The Silent Gatekeeper: Authoritarianism and Civil Society in China

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This paper examines the emergence of civil society in China under the authoritarian system in the last thirty years. It seeks to explore the ways in which an initial, traditional notion of civil society has altered in the context of China, as well as the respective challenges faced by both the organizations and the government in carrying out their goals and governance. The rapid rise of market capitalism, globalization and Chinese economic success in the last forty years to present day has made room for the rise of non-governmental organizations as well as social mobilization and engagement from citizens. This paper suggests that China has been able to accept the emergence of civil society, however, despite these developments, the government has been able to sufficiently suppress civil society from carrying out any objectives of transparency, social justice and accountability. It surveys the history of civil society within the authoritarian state, analyzes the specific government-NGO relations between the Chinese Communist Party and civil society organizations, and reflects upon the implications of the current legal and political framework that Chinese civil society must operate under.

With the rise in globalization and neoliberalism, China as an authoritarian state has opened itself up to the free market and the world in order to participate and compete internationally. As a result, the country has experienced great economic success as well as exposed itself to an emerging civil society and civic mobilization. Despite these factors, the Communist Party of China has always been able to maintain both its power and social stability. In the last thirty years, to what extent has China's authoritarian regime affected the emergence of Chinese civil society and to what extent has civil society had an effect on China's authoritarian regime? This essay will argue that the Chinese government has been able to sufficiently suppress civil society from carrying out certain objectives of democratic rights, social justice and accountability when it directly targets the state. The effect that civil society has had on China's authoritarian system is one that the government sees as a threat, and therefore has caused China to implement many regulatory measures on organizations and citizen activism.

Although the definition of civil society is constantly being contested, as a starting point it will be defined as a "third sector" of society, distinct from purely government and business, that is meant to

carry out the interests and will of the citizens. For purpose of scope, this essay will focus on local NGOs only. It will seek to examine the challenges that both civil society organizations and the Chinese government face when attempting to carry out their goals and governance as well as explore the ways in which this initial and traditional notion of civil society has altered in the context of China. In order to answer this question, this essay will first outline the concept of civil society and briefly account for the history of the authoritarian regime in its power and censorship of citizen activism as well as the emergence of civil society organizations in China. It will then proceed to examine the relationship that the government has with these emerging NGO's and what it has done to reduce any threat it sees to the legitimacy of the state, through registration requirements and government-organized non-governmental organizations, or GONGO's. Finally, it will explore the implications of this uniquely created civil society for Chinese citizens in terms of social mobilization, transparency and accountability.

Civil Society and the Authoritarian Regime: History and Concept

As mentioned previously, the concept of civil society is constantly changing and being contested. But as a starting point, civil society is a “third sector” of society, distinct from purely government and business, that is meant to carry out the interests and will of the citizens. However, in the context of China, the lines of this traditionally liberal model of civil society begin to blur. Historically and politically, the authoritarian government does not possess a record of supporting non-state organizations, to the extent that it treats them with hostility due to the view that they are potential threats to the stability of the state. Voluntary social organizations began to emerge after Deng Xiaoping's market reforms in 1979 shifted social welfare from the central to local governments and communities, but any widespread movement was smothered by the government, most infamously following the 1989 Tiananmen square protests.[1] As globalizing and free market forces continued to emerge, so did the exchange of ideas, non-governmental groups and civil engagement. As Ma explains:

the state gradually withdrew – in part by design, in part by default – from many economic and social responsibilities, [and] the Chinese people responded to this new situation with great energy and creativity. . . economic development produced a rapidly enlarging middle class, especially in cities and coastal regions, whose members vigorously pursued associate actions to represent their economic and political voices.[2]

The rising growth of local civic groups and organizations is indicative of the willingness of Chinese citizens to become more engaged in their communities and vocal in defending their rights and seeking deeper fundamental changes in the system.[3] This aspect of civil society is seen as a threat to party control, hence the hostility and exercise of control at times when the state deems it excessively infringing on political and social stability.

Today, civil society organizations have varying relationships with the state. As Wacker explains, “From an official position, civil society and NGOs have been welcomed in China to fill the gap where the state lacks either the capability or the will to provide services or to supplement state efforts”.[4] They may serve as bridges for the government to reach out to the people, as adjuncts to assist a cause the party wishes to push forward, and as a complementary force able to take over responsibilities the government

no longer wishes to carry.[5] In general, the state accepts civil society groups and NGOs when they act in service to the state or contribute to social stability, such as volunteering for the Olympic games in 2008 or donating towards earthquake relief efforts in the Qinghai province in 2010.[6] It has been observed that most civil unrest or protests in China are concerned with blaming the local authorities rather than China's top leaders or the political system,[7] offering a partial explanation as to why nation-wide protests have not materialized in the region. However, explicit relationship and control mechanisms that the Communist Party holds over civil society and related civil mobilization can also provide insight into the lack of collectivization and action.

