

University of Toronto – York University
Joint Centre for Asia Pacific Studies



**Auto-Organization Within
Chinese Society:
A Historical View**

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Series Preface

What lies behind the dynamic economic growth that East and Southeast Asia have experienced in the past two decades? What is the extent of economic integration in the region? Is the process of regionalization likely to foster distinct regional institutions and processes? What are the specific connections between economic, social and political development? How do the security issues of the post-Cold War agenda link to development concerns? What strategies are Eastern Asian governments using to integrate into the region and what devices are they using to protect themselves from the accompanying environmental and social dislocations? What implications do these changes have for Canadian developmental assistance programs in the region?

These are some of the questions that are being addressed in an innovative three-year research program supported by the Canadian International Development Agency and administered by the Joint Centre for Asia Pacific Studies.

The main element of the program is the commissioning of some thirty papers prepared by academic specialists in Canada and Asia. The immediate audience for the papers is officials in the Asia Branch of CIDA and their colleagues in other government departments.

An additional objective, which CIDA has encouraged, is the enrichment of public discussion of Canadian interests and involvement in the region. This is being pursued through broader dissemination of the papers and through a series of meetings involving government officials, academics, businesspeople and representatives of nongovernmental organizations.

We are thus grateful to CIDA for permitting us to publish in slightly altered form some of the papers produced for the project. It should be emphasized that the views expressed are the responsibility of the authors themselves and not CIDA.

Paul M. Evans
Director and Series Editor

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Executive Summary

The relationship between state and society in China has received much attention since 1989, when an autonomous popular movement pressured the state, with disastrous consequences. Since that time, some have argued that China in the 1980s began to develop "civil society." This concept, which is important to Western self-conceptions about the autonomy of society from the state, designates the social realm in which people organize themselves in ways that are voluntary, self-supporting, and autonomous from the state. Others have suggested, however, that the state-society relationship in China does not allow for such a concept, and that the Chinese tradition does not allow conceptualizing the notion that society has legitimate power against the state.

The present study proposes that China does indeed have a tradition of social organization independent of the state. It argues that auto-organization—the organizing of social groups by themselves rather than at the behest of the state—has been an important factor shaping the lives of Chinese individuals and has contributed to the formation of the complex relationship between state and society that pertains in China today.

Although auto-organization has been weak during the People's Republic, it flowered under difficult conditions during the Republican era (1912–49). This study proposes four principles of auto-organization (locality, occupation, fellowship, and common cause), and uses these categories to reconstruct part of the organizational life of Shanghai during the late 1930s. This reconstruction illustrates the vitality of auto-organization at that time and suggests some of its characteristics: most notably, that Chinese people tend to organize themselves most actively at moments of political crisis; and that Chinese social organizations, while obliged by the Chinese state to remain nonpolitical, are organized for politics at some level nonetheless.

The study does not argue that China had or has civil society. But it does suggest that auto-organization is not foreign to Chinese political life, and that the burst of auto-organizational activity in 1989 is part of a tradition and historical memory that may have an influential role to play in China's future. It also argues that auto-organization does not destabilize a regime, but rather serves to compensate for instability induced by the state.

Introduction

The concept of “civil society” pivots on the post-eighteenth-century habit of distinguishing the realm of the political—“the state”—from the realm of the social—“society.” This distinction between state and society has grown out of the historical experience of state-formation under capitalism in the European West, explained as a process of social forces from below progressively limiting state power above: through elite challenges to the power of sovereigns (through the process of constitutionalism), through the ascendancy of market principles (in the form of capitalism), and through the pressure of public opinion on state decisions (in the realm of what has been called the public sphere).

The state-society relationship is regarded as a source of stability in Western societies; it is just as regularly viewed as a source of instability in authoritarian regimes in the Third World. Where democracy has failed, its failure has been attributed to blockages or imbalances in this relationship, and proposals to remedy this problem variously identify the state (located on a spectrum from authoritarian to democratic) or society (ranging from vertical to horizontal) as the principal locus of dynamism, or barrier in need of removal, for broadening the political process and enhancing regime stability in the Third World. Among Western observers, pragmatists favor accepting the power of the state over society in their proposals for Third World political development; the reform-minded argue in favor of strengthening society against the state.

Analyzing the structure of power in China in terms of the state-society relationship can provide insights into how power is distributed, and how the exercise of power is alternately publicized and hidden from view, creating the sort of instability that is essential for power to be effective. Yet an analysis predicated on a clear distinction between state and society poses difficulties in the Chinese context. The state has been a far more conspicuous element in constructions of the moral world in China than in the West, where the demands of society for representation both within and against the state have been strong.¹ A view that polarizes society against the state derives from a conception of society as larger and morally more legitimate than the state. In China, by contrast, promoting “society” as a locus of legitimate public action has less easily found moral terrain on which to stand that has not already been appropriated by the state or effectively delegitimized by state ideology.

The apparent weakness of Chinese society vis-à-vis the state may signal an ideological blind limiting people’s ability to recognize the full extent of their subordination to the state—a blind that only an externally situated analysis can raise. On the other hand, the notion that society in China is “weak” may signal an unwarranted assumption about universal norms about state and society that simply do not apply within Chinese political culture, leading us to conclude that what *is* there signifies an absence of what *should be* there. Both are misperceptions, and both affect how we think of China. Political regimes in China have

indeed succeeded in building and communicating an effective ideological casing—what might be summarized as a conviction in the necessity and benignity of a directive state—that blocks an effective critique of state power from within the Chinese world view. That conviction has been formative in determining how actors within the Chinese setting imagine, broker, and pursue political opportunities. It can be left out of the analysis only at the risk of missing how Chinese orient themselves to issues of power. To some extent, however, the internationalization of human-rights discourse since the 1980s has altered the terms through which the Chinese government must enunciate its legitimacy. International criticism of the government's human-rights record over the past decade has exposed the regime to internal, society-based scrutiny that it has not been able completely to deflect by appealing to a culturally sanctioned tradition of state-over-society. Although this criticism derives originally from assumptions that have little to do with long-established Chinese notions of state and society, it is also beginning to draw on alternative moral expectations and submerged historical memories within Chinese traditions that recognize the power of society without being dependent on Western notions about human rights or the power of society against the state.

The concept of "civil society" has been introduced into discussions on China as a potential framework for analyzing recent developments, notably the 1989 Democracy Movement and its legacy. The concept belongs to a tradition of political thought originating outside China, of course, and has only recently and incompletely been incorporated into the domestic critique of the Chinese state. From one point of view, "civil society" has everything to do with the history of the West and our contemporary critique of the erosion of critical and communicative action in advanced capitalist society, and little if anything to do with a place as different from the West as China. From another, however, an analysis that sheds new light on significant questions, even if it happens to be externally derived, may be worth considering.

To broach the concept or any of its constitutive elements with regard to China, it is essential to bear in mind three cautions, two conceptual and one historical. The first has been made by Philip Kuhn, who has sensibly cautioned that civil society is a model, not a reality. He points out that the "West" from which Jürgen Habermas, among others, has elaborated the concept of civil society is not the historical West but its theoretical double. Habermasian constructions of civil society and public sphere are ideal types, not direct transcriptions of concrete historical formations (Kuhn 1994:305–307). Since the concept of civil society is simply that, a concept, we should not think of Europe as "having" civil society; rather, civil society is a concept that provides a certain analytical perspective on Europe. In the same vein, China does not "have" civil society, however many of the elements associated with this Europe-derived concept can be traced in the Chinese past and present. Civil society in China is not a reality but a concept.

The second caution proceeds from the first: comparative history driven by concepts is in danger not only of borrowing a model and assuming a reality attached to it, but of importing inappropriate assumptions (most particularly in this case, assumptions about the reach of the state) as we move from one cultural/historical context to another. This danger is heightened when working from a concept like civil society, which through Habermas carries explicit critical resources for the analysis of Western society. Moving from the European context to the Chinese requires bearing in mind the very different historical and philosophical ground on which the concept of civil society was developed, in contrast with that to which it is being transferred. Bringing with the concept expectations regarding social and political life that do not apply and have historically never applied to the new context threatens to reduce the concept to little more than a banal generality that shrugs off the test of history.

The third caution, which Bin Wong (1993:44–45) has urged, considers the implications of importing wrong assumptions into the task of writing social theory. He advises that comparative history not be undertaken on the presumption that similarities signify parallels or convergences. To avoid a unilinear Eurocentrism, comparative history must allow that profound historical differences can underlie similarities and must grant what is distinctive in the historical trajectory of Chinese society as much theoretical weight as what is distinctive about the history of European society. Otherwise, while picking out new historical possibilities as we look at China from a Western perspective, we may fail to see those that lie closer to the heart of the Chinese experience. The task of the genuine comparativist is to take the European and the Chinese historical experiences and read equally from both when constructing general models of state and society.

