

University Press Scholarship Online

Oxford Scholarship Online



## In Search of Civil Society: Market Reform and Social Change in Contemporary China

Gordon White, Jude A. Howell, and Shang Xiaoyuan

Print publication date: 1996

Print ISBN-13: 9780198289562

Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: October 2011

DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198289562.001.0001

# Civil Society, Corporatism, and China's Political Future

Gordon White

Jude Howell

Shang Xiaoyuan

DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198289562.003.0009

## Abstract and Keywords

This chapter discusses the overall results of the investigations on China's civil society. It associates them with the paradigm of 'civil society' and the specific initial hypotheses about the changing nature of social organization. The chapter presents analytical insights and revisions that have emerged from the inquiry.

*Keywords:* China, civil society, social organization, corporatism, political future

As we remarked at the outset, the research for this book was a voyage of exploration; we tried to approach the subject without any fixed ideas about what we would find or any firm notions we were trying to prove. In the event, we discovered things we were not expecting and these discoveries led us to reformulate our ideas and revise our initial hypotheses. Herein we have documented our intellectual transition, and this concluding chapter describes the things we think we learned.

## Civil Society in Contemporary China?

In our overview of the growing constellation of intermediate organizations, we concluded that, by using a sociological definition of civil society, one can identify a strong and growing sphere of social association in China which exhibits, albeit to widely differing degrees, the organizational features a civil society—those of voluntary participation and self-regulation in their activities, and autonomy and separation in their relationship with the state. This associational realm is embryonic and uneven in the sense that only part of these organizations share these characteristics to the full, and none of them operates in a political context which guarantees them the right to do so. This emergent associational universe is segmented and stratified, being composed of layers which differ widely in the nature of their relationship with the Party/state. They range from the caged and incorporated sectors—the old official mass organizations and the new-style registered social organizations—through the interstitial, tolerated, and monitored to the suppressed. This associational constellation is extraordinarily heterogeneous, containing sectors which are traditional and modern, incorporated and oppositional, urban and rural, national and grass-roots, political and non-political, respectable and sinister, liberal and ultra-leftist, open and underground. The realm of intermediate association is also potentially contradictory, embodying competing and conflicting interests throughout society: between economic sectors, classes and groups, regions, political tendencies, and social values. It is also in flux, characterized by rapid change and ambiguity.

The growing diversity of this emerging associational universe and its (p.209) relationships with the state mirrors various patterns identified in the half century before Communist rule: the coexistence and contradiction of old and new; the conflict between progressive and conservative organizations; the periodic collaboration of urban social forces to oppose an unpopular or discredited government; the attempt by an entrenched or consolidating regime to incorporate and control associational life; the role of associations as agents of social governance in co-ordination with the state; and the ability of some organizations to move from dependence on state sponsorship to greater social autonomy and political influence. Like the earlier period, this associational constellation has the dynamic and disjointed characteristics one could expect in a society undergoing a rapid developmental and systemic transition. If one is looking for historical parallels or continuities, they exist, but in multi faceted ways.

Yet the sociological conception of civil society has its limitations as a description of current Chinese society. It tends to provide partial and static snapshots which blind us to important elements of the reality and cannot capture the dynamics of a rapidly changing social universe. Though we found evidence of new forms of association characteristic of an emergent civil society which the central hypothesis suggested, we found that this was but one part of a broader, more complex, and contradictory process of institutional change. The dichotomous ideal-type model of civil society may be useful in framing general questions about the nature of specific social organizations, but it ill accords with our finding that the defining characteristics of civil society vary along an associational continuum rather than being sharply delineated along yes-no lines. Moreover, social organizations in the burgeoning incorporated sector constitute an institutional terrain in which state and society are intermingled and braided, blurring the distinction between them. That said, however, it is too hasty to dismiss the paradigm of civil society as some misplaced product of allegedly Western dichotomous thinking. Although the organisational realities are not dichotomous, the substantive issues raised by the idea of civil society—the importance of organizational autonomy and voluntary membership—are clearly important to Chinese observers. For many Chinese interviewed, the recognized social organizations are lapdogs of the state and cannot be described as popular organisations (*minjian tuanti*), the latter term being reserved for truly independent associations in the interstitial and illegal sectors. As such, the ideal-type notion of civil society which we put forward at the outset as a potentially useful interpretative framework for assessing the social and political substance of intermediate associations is in fact shared by both external researchers and internal participants.

