

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



**The Emergence of
Civil Society in China**

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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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About the Author

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Executive Summary

The study of civil society in China is a recent phenomenon. Two events—the Tiananmen crisis of 1989, and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union—focused our attention on the emergence of civil society in China.

“Civil society” is difficult to define. The study examines four meanings or perspectives within the civil society discourse: “civil society against the state;” “civil society as citizenship;” “civil society as political space;” and “civil society as good governance.” These four perspectives reveal the multiple facets of the concept, which has its roots in the Greek *polis*, in the rise of capitalism and liberal democracy in the West, and in the events of Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s.

Two types of civil society exist in today’s China. One is an amalgam of the four perspectives linked to the opening up of an authoritarian political system and its “democratization.” This type of civil society is weakly developed in China. The second type now emerging represents a fifth perspective. This is state-led civil society. It is created by the state, principally to help the state govern, but also to co-opt potentially politically active elements in the population. State-led civil society unites two strands of authoritarian politics: those of the Leninist state in transition and those of the East Asian communitarian state.

The study provides four case studies: Project Hope of the China Youth Development Foundation; the city of Xiaoshan; village elections; and business entrepreneurs in Xiamen. The study concludes with a discussion of the policy implications of the emergence of state-led civil society in China. It is argued that in China civil society and democratization should be delinked, at least in the foreseeable future, and that Leninist legacies and Asian pathways to development will limit the emergence of “Western style” civil society.

The identification of democracy with civil society created a powerful vision of collective identity: civil society was "Us," state authority was "Them." This duality was especially important in Czechoslovakia, where, during the Velvet Revolution, demonstrators in Prague's Wenceslas Square chanted, "We are not like Them."

ELIZABETH KISS

Civil society, then, is a community in constant tension, its members pulled in several directions simultaneously; toward one another and apart, both toward their individual private worlds and the more public realm of state authority. Tension is a defining feature of civil society and a major source of both its strength and weakness.

HEATH B. CHAMBERLAIN

... either civil society is separate from the state, poised apart from and challenging the regime, or it is not. If it is separate, civil society may be conceived ... as encompassed by and inextricably joined to the state, no matter what the form of economic or political system.

DOROTHY SOLINGER

A market economy is the appropriate pattern of the economic life of a civil society There is, however, much more to civil society than the market. The hallmark of a civil society is the autonomy of private associations and institutions as well as that of private business firms.

EDWARD SHILS1

Introduction

Reference to "civil society" abounds in the current Western literature on political change in China. Since Tiananmen the term has increasingly replaced "democracy" as a buzzword for reform. If the prospects for immediate democratization are uncertain, more promising is the vision of the emergence of civil society, a sphere of activity marked by a significant degree of autonomy from state power. For some, the emergence of civil society will be a long and slow process, linked to the social and political consequences of the opening up of China's economy. In their view, as the Chinese party-state loosens its grip, civil society takes shape and gains strength. Others, less patient, look to instances of dissent and opposition, seeing civil society as a tool to overthrow a "bad" state, rather than evolving in tandem with it.

Our interest in civil society was heightened by two recent events. The first was Tiananmen, which whetted expectations that democratic reform was imminent in China. Instead, the regime tightened its controls in the post-Tiananmen period. Those who expected a Chinese outcome along the lines of Eastern Europe were disappointed. The prospects for Chinese democracy, seemingly tangible before 1989, evaporated in the retreat to political conservatism after 1989. Therefore, if the conditions for the emergence of democracy in China have deteriorated, why not focus on one of the preconditions, the existence of civil society? The democratic agenda had lacked, among other things, an infrastructure that could support it. Civil society was seen as this precondition, an emerging infrastructure that has to be nurtured and expanded as a base for China's future democratization.

A second event that turned our attention to civil society and away from democracy in the first instance, was the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. Civil society had seemingly triumphed. Alternative society, "the parallel *polis*," "parliaments of the streets," "flying universities," *samizdat*—the deliberate opposition of society to state—these had brought down a row of one-party-states. Havel's Velvet Revolution and *Solidarnosc* in Poland served as models for a "civil society strategy" wherein democratic goals were achieved through the creation of networks of autonomous organizations in a space parallel to the state. Civil society proponents did not directly confront the state, but surrounded it with "a wide spectrum of activities, from cultural and religious organizations and human rights groups, to independent economic activities ranging from trade unions to private enterprises."²

These two events, the collapse of communism and the reaffirmation of the Chinese state's power in the face of Tiananmen, have brought the civil society discourse to the centre of Western political analysis. Yet the concept has proved difficult to define. Like "democracy," which it has frequently replaced in political discourse and rhetoric, "civil society" inspires a wide range of interpretations and individual agendas. It is an elusive concept beset by ideological

and cultural barriers. For Westerners it may be an imperfect lens, and within China, most Chinese still struggle to find the right terminology (*gongmin*, *shimin*) to describe these emerging forces which we have identified broadly as "civil society."³

In this paper I present four perspectives on civil society, drawn from the substantial literature that now exists on the collapse of communism and on the nature of political change in China. Each of the four perspectives focuses on a central theme within the civil society discourse. The four are not mutually exclusive. Together they paint a portrait of a concept that is analytical, yet normative; a strategy for revolution, yet predicated on evolutionary change. In the second part of the paper I suggest that China is indeed "different." In looking for civil society in China I identify a "fifth perspective," linked to the Chinese party-state's continued control over the Chinese polity. This authoritarian "state-led civil society," created from the top down as an adjunct to state power, co-exists with the more familiar "democratic" manifestations of emerging civil society. Is state-led civil-society a new form or just a temporary accommodation by the authoritarian state to forces which will overwhelm it soon enough? To what extent does this Chinese version of civil society represent not only a government strategy, but also an "Asian" form of political development?⁴ In the third section of the paper I discuss four case studies: the new system of village elections; the rise of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); civil society in a Zhejiang municipality; and private business in Xiamen. These examples indicate the diversity and scale of emerging Chinese civil society, as well as its still tentative and peripheral nature.

