This article examines the broad question of how countries improve governance—the process whereby the government effectively meets citizen needs—through analysis of Chinese governance reforms and the role played by civil society. This definition of governance focuses first on the mechanism which allows the government to understand citizen needs, and secondly on the mechanism by which the government effectively meets those needs. Given this definition, better governance rests heavily on pluralism and accountability in the policy process. Pluralism means that multiple voices are allowed in the policy process, which increases the government’s understanding of citizen needs. Accountability creates the need for government to answer to horizontal agencies or broader societal actors regarding decisions and spending, generating more emphasis on efficiently and effectively meeting citizen needs. Because many problems such as corruption, fiscal inefficiency, ineffective policy making and implementation are typically ascribed to poor governance, and desired outcomes such as economic growth, social stability, and civic participation are attributed to good governance, one would assume that scholars know a good deal about achieving good governance. However, while analyses of governance are increasingly more nuanced, we do not understand why variation in effective governance exists across time and across countries.¹

Traditionally, scholars use a dichotomous regime-type approach to explain how countries develop the most effective government system for meeting citizen needs.² According to these arguments, democracies have better governance than non-democracies due to mechanisms of accountability like elections, which ensure that citizen needs are met or there is a corresponding change in office-holders. While this mechanism of accountability through elections provides a theory as to why democracies might have better governance, many scholars argue that this mechanism is too indirect and empirical work does not support the argument that voters use

¹ For example, the World Bank’s government effectiveness measure attempts to quantify governance quality by evaluating the quality of public services, the quality of the civil service and the degree of its independence from political pressures, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, and the credibility of the government’s commitment to such policies. Tremendous variation exists across regime type, with India scoring 54 percent and Morocco scoring 56.4 percent in 2006, and substantial variation also exists over time.

elections to promote accountability. Recognizing the limitations of simple regime-type explanations in specifying an adequate causal mechanism, several scholars expanded their analyses to specific institutions inside of all regimes, such as legal institutions or autonomous central banks. While these more recent analyses attempt to identify causal mechanisms in addition to that of regime type, they still cannot explain variation in governance outcomes inside of one type of regime (democracies) or across countries with similar formal institutions.

The inability to explain this variance illustrates that a gap remains in our understanding of the specific causal mechanisms which achieve better governance. To continue to build on the advances made by past research, I contend that we need to expand our analyses to informal institutions—civil society—across all regime types through an examination of the interaction between civil society and state specifically in non-democracies. Examining the role of informal institutions allows for the analysis of variation in governance in countries with similar formal institutions or within the same country over time. Douglass North claims that in some instances “the formal rules change, but the informal constraints do not. In consequence, there develops an ongoing tension between informal constraints and new formal rules.” While I contend that the role played by civil society explains much of the variation in better governance across and within regime types, this analysis does not privilege formal institutions. As Kellee Tsai emphasizes, “the analytic shortcoming of this [privileging formal institutions], however, is that informal institutions effectively become residual variables that are expected to bear the explanatory slack whenever formal institutions can no longer account for the variation in outcomes.” I argue that both informal and formal institutions interact to mutually shape outcomes, and that this analysis will better serve to examine causal mechanisms. Additionally, examining this interaction in non-

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democracies helps to deepen our understanding of governance and the specific mechanisms which account for variation within and across regime type.

Thus I propose to extend analysis on good governance to informal institutions such as civil society. Civil society is an informal institution because while the norms and networks comprising civil society constrain individual behavior, this is not a codified institution in most regimes, especially in non-democracies. While other scholars such as Robert Putnam have also discussed the role of civil society in achieving good governance, they have done this in the dichotomous regime-type tradition of only examining democracies. This analysis examines the role of civil society organizations in encouraging better governance in China. Through fieldwork completed in three prefectures in Yunnan province in 2007-2008, I find that civil society organizations in China increasingly create the pluralism and accountability upon which good governance depends. Through the ability of these organizations to transmit credible information to local government about societal interests and to transmit information to society and higher levels of government about local officials’ reputation and behavior, they facilitate more pluralism and accountability in the policy process at the local level. While institutional change in China created decreasing local-state capacity and a legitimate public sphere for service delivery by civil society, these organizations use a partnership strategy which creates opportunities to access a closed policy process and generate a measure of transparency that allows for accountability.

This analysis of informal institutions in a non-democracy advances our understanding of the variation in governance outcomes, which is vital due to the important welfare and distributional outcomes for society. Governance impacts on many areas including development, corruption, public-goods provision, citizen trust and political participation. Governance is simultaneously responsible for predatory and developmental states, corrupt and clean states, and strong and weak states, which makes achieving good governance a vital area of research. Additionally, this research allows us to move to an action-based understanding of civil society, which better corresponds with civil society activity in non-democracies. Past analyses privilege democracies

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9 Please see appendix for a discussion of case selection.
in understanding both good governance and civil society, this analysis seeks to focus on the causal mechanisms in common between democracies and non-democracies allowing a better understanding of the interaction between formal and informal institutions.

**Governance in China: Reforming Toward Accountability**

Given China’s governance challenges in the post-reform era—ranging from corruption, inefficient investment and spending, and principal-agent problems with local governments—many scholars, policy analysts, and even Chinese government officials argue that China is currently in a governance crisis.\(^\text{10}\) China responded initially in the late 1990s to this crisis in two ways: first, by implementing village-level elections; and second, by streamlining government institutions. However, despite these formal institutional reforms, significant variation in governance quality continues to exist across time, provinces, and municipalities within the same province. For example, using the World Bank’s government effectiveness index, China ranges from 48.3 percent in 1998 to 60.2 percent in 2002 as indicated in the chart below. This variation illustrates the continuing variation in governance regardless of the continuity of formal institutions: While China enacted institutional reform in 1998, we see that even well into the 2000s variation in governance quality continues to exist.