As a structural analysis, however, the civil society paradigm does focus one's attention too exclusively on formal associations and needs to be situated within a wider awareness of the dense networks of informal relationships which pervade both state and society. The relationship between the formal and informal spheres of association is crucial in understanding how relations (p.210) between state and society have evolved over the past two decades. We have shown how the recognized social organizations have constituted a terrain in which state institutions and social groups have overlapped and interpenetrated in different mixes, from official to semi-official to popular. Along with this has come a far more pervasive and influential form of interpenetration between state officials and social actors through personal connections. In analytical terms, this process further weakens the relevance of the public—private distinction embedded in the paradigm of civil society. In

practical terms, it provides the sociological basis for the spread of corruption during the reform era. It is too simple to see this in terms of personal morality. One should also see it as a systemic consequence of the failure to establish new forms of institutionalized interaction between state and society in a period when the need for these was increasing at an exponential rate. One can argue that these personal connections and the corrupt behaviour they may embody represent the costs of not allowing the development of a richer and more independent realm of formal associations. It is not surprising, therefore, that the extent of corruption increased when the scope of associational life was restricted after Tiananmen, notwithstanding increasingly desperate official campaigns to stamp it out. From this perspective, corruption is a by-product of associational repression and this connection bears out some of the arguments made by those who stress the political virtues of a formal, institutionalized civil society as a potential source of pressure for clean and accountable government.

To understand the development of civil society in contemporary China, moreover, we need to go beyond a structural analysis to investigate the dynamics of the process, as suggested in our initial discussion of the political and the market dynamics of civil society. The shifting constellation of intermediate associational life described above reflects the operation of both. The market dynamic has opened up socio-economic space, endowed social actors with resources and the power to use them, created the basis for new horizontal forms of social interaction and weakened the vertical controls embodied in the old institutional regime. This process is visible both in the cities and in the more dynamic rural areas. The political dynamic has fluctuated over time between periods of relaxation and restriction, respectively encouraging and repressing the impulse towards the formation of intermediate organizations. During the early years of the reforms, the new atmosphere of political relaxation was particularly crucial both in allowing the resurrection of previous social organizations, such as the trade unions, ACWF, and the Federation of Industry and Commerce, but also in encouraging the emergence of new ones. By the mid-1980s, the two dynamics were beginning to reinforce each other as new market-based forces—particularly urban small-scale business, larger-scale private enterprise in the more dynamic coastal cities, and commercial agriculture and small-scale industry in the countryside—helped to underpin a proliferation of new forms of social organization and to maintain a relatively liberal political atmosphere. From 1989 onwards, however, the two dynamics came into conflict (p.211) as the conservative post-Tiananmen leadership sought to rein in the perceivedly threatening associational impulses of the earlier phases by

means of incorporation and repression. As the economic reforms regained their momentum from early 1992, the market dynamic of civil society intensified and came into conflict with a regime which had scant interest in political reform. The result was an increasingly tense situation of associational repression with two types of consequence: first, the state's attempt to control existing social organizations by maintaining controls over mass organizations and subjecting new social organizations to a strict system of registration sapped their institutional vitality and undermined their social credibility; and, second, through its regulatory and repressive apparatus, the state marginalized or drove underground many genuinely popular associations.

The associational repression of the post-Tiananmen era operates in different ways for each layer of associations, depending on the specific nature of its relationship with the Party/state. Each layer has its own particular dynamic: the institutional prisoners in the caged sector are facing increasingly strong pressures to choose between autonomy and dependence; the balance of power within the incorporated layer is shifting gradually in favour of the societal component; and the interstitial and illegal layers are nibbling away at the state's capacity to control and coerce. These movements suggest the image of tectonic plates shifting before an earth tremor. In their different ways, these two dynamics are moving in a direction which presages major changes in the balance of power and the nature of the relationships between state and society in contemporary China. The Party/state's coping strategy—a combination of incorporation and repression—has channelled and staunched the rise of organized social forces, but was proving increasingly problematic as the pace of socio-economic change accelerated in the mid-1990s.