Bearing these caveats in mind, I remain willing to concede to the concept of civil society a provisional usefulness pending its eventual retheorization or relegation to the status of a merely local explanation of historical change. If it helps to raise questions about the relationship between state and society that, at this point in the history of social theory, a conventional familiarity with Chinese state traditions keeps us from considering, then its application has merit. The chance that such new questions might in fact lead to informative hypotheses about the nature of Chinese society is notably strengthened when the questions are asked of China in its immediate post-imperial phase, when social and political institutions were most in flux and the grip of established practices weakened by political challenges from within and without.

Auto-Organization

A recent definition characterizes civil society in part as "the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, [and] autonomous from the state" (Diamond 1994:5).² The present study has been written to reflect upon the voluntary, autonomous organizing of social life in

China, a process that I shall refer to as auto-organization and will distinguish from the organizing of social life at state direction.

The Chinese state over the past three millennia has been active recurrently and conspicuously in organizing people into social units or "communities." An early ideal for the state modeling of community units, still active in Chinese cultural memory, is the ancient well-field system. According to this system, arable land was divided into units of nine equal parcels distributed among eight households, each getting one parcel to cultivate and all holding joint responsibility for cultivating the ninth and tendering its product as tribute to an overlord/state.³ Although the well-field model rested on the existence of natural communities predating the formation of the state in the second millennium BCE, it assumed the state's right to impose internal boundaries and to group people according to principles that could override natural social arrangements.

Not all organizing through Chinese history has been at the behest of the state, however. The Chinese have recurrently formed communities that are not under the direction of the state nor bound to such state functions as revenue extraction. This process of autonomous group formation, or auto-organization, as I shall refer to it, has gone on within Chinese society since the emergence of the state, often out of its sight, and sometimes in tandem with (even in cooperation with) state interventions at the local level. Auto-organization has been an important factor shaping the lives of Chinese. It has contributed to the formation of the particular historical relationship between state and society that pertains in China today, rendering that relationship more complex, and more disjointed, than is usually acknowledged.

Auto-organization also testifies to the presence within Chinese society of a principle of horizontal integration, which political science scholarship tends to neglect. The standard model of Chinese society, which adopts the perspective of its elites, identifies local corporatism—through which power is divided among functionally specific groups (Thompson 1995:58)—as the principle governing how people are grouped in the local setting. Local corporatism stresses the vertical integration of commoners with elites, to whom they surrender their political voice, and minimizes the capabilities and opportunities that people have to communicate horizontally and form cooperative bodies. Kinship structures are regarded as reinforcing this vertical fragmentation. Local corporatism has undeniably been a characteristic structure of Chinese society in the imperial period and beyond, shaping people's fundamental assumptions about social action. But I would suggest that it does not exhaust the principles of social organization, in China or anywhere else. In his study of contemporary Italy, Robert Putnam has noted distinctive variation in the structure of local political life. At one extreme are the civic communities he tends to find in northern Italy, which are "marked by an active, public-spirited citizenry, by egalitarian political relations, by a social fabric of trust and cooperation." At the other extreme in southern Italy he sees places "cursed with vertically structured politics, a social

life of fragmentation and isolation, and a culture of distrust" (Putnam 1993:15). Putnam regards the second type of local society, where "force and family provide a primitive substitute for the civic community," as a "second-best, 'default' solution" to the challenge of building social integration (Putnam 1993:178), but this negative evaluation does not induce him to elevate the latter to the status of what may be considered "typically" Italian. Both civic and uncivic communities exist in Italy, and do so across a range of possible modes of social integration that vary according to local habits and rational strategies for survival that Putnam traces back a thousand years.

I would argue in the same vein that while the clientelistic fragmentation of local corporatism can be widely evinced in Chinese society, both historical and contemporary, so too it is possible to identify consistent instances of associative behavior based on voluntary cooperation. Local corporatism may be one principle operative in the Chinese context, but it is not the only principle of Chinese social organization. This paper will indicate the presence of a more cooperative principle of social integration at the local level in the last four centuries. Putnam has argued, in keeping with the new historical institutionalism in the field of political science, that the regional variation in Italy between horizontally and vertically structured communities is best explained in terms of the historical practices by which social pathologies have become established. I assume the same argument for China, which is based on the idea that people interact socially in terms of the choices that political opportunity has made available to them over time, though I must do so without being able to test for it by comparing different regions. In this paper I shall reconstruct the organizational life of only one case, Shanghai.

Shanghai, both as county and as city, is a place that has had a reasonably well-developed civic culture going back at least to the latter half of the sixteenth century. In a text written in 1606 to honor the restoration of the Confucian shrine at the county school, an elderly local scholar recalls a time when Shanghai was characterized by a higher level of distrust, gang justice, and fraud than any other county in the region. He asserts that the zealous administration of local officials in recent years has helped greatly to inspire popular trust in the gentry, which in turn has stabilized local society (Shanghai 1980:467–468). As if to affirm the commitment of the next generation to this stabilizing process, the names of all 267 *shengyuan* registered in the county school have been entered on the stele on which his text is inscribed. The way in which the author formulates his observation suggests that a transition from uncivic to civic community may have taken place during his own lifetime, although more evidence is needed to confirm this impression. In the seventeenth century, the sphere of public commercial organization in the city of Shanghai developed rapidly, as I shall note below, leading to a marked growth in formal trade and native-place organizations in the eighteenth. This growth not only continued but increased after Shanghai's designation as a treaty port in 1842, resulting in a productive mix of Chinese and Western-style association-building through the latter part of the

nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. Because of its treaty-port status, Shanghai has been singled out as an exception to Chinese patterns of urban development, largely because of the foreigners' view of the transformation they felt that they brought about to what they considered an otherwise insignificant town. By going back before 1842, I will show that a process of civic-community formation was already well under way. I will also argue that the later florescence of associational life in Shanghai cannot be adequately assessed without recognizing the depth of historical experience that lay behind treaty-port Shanghai, although I acknowledge that we do not yet have a sufficiently dense body of research on Shanghai society to demonstrate this hypothesis conclusively.

This paper will begin by reconstructing, in brief outline, aspects of auto-organization in Shanghai during the late-imperial period, from the sixteenth century to 1911, to underscore the historical foundation on which associational life in the twentieth century came to be built. The focus of the study, however, will be on the Republican period (1912–49), when the political strictures on auto-organization were removed. We will also briefly consider the submergence and resurgence of auto-organizational activity during the People's Republic. Empire, republic, and people's republic differ in their constitutions, each following a distinct set of principles ordering public life and distributing political power. What will be striking is the extent to which auto-organizational activity and types crossed the political divides of 1911 and 1949, and as well the degree to which Western practices and discourses of social organization have played only a secondary role.

On the basis of an extensive survey of sources from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, I identify for the purpose of this study four principles by which Chinese have constituted nonkin groups: (1) locality, (2) occupation, and what for want of an established terminology I call (3) fellowship and (4) common cause.⁴ These principles situate along a continuum of voluntarism, locality at one end creating associations assembled from largely pre-established ties, and fellowship and common cause at the other, grouping people on a voluntary basis. The four principles and some historical types are listed in Table 1.

Late-Imperial Foundations

Locality was a basic marker of identification for all Chinese in the late-imperial period. Living together in the same place provided the most obvious foundation for group identity. Members of a village were simultaneously members of the village society (*she*), which was struck and dissolved as necessary to raise funds for religious festivals, unify local efforts in such projects as irrigation, and coordinate labour for such tasks as crop-watching.⁵ Although locality is primarily an ascriptive rather than elective identity, within the local community it involved a transgression of kinship boundaries and an affirmation of the value of horizontal ties.

