

In Search of a Historical Perspective on "Civil Society" China^{*}

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Introduction

The Tiananmen Square incident in 1989 served as the impetus for the quest for civil society (or its precursor) in China. Scholars who dissected the "pro-democracy movement" led by those who gathered at Tiananmen Square blamed the weakness of civil society in China for the failure of the movement. That conclusion sparked a string of lively debate as to which phase of development civil society in China was at, and how its potential should be measured from a historical

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point of view. The publication of the English edition of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* by Jürgen Habermas coincided with that very year, adding fresh fuel to the debate over the applicability of the civil society concept to China.

While emphasizing that this is an important yet merely one of the perceptions of civil society, for the time being, we will adopt the perception by Jürgen Kocka, and view civil society as a space of social self-organization in among the state, market, and the private sphere; in other words, the sphere of activities such as various associations, circles, networks, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This sphere is a space of public debate, disputes, and cooperation. It is a space of independence for individuals and groups. It is also a sphere of vitality and innovation, and a place where people work for the welfare of the public¹.

The debate as to whether civil society or at least its precursor exists or had existed in China, being so extremely removed geographically from the tradition in the West, has come to develop concerning two separate periods in history. One is from the late Qing to the early Republican period, and the other is the reform and opening-up period, particularly the 1990s onwards. The "socialist" period from 1949 to 1978 comes between these two periods. The 30 years of the "socialist" period during which an absolute dictator ruled China is generally

¹ Jürgen Kocka, "Civil Society as a Historical Problem and a Promise," *Shiso*, no.953 (September 2003), p. 40. He calls this a "narrow concept" of civil society. What Kocka advocates in order to devise a more comprehensive concept is to include its relationship with the state, market, and families in the formation of the concept.

regarded as when society was being oppressed by the state, and thus deemed out of question, as not affording any possibility for civil society (This view, however, is not necessarily valid. While Chinese society did remain quiet during this period, it had not completely died down).

Those who look for the Eastern counterparts of things Western in the course of history, as referred to by the social historian Hanchao Lu as those taking the counterpart-hunting approach², end up crossing a shaky bridge from an ethical as well as methodological point of view. There are those who firmly believe that experience in the West is of universal nature, and thus the equivalent must surely be found in China. In this case, they risk being labeled ethnocentrists. There are also those who seek to prove themselves that Chinese counterparts of things Western cannot be found. In this case, they risk being called orientalist. Both types of people are equally motivated for their quest. Furthermore, there are still others, namely scholars who are Chinese themselves or of Chinese descent. Their intellectual attempts are typically fuelled by their "desire for civil society." Frustrated with being reminded of the "Chinese peculiarity" at every opportunity, they are out to fulfill their desire "to catch up with the rest of the world" at least in theory³. Therefore, maintaining the subtle sense of balance is essential in this intellectual quest.

² Hanchao Lu, *Beyond the Neon Lights: Everyday Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 40.

³ The phrase, "desire for civil society" was borrowed from Pheng Cheah, "Universal Regions - Research on the Changing World and Asia," *Bessatsu Shiso*, no. 918 (November 2000), p.87. However, he does not necessarily use this phrase in the way meant by the present writer.

The first sign that would encourage those with the "desire for civil society" was already manifest in the late Qing to the early Chinese Republic period. The development of numerous "self-governing organizations" formed by merchants and bore the functions such as the maintenance of public order, fire fighting, and relief of the poor as discovered by William T. Rowe in the commercial city Hankow is a fine example⁴. There is also the rapid expansion of publishing houses for newspapers, magazines, and books as well as their circulation figures accompanied by an increase in the number of libraries⁵. Nevertheless, these precursors of civil society were far from blossoming; rather, they could not even function to their full potential. Furthermore, as severely criticized by Frederic Wakeman, Jr., what had been regarded as the precursor of civil society could have been totally under the thumb of the state in reality⁶.

In the meantime, after the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, those examining the actual conditions of various social organizations in China were starting to notice the ambiguous relationship between these social organizations and the state, although on the outside it looked as if the social organizations were gaining an increasing amount of independence from the state. Having noticed this relationship, many concluded that corporatism, rather than civil society, was the better concept in defining the state-society relations in

⁴ William T. Row, *Hankow: Commerce and Society in a Chinese City, 1796-1889* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984).

⁵ Qiusha Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations in Contemporary China: Paving the Way to Civil Society?* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 45.

⁶ Frederick Wakeman, Jr., "The Civil Society and Public Sphere Debate," *Modern China*, 19-2 (April 1993), pp. 108-137.

China. The phrase "state-led civil society" by B. Michael Frolic, however contradictory in terms it may seem, concisely summarizes the ambiguous relationship between social organizations and the state in today's China⁷.

