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Civil Society as an Analytic Lens for Contemporary China

David YANG Da-hua

This article offers a review and commentary on the applicability of the civil society model to contemporary China. Critiques of the civil society paradigm and corporatist interpretations are examined, then situated within the context of post-totalitarian Communism by drawing upon literature on Eastern Europe. Based on recent empirical findings, the author argues that the tension between state and society should not be interpreted as dichotomous; nor is the state/society divide the only major political cleavage in today's China. Increasingly civil society will play a critical role in the trilateral dynamics between the state, business elite and working classes.

In recent years “civil society” in contemporary China has become, in the words of one researcher, a “growth industry in China studies”. The literature on the topic is copious, and a rich body of case studies covering a diverse range of settings exists to provide detailed empirical texture to the theoretical discussion. The prodigious amount of scholarly energy devoted to the subject, however, has not produced a consensus understanding of this important topic. A great deal of disagreement still exists even over such basic questions as the functional nature of state-sponsored civic organisations. Part of the problem, no doubt, is the very size and diversity of China. While local variations exist, however, they should not be over-emphasised. Even after more than 20 years of reforms, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continues to

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provide a common institutional context and framework for our understanding of “civil society” in China. We should be mindful of over-generalisations based on particularistic local observations, but meaningful insights on the subject as a national question can still be gained from careful readings of various local phenomena.

This essay represents some reflections on the current debate. Of particular interest to this author are some of the criticisms raised with regard to the applicability of the civil society paradigm to contemporary Chinese politics. It has often been argued, for instance, that Chinese society lacks autonomy from the state; that the very concept of an adversarial relationship between state and society is alien to Chinese political culture; that existing civic organisations in China are intended as instruments of mass mobilisation for the ruling Party. As descriptions of contemporary Chinese reality, these contentions may be factually accurate, but they do not in themselves nullify the utility of the civil society model for understanding contemporary China. The civil society model remains one of the most successful theoretical frameworks in our understanding of the process of democratisation, an achievement owing in no small part to its remarkable ability to travel. A model that has proven its value in so many diverse settings should not be discarded lightly.

It is important to bear in mind that the civil society paradigm is an ideal-typical construct in the Weberian sense. As such, it is never intended to be a precise reflection of reality, but rather an analytical instrument accentuating certain elements of reality to the point of utopian extreme. It is a “plan for thought”, a useful heuristic attempt to guide empirical research, a theoretical standard against which real phenomena can be measured.¹ As Gordon White remarked, the “civil society” paradigm owes much of its power to its utility in the interpretation of the “generalised contestation between state and society”. Moreover, to the extent that this contestation is a problem central to the development of contemporary China, civil society is a useful framework that “leads one to focus on the balance of power between state and society and to investigate the ways in which members of society act to protect themselves from powerful states”.² Keeping in mind that open state-societal confrontation typically arises only in times of crises, our analysis is likely to be much more

¹ Dirk Kasler, *Max Weber: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1988), pp. 180–4.

² Gordon White, “The Dynamics of Civil Society in Post-Mao China”, in *The Individual and the State in China*, ed. Brian Hook (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 197.

fruitful if we were to focus on the latent conflict between state and societal interests (and the ways in which societal actors defend themselves) rather than to overly emphasise direct political demands. Likewise, a continuous conception differentiating between various degrees of *de jure* and *de facto* social autonomy is likely to be much more powerful than a dichotomous one focusing on formal institutional features. It is perhaps premature to search for political civil society, when its sociological foundations are still being laid.

It is argued in this article that the concept of civil society can indeed provide a useful prism for the analysis of modern Chinese political culture: On a normative level, the concept is in fact sufficiently nuanced to accommodate many key elements of traditional Chinese political thought. On an empirical level, many of the problems that beset the emergence of civil society in China are in fact not unique to the Chinese experience, but common to other post-totalitarian Communist societies.

Assessments of State-society Relations in China

Although scholars differ in their assessments of many aspects of the state-society relationship in China, a few common themes have emerged from the current literature. First and foremost is the agreement among many recent studies that the conventional “civil society” model, based largely on the history of bourgeois liberalisation in Europe and more recently the democratisation of the Eastern Bloc, is not appropriate for contemporary China. Of paramount importance to the civil society model of democratisation is the existence of an arena of independent associational activity, free from state interference. Civil society, it is hoped, will stimulate political participation, cultivate democratic habits of public life and provide the channel through which the traditionally powerless can acquire power — in the form of collective action — to assert their rights against an overwhelming state. The autonomy of civic associations is considered crucially important as it is regarded as the only effective shield against the hegemony of the dominant classes of the state.

In today’s China, although private individuals can mobilise increasing amounts of resources independently of the state, with very few exceptions, Chinese civic organisations remain closely linked to the state. Their general lack of autonomy apparently renders them ineffective as counterweights to state power. Researchers studying the behaviour of urban entrepreneurs often point to the lack of group identity and cohesiveness among China’s emerging bourgeois, and emphasise its high degree of dependency on the state and the resultant symbiosis

between the old and new elite.³ As Dorothy Solinger puts it, what follows in the wake of China's economic reforms is not so much the separation of state and society, but their "merger". Scholars studying the role of the intelligentsia have come to similar conclusions. Elizabeth Perry chastises Chinese intellectuals for evincing "a brand of political behaviour and belief replete with the stigmata of the past", one that amounts to no less than "complicity in despotism".⁴ Chinese scholars such as Yu Shicun and Gu Xin, who likewise deplore the "dependent personality" of Chinese intellectuals and their stubborn "statist" outlooks, echo her views.⁵

From a culturalist perspective, various scholars have cast doubts on the relevance of the "civil society" paradigm within the context of Chinese political culture. Lucian Pye famously remarked that "no people have ever outdone the Chinese in ascribing moral virtues to the state or in deprecating the worth of the individual".⁶ Pye contends that the lack of an individualist ethos in Confucian culture, coupled with the historical absence of any "national" civil society capable

³ See for example, Dorothy Solinger, "Urban Entrepreneurs and the State: The Merger of State and Society", in *State and Society in China: The Consequences of Reform*, ed. Arthur Lewis Rosenbaum (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992); Li Baoliang, "Shimin zhengzhi wenhua de shengzhangdian: Zhongguo siying laodongzhe de sixiang xingtai yu zhengzhi xingwei fangshi fenxi" (The Point of Emergence of Civil Political Culture: An Analysis of the Ideational and Political Behaviours of Self-Employed Labourers in Contemporary China), *Dangdai zhongguo yanjiu* (Modern China Studies), no. 4 (1994) (hereafter *DZY*); Margaret Pearson, *China's New Business Elite: The Political Consequences of Economic Reforms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); "Cong shehuiwang de jiaodu kan siying qiyezhuzhu de zhengzhi guannian he xingwei" (A Study of the Political Beliefs and Behaviour of Private Entrepreneurs from the Perspective of Social Networks), *DZY*, no. 4 (1998).

⁴ Elizabeth Perry, "Casting a Chinese 'Democracy' Movement: The Roles of Students, Workers and Entrepreneurs", in *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China*, ed. J. Wasserstrom and E. Perry (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994).