Table 1
Principles of Auto-Organization and Selected Historical Types

Principles	Late-Imperial Types	Republican Types
Locality	Village society	Village committee Street union, district association
	Native-place association	Fellow countrymen's association
Occupation	Guild	Trade association, chamber of commerce Occupational association Trade union, workers' association
Fellowship	Religious society Benevolent society	Religious society, church Benevolent society, charity Improvement society
	Literary club	Dramatic society, choral society, book club Athletic club Women's association Youth group
	Academy	Private school, university Student union, alumni association Research society
Common cause		Policy advocacy group Political party

Living away from a common locality also united people. Sojourners from the same province or county formed native-place organizations in increasing numbers in the Qing dynasty to pool resources and provide themselves with social support and services that they otherwise lacked by virtue of being away from home. Such groups existed prior to formalizing their members into corporate native-place associations. Sources from Shanghai indicate that out-of-county residents in the Ming dynasty clubbed together in loose affiliations or "groups" (*bang*) of people sharing a common origin. Northerners tended to group by province—we know that there existed Shanxi and Shandong *bang* in Shanghai in the late Ming, for example—while southerners, who were more numerous, associated by prefecture. In the seventeenth century, these groups began combining resources to establish such sojourner institutions as nonlineage cemeteries (Shanghai 1980:194). By the eighteenth, native-place associations in Shanghai were constructing guildhalls (*huiguan*) where social and ritual functions reinforced the solidarity of the group and its authority in local society (Shanghai 1980:235). The term "public office" (*gongsuo*) came into general use

in the nineteenth century to signify the offices that native-place associations maintained to handle their members' affairs at a time when the number of native-place associations putting up buildings expanded conspicuously (Negishi 1951:6; Johnson 1995: 124–52).

Occupation was a second principle of group formation. It operated principally among urban artisans and merchants who belonged to guilds (*hang* or *hui*) distinguished by the goods they made or traded. While manufacturing guilds were well established before the Qing, the institution of the trade guildhall (also *huiguan*) proliferated during the dynasty among merchants who were not from the same locality. Shanghai's maritime merchants furnish an example of a commercial guild that intensified its corporate identity without reliance on locality-based ties. These merchants enter the historical record in 1715 when they pooled their resources to construct the Commercial Shippers' Guildhall (*Shangchuan huiguan*) (Shanghai 1980:197). The stele recording the original building of the guildhall does not indicate whether these merchants associated as a guild prior to erecting this sign of their corporate identity, though it is likely that they did.

The state looked favorably on guilds as a means of guaranteeing its own interests, for it could offload onto them such matters as taxation and urban control rather than trying to ramify its own control mechanisms into every nook of urban society, which was naturally resistant to the reach of the state. The state's interest in supporting this form of social organization is reflected in the willingness of local officials to intervene whenever the commercial interests of guild members were threatened by interlopers. When for example the chandlers of both the Ningbo and Shaoxing *bang* found their members being subject to extortion by self-appointed "heads of the trade" (*hangtou*) who fraudulently claimed they were collecting legitimate taxes, they appealed successfully to the Shanghai magistrate's office in 1868 for a writ of official protection (Shanghai 1980:131).

Given the prevalence of sojourners among merchants, occupational and native-place identities often overlapped, as did the institutional forms they constructed, guildhalls (*huiguan*) and public offices (*gongsuo*). For example, sojourners from Ningbo, who were prominent in Shanghai banking circles, founded both the money trade guild (*Shanghai qianye gongsuo*) and the Ningbo native-place association (*Siming gongsuo*) in the latter half of the eighteenth century. As institutions they were distinct, but their memberships overlapped extensively. By working through both associations, Ningbo bankers were able "not only to create an important monopoly in Shanghai commerce, but to exercise a powerful influence in the financial structure of all China" (Jones 1974:78).

Fellowship-based organizations were formed on the strength of shared interests rather than nonelective ties. One was not born into a fellowship group, though the social situatedness of the fellowship group meant that kinship,

locality, occupation, and business ties all shaped and influenced membership. The fellowship principle produced the richest array of auto-organizational forms in the late-imperial period. There were devotional societies (usually *hui*) organized to promote the worship of a particular deity, encourage religious devotion among members, and mobilize funds for temple-building; these became quite popular among local gentry in the sixteenth and seventeenth century (Brook 1993:103–107). Closely associated historically were benevolent societies (*tongshan hui*, *tongshan tang*), which were organized to carry out charitable work; these were increasingly popular with local gentry in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Infant Protection Bureau of Shanghai in the 1870s is a good, late example. Funded by local gentry with extensive experience in managing charitable enterprises, it was organized explicitly to compensate for the failure of local officials to take seriously or deal effectively with what local elites perceived to be unacceptably high rates of infant mortality, especially for girls (Fuma 1995:51–52, 58).

The most common, and most characteristic, friendship-based association within elite circles was the literary club. Lu Shen (1477–1544), the dominant figure in the local gentry of Shanghai in the 1520s, formed such a club or society (*she*) among the leading Shanghai writers and calligraphers of his time. So too Dong Qichang (1555–1636), native to Shanghai and recognized as the greatest painter of the late Ming period, formed a poetry society in his younger days and later in life was a member of a Buddhist Lotus Society with eminent scholars in the prefectural capital of Songjiang (Dong 1630:1.36a, 4.54a). A literary club could be no more than a trivial exercise in socializing among a closed class faction, but it could also be critical to the process by which a politically unenfranchised gentry built horizontal social ties, providing them with a forum for public discussion and giving them a presence in local affairs and influence with state representatives (Brook 1990:38–43). Depending on the political climate, these groups could further formalize themselves into academies (*shuyuan*). Academies were unofficial institutions that offered private instruction to examination candidates but also hosted academic discussions on pressing moral and political topics among the scholars of a county or even wider region. Shanghai did not have a widely known academy in the Ming dynasty, but the famous Donglin Academy in nearby Wuxi became, early in the seventeenth century, a forum for a conservative revitalization of Confucianism and a base for challenging bureaucratic and eunuch factions at court. These "experiments in independent moral cultivation," as Meskill (1982:138) has described them, occupied a "precarious" niche in the political structure of late-imperial China—precisely because of the ease with which they could become bases for challenging state policies.⁶ In times of intense competition for political resources, literary clubs and academies could become building blocks by which "bureaucratic differences were articulated into extra-bureaucratic social movements" (Wakeman 1985:92). This sort of politicization was strong in the last four

decades of the Ming dynasty, when soft alliances among literary clubs led to the formation of vertically integrated factions interested in challenging the growing power of the eunuch establishment at court.

The fourth principle of auto-organization, common cause, was not available in the imperial era, for the simple reason that the state forbade those other than incumbent officials from discussing affairs of state. In actual fact, many fellowship-based organizations, from religious societies to academies, existed on the strength of a common espousal of public causes or a common aspiration for action. The Chinese state's monopoly of explicitly political resources made negotiating with interest groups within society inconceivable. The only recognized common cause was the cause of the state, and any group that positioned itself for political influence was automatically regarded as doing so for a cause less than the cause of the whole. Such a group was labeled a *dang*, which would become the term used for political party early in the twentieth century (via Japanese usage in the nineteenth). *Dang* could signify nothing more than a tight group of like-minded people—Dong Qichang (1630:1.36b–37a) refers repeatedly to his cohort of gentry friends as “our party” (*wu dang*)—but it also had a history of being used in a derogatory sense for political cliques. Thus when a eunuch faction within the Ming imperial household arrogated to itself the authority of the emperor, officials condemned this takeover in terms of *dang*. So too, though, did early-Qing commentators condemn late-Ming factions struggling to challenge abuses at court. Looking back at the disarray that led to the dynasty's fall, Tang Zhen refused to listen to the common defence of the reform faction as having been the only option for good men to battle evil. “*Dang* are the mortal disease of the state,” he declared in his uncompromising essay, “Root out Factions.” “Fail to control them and the state will perish” (Tang 1984:449). Tang allows no notion that auto-organization could be a foundation for stability. Stability's only guarantee was a strong state—even if it was a state headed by foreign invaders like the Manchus. The Manchu emperors adopted this interpretation that the Ming dynasty had fallen because of internal factions and published edicts against forming *dang*, taking brotherhood oaths, or gathering in clubs.⁷

The foregoing picture of auto-organizations based on locality, occupation, and fellowship that I have traced in the history of Shanghai during the late-imperial period amounts to no more than a superficial glance at the social structure of a city where the fabric of social and commercial ties became only more complex and dense over time. This glance nonetheless does testify to a significant measure of association-building before the twentieth century that did not just formalize clientelistic bonds but, at least in some cases, constituted bases from which individuals socialized in the first instance but also, on the evidence of having emerged into the public record, sought to affect the terms on which they related with other social groups and with the state. This auto-organizational activity provided an important foundation for the rich associative life of the Republican era.

