improvement, laying a solid foundation for the first "participatory strategic plan".

In 2004, supported by the Ford Foundation and the Capacity Building & Assessment Centre, Stars and Rain completed the first three-year strategic plan (2005-2007) and, as a result of the joint discussion by all the staff members, produced a new vision; to "set up a bridge between autistic people and society through professional technical training focusing on family support". During this stage, Stars and Rain has been constantly improving and updating its internal systems, establishing a volunteer management system and realising better standardised institutional management. In 2005, Stars and Rain established the "Heart-Alliance Network" which provides professional technical support and capacity building training for other autism service institutions. In November of the same year, Stars and Rain initiated a care and training programme for 13-18 year old autistic people which filled the gap in China's services for autistic grownups.

On December 27, supported by New Philanthropy Partners, Stars and Rain completed the second three-year strategic plan (2008-2010), and upon joint discussion by all the staff members, adjusted its mission to "focusing on the provision of professional technical training, improving parents' ability to raise their autistic children and promoting the healthy development of society". During this stage, Stars and Rain not only raised their own service awareness, but also strengthened the governance structure.

In December 2010, Stars and Rain accomplished its third five-year strategic plan (2011-2013) and added evaluation services, themed teacher training programmes and instruction programmes for teachers from abroad. Its mission was also slightly adjusted to “focusing on the provision of professional technical training, improving the parenting capacity of the families of autistic people and promoting the healthy development of social services”.

In December 2013, Stars and Rain began to implement its fourth strategic plan and established the strategic objectives and annual targets for the next five years. The new mission was to “provide high-quality services for autistic people and relevant populations, improve the quality of life for autistic people, promote social acceptance and guide the healthy development of social services through professional technical support, resource integration and social advocating”.

It is worth mentioning that although its development course bears the typical characteristics of trial and error, Stars and Rain has continued to re-examine its own vision and mission all along with strategic plans regularly worked out by its entire staff, and to distribute its own resources according to the strategic targets set out in the strategic plans. Stars and Rain is one of the most competent institutions in formulating and implementing strategic plans in China.

III. Governance and Leadership Transition

Like most NGOs, Stars and Rain has had to face problems in the improvement of its governance structure and leadership transition during its development. In 2005, the first board of governors was established at Stars and Rain as implementation of the second strategic plan began, most of the board members being consultants. Although they may bring a lot of external resources and opportunities, they are not much involved in concrete management. Tian Huiping, founder of Stars and Rain, began to re-examine the internal governance and decision making mechanism of the institution in 2008. She found out that in spite of the highly participatory discussion and the democratic decision-making atmosphere, her personal opinion still held a dominant position. She felt that if things went on like this, it may be unfavourable for the organisation’s development. Thus, Stars and Rain began its transition towards the second generation of leadership. During this process, it made a variety of attempts, such as the heads of each department acting as the executive director in turn together with an internal rating system, and appointing an external professional with managerial experience to its management post.

In February 2010, Tian Huiping, founder of Stars and Rain joined the board and became its president. As she was familiar with the specific work at Stars and Rain, she kept in constant communication with the council members, and the council members also gradually turned from consultants into decision makers. It is the council that makes the final decision on strategic plans, annual working plans and the budget each year. Meanwhile, Sun Zhongkai was appointed as the first Permanent Executive Director of the Council. Joining Stars and Rain in 2002, Sun used to be responsible for volunteer management, project management and fundraising, and was involved in the establishment of the Heart-Alliance Network. When he assumed the post, Stars and Rain’s business enjoyed significant development. Its budget in 2010 was around RMB 2 million, which included RMB 1 million of service incomes and some RMB 1 million of donations. In 2013, however, service incomes and donations reached RMB 2.64 million and RMB 3.87 million respectively. Under his leadership, Stars and Rain now enjoys core businesses in the following areas: parent training, service programmes, professional training and development, industrial promotion and supportive networks.

Stars and Rain is one of the few NGOs in China that paid attention to the development of a balanced governance structure and the steady transition of powers between different generations of leadership as soon as it was established, thanks to the founder's focus and vision on governance issues. More importantly, Stars and Rain is a social enterprise, and the income from professional services already held a dominant position in its total income once it was established. This ensures that the strategic implementation of Stars and Rain will be less affected by changes in donation resources.

IV. The Path to Scale Development that Does not Pursue Scale Development

As a social enterprise entering its maturing and development stage, Stars and Rain did not try to expand its social impact by simply pursuing expansion in the size of its customer service, and this is quite different from the service-based social enterprises both at home and abroad. Executive Director Sun Zhongkai of Stars and Rain noted: "We do not want a bigger size. From a business point of view, it is easy to turn Stars and Rain into a completely successful business or to generate more profits. But this is not what we want. From the founder to myself, at least, our mission is clearly to enable more people to pay attention to this topic and take actions instead of making ourselves bigger and bigger."

With a position such as this, Stars and Rain first emphasises giving further play to its advantages in professional techniques and the brand, so as to provide more refined and convenient services. Secondly, through the "Heart-Alliance Network" designed to share experience and resources with other autism service organisations/institutions, Stars and Rain tries to offer its peers training in organising capacity building and action guidance, training in professional knowledge of teachers, improving the quality of the autism service industry and setting up professional standards for the autism service industry. Meanwhile, through improving Chinese society's respect for the equal right to survive of the disabled, Stars and Rain is committed to stimulating social concerns and acceptance and government recognition, facilitating the formulation and improvement of policies and laws on autistic persons and improving the living environment of this special community.

Conclusion:

As a social enterprise with a history of 21 years that has entered the stage of stable development, Stars and Rain may provide other domestic social enterprises with the following advice:

- It is the fundamental prerequisite of service-based social enterprises to, based on the demands of the target customers, cultivate their own professional competences and then translate them into a steady service income.
- Standardised and balanced governance structures are guarantees of the scale development of social enterprises.
- A social enterprise should first do a good job in service delivery while bringing the scale of target customers under control. Meanwhile, with its own professional competence, it should also facilitate the development of the industry by providing its peers with knowledge products and then advocate its ideas. This is a way for social enterprises to expand their impact.