![World Bank’s Government Effectiveness Measure for China](image)

Thus, I contend that we need to examine how informal institutions such as civil society organizations, which are left out of most analyses of governance, affect governance across

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regime types. A hard case for this analysis is China. All non-democracies, but especially communist regimes due to state corporatism models of social participation, are stereotypically conceived of as having powerful states and silent societies. Thus China provides an opportunity to advance theories of governance and civil society.

Traditionally Chinese views of governance were heavily influenced by Confucius (Kong Zi), where the relationship between an official and citizen is one of parental authority (fumuguan 父母官), where parents (governments) were responsible for the future development of children (citizens/subjects) and their livelihood.\(^\text{11}\) Thus government officials were not accountable for their decisions to society but were responsible for providing a good example of morality. Many of these beliefs were incorporated into Mao Zedong’s beliefs of communism, where officials served as the vanguard of the people to inspire them through good examples to achieve national goals.\(^\text{12}\) Accountability was also still only an “upward” concept, with officials answering for their decisions to the Party.

Since the reform era began in 1979, problems with governance in China began to capture the attention of scholars and policy makers as an important variable in sustaining China’s economic achievements and the prospects for deepening economic reform.\(^\text{13}\) As the economy expanded, the lack of effective channels for relaying the concerns and views of new socio-economic groups to the state means that the Party became increasingly out of touch with the changing needs of society and unable to negotiate and balance an increasingly diverse range of interests.\(^\text{14}\) These governance challenges initiated a new approach to governance, which is especially concerned with economic governance that the state believes requires a more limited government (youxian zhengfu 有限政府). As explained below, this new focus on governance introduces the idea of

\(^{11}\) Yu Keping, “The Emerging of China’s Civil Society and Its Significance to Governance,” Focus Asien 8, 11 April 2001: While I do not have the space here to conduct an in-depth analysis of traditional Chinese views of governance, most historians note the influence of Confucius on accountability taking the form of being responsible for moral action. As Yu Keping describes, “In China’s traditional political culture, through political behaviors superiors set an important example for the inferiors. Such Chinese idioms as “the inferiors imitate the superiors”, “setting a good example with good conduct”, “being a paragon of virtue and learning” and “playing an exemplary role” express the meaning.”


\(^{14}\) Howell, 231.
intermediary social organizations assisting the government with social welfare, and also the concept of accountability at least in a bureaucratic quality sense. Since the 1980s, the state has pursued both village-level elections and institutional reform as the main strategies for achieving better governance (shanzheng 善政); however, due to lack of space, I only briefly describe the results of village-level elections before concentrating on the institutional reforms which created, I argue, legitimate space in the public sphere for civil society activity.

In order to deal with concerns about cadre quality, corruption and principle-agent problems between the central and local-level governments, the central government promulgated the 1998 Organic Law on Village-Level Elections. While local-level experimentation had been occurring for a number of years, this legislation required that all villages move toward an election rather than appointment system for the position of village head. The increasing amount of research conducted on village elections reveals mixed outcomes, but many studies do find increased government responsiveness to citizens’ needs. However, despite attempts to widen the scope of elections to the township and county levels due to the (limited) success of village elections, the central government has not been willing to endorse such an expansion which limits the effectiveness of this reform to the village level.

In conjunction with village-level elections, the central government has vigorously pursued institutional reform at all levels, especially the streamlining and downsizing of central agencies and local governments. As Dali Yang explains in his thorough analysis of the 1998 reforms, contrary to prevailing predictions and continuing problems with accountability and transparency, China has made substantial progress in improving the institutional framework for economic governance. Yang contends that the Chinese leadership reformed by streamlining government, divesting government of its businesses, strengthening the fiscal and regulatory capacity of

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17 When I discuss “local” government, I am referring to the aggregate of the four levels of local government: the provinces (autonomous regions and centrally administered municipalities), cities and prefectures, counties and townships.
economic governance, disciplining bureaucrats through public management reforms, curbing corruption and creating more transparency. In fact, the 1998 government restructuring program reduced the number of central government ministries from 40 to 29, with staff size trimmed by nearly half; and Party organizations also were downsized, as were 21 mass organizations including the All China Federation of Trade Unions, the Chinese Communist Youth League, and the All China Women’s Federation who all cut their staffing size by 25 percent in 2001.\footnote{Yang, 37.} The public management reforms sought to promote professionalization, less hiring discretion, and increased transparency and public service ethic in the civil service. The goal, as Former Personnel Minister Song Defu states, is that “government civil servants should acquire the mentality of serving taxpayers.”\footnote{Cited in Yang, 172.} In complement to institutional restructuring and downsizing, the central government initiated the “small state-big society” reforms in the late 1980s. This initiative sought to redefine the state’s role in governance, especially economic governance, as a limited regulatory role.

**Results of Reform—Creating a Limited Public Sphere and Increased Civil Society Capacity**

These reforms fundamentally alter the concept of governance from a traditional parental relationship between government and society to one of a more limited and accountable government. In this section, I contend that institutional reforms in China are also generating a limited public sphere and increased capacity for civil society activity through three interrelated ways—creating weaker local government, unfunded mandates for local government, and competitive promotions for local officials. I explore each in turn, and then discuss how international funding and uncertainty around the role of the state in a “socialist market” system increase both the capacity and legitimacy of civil society organizations.

Institutional streamlining purposively resulted in local government downsizing, which reduces local capacity. As funding and staffing levels decrease, local government must accomplish its goals with fewer resources. In addition to decreasing capacity, local government responsibilities dramatically increased through decentralization of service delivery beginning in the 1980s.\footnote{Deborah Davis, “Chinese Social Welfare: Policies and Outcomes,” *The China Quarterly* 119, September 1989: 577-597.} Decentralization devolved responsibility for public policy and spending to lower levels of
government, which also opened new channels for groups to access embedded decision makers. While responsibility was devolved, in many cases funding decisions were not, creating a common problem within decentralized systems of unfunded mandates, where local governments were responsible for certain services yet unable to fund delivery through formal budgets.\textsuperscript{22} Thus, simultaneously as local governments must provide increased welfare services without a substantial increase in transfers from the central government, they also suffer decreased capacity through downsizing. This confluence of institutional reforms creates a space for civil society organizations to take over many aspects of service delivery formerly controlled by the local state.

In addition to the creation of a limited public sphere by the decreasing capacity of the local state coupled with increasing responsibilities, the combination of domestic institutional reform and the international associational revolution generates increasing capacity for civil society organizations. Beginning in the 1990s, globalization and the worldwide “associational revolution” increased the flow of grant money and the presence of INGOs in China.\textsuperscript{23} These INGOs and foundations engaged in community building projects with the aim of creating high-capacity domestic grass-roots groups. Domestic groups increasingly can access international funding, especially as development agencies have also shifted focus on funding large central government projects to funding more bottom-up groups associated with local governments and NGOs.\textsuperscript{24} Although this shift was largely in response to corruption at central level, not necessarily the successes of grass-roots development, many agencies nevertheless increased funding to local NGO projects.\textsuperscript{25} Thus, the decreasing capacity of local government corresponded with increased international funding to groups at the local level, both of which have allowed civil society groups to become more active in service delivery and advocacy.

\textsuperscript{23} Lester Salamon, The John Hopkins Comparative Non-Profit Program.
Additionally, domestic institutional reforms to strengthen mechanisms of horizontal accountability produce a more competitive political environment for local cadres.\textsuperscript{26} For example, Kevin O’Brien finds that both the National People’s Congress (NPC) and Local People’s Congresses (LPCs) have regained power guaranteed to them under the constitution in the mid-1990s.\textsuperscript{27} This growing power can be seen through the appointment and budgeting processes, where local legislatures vote down nominations and budgets. In addition to the strengthening of these institutions, the Party also introduced more competition to the personnel-selection process through stipulating eight steps by which the competitive personnel selection process should be managed, including announcement of available positions, open registration, examination of candidate qualifications, written examination, speech and interview, democratic opinion survey, Party evaluation, and final appointment.\textsuperscript{28} The public notice system has prompted party leaders to be more diligent in selecting nominees, at least to avoid public embarrassment.\textsuperscript{29} Reforms strengthening horizontal accountability provide formal avenues, in addition to the letters and visits complaint system, for civil society organizations to pursue limited forms of accountability. In fact, Dali Yang argues that while the Party has made much more progress toward the goal of limited government than accountability, he acknowledges that we do see increasing transparency that helps empower the interested public to hold bureaucrats to their words and standards.\textsuperscript{30} The increase in channels of horizontal accountability and transparency creates more capacity and legitimacy for civil society organizations to demand accountability from local governments.

This increasing space and capacity, while still limited, correspond with repeated calls for more accountability and streamlining of government from the central government.\textsuperscript{31} To increase accountability, Wen Jiabao stated that the checks on government authority need to be strengthened through further streamlining of agencies and creating new “super-ministries,” and

\textsuperscript{26} Guillermo O'Donnell, “Horizontal Accountability in New Democracies,” Andreas Schedler, Larry Diamond, and Marc Platten, eds., The Self-Restraining State: Power and Accountability in New Democracies, Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999: 29-51, defines horizontal accountability as the legal empowerment of some state agencies to oversee and even take legal action against other state agencies.


\textsuperscript{28} This law “Suggestions for Using Competition for Positions in Party and Government Agencies” was codified in 1998.

\textsuperscript{29} Yang, 181.

\textsuperscript{30} Yang, 169.

\textsuperscript{31} “You Have Permission to Think Freely,” The Economist, 6 March 2008.
that social organizations must play a role in “voicing the concerns of the people.”

Wen Jiabao’s statement advances the central government’s continuing focus on “small state-big society” reforms. I contend that the “small state-big society” debate between elites at both the central and local levels illustrates Knightian uncertainty, where the concept of the proper role of the state in a market economy is in flux. Given that a “socialist-market economy” is a new concept, no one can clearly define what the appropriate role of the state is in this new model. While it clearly is not the same role that existed under a centrally planned system, it is also clearly not a laissez-faire model. Some elites believe the role should be an expansive one, with the state mitigating undesirable market consequences such as income inequality; while others believe the state should pursue a limited role of simply refereeing or regulating the market and allow social actors to undertake collective and individual action.

While this uncertainty characterized much of the 1990s, the scope was originally limited to the question of the proper role of the state in relation to private enterprise. In the last eight years, this scope has expanded to re-envisioning the proper role of the state in relation to society. Due to this period of Knightian uncertainty, governmental and societal actors are uncertain of their goals and thus engage in a process of experimentation at the local level regarding the appropriate role for and relationship between civil society and the local state.

Therefore, in addition to the weakening of the local state, increasing unfunded mandates and increasing competitive promotion process, the fundamental questioning of the proper role of the state through market-based institutional reforms creates space for civil society activity in areas formerly controlled by either the central or local state. In fact, Yang argues that as the government began to focus its energies on a smaller number of major functions, especially the

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32 A book published late last year by a group of scholars, including several from the Party's academy for senior officials, outlines steps for political reform, such as turning the NPC/LPCs and court system into “modern power balance mechanisms” by 2016 and creating a “modern civil society” by 2020.

33 Blythe defines change under Knightian uncertainty as situations regarded by contemporary agents as unique events where the agents are unsure as to what their interests actually are, let alone how to realize them. See Mark Blythe, Great Transformations - Economic Ideas and Institutional Change in the Twentieth Century, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.


provision of public goods and infrastructure, more room for non-governmental organizations was created, ranging from neighborhood committees to industrial associations and professional organizations. Increasingly civil society organizations expand the space available to act politically by capitalizing on the uncertainty by central and local government over the proper role of a limited government in a market economy. While this analysis does not question the still powerful status of both the central and local state in China, the “limited government” and “small state-big society” reforms have created legitimate space for civil society organizations to act in political ways—delivering services, advocating policies, and exercising vertical accountability. While this space is contested across regions, the environment of decreasing local state capacity, increasing civil society capacity, and ambiguity of what roles belong to the state versus society promote the ability of civil society to increase pluralism and accountability at the local level.

Civil Society in China: Challenging Habermasian Autonomy with an Action-Based Model

Due to space limitations, I only briefly outline the Habermasian model and past debates on civil society in China (gongminshehui 公民社会). Increasing participation in social groups in China and the success attributed to civil society movements in the collapse of communism in Eastern and Central Europe led many China scholars to investigate civil society’s emergence in the early 1990s. These examinations were based on a model of civil society developed by Jürgen Habermas, positing a public sphere autonomous from the state and composed of groups of voluntary association. Habermas contends that establishing this ideal-type of civil society based on the historical experiences of Western Europe is important as a heuristic for understanding state-society relations. The key criterion for this idealized civil society, one that plays an oppositional role to the state and fosters democracy, is that the associations composing civil society must be autonomous from the state. If civil society is not autonomous, it cannot allow the democratic will-formation for legitimizing or opposing state action. A public sphere of un-coerced action is necessary for the development of social trust upon which collective action rests. The majority of these scholars concluded that associations did exist in China that sometimes served to oppose the state, but these associations did not look like Habermas’ model

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36 Yang, 57.
39 Putnam.
in that they were not autonomous. In fact, in 1996, a high official in the Ministry of Civil Affairs estimated that less than 50 percent of groups were self-organized, self-supported, and self-governed. Similarly, Chinese and Western analysis of the late 1990s based on autonomy from the state suggested that the majority of groups are semi-governmental.

Whereas past research largely found little autonomy from the state, recent research emphasizes the variation in autonomy in both mass and grass-roots organizations. Several scholars find that as the market transitions from centrally planned to market-based, workers in mass organizations like the Labor Federation have begun to not only “articulate its interests vis-à-vis the state, but their individual rights vis-à-vis the group.” The mass organizations have gradually shifted from state corporatism to a role of social representation, leading many to the conclusion that this is an area of emerging civil society in China. Mass organizations are legally dependent on the state, while funding and issue/project decisions are increasingly more independent, leading to a more dynamic role for these organization than imagined under the state corporatism model. In addition to the mass organizations structured by the government, many self-organized or grass-roots associations exist to promote members’ interests in business, professional and social realms. There is great variation in the legal status of these associations, many of them are registered as social organizations (minjian zuzhi 民间组织) with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, but many of them are unofficially associated with a university or operate informally. Howell contends that since the early 1990s, the creation of new forms of associations such as networks,

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42 F. Li, Jingiaojiao de geming, Zhongguo dangdai shimin shehui [A silent revolution: China’s contemporary civil society], Hong Kong: Mirror Publishing House1998, and J. Fisher, Nongovernment: NGOs and the Political Development of the Third World, West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1998, who both use autonomy as a key feature of the nongovernmental sector believe China has only a handful of true NGOs.
centers, user groups, and projects can bypass the need for registration; however, the group’s intentions still matter—if the group appears to have political goals the state will repress the group, but if the group appears beneficial local officials especially will cast a blind eye towards registration.\textsuperscript{45} Bypassing the registration system allows for slightly more autonomy, but the boundaries of this space are fragile and contested.

Besides variation in legal autonomy, many groups rely on a diversity of funding, such as grants from INGOs, foundations, international organizations, foreign governments and businesses, and the Chinese government. This diversity of funding suggests that civil society organizations have some autonomy from the state. For example, recent research highlights that private business associations (\textit{shanghi} 商会) are funded through membership dues and independently select issues to advance. Despite past analyses which questioned the ability of these groups to sustain collective action due to the lack of common identity among entrepreneurs, recently Scott Kennedy finds that membership in these groups is increasingly creating a common identity.\textsuperscript{46} Kennedy argues that economic reforms created incentives for businesspeople to defend their interests, often by joining associations, but also by direct lobbying. Kennedy finds that these associations are primarily voluntary, increasingly financially independent, not ordered hierarchically, and not unchallenged representatives of certain interests.\textsuperscript{47} While Kennedy finds that these groups secure their own funding and develop their own issue agendas, he argues that a focus on civil society as autonomous from the state privileges separation as being more important than access to challenge the state, as well as privileging organized political action.

Similarly cultural organizations in China, one of the largest growing group categories, are composed of voluntary membership depending in large part on dues or donations. This category consists of groups organized to protect and promote cultural practices such as ethnic music, ethnic history/tradition, religion, traditional music or literature, and martial arts. These groups are increasingly popular, and are autonomous from the government although in some instances

\textsuperscript{45} Howell, 151.  
\textsuperscript{47} Kennedy, 44.
they might receive funding for a particular project from the local government. Lily Tsai recently explored how these groups actively seek to provide public goods and services to community members, using embedded relationships such as kinship ties. As recent research illustrates, civil society in China—NGOs, private business associations and cultural groups—exercise varying degrees of autonomy through registration status, funding sources and in project decisions.

In the past, analyses of civil society in China often relied on this dichotomous understanding of societal autonomy—civil society must either be completely autonomous similar to the Habermasian model, or completely co-opted similar to the state corporatism model. While many scholars contend that state corporatism no longer best describes Chinese state-society relationship, just as many scholars also contend that Chinese state-society relationships also do not fit into a Habermasian model. This leaves us with an obvious dilemma which is that using group autonomy to define the model of state-society relationships is inconclusive when group autonomy varies greatly. As described in the preceding section, both mass organizations and grass-roots organizations vary on their level of autonomy from the state, whether measured legally, by funding or by project decisions/issue positions. This variance is not just seen in China, but also around the world. In fact, Lester Saloman's finds most Western governments fund NGOs at high levels—Western European NGOs receive 56 percent of their funding from the state.

Other scholars also have reservations about the use of autonomy to delineate state-society relationships. For example, many scholars question the notion that there exists a “bright line” dividing state and society; in fact, as Neera Chandhoke argues, this line is blurred and dynamic.

Thus the dichotomy between state and society is over idealized and in reality a bright line separating state from society does not exist, but instead state and society overlap. For example, Timothy Brook argues that civil society in China should be thought of as a spatial interaction between state and society, not as something between or autonomous from either.\textsuperscript{52} Alison Jaggar agrees with this conception, and argues that civil society is “enmeshed with the state…in a complex, changing and co-dependent web of relationships that are both oppositional and symbiotic.”\textsuperscript{53} Michael Walzer goes as far as to reject the idea that civil society can exist without the state, saying “the state frames civil society and occupies space within it. It fixes the boundary conditions and the basic rules of all associational activity. It compels association members to think about a common good beyond their own conceptions of the good life.”\textsuperscript{54} Given the necessity of an interacting and overlapping state-society relationship, Gordon White argues “in brief, the extent to which a specific social organization embodies the defining qualities of ‘civil society’—autonomy, separation and voluntariness—is a question of degree rather than either/or.”\textsuperscript{55} This overlap implies the need for a more interactive approach to understanding state-civil society relationships. Additionally, the use of an oppositional model for state-society relationship overlooks the positive interaction potentially found in more dynamic model. Using this conception, the relationship is one that is shifting, contested and periodically accommodating or oppositional depending on the issue. For example, Philip Huang envisions a “third realm” between state and society where a civil society exists that is born of the interaction of the two.\textsuperscript{56} In fact, full autonomy might not be necessary for associations to play an oppositional role, simply ‘relative autonomy.’\textsuperscript{57} A focus on state-civil society autonomy disregard that this is a dynamic space where boundaries might shift, and both society and the state have influence.

\textsuperscript{55}Philip Huang, “’Public Sphere’/’Civil Society’ in China?: The Third Realm Between State and Society,” \textit{Modern China} 19, April 1993: 216-240.
This concentration on autonomy also distracts us from the theoretical reason behind the need for autonomy. Autonomy from the state allows civil society to develop a democratic will which then can legitimatize or oppose state action. This conception of civil society implicitly emphasizes the positive role of these groups; however, many theorists find that civil society is not inherently good or democratizing. In fact, despite the strong theoretical and empirical linkage between civil society and democracy in Europe and the US, recently many scholars have observed that different types of associations create different effects. For example, as Frank Trentmann finds, historically “plurality and inequality, tolerance and discrimination went hand in hand in associational life.”

Civil society can be illiberal and work against the common good even if the groups are autonomous, voluntary and horizontally organized. An obvious group representing “bad” civil society is a white supremacist group. Indeed, Habermas’ model for civil society is drawn from an extremely exclusive perspective: in his historical model both women and the poor were excluded from participation in the public sphere. As Jean-Francois Bayart argues in the African context, “The advance of a civil society which does not necessarily contain the democratic ideal does not in itself ensure the democratization of the political system.”

Therefore, instead of focusing on autonomy to understand both state-society relationships and the role of civil society in the state, I argue that a more action-based approach would allow us to analyze the dynamic interaction between state and society as well as examine varying outcomes of civil society activity.

Habermas’ model concentrates on two aspects of civil society—state-society relationship and the role of civil society. As explained above, this model as it has been elaborated by other Western theorists posits an oppositional relationship between state and society, and the role of civil society in acting in the public sphere to generate a democratic will and, if necessary, to oppose the state to attain this will. Chinese civil society does not fit this model well, but rather than debating the usefulness in imposing a model from one historical context on another or

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categorizing all civil society in China as not in fact being a civil society, I want to use the empirical richness of past research and my field research in China to re-envision civil society as an action-based category. What I mean by this is that associational activity in China can help us develop a new conception of civil society that can create social trust, facilitate collective action, and encourage citizen participation in politics. The primary differences between an action-based definition of civil society and a Habermasian conception is first that the state-society relationship is theorized to be dynamic and contested, thus not dependent on autonomy as the primary determinant of this relationship but rather allowing for a relational view that includes varying degrees of partnership and collaboration. Second, an action-based definition of civil society focuses on the ability of civil society organizations to create social trust, collective action and civic participation. This definition allows us to move away from a model of autonomous and contentious state-society relationships that does not fit either the developed or developing world well, toward a model of state-society collaboration that enables civil society to generate better governance and welfare outcomes.

Local State-Civil Society Synergy in Yunnan Province
In this section I first describe the effect of institutional changes in Yunnan province, then examine how and why civil society organizations choose to partner with local government, finally analyzing the results of this partnership model in three prefectures in Yunnan. These three prefectures share the same formal institutional structure but differ on the type of civil society groups prevalent in each area. This variation allows us to examine why different types of groups with dissimilar resources and relationships with the government pursue a similar partnership strategy. Through this strategy, groups play an indirect role in increasing pluralism and accountability in local policy in these three prefectures.

As described previously, institutional changes helped create a legitimate space for civil society groups. As the central government enforced edicts requiring local government streamlining beginning in 1999, the size of local government in Yunnan shrunk with a corresponding decrease

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63 See the appendix for an explanation of case selection.
in capacity. Additionally, many new responsibilities were devolved from the central government without supplementary funding, creating a problem of unfunded mandates. For example, Howell argues that as the state-owned enterprise system of welfare disintegrated, social intermediaries became necessary to provide health and other welfare services and absorb the unemployed workers. In this environment, local governments needed to provide higher levels of goods and services with less staff and budget. The inability of the local government to provide these goods and services created space for the functioning of civil society groups focused on service delivery. This decrease in local state capacity in Yunnan corresponded with an increase in the capacity of civil society organizations.

Beginning in the early 1990s, many funding agencies expanded their reach to local NGOs and INGOs began to work extensively in China, often subcontracting or partnering with local groups on projects. These funding sources explicitly excluded local governments in China but actively sought to fund projects from NGOs. The World Bank and other larger international funding agencies, such as the Ford Foundation who is very active in China, also wanted to fund development through more bottom-up initiatives. As the local government lost capacity, local NGOs were gaining capacity and more importantly, had access to international resources from which the local state was excluded. Together this environment created limited space for the legitimate functioning of civil society groups in service delivery as well as limited capacity among these groups to undertake expanded projects.

As one interviewee in the rural area of Simao explained, “my organization’s role is service delivery—providing services that the government cannot provide. While government investment in health is increasing, the majority goes to the cities (80 percent of the funding serving 20 percent of the population).” Since the 1980s, many organizations broadly called non-governmental organizations (minjianzuzhi 民间组织; shehuituanti 社会团体; feizhengzuzhi 非政府组织) formed to deliver services and advocate for certain groups in society. These organizations seek to address the concerns of the rural poor, migrants, rural women and other vulnerable

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64 Howell, 144.
65 Interview with leader of professional association in healthcare, Simao, Yunnan, 2/8/07.
groups through service delivery, local capacity building, legal advocacy and policy advocacy. As illustrated below, increasingly we see an associational revolution in China.

**Registered Civil Society Organizations in China**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>NGO</th>
<th>Social Group</th>
<th>NPO</th>
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Although external events, such as central “small state-big society” reforms and the decentralization of policy-making and social-service delivery to ill-funded local government, created legitimate political space for social intermediaries in China, the activities of civil society organizations are expanding this space and creating a larger policy role for these groups. As China transitions from a communist state heavily involved in both the market and society into a “socialist capitalist” state that advocates “small state-big society,” this creates contestation around ideas of the proper role for this new type of state, as well as the proper role for society in this new system. Based on interviews with local government officials, heads of mass organizations, and leaders of NGOs and social groups in three prefectures in Yunnan province, I find that civil society-state relationships in China are dynamic, with civil society pursuing a strategy of “relative autonomy.” Groups prefer project/issue decision freedom, while needing government relationships to secure access to a closed policy process. Groups use partnering

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66 Statistics are drawn from the Ministry of Civil Affairs. Please note that NGO is the category under which all groups are registered, although there are subcategories of social group, non-profit organization and foundation. Also foundations and social groups were only separate categories after 2002.
strategies to secure this access, and play a large, if often informal, role in advocating certain types of public-service delivery, government spending, and policy decisions. Through these actions and due to their ability to transmit information in a non-transparent system, groups improve local government effectiveness and quality. Thus civil society activity in China leads us to develop new conceptions of what associational life needs to look like in order to accomplish the goals intended for civil society—creation of social trust, basis for collective action, and site of citizen participation in politics. Instead of focusing on autonomy to understand both state-society relationships and the role of civil society in the state, I argue that a more action-based approach would allow us to analyze the dynamic interaction between state and society as well as examine varying outcomes of civil society activity. Civil society in China assists in this reconceptualization because ideas about the role of civil society and the role of the state are in transition.

**Increasing Pluralism and Accountability through Public-Private Partnerships**

Civil society groups engage in both service delivery and policy advocacy; however, as lobbying is still an illegal activity in China, most groups indirectly advocate for policies. As one high-ranking government official explained, “social groups mostly play a service delivery role, and they have a small, but growing, influence on policy. But their influence is mostly through their role of cooperation and service delivery.” A plethora of groups exist in China delivering a diverse range of services from poverty alleviation, alternative energy, legal assistance, education for impoverished youth, AIDS prevention and care, and training in traditional music and arts.

The primary strategy used by most groups is to partner with the local government. Howell finds that cooperation between local government and groups is due to mutual recognition of comparative advantage—groups can more effectively work at the micro-level and government can increase outreach. As one of Howell’s interviewees from the Yunnan Reproductive Health Association states, “We need a government network, like the Women’s Federation, for this makes our work convenient. It helps us to organize a focus group discussion or visit households.

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67 Interview with high-ranking government official in Simao, Yunnan, 2/18/07.

So there is a cooperative relationship. If you go to a local place, the government can support us.”

This positive attitude toward state-civil society partnership reflects the idea that civil society groups complement rather than supplement the government; that by working together both can achieve their goals more effectively than by working separately. In appreciation of the complementary nature of civil society and the state, Peter Evans and Elinor Ostrom advocate a state-society synergy or public-private partnership model of development. This synergy includes the idea of coproduction, which is the process through which inputs used to produce a good or service are contributed by individuals who are not “in” the same organization. Coproduction creates opportunities for citizens to play an active role in producing public goods and services of consequence to them, thus improving the delivery of these goods.

Common ways for partnering with the government policy include research dissemination, demonstration of alternative models, and by conducting training courses for government leaders. One cadre from the Health Bureau agreed that the reason the government seeks to partner with NGOs is because they can provide the government with community networks, technology/specialized knowledge (training, new models, technology), and also can run pilots for the government to test new policy ideas. Most partnerships are project-based, but several groups also attempt to involve government officials by inviting them to participate in activities and meetings. As one interviewee explained, “the directors of most of the offices [NGOs] are retired cadres who now hold at least half-time jobs consisting of creating good guanxi (zhengfu guanxi gongzuo 政府关系工作).” In fact, as cadres legally must retire in their early 60 and are increasingly in good health during retirement, many retired cadres choose to join or start groups to utilize their ties in the community and government to accomplish tasks they were unable to finish prior to retirement. As one retired cadre explains, “When I retired I had the connections and knowledge to make a difference in my community, and the government could not easily provide this service due to lack of resources, so I started a grass-roots NGO.”

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69 Howell, 159.
71 Ostrom, 86.
72 Interview with health-based INGO, Kunming, Yunnan 6/6/2007; See also Howell, 160.
73 Interview with Health Bureau cadres, Kunming, Yunnan, 6/6/2007.
74 Interview with environmental INGO’s Chinese staff, Lijiang, Yunnan, 3/19/07.
75 Interview with retired Health Bureau cadre, Kunming, Yunnan, 5/6/2007.
institutionalized channels of participation and interest articulation, social groups utilize informal and indirect channels. While access to the policy process depends in large part on the ability of groups to create relationships with government officials, these relationships are not simply clientelism. These relationships, while possessing power asymmetries, are mutually beneficial while at the same time providing greater goods and services to the whole community. While individuals with government guanxi connections have better access, these relationships can be built over time through project partnership or by involving local officials in group activities. 76 Additionally, as many interviewees pointed out, guanxi connections to government officials helps secure access, but does not guarantee success. In fact, one cadre gave several examples where guanxi was not enough to secure success, but access to things such as resources or services the government cannot provide gave a group more influence than one with connections. 77

Local government officials choose to partner with civil society organizations primarily because these groups can help officials secure promotions. In an increasingly competitive promotion system, local officials must consistently attain performance goals in order to gain raises or promotions. The two most important goals are economic development and social order. 78 As local officials face declining capacity, partnerships with groups help bridge the resource gap. Civil society organizations help the government meet economic and social goals through running pilot programs, generating research and policies for the use of local officials, and acquiring international funding and resources to use for government projects. Social groups are able not only to assist local officials in meeting promotion goals, but also in transmitting reputational information downward to society and upwards to supervisors at the provincial level. Because these groups and local officials are embedded in their community, the ability of groups to transmit information about officials’ behavior and decisions downward to the rest of society and upwards to supervisors creates a feeling of accountability or responsibility for actions. 79 As formal avenues of complaint, such as the People’s Congresses, open to public participation and

76 Katherine Xin, and Jon L. Pearce, “Guanxi: Connections as Substitutes for Formal Institutional Support,” Academy of Management Journal 39, 1996: 1641-1658; guanxi is usually defined as a web of relationships.
77 Interviews with head of local NGO (3/31/2007) and government cadre (4/2/2007) in Lijiang, Yunnan.
as the promotion process becomes more competitive, negative information about local officials can lead to threats to job security and advancement as well as informal social sanctioning leading to the loss of voluntary policy enforcement among citizens. Thus this information can potentially affect officials’ possibilities of advancement through bad publicity or by not allowing them to meet the job performance goals in their annual reviews. For example, one interviewee argued that the influence of social groups is large, mostly due to their role in expressing society interests and providing services to the community. Because of these two roles, the government has an interest in listening and cooperating with these groups. Also, these groups can publicize the behavior of cadres through public opinion mobilization and/or complaints to higher levels of government. The interviewee gave an example of how a group of laid-off workers organized a protest outside the government offices using a retired official as their representative. Thus, in addition to local government officials depending on a good reputation in society to ensure voluntary compliance with rules, they also depend on a good reputation and performance record with their supervisors to secure a promotion in an increasingly competitive promotion system. As one government official points out, she feels that “cadres’ reputations are very important because reputation leads to the peoples’ trust which leads to cooperation. Cooperation helps a cadre meet their goals.”