⁵ Yu Shicun, "Dangqian Zhongguo de xianzhuang ji jingying de taidu yu xuanzhe" (The Current Situation in China and the Attitudes and Choices of the Elite), *DZY*, no. 1 (2002); Gu Xin, "Dangdai Zhongguo youwu gongmin shehui yu gonggong kongjian?: ping xifang xuezhe youguan lunshu" (Do Civil Society and Public Space Exist in Contemporary China?: Comments on Western Scholarship on the Topic), *DZY*, no. 4 (1994).

⁶ Lucian Pye, "The State and the Individual: An Overview Interpretation", in *The Individual and the State in China*, ed. Brian Hook (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 16.

of countering state authority in any meaningful way, renders any discussion of “state-society relations” meaningless. Pye’s sentiments are echoed by Chinese scholars such as Liang Zhiping, who argues that state and society merely represent “two poles of an internally connected continuum” in traditional Chinese political thoughts, that the ideal relationship between state and society is one of cooperation and mutual dependence, with state intervention in society being both justified and expected.⁷ Along similar lines, Margaret Pearson has attributed the political passivity of the Chinese bourgeoisie to Confucian China’s long tradition of bureaucratic clientelism.⁸ Little wonder that scholars such as Frederic Wakeman and Philip Huang found “poignant” the effort to apply the concepts of civil society to China.⁹

Whether or not one agrees with the assertion that civil society “does not exist” in today’s China, it cannot be denied that truly autonomous societal organisations are rare and where they are tolerated, tend to be rather limited in scale and scope. Even lineage and religious organisations in rural China, which in recent years have been increasingly called upon to assist in the provision of public goods, enjoy some degree of autonomy only in matters beyond the purview of state power.¹⁰ In urban areas where state penetration of society has been far more complete, autonomous civil society tends to take the form of individual initiatives filling the gaps in the provision of social services — so long as such initiatives do not contradict the objectives of the state.

As stipulated in the 1998 “Regulations on the Registration and Management of Social Organisations”, every social organisation must be attached to an official institutional sponsor, which is held responsible for the activities of that organisation. In order to ensure monopoly of representation for state-sanctioned groups, “similar” organisations are not allowed to exist at the same administrative level. Other provisions in the 1998 law are designed to “mimic the compartmentalisation of government departments”.¹¹ The intent

⁷ Liang Zhiping, “‘Minjian’, ‘mianjian shehui’ he civil society: civil society gainian zai jiantao” (A Re-examination of the Concept of Civil Society), *DZY*, no. 1 (2001).

⁸ Pearson, *China’s New Business Elite*.

⁹ Frederic Wakeman, “The Civil Society and Public Sphere Debate: Western Reflections on Chinese Political Culture”, *Modern China* 19, no. 2 (Apr. 1993).

¹⁰ Lily Tsai, “Cadres, Temples and Lineage Institutions and Governance in Rural China”, *China Journal*, no. 48 (2002).

¹¹ Tony Saich, “Negotiating the State: The Development of Social Organisations in China”, *China Quarterly*, no. 161 (Mar. 2000).

clearly is to integrate social organisations more tightly into the Party-state and pre-empt the emergence of any autonomous societal coalition. Many formally “non-governmental” organisations are in fact creations of the state, often funded and staffed by their respective controlling agencies. Examples abound of small business associations run by officials wearing the uniforms of the Tax Bureau.

The model most often invoked to explain the current arrangement is that of state corporatism. According to this interpretation, the current arrangement exemplifies a corporatist structure imposed by the state upon society in an effort to pre-empt the emergence of autonomous interest groups. While some functional autonomy may be tolerated, the state retains direct control over the organisation, leadership and indeed the very legitimacy of these organisations. From the perspective of the state, corporatist structures exist to enhance the governance capacity of the state. In the context of reform-era China, they may serve the additional purpose of recapturing some of the powers and resources devolved to society during the marketisation of the economy.

The corporatist model explains many aspects of the state-society relationship in China remarkably well, but it remains unsatisfactory in other regards. For one, it should be pointed out that despite its increasing technocratisation, the Chinese State remains far more ambitious ideologically than many of the authoritarian states originally studied by Philippe Schmitter. Schmitter’s corporatist state recognises the existence of independent societal interests — it merely wishes to *manage* their aggregation and articulation. In contrast, the current ideology of the CCP entails no less than the *monopolisation* of the articulation of societal interests. In this regard Jiang’s CCP shares a fundamental characteristic with other post-totalitarian Communist regimes. The Party may have abandoned the salvationist and millennial objectives of its founders, but it continues to invoke claims to what Giuseppe Di Palma has termed the “outright cognitive monopoly as the trustee of a superior truth”, if only because cognitive infallibility has always been invoked as a pillar of legitimisation.¹² To claim cognitive infallibility one must monopolise political discourse, but to monopolise political discourse one must also monopolise the articulation of societal interests. Jiang’s theory of “The Three Represents” explicitly asserts that the mission of the CCP is to represent “the development trend of advanced productive forces, the orientation of

¹² Giuseppe Di Palma, “Legitimization from the Top to Civil Society: Politico-Cultural Change in Eastern Europe”, *World Politics* 44, no. 1 (Oct. 1991): 49–80.

advanced culture and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the people in China".¹³ The Party's (highly controversial) recent invitation to entrepreneurs to join the CCP can also be interpreted in this light.

Within this political milieu the horizontal integration of Chinese society remains severely hindered, and in the absence of effective collective bargaining with the state, vertical patronage relationships have persisted in importance. The effectiveness of most civic organisations as vehicles of bottom-up interest articulation is doubtful. More often than not they serve as top-down "transmission belts", to be created or discarded at the state's discretion. Grafted onto a fundamentally monist ideology, the corporatist project may be no more than a new institutional strategy for social mobilisation. As such, it has even been argued that in contemporary China, corporatism may exist in form, but does not exist in essence.¹⁴

More problematically, the utility of the corporatist model is handicapped by its limited ability to account for future changes. Critics of the civil society model prefer to interpret the evolution of Chinese associational life along the state/societal corporatist axis and maintain that Chinese political development is far more likely to involve "incremental shifts into societal corporatism rather than the introduction of any form of political democracy".¹⁵ The dichotomy, however, is a false one. As it has been pointed out, in those cases where state corporatism gave way to societal corporatism, "the emergence of societal corporatism was the consequence of democratisation..., not an alternative to it".¹⁶ In the words of Phillipe Schmitter,

Societal corporatism appears to be the concomitant, if not ineluctable, component of the post-liberal, advanced capitalist, organised democratic welfare state; state corporatism seems to be a defining element of, if not structural necessity for, the antiliberal, delayed capitalist, authoritarian, neomercantilist state. ... In a nutshell, the origins of societal corporatism lie in the slow, almost imperceptible decay of

¹³ See for example, "The 'Three Represents' Theory", *Xinhua News*, 25 Jun. 2001 <<http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/20010625/422678.htm>>.

¹⁴ Ray Yep, "The Limitations of Corporatism for Understanding Reforming China: An Empirical Analysis in a Rural County", *Journal of Contemporary China* 9, no. 25 (Nov. 2000).