The Republican Experience

The formal ban on *dang* came to an end with the fall of the empire in 1911. Even before that collapse, however, the legal framework for auto-organization within Chinese society had begun to change. The cumulative burden of China's defeat by Japan in 1895, the collapse of the Guangxu reform regime in 1898, and the occupation of Beijing by foreign troops suppressing the Boxer uprising in 1900 pushed intellectuals, and eventually the Qing court, in the direction of limited constitutionalism. In 1902, the regime promulgated the first in a series of edicts that conceded to propertied individuals the right to associate for public purposes. The first such edict called for the organization, by urban officials, of chambers of commerce, although a national code governing their operation was not published until 1914 (Garrett 1974:217–218). Recognition of the rights of assembly and association in other contexts followed. To tag the new public organizations, the state created the registration category of “legal group” (*fatuan*). It made this status available in 1903 to the newly emerging professionals—lawyers, bankers, industrialists—who wanted to form associations to regulate their members' activities and promote the elite's ability to intervene with the state in civic matters that affected them.⁸

With the notable exception of the release of common-cause association from prohibition, the forms that auto-organization had taken in the late-imperial period did not suddenly change with the endowment of legal status under a Republican constitution. The imperial-era types continued to exist, sometimes to mutate, and certainly to proliferate in the Republican era. If 1911 marks a shift in Chinese auto-organizational practice, it is has to do firstly with the growth of cities as political centres, and secondly with the altered position of the state.

The founding of the Republic opened up urban politics. Compared to a century earlier, urban residents had greater opportunities to organize themselves and, through these organizations, to seek to influence municipal and national affairs. The Republican Revolution, the May Fourth Movement of 1919, the May Thirtieth strike wave of 1925, and the anti-Japanese agitations of 1931–32 and 1937 were only the most prominent of the political crises that engaged large numbers of urban Chinese. As it became possible for anyone to become an actor in these events, people quickly recognized that the most effective way to act was as an organization rather than as an individual. Associations of all types proliferated in Shanghai in the 1910s and beyond: fellow-countrymen's associations, student unions, street unions, advocacy groups. Unlike the new political parties, these were not political organizations in the sense that they identified their goal as the capture of state power; rather, they were social organizations. Though *organized in society*, they were *organized for politics* in the sense of seeking to influence state policies in their favor. The presence of these auto-organizations created a new civic politics that changed the face of political life in the cities

and further stimulated auto-organizational activity in a way that greatly altered the social landscape of urban China. It did so because of the continuities with the past, not the disjunctures. As David Strand (1994:310) has stressed, and as this paper argues, urban politics in the Republic were pursued on the foundation of "a rich associational life which in turn was rooted in long-standing social practices in neighborhoods and occupational groups."

Secondly, 1911 marked a shift in the state's relationship to auto-organization. The Republican state found itself obliged to respond to and interact with social organizations in ways that the imperial regime did not tolerate. A Qing magistrate had to work with interested local groups—the local gentry, merchant guilds, native-place associations—to negotiate the state's concerns with their collective interests, a negotiation that is often obscured by the magistrate's patronage of their institutions. The Republic did not leave the state's relationship to social organizations on such an informal, ad hoc footing, but put regulations in place to set limits on the formation and activities of social organizations. It required formal registration and used that process to decide whether an organization should be allowed to exist and what activities it would be allowed to pursue. The Shanghai city government issued regulations on trade associations in 1930 in conformity with guidelines issued by the Guomintang regime, although as one scholar has noted the effect was not to promote government involvement but to stimulate the emergence of many new associations (Lu 1995:113). In dealing with more politically sensitive associations, however, the modernizing state was anxious to channel public activism in ways that enabled it to direct and control the modernization process without opening political challenges from below, and therefore could not afford to remain a disinterested observer of civic organizing. As Guomintang, and Communist, regimes registered organizations above ground, their parties and security apparatuses expended enormous efforts penetrating them or setting up rivals, particularly those espousing a common cause that could challenge the existing state. The political stakes in an unstable period were simply too high to permit the autonomy of society.

To provide a sense of the associational life of Republican Shanghai, I have surveyed social organizations that were sufficiently active in the late 1930s to have come to the attention of the Special Branch of the Shanghai Municipal Police (SMP). The SMP was a foreign police agency under the jurisdiction of the Shanghai Municipal Council (SMC), which oversaw the administration of the International Settlement. The Special Branch, which was charged with investigating political matters such as dissent and sedition as well as issues that could potentially have international consequences, became particularly interested in the activities of social organizations in the wake of Japan's invasion of China in the summer of 1937, when many such organizations in Shanghai mobilized to protest Japan's actions. From the files of the Special Branch I have culled three sets of organizations: eighty-six associations that engaged in public

Table 2
Types of Associations Active in Shanghai, 1937–41

Types	Locality	Occupation	Fellowship	Common Cause	Total
Organizations active in July–August 1937 (see Table 3)	15	34	36	1	86
National Salvation Associations formed in July–August 1937 (see Table 4)	2	14	22	7	45
Organizations seeking/evading registration between 1937 and 1941 (see Table 5)	2	12	7	1	22
Totals	19	60	65	9	153

protests or issued statements of opposition to Japan during July and August 1937 (see Table 3); forty-five National Salvation Associations created by existing organizations to mobilize public opinion against Japan and raise funds to support the Chinese army (see Table 4); and twenty-two organizations that either applied or failed to apply to the SMP for registration between December 1937 and January 1941 (see Table 5). In the discussion that follows, I shall refer to these associations by their English names as they are recorded in the SMP files.

These sets of auto-organizations are broken down by type in Table 2.⁹ The first set of organizations—the eighty-six listed in Table 3 that came to Special Branch attention in July and August 1937—include significant numbers of almost every type. Nine native-place associations appear in this set, from prestigious prefectural groups like the Ningpo Fellow Countrymen's Association to provincial associations representing natives of Anhui, Shandong, Sichuan, and Zhejiang, along with six local Shanghai district associations. The occupation-based associations include eighteen trade associations (as traditional as the Bean and Rice Hong Owners' Association, and as modern as the Shanghai Film Producers' Association), thirteen professional societies (of bankers, lawyers, dramatists, marine engineers, reporters, university professors, and wood sculptors, to name only some of them), and three trade unions. The category showing the largest number of organizations was fellowship-based groups, which included five benevolent societies (including the Chinese Red Cross Society), five improvement societies, a sports club, two choral societies, two drama clubs, three reading groups, one vocational school, two alumni associations, ten research societies, and five women's organizations. The sole common-cause group was the Chinese Communist Youth League, which operated clandestinely in Shanghai.

The second set of organizations identified in the SMP files consists of National Salvation associations that were established by existing organizations in July and August 1937 (listed in Table 4). For this set the distribution is slightly different than for the previous set. Only two native-place associations came to the attention of the Special Branch as engaged in this sort of organizing, and one of these, the Cantonese Educational Circles' National Salvation Service Group, was in fact an occupational subset of a provincial group. Occupational, fellowship, and common-cause groups proved to be far more significant in mobilizing public opposition to Japan. Compared to the previous set, trade associations were considerably less prominent (only two).

The twenty-two organizations listed in Table 5 that applied or failed to apply for registration with the SMC represent only a small number of such groups for which I was able to find documentation, usually the group's formal application for registration, in the Special Branch archive. Registration had been required of Chinese public bodies operating within the International Settlement before 1937, and it was reaffirmed by an SMP investigation of the status of all organizations in the summer of 1938 (SMP file D-8692). The intent of this investigation was to limit the proliferation of National Salvation Associations, which the SMC judged as jeopardizing the weak independence that the International Settlement strove to maintain after Japan had established control over the rest of Shanghai (Fu 1993:84ff.). The one application from a common-cause group, the "Unwilling to Become Slaves" National Salvation Association was rejected on 13 November 1937. The deputy commissioner of the SMP Special Branch went on record to declare that he did "not propose to register *any National Salvation Societies* [emphasis in the original], or paper, in the Settlement at this time." He suspected them, rightly as it turned out, of being Guomindang and Communist fronts (SMP file D-8166). The Shanghai Municipal Council preferred to prevent auto-organization from moving out into the volatile arena of common cause.

To those associations that could gain recognition, however, registration must have seemed increasingly attractive as the Japanese Army pressured Chinese groups to show support for the occupation. Some had been in existence well before the occupation. Of the two native-place associations that applied (both for counties in the hinterland of Ningbo), the Fenghua association had been formed in 1924 and the Xiangshan association in 1935; presumably they came forward to register in the summer of 1940 in the hope of gaining some protection through their status with the SMC. Most of the other associations seeking registration had been founded since July 1937. This was the month when the San Sing (Sansheng or "Three Lives") Dramatic Society came into existence, according to its application for registration dated 20 June 1940. This "dramatic society" was not an amateur theatre group, as the name might have suggested, but a workers' association set up by the managements of three cotton and flour mills, all with the character *sheng* (life) in their names, to organize after-hours

activities for their employees. These three mills were all that remained of the great industrial empire of the famous Rong family after Japan occupied the parts of Shanghai where the Rongs' other mills were located.