Similarly, both historians and analysts of current conditions alike, many of them tend to become completely helpless between two contradicting perspectives in their attempts to find a sign of civil society in this Eastern superstate with a long history. Within what kind of framework can they redefine what they have observed? Needless to say, such redefining should be done in a manner as to reveal what it is that seems like a precursor of "civil society," and what kind of potential it has for future development. That is precisely the purpose of this essay. The present writer will attempt to link the results of the observation on civil society from two separate periods in Chinese history, and then subsume them into a new viable framework, and at the same time provide a certain level of historical perspective to the direction of the development of "civil society" in China.

Nevertheless, it must be mentioned in advance that the debate here will not be clear cut, rather, it will progress more like the repetition of cut-and-try methods. First of all, I will organize the theories concerning civil society that have been constructed for separate periods in Chinese history, and then retie those various factors by putting them through a "surgical procedure" of a kind, thereby

⁷ B. Michael Frolic, "State-Led Civil Society," in Timothy Brook and B. Michael Frolic eds., *Civil Society in China* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1997), pp. 46-67.

creating four new types of theories concerning the development of civil society in China. However, I will assert that none of the theories are satisfactory. Then, having revised the conventional method of questioning, I will propose a hypothesis on the nature of the organizations regarded as the precursor of civil society in China. Once it is achieved, I will go on to discuss which direction the development of "civil society" in China could take by comparing it to the existing civil society models.

I. Quest for "civil society" in China

1. On state-society relations in late Qing and early Republic China

According to the words of Weber, in contrast to cities in Europe, cities in China lacked legally guaranteed self-governing organizations⁸. It is true that, historically, Chinese cities were where bureaucrats resided, and thus it seems unlikely that we would find any counterparts to strong self-governing organizations seen in European history. However, William T. Rowe, Mary B. Rankin, and David Strand put forward a revisionistic view in their historical and sociological analysis of urban society in late Qing and early Republic China⁹. For example, Rowe wrote about Hankow, a large city located in the Middle Yangtze region at the end of the nineteenth century where autonomic associations mainly consisting of merchants existed for the purposes such as maintenance of public order, defense, relief of

⁸ Max Weber, trans. by Tokuo Kimata, *Confucianism and Taoism* (Sobunsha, 1971), p. 32.

⁹ Mary Backus Rankin, *Elite Activism and Political Transformation in China: Zhejiang Province, 1865-1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986); David Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing: City People and Politics in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

the poor, and childcare. He suggested that those who belonged to the associations came to acquire an identity as citizens of Hankow, and thus an internal bond. His suggestion continued that these associations displayed a tendency to gradually become more independent from the state, and this tendency can be regarded as a precursor of civil society¹⁰.

Long before Rowe's book was published, Japanese scholars on China such as Noboru Niida, Tadashi Negishi, and Shiraki Tachibana were also examining the autonomous functions of guilds in Chinese cities that were constituted along lines of common provincial origin as well as common occupation. It is true that, rather than questioning how much independence these organizations acquired from the state as did the scholars in the West, they tended to question how these organizations could serve as the foundation for the unification of the modern state. In other words, Japanese theorists often took the growth of autonomic associations in Chinese cities as part of the growth of the powerful modern state, and not as the growth of the sphere against the state. (In the first place, local-origin guilds were formed by both the government and private sectors.)¹¹ This viewpoint held by the Japanese scholars on China will be revisited at a later stage.

As for the issue on the degree of independence from the state, the revisionistic view opposing Weber came to be in the center of

¹⁰ Row, *Hankow*, pp. 10, 38, 338-339.

¹¹ For the outline of the debate surrounding intermediary organizations in China by Japanese scholars, refer to Mio Kishimoto, "Shimin Shakai Ron to Chugoku" *Rekishii Hyoron*, no. 527 (March 1994), pp. 56-72.

criticism. In the opinion of the harshest critic F. Wakeman, the leaders of the groups organized by merchants were far from having independent power. They were selected by bureaucrats, and were obliged to report, and offer bribes, to the bureaucrats. Moreover, activities that were thought to be autonomic also could have been at the request of the authorities in reality. Furthermore, cooperation among the associations was also dictated by bureaucrats. In essence, what Rowe and the others considered as a sphere independent from the state was in reality protected and manipulated by the state, and was no more than a sphere attached firmly to the state¹².

In this manner, Western scholars have been entertaining two contradicting theories concerning the growth of social organizations in Chinese cities across two centuries from the late Qing to the early Republican period. One theory observes the organizations chiefly maintained and operated by merchants such as guilds and philanthropic organizations - as well as the organizations run by the intellectuals - and finds in their development process the precursor of civil society as a sphere independent of the state. We will call it Theory A for the time being. The other theory does not completely deny that such organizations had a certain amount of independence based on the profits and interests of their membership, but it does emphasize that the organizations were inextricably linked to the state. We will call it Theory B for the time being.

¹² Wakeman, "The Civil Society and Public Sphere Debate," pp. 117-128.

