



CHAPTER 18

THE ISSUE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN CHINA AND ITS COMPLEXITY

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Introduction

In recent years, “civil society” has been one of the most often used concepts among academics in examining the sociopolitical transformation experienced by Eastern European countries and the former Soviet Union since the late 1980s, and in assessing similar changes in many non-Western developing countries. Obviously, the concept of civil society is in opposition to the autocratic state, its intense control over and arbitrary interference in society, and its superior standing high above the masses. Civil society, rather, is expressed in the independence and autonomy of society, the diversification of its inner components, the “secular” and non-ideological character of its values, and its liberal or “civilized” nature. Within the framework of an autocratic state, the tendency of a national population to move toward civil society and the various causes of this move have been regarded quite justifiably as deeply rooted driving forces for progressive sociopolitical change, as well as their primary manifestation. Together with diversification and liberalization within the state machinery, these social forces erode, pound at, destroy, or transform the framework of autocratic polity itself, while bestowing new dynamics, competence and relevance on the changed or changing polity and its administrative operations. This creates a far more reasonable, efficient, and perhaps even harmonious relationship between the state and society. Of course, the opposite can occur, i.e., the growth of civil society might be so unsound and immature that the existing state machinery, which has serious faults but still can perform the minimum functions of a state, suddenly collapses without any other functional state machinery to take its place. What ensues is a so-called “failed state” situation similar to the Hobbesian “state of nature,” in which law and order crumble, ethics and morality fall to dust, and violence rules the day, leaving the people with a life that is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”¹ In some countries of the post-Cold War world, that is indeed the shocking reality.

¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*. The Library of Liberal Arts edition, Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1958, p. 107.

Before looking at the issue of civil society in present-day China, one should first consider the following six general and fundamental characteristics of a typical developed civil society.

1. It exists largely independent of state power; its “basic units,” of various sizes and functions and at various social levels (in Edmund Burke’s words, “platoons and associations”) are autonomous in relation to the state.
2. It is either largely free from the state interference aimed at imposing control and dominance (though not necessarily immune to state influence or regulations) or able to effectively resist such interference.
3. It has a clear self-consciousness as an independent and autonomous being characterized by self-reliance, and pride or dignity.
4. A strong and relatively independent middle class serves as a fundamental economic force. The existence of such a class depends in turn upon whether the economy of the society is relatively free, and whether the direction of investment, the distribution of wealth, and the income structure are determined generally or primarily by the operation of the market, rather than by the state.
5. In cases where the state is greatly detached from society, the latter alienates itself from the ideology, belief system, and “official discourse” of the state. “State incapacitation” in the shaping of the spirit and ideas of society will result.
6. It is largely liberal, enlightened, rational, and “civilized,” in the mores, social style, and general patterns of behavior of most of its members. In other words, a developed civil society is necessarily a “civilized” society. (In regards to the earlier reference to “the failed state” and the analogy with the Hobbesian “state of nature,” perhaps the “civilized” nature of civil society pointed out here bears some analogy to the Lockean “state of nature,” with Natural Law [common morality] as its essential and largely effective norm.

The above six characteristics can be summarized as: independence and autonomy; immunity from excessive state interference; self-consciousness and insubordinate values; the presence of a strong and economically powerful middle class; alienation from the state’s belief system or ideology; and rationality and “civility.” A society that combines these fundamental characteristics is a developed civil society.

Measured against the above characteristics, present-day China is not yet a civil society, but at the same time it has shown an increasing inclination towards the germination of a civil society. This is the first of two dualities of today’s China. Her second duality is more complicated and self-contradictory and is defined especially in terms of the last of the above six characteristics. That is, China’s embryonic civil society simultaneously has both “civilized” and “uncivilized” natures, and this is the most prominent characteristic of Chinese society as it stands now.