These findings testify that native-place identity continued to matter as an urban auto-organizing principle in Republican Shanghai, as the research of Bryna Goodman (1992, 1995, 1996) has demonstrated. The findings also indicate that the principles of occupation and fellowship may have become even more prominent in the disoriented political climate of the Japanese occupation, suggesting that Shanghai residents were eager to create lateral social linkages to protect and advance their interests. Mutual aid and "friendship" societies, for example, like the Shanghai Municipal Monks' Adjustment Committee which was formed on 5 June 1940 and registered seven weeks later, tended to be occupation-based. They assumed increasing importance among the unprotected who faced growing deprivations under occupation. As Robert Putnam (1993:139) has noted of such groups in post-unification Italy, "these voluntary associations signified less an idealistic altruism than a pragmatic readiness to cooperate with others similarly placed in order to surmount the risks of a rapidly changing society."

Fellowship appears to have become the dominant auto-organizational principle at the time. Shanghai during the late 1930s was a time and place when almost any interest espoused in common was sufficient to bring individuals together to share and protect common concerns or to promote ideas within society. The old-style religious and benevolent societies continued to function past the imperial period, but alongside them appeared modern organizations like the Chinese Red Cross and the YMCA. The old literary clubs left no trace, but in their place emerged drama clubs, choral societies, sports clubs, reading circles, alumni associations, and improvement societies promoting causes from Esperanto to an improved system for learning Chinese characters. Many of these were also specifically for women or youth. The significance of their proliferation in the 1930s (most were founded before the emergency of 1937) cannot be exaggerated. These associations constituted an emerging structure of social cooperation and civic responsibility that was far broader than the associational fabric of late-imperial society, when membership in groups that extended beyond the confines of kinship or locality tended to be limited to those of elite status. Their impact on the formation of civic consciousness in the Republican period must have been considerable. To recur again to Putnam's findings on Italy:

Participation in civic organizations inculcates skills of cooperation as well as a sense of shared responsibility for collective endeavors. Moreover, when individuals belongs to "cross-cutting" groups with diverse goals and members, their attitudes will tend to moderate as a result of group interactions and cross-pressures. These effects, it is worth noting, do not require that the manifest purpose of the association be political. Taking part in a choral society

or a bird-watching club can teach self-discipline and an appreciation for the joys of successful collaboration (Putnam 1993:90).

Least overtly active in shaping the associational realm in the Republican era was the principle of common cause. The only explicitly political (banned) organization that appears in the first set of organizations for the summer of 1937 is the Chinese Communist Youth League. From another perspective, however, all of the forty-five National Salvation Associations could be interpreted as common-cause bodies, even though I have categorized all but seven according to the identity of their patron association (when this could be determined). Their sudden appearance signals that common cause, suppressed by state authorities in "normal" times, could become an important principle of organizing under conditions of sudden urgency or extreme political instability. The Japanese invasion also stimulated the formation of higher-order associations of previously separate organizations. Benevolent societies grouped together to form a Federation of Various Benevolent Societies for Famine Relief; women's associations joined forces to create the Shanghai Various Women's Organizations' Joint Office (under direct Guomintang sponsorship); and student unions linked up to create the University Students' Friendship Society. Not surprisingly, the SMP declined to register any of them.

Brief Comments on the State-Socialist Experience

During the first four decades of the People's Republic, the Chinese Communist Party succeeded in dominating associational life and disciplining the people to accept Party-led organizations as the appropriate vehicles for mobilizing social action and public opinion. Those organizations that were permitted to exist did so under Party tutelage. The leeway for such organizations (conceived and confined as elements of the Party's "United Front" with non-Party elements) was somewhat greater during the state-corporatist phases of the 1950s and 1980s. During the Cultural Revolutionary phase of the 1960s and 1970s, society was made to disappear into the state. Briefly during the first year of the Cultural Revolution, socially based Red Guard organizations sprang up in Shanghai, though most existed by virtue of covert support from a Party faction and all were eventually suppressed. Under the extreme conditions of that time, any sense of legitimate space between state and society was eliminated. To argue for autonomy was to argue for the uncoupling of society from the state, a claim judged as treasonable to the nation and its fleshly embodiment in Chairman Mao.

The political reform program of the 1980s moved in the direction of distinguishing Party and government, with the Party providing the rules by which the state would exist and the government charged with operating the machinery of state efficiently. This distinction was not one of state and society, but it did open some space within the flows of political power. One of these points of opening was the "mass body" (*qunzhong tuanti*). Prior to the late

1980s, these mass organizations were formed, directed, and managed by the Communist Party as adjuncts of state control. As part of the political reform program announced at the Thirteenth Party Congress in 1987, the relationship between Party organs and mass bodies was to be adjusted such that "each manages its particular functions and [the relationship] moves by stages toward systematization." More particularly, both Party and government were called upon to make fuller use of "mass bodies and basic-level autonomous organizations of a mass nature" in order that "matters concerning the masses are handled by the masses themselves according to law."¹⁰

That "masses" (*qunzhong*) and "autonomy" (*zizhi*) should be juxtaposed in this statement points to contrary lineages in the political reform position. "Masses" designates non-Party people whose political rights are determined by the Party; in the lexicon of Chinese Communism, the term is meaningless in the absence of the Party that gives it meaning. "Autonomy" on the other hand indicates at least superficially the absence of higher authority in decision-making within the body. What it asks to be absent is the Party. The political reform was not seeking to remove the Party from its right to intervene in social entities, however. Despite the reference to autonomy, it was not declaring that power would be dispersed away from the Party. Rather, it was rephrasing the authority of the Party in the abstract form of "law," to which Party-created bodies were obliged to accord. The rephrasing does open some space between Party organs and mass bodies, but does not legislate the formation of a civil society interposed between the masses as society and the Party as the state.

The language of "autonomy" would serve as a marker of resistance to Party control during the Democracy Movement, when students and workers formed "autonomous associations" (*zizhihui*). Occupation and fellowship were the main principles governing this brief phase of auto-organization. The process began in Beijing during the first week of the Democracy Movement (the third week of April 1989), and in Shanghai shortly afterward, with students forming their autonomous student unions by university that were distinct from those the Party organized for them. In Beijing the process continued the following week as these in turn combined into the Beijing Federation of Autonomous Student Unions. This organization was weakly integrated, vulnerable to factional splitting and unable to firm up its goals, yet it succeeded throughout May and early June in exercising a measure of leadership over the movement. Among Beijing workers the process was simpler and occurred much later. Prevented from organizing autonomous unions in their enterprises, workers on 25 May formed a Beijing Workers' Autonomous Union that aspired to occupying a structural position parallel to the students' federation. Students who were keen to mobilize worker support had distributed pamphlets that week praising Beijing workers for the support they had shown and reminding them of the heroic struggle of Polish workers to create Solidarity and remake the Polish state. This was the very parallel that most alarmed Chinese Party hierarchs, who feared the emergence

of an independent working-class organization far more than they anguished over declarations of autonomy from students, who as future elites could more easily be reincorporated into the state (Brook 1992:85). The undertakings marked a radical departure from both the state-dictatorial and state-corporatist models of the previous four decades of the People's Republic. They were strongly reminiscent of practices auto-organizations had used in the Republican era, although most participants appeared to be unaware of these precedents (Esherick and Wasserstrom 1990). They were also painfully vulnerable to state suppression.

Despite the setback experienced in 1989, occupation as a principle of group formation has gained ground since the 1980s with the growth of professional associations and local trade unions. Auto-organization will have to expand its presence within the currently emerging structure of state-society relations under the reform program. This necessity does not arise because of the moral claim of the individual to the right to associate, but more crudely because horizontal civic bonds contribute to improved levels of economic and institutional performance. The social engineers who are guiding the reform process have come to realize, to quote Putnam (1993:181) again, that "both states and markets operate more efficiently in civic settings." It is in the interest of a regime committed to economic growth to encourage participation in multiple arenas of social life, not just on an occupational basis but well beyond.

Some Characteristics of Chinese Auto-Organization

From the materials on Shanghai that have been presented in this paper, I would like to suggest five characteristics of auto-organization. Although derived from the Chinese historical experience, they may be salient in other cultures as well in which civil society is or has been in the process of formation. The first is the most obvious, and that is its ubiquity. Associations organized among the people were available to almost everyone in Chinese society, since most everyone could be reached through kin and locality networks, and most urbanites through ties of occupation as well. Their availability has increased in the twentieth century due to the opening up of political processes. Accordingly, it is absurd to suggest that Chinese people have no experience in mobilizing themselves into groups outside of the associational pathways provided by the state.