Chinese historians who later joined in this discussion displayed a similar tendency although the organizations they studied were not the same as above. In their study of the organization and activities of the chambers of commerce which originated in Shanghai in 1902, they assert, on the one hand, that the chambers of commerce were showing a tendency toward independence from the state in aspects such as the selection of leaders, fundraising, day-to-day operations, auditing, and formation of local organizational networks; however, they also point out that, on the other hand, the chambers of commerce were running in close cooperation with the state on other aspects¹³.

2. On state-society relations in the 1990s onwards

In this period, we again find observers split between contradicting perspectives rather than holding a clear, consistent perspective. If the core of civil society is found in the mesh of interactions between various autonomic organizations that have become independent from the state, it came as no surprise that the interests of the observers were directed toward Chinese social organizations that have been increasing at an astonishing speed ever since the start of the reforms and open-door policies. The luxuriant growth of social organizations in the late twentieth century was not merely a necessary consequence of the state loosening up its controlling hand over society, but it was also a phenomenon caused by the state scheming to build a more efficient

¹³ A notable example of this research is, ZhuYing, *zhuan xin shiqi de shehui yu guojia yijindai ZhongGuo shanghai wei zhuti de lishi toushi* [*Turning point for the Society and State: focusing on the historical perspective of modern Chinese Chamber of commerce*], Wuhan: Huazhong Normal Unibersity Press, 1997

indirect social control system in place of the conventional "unit" system, and in so doing attempting to outsource its governance to social organizations. Furthermore, some of the scheming might have come from bureaucrats who tried to secure their destination for a "future lucrative post in the private sector."

For this reason, while those who surveyed these organizations each found a dawn of civil society there, they also came across a sign of corporatism at the same time¹⁴. The state's intention to control the activities of social organizations through peak organizations was publicly announced in October 1989, and further clarified in the "Social Organization Registration Management Act" revised in September 1998. This act, while making it mandatory for all social organizations to register with the government, stipulates that each organization is to be managed through the "main division," and that the founding of similar organizations within the specific administrative district is not permitted. Considering the above, the astonishing growth of social organizations in the 1990s onwards should be mostly viewed from the perspective that the state was reorganizing and improving the efficiency of its social control. Interpreting it as the increase of social organizations' independence from the state seems limiting in itself.

¹⁴ For example, Gordon White, Jude Howell, and Shang Xiaoyuan, *In Search of Civil Society: Market Reform and Social Change in Contemporary China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Jonathan Unger and Anita Chan, "China, Corporatism, and the East Asian Model," *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 33 (January 1995).

However, the reality is far from what the state intended. In practice, as warned by the Communist party organ *Qiushi*, the state is not controlling the increase of social organizations successfully¹⁵. That attributes to the fact that those wishing to found an organization can do so relatively easily through their personal connections with bureaucrats. Founding an unofficial organization can also be done without much difficulty. Furthermore, it is also possible for a social organization to found another social organization. This is often done for profit-making purposes. Consequently, too many organizations have come into existence; some regions have a number of similar organizations emerging within the same region¹⁶. Although the state keeps the groups with strategic importance under its control, the corporatist framework in China carries the risk of being eventually pulled down by the proliferation of social organizations.

In addition, some research results on social organizations in China show that the functions to produce profit for their members are beginning to play a more important role than the functions to control the members. As shown by the research on trade unions by Anita Chan, organizations in China on the whole are beginning to look "downward" rather than "upward." In other words, they seem to be more inclined to serve their members' interests than serve as

¹⁵ Yu Dehu, "Youguan woguo shehuituanti wenti de sikao"[Reflections on Chinese Social Group Issues] *Qiushi* Vol.17,(September 1) 1991, pp. 18-19.

¹⁶ Yijiang Ding, *Chinese Democracy After Tiananmen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 58.

representatives of the state¹⁷. In this manner, a gradual shift from state corporatism to social corporatism is taking place.

Furthermore, as told by Christopher E. Nevitt in his analysis of private business associations in Tianjin, more regional governments and local influential figures today are uniting locally sometimes in rivalry with the central government¹⁸. This is a phenomenon regarded as the rise of local corporatism; nonetheless, these alliances are not necessarily looking "upward" constantly. It seems the formation of social corporatism is also beginning on the regional level. In any case, Yijiang Ding's view on the virtual fragmentation of corporatist framework seems viable¹⁹.

The above trend could be interpreted as a sign of the formation of civil society. Firstly, at least in theory, social corporatism in which the independence of social organizations has become prominent does not necessarily contradict civil society. Secondly, if the framework for state corporatism is virtually falling apart, that means the liberation of social organizations in China from the unfair partnership destined for subjection to the state. Nevertheless, the above theory may not be applicable in every case. As commented by Margaret M. Pearson on the mindset and behavior pattern of new business elites, there is evidence that social organizations display both the desire to take the initiative to rebuild their connections with the state and the desire for

¹⁷ Anita Chan, "Revolution or Corporatism?: Workers and Trade Unions in Post-Mao China," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 29 (January 1993), pp. 31-61.