¹⁵ Jonathan Unger and Anita Chan, "China, Corporatism, and the East Asian Model", *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 33 (Jan. 1995): 52.

¹⁶ Bruce Dickson, "Cooptation and Corporatism in China: The Logic of Party Adaptation", *Political Science Quarterly* 115, no. 4 (2000-1): 537.

advanced pluralism; the origins of state corporatism lie in the rapid, highly visible demise of nascent pluralism.¹⁷

In other words, while societal corporatism arises out of the need to incorporate subordinate classes more closely into the political system due to the expanding role of the modern state, state corporatism arises out of the desire to suppress subordinate classes due to the vulnerability of the ruling elite. It is therefore no surprise that the institutional shift from the imposed, exclusionist to the invited, inclusionist type of corporatism has never been made peacefully and incrementally because the transition to societal corporatism “depends very much on a liberal-pluralist past”, and in particular “a previous pattern of relative noninterference by the state which only gradually came to expand its role — and then usually at the request of organised private interests”. As a gradual and incremental transformation towards societal corporatism is highly improbable, “the state corporatist system must first degenerate into openly conflictful, multifaceted, uncontrolled interest politics — pluralism in other words”.¹⁸ Seen from this perspective, while state corporatism is effective in capturing certain key aspects of contemporary China as a descriptive model of interest representation, as a predictive model of political development it is an evolutionary dead-end.

Civil Society under Post-totalitarian Communism: A Historical Perspective

In contrast, the strength of the civil society model lies in its ability to offer a comparative roadmap for charting associational life as an *evolutionary*, albeit not necessarily teleological, process. It is important to keep in mind that from a historical perspective, the Chinese experience is in fact typical of the post-totalitarian Communist regime. Juan Linz’s well-known characterisation of post-totalitarianism applies to contemporary China just as well as it does to pre-Gorbachev Eastern Europe.¹⁹ Equally applicable is di Palma’s observation that tensions between the two principles of legitimation — one from the top

¹⁷ Phillippe Schmitter, “Still the Century of Corporatism?”, *Review of Politics* (Jan. 1974): 105–6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 126–7.

¹⁹ Juan Linz, “Totalitarianism and Authoritarianism”, in *The Handbook of Political Science*, 3: *Macro-political Theory*, ed. Fred Greenstein and Nelson Polsby (Reading: Addison Wesley, 1975), pp. 336–50.

and based on dogmatic claims to cognitive superiority, and one from the bottom and based on economic performance — are “simply dealt with by repressing dissent in the name of the first, pre-emptive principle”.²⁰

Commentators who deplore Chinese society’s dependency on the state often overlook the fact that the dissident movement at the forefront of Eastern European civil society in the 1980s was very much in the wilderness of society in the 1960s and 1970s. A key anchor of (relative) stability for the regimes of Eastern Europe was their ability to compel their peoples, if not to cooperate actively with the system, but at least to act as expected. Dissent was stifled not only by the coercive means of the state, but also by the apathy and perhaps even the antipathy of society itself. At least initially, the values of the dissident movement simply did not resonate with most members of the public.²¹ It was a problem well recognised by the East Europeans themselves: Aleksandr Zinoviev memorably labelled it “totalitarianism from the bottom”.²²

Until the moment of crisis, the normal relation between society and state, even an autocratic one, is one of at least semi-loyalty. The image of an autonomous “second society” valiantly resisting the advances of an autocratic state at every turn is a largely mythical construction. The Jacobin leaders of the French Revolution waxed poetic on the virtues of democracy from the salons of the nobility, and the same ambiguous attitude towards the regime also characterised the elite of East European civil society. Marcia Weigle and Jim Butterfield suggest that the development of East European civil society can be divided into four stages:

Defensive, in which private individuals and independent groups actively or passively defend their autonomy vis-à-vis the party-state; emergent, in which independent social groups or movements seek limited goals in a widened public sphere which is sanctioned or conceded by the reforming party-state; mobilisational, in which independent groups or movements undermine the legitimacy of the party-state by offering alternative forms of governance to a politicised society; and institutional, in which publicly supported leaders enact laws guaranteeing autonomy of social action, leading

²⁰ Di Palma, “Legitimization from the Top to Civil Society”, p. 62.

²¹ See for example, Roy A. Medvedev, *On Soviet Dissent* (London: Constable, 1980); David Lane, *State and Politics in the USSR* (New York: NYU Press, 1985); Walter Connor, *Socialism’s Dilemma: State and Society in the Soviet Bloc* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

²² Di Palma, “Legitimization from the Top to Civil Society”, p. 65.

to a contractual relationship between state and society regulated eventually by free elections.²³

The initial “defensive” stage of development lasted until the early 1980s, when a great spurt of growth was stimulated by the reformist policies of glasnost. Until then, politically motivated civil society existed only on the edges of society, and even these handfuls of groups and individuals rarely adopted an uncompromising stance against the state. “Realist” elements that actively sought out reformist allies within the regime have always been important.²⁴ Only after repeated appeals to the Party-state proved ineffectual were the dissidents forced to accept the unreformability of the Party. Even then, a directly confrontational approach would have been self-destructive and just as ineffectual. Instead, civil society conceded high politics to the state and sought to defend and promote societal interests without directly challenging state authority. Societal autonomy was defended on a moral level, not a policy-making level.

When commentators lament the absence of Chinese civil society, they usually have in mind political civil society, in which societal associations are willing to exert pressure to affect political output in an institutionalised manner, if not in fact to seek political power for themselves. However, much of what came to be regarded as the genesis of East European civil society consisted of informal, self-organised networks geared to satisfy basic personal or professional needs, sometimes as basic as the physical needs for survival, with no obvious indication of their latent political potential. Nonconformism may be no more subversive than a technical discussion group or a network for the bartering of consumer goods. Yet as Kazimierz Wojcicki remarked, even the withdrawal into the personal network of friends and family is actually “a conscious reaction of society in defence of its acquisitions”, a defence that ultimately gave rise to various forms of dissent.²⁵

Voluntary associations for all purposes, overtly political or otherwise, are valuable because they provide the rare opportunity for their participants to acquire the skills and habits of self-governance. In fact, evidence from the former USSR suggests that even participation in the widely-dismissed

²³ Marcia A. Weigle and Jim Butterfield, “Civil Society in Reforming Communist Regimes: The Logic of Emergence”, *Comparative Politics* 25, no. 1 (Oct. 1992): 1.

²⁴ See for example, Zbigniew Rau, ed., *The Reemergence of Civil Society in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991).

²⁵ Di Palma, “Legitimization from the Top to Civil Society”, p. 70.

state-sponsored associations may prove beneficial for the latter development of civil society: Activists in state-sponsored housing boards, parents' associations and the like were well represented in the voluntary associations that sprang up in the 1980s.²⁶

With regards to China, it is worth noting that the intellectual "salons" that were so widely credited with laying the groundwork for the pro-democracy movement in the 1980s began as mere informal gatherings of friends, dealing mainly with "cultural" matters such as literature and philosophy. Despite burgeoning pluralism in the economic and social spheres, direct political participation was allowed only under the aegis of official patronage, eagerly sought-after by intellectuals happy to be back in the embrace of society. Yet as Michel Bonnin and Yves Chevrier pointed out, the breakthrough that was Fang Lizhi's "Democracy Salon" would not have been possible without the steady advances in autonomy made in the non-political arena. Tectonic shifts were taking place, on an ideational level. "Belonging to the state or advising it no longer meant that one had to submit to its values or identify its interests to the interests of society: ... the legitimacy of society, to which the intellectuals felt they were primarily responsible — gained ground in the 1980s."²⁷ The power of these ideational tremors was to be put on awesome display in 1989.