A second characteristic of Chinese auto-organization is a readiness to combine into larger entities, notably at times of crisis. Just as the Beijing Federation of Autonomous Student Unions was founded soon after the start of the Democracy Movement in 1989, so the Shanghai Students' Union emerged within four days of the May Fourth demonstration in Beijing in 1919 (SMP file IO-6691). It in turn became affiliated with a national students' association, although this pyramiding proved hugely difficult seventy years later. Street unions demonstrated a similar process during the 1919 movement, pyramiding at the national level in the Amalgamated Association of Street Unions. Above these and other citizens' federations emerged the National Organizations' Union

of China (SMP file IO-3524). Crisis had the same impact on the elaboration of associations during the May Thirtieth Movement in 1925, when the Shanghai General Trade Union was formed; and again during the crisis provoked by Japan's attacks on China in 1931-32 (Henriot 1993:66ff). Finally, as we have seen, the public outcry against Japan's invasion of China in 1937 generated a surge of alliance-building with the creation of a National Salvation Association for almost every constituency in Shanghai: students, cadets, women, merchants, vocational workers, cultural workers, reporters, editors, professors, youth, even children (SMP file D-8122).

The tendency to combine is as true *among* different types of association as well as *within* the same type. The ability of Chinese organizations to form cross-associational alliances and weave them together into a tight fabric of common-cause resistance has been marked, again at moments of crisis. It occurred in the 1911 Revolution, and again even more strongly in the May Fourth Movement in 1919, when student unions, chambers of commerce, native-place associations, trade associations, and even the Boy Scouts, coordinated their efforts to a common purpose (Goodman 1992; Wasserstrom 1992; SMP files IO-6691, D-4656). Japan's invasion in 1937 led to even broader alliance-formation, as the many National Salvation groups pyramided into the "Unwilling to Become Slaves" National Salvation Association.

A third characteristic of Chinese auto-organizational activity, implicit in the second, is its dependency on political crisis. This dependency produces impressive organizing at critical moments, but suggests difficulty in sustaining a consistent, day-to-day presence of auto-organizations in the public sphere. In more general terms, this difficulty reflects the instability or incompleteness of the rights culture as it has developed in twentieth-century China. A good example of this incompleteness is the People's Rights Protection League of China. The executive committee of the Shanghai branch, inaugurated on 17 January 1933, was composed of prestigious figures from within left Guomintang circles. According to an SMP Special Branch report on the League filed on 9 September 1936, "its object was to safeguard the rights of free association, speech, press and assembly, and oppose the arrest of political offenders of the Government" (SMP file D-8094). Support for this direct challenge to the hegemony of the right Guomintang faction was weak and the league soon folded. The frailty of the rights culture of Republican Shanghai was an effect of a violently repressive regime; but that repression in turn must be traced to the instability of the modernizing state, which finds itself unable to negotiate with particular interests because of its constant fear that each point of negotiation threatens to strip it of its legitimacy. Legitimacy ultimately relies on the perception that the state is governing in a consistent and reasonable (that is, lawful) manner—which is precisely what the People's Rights Protection League of China sought to realize when it called for recognition of the rights implied by auto-organization.

Although not free to be fully political, whether because of repression or because of the weakness of a culture of rights, the auto-organizational sphere in the Republican era was nonetheless, to use a phrase introduced early in this chapter, *organized for politics*. This is the fourth characteristic. Social organizations understood that their purpose was to influence the relationship between state and society, and to do so by pressuring the state. They might not be able to work explicitly for the institutionalizing of a legal order, for instance, and they wisely shrank from adopting explicitly political forms or platforms, but they could intervene to publicly scrutinize state actions. People at the time were aware of the political character of interventions in the public sphere, and sensibly shied away from common-cause entities in preference for bodies that did not declare political aims.

The same understanding underpins other types of auto-organization in Republican-era Shanghai. This includes the modern native-place association, the organizers of which often chose to interpret their work in modern, nationalist terms. Bryna Goodman (1992:101) has noted that such associations recognized their political character. She quotes a work report issued by the association of Henanese provincials in Shanghai that declared that to establish "nationalism it is necessary to have organizations" but that it is difficult to do so because, falling back on conventional wisdom, the "people's ability to organize is weak." The best way to exit from this conundrum, according to the Henanese author, is to work from native-place sentiment. By "going from the small to the great and from weakness to strength," the report insists, "nationalism becomes gradually possible." While accepting the notion that Chinese society somehow lacked the ability to build organic solidarity, the author has chosen to dignify locality as the effective building block of the modern Chinese nation-state. The formulation is awkward inasmuch as the author is obliged to work a counter-intuitive equation between localism and nationalism: he can express his commitment to the formation of the nation-state only in terms of a postponement. Nonetheless, he accepts that his association was organized for the politics of creating the solidary nation.

Of the different types of auto-organization, those based on the principle of fellowship contributed most forcefully at the time to the process of bringing the Chinese state within an accountability based on a shared set of rules (however much the rules themselves may have been under contestation). An occupation-based association by contrast was least likely to serve as a forum for "citizens *acting collectively in a public sphere* to express their interests, passions, and ideas, exchange information, achieve mutual goals, make demands on the state, and hold state officials accountable" (Diamond 1994:5). Craft guilds and workers' associations might do something of this sort when demanding fair treatment from employers and in their relations with the state, nourishing an awareness of rights and their place within the larger structure of legal norms. But it is difficult to argue that they were able to make the same contributions

toward establishing a larger structure of legal norms by which "to guard their autonomy and freedom of action" that other citizens' forums helped to achieve.

A final characteristic of auto-organization within Chinese society, already much noted, is the high degree of continuity of organizational forms and, by implication, their resilience over time under varying social and political environments. What does this continuity tell us, particularly about the state? In her study of the Shanghai Bankers' Association, Marie-Claire Bergère (1992:33) notes the coexistence and cooperation of old and new institutions and concludes on the positive note that "the existence of such traditional associations can therefore be considered a favorable precondition in modernizing societies." But to this she attaches a condition, which is that "the transition from the archaic, particularistic stage to a modern open society, from the customary laws to the legal organization of social relations and economic production, cannot be completed without the intervention of state power, which remains the decisive factor in the modernizing process." Full transition "to the legal organization of social relations and economic production" has yet to occur in China; and while the state may be playing a leading role in promoting it, it is not clear that this transition is something the state can bring about without initiatives coming from below. Such initiatives will only be forthcoming when citizens—not the state alone—agitate "to safeguard the rights of free organization, speech, press and assembly, and oppose the arrest of political offenders of the Government," to quote again the SMP's analysis of the People's Rights Protection League of China. Without that agitation from organs outside the state's patronage, no state will volunteer such safeguards.

Auto-Organization and the Chinese State

The notion of civil society emerged in European social theory toward the end of Europe's absolutist phase. This was a time when intellectuals were looking ahead to understand the outcome of bourgeois challenges to the modernizing state. It was believed that the failure of such challenges to occur—and China has been the popular example from Hegel through Marx to Weber, and even on to Deleuze—led to despotism. China's record as a warlord state during the first half of the twentieth century, and as a party-state through the second, seems only to confirm this analysis. And yet the Chinese state has not in this century, nor in any other, been a successful despotism for more than a few years. Despotism is a theoretical imaginary based on the unrealistic notion of absorbing all power to the centre, an arrangement that can be only temporary and always incomplete. Auto-organization is evidence of the incompleteness of Chinese despotism, and the historical counterweight to its realization.

The success with which the Chinese state has disciplined society throughout the last millennium nonetheless has led many to conclude, more modestly, that Chinese political culture favors dependent relationships rather than assertions of independent moral decision, and that Chinese moral culture favors

harmonizing the individual with society, and doing so within the larger moral goal of harmonizing society with the state. In a recent essay on the relationship of academies to the late-imperial state, Thomas Lee has argued that Confucianism did furnish intellectuals with the ideal of intellectual autonomy and moral independence within this larger framework of vertical harmony. The pursuit of moral independence drove academy intellectuals at moments of crisis to speak out against the moral failure of the monarch or those close to him. Lee sees the resolution of this tension in the tendency to rate the omnipotence of the emperor more highly than the life of the critic, whose commitment must be regarded, in Lee's view, as "irrational." The intention of critique was to remonstrate, never to stake a claim against the authority of the emperor over his subjects nor, more abstractly, against the authority of the state over society. The academy movement, and most other expressions of auto-organization, should be viewed "in terms of successful involvement in moral government, rather than in terms of separation from it, and much less even in terms of a search for a legally sanctioned separate sphere of action." Lee is willing to accept that "something resembling a 'civil society'" existed in China before the eighteenth century, but "only briefly and only in difficult times." The occasional irruption of civil society signalled not a step toward something new, but a temporary systemic failure that only confirmed the more fundamental commitment to "mediation, harmony and unity in community rather than a carving out of an autonomous sphere for action" (Lee 1994:118, 119, 133-35).