The First Duality of Civil Society in China

Due to the economic reforms launched by Deng Xiaoping and the partial changes of the pattern of state political conduct that accompanied that reform, China has not been a “totalitarian” state for more than 20 years, and the magnitude, intensity, and extent of the state power exercised (both in reality and in theory based on official ideology) over society and its various “basic units” cannot be in any way compared with those in the Mao Zedong era. However, the exertion of that power is still so widespread and penetrating that it cannot yet be suggested that Chinese society has become largely independent of state power and that its various basic units enjoy largely undoubted autonomy. Though there are numerous examples of such autonomy, especially at the level of grassroots social units and in rural and remote inland areas, social independence and autonomy are far from the norm. As recently as a few years ago, a department of the central government dictated that a branch of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) should be established within any academic peer group (such as scholarly societies and research associations) to provide political leadership and supervision. Permission for the formation of any new such group has become extremely difficult to obtain since then, unless organizers are inspired or supported by high governmental authorities, or they go through the “back door” of personal connections with high-ranking officials. Immunity from state interference remains weak, especially against the state’s strict control over dissemination of news (and, therefore, over the rights of society and individual citizens to know public facts) including political publications, mass media, and the use of Internet sites. In short, state censorship has not met any widespread, serious and active resistance.

Since there is no independent and autonomous civil society in China, the aforementioned self-consciousness is also lacking. In today’s China, “the primacy of the state” remains a somewhat celebrated notion. One of the most frequently expressed complaints by ordinary people about the political system, administrative rules or regulations, and the conventions of the political culture is the idea of *guan benwei*—sometimes translated as “officials rule the roost”—which emphasizes the supremacy of officialdom. Compared to the situation 15 to 20 years ago, however, some important social values, such as the rights to individual wealth, liberty, and independent thought have gained strength, and the sense of independence, self-reliance, and pride on the part of social units and individuals has grown.

The existence of an economically unconstrained middle class is now a fact as a result of the economic reforms two decades ago. Private individual wealth that cannot be controlled by the state with political or administrative methods has grown dramatically. Free markets have increasingly played a primary role in economic regulation, and in this environment a middle class based on a vast amount of small- and medium-size private enterprises is rapidly emerging. However, this middle class has not yet developed into a largely independent entity, lacking a clear sense of collective identity and its own distinct class culture. In many cases, having special connections with officialdom is a necessity for business success. Bribery of officials can guarantee that kind of profits that would have been unimaginable otherwise, while many private enterprises have to bear illegal levies and extortion by various local

governmental institutions and official personnel. There is a grave problem of moral degeneration or a “moral vacuum” in many aspects of life in present-day China. (These problems are considered so serious that the Chinese government has added the word “civilized” to its slogan of long-term national objectives—“a rich, strong, and democratic [socialist] China”—and prompted former president Jiang Zemin to advocate “rule by morality” as well as “rule by law.” In light of all this, one can hardly apply the word “civilized” to present Chinese society without serious reservation.

A key factor in the absence of civil society in China is found in the attitudes and behavior of state officials. In China, certain ideological beliefs, cultural traditions, and political self-interests prevent the state from trusting, accepting or even tolerating a civil society. The existence of a relatively independent and strong middle class and its resistance to state interference have made the state recognize that imposing “totalitarian” rule is not only impossible, but that it also perpetuates poverty and backwardness by isolating the regime, both internally and externally, and could sow the seeds of the regime’s own destruction. On the other hand, the stubborn traditions of Chinese society, the relatively low-quality civil education, the existing sociopolitical institutional structure, and the dominance of the conservative over reformatory forces both within the society and the state serve to maintain the state’s capability to check, whether consciously or unconsciously, the growth of civil society.

However, an embryonic civil society has already rendered the state machinery non-totalitarian. If compared with the typical totalitarian condition (that is, “nothing without state, nothing outside state, nothing against state,” or put simply, the condition of “Leviathan”), it is rather liberal. Looking at the social grassroots and the countryside and remote inland areas, as well taking into account the increasing diversification and relative autonomy of social components, ways of life, ways of thinking and political opinions among the upper social strata and in coastal cities, China today does not qualify as a “typical autocratic state.” Although civil society is immature, some important elements or components of civil society exist. Some basic social values still toe the official Party line, but other important values of civil society, including individual wealth, individual rights, liberty, and independent thinking, have been widely accepted. The notion that financial success depends on the self is increasingly in vogue among ordinary citizens, while many intellectual elites live entirely outside the state-owned and managed “system.” In addition to the great number of private entrepreneurs and their employees, there are many real professionals, including freelancers, doing business. The emerging Chinese middle class consists of millions of private entrepreneurs, high-income professionals, high-level employees of foreign and joint-venture companies (known as “high-ranking white collar” workers and “golden collar” workers) and successful stock-market speculators. In some cities, these people have their own exclusive residential quarters, clubs, and entertainment locations—luxuries quite unknown to most ordinary low-income Chinese.

However, the most remarkable manifestation of civil society in China is found in the alienation of society from the state’s ideology, belief system, political culture, and “official discourse.” Political indoctrination courses and their examinations have long been viewed as repugnant by undergraduate and postgraduate students, who muddle

through them with the least amount of effort. There is hardly any private subscription to the central and local Party newspapers, magazines and journals. The Chinese Communist Party's propaganda-producing departments are viewed as the least prestigious party institutions by intellectuals. Political functionaries are regarded in most places as cadres possessing no specialized or professional skills who make their living with "empty talk." In parallel with the changing attitude toward officialdom, a wide range of customs, interests, beliefs, ideas and theories—often very different from, or even opposed to, the official ideology—have their adherents.

China's embryonic civil society, or at least some important elements of a civil society, stems from five ongoing developments:

1. The economic reforms and the partial change in the pattern of state political conduct accompanying that reform, of which the most fundamental feature is the great retrenchment of the state's power over society and its interference against society.
2. The continuous rapid economic growth, together with vast improvements in material life and education.
3. The diversification and increasing complexity of society, which, according to a study by CASS (the Chinese Academy of Social Science),² has stratified into ten major levels, from state officials, the civil service, professional intellectuals, and private enterprises and down to ordinary manual workers and peasants. This replaces the previous notion of a much-simplified social division including mainly the proletariat, bourgeoisie, and petty bourgeoisie.
4. The opening to the outside world, in particular the dramatic increase in non-political exchanges with major Western nations in the fields of trade, finance, culture, education, information, travel, and migration, to such an extent that a web of interdependence is developing in some areas.
5. The gradual transformation of social values, of which the fundamental direction is the replacement of "state-standard" values with "society-standard" values, and the prioritization of individual welfare over state power.

Taken together, these developments constitute the most important forces acting on social life in China in the past two decades. The change that they have brought suggests that China, after the constant disasters of Mao's era, not only can obtain the national dynamism to become rich and strong, but also that the evolution of liberal democracy remains a long-term prospect.

² This research report has not yet gained the final endorsement of the highest relevant institutions in the government, and therefore has not been formally published, though its main content became known through Chinese media reports.

The Second Duality of Civil Society in China

The second duality to be elaborated here complicates the picture, and will concentrate on the last measurement of a civil society: liberty, enlightenment, rationality, and civility. China's embryonic civil society simultaneously has both "civilized" and serious "uncivilized" characteristics. On one hand, China's greatest hope lies in the comprehensive reform and opening to the outside world and the healthy growth of civil society, which could make China, one of the few vast continental states, a first-rate and constructive great power in the 21st century. On the other hand, China's greatest long-term hardship and the biggest restraint on its future is perhaps the serious moral degeneration symbolized by this "uncivilized" nature, combined with its heavy population burden and related ecological deterioration.

What constitutes the "civilized" nature of embryonic Chinese civil society? From the perspective of one who experienced life in the "totalitarian" society of Mao Zedong, the greatest change since then is the tendency to emphasize individual liberty and human values, together with the related recognition of the legitimate diversification of those values and the right of others to choose freely their own values. For example, a popular song praises young people who "act according to (one's own) feeling." Such phrases as "Realizing (the values of) one's self," "What is valuable is understanding (other people)," and "Long live understanding!" are espoused by the masses. Divorce has become easier for women to obtain and no longer carries such a heavy social stigma. Even love affairs outside marriage are widely viewed as private and individual matters and not subject to moral criticism and administrative punishment. In universities, academic freedom is becoming the standard, though political expediency sometimes leads to self-censorship. With the exception of direct criticism of China's leader or the dominant position of the Communist Party, hardly any free expressions draw administrative punishment anymore. A published written opinion that is regarded by authorities as seriously violating some basic ideological doctrine or important state policy would result in punishment, but it would be levied against the publication or its publisher, rather than the author. This stems both from the intellectual world's great opposition to punishment of free expression, and from the government's unwillingness to publicize the offending writer (and his or her views) by creating a *cause celebre*.

Moreover, in the public mind, the economy and politics have changed places on the scale of importance. The primacy of politics in the Mao era has left a bitter aftertaste in China. In contrast, people have taken to heart Deng Xiaoping's advice to "take very consistently economic construction as the center of state affairs for at least 100 years." The free-market economy has become the primary means to carry out this idea. The notion of rule by law and of democracy has gained influence. Democracy is still a sensitive term in China that makes the government wary, especially if interpreted as Western multi-party liberal democracy. However, to deny the value in liberal democracy has become infeasible. The government has emphasized an argument that has been relatively convincing to most Chinese: that steps toward democracy have to be prudent, slow and evolutionary, taking fully into consideration China's particular situation and backwardness, and never sacrificing social stability.

Society's recognition of the importance of education, knowledge, science and advanced technology has rapidly increased. A slogan that prevailed in the beginning of the reform process two decades ago was "Long live science!" That sentiment survives today in the slogan "Making China strong and prosperous through science and education." In urban areas, most families are willing to spend lavishly on their children's education, and entrance to the best senior middle schools and top universities is fiercely competitive.

State prevalence in society has been greatly reduced, perhaps to the vanishing point. A prevailing view among ordinary people today is that good governance is that which is good for the common people. Chinese intellectual elites argue that the ambiguous and often abused concept of "national interest" should be dissected into three types of national interest—the interests of the people, the interests of the state, and the interests of the regime, in descending order of importance.

However, China's embryonic civil society is also plagued by its serious "uncivilized" side. A particularly salient problem is the serious degeneration of social morality. The domestic market is flooded with faked and inferior goods that are hard to stamp out. Contaminated or even poisoned rice, wine, and meats have made their way into the open market. Customers and guests often encounter indifferent service workers. Plagiarism and fraud in academic competition are common occurrences. Obscenity in literature and some popular magazines can too frequently be found. Scandals in professional sports and the performing arts break out almost continuously. A large segment of the emerging middle class has sought to get rich quick with trade-offs between political power and money, and collusion between businesses and officialdom. This greed, corruption, and violations of the law have tainted the embryonic Chinese civil society. Violent crime is also on the rise, a result of the disruptive effects of rapid social transformation, the relatively uncivilized qualities of large segments of the population, and the profound damage inflicted on social morality during Mao Zedong's era. Steel doors, to guard against thieves and robbers, are now common in big cities. Organized crime is rampant in many areas. Underground or semi-public prostitution prevails, with more than five million people estimated to be engaged in this illegal business. Fraud is widespread, and big cases routinely are splashed across the news media. Above all, a serious erosion of the sense of trust in daily human and social relations—the vital "social capital" of trust—has become the most profound and damaging legacy of the degradation of social morality. Finally, the growth of extreme nationalist sentiment, as well as anti-reform and anti-democracy ideas in recent years has aggravated the "uncivilized" nature of Chinese civil society.

Conclusion: The Prospects for China's Democratization

To grasp the essence of the issue of civil society in present-day China, one must focus on its duality: (1) China is not yet a civil society as measured by the six basic "theoretical" characteristics of a developed or typical civil society; but at the same time, it has shown an increasing inclination toward the germination of civil society, or an embryonic civil society; (2) the present embryonic civil society in China simultaneously has both "civilized" and "uncivilized" natures.

This complexity, on the one hand, directly or indirectly promotes China's democratization. On the other hand, the state's conservative attitude (shaped by its self-interest and ideology), social traditions, the low level of civility among the people, and the existing institutional structure of both state and society are in different degrees hindering and obstructing democratization. The fact that the present embryonic civil society in China is both "civilized" and "uncivilized" brings about at least two possible prospects for China's democratization: (1) a healthy and mature liberal democracy (with features of political life in advanced Western nations and some particular Chinese characteristics) comes into being in China through a gradual process of political and social development; or (2) an excessively rapid democratization creates a country with some democratic institutions but still far from being a sound and mature liberal democracy. This second scenario would probably lead to the kind of political morbidity, economic hardship, and social disorder that have plagued several underdeveloped countries during their democratic transformation in recent years. Moreover, an excessively rapid and even chaotic democratization might make China a "failed state," forfeiting the growth of civil society and the future of liberal democracy, although the chances of this are slim.

Whatever the prospects for China's democratization, it will bring major political and economic consequences to the rest of the world and East Asia, be they positive, negative, or even disastrous. The outside world can exert strong and important positive influences upon the growth of civil society and democratization in China. However, to exert such influences successfully is a complicated and arduous matter, requiring comprehensive observation, sophisticated insights, empathic understanding, and a sense of a grand strategy.