¹⁸ Christopher E. Nevitt, "Private Business Associations in China: Evidence of Civil Society or Local State Power?" *The China Journal*, no. 36 (July 1996), pp. 39-40.

¹⁹ Ding, *Chinese Democracy After Tiananmen*, pp. 60-62.

more independence at the same time²⁰. Thus, we are again at a loss between two perspectives that are seemingly in conflict. At this point, as before, the argument that a precursor of civil society has emerged and is growing within the corporatist framework will be called Theory C for the time being. The argument that a certain amount of external and internal brakes are being put on the independence of social organizations within the framework, and that civil society would remain in its germinal stage at the very most will be called Theory D for the time being.

II. Four scenarios concerning the historical development of "civil society" in China

By combining the above Theories A, B, C, and D, we can structure four basic scenarios or interpretive frameworks concerning the historical development of civil society in China. The first is a scenario of the development of a sustained (or recurrent) civil society resulting from the A-C combination. According to these theories, autonomic organizations regarded as a precursor of civil society had already emerged in large cities in late Qing and early Republic China. The slow process toward the growth of civil society was unfortunately stopped or reversed by the "socialist revolution"; however, it resumed with the market-oriented economic reform that came with the reforms and open-door policies. Considering the cultural tradition in China, this process will go on for some time; nevertheless, this is nothing

²⁰ Margaret M. Pearson, *China's New Business Elite: The Political Consequences of Economic Reform* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 110-115.

other than the modern European history being replayed in a different place under different conditions, and thus a universal process in human history.

The second is a scenario of the authoritarian development resulting from the A-D combination. In this scenario, the clear beginning of civil society in early twentieth-century China was unfortunately lost due to the prolonged revolution and war. Any remaining hope of its comeback dissipated under the state power made extremely strong by the subsequent communist regime. Today, the social organizations in question are left with self-governing functions only to the extent allowed by the powerful state according to its own calculations, or to the extent the state has assigned part of its governance. Nevertheless, they are basically nothing more than the groups subject to the state. Moreover, these organizations feel in a way comfortable with the straitjacket which the state put on them, and it is highly unlikely that they would ever take it off on their own initiative.

The third is a scenario of the growth of civil society as a new trend beginning in the late twentieth century, resulting from the B-C combination. According to this scenario, China in the first half of the twentieth century scarcely had any political, economic, social, or cultural infrastructure from which civil society could emerge. However, the late twentieth century brought the reforms and open-door policies accompanied by the market-oriented economic reform, the advancement of the rule of law, and the expansion of civil rights (needless to say, the latter two cannot be praised without some

concern). These changes influenced China with a wave of globalization. As a result, social organizations which are independent of the state and able to hold out against the state by maintaining tensions at last began to grow.

And the last is a scenario of China as a barren land for civil society from a historical point of view, resulting from the B-D combination. Those who support this scenario would generally view the development of state-society relations in China through cultural determinism. Kiyooki Hirata once simply stated, "in Asia, the familial formation of human sets dictates that there is no clear distinction between society and state."²¹ Furthermore, as Suzanne Ogden commented, the Confucian tradition urges people to be subject to authority on one hand, and to value family ties on the other hand. In summary, the culture which makes the growth of social organizations independent of the state and blood relatives difficult has always existed in China²². In this context, the Confucian tradition (or, more broadly, "Asian culture") is regarded as a persistent social and psychological trend which endures through changes in various objective conditions that are social and economic in nature. The seemingly new trends concerning state-society relations witnessed in the early twentieth century and again in the 1990s onwards gave in to such a powerful culture, or will give in to such a culture in the end. Therefore, it is impossible to speak of the growth of civil society in China as a sphere distinguished from, and holding out against, the state.

²¹ Kiyooki Hirata, *Shimin Shakai to Shakai Shugi* (Iwanami Shoten, 1975), p. 171.

²² Suzanne Ogden, *Inklings of Democracy in China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002), pp. 279-280.

As we have done so far, by reconstructing the previous theories concerning civil society for the two separate periods in Chinese history, we are able to derive four new interpretive frameworks concerning the long-term perspective of the development of civil society in this part of the world. However, in practice, hardly anyone will support one framework over the other exclusively. In particular, it is highly unlikely to find an observer who is satisfied with the second or the third framework. The reason being that most observers sense a certain commonality between the circumstances in the early twentieth century and the late twentieth century in China, though it is difficult to prove. Nevertheless, instead of leaning toward either the first or the fourth framework, the observers vacillate between the two. No careful observer can accept either the first or the fourth framework on an "as is" basis, or discard one or the other altogether. On one hand, in considering state-society relations in China - either past or present - it seems difficult to speak of any sustained growth of civil society in China to the extent it seems impossible to assume two clearly distinguishable realms. However, on the other hand, they are not able to assert with certainty that China is a barren land for civil society. The reason is that the framework for corporatism that was supposed to have been built to exacting standards is not at all complete in reality; moreover, it looks like something fragile that would start tumbling down as soon as it is built. How could we possibly assert that this framework is the optimized, and thus stable goal of state-society relations in China, and not merely a transit point? Although paradoxical, who can say with assurance that the corporatist framework will not become a cradle for a "genuine" civil society?