#### Towards Chinese Corporatism?

The political resistance to the market dynamic of civil society went beyond fluctuations between liberal and conservative phases in CCP policy. The political response involved a deeper impetus on the part of institutions throughout the state apparatus towards shaping and controlling the emergence of intermediate organizations. Our research made us realize that our initial focus on the emergence of civil society was one-sided in that it diverted attention away from changes in the structure and behaviour of the state. Indeed, at times we felt that we had set out in search of civil society only to find corporatism. State institutions have responded to the new socio-economic environment resulting from the reforms not only by refusing to let the old mass organisations off the leash, but also by attempting to create and/or co-

opt new social organizations. Registered associations were penetrated by the state and (p.212) social organizations more truly characteristic of civil society were marginalized or repressed. Yet is this 'corporatism' worthy of the name, and, if so, is it taking a distinctively Chinese form?

It is true that we have found processes operating at all levels of the Party/ state system that embody central elements of the conventional corporatist practice. As the state's partner in an emerging institutional nexus, the officially recognized social organizations do exhibit many features of the corporatist model. They are regarded by state agencies as a bridge between themselves and specific social sectors; they enjoy a representational monopoly in their particular sphere; they receive certain privileged benefits from the state, but must in turn fulfil certain responsibilities; they enjoy a more or less limited degree of autonomy which is delineated and policed by state agencies. It is true that this formal system coexists with and is much less influential than the informal ties between state and society based on personal connections, but then this coexistence is a feature of other corporatist systems in East and South East Asia (MacIntyre 1994: 4). Yet we are still uncomfortable about referring to 'Chinese corporatism'. If there is a Chinese corporatism, it may well be a rickety and piebald phenomenon, for several reasons.

If we accept that corporatism is usually a matter of institutional design by state elites with certain conscious aims, this accords to some extent with Chinese experience in that the sponsorship of a certain stratum of social organizations does reflect a conscious response on the part of political and administrative elites to the new environment created by market reforms. Many of these organizations, such as professional and academic associations, are one consequence of a strategic political decision to grant greater recognition to, but still retain control over, increasingly influential professional strata. Others reflect a generalized attempt by the Party/state to come to terms with growing sectoral differentiation in the economy and the rise of new economic forces such as self-employed, new-collective, and large-scale private business people.

However, this does not mean that there has been a systematic and clear-minded attempt to establish a form of socialist corporatism as part of the reform programme. The process of incorporation has been much more incremental, disjointed, implicit, and haphazard than that. The overall impulse towards incorporation is by no means consistent; it reflects four overlapping but also potentially conflicting rationales which motivate state behaviour: 1 a political rationale reflecting the desire to co-opt rising social forces and control a growth of associations

which could pose a threat to the political status quo; 2 a managerial rationale aimed at creating new institutional mechanisms to regulate an increasingly complex and fluid socio-economic system; 3 a developmental rationale seeking to involve emergent socio-economic forces in programmes of state-led economic growth;<sup>1</sup> and 4 a bureaucratic rationale (p.213) which reflects the institutional responses of specific state agencies to the contradictory pressures of economic reform. While each of these rationales operates at all levels of the political system, they also operate in uncoordinated and dispersed ways which both reflect and intensify fault-lines within that system. Thus there are powerful impulses towards local or community corporatism, from the large city down to the small rural town, which may fuel conflict with higher levels and intensify competition with other localities. Similarly, the pervasive impetus towards departmental corporatism at all levels can serve to impair the coherence of governments, helping to convert them into a conglomeration of competing bureaucratic bailiwicks. Thus the various modes of incorporation operate both to integrate and to disarticulate the operations of the Party/state. It is corporatism of a fragmented and fragmenting kind, which reflects the increasingly fragmented, pluralist nature of the Chinese state system as a whole.