Is civil society "on the move" in China? Will it provide the infrastructure for the democratization/liberalization of the authoritarian system? Will this process make their system more like ours, or is there a particular synthesis occurring, one in which Chinese civil society will take a somewhat different form from Western models? Here we may confront speculations about the enduring authoritarian nature of Asian life and politics, and about the need for greater patience in awaiting democratic outcomes linked to the process of economic modernization. In the final section of the paper I look at the policy implications of these trends. Given the nature of political change in today's China and its probable future direction, which will not always follow Western democratic pathways, how should Western governments deal with China? For example, in the area of development assistance, should we strengthen our ties with elements of emerging Chinese civil society? Which elements? Those from the state-led sector or those from the more familiar "spontaneous" groups and associations? Is our purpose to encourage stable economic growth while acquiescing in a long period of authoritarian rule? Or should we intervene in this process by whatever means, to speed up the development of civil society by direct confrontation, in the mode of Havel and the East Europeans? Is the risk of China's destabilization worth such intervention? Is there some middle ground

between these views, where our programs can contribute to a measure of liberalization/democratization while retaining the support of the Chinese party-state? If Canadian programs in China are judged by their "impact," where should this impact be felt most strongly? Among the liberal/democratic oppositional forces in China? Among the officials and bureaucrats running the Chinese system? Or in Canada, among the media, the informed public and the electorate?

Four Perspectives on Civil Society

Civil Society against the State

"Civil society" is a concept that came to life in the 1970s, primarily in Eastern Europe where it became an arena for dissent. Dissidents were able to create alternative structures outside the state. The state did not and, apparently, could not, eliminate these structures of opposition. "Civil society" emerges from the perception that the totalitarian state is no longer able to enforce its full control over the society. Havel refers to a "post-totalitarian" system where individuals, "live within the truth," and "citizens' initiatives, dissident movements, or even oppositions, emerge, like the proverbial one-tenth of the iceberg visible above the water."⁵ Civil society had been crushed by the totalitarian state. Now, alienated intellectuals and individuals with a true public spirit sought to recapture their institutions, ideologies and values by setting up their own civil society in nonviolent opposition to the state. It was a citizen's duty to support "good" civil society against the "bad" communist state. According to Kuron, "Society organizes itself as a democratic movement and becomes active outside the limits of the institutions of the totalitarian state."⁶ When these regimes imploded in the late 1980s, much of the credit was given to this strategy: it was based within the society; it produced a counter-elite potentially capable of seizing power on behalf of the "people"; its methods were nonviolent; it was linked to understandings and perceptions of a civil society that existed in the past and could now be used as a basis for the future democratization/liberalization of these post-communist regimes.

The idea that dissidents and intellectuals in opposition could peacefully change a communist party-state was not lost upon a small group of Chinese intellectuals and an even smaller group of dissidents in the 1980s. A part of the Chinese leadership was willing to permit a modest political opening. The economic reforms were creating potential "social bases for autonomy."⁷ This contributed to the perception that it was possible to pursue tactics similar to those in Eastern Europe. But conditions in China were very different. The idea of restoring a civil society that had been crushed by the state was problematic for China which barely had a tradition of civil society in its past. Much of the energy of China's intellectuals and dissidents was consumed in trying to persuade the state to change itself, rather than in overthrowing it by means of civil

society. The idea of “new authoritarianism” (*xin quanweizhuyi*) which was advocated as a pathway to political reform in the late 1980s, essentially argued for a modified authoritarianism—not for democracy. Civil society was seen as a future benefit, rather than a means to effect immediate change.

Civil Society as Citizenship

The concept of “civil society against the state” is relatively new. In earlier usage civil society had another meaning, that of good citizenship. Benda refers to civil society as a parallel *polis*.⁸ In fact, we might argue that civil society originally was the Greek *polis*. Civil society was what man created in opposition to the state of nature. The good *polis* was civil society, where virtue and good citizenship reigned supreme. Civil society and the city-state were coterminous. This civil society was polite and it was “civil.” It was elitist, since only a few men of virtue were citizens. It set the tone for all society, however. The community of citizens, “is the source of morality which arises out of, and is sustained by the everyday interactions of persons within what is now called civil society.”⁹

This idea of civil society as good citizenship is at the centre of the Western liberal-democratic tradition. Transposed from the *polis* to the twentieth century post-capitalist state, it encompasses the individualistic, rational, and, up till recent times, elitist strands that comprise our political ideologies. Good citizenship only develops over time, and it requires a community of rational, self-directing individuals who can elevate their private interests to a consideration of the greater public good. Trust and honesty are essential components in this process. In the long journey from subject to citizen what counts is, “the readiness to moderate particular, individual or parochial interests and to give precedence to the common good.”¹⁰