In general, the conflictual aspect of the relationship between civil society and the state should not be exaggerated. The East European experience suggests that an ideologically alienated society can remain bound to the state in a marriage of convenience as long as the net benefits of collaboration outweigh the expected costs of confrontation. (Surveys of Soviet émigrés reveal no relationship between attitudes towards state control and the propensity to cultivate personal relationships with officials,²⁸ which unsurprisingly was by far the most prevalent form of political participation in the former Soviet Union.²⁹) Nor is formal separation of state and society necessarily integral to successful civil society. A simplistic notion of state-

²⁶ Donna Bahry and Brian D. Silver, "Soviet Citizen Participation on the Eve of Democratization", *American Political Science Review* 84, no. 3 (Sep. 1990): 841–2 (hereafter *APSR*).

²⁷ Michel Bonnin and Yves Chevrier, "The Intellectual and the State: Social Dynamics of Intellectual Autonomy during the Post-Mao Era", in *The Individual and the State in China*, ed. Brian Hook (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 158.

²⁸ Bahry and Silver, "Soviet Citizen Participation".

²⁹ Wayne Di Francisco and Zvi Gitelman, "Soviet Political Culture and 'Covert Participation' in Policy Implementation", *APSR* 78, no. 3 (Sep. 1984): 603–21.

society dichotomy tends to exaggerate the historic independence of Western European civil society, and it certainly cannot account for the symbiotic relationship that has evolved between state agencies and social organisations in modern welfare states.

In his well-known essay on the topic, Charles Taylor pointed out that the concept of civil society is in fact an amalgam of several distinct strands of tradition, of which the Lockean construct of society as an extra-political entity in opposition to the state is but one. It should be noted that this notion of a societal existence outside of the state would be just as incomprehensible to an ancient Greek or Roman as it would be to a classical Confucian, whose concept of the state as ordered society has much in common with the Aristotelian idea of the *polis*. Montesquieu's concept of the state was firmly rooted in the classical tradition but nonetheless reconciled "a thoroughly political definition of society" with "a view of [civil] society as an equilibrium between central power and a skein of entrenched rights". In this view "civil society is not so much a sphere outside political power; rather it penetrates deeply into this power, fragments and decentralises it".³⁰ The primary purpose of independent associations need not be political. Their functions may lie largely outside of politics, but it is critical that they play a role in the political system because they constitute the basis for the fragmentation and diversity of power within the polity.

East European civil society did not reach its "emergent" stage until *glasnost* created the necessary public space for its emergence. In contemporary China, the development of civil society is evidently still in its primary "defensive" stage. It would therefore be misleading to apply formal, pluralist criteria such as the degree of institutionalisation and horizontal integration when measuring civil society in China. As di Palma pointed out, in the context of post-totalitarian authoritarianism, civil society must necessarily express itself through informal and unconventional channels, with limited ability to self-structure and self-coordinate. Even when it is too fragile and disjointed to affect political output in a systematic manner, its role in the penetration and erosion of state power should not be undervalued. The evolution of civil society is by no means teleological, but neither does the lack of organisational cohesiveness and a clear political agenda preclude the emergence of effective civil society.

Thus, when searching for the genesis of civil society, we should not neglect the role of informal and unconventional associations; nor should we be unduly impressed by the formal characteristics of conventional associations such as their

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

organisational structure or their official objectives. Due to the amorphous nature of civil society in its embryonic stage, it may be more relevant to focus on the functional, rather than the structural, aspects of state-society exchanges. Likewise, in searching for the seeds of civil society it may be more fruitful to focus on the autonomy of political participation (collective or otherwise) rather than the degree of horizontal societal integration. Instruments of corporatist mobilisation can be transformed into genuine representatives of civil society if effectively captured by societal interests. Ritual displays of grassroots democracy may generate genuine challenges to regime legitimacy if elected leaders seek to assert their authority. As Tony Saich observed, too much emphasis on the rhetoric of the state and formal characteristics of the corporatist design risks missing the remarkable successes “incorporated groups” have achieved in advancing their members’ interests and deflecting state intrusion.³¹ Before a balance can be struck between state and societal power, civil society must first fragment and dilute overwhelming state power, both central and local.

In the following section, the author illustrates how the interpretative framework sketched out above can be applied to the evaluation of political participation among China’s private entrepreneurs, drawing upon a number of recent empirical studies. It is argued that within the hegemonic institutional arrangements, a great deal of meaningful political participation will necessarily take place outside the formal channels. Societal actors may lack organisational cohesiveness, but in asserting and defending their autonomy against the Party-state, they are in fact carving out the necessary public space for the emergence of civil society. In particular, the reader’s attention is called to the dynamics of intra-state divergences of interests and the opportunities they create in the corporatist structure for the articulation and pursuit of self-defined societal interests. The oft-voiced observation that all social interests are socially constructed need not overly concern us here. Those who have power in its rawest form at their disposal do not require the subtlety of its “Third Face”. At issue is not the source of interest definition — self-definition in this context does not need to be objectively informed in any sense, it merely needs to reflect the societal actor’s own volition. Choice is a form of self-definition, however imperfect.

As a theoretical framework, “civil society” has travelled remarkably well. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this discussion the concept may be more fruitfully employed if taken up one rung on the ladder of abstraction. This

³¹ Saich, “Negotiating the State”.

author proposes the following working definition of civil society: The voluntary association of societal actors for the pursuit of individual, group or national interests defined independently of state tutelage. Note that this definition differs slightly from common usage in that it relaxes the emphasis on the formal autonomy of social associations from state sponsorship, but it does insist upon the voluntariness of participation and the autonomy of interest articulation. However, no assumption can be made regarding the democratic orientation of civil society thus defined. Political participation in this context is defined in the Huntingtonian sense, i.e., as any activity by private citizens designed to affect policy output.

Political Participation among Private Entrepreneurs: A Re-evaluation

Many studies have confirmed the leading role played by the non-state sector in China's phenomenal economic growth over the past two decades. By the late 1990s China's once state-dominated economic landscape has been drastically altered: In 1998, the non-state sector employed some 56 per cent of the urban labour force and almost the entire rural non-agricultural labour force. It accounted for over 75 per cent of total industrial output and 45 per cent of total investment in fixed assets.³² Meanwhile private entrepreneurs have also been well compensated for their efforts — recent surveys reveal that their average income is often 2–3 times the local average.³³ Not surprisingly, the new business elite has become the focus of much scholarly attention in search of an emergent civil society. In more optimistic moments it has even been speculated that the entrepreneurial class will prove to be the most natural ally for any pro-democratic opposition, so much so that the two forces will join hands to “organise a political offensive against the state”.³⁴

Entrepreneurs certainly have their share of grievances. Despite their wealth and importance to the economy, they are generally dissatisfied with their social status, a finding confirmed in numerous studies.³⁵ They complain of systematic

³² Liu Zhiqiang, “The Nature of China's Economic Growth in the Past Two Decades”, *Post-Communist Economies* 12, no. 2 (Jun. 2000): Tables 1, 2 and 3.