Such descriptions of Chinese culture are sensible enough, and widely replicated by scholars who advocate a "China-centred" approach to questions of state power. But they batten down more than they expose and so make themselves vulnerable to confirming ideological claims rather than probing the political basis on which such claims are structured. The recurring reversion to a fundamental commitment to harmony, which Thomas Lee describes, does not rule China out of an analysis that attributes this reversion to the instability of the Chinese state rather than to the "weakness" of Chinese society. Lee implies the instability of the state (in the unstable person of the emperor) when he observes that the Confucian commitment to harmony is ultimately "irrational" in exposing the unrelenting advocate of good government to execution.

Autonomous organization in the public realm has been construed by contemporary East Asian elites as potentially corrosive of state stability. The analysis in this paper suggests that the truth runs very much the other way. Auto-organizational activity increases in times of political crisis as a response to the breakdown or compromise of proper state functioning, not because society has somehow detached itself from the polity, but because a regime has failed to meet economic or political challenges. Auto-organization does not destabilize regimes. Destabilization occurs when the state acts in ways that cause its authority to appear merely oppressive and its legitimacy unsupported. Social organizations strive to reconstruct that stability, albeit on a different basis from

state organs. Rather than polarizing society from the state, it patches ruptures between the two, anticipating breakdowns and rebuilding fallen bridges. It compensates for the recurring failures of the state, which are inevitable even under the most perfect of Confucian or Communist constitutions.

The history of auto-organization suggests that Chinese society is not the spring from which despotic tendencies flow. To fault Chinese society for stubborn localist, isolationist, or corporatist habits that interfere with the formation of a mature public sphere or strong civic culture in the twentieth century (or earlier)—for lacking sufficient vitality to sustain its own integration, in other words—is to ignore the terrific pressure that Chinese state-bodies have exerted by judicial and extrajudicial means through most of this century to maintain political power when challenged by its elites to do better (Brook 1992:204-209).

The best argument that I have encountered for the weakness or structural instability of Chinese society based on a clientelist model has been made by David Strand in the course of comparing the visions that Mao Zedong and Sun Yatsen had of Chinese capacities for auto-organization early in the Republican period. He points out that the ability of the small organizations that were formed at that time to pyramid rapidly into regional and national organizations was more than matched both by a tendency to fall apart and by a vulnerability to political manipulation. "Such groups could be merged and enlarged at the behest of a labor boss, shopkeeper, policeman, union leader, or party official (whether the active agent was a social notable or government official had little to do with the actual structure and process of what was happening)." If struggles for leadership were cleanly resolved, these organizations could strengthen; but if factionalism or scandal, to say nothing of state repression, took over, they could collapse. "The stability of society at its base or in its middle or at the point where it came in contact with government depended on current balances of power between levels and among groups" (1994:321). My one caution to this unstable picture would be to suggest that much the same description might well be applied to groups in European cities prior to the full development of civil society there. The formation of civil society in the West was not a smooth upward progress. Contrary to the assumption often made about the power of Western auto-organizations to resist state control (e.g., Goodman 1996:167-170), states in the West have regularly licensed social organizations and have harassed, penetrated, and suppressed them whenever they could not co-opt them. Indeed, they have co-opted them so successfully now that few organizations exist outside of the regulatory and financial mechanisms of the state, and many would evaporate were these mechanisms to disappear. What Strand pictures may be less intrinsic to Chinese society than attributable to the instabilities of power in a state in transition from an imperial constitution. The problem thus continues to lie with the state more than with society. As Strand himself points out, the autonomy of civil society in Republican China was limited by "the absence of a reliable state

to deal with," and this absence opened China ultimately to "illiberal solutions" (329).

From this perspective, it is difficult to refuse the argument that many elements attached to the concept of civil society, notably the importance of local associational life, apply as well to China as to other cultures, and that measures taken to strengthen civil society in other parts of the world might also be appropriate for China. Such measures could include encouraging the formation of networks among citizens sharing occupation or fellowship interests, and even more so among those who have committed themselves to the pursuit of what they identify as the public interest. Despite a half-century's suspension of auto-organizational activity in China, historical foundations for the re-emergence of social organizations exist. Such organizations will unavoidably come to act in ways that, at some point, will be construed as political; and the Chinese state accordingly will continue to move cautiously in permitting such bodies to exist independently of its direction. Yet the process of ramifying the organizational fabric of Chinese life will be to their mutual benefit insofar as the enhancement of this sort of social capital serves to multiply the bases of stability and link citizens more effectively to their state. Within the current political environment in China, this development will come only through a judicious balance between cooperation and critique. If the path seems narrow, it is one with which Chinese in this century have been made intensely familiar.

Table 3
Some Organizations Active in Shanghai in July and August 1937

Locality: Native-Place Associations

Anhui Fellow Countrymen's Association
Chekiang Provincials' Association
Changshu Fellow Countrymen's Association
Huchow Guild
Ningpo Fellow Countrymen's Association
Northeastern Fellow Countrymen's Association
Overseas Chinese Federation
Shantung Fellow Countrymen's Association
Szechuen Fellow Provincials' Association

Locality: District Associations

First Special District Citizens' Federation
Hut Dwellers' Association
Nantao District Citizens' Federation
Second Special District Citizens' Federation
Shanghai District Association
Western District Lien Nyi [Friendship] Society

Occupation: Trade Associations

Aviation Association
Bean and Rice Hong Owners' Association
Cake and Provision Trade Association
Chamber of Commerce
Chinese Bankers' Association
Chinese Native Products Maintenance Association
Chung Hwa Industrial Federation
Chung Hwa National Factory Owners' Association
Coal Merchants' Association
Leather Goods Dealers' Association
Nanking Road Traders' Union
National Federation of Foreign Style Medicine Trade Association
Native Bankers' Guild
Rice Shop Owners' Association
Sand and Stone Dealers' Association
Shanghai Film Producers' Association
Shanghai Municipal Public Ricksha Owners' Association
Silk Filatures Trade Association

Occupation: Occupational Associations

China Educational Film Association
China Industrial and Commercial Artists' Association

Table 3 cont'd

China Literary and Art Society
 Chinese Bar Association
 Chinese Drama Writers' Association
 Chinese Marine Engineers' Federation
 Newspaper Reporters' Lien Nyi Society
 Shanghai Bankers' Lien Nyi Society
 Shanghai Dramatic Group Lien Nyi Society
 Shanghai Educational Association
 Shanghai Peasants' Association
 Shanghai University Professors' Federation
 Shanghai Wood Sculptors' Association

Occupation: Trade Unions, Mutual Aid Societies
 Filature Labour Union
 General Labour Union
 Printing Workers' Unemployment and Mutual Aid Association

Fellowship: Benevolent Societies
 Chinese Red Cross Society
 Jen Chi Tang Benevolent Society
 Yang Van Zoe
 Yih Yu Dong Loh Zoe
 Zung Chi Tang Benevolent Society

Fellowship: Improvement Societies
 China Educational Popularization Acceleration Association
 Constitutional Government Acceleration Association
 Esperanto Association
 Shanghai Eastern District Educational Acceleration Association
 Unjust Prosecution Compensation Movement Committee

Fellowship: Art, Music, and Athletic Groups
 Art and Literary Precursors' Society
 Dah Kung Theatrical and Movie Readers' Society
 Kung Yu Readers' Society
 People's Choral Society
 Sing Chi Choral Group
 Tsing Hua Dramatic Club
 Tsing Woo Athletic Association
 Wei Chun Dramatic Club

Fellowship: Women's Associations
 Chung Hwa Women's Temperance Association
 Federation of Shanghai Women's Bodies
 Shanghai Women's Culture Acceleration Association

Table 3 cont'd

Shanghai Women's Movement Acceleration Association
 Young Women's Club

Fellowship: Youth Groups
 Young Men's Social Research Society

Fellowship: Educational Groups
 Chusan Middle School Alumni Association
 Foreign Affairs Vocational School
 Second Chung Hwa Vocational Supplementary School Alumni Association

Fellowship: Research Societies
 China Political Science Institute
 China Rural Economy Research Society
 Chinese Li Chao Federation
 Cultural Material Supply Institute
 Dah Chung Scientific Society
 Human Problems Discussion Group
 Livelihood Educational Institute
 People's Educational Institute
 San Hai Labour Institute

Common Cause: Political Parties
 Chinese Communist Youth League

Source: Shanghai Municipal Police files D-7994, D-8002.