Consequently, the observers cannot side with either the first or the fourth interpretive framework, nor can they eliminate either of the frameworks instead. This dilemma is also a reflection of our inadequate knowledge concerning as to how civil society can emerge and then grow (or be restored) under the authoritarian system.

Now, how do we break free from the state of being stuck between the two contradicting historical perspectives of the first and the fourth theories, and take a step toward understanding? There are important guidelines in carrying out the necessary survey. We should follow the intuition of many observers and hypothesize that there has been a historical trend that has remained consistent over a long period of time from the early twentieth century to the late twentieth century. That is not to say that we should view the state-society relations we are witnessing today as something fixed, rather, we should endeavor to understand them as part of a changing phase. Nonetheless, these guidelines on their own are not sufficient. It seems to me beneficial to add some revision to how our conventional questioning is done concerning state-society relations in China.

III. In search of a new perspective on "civil society" in China

1. Revising the questioning and proposing a hypothesis

Up to now, in discussing a precursor of civil society in China, scholars have generally focused on specific social organizations, and have questioned the degree of independence they acquired from the state in aspects such as the number of members, resources for

activities, rules, and actual activities. This type of questioning exactly corresponds to the way civil society is defined at the beginning of this essay, as a sphere of social self-organization independent from the state - the "public realm" model of civil society as referred to by Shin Chiba²³. In addition, this type of questioning comes from the assumption that the state is always relatively powerful compared to society, and thus autonomic associations must win independence in some cases through fighting, in other cases through negotiation, and at times through creative scheming.

However, what if the lack, immaturity, or weakness of civil society is related to the weakness of the state? As a matter of fact, some theorists point out the weakening of the state as they speak of the subsidiary position of social organizations to the state in the early twentieth-century China, and go on to suggest that there was a correlation between them. Marie-Claire Bergere states that, in the "golden age" for the Chinese bourgeoisie in the 1920s, the reason why emerging capitalists failed to develop the strengthening autonomy of social organizations into a vibrant civil society lies in the weakness of their class solidarity as well as the weakness of the state²⁴. In other words, she is suggesting that, at the time social organizations should have grown as a pluralistic bridgehead by maintaining - this is important - tensions with the state, the state was weak.

²³ Shin Chiba, "Shimin Shakai Ron no Genzai," *Shiso*, no. 924 (May 2001), pp. 2-3.

²⁴ Marie-Claire Bergere, *The Golden Age of the Chinese Bourgeoisie, 1911-1937* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 121-125.

The comment that relates the weakness of the state with the immaturity of civil society may also apply to China in the 1990s onwards. Many people are already raising an alarm over the central government's diminishing abilities for accomplishing administrative orders, for administrative efficiency, for mobilization, as well as its rampant corruption. In addition to this so-called "governmental failing" or "governmental weakening" phenomenon, upon comparing the central government and the regional government in terms of their financial abilities, the relative decline of the former has been pointed out²⁵. In the meantime, regional governments are expanding systematically. To the extent the central area is hollowing out as the surrounding areas expand irregularly just like many cities of today, this could perhaps be called "state sprawl"²⁶. This is exactly the political context that is facilitating the growth of "civil society" in today's China.

Having come thus far in our survey, it starts to seem more likely that civil society can only emerge, grow, and become strong as a result of interactions involving tensions with a certain type of "strong" state. In my estimation, such a state is equipped at least with cohesiveness, efficiency, and the ability to resist external manipulation. In contrast, the state which lacks cohesiveness, efficiency, and resistance to external manipulation (the "weak" state) is unorganized and lacks

²⁵ Minxin Pei, "China's Governance Crisis," *Foreign Affairs*, 81-5 (September/October, 2002), p. 105; Yongnian Zheng, *Will China Become Democratic?* (Singapore: Eastern University Press, 2004), p. 130.

²⁶ The phrase "state sprawl" is used by D. Davis. Deborah S. Davis, "Introduction: Urban China," in Deborah S. Davis, Richard Kraus, Barry Naughton, Elizabeth Perry, eds., *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 15.

independence. When such a weak state encounters society which is over-familiar (the "weak" society), they will potentially weaken each other further. If that is the case, before we question the degree to which the society has become independent from the state, we should question the degree to which the actual state-society relations are being supported by the "strong" state in the above sense. What Bergere found in China in the 1920s was probably the circulatory effect of the state and society weakening each other, and what we are witnessing in China in the 1990s onwards is perhaps the state-society relations of a similar nature.

Having revised how the questioning is carried out in the above manner, the basic hypothesis that comes to surface is this. In essence, social organizations that seem to have acquired a certain amount of independence from the state in China emerged as follows: The authoritarian state declined and state sprawl followed as a result - this seems to be the commonality between the 1920s and the 1990s - and when the fragments of the state that had lost cohesiveness encountered society that had poor horizontal solidarity, the fragments of the state connected with the fragments of society vertically and locally, and the social organizations in question emerged as a result²⁷.

2. What are the bases of "civil society" in China?

If the sphere formed by the above-mentioned organizations is called

²⁷ The idea of this hypothesis came from the following book: Joel S. Migdal, *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 43-53.

"civil society" in China for the time being (written with quotation marks because this definition is clearly far from our earlier definition of civil society), then why does China have a tendency for such a form of "civil society"? Where do we find its political, social, and cultural bases? Is the reason related to the lack of the state's political consistency, the bureaucracy's inadequacy and inefficiency, or individual bureaucrats' low ability and corruption? Although these are probably some of the main factors that cannot be ignored, they may not be the decisive factors.

It is fair to say that the contrast between the state which insists on the official stance of centralized rule and the society which behaves in an unruly manner in reality is a frame of reference which is shared to a large extent by scholars on China, whether engaged in the political, economic, or social research field. Therefore, scholars readily accept the comment made by Lucian Pye that one of the characteristics of the Chinese political culture is the fact the Chinese can easily live with cognitive dissonance, and that they are indifferent to the gap between the representation of reality and the reality itself²⁸. Presumably, the associations formed by local governments (or local bureaucrats) and local influential figures have contributed to causing such a gap between what the state intends and the reality of society. However, on the other hand, these associations which are halfway between "public" and "private" had a certain useful function. With the lack of both the democratic system and the efficient bureaucracy in this vast country

²⁸ Lucian Pye, *The Mandarin and the Cadre: China's Political Cultures* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1988), pp. 80-89.

with great diversity, these associations enabled the policies of the central government to be adapted to a wide range of regional situations to a degree, thereby fulfilling a function of procuring a certain level of approval from society. In that sense, it could be said that these associations played the role of a "device" to fulfill a necessary function in the system, and were practical to that extent (although that practicality often came with a price: Regional bureaucrats tied up with local influential figures, and the tie-up encouraged the latter's rentseeking and bred the former's corruption at the same time). Shigeki Iwai, upon researching the history of the financial system in China, wrote as follows:

"The state has under it an extraordinarily enormous society both spatially and quantitatively. For such a state, whether in the past or today, and regardless of its government system or financial system, it is altogether impossible to successfully implement the single-dimensional and centralized approach of enforcing its laws and plans in every corner of its domain. The state had no alternative but to be formed as a combination of the central unit with a collection of dispersed and highly independent units"²⁹.

From such a perspective, "civil society" in China cannot necessarily be referred to as an "outdated," "distorted," and "unsound" sign of state-society relations.

In addition, the historical nature of intermediary organizations in China may also be an important point. The organizations based on

²⁹ Shigeki Iwai, *Chugoku Kinsei Zaiseishi no Kenkyu* (Kyoto Daigaku Gakujutsu Shuppan Kai, 2004), p. 479.

religious and local unity were associations with a certain degree of strength. However, they did not function as a powerful breakwater to withstand the power of the state like various feudal and privileged organizations as seen in European history - such as municipal boroughs, privileged guilds, and sacred buildings with right to deny entry. These intermediary organizations in China were not only frequently powerless in the face of arbitrary intervention by bureaucrats, but chose to have cozy relations with bureaucrats when they could. Presumably, such behavior pattern of intermediary organizations was due to the nature of local-origin guilds in which both the government and private sectors were involved. This was also a result of the previously-mentioned "weak" state, and at the same time one of the factors that caused the weak state. The tendency of the intermediary organizations to inch their way upward, or a strong possibility of collusive links with the state - may be better described as their tendency to link vertically because of their inability to link horizontally - and the above-mentioned intermediary function using ambiguous realms necessary in the system of governance would have strengthened each other, and facilitated the association of the state and local influential figures on the local level.

If such an image is correct, the name "state-led civil society" given by B. Michael Frolic does not necessarily seem suitable. The reason being that, although its starting point might have been provided by the state, China's "civil society" in its growing process would already step out of the state's intended plan and upset its expectations. One cause would be the unintentional gradual shift from state corporatism to

social corporatism. The other cause would be the rise of protectionist local corporatism formed in rivalry with upper-level state organs and other state organs of the same level. Whichever may be the main cause, in the development process of "civil society," the state (at least the central government) can maintain a clear lead only for a limited time and in limited aspects.

Moreover, I feel that I cannot endorse the concept of "the third realm" that results from the participation of both the state and society as proposed by Philip C. C. Huang³⁰. It is true that, using this concept, one can avoid the simple choice between the two options of whether what William T. Rowe found in Hankow in the late Qing period were autonomic association by merchants or agents of the state. In addition, the idea that the increasing of social organizations' independence and the strengthening of the state's influential power can occur at the same time can become easier to understand. However, a more dynamic image may be suitable. The problem is the point that this "third realm" does not merely exist between the two realms called the state and society, but it changes the appearance of the state and society at the same time. Huang uses a metaphor of a child born between parents, and speaks of the development of "the third realm" as an existence similar to that of a child who completes his unique development away from his father and mother; however, this concept overlooks the fact that the birth and growth of a child have the potential to change how the parents live.

³⁰ Philip C. C. Huang, "Public Sphere/Civil Society in China?: The Third Realm between State and Society," *Modern China*, 19-2 (April 1993), pp. 216-239.

3. On the direction of the development of "civil society" in China

Assuming that the description concerning the formation and origin of the above-mentioned "civil society" in China is valid, what potential does it have for further development? In discussing this point, we must include in our perspective both the practical and normative dimensions of the people surrounding state-society relations.

As it is already clear from the discussion so far, when we speak of the reality of "civil society" in China with the "public realm" model in mind, at any time, we can only speak by using negation or using expressions that contain contradiction. In other words, it has not sufficiently become independent from the state. It is not a political realm with the substantial ability to resist the state. So far, it has not appeared as if it is going to become the beachhead that would shift the balance of power held by the state and society to make it more advantageous for the latter, and break down the foundation of the authoritarian system. It does not seem like the place from where the rational and critical debate against the state is born and spread. In addition, social organizations are content to have autonomy in subjection to the state, so to speak. Therefore, if we attempt to consider the reality of "civil society" in China in light of the "public realm" model, we will only run into a dead end. Furthermore, it must be added that it is highly unlikely that many Chinese - whether intellectuals, entrepreneurs, laborers, or farmers - would envision the civil society which will face off against the state, and in turn become the beachhead for democratization as the model of a kind.

However, that is not the only model of civil society. What if we distanced ourselves from the "public realm" model of civil society, and took up the "pluralistic realm" model?³¹ According to this model, civil society is "a framework consisting of a variety of frameworks" as stated by Michael Walzer. In other words, it is understood to be a liberal framework which, although including every framework of the life based on several ideologies concerning the good life, does not grant a privileged status to any of these³². According to this understanding, regardless of whether the government system is democratic or authoritarian, as long as the rule of law, private ownership, civil liberties (freedom of meeting and association, freedom of expression, freedom of conscience etc.) are guaranteed, and people can pursue their diverse ideas of good life without being completely mobilized for the singular goal of the state, civil society is deemed to have been established. In other words, civil society can coexist with either the democratic or authoritarian government in this model. Needless to say, a certain amount of normative meaning is also implied here. In other words, civil society should work against singularity and exclusiveness.

How much do the norms and reality surrounding the sphere created by social organizations in China conform to this model? If this model is different from the "public realm" model, and does not place upon itself the unspoken goal of escaping from the authoritarian system, and if Confucianism had originally carried the concept which aimed

³¹ The phrase, the "pluralistic realm" model also came from Shin Chiba. Chiba, "Shimin Shakai Ron no Genzai," pp. 2-3.

³² Michael Walzer, "Shimin Shakai Ron", *Shiso*, no. 867 (September 1996), p. 174.

for "public life as a harmonious phase of private life" by achieving solidarity while allowing differences as described by Koka Yu, "a framework consisting of a variety of frameworks" can be accepted as the norm by Chinese intellectuals³³. However, in reality, the sphere of interactions by social organizations in China may even aim for singularity and exclusiveness as symbolized by the May Fourth Movement in 1919 and the anti-Japan demonstration in the spring of 2005. Such an inclination can perhaps be understood as a reaction against the fact that this sphere facilitates local integration of society and the state on one hand, and chops up both on the other hand. If that is so, the actual behavior pattern of "civil society" in China will again exceed its semantically acceptable level even when this model is chosen as a frame of reference.

In considering "civil society" in China, perhaps we are better off building yet another model. That may be called the "authoritarian" model. This model has nothing to do with Tocqueville-Ferguson or Hegel-Marx. Rather, it has links with the perspectives of Chinese intellectuals in the late twentieth century and Japanese scholars on China in the prewar period. This civil society, put simply, will become the sphere where autonomic associations will collaborate to strengthen the state - on this point, this model also has the strong normative nature. Although the autonomic associations would acquire a certain amount of independence from the state, they would let the state define what is public, and take initiative to link with the state to strengthen the state. They will not be against singularity or exclusiveness; rather,

³³ Koka Yo, *Chugoku Bunmei to Kindaiteki Chitsujo Keisei* (Hoyu Shuppan, 2004), p. 11.

they will work to mobilize people toward them. Therefore, that framework can hardly be called liberal. It will have an affinity to nationalism. The intellectuals in China represented by Deng Zhenglai who emerged in the 1990s onwards and advocated the building of "good mutual relations" between "the strong state-strong society" and tried to endow civil society with the instrumental nature to strengthen the state can safely be regarded as the advocates of this model³⁴. In addition, this model corresponds with the perspective of the pre-war Japanese scholars on China who studied organizations such as guilds constituted along lines of common provincial origin as well as common occupation, and envisaged a powerful modern state; in some cases as a result of the direct and unmediated expansion of these guilds, and in other cases as a result of the cooperation of the guilds³⁵. The "authoritarian" model of civil society is different from the above-mentioned two models, and it is a model which has become the goal of more than a few intellectuals in China in reality.

The formulation of the goal of building "good mutual relations" between "the strong state-strong society" is similar to the above-mentioned my understanding to the extent it repositions the growth of civil society in a certain amount of interactions with the state. Nevertheless, my argument is that, if a metaphor of the parent-child relationship is used like Huang did, for the child (civil society) to grow into an existence with sufficient independence, there is a need for a relationship involving tensions with a certain "strong"

³⁴ Kishimoto, "Shimin Shakai Ron to Chugoku," pp. 65-66.

³⁵ For the expression, "good mutual relations" between the state and society, refer to Deng zhenglai, *Guojia yu shehui: ZhongGuo shiminshenhui yanjiu* [State and Society: Study of Chinese Civil Society] Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe (2001,) pp. 12-13.

parent (the state) as typically seen in the "rebellious phase" of a human child, and making the parent strong is not the purpose of the relationship.

Nevertheless, if we shift our focus from the normative aspect to the practical aspect of civil society, the actual "civil society" in China may be operating away from, or against the "authoritarian" model (it can also be understood that the strengthening of the state is being pushed as imperative precisely for this reason). Firstly, the realm consisting of unofficial organizations spread beyond the corporatist framework - the vast realm of which nobody has revealed the full extent - is not interested in strengthening the state in the first place. Rather, as warned by Laurence Whitehead, what tend to emerge once the restriction on the association of autonomic organizations is lifted in the unjust, inconsistent, and segmented society are many dubious organizations that are opposed to "citizenship" itself³⁶. Secondly, the fragments of the state that emerge as a result of the decline of the state and state sprawl will have relations involving tensions potentially or explicitly with what is left of the state by linking with a part of society. This could potentially lead to further loss of the state's cohesiveness, accelerating its weakening process. Thirdly, due to a part of society stealing a march on the rest and linking vertically with a part of the state by sacrificing the horizontal solidarity, further fragmentation of society could occur. In essence, far from a "good mutual relationship" between "the strong state-strong society," this "civil society" could cause a spiral of chain reaction that would weaken both the state and

³⁶ Laurence Whitehead, *Democratization: Theory and Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 87-89.

society by chopping them up. If such a process took place where there was neither the framework as social self-organizations facing off against the state nor the liberal framework that guarantees pluralism, it would be difficult for us to draw a picture of the authoritarian future or the democratic future of the government in China. What the I envisage is a scenario in which anarchic conditions rise while the governance by the Chinese Communist Party still continues, and society is hit by the enormous waves of the radical movement led by the normally nonpolitical, but sometimes overpolitical mass (many of them will be of a patriotic nature).

Conclusion

The concept of civil society, even if it has its origin in the West, can also be valuable for the research of Chinese history as well as the research on other non-Western regions of the world. It can become a flexible framework in order to organize the portrayal of history by mutually linking the results of various individual research efforts concerning politics, economy, society, and culture that seemingly have little to do with each other. However, with the existing model of civil society, the birth, growth, and behavior of social organizations in China cannot be described adequately. The associations in question were born like warm-eaten holes when a part of the state linked with a part of society in the early and late twentieth-century China. If we focus on their certain aspects, they could be called a precursor of "civil society" to the extent a certain amount of independence from the state - together with the dependency thereon - is revealed.

Nevertheless, their behavior pattern cannot be understood adequately either through the "public realm" model or the "pluralistic realm" model. While the "authoritarian" model conforms to normative consciousness of Chinese intellectuals engaged in state-society relations, the practice of "civil society" in China again seems to take the opposite direction to such a norm in this case.

However, while China in the 1920s and the 1990s might have looked similar to each other, they are not exactly the same. If we assume the unique associations formed by the fragments of the state and the fragments of society such as mentioned above as something transhistorical, we could make a serious mistake. We should acknowledge that "civil society" in China carries the potential for self reform toward a multiple of directions. The new technologies such as the Internet, fax, and cellular phones will be useful in nurturing the people's horizontal solidarity if they are used well. Gradually spreading volunteer activities, company-led charitable activities, consumers' movements and the like will also fulfill a similar function. The philosophy and practice of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which originated in the West are becoming a model for the people who seek similar organizations for China just through various western NGOs working in China. Under these new conditions, the combination of the gradual dismantling of the corporatist framework and the actual increase of social organizations with more independence - whether official or unofficial - may not merely produce "civil society" which would chop up both the state and society. Needless to say, the direction of its development also depends on the intention of people.

探求中国“市民社会”的历史性展望

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In Search of a Historical Perspective on “Civil Society” China

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