³³ Lu Xueyi, ed., *Dangdai Zhongguo shehui jieceng yanjiu baogao* (Research Report on Social Strata in Contemporary China) (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2002), p. 27.

³⁴ Gordon White, Jude Howell and Shang Xiaoyuan, *In Search of Civil Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 9.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 199–248. See also the articles by Li Baoliang and Yang Qing.

discrimination against private businesses, severe competitive disadvantages and above all the lack of adequate legal protection. Not only are they extremely vulnerable to petty bureaucratic extortion, they cannot even be assured of legal recognition of their basic property rights due to the Party's historically ambiguous attitude towards private ownership. Although as a group entrepreneurs are generally uninterested in politics, they do recognise the "omnipotence" of politics in today's China and its importance for their economic welfare. Most voice support for strengthening the rule of law, but in reality almost everyone relies on personal connections with influential officials or organisations. Certainly few are willing to risk the umbrage of "omnipotent" officialdom.

As a result, those looking for evidence of a budding "civil society" among the entrepreneurial elite are often disappointed. Political participation among this group is focused on narrow business interests and defensive in character, with little potential for collective political action. As mentioned above, Margaret Pearson emphasises the clientelist aspects of state-business relations.³⁶ Yang Qing argues that most entrepreneurs seek some form of "political arrangement" (e.g., an honorific appointment) from the state to bolster their standings within the establishment.³⁷ In fact, Li Baoliang noticed a curvilinear relationship between the demand for political participation and the degree of economic success — once their desire for recognition has been satisfied, few people are inclined to risk their newfound place amongst the elite.³⁸

Most entrepreneurs are formal members of state-sponsored business associations such as the Industry and Commerce Federation (ICF) or the Private Entrepreneurs' Friendship Association. Most observers are dismissive of the representative value of these organisations, as they are generally considered top-down "transmission belts" for the state.³⁹ Certainly most local officials tend to see these organisations as little more than mechanisms for the exercise of state control,

³⁶ Pearson, *China's New Business Elite*.

³⁷ Yang Qing, "Cong chaojingji qiangzhi dao guanxixing heyi: dui siying qiyezhuzhengzhicanyu guocheng de fenxi" (From Extra-economic Coercion to Relational Convenience: Analysis of Political Participation among Private Entrepreneurs), *DZY*, no. 4 (2000).

³⁸ Li Baoliang, "Cong shehuiwang de jiaodu kan siying qiyezhuzhengzhiguannianhexingwei" (A Study of the Political Beliefs and Behaviour of Private Entrepreneurs from the Perspective of Social Networks), *DZY*, no. 4 (1998).

³⁹ See for example, Gordon White, "Prospects for Civil Society: a Case Study of Xiaoshan City", in *China's Quiet Revolution*, ed. David S. G. Goodman and Beverly Hooper (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). Also Yep, "The Limitations of Corporatism".

and in the few instances where these groups did attempt to lobby on their members' behalf, they were often promptly shut down.⁴⁰ Correspondingly, these groups are usually regarded with indifference if not contempt by their membership. In an environment where political power holds ultimate sway over economic decision-making, particular personal relationships continue to be by far the most effective method for affecting political output. As noted earlier this form of "covert participation" should be quite familiar to students of post-totalitarian Communist societies. When policy-making is largely insulated from society, manipulation of policy implementation becomes society's only recourse.

There's little doubt that from the perspective of the state centre, civic associations exist primarily as instruments of political control and mass mobilisation. As is frequently the case, however, local agents of the state may have agendas very different from that of the state centre. Local agents tend to pursue much more narrowly defined bureaucratic and personalistic goals at the expense of the centre, often to the point of severely undermining the objectives of the overall organisation. Of course, this phenomenon of "goal displacement" is common in any bureaucratic system, but the problem is especially severe in post-totalitarian Communist regimes due to the lack of effective supervisory mechanisms and proper channels for the articulation of subordinate interests.⁴¹ Thus, while state-sponsored associations may not be effective advocates of societal interests, neither are they always effective as instruments of state domination, especially when government agencies are asked to oversee hundreds of affiliated social groups! Fissures in the edifice of the state created by goal displacement may work to the great advantage of societal elements, especially when such elements have ample resources at their disposal.

Indeed, various studies have attributed the dramatically different performances of two nationwide business associations to the relative power of their respective memberships and the personal career concerns of local bureaucrats. Both the Self-Employed Labourers' Association (SELA — consisting of small businessmen employing eight people or less) and the Industrial and Commercial Federation (ICF — which caters to a membership of larger enterprises) are creations of the state and headed by officials from the Bureau of Industry and Commerce. However, whereas the small businessmen in SELA are barely eking

⁴⁰ Michael Frolic, "State Led Civil Society", in *Civil Society in China*, eds. Timothy Brook and Michael Frolic (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1997).

⁴¹ See Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: Free Press, 1968), pp. 253–5.

out an existence, the wealthy enterprises in the ICF promise to reward their grassroots bureaucratic allies with attractive career opportunities. As a result, while SELA officials generally consider their function to be regulatory, ICF officials are so zealous in their advocacy role that they frequently resort to influence-peddling to secure preferential treatment for their members.⁴² On a national level, the ICF's ownership of 28 profitable enterprises has given it a rare amount of autonomy, allowing it to publish its own newspaper and sponsor a network of semi-autonomous local chambers of commerce.⁴³

Similarly, case studies in Shenyang reveal that the primary consideration in city officials' dealings with social organisations is the economic value of the organisations in question. As the head of the municipal Social Organisations Management Office frankly admitted, "[the office had] managed to register all trade associations which could benefit the local economy". In the process, local officials had not hesitated to brush aside inconvenient Central regulations, thereby keeping a number of legally illegible business groups and commercial firms in existence due to their perceived economic benefits to the city. As one Shenyang official explained, though he did not wish to antagonise his superiors in Beijing, "it was the local government that was paying [his] salary".⁴⁴

Seen from this perspective, the relationship between state and society in the reform era may entail much greater ambiguity than captured by simple conceptions of state domination. As White, Howell and Shang posited in what they referred to as the "market hypothesis of civil society", a state that no longer enjoys monopoly over resource distribution cannot dictate the terms of participation. As market reforms endow society with increasing amounts of economic power, mobilisation can only be achieved at the price of greater accommodation of societal interests.⁴⁵ Mutual penetration between state and society at the grassroots may bind society more tightly to the state centre, but it can also undermine central control and align the interests of the local state closer to those of society. As Tony Saich pointed out, the close links to state organs have given many social organisations unprecedented levels of influence in policy formulation, while allowing them to

⁴² Christopher Nevitt, "Private Business Associations in China: Evidence of Civil Society or Local State Power?", *China Journal*, no. 36 (Jul. 1996).