Thus it is misleading to talk of the emergence of a Chinese corporatism as a conscious and coherent project. The idea of incorporation is not a central element of the overall ideological framework of the socialist market economy; the process of incorporation is only one element in a more complex restructuring of relationships between state and society/economy and not the most important at that; the incorporation of social organizations at the national level is weak and across the country the commitment to incorporation is uneven across sector and region. Moreover, to the extent that there is a consistent thrust to incorporation, the process is not only highly statist but also very selective and exclusionary. Only a relatively small stratum of associations make the grade and other forms of association are excluded. The registered social organizations are like a thin layer of marzipan on a very large cake.

Nor can we speak of a Chinese corporatism as some stable institutional *fait accompli*. Both state and society are in flux and the relationships between them are constantly changing. Comparative experience suggests (for example, Bianchi 1989) that corporatist systems are hard to establish and prone to instability and disintegration. In the Chinese context, there is a constant tension between official regulations and the changing reality of social organizations and society, the latter acting

constantly to render the former obsolete. For example, the requirement that there should be only one association of its kind in each area is often challenged by competing associations and officially designated monopolies are increasingly being undermined by the rise of second-level associations which attach themselves to a first-level host association. Similarly, it is increasingly difficult to maintain departmental corporatism in a situation in which market participants are expanding outside the traditional reach of a department and relations between them are becoming more competitive. These pressures are weakening any effort towards a more systematic corporatist project even as it begins to take shape. It is here that the contradiction (p.214) between the horizontal market dynamic of civil society and the vertical institutional logic of the previous system is particularly visible.

Moreover, there is evidence that the balance between the (now dominant) state and the (now subordinate) societal components of recognized social organizations is shifting in the mid-1990s. Government agencies at all levels are trying to reduce the burden of supporting social organizations financially, prompting the latter to make an effort to find their own sources of revenue and become more autonomous as a matter of institutional survival. This involves setting up their own businesses, exploiting any real estate at their disposal, and providing paid services to their members. These new activities in turn push them to be more sensitive to the needs and interests of their own social constituencies and, because less dependent on the state, less beholden to it. The associations we studied clearly varied in their ability to do this and there is likely to be a shake-out as the more fortunate and entrepreneurial organizations gain strength and the more flaccid or ill-situated ones wither on the institutional vine. The fittest which survive are likely to have an institutional capacity and resilience which bodes well for their longer-term future.

As the extent of government control over social organizations gradually recedes, moreover, the power of social interests is increasing, a phenomenon particularly visible in the spheres of private business and the professions. For example, the growing influence of trade associations is visible, particularly in the localities, in both the urban and rural areas. These can provide tangible benefits to their members in terms of access to state agencies, market information and promotion, business contacts, prevention of 'unfair' competition, establishment and monitoring of standards, technical services, and the like. The rising power of the liberal professions is also visible: for example, lawyers are increasingly moving out of government service to establish their own



private partnerships and the number of lawyers is expected to double (to 100,000) by the year 2000. Private medicine and education are also expanding rapidly.<sup>2</sup> Semi-official and private newspapers and journals have also proliferated over recent years, outrunning the capacity of the state to control and regulate them, and journalists have become increasingly vocal in agitating for greater freedom and legal protection.<sup>3</sup>

All these trends may be gradually converting the recognized sector of social organizations into associations of a more civil nature. To the extent that corporatist controls are maintained, this would imply a transition from state corporatism to societal corporatism. However, this changing balance may undermine the very basis of incorporation itself, opening up the possibility of a proliferation of alternative and competing organizations which arise to challenge the current associational monopolies. Given the escalating difficulties (p.215) in maintaining monopolies over a socio-economic system which is increasingly complex, competitive, and volatile, this latter scenario would hardly be surprising.

### Civil Society and Political Change

We have identified an intensifying process of associational repression which has been gaining force since the clampdowns after Tiananmen. Pressure from social groups to have their voices heard and to form their own associations have mounted throughout society, but they have not yet found adequate channels for expression. Part of the tragedy of Tiananmen was that it marked a lost historical opportunity—comparable to the repression of the Czechoslovakian reforms in 1968—to allow social organizations to operate as agents of gradual social and political democratization within a continued one-party framework. Instead of being harbingers of democracy, however, recognized social organizations were converted into another echelon of state control. The tension between state and society has increased in consequence and associational repression has given rise to increasingly pervasive outbursts of spontaneous activity—demonstrations, riots, protests, sit-ins, beatings, and fights—in both urban and rural areas. The image of a boiler building up a dangerous level of steam pressure is an apt one.