Table 4
Some National Salvation Organizations
Founded during July and August 1937

Locality: Fellow Countrymen's Associations

Cantonese Educational Circles' National Salvation Service Group
Northeastern Fellow Countrymen's Enemy-Resisting Support Association

Occupation: Trade Associations

Shanghai Amusement Circles' National Salvation Association
Shanghai Municipal Relief Committee

Occupation: Occupational Associations

Film League for Times of Emergency
National Crisis Education Society
Pao Kao Literary National Salvation Association
Shanghai Cultural Circles' Race Salvation Association
Shanghai Editors' Association
Shanghai Literary Circles' National Salvation Federation
Shanghai Municipal Educationalists' Race Salvation Association
Shanghai Newspaper Reporters' Association
Vocational National Salvation Association

Occupation: Trade Unions

Chinese Seamen's Enemy-Resisting Support Association
Nanking-Shanghai and Shanghai-Hangchow-Ningpo Railways Employees'
Enemy-Resisting Association
Sung Woh Bookstore Employees' War Time Service Group

Fellowship: Benevolent Societies

Federation of Various Benevolent Societies for Famine Relief

Fellowship: Music and Drama Groups

Dramatic Group for National Salvation
Lan Tien National Salvation Choral Group
People's National Salvation Choral Movement Society

Fellowship: Women's Groups

Art and Literary Circles' War Time Service Group
Association of Chinese Women for War Time Service
China Art and Literary War Area Service Group
Chinese Women's Committee to Support Resistance against the Enemy
Chung Hwa Women's Mutual Aid Society
Cultural Circles' Race Salvation Association
Shanghai Various Women's Organizations' Joint Office
Shanghai Women's Association for the Comfort of Officers and Men
Engaged in Resistance against the Enemy

Table 4 cont'd

Fellowship: Youth Groups

Chinese Youths' Anti-Enemy and National Salvation Group
Western District Employed Youths' Enemy Resistance Support Association
Western District War Time Young Men's Service Group
Young Men's National Salvation Service Group

Fellowship: Educational Groups

China University Enemy Resistance Support Association
China University Students' Enemy Resistance Support Association
Great China University Students' Comfort Group
Liang Zai First School Enemy Resistance Support Association
National Salvation Association of Chinese Students Returned from Japan
University Students' Friendship Society

Common Cause

Citizens' Traitors-Extermination Group
Constitutional Law Research Society
People's National Salvation Lecturing Group
Shanghai Various Circles' Enemy-Resisting Support Association
Shanghai Volunteer War Time Service Group
Smuggled Goods Boycott Movement Committee
War Time Knowledge Lecturing Group

Source: Shanghai Municipal Police files D-7994, D-8002, D-8039.

Table 5
Some Organizations that Applied, or Failed to Apply, to the Shanghai
Municipal Police for Registration between November 1937 and January 1941

Type and Name of Organization	Date Formed	Date Applied
<i>Locality: Fellow Countrymen's Associations</i>		
Fenghwa Fellow Countrymen's Association	1924	28 Aug 1940
Ziangshan [Xiangshan] Fellow Countrymen's Association	Aug 1935	8 July 1940
<i>Occupation: Trade Associations</i>		
Shanghai Fish Peddlers' Mutual Help Association	June 1938	—
Shanghai Municipal Books and Stationery Dealers' Ass'n	Mar 1935	28 Aug 1940
Chinese and Foreign Grocery Merchants' Lien Yih Society	ca 1918	—
Shanghai Municipal Food Contractors' Guild	1876	28 Aug 1940
Shanghai Municipal Lumber Hong Owners' Trade Ass'n	1930	20 June 1940
Shanghai Municipal Sauce and Wine Shop Owners' Ass'n	Aug 1930	28 Aug 1940
<i>Occupation: Trade Unions, Workers' Associations, Mutual Aid Societies</i>		
San Sing Dramatic Society	July 1937	20 June 1940
Shanghai Commercial & Savings Bank Employees' Dramatic Society	—	—
Shanghai Knitting Factory Mechanics' Lien Nyi Society	16 May 1940	14 June 1940
Shanghai Municipal Hosiery Finishing, Dyeing and Ironing Trade Association	29 July 1939	29 Aug 1940
Shanghai Municipal Monks' Adjustment Committee	5 June 1940	22 July 1940
Shanghai Municipal Torchlight Bulb Factory Workers' Society	—	4 May 1940
<i>Fellowship: Benevolent Societies</i>		
Chung Hwa People's Relief Society	Nov 1940	24 Jan 1941
<i>Fellowship: Improvement Societies</i>		
Chinese Character Reading Educational Society	—	Dec 1938
Spinning, Weaving and Dyeing Art School	1 Sept 1939	23 July 1940
<i>Fellowship: Art, Music, and Athletic Groups</i>		
Shanghai Experimental Chorus and Dramatic Society	14 May 1940	—
Shanghai Nyi Lin Dramatic Society	1 Nov 1937	30 Jan 1939
Yoeh Sung Dramatic Society	2 July 1940	11 July 1940
<i>Fellowship: Educational Groups</i>		
Nanyang Model Middle School Alumni Association	July 1933	26 July 1940
<i>Common Cause</i>		
"Unwilling to Become Slaves" National Salvation Ass'n	13 Sept 1937	11 Nov 1937

Sources: Shanghai Municipal Police files D-8157, D-8157(C), D-8166, D-8350, D-8679, D-8692, D-8911.

Notes

1. The remarkable expansion of state capacities for surveillance and revenue-taking in the twentieth century, due to enhanced communication technologies and infrastructures, has reduced the extent to which the notion of society against the state is anything but an ideological posture designed to obscure the extent to which society has disappeared as a locus of action—as Habermas (1989) argues in his observations on the decline of the public sphere since the nineteenth century.
2. One element of Diamond's definition I exclude is the presence of an institutionalized legal order. This order certainly favors the development of civil society, but its formation and role require more thorough consideration than is possible in this study. On the vulnerability that a lack of juridical basis for free action placed on activists in the Republican era, see Strand 1994:326.
3. The well-field system is described and analyzed in Zhao 1989; see especially 70–75. Zhao directs his discussion toward the problem of the legal status of persons and land within communes (78–79), thereby implicitly tying his analysis to a critique of the People's Communes as the most recent manifestation of the "Asiatic" conviction that society is best ordered under state direction.
4. Business, entered into on provision of a share or stake (*gu*) in the form of labour, capital, or access to a closed market, is another principle of association, and quite as important as the others for inducing distinct organizational forms, but it lies outside the scope of this paper. I am grateful to Takeshi Hamashita for suggesting this principle and the forms it promotes.
5. Residents of urban neighborhoods also combined into ritual societies of this sort, though these cults are not well documented for the Ming; see Wang 1995.
6. The group of seven eunuchs headed by Liu Jin who took power in 1505–10 "at the time was called the faction (*dang*) of seven" (Chen 1985:70). Similarly, the eunuch group headed by Wei Zhongxian who took control of the court in the 1620s was called "the Wei faction (*dang*)" (Ye 1986:3).
7. For Shunzhi's edict of 1652, see Wakeman 1985:941; regarding Yongzheng's edict of 1724, see Huang 1974:90–92.
8. Henriot (1996:164) notes that professional associations in Shanghai are the subject of a 1993 Columbia University doctoral dissertation by Xu Xiaqun entitled "State and Society in Republican China: The Rise of Shanghai Professional Associations, 1912–1937." This was not available to me at time of publication.
9. Distinguishing by type was not a foolproof operation, as the boundaries between types are fluid and the names of organizations often fail to correspond to their substance, and sometimes intentionally mask it. For example, when the Special Branch investigated the Shanghai Fish Peddlers' Mutual Help Association for nonregistration in August 1938, they found that it had been formed by a former Guomindang official, cashiered two years earlier for misconduct, for the purpose of extorting protection money from the Cold Storage Owners' Association (D-8679). That same month the SMP tracked down another unregistered organization called the Chinese and

Foreign Grocery Merchants' Lien Yih [Friendship] Society, only to find that it was, in the words of their report, "a bazaar" or "an old style society established for the purpose of discussing market prices and conditions in the trade" rather than a public body (D-8692). Fortunately, there is often enough data in the SMP files to discover the actual character of the organization named.

10. "Yanzhe you Zhongguo tese de shehuizhuyi daolu qianjin" [Forward along the road of socialism with Chinese characteristics] (1987), reprinted in Chen Ruisheng et al 1992:220–221. On Chinese understandings of "masses," see Strand 1994:312.

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