⁴³ Jonathan Unger, "'Bridges': Private Business, the Chinese Government and the Rise of New Associations", *China Quarterly*, no. 147 (Sep. 1996).

⁴⁴ Gordon White, *et al.*, *In Search of Civil Society: Market Reform and Social Change in Contemporary China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 137–8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, ch. 2.

sidestep restrictive policies from the centre. When the state attempts to bind society closer to itself, it also imports various social interests into the state and along with them the existing fault-lines of social conflict.⁴⁶

In this regard the economic autonomy of society is of critical importance. It neutralises purely economic means of state coercion and helps deflect extra-economic means of coercion by engendering a network of “relational convenience” between the local state and society. “Goal displacement” under a command economy merely redistributes discretionary powers within the bureaucracy without affecting the nature of state-society exchanges. Those private citizens who have at their disposal significant amounts of economic resources, however, may gain sufficient leverage to extract better terms of exchange from the local state, even if their strength remains insignificant in the face of central power. Driven by the calculus of their own self-interests, local agents of the state are sometimes compelled to concede to societal interests, thereby germinating the seeds of civil society in the crevices of the state.

It should be stressed that what is important is not political decentralisation *per se*, but the equilibrium between central and local powers so that society does not lie exclusively within the bureaucratic purview of any particular level of authority. The phenomenon of *tanpai* — *ad hoc* fees of dubious legality levied by local authorities — is a telling example of decentralisation running amok. As Wang Shaoguang points out, weakness at the centre has historically gone hand-in-hand with rampant expansion of local extraction.⁴⁷ Along these lines the fiscal reforms of 1994 — which dramatically increased the share of revenue directly collected by the centre — may play to the private sector’s advantage by placing the central and local governments in direct competition over the same sources of revenue.⁴⁸ Just as direct contributions to the central coffers may give Beijing extra incentives to protect private businesses from local predation, they may also give private entrepreneurs more opportunities to triangulate between various levels of authority. In this area recent developments have been encouraging: Large numbers of court cases have been brought against local governments over illegal

⁴⁶ Saich, “Negotiating the State”.

⁴⁷ Wang Shaoguang, “Central-Local Fiscal Politics in China”, in *Changing Central-Local Relations in China*, ed. Hao Jia and Lin Zhimin (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 108–9.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Table 5. By 1997, the centre’s share in total revenue collection had risen to 57 per cent, a dramatic increase over the 1993 level of 22 per cent.

taxation and the success rate has been high: 73 per cent in Shandong, 68 per cent in Hunan, 86 per cent in Jiangsu and 89 per cent in Sichuan.⁴⁹

Finally, the demand for institutional channels of political participation among entrepreneurs should not be too readily dismissed. Although they certainly lack organisational cohesiveness at present, their common dissatisfaction with the political arrangement, combined with their organisational and managerial experience gained from the economic sphere, gives them their latent political potency. In recent years many entrepreneurs have expressed interest in running for the National People's Congress (NPC) and other representative bodies, if only as a means of enhancing their public standing. According to a recent survey of private entrepreneurs, NPC membership far outstripped other options such as Party membership or securing a government appointment as a preferred venue of political participation.⁵⁰ Whether an influx of entrepreneurial energy will contribute to the increasing (albeit slowly) assertiveness of the heretofore rubber-stamp representative organs deserves serious attention.⁵¹

Direct confrontation against the considerable powers of the state is always a risky proposition. It is far more preferable to exploit the state for the advancement of one's own interests. If, as Lucian Pye contends, the advocacy of shared private interests marks the beginning of a true civil society, then mere marriages of convenience in their pursuit do not alter the fundamental challenge civil society poses to the legitimacy of the post-totalitarian regime.⁵² Once the claim to cognitive superiority has been exploded, the state becomes a mere instrument — or obstacle — to the pursuit of self-defined interests. Seen in this light, the “merger” between state and society is remarkable not for the state penetration of society (which has always been present), but for the reciprocal societal penetration of the state.

It should be noted that much of this reciprocal penetration is informal, as exemplified by co-option of grassroots agents of the state by private business interests. Consequently, formal corporatist structures may not always be the locus

⁴⁹ Zhang Le-Yin, “Chinese Central-provincial Fiscal Relationships...”, *China Quarterly*, no. 157 (Mar. 1999): 115–41.

⁵⁰ Lu Xueyi, ed., *Dangdai Zhongguo shehui jiecong yanjiu baogao* (Research Report on Social Strata in Contemporary China), p. 221.

⁵¹ Pei Minxin, “‘Creeping Democratization’ in China”, *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 4 (1995): 65–79.

⁵² Lucian Pye, “An Overview Interpretation”, in *The Individual and the State in China*, ed. Brian Hook (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 39.

of state-society exchanges. In some cases, elements of societal interests may have been so well incorporated into the formal policy-making process that corporatist structures are rendered largely redundant. In other cases, the real exchanges between state and society may take place entirely outside of any formal framework, so that the activities of corporatist organisations represent the result rather than the process of state-society bargaining.

Working Classes Participation and the Prospects for Democratisation

Nonetheless, anecdotal evidence does not a civil society make. The majority of state-sponsored civic organisations in China today are barely functional, either as instruments of state control or as advocates of societal interests. However, while cases such as the ICF may be atypical, they do illustrate a potentially crucial mechanism in the evolution of civil society; and while the advocacy of elite business interests is still a long way from genuine democratic participation, it does represent a step forward towards a more inclusive polity. In and of themselves, these changes may not take us to polyarchy. They may, however, trigger the emergence of more direct pressures on the state and help soften some of the obstacles along the path to polyarchy.

Ultimately meaningful political liberalisation will not likely occur without the active involvement of the working classes, both industrial and agricultural. Historically the attitude of the bourgeoisie towards democracy has been ambiguous. They supported democracy only when broad-based political participation did not threaten their interests. As Dietrich Rueschemeyer *et al.* pointed out, it is not the presence of civil society *per se*, nor the supposed “universalist character” of democratic ideals that pushed democratisation forward. Fundamentally, democracy was achieved by the organisational empowerment of those subordinate classes previously excluded from the political process.⁵³ Civil society need not be united against the state — although at critical junctures of transition the posture of various social groups may have lasting consequences. The process of democratisation necessarily involves the contestation between state and societal powers, but the fault-line between state and society need not be the only, and in fact nor even the primary, political divide.

Without a doubt, the greatest beneficiaries of economic reforms have been the entrepreneurial elite. Although this group is perhaps the best positioned to

⁵³ Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens and John Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 46.

challenge the current political arrangement, it already enjoys some formal and informal channels to power and is therefore unlikely to demand institutionalised participation as long as these channels remain effective. Relative to the new bourgeoisie the working classes have been the primary bearers of the costs of reform. Especially since the 1990s, workers and peasants have experienced a sharp decline in social status, accompanied by a steeply widening income gap between themselves and the elite of society. By the end of the 1990s China has become one of the most polarised countries in the world, with a Gini coefficient approaching those of Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, and the trend is likely to be exacerbated by China's WTO ascension.⁵⁴ The working classes therefore have the most to gain from political participation, yet simultaneously they are also the most lacking in adequate interest representation and access to state power.