Is China ready for this kind of civil society? The road from subject to citizen is long and arduous. Finding a critical mass of “rational, self-directing individuals” capable of joining their private interests in a broader consideration of the greater public good will be difficult. China has lacked traditions of individuality and of “the public” (*gong*). A recent Australian study identifies two types of citizenship, individualistic (Western) and communitarian (Asian), and suggests that the latter is strongly entrenched in the Asian setting:

In Neo-Confucian societies where the public sphere has been created by and from the state and not from the private sphere there remain few limits to the state and there are few opportunities for individuals to play multiple roles (such as the “role” of the independent citizen) in Asian society. They cannot easily “drop out.” They are always expected to behave as political participants in their communities, and the state has a right to intrude into their private lives, in ways which the hypothesized, individualistic, capitalist-liberal democrat citizen would not accept.¹¹

If this is the dominant pathway for citizenship in contemporary China, what does this tell us about its emerging civil society? From a Western perspective, “communitarian” citizens lack the freedom of will, conditions of trust, and the protection of law to act as rational individuals. Thus, the basic requisites of civil society are missing. But, from a non-Western perspective, a transition is slowly being made, mediated by the state, rather than by civil society.

Civil Society as Political Space

The most common perspective on civil society is based upon the great transformation of relations between state and society in the modern era. Specifically, the key events are first, the separation of church and state; second, the rise of the capitalist economy; and third, the creation of the modern bureaucratic state. The separation of church from state created a space for multiple loyalties, for the separation of state and society, and for the evolution of the idea of a private sphere for individuals. The subsequent rise of the capitalist economy provided a different sort of space, based on the need to protect one’s property. According to Macpherson, the spread of “possessive individualism” in defence of private economic space contributed to the rise of modern civil society.¹² A number of processes were occurring simultaneously. Individuals were acquiring wealth and power, staking a claim to terrain independent of both state and society. The state expanded to fulfill its distributive and regulatory functions in an increasingly complex world. The multiplicity of private interests had to be integrated into a new concept of the public, one which could remind, if not mobilize, individuals in support of the common good. The relationship of individuals and state to society—the wellspring of values and, ultimately, change—had to be redefined.

The process of political modernization thus demands a crucial space between a changing state and society, in which individuals interact and define themselves in relationship to the political system. Civil society is that space and it serves to mediate political participation and change. It is this accommodation to change in multiple directions (economy, state, society, individual, political community) that characterizes civil society and explains its unique place in modern political development. In focusing on contemporary China, we can see the linkage between incipient civil society and economic modernization. The market economy has created a new economic “space,” within a rapidly differentiating society, in which central state political control cannot be sustained without increased reliance on mediating social structures. Civil society is the most important of these structures, and its existence in China is predicated on the state’s need to have such mediation. The state needs a civil society so that it can govern more effectively. However, civil society also provides a realm in which individuals can protect themselves against both state and society in an ever-changing and increasingly complicated environment. In today’s China

these are only emerging roles, existing in a weak institutional base, within a context of value conflict and change.

Civil Society as Good Governance

Ideally, civil society lubricates the political system. It is the stuff that links the various parts together. To Havel and other East European dissidents, the "system" had gone out of whack under the communist party-state. It had to be restored, by means of civil society which could serve as compass and navigator for the new ship of state. Civil society is what makes the whole system work. It unites public and private; state and individual; disparate individuals within a community; and state and society. Civil society is both the energizer of development and its stabilizer. It is comprised of the main players and is at the same time their umpire. It provides structure and certainty, but is also flexible and accommodating of change.

Without such a civil society there cannot be "good governance," at least not in the Western liberal-democratic sense. Diamond emphasizes the close connection between democracy and civil society: in his view the ideal civil society must be fully democratic, in the Western sense. It is the centrepiece of the most advanced, i.e., Western democratic, political systems. Citing Huntington, he writes, "the first and most basic function of civil society is to provide, the basis for the limitation of state power, hence for the control of the state by society, and hence for democratic political institutions and the most effective means of exercising that control."¹³

It is this image of civil society tied to democracy that so frequently informs the political agenda of those who are looking for civil society. Not infrequently we are motivated by the conviction that a fully formed civil society, linked to liberal democracy, must emerge from the cocoon of authoritarianism. Far more likely, however, is an incipient civil society linked to a stage of early capitalist development, that is, one not based on good governance, but on building infrastructure and values for the long path to political development. In analyzing China we tend to look for good governance as if China were a highly evolved polity, rather than an authoritarian political system emerging, blinking into the light of political change. Nor is it realistic to adopt a "civil society against the state" strategy for China when there is yet no Chinese consensus about an alternative *polis*, and no institutional memory of a previous civil society.¹⁴ To talk of a civil society based upon citizenship is equally questionable, given that the rights of citizenship are still being negotiated as China moves from a subject political culture to one that is more participatory and autonomous.

To summarize, in this part of the paper I presented four perspectives on civil society. My purpose was to indicate the range and complexity of the concept, which has strong roots in the Greek *polis*, in the rise of capitalism and liberal democracy in the past three centuries, and in the events of East Europe

in the 1970s and 1980s. Civil society is made up of many strands and perspectives. Some of these elements are present in contemporary China; others are not. In the discussion I intimated that the description of civil society in China presented through these four perspectives was not a satisfying one. Much seems to be missing. For a number of reasons—developmental, cultural, historical and ideological—civil society may be emerging along a different path, at least in the immediate future.