What are the implications of these trends for the question we raised at the outset about the relationship between the rise of civil society as a sociological entity and the establishment of a civil society in the sense of a political society which legitimizes the free operations of social associations through the rule of law and guaranteed civil and political rights (in effect some form of liberal democracy)? Have the associational consequences of market reforms created pressures for redefining the relationship between state and society through political reform and can these pressures be the basis for constituting a democratic polity? The sociological civil society we have identified has an ambiguous political potential. It contains the seeds of both political construction and collapse. On the one hand, state and intermediate associations continue to intermesh through the official mass organizations and the incorporated social organizations. On the other hand, the tensions between an authoritarian state and the burgeoning interstitial and illegal sectors of civil society are mounting and the capacity of the state to manage them is dwindling. The former scenario offers the possibility of a gradual political evolution whereby recognized associations gain greater political autonomy and social credibility, and the range of legitimate associations gradually widens. In this scenario, there would be a gradual convergence of the four associational sectors into an institutionalized form of civil society in which rights of social association are guaranteed and protected. The latter scenario points towards the prospect of an (p.216) increasingly acute and generalized political struggle between state and society

leading to some form of takeover or collapse rather than an orderly transition to an alternative, more democratic polity.

The current character of China's incipient civil society poses problems for a smooth political transition because it is so diverse, fragmented, and potentially destabilizing. To this extent, civil society is as much of an obstacle as an impetus to democratization. For example, too many officials in the old mass organizations are unwilling to break the umbilical tie with the Party and they thereby lose credibility in the eyes of their constituencies; and too many leaders in the registered social organizations are unwilling or unable to seek greater autonomy from their state sponsors and assume greater accountability to their members. So long as these associational sectors remain so deeply enmeshed with and dependent on the state, they will be an obstacle to political reform; the gap between them and the underclass of interstitial and illegal organizations will widen and the possibilities for peaceful and stable political transition will be weakened. In the event of a collapse of the CCP regime, the mass organizations and many associations in the incorporated sector would be likely to collapse with it and their intermediary roles would be occupied by currently submerged or repressed organizations which would rush in to fill the vacuum.

But the latter are themselves divided and ambivalent on the issue of political reform. For example, while some of the underground political organizations may be in favour of liberal democracy, others advocate a return to Maoist politics or, in the case of ethnic separatist organizations, a break-up of the existing political community. Moreover, certain key potential counter-elites—most notably the new private entrepreneurial strata—have shown little interest in the prospect of radical political change because their interests are bound up with the stability of the current process of market reform under the auspices of an authoritarian regime with which they are deeply entangled.<sup>4</sup> As Wang Shaoguang (1991) has pointed out, civil societies in general—and Chinese civil society in particular—are riven by conflicts and inequalities and have a potential for a wide variety of different types of politics, of which democracy is but one. The tendency towards idealizing the political potential of civil society should be resisted.

The ideological climate among political reformers in China has moved in a more sober and conservative direction over recent years. After the radical political fervour of Tiananmen died away, there has been a growing consensus that, if a process of political liberalization and democratization is to take place, it should be a gradual, managed process. This does not merely represent the desire of political elites

either to cling to their power or go out gracefully (or at least comfortably). To a considerable extent it also represents the fears and (p.217) conflicts inherent in China's incipient civil society: the new entrepreneurial class worries that radical political change might lead to instability, mass rule, or a recalcitrant labour force; the industrial working class fears that it might lead to a rapid erosion of its relatively privileged position in society, and greater insecurity and exploitation by capital; and intellectuals and professionals fear that it could lead either to chaos or to rule by an illiterate numerical majority.