Ironically, the Party of the proletariat has become the one most insulated from the proletariat. Since 1982, Chinese workers' right to strike has been abrogated from the Constitution, and to this date Chinese farmers still do not have a national association of their own for fear that it would challenge the government's urban-biased development strategies. This is not to say that the regime does not recognise the dangers associated with unaddressed mass grievances, and the state has taken a number of highly symbolic acts in response to such concerns. A new Labour Union Law was promulgated in 1992, followed by a new Labour Law in 1995. These are fairly comprehensive in their coverage of labour rights, and they even envision a more adversarial role for labour unions in their dealings with management, including a much-touted new system of collective bargaining.⁵⁵ Likewise, the much-heralded experiment in village self-government can be best understood as an effort to placate peasant discontent at the grassroots, an attempt to arrest the deterioration in cadre-peasant relations and the general decay of state power in the Chinese countryside.⁵⁶

Such formal concessions by the state do not necessarily imply greater accommodation of autonomous interest articulation, however. The Party's position

⁵⁴ Wang Shaoguang, "The Social and Political Implications of China's WTO Membership", *Journal of Contemporary China* 9, no. 25 (2000): 391–8.

⁵⁵ See for example, Zhu Ying and Stephanie Fahey, "The Impact of Economic Reform in Industrial Labor Relations in China and Vietnam", *Post-Communist Economies* 11, no. 2 (Jun. 1999): 173–92.

⁵⁶ See for example, Wang Xu, *Mutual Empowerment of State and Peasantry: Village Self-Government in Rural China*, Princeton University Doctoral Dissertation, 2000.

is inherently self-contradictory. It is aware of its inability to represent adequately all societal interests, but insists upon monopolising interest articulation. It recognises the looming crisis of governability and the need to broaden political participation, but is reluctant to relinquish Party supremacy even at the grassroots. It wishes to enhance state capacity through greater social mobilisation, but is fearful that such efforts would instead undermine its legitimacy and authority. Thus, while elected village committees are encouraged to exercise self-government, they are also expected to operate under the “guidance” of local Party branches. Similarly the Party’s labour policy is saddled with the two-fold objective of protecting worker welfare on the one hand, and ensuring labour quiescence in the implementation of developmental policies on the other. Given the economistic orientation of the current leadership, the second objective usually pre-empts the first.

The result, all too often, is the utter ineffectuality of state-sponsored channels of political participation. Rural Party secretaries tend to interpret “guidance” as just another code word for old-styled direct leadership, and many peasants quickly became disenchanted with the entire exercise of village self-government. In the factories, union structures are in increasing disarray despite formal improvements such as the new labour laws. Without effective representation of worker interests, managerial autonomy has created what has been labelled a regime of “disorganised despotism” in many private enterprises and contracted state-owned enterprises.⁵⁷ Even the traditional Party structures are helpless against managerial domination: In an effort to purchase the political loyalty of the new managerial elite, managers are now routinely appointed to leadership positions within the Party, a process largely marginalising the Party’s veteran proletariat membership.⁵⁸

It is therefore hardly surprising that the proletariat is turning away from the Party and its official venues of participation in droves.⁵⁹ By the late 1990s Party membership among SOE workers has fallen below 10 per cent, down from

⁵⁷ Lee Ching Kwan, “From Organized Dependence to Disorganized Despotism: Changing Labour Regimes in Chinese Factories”, *China Quarterly*, no. 157 (Mar. 1999): 44–71.

⁵⁸ See Heath B. Chamberlain, “Party-Management Relations in Chinese Industries: Some Political Dimensions of Economic Reform”, *China Quarterly*, no. 112 (1992): 631–61.

⁵⁹ See Li Peilin, ed., *Zhongguo xinshiqi jieji jieceng baogao* (Report on Class and Social Stratification in the Market Transition in China) (Shenyang: Liaoning renmin chubanshe, 1995).

14 per cent in 1978.⁶⁰ Amazingly, a 1999 survey in Shenzhen found no Party members among the booming city's industrial workers.⁶¹ In the villages it is common to find Party cells that have not recruited a single new member for the last 20 years. In a political climate where any hint of autonomous interest aggregation is quickly suppressed, however, the working classes must turn to unconventional methods of resistance to defend their interests. These may range from collective outbursts of violence on one extreme to individual acts of work slowdown on the other. Self-organised demonstrations and petitions by workers or peasants are becoming increasingly common. According to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences *Bluebook on Society*, 3,955 cases of collective labour disputes were reported in 1999, nearly quadruple the number reported in 1996.⁶² More and more people are also seeking legal redresses to their grievances, often with the assistance of sympathetic lawyers.⁶³

A detailed discussion of working class collective action is beyond the scope of this article, although it is an important topic that deserves serious attention from any student of contemporary Chinese civil society. In general, it appears that the primary conflict in the agricultural sector is that between the peasants and the local state; whereas in the industrial/commercial sector, the major antagonism is that between labour and management. Not surprisingly, greater economic autonomy affords greater ability to resist exploitation, but the relationship is curvilinear. Younger workers with more marketable skills are found to be able to negotiate better terms of employment, but on the other extreme, laid-off or retired workers no longer on the payroll also enjoy an "independence" of sorts.⁶⁴ With little left to lose, they tend to be the most militant and vocal in pressing their demands and are the most likely to undertake collective action.

A similar pattern can also be detected in the countryside. Xu Wang found that higher income levels increase the likelihood of success for village self-

⁶⁰ Chen Feng and Gong Ting, "Party vs. Market in Post-Mao China: The Erosion of the Leninist Organisation from Below", *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 13, no. 3 (1997).

⁶¹ Lu Xueyi (ed.), *Dangdai Zhongguo shehui jieceng yanjiu baogao* (Research Report on Social Strata in Contemporary China), p. 36.

⁶² Cited in Wang Shaoguang, "The Social and Political Implications of China's WTO Membership", p. 400.

⁶³ Anita Chan, *China's Workers Under Assault: The Exploitation of Labor in a Globalizing Economy* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2001), ch. 8.

⁶⁴ Lee, "From Organized Dependence", pp. 44–71.

government, except in the wealthiest villages where village committees tend to be less effective. This can be explained by the fact that such villages are usually located in coastal areas where most residents work in township and village enterprises run by local cadres. Stripped of the relative autonomy of household farming, the workers' dependency on their employers renders them powerless to resist political domination.⁶⁵

This leads us to another important insight regarding the development of democratic politics. In the words of Dietrich Rueschemeyer *et al.*, "democracy is possible only if there exists a fairly strong institutional separation ... of the realm of politics from the overall system of inequality in society".⁶⁶ Just as village self-government is stunted by the economic supremacy of the local political elite, the prospects for independent worker action are also indeed bleak when enterprises are essentially mere extensions of the state, and managerial authority essentially an extension of political authority. However, when the economic order is differentiated from the political order, workers may gain more opportunities to triangulate between management and the state. As Andrew Walder observes, market reforms have not only accentuated the conflict between labour and management, they have also greatly weakened the grassroots Party institutions which were previously so instrumental in the suppression of shop-floor conflicts and collective action.⁶⁷ If the demand by workers for state protection is chronically unmet and their efforts at self-defence are repeatedly frustrated, it is entirely conceivable that their anger against management would be increasingly redirected against the state. Conversely, if the influence of private capital continues to increase and worker discontent reaches a level deemed threatening to regime stability, it is also conceivable that the state may intervene on labour's behalf or even relax the prohibition against independent organisation, if only to channel labour activism away from the regime.