Government-NGO Relations

The government-NGO relationships that are present in China's civil society are an example of its deviance from the traditional Western framework. The official management of NGOs by the government involves a regulatory registration program. NGOs are required to register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs in their respective local bureaus, yet to do so they must have the approval of its professional supervisory agency, or *yewu zhuguan danwei*, which is usually a governmental organization or CONGO.[8] These supervisory agencies are sometimes referred to as "mothers-in-law" due to their day-to-day oversight.[9] As Ma explains, "strict rules determine what types of organizations or governmental departments can be "mothers-in-law"; they have to be in a similar professional field and at the same administrative level as the organization seeking a sponsor".[10] In the government's eyes, these agencies help to politically and legally control the NGOs by extension.[11] To go further, NGOs with religious affiliation must navigate a fine line regarding their relationships with the government. As Tam and Hasmath write, "RNGOs not only have to deal with the government's complex corporatist model of handling all NGOs, they need to negotiate the additional complex dimension of religion".[12] In order to stay accountable to donors, a specialized form of organizational awareness and flexibility needs to be maintained while retaining the religious mission.[13] It is observed by Tam and Hasmath that RNGOs hold a certain level of cooperation with local agents, foster a certain level of trust with the government and keep a low profile in order to operate and survive. Grassroots NGOs survive only to the extent that they limit any democratization promotion and instead help promote goals of social welfare.[14] As a means of survival, these grassroots groups often collaborate with local state agencies and INGOs for accessing the policy process as well as additional sources of funding and resources.[15] Otherwise, the organizations are reliant on funds and other forms of assistance from the government, which come with adherence to the CCP's ideological and political principles.[16]

The institutional mechanisms put in place by the state have uniquely shaped the power and experience of Chinese organizations, and corporatism is used to explain the government NGO relationship in Chinese civil society. "Corporatism refers to the power and interest arrangements between the state and associations . . . in other words, corporatism indicated a balanced and integrative relationship between the state and interest groups".[17] In China, this seems like an accurate framework to highlight the mechanisms that the state can use to limit and control NGOs political impact.[18] As Hsu and Hasmath argue, "the Chinese state has moved away from the tactics of days past to compel individuals and organizations".[19] Coercion, propaganda, and overt sanctioning are less frequently used to manage social organizations; instead the central and local states are more adept at managing the interests that have potential to undermine the state.[20] Several features of corporatism are apparent in

the state's civil society structure as the government deploys *tacit sanctioning* to condition and foster implicit control. Hsu and Hasmath explain tacit sanctioning behaviour as follows: The state creates and maintains the relationship; select organizations and groups are granted the privilege to mediate interests on behalf of their constituents to the state; and these organizations and groups must adhere to the rules and regulations of the state.[21] Tacit sanctioning creates a mutual beneficiary between the two actors and the state in fact uses the NGOs as a control mechanism in themselves.

When tacit conditioning does not work, the state still holds the ability to explicitly show their power. The CCP has exercised their strength and control in their repressive tactics throughout the years, often targeting certain areas of rights protection and reform-minded activism. As an example, the Sunflower Women Workers' Centre, a grassroots NGO providing leisure activities for female migrant workers in the Guangdong Province, occasionally engaged in rights defense activities. While it had initial support from the local authorities and GONGOs after registering in 2012, the NGO has since experienced harassment by thugs, forced to relocate by landlords, and most recently threatened with closure by officials.[22] This repression is further entrenched by the local bureaucratic apparatuses that are implemented to supervise stability maintenance.[23] Both covert and overt control can be exercised by the government at a gradual or rapid pace due to the structure of civil society in the country.

Implications of China's Unique Civil Society

As a result of the current legal and political framework of Chinese civil society, the accountability, transparency and overall efficacy of local NGOs is called into question. Hasmath and Hsu found that local NGOs responsible for the care of their constituents were not perceived as having the right to the best available service.[24] As explained in *NGOs in China: Issues of Good Governance and Accountability*, the relationship that the NGOs have with their constituents "is affected by the immaturity of the Chinese civil society sector, which to an extent is manifested in the foundations and intentions of the organizations, as well as in the lack of institutional support for them".[25] That is not to say there aren't certain prospects for development. Economic reforms and growth, the diversification of Chinese society, ongoing opening to the outside world and gradual transformation of social values indicate room for growth.[26] Yet, those prospects are still evened out by the fluid control by the government that is able to be stiffened at any time. As Ye and Onyx argue:

The Chinese State is moving in two apparently contradictory directions with respect to civil society organizations. On the one hand there are clear moves towards liberalization and growing support for an independent sector, particularly related to social organizations providing domestic welfare and public benefit services. On the other hand there are increasing restrictions against what are perceived to be foreign interests within civil society, and against those organizations seen as a threat to social cohesion, particularly those organizations concerned with advocacy, labor rights, religion and ethnic minorities.[27]

Some authors argue that the GONGOs, grassroots NGOs, INGOs and corporations combined created a legitimate civil society in China.[28] But factors such as weak rule of law, the social legitimacy of NGO goals, lack of media reporting and censorship as well as purposeful fragmentation of NGO governance by

CCP agencies create the unique government-NGO relationship and tight oversight[29] that is hard to look past. The factor of autonomy is virtually non-existent in Chinese civil society, and if it is being looked towards to bring democratization to the country, it is a vision in the very far distance.

Conclusion

In China, the rapid rise of market capitalism, globalization and economic success in the last forty years has combined to make room for the emergence of non-governmental organizations, social mobilization and engagement from citizens from within the state. While China's civil society is relatively weak in relation to how freely it is able to operate under the authoritarian regime, there is still prospect for further development and mobilization. Civil society in China is here to stay, but it will never fit the Western liberal notion of non-profit, private, autonomous, voluntary and self-governing organizations. The government still holds enough power, pressure and regulation to put a cap on these groups if it deems it too much of a threat to the legitimacy of the state. Looking forward, the power of civil society will continue to emerge and it is up to the state to grapple with and balance the challenges and consequences of more NGO's and activism under its authoritarian regime.

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End Notes

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