A Fifth Perspective: State-led Civil Society

There are two kinds of civil society in today's China. One fits the pattern described above: an amalgam of the four perspectives, which emphasizes the opening up of the political system, limitations on state power, and the advancement of the rights of autonomous groups and individuals. It is clear that this civil society is still poorly developed and is struggling to maintain itself in China. But there is a second civil society that extends the reach of the state into the new Chinese economy and community. This is state-led civil society. It is created by the state, principally to help it govern, but also to co-opt and to socialize potentially politically active elements in the population. State-led civil society is an intriguing concept because it unites two strands of authoritarian politics: those of the socialist authoritarian state in transition, and those of the ascendant East Asian communitarian state.¹⁵

What exactly is meant by "state-led civil society"? In the case of China I refer to the recent creation by the state of literally hundreds of thousands of organizations and groups which serve as support mechanisms to the state. In the old Marxist-Leninist system, officially sanctioned groups and associations such as the Women's Federation, the Trade Unions, Youth Leagues, and Writers' Associations functioned as "transmission belts" for government policies. In the new Chinese political system the number and functions of these social organizations (*shehui tuanti*) have soared. According to White, "they are generally seen as occupying an organizational space between a state organ proper and an enterprise, an intermediate position that gives them, in theory at least, some degree of formally recognized status as a 'popular' (*minjian*) or 'people-run' (*minban*) organization as opposed to an 'official' (*guanban*) organization." In a city of 1.153 million there were approximately 100 of these social organizations, divided into ten categories. Those in the categories of "political," "economic" and "science and technology" were the most numerous and important, comprising over half. Others were in the following areas: arts and culture; social welfare; social clubs; public affairs; health; and sports. The groups ranged from new social organizations such as the Individual Labourers' Association and the Private Enterprises Association, to old "official" organizations such as the Women's Federation and the Overseas Chinese Federation. Other examples include the Qigong Research Association, the Old People's Exercise Association, and the Dried Turnip Association.¹⁶

These social organizations serve multiple functions. According to White, they are, "a crucial communications channel between a state organ and the organization's members, thereby helping the state to get across ideological points or specific policies."¹⁷ In addition, they help to coordinate and focus state activity in particular sectors of the economy. They can also take over functions formerly exercised by the state. They can serve a bridging function between the state enterprises and the private economy, and between collective and private interests. In an increasingly complex and more mobile society and economy, these social organizations extend the reach of the state, providing a critical coordinating and participation mechanism. They are agents of administration and political socialization in the first instance. They are embryos of civil society as it is understood in the West. From another perspective they are political incubators for a state that has to devolve control, and not centres of citizen resistance seeking to reclaim a lost civil society.

State-led civil society is not only about helping the state to organize economy and society, it also is about the state acting as a powerful ally in separating individuals from society. Chamberlain writes, "The 'rule of the folk' can be just as tyrannical as the 'dictatorship of the proletariat.'"¹⁸ Even the dictatorship of the proletariat at times could be more benevolent than the tyranny of semi-feudal society. As Chamberlain reminds us, "Chinese society of the 1950s was a long way from being civil. It was essential that the state intrude rudely and violently to liberate people from the constraints of traditional family and social bonds, precisely in order to prepare the soil for civil society's future growth."¹⁹ What the communist state did against society so "rudely" in the past, is negotiated more politely by "mature" civil societies in the present. If China's civil society was absent or in an embryonic stage, it was up to the state, then and now, to disengage individuals from society. But one tyranny leads to another: the state takes on itself the precise role of the society it has condemned.

State-led civil society is based on a number of assumptions. First, the new associations and groups are not against the state but are a part of it. Second, they serve as training grounds for the development of civic consciousness. Third, they function as intermediaries between state and society. Fourth, state-led civil society is not riven by any conflict between its civil society components and the state. It is a marriage of convenience, rather than a catalyst for citizen resistance. Finally, mutual perception of strength and weakness plays a key role. Elements in the state perceive the need for change and that social organizations can be functionally useful, without threatening the state's hegemony. Those within the social organization perceive a slightly weakened state, but are more interested in short-term economic gains than individual autonomy at the expense of state power. Neither wants the state to collapse.

State-led civil society is a form of corporatism. The state determines which organizations are legitimate and "forms an unequal partnership" with them. The state does not dominate directly. It leaves some degree of autonomy to these

organizations, but it does demand a disciplined partnership, based upon cooperation within specified sectors, usually in tripartite arrangements among business, labour and the state. While corporatism is best identified with fascist forms of government, corporatist mechanisms also have existed in liberal and socialist political systems. Anita Chan differentiates state corporatism from societal corporatism. Societal corporatism is a form of interest group politics. It functions at the grass roots level rather than at the peak of the system. It is less hierarchical and rigid than state corporatism, and is characterized by bargaining among the partners, rather than the dominance of the state. "At the other end of the spectrum from such societal corporatism lies what is variously called authoritarian or state corporatism, where the weight of decision-making power lies very heavily on the side of the state."

Qigong Research Associations and Old People's Exercise Associations are examples of societal corporatism. Private Enterprise Associations and Overseas Chinese Associations are examples of state corporatism. The latter deal with the "hard" issues of production and ideological matters. In part this is a legacy of state domination under Mao. But state corporatism is also viewed as a system of power relations that characterizes East Asian developmental states. Viewed from an "Asian" perspective, China's state-corporatism bears many similarities to the developmental states of Japan, Taiwan and Korea when they were in the midst of rapid economic growth. Unger and Chan have summarized the main features of what they call, "the East Asian Model of State Corporatism:"

The East Asian states have shared a cultural bias favourable to corporatist structures. In the Confucianist teachings that pervaded all of the East Asian cultures, giving primacy to private interests had been viewed as equivalent to selfishness. The greater good was ideally manifested in a consensus overseen by the moral authority of the leadership, reflected in a moralistic father-knows-best paternalism.²⁰

It is tempting to argue that state corporatism is the "natural" pathway for Asian developmental states, based upon the examples of first Japan, then Korea and Taiwan, and now China. Asian political cultures may indeed be more authoritarian and less focused on individual needs and rights. State corporatism may be the preferred "space" between state and society—not civil society. In China, "citizenship," "governance" and "political development" are much more at the mercy of the state than in the West at a comparable period of economic growth. A double legacy of authoritarianism (Leninist and Confucian) may be more than civil society (in the Western sense) can bear. Still, while state-led civil society may be the present norm in China, expressed through corporatist structures led by the state, societal corporatism is increasing at the grass roots. Walder writes of "local corporatism," wherein state and nonstate merge at the lower levels of production and management.²¹ And we would be wise not to

ignore the slow progress of "traditional" civil society on the margins, expressed in nagging reminders of the potential for dissent, the slow drip-drip-drip of legal reform and electoral change, and the leakage from abroad of images and information about developmental alternatives. These are not antidotes to what is clearly an authoritarian developmental experience, but rather complement what currently is the mainstream of Chinese political development.

Civil Society in China: Case Studies

I have argued that "civil society" in China is a quite recent phenomenon, inspired primarily by events in Eastern Europe and by the political consequences of Tiananmen. Evidence of the emergence of civil society is still sparse. We are talking about a period of five to ten years. Yet such has been the pace of change in China, and such has been our thirst to document these changes, that we already have a number of solid case studies. This section of the paper looks at four examples of the emergence of civil society in China. I chose the example of a national NGO; a study of the growth of social organizations in Xiaoshan city; village elections; and business associations in Xiamen. Time, space and data limitations prevent me from adding to this list—for example, legal reform; workers and trade union activity; women's organizations; religious activity; dissent (the recent four petitions presented to the National People's Congress by thirty-six intellectuals); youth and education; and environmental groups.

Project Hope of the China Youth Development Foundation

Project Hope (*Xiwang gongcheng*) was set up in 1989 by the China Youth Development Foundation (CYDF) which itself had been established only six months earlier by the All-China Youth Federation.²² The project's purpose is to raise funds to educate children in the poorest areas of China. It solicits funds from Chinese citizens and from abroad. As of mid-1993 it had established sixty-two primary schools and provided assistance to over 300 000 school dropouts. The project serves an urgent need that the Chinese state seems unable or unwilling to meet: upgrading the very low level of rural education. Its nominal "parent," CYDF, is controlled by one of China's oldest communist front organizations, the All-China Youth Federation. The relationship among these three organizations is opaque. A recent Western account observes, "It is unclear whether the CYDF (China Youth Development Foundation) has any authority over the distribution of funds and donations among the provinces and whether it can supervise the use of these funds when they are transferred to official organs."²³ The National Committee on U.S.-China Relations questions, "the lack of transparency in both organizational structure and accounting procedures (which) inhibits foreign cooperation and indigenous fundraising in China."²⁴

The example of Project Hope tells us a number of things. First, the Chinese state has set up a number of NGOs to organize and direct private funding in

areas of urgent economic need. As the state withdraws in favour of the market, Chinese authorities "hope" that private sources can take over. Second, these efforts, while ostensibly under the control of autonomous organizations are closely monitored by a state "parent," tied to the old structure of power. This is a case of state-led civil society—on the boundary between state and societal corporatism. Third, much of this NGO's activities remains confined within the orbit of secrecy and lack of transparency which characterized the old way of management. Finally, there is no evidence linking this NGO to any group of individuals who are distancing themselves from the state and manifesting any attributes of a budding civil society. To be fair, the simple conclusion is that it is too soon to make any judgements, based on the sparse reports of these visitors.

Xiaoshan City, Zhejiang Province

Gordon White visited this city of over a million inhabitants several times in 1990–91. Xiaoshan is a new commercial centre, "on the make," in one of China's most productive areas.²⁵ According to White, "there appears to have been a flowering of associational life" in Xiaoshan during the Republican period. The usual communist-led organizations were formed after 1949, functioning as "transmission belts" between the party-state and the population. In the post-Mao era, especially from the mid-1980s, the situation changed, "reaching a high point in 1988–89 and then declining drastically in 1990." There were ninety-nine social organizations in Xiaoshan in 1990. Their growth is mainly attributed to the economic reforms which opened up new areas for such organizations. Within the ten categories of social organizations present in the city there are the old-line "mass organizations" still serving as "transmission belts"; newer organizations which have been brought into the state-corporatist web, such as the Private Enterprise Association which has a membership that is gaining economic strength in the community; and a range of popular (*minjian*) or people-run (*minban*) organizations, mainly in the field of culture, education, sports, health, and religion.

The social organizations can be classified in terms of their relative autonomy from the party-state. White divides them into "official" (*guanban*), "semi-official" (*banguan*), and "popular" (*minjiaxing*). The six official organizations such as the Communist Youth League and the Trade Union Federation have special links to the Party. The semi-official organizations are primarily economic and technical in nature, and comprise two-thirds of the social organizations. A social organization must be formally affiliated to a state organ or parent. Often positions in a semi-official organization will be staffed by persons who hold positions in the affiliated state organ in charge of that social organization. The more important an organization is perceived to be, the stronger the state control. The two types of organizations, state and social, "act as complementary parts of an evolving new network of management."

What does the example of Xiaoshan tell us about civil society? First, while organizations have proliferated, they are still directed by the state, to varying degrees. They function as intermediaries and possess limited autonomy, but they are not "independent" and they offer no challenge to the state. Second, new relationships and networks are constantly evolving, and state and social organizations are working out new divisions of labour. One can hypothesize that in this process the social organizations will acquire more, rather than less, autonomy over time. Third, there is little evidence to support the emergence of civil society. White observes that, "one can detect only embryonic elements of anything that could be described as 'civil society.'" This is attributed to the fact that the state has retained its dominant position in the economy. The distinguishing feature of organizational life in Xiaoshan is state corporatism and state-led civil society.

Village Elections

In the summer of 1992 foreign researchers participated in a project on village self-government organized by the Ministry of Civil Affairs.²⁶ The purpose was to provide a closer look at ongoing rural political reforms. Since the dismantling of the communes and the production brigades which were the key units for managing village life, "grass roots political institutions were in disarray." In late 1987, a trial Organic Law was passed by the National People's Congress to enlarge village autonomy and to provide increased opportunities for political participation. It was not designed to dismantle the state at the village level. Indeed, a strong state presence was deemed crucial to prevent the emergence of parochialism and the growth of "independent kingdoms." O'Brien's study looks at the results of these measures, principally in Fujian province, in three areas: the holding of direct, semi-competitive elections; the creation of villagers' representative assemblies (VRAs) (*cunmin daibiao huiyi*); and the promulgation of village charters (*zhangcheng*) and codes of conduct (*cungui minyue*).

By mid-1992, 80 percent of the villages had completed at least two rounds of elections, and VRAs existed in almost every village. While the new law encouraged electoral competition, often this did not happen, and leaders continued to be selected by local Party committees instead of by villagers. In poorer areas, there is less likelihood of "democratic outcomes." While the percent of non-Party members on village committees has increased, the key decisions, for the most part, continue to be made by the Party. Thurston notes that without the support of higher level leaders the process will not work. She points out that, "there is no alternative to the communist party in the countryside."²⁷

O'Brien identifies four types of villages: up-to-standard; authoritarian; run-away; and paralyzed. In terms of successful implementation of these reforms, only a minority of villages have, as yet, attained up-to-standard status. Most remain authoritarian, in that they prefer not to challenge existing authority patterns. Paralyzed villages are generally remote and backward, and have

done little to implement the reforms. Run-away villages are those where village populist leaders have taken control and seek to gain maximum autonomy from the state. Party authorities worry about run-away villages because they usually mean run-away cadres and weak Party organizations.

The rural sector comprises 75 percent of China's population. Political reform in the villages is a daunting task, not just because there are so many peasants, but because their level of political development is low. It is encouraging that some villages have elected their own leaders and that observers note glimmers of change taking place. But this is not favourable terrain for the growth of civil society. The authoritarian cast of China's countryside is a tremendous burden. The contrast with the city reminds us that civil society has been an urban elite concept for most of its existence. Only in highly integrated societies can we think of a civil society where "the masses" are a central force. The Tiananmen crisis and its aftermath revealed that if there is to be an emergent Chinese civil society, it will be found in the cities and not in the rural areas.

Business in Xiamen

David Wank spent eighteen months in Xiamen between 1988-90.²⁸ He interviewed a hundred entrepreneurs who ran private businesses. Xiamen has a population of 600 000, and it is one of China's five Special Economic Zones. It is a boom city and it has strong ties with Taiwan across the Straits. By 1988 Xiamen had 15 000 small private shops, mostly market stalls and family-run stores. It had 621 private trading firms. In 1988 the Xiamen City Chamber of Commerce (*Xiamen shi shang hui*) set up the Xiamen Civic Association of Private Industry and Commerce (*Xiamen shi siyang gong shang gonghui*). This association sought to lobby the government on behalf of entrepreneurs' interests. They wanted reduced taxes for all entrepreneurs and also lobbied for individual companies. But the Civic Association ran afoul of the state Bureau of Industry and Commerce. The bureau, "saw the Civic Association as a challenge to [its] regulatory authority." It "moved to suppress the Civic Association, harassing its members by summoning them to meetings at short notice, raising their licensing fees, and warning non-members against joining." In 1990 the bureau set up its own private business association, headed by an exceptionally able and well-connected businessman.

Shortly thereafter, the Civic Association was shut down by the state. Most of its members disassociated themselves from its demise. Wank had expected that Xiamen entrepreneurs would have had a stronger self-interest as a group. He had hypothesized, based upon the experience of East European marketization, that "[Xiamen] entrepreneurs would seek alliances with other entrepreneurs, thereby enhancing their collective representation as a political interest group." He found this not to be the case. In addition, he hypothesized that

"[Xiamen] entrepreneurs seek alliances with other subordinated social groups, thereby enhancing the collective capacity of civil society vis-à-vis the state." This, too, he found not to be the case. Possible explanations included the following: Chinese traditionally have viewed interest-based associations as inherently selfish; the entrepreneurs had a low level of political consciousness; the state was too strong and could always exercise its will if it chose to do so. Wank found a better explanation in the fact that there was no one "group" of entrepreneurs. These businessmen had different interests, depending on their social background, size of their business, and relationship to the bureaucracy. The latter was especially important. Each entrepreneur dealt with the bureaucracy in his own way. Some sought to avoid contact with the state as much as possible. Others established patron-client relations with the bureaucracy to advance their own interests. His conclusion is that this is a group caught in transition between a market and a command economy, for whom individual, as opposed to group decisions or alliances, are the norm.