In addition, the ability of apparently segmented, vertically structured civil society to integrate horizontally should not be underestimated. In the absence of adequate channels of political participation, the presence of any civic associations may give voice to the expression of popular demands, no matter how narrow their original intents. The recent trend among many rural associations (which have been generally limited to local, product-specific bodies)

⁶⁵ Wang Xu, *Mutual Empowerment of State and Peasantry*.

⁶⁶ Dietrich Rueschemeyer, *et al.*, *Capitalist Development and Democracy*, p. 41.

⁶⁷ Andrew Walder, "Workers, Managers, and the State", in *The Individual and the State in China*, ed. Brian Hook (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

to link up and push for broader policy concessions is one indication of this potential.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, it must be recognised that working class activism is presently sporadic and isolated, tending more towards passive resistance than active participation. Deprived of broad-based organisation and coherent intellectual leadership, the political power of the working classes remains largely dormant. However, as the Latin American experience demonstrates, the organisational strength of the working classes is in fact crucial to the strength and long-term stability of democracies. While it may be possible to exclude the working classes from initial political liberalisation, the sustained defence of political liberties requires the full engagement of their support. This is not to say that the stance of the working classes is necessarily innately pro-democratic. The key issue here is the balance of class power — between the coercive powers of the dominant class and the societal powers of the subordinate classes, between the economic power of the bourgeoisie and the organisational power of the working classes. Without this balance of power there can be no democracy, only hegemony.

Concluding Remarks

The notion of civil society as the champion of popular liberties asserting the democratic aspirations of the masses against authoritarian hegemony is a misleading, if romantic, one. As a catalyst of autonomous social mobilisation, civil society is often a precursor of democracy, but democracy is by no means the inevitable end product of every process civil society set in motion. Gordon White *et al.* were correct in cautioning that in the headlong pursuit of narrow group interests, civil society may well prove to be an obstacle to democratisation.⁶⁹ Defined as the autonomous association of societal actors for the pursuit of self-defined objectives, civil society is entirely compatible with anti-democratic, “maximalist” tendencies and may in fact carry within it the seeds of its own destruction. Sheri Berman, for example, has cogently demonstrated the role of civil society in the Nazis’ rise to power.⁷⁰ For civil society to be effective as a bridgehead to polyarchy, it must possess certain characteristics which lend themselves to the cultivation of democratic values and norms of behaviour. A

⁶⁸ See for example, Bruce Gilley, “A Plot for the Farmers”, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 2 Aug. 2001.

⁶⁹ White, Howell and Shang, *In Search of Civil Society*, pp. 215–8.

⁷⁰ Sheri Berman, “Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic”, *World Politics* 49, no. 3 (Apr. 1997).

high degree of pluralism, a level of density sufficient to allow cross-cutting affiliations and the democratic orientation of component groups are some of the features that distinguish a democratic civil society.⁷¹

Although much scholarly attention has been rightly focused on the strengthening of civil society, the importance of state autonomy should not be overlooked. While civil society should be strong enough to resist state domination, it should not be so strong as to overwhelm the state, as the state must retain sufficient autonomy to mediate among competing interest groups. As Larry Diamond pointed out, a habitual defiance of authority cultivated over a long history of resistance to a corrupt, decadent state is just as dangerous to the stability of democratic regimes as it is to the survival of authoritarian ones.⁷² At the same time, the state should not be so strong as to be able to brush aside any societal pressure, but nor should it be so weak as to be susceptible to capture by any particular class interest. Polyarchy is made possible by the balance of state autonomy against the participatory pressures of society.

With regard to contemporary China, given the overwhelming strength of the state and glaring lack of an effective system of checks-and-balances against arbitrary state power, the discussion has been primarily concerned with the development of civic power as a counterweight against state hegemony. Within that context, societal penetration that fragments the cohesiveness of state power may strengthen society *vis-à-vis* the state, even if societal interests do not operate in direct opposition to the state. At present, the economic resources at the bourgeoisie's disposal provide them with increasing access to various informal channels of participation. While these channels do serve to promote elite societal interests to various extents, they also reduce the incentive for the bourgeoisie to demand institutionalised participation.

On the other hand, the working classes have seen a steady erosion of their social status over the past decade, and the regime's half-hearted attempts at protecting their welfare have failed to arrest the decline. Lacking the wealth to purchase access to informal channels of participation, they have little recourse except the power of collective action. As a result, the working classes carry far greater potential for generating more direct participatory pressures, as evinced by labour's prominent role in the 1989 Tiananmen Square movement. If the students' conception of democracy was frequently vague, the workers' understanding of

⁷¹ Larry Diamond, "Toward Democratic Consolidation", *Journal of Democracy* 5 (Jul. 1994): 4-17.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.15.

democracy was unwaveringly concrete. They wanted their own autonomous labour union to represent their interests at the national level, and they wanted a say in the making of policies that affected workers.

Of great interest to the prospects of political liberalisation is the impact of societal penetration on the coercive capacity of the state. At this time very little is known about the factors that determine the regime's capacity for social control, especially at the level of the local state. Is a more fragmented state more closely aligned to the interests of the bourgeois elite, and if so, how does that alliance affect the state's capacity for responding to social unrest? What factors determine the local state's choice of strategy in dealing with participatory pressures, and are those the same factors that determine the central state's strategy? Will the bourgeois view the political action of the working classes as conducive to furthering their own interests, or will they be unremittingly hostile to any working class mobilisation? These are some of the questions we must answer for a proper understanding of civil society's impact on Chinese political development.

The increasing reliance on economic performance as the primary basis of regime legitimacy is a feature common to most modern authoritarian regimes. As the history of the past two decades illustrates, however, economism as a basis of legitimacy is no more than a form of political bribery and is thus inherently unstable and temporary. It is worth noting that survey evidence from South Korea around the time of transition suggests that popular support for the regime was determined almost entirely by satisfaction with political and social policies, while satisfaction with the economy had no significant effect.⁷³ Perhaps alarmed by the fall of authoritarian regimes elsewhere, the current Chinese leadership has tenaciously stamped out any indications of truly autonomous social mobilisation. One wonders though — and perhaps the men in Zhongnanhai wonder as well — how long the floodgates of democracy can be held back, in a world where democracy is an internationally accepted ideal, where authoritarian dictatorships are falling one after another by the wayside, where a democratic system of government is becoming a basic prerequisite for full membership in the community of modern nations.

Power, in the memorable words of Karl Deutsch, is the ability to afford not to learn.⁷⁴ As the power of the Party-state slowly seeps away, the oligarchs of China may soon find themselves in a position of having to learn.

⁷³ Park Chong-Min, "Authoritarian Rule in South Korea: Political Support and Governmental Performance", *Asian Survey* 31, no. 8 (Aug. 1991).

⁷⁴ Karl Deutsch, *The Nerves of Government* (New York: Free Press, 1966), p. 111.