Given these antagonisms, comparative experience suggests that a stable and peaceful political transition—involving liberalization or democratization—can most effectively be achieved through a process of political bargaining and accommodation between key elites in state and civil society.<sup>5</sup> The balance of power between the two sectors varies from country to country. In the Soviet case, for example, a democratic transition was sponsored and organized by reformist elements within the existing political elite, in a situation in which civil society in any organized form was virtually non-existent. In South Korea, the state elites of the *ancien régime* retained a commanding position in the transition but were forced to deal with an increasingly assertive business elite in the *chaebol* sector and opposition politicians bolstered by widespread mobilization of public support by social organizations such as labour unions and church groups. In Zambia, by contrast, the previous one-party system was collapsing and it was the elites of civil society—from the unions, church groups, and business—who sponsored and commanded the transition to democracy. (G.White 1995). In terms of the balance between state and civil society, China may perhaps be situated somewhere between the Soviet Union and South Korea: the key elites of the Leninist regime—in the Party, the state bureaucracy, and the military—are still the overwhelmingly dominant political force, but the new social groups and organizations resulting from the economic reforms are creating an increasingly influential counter-force: the democratic intellectuals active in 1989 and before; the emergent business sector and its potentially influential organizations such as the various entrepreneurs' associations, the trade associations and the Federation of Industry and Commerce and its affiliates; the growing professional strata who are highly organized in associations and rapidly gaining occupational autonomy; and the trade unions with their strong roots in urban factories and their growing awareness of the need to act on behalf of their constituency or face dissolution.

The viability of this scenario of bargained or crafted transition depends partly on the emergence of a reformist leadership within the CCP which is willing to read the writing on the wall and come to terms with new socio political forces through institutional change. It also depends on the ability of influential social forces, both old and new, to come together and agree on the form of new political arrangements. By so doing, the organizations of civil (p.218) society and their leaders can play a crucial constitutive role not only in impelling and organizing the transition to a democratic polity, but also in defining its distinctive institutional shape and political character. The form of democratic order which emerges—in particular the extent to which democratic procedures overlay substantive democratic processes—depends heavily on the range of social groups included in this initial compact: for example, whether or not workers' organizations are involved, or whether the peasantry is able to find a cohesive associational voice. It also depends heavily on the kind of political society to which the interests and associations of civil society give rise—in particular the new political parties which arise to link civil society with the state and take over the role formerly played by the CCP. The nature of this political society is important in determining not only the political character of the new polity but also its stability.

Even more fundamentally, the organized forces of civil society can also play a crucial constitutive role in establishing a new system of societal organization to replace the institutions of the Marxist-Leninist era. As Émile Durkheim (1893–1964) warned in his discussion of the transition from 'mechanical' to 'organic' solidarity, in a context of rapid socio-economic transformation the previous institutions which hold a society together lose their efficacy and relevance and there is a danger of social anomie. In its most acute form, this would mean of a collapse of Chinese society into its basic components—not merely into localities or communities, but still further down to the level of networks and families. As in the case of Durkheim's professional associations (Durkheim 1992), intermediate associations have the potential to provide a new source of social cohesion to fill the institutional vacuum, not only by providing new links between state and society but also by reconstituting Chinese society itself in an era of potentially convulsive change. From this admittedly optimistic perspective, the organized forces of emergent civil society could be the architects of the new post-communist China. However, given their current diversity and potential for conflict, the transition to a new political order is likely to be a rough and rocky one.

Notes:

- (1) Jean Oi (1992) has provided a valuable analysis of the politico-economic motives underlying local state corporatism in China.
- (2) For a report on the expansion of private schools in Beijing, e.g., see the report in *NCNA*, 23 Mar. 1994, in *SWB: FE*, 1984.
- (3) For a report on the demand for legal protection by journalists in Guangdong province, see *Lian He Bao*, Hong Kong, 10 Dec. 1993, in *SWB: FE*, 1872.
- (4) This point is made cogently by Solinger (1992) and demonstrated by Wank (1995) in his case study of Xiamen.
- (5) For comparative experience on the political dynamics of democratic transitions, see O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead (1986), Przeworski (1991) and Huntington (1991).



Access brought to you by: