

Where Have All the People Gone?

Some Reflections on Civil Society and Regime Stability in the People's Republic of China

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Abstract

The past two decades have witnessed the unprecedented proliferation of civil-society organizations across China. Yet, contrary to what many political scientists predicted, this proliferation has led neither to the formation of a strong political opposition, nor to any organized anti-systemic social movement. The author of this essay argues that this is due to the unique characteristics of the post-Mao Chinese civil society—including its functional depoliticization, conformity to the ruling regime, supplemental role in service provision, symbiotic relationship with the local authorities, as well as the lack of an engaged intelligentsia who can provide guidance and assume leadership. Combining with the consistent party-state control and the distance between Chinese civil society and the country's burgeoning contentious movements at the grassroots, the inherent weaknesses of contemporary Chinese civil society may have predetermined its limited potential in affecting systematic political change up till today.

Keywords: Civil society, Chinese politics, authoritarian regime, social movement.

Introduction

Conventional wisdom has long held that civil society is the paramount force driving political change under authoritarian or hybrid regimes. Be it the classical modernization theories that extol the democratic potential of a rising middle class, or the new Tocquevillians who stress the pivotal role that civic associations play in “making democracy work,” the nonstate, nonmarket, and nonfamily public space which scholars and activists term “civil society”

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is lauded as the fountainhead of dynamism for democratic transition and consolidation. A vibrant civil society, after all, forms an alternative forum for political discourse and action, builds solidarity and collective autonomy among the political opposition, and eventually demands “civil and political emancipation” for the people living under a repressive regime.¹ History provides many broad examples that seem to affirm this view, from the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s to the burgeoning triumphs of the “Arab Spring” in 2011, to name a recent few. During this same timeframe, however, the government of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) apparently bucked this trend, testing the universality of these theories.

The Chinese experience of the last two decades has shed some doubt on this relatively optimistic perspective. China’s full-scale “deep reform” following Deng Xiaoping’s Southern Tour in 1992 has witnessed the unprecedented proliferation of civil-society organizations across the nation.² According to the State Administration of Social Organizations (*Guojia Shehui Zuzhi Guanlijiju*), China had only 4,446 registered social organizations in 1988; by 2009, this number had increased exponentially to 431,096. This figure includes 238,747 civic associations, 190,479 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and 1,843 private foundations.³ If we follow the suggestion of Yu Keping—a prominent Chinese political scientist—and consider the scores of “underground” NGOs operating in China without formal registration, the total might approach three million.⁴ Yet, contrary to what many political scientists predicted, this proliferation has led neither to the formation of a strong political opposition, nor to any organized anti-systemic social movement. In fact, on many levels, China’s resurgent civil society seems to acquiesce to the direction of the authoritarian party-state. *Why* is China exceptional, and *how* has its government been able to maintain a stable grasp on power, despite encountering what many political scientists consider the inevitable tidal forces of history?

¹ Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 26.

² Lowell Dittmer and Guoli Liu, eds., *China’s Deep Reform* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2006).

³ For the latest set of data on China’s social organizations, see Ministry of Civil Affairs, “2009 nian minzheng shiye tongji baogao” [The 2009 statistics for civil affairs], <http://www.chinanpo.gov.cn/2202/40005/yjzlkindex.html> (accessed July 30, 2012). For historical data on China’s social organizations (1978–2004), see Ministry of Civil Affairs, “Minjian zuzhi linian tongjishuju” [Historical statistical data on civil organizations], <http://www.chinanpo.gov.cn/2201/20151/yjzlkindex.html> (accessed July 30, 2012).

⁴ Meng Xia, “Three Million NGOs Deemed Illegal in China,” *Chinese Social Science Network*, July 11, 2011, <http://www.cssn.cn/news/379783.htm> (accessed May 29, 2012).

Civil Society in Post-Deng China

A careful study of the characteristics of post-Deng Chinese civil society and the corresponding state-society relationship is needed to explain this unique political phenomenon. In this short essay, however, I would like to provide some preliminary thinking on the major attributes of civil society in today's PRC, hoping that this may open some interesting lines of inquiry for future empirical research on the issue. In my view, the recent development of China's civil society demonstrates several important characteristics that have shaped state-society interaction in modern Chinese politics and—to a certain extent—have weakened the society's capacity to lead or pursue an independent democratic social movement.

First, the development of Chinese civil society is *highly depoliticized* (i.e., both the missions and activities of China's civic organizations are confined to issues considered not politically sensitive). For example, the vast majority of China's NGOs are chartered environmental⁵ and scientific educational groups; the rest are charities or philanthropic associations. Groups that tread upon more politically sensitive grounds, such as rights advocacy or religious worship, are either not permitted at all or merely subsist under extreme state scrutiny. Numerous regulatory mechanisms imposed by the state, ranging from registration requirements to financial monitoring, operate to ensure that civic organizations avoid entering the political sphere. Depoliticization is necessary for any civil organization to survive in post-Deng China.

Second, modern Chinese civil society demonstrates a *high level of conformity* with the political agenda, discourse, and rhetoric of the authoritarian state. Chinese civic leaders seem eager to frame their causes within the grand social, economic, or political narrative espoused by Beijing.⁶ For example, environmental organizations frequently package their activities as part and parcel of the Communist Party's "Scientific Development" (*Kexue Fazhan*) scheme, while philanthropic organizations advertise their contributions to the construction of a socialist "Harmonious Society" (*Hexie Shehui*). This ostensive conformity permits breathing room for activism, but also substantially weakens the society's capacity for building any alternative political discourse, setting an opposing agenda, or consolidating anti-systemic forces. In fact, Chinese civil

⁵ In light of the Shifang and Qidong protests of 2012 (both are against government planning of major industrial projects that might impose a serious environmental threat to local residents), environmental issues might become more sensitive along the way of China's further economic development. Hence, the boundary for "political sensitivity" in the PRC is always shifting, which can be another obstacle for a well-rounded flourishing of autonomous civil society in China.

⁶ Elizabeth J. Perry also found a similar phenomenon in her study of grass-roots social protests in contemporary China. See, for example, Elizabeth J. Perry, "Studying Chinese Politics: Farewell to Revolution?" *China Journal*, no. 57 (2007): 21, and id., "Chinese Conceptions of 'Rights': From Mencius to Mao—and Now," *Perspectives on Politics* 6, no. 1 (2008): 37, 45-47.

society has been unable to secure a leading voice in any major political, social, or economic reforms since the mid-1990s.

Third, the programs and activities of Chinese civil society are overwhelmingly *focused on providing supplemental public services* that the state cannot sufficiently administer. This emphasis on service-delivery rather than rights-advocacy is unique, and has rendered only supplemental tasks to Chinese civil society. Furthermore, it helps to distract the attention of individuals and civic organizations from engaging in political mobilization or organization. An astounding 101,366 organizations defined themselves as service-oriented in the 2009 census, focusing primarily on scientific research, environmental awareness, education, public health, social work, or industrial/commercial services. In the same year, the number of civic organizations citing religious orientations was a mere 3,979, and the number declaring legal issues as their primary mission was only 3,236.⁷ Not surprisingly, the state selectively favors civic organizations that provide supplementary public services. The Ministry of Civil Affairs announced in July 2011 that it would waive the burdensome government endorsement requirements and directly register civic organizations that focused on charitable activities, social welfare, and social services.⁸ Apparently, the overwhelming focus on the provision of public services by Chinese civil society results from a combination of self-preference and state-regulation; yet, this feature significantly limits the political potential for Chinese civil society.

Fourth, modern Chinese civil society has *a symbiotic relationship with local branches of the party-state*. Civic organizations need the permission of the party-state to obtain the necessary permits to operate, while local officials have come to rely on civil society for the provisions of supplemental public services. This symbiosis is based on voluntary collaboration and mutual dependence. The relationship benefits both the regime and civil society in some ways, but it also seriously restricts civil society's capacity to initiate or advocate any political perspective that might weaken the regime's ideological foundations.

Last but not least, modern Chinese civil society is *highly disorganized because it lacks the involvement of an engaged intelligentsia*. Following the 1989 Tiananmen Movement, with only few exceptions, the majority of new Chinese intellectuals have kept a considerable distance from civic organizations and grass-roots movements. Apart from a brief crest in associational activism during the 1980s, today's intellectuals seem to focus more upon improving their personal finances, increasing their commercial exposure, or participating in policymaking through institutionalized channels. Very few seek a leading

⁷ Ministry of Civil Affairs, "2009 nian minzheng shiye tongji baogao" [The 2009 statistics for civil affairs].

⁸ Meng Xia, "Three Million NGOs Deemed Illegal in China."

role in civil society or the aggrandizement of social influence. The minority of intellectuals who do become involved in political events usually speak as isolated, individual voices and refrain from engaging in any collective activities. The absence of an engaged intelligentsia results in a disorganized civil society, which muddles through without unifying ideology, alternative discourse, enlightened leadership, or even a clear self-identity. These negative attributes make it extremely difficult for Chinese civil society to serve as a substantial force for reform.

State Control

In his 1996 book, *The State against Society*, Grzegorz Ekiert argues that the ways in which communist regimes respond to political crises mounted by societal challengers has a lasting impact on shaping the post-crisis political landscape.⁹ In the Chinese case, the unique ways in which the party-state controls civil society and responds to its occasional acts of deviance represent the other side of the coin, which has an equally—if not more—important impact on the political potential of civil society.

The Chinese party-state has treated civil society with great caution since the failed 1989 opposition movement. With the increasingly serious grassroots political resistance in recent years, the party-state's suspicion and hostility toward civil society is reaching a new level. Early in 2011, Zhou Benshun (Chief Secretary of the Communist Party's Central Politics and Law Committee) published an article in the party's highest-level journal, *Qiu Shi*, arguing that civil society is a "pitfall" established by the Western powers to destroy China's development, and that the party-state must do whatever it can to oppose its reach.¹⁰

Inspired by its deep suspicion, the state has set up and maintained an *extremely strict registration procedure* for civic organizations since the 1990s. Each association must obtain the consent and sponsorship of a government agency in order to register. This concrete institutional arrangement links civil society to the party-state and creates a spontaneous patron-client relationship. The party-state also established a mechanism that provides *favorable treatment to particular kinds of organizations*, including groups considered "helpful" to the party-state's overall policy goals (such as social welfare, charitable activities, or social services), but denies this to other organizations considered more threatening (such as rights advocacy groups, legal-aid groups,

⁹ Grzegorz Ekiert, ed., *The State against Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

¹⁰ Zhou Benshun, "Zou Zhongguo Tese Shehuiguanli Chuangxin Zhi Lu" [Look for a pathway for innovation in social management with Chinese characteristics], *Qiu Shi Zazhi* [The Qiu Shi Journal], no. 2011/10 (2011): 37-38.

or religious groups). By this “trimming” process, the party-state encourages “good” elements of civil society that are compatible with the state’s demands, while discouraging or even forcefully removing “bad” elements that possess the potential to threaten the political foundation of the regime.

Another important feature of the modern Chinese party-state’s response to the growth of civil society is its *highly adaptive capacity* to the changing domestic and international context. For example, in Guangdong, China’s most developed province, the local party-state faces more regular and severe conflicts than other provinces, including the significant problem of insufficient social-welfare provisions for migrant workers. Also, due to the early development of an elite, rich class and a growing middle class, Guangdong’s civil society is particularly strong in terms of its financial power, mobilization capacity, and internal management. Hence, the local party-state has demonstrated a more favorable stance toward civil society in that province than elsewhere, and has found it to be a useful partner for local governments in pacifying social tensions, solving communal disputes, providing welfare to the marginalized, and managing different social sectors. This high level of adaptability in dealing with civil society according to local conditions gives the local party-state remarkable flexibility in managing civil society effectively.

Relationship with Radical Grass-roots Movements

Given all of these factors, modern Chinese civil society is unsurprisingly disinclined to embrace radical grass-roots political activities, such as protests, riots, the “Rights Protection” movement (*Weiquan Yundong*), and so on. While intellectuals and activists may join these causes or show sympathy as individuals, civil society as a whole has not played any significant, organized role in grass-roots movements. China’s grass-roots resistance remains issue-oriented, disorganized, disrupted, and politically disoriented. Lacking organizational support and leadership from a mature civil society, radical grass-roots demonstrations against local governments over the past decade have remained confined to small social sectors and geographical areas. Where cross-sector and cross-regional movements do take place, they are often nationalist movements targeting “foreign imperialists,” triggered by some specific event and unopposed by the government. It is not clear to what extent Chinese civic organizations will be able to embrace grass-roots protesters or the mantle of civil leadership in the future.

The awkward silence of Chinese civil society in grass-roots political contention is an interesting and unique phenomenon. There may be several possible reasons for this.

First, participants in Chinese civil society mostly are wealthier and better-educated than the majority of Chinese and come from China’s small middle class. They have substantially different ideologies and grievances than the masses of peasants, laid-off workers, migrant workers, veteran soldiers, and

other disadvantaged social groups, who constitute the majority of radical protestors. Thus, the Chinese middle class and grass-roots society have different relationships with the party-state. This material and spiritual barrier between social classes in today's China prevents collaboration between leaders of the burgeoning civil society and the poorer and less educated denizens.

Second, the maintenance of strict state control over civic organizations has become a motivating reason for civil activists to voluntarily keep their distance from radical social challengers. After the 2008 Sichuan earthquake tragedy, for example, hundreds of thousands of Chinese NGOs rushed into the affected areas to provide services, ranging from disaster relief to medical aid to psychological recovery. Despite their proximity to the devastation, few of them chose to evolve and research more sensitive issue areas, such as the subpar quality of school buildings. This demonstrates, once again, that China's civil society is willing to embrace charitable causes but (contrary to their counterparts under Soviet socialism in Eastern Europe) is unwilling to undertake rights advocacy or political mobilization.

Third, the grass-roots protesters have gradually formed their own informal organizational networks, further distancing them from the existing "middle-class civil society." The recent resistance in the Guangdong village of Wukan is a prime example of this. There is the great potential that these grass-roots organizations will develop into another form of civil society, diverting from the established one in its demographics, discourse, and behavioral patterns. The direction in which these informal networks emerge and evolve in response to specific crises will have a deep impact on the future of state-society relations in China, as the unchecked growth of these "movement organizations" would surely weaken the attractiveness of the existing civil-society organizations among grass-roots opponents of the regime.

Conclusion

Civil society in contemporary China has been unable to establish itself as a political force as its Eastern European counterparts did decades ago. On the contrary, modern Chinese civil-society organizations often collaborate with the party-state to improve local governance and provide supplementary public services. Highly depoliticized and mutually dependent on the state, the missions, goals, and rhetoric of Chinese civic actors demonstrate a high level of conformity to the political regime's overall platform. Without a committed intelligentsia to play a leadership role and provide a guiding ideology, Chinese civil society is largely disorganized and unable to build cross-class and cross-regional solidarity.

Given its inherent weaknesses, modern Chinese civil society has very limited potential in affecting systematic political change. Unlike the Eastern European experiences, where the "Petofi Circle" served as an engine of dissenting political discourse and the "*Solidarność* Movement" led a nationwide

political opposition, Chinese civil society occupies very marginalized “residual space” on the political landscape that is tolerated by the ruling apparatus. Although civil society proactively seeks to expand such “residual space” and constantly tests the boundaries of state toleration, more often than not these actions are only cautious pursuits of a little more “breathing room” to prevent the organizations from being suffocated by state power, rather than courageous attempts to challenge that power or bring about any systematic political reform.