This example of Xiamen raises a number of points. First, it may be that entrepreneurs are too busy pursuing their individual economic interests to develop a sense of group identity. Second, the state has the power to limit the entrepreneur's activities, and the latter have no intention of challenging that power. Third, entrepreneurs will cultivate or ignore the bureaucracy on their own terms when they deem it necessary. They see their relations with the state as one of individual bargaining. Fourth, the state at the local level will develop alliances with entrepreneurs to pursue its own interests. The Xiamen Bureau of Industry and Commerce sponsored its own Association of Entrepreneurs in good part to "get a piece of the action" for itself. Finally, entrepreneurs are not advocates for civil society, and prefer, for the most part, to be left alone. The Xiamen businessmen did not support the 1989 student movement. They felt that the students wanted too much, too quickly. In the words of one entrepreneur, "We must go slowly, generation by generation. A country's stability is connected with order. Only by having normal order can people lead a normal life." If the Xiamen entrepreneurs had a choice they would have opted for the security of state-led civil society, rather than participating in a less authoritarian alternative.

Policy Implications

The premise of this discussion is that these political processes and emerging structures are of interest to policymakers and administrators engaged in establishing or maintaining relations with China. There is no question that we want to have a clearer picture of the trend lines of China's current development. Usually we focus upon "hard" political issues, such as the Deng Xiaoping succession, the military "threat," or the Party's ability to maintain its leadership. The emergence of civil society is a "soft" issue, and the concept is at times vague, ideologically driven, and contradictory. It is a concept that has still not found a comfortable home in Chinese: neither *shimin* nor *gongmin* encompass its

various meanings. I have indicated that the Western definition of civil society may not be appropriate for today's China. Instead, I argued for the concept of "state-led" civil society, while suggesting that one of the elements in the civil society discourse, that of civil society against the state, is not a useful approach.

The first policy implication is that *we must delink democracy and civil society*. We must support the creation of civil society in China. Civil society is the infrastructure of political development, of citizenship and good governance. But we may find ourselves having to support the authoritarian state as it goes about building its version of civil society. This will be an unpopular policy for some Canadians, who will see it as the abandonment of "democratic forces" in China. The latter need not be sacrificed, but we have to find a better balance between our rhetoric and our policies.

Second, it is now six years since Tiananmen. The party-state has still not fallen. *We must assume that the Chinese political system is not about to collapse*. Much of our rhetoric and thinking about China revolves around the idea of imminent collapse. (It happened in East Europe and Russia. It will happen in China. A Communist Party-state cannot survive. Tiananmen was the last gasp of an aging gerontocracy.) Yet the regime still survives and it has not appreciably "democratized" itself. We need to come to terms with this fact in our policies and programs. We cannot expect that Chinese civil society will suddenly rise up and overwhelm its rulers. What worked for Havel in the Czech Republic will not, in the immediate future, work in China. We have seen in this paper why such a scenario is highly unlikely.

My discussion of civil society moved from the "universal" to the particular, from Western experience over a long period of time, to that of China today. This leads to the proposition that *at least in the short run we should accept the existence of "Asian" pathways to development, with respect to the emergence of civil society*. State corporatism, communitarianism, Asian models, new authoritarianism, and state-led civil society—they all challenge Western assumptions about political development. Perhaps we have to rethink some of these assumptions, in the wake of the experiences of Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Singapore. This does not mean abandoning ourselves to "Orientalism," but rather, taking into account the trends, dominant values, and authority structures that have evolved over time in this region generally, and in particular, in China.

We must also accept the fact that we have limited influence over China's policymakers. We cannot force China's leaders to pursue policies against their perceived interests, although we should continue to remind them of our commitment to human rights and Western democratic ideals. The gist of this paper suggests there is no oppositionist constituency capable immediately of democratizing China. The more likely change is from one authoritarian mode to another. Should we try to influence China's leaders to behave "more democratically," and to improve China's human rights record? Of course we should, but

we must be aware that our democratic rhetoric plays most strongly in Winnipeg and Burnaby, and has much less of an impact in Beijing or Zhengzhou.

From a development assistance perspective, how should we proceed?

- First, *target the infrastructure of civil society, that is, the development of law, NGOs, associations, education, the urban middle class, etc.* We should be engaged in helping China build its civil society—and this should be seen as a long-term task. There is no quick fix in this area. CIDA is already committed to a number of programs of this type. It should do even more.
- Second, *CIDA programmes and policies should involve close cooperation with Chinese state authorities.* The Chinese state is engaged in building its version of civil society. This has been a recurring theme throughout this paper. By focusing on the new structures of state-led civil society, CIDA can meet Canadian goals while enlisting the cooperation of the Chinese state.
- Third, *focus on civil society at the local levels wherever possible.* The reach of the Chinese state is large, but a decentralizing state has to yield power at the lower levels. The growth of new state-private forms in cities and in the townships is worth a closer look. Associations have proliferated; the tasks of local administration and economic activity have become more complex. In the ensuing redefinition of state and private roles and responsibilities, structures of civil society will emerge to play a key mediating role.
- Fourth, *be more selective; target special sectors.* China is too big and Canada has a shrinking budget. This will require some thought and discussion. For example, should we focus on both legal reform and women in China? Or must we choose one of these? In my opinion CIDA should be selective, both in terms of its choice of sectors and its “national” coverage in each sector. Maybe we should choose a “demonstration” province or city and concentrate the bulk of our resources on that province or city? If we pursue our policies nationally we may be spreading ourselves too thin. On the other hand, by focusing on a lower level we may reduce our impact on central-level leadership.
- Fifth, *we should assume that in the future China programs will continue to shrink.* China is getting richer and we are not as wealthy as in the past. At what point do we decide substantially to reduce our development assistance to China? When that happens, “soft” programs designed to support civil society and good governance are less likely to be preserved. Governments will choose to concentrate Canada’s dwindling development assistance resources on “hard” projects which have an immediate trade and economic development pay-off.

- Sixth, *spend more time and money explaining our China policies and programs to the Canadian public.* This applies especially to development assistance, an area that is poorly understood by most Canadians. The Canadian public knows little about CIDA’s current projects on good governance. If hard choices have to be made in the future concerning CIDA’s China priorities, it will be worthwhile to be more transparent, that is, to engage in an open public discussion, to educate governments and politicians as well as informing the general public.

Conclusion

In the first part of the paper I presented an approach to civil society which I expect may conflict with traditional views. The discussion led me through a wide range of ideas about civil society, to the notion of state-led civil society. The case studies provided substance and reassurance that I was on the right track. The section on policy implications linked my “theory” and concrete information to policy-making perspectives. The propositions in this last section followed logically from the assumptions made in the first parts of the paper. Some will question my assumptions and these propositions. That is the purpose of this paper, along with the possibility that it might be of use to scholars and to our policy-making community.

Notes

1. See Elizabeth Kiss, “Democracy Without Parties? ‘Civil Society’ in East-Central Europe,” *Dissent* (Spring 1992), p. 229; Heath B. Chamberlain, “On the Search for Civil Society in China,” *Modern China* 19, no. 2 (April 1993), p. 208; Dorothy Solinger, “China’s Transients and the State: A Form of Civil Society?” *Politics and Society* 21, no. 1 (March 1993), pp. 91–92; Edward Shils, “The Virtue of Civil Society,” *Government and Opposition* 26, no. 1 (1991), p. 9.
2. Kiss, “Democracy without Parties?” p. 227.
3. See Shu-Yun Ma, “The Chinese Discourse on Civil Society,” *China Quarterly* 137 (March 1994), pp. 180–193.
4. See Jonathan Unger and Anita Chan, “China, Corporatism, and the East Asian Model,” *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs (AJCA)* 33 (January 1995), pp. 29–54.
5. Vaclav Havel, “The Power and the Powerless,” in Paul Wilson, ed. *Open Letter* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), p. 177.
6. Jacek Kuron cited in Kiss, p. 227.
7. David Kelly and He Baogang, “Emergent civil society and the intellectuals in China,” in Robert F. Miller, ed., *The Developments of Civil Society in Communist Systems* (North Sydney: Allen and Unwin), 1992. p. 28.

8. Vaclav Benda, "The Parallel *Polis*," in H. Gordon Skilling and Paul Wilson, ed., *Civic Freedom in Central Europe: Voices From Czechoslovakia* (London: Macmillan, 1991).
9. Australian-Asian Perceptions Project, *Perceiving Citizenship*, Academy of the Social Sciences in China and the Asia-Australia Institute, University of New South Wales, Working Paper No. 1, October 1993, p. 7.
10. Shils, "The Virtue of Civil Society," p. 16.
11. Australian-Asian Perceptions Project, p. 8.
12. C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford, 1962).
13. Larry Diamond, "Toward Democratic Consolidation," *The Journal of Democracy* 5, no. 1 (1994), p. 5 (He cites S. Huntington, "Will More Countries Become Democratic?" *Political Science Quarterly*, 99 (Summer 1984), p. 204).
14. The point is discussed by several contributors to *Modern China* 19, no. 2 (April 1993). See also David Strand, "Protest in Beijing: Civil Society and Public Sphere in China," *Problems of Communism* (May-June 1990).
15. See Unger and Chan, "China, Corporatism and the East Asian Model," pp. 32-39.
16. Gordon White, "Prospects for Civil Society in China: A Case Study of Xiaoshan City," *AJCA* 29 (January 1993), pp. 73-76.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
18. Heath B. Chamberlain, "Coming to Terms with Civil Society," *AJCA* 31 (January 1994), p. 117.
19. Chamberlain, *Modern China*, p. 210.
20. Unger and Chan, "China, Corporatism and the East Asian Model," p. 33.
21. Andrew Walder, "The decline of communist power: Elements of a theory of institutional change," *Theory and Society* 23 (1993), pp. 311-315.
22. *The Rise of Nongovernmental Organizations in China: Implications for Americans*, A Report on a Project of the National Committee on U.S. China Relations, May 1994, pp. 14-16.
23. "Education in a Socialist Market Economy," *China News Analysis*, no. 1495 (October 15, 1993).
24. *The Rise of Nongovernmental Organizations*, p. 13.
25. This section is based on Gordon White, "Xiaoshan" pp. 63-88.
26. This section is based on Kevin O'Brien, "Implementing Political Reform in China's Villages," *AJCA* 32, (July 1994), pp. 33-60.
27. Anne Thurston, "Village Elections: The Seeds of Democracy in China?", *China Focus*, April 1, 1995, p. 3.
28. This section is based on David Wank, "Private Business, Bureaucracy, and Political Alliance in a Chinese City," *AJCA* 33 (January 1995), pp. 55-74.

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