Due to their ability to transmit information in a quick and credible way to large numbers of people, civil society groups generate a feeling of supervision and accountability that otherwise does not exist in a non-transparent government system with large principal-agent problems between the central and local state.

Civil society groups choose to partner with the local government to access a closed, non-transparent policy process and secure the long-term success of their programs. Through civil society-local state partnerships, groups use access to local officials to create trust regarding their intentions and to increase pluralism in the policy process. These groups seek to indirectly and informally advocate for certain policies on behalf of the often unheard voices of their constituents. Their ability to deliver services in partnership with the state does not signal cooption by the state, but instead is a purposeful strategy on behalf of these groups to access an otherwise closed policy process. Groups use their comparative advantage—international

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80 Interview with government cadre, Simao, Yunnan, 2/3/07.
81 Series of five interviews with government cadre in Simao, Yunnan, 2/16/07.
funding, volunteer networks, community trust and knowledge—to partner with an asymmetrically powerful state in order to expand their influence in an emerging public sphere. For example, one interviewee who simultaneously is the head of a private business association and a member of the Local People’s Congress, thinks that social groups still have little influence in government decision making, although this influence is growing. He argues that “especially for groups that have something to offer to the local government such as investment, development experience, etc, these groups have more influence, although much of it is informal.” In addition to the use of partnerships to access a closed policy process through indirect advocacy, groups seek to expand their projects and guarantee long-term sustainability of existing projects through local government assistance. The local government is able to implement pilot projects in multiple locations and codify successful projects in local rules and guidelines. Through the three case studies detailed below, I next examine the process of partnering to create trust between civil society organizations and the local state, increase pluralism through indirect advocacy, and increase accountability through information transmission.

**Lijiang Case—Partnering with the EPA**

Lijiang (丽江) is a prefecture located in northern Yunnan province comprised of Lijiang new and old city, as well as surrounding counties and townships. It is comparatively a smaller and poorer prefecture than other prefectures. While Lijiang contains a number of cultural groups desiring to protect traditional Naxi music, culture and indigenous knowledge, environmental groups are the most prevalent civil society organizations. Lijiang and its northern neighbor Tibet (Xizang 西藏) both contain biodiversity and water resources that domestic and international environmental groups deem of the utmost ecological importance. Many of the rivers flowing through and originating in Lijiang continue on to the rest of China and Southeast Asia. Therefore, Lijiang contains many environmental INGOs and domestic groups. In this case, I outline the interactions between an INGO, Lijiang’s Bureau of Environmental Protection, and several small domestic environmental groups to illustrate how partnerships generate trust between local state and civil society expanding the public sphere.

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83 Interview with the head of a private business association and a member of the Local People’s Congress, Simao, 2/9/2007.
84 Please see appendix for a description of Yunnan prefectures’ income and population.
The INGO began its operations in the late 1990s as a registered social group, and hired a retired cadre as its director. The director was able to use his connections in the local government and at the EPA to partner with the local state to initiate a number of pilot programs—ecotourism, alternative energy and conservation. While funding comes from the home office of the INGO, all projects are in partnership with the government, so the government does not supply direct funding but does provide half of the resources for these cooperative projects. In addition to partnering with the local EPA, this group also supports smaller environmental and cultural groups by outsourcing parts of projects. When asked why the local state partners with the group, staff described how the group always pursues cooperative, not independent projects, so thus has a good relationship with the government. Moreover, the group “does not ask for government funds but instead invests international money into Chinese projects, so the local government welcomes our assistance.” Additionally, the INGO arranges trips abroad for local cadres to see other environmental projects.

This collaborative relationship is effective in meeting goals both the local EPA and the INGO hold in common. One staff member stated that she “believes strongly that social groups are increasingly having more influence.” She pointed to an example of the local EPA asks the group’s opinion about environmental decisions, and even for help in drafting increasingly technical local environmental laws. When asked why this INGO has influence in local policy, she argued that it is because of the “trust between the group and the local government—trust earned through cooperation.” However, she also stated that this influence is also due to the ability of the INGO to access international money and expertise to help complete the government’s projects, and its ability to help local cadres promote their reputation above and below them—primarily by taking credit for the successful pilot projects run by the INGO. Thus, partnering with the local EPA increases the space in which this INGO runs projects and indirectly advocates for its interests. The trust between this group and the EPA allows for a greater role in influencing policy outcomes, but also increases the size of the public sphere. As the EPA learns to trust the INGO and its domestic subcontractors, the EPA is more likely to consider future interactions with civil society organizations to be positive and act accordingly.

85 Interview with two staff members of INGO, Kunming, 5/10/2007.
86 Series of interview with staff member of INGO, Lijiang, 3/7/2007.
87 ibid, Lijiang, 4/2/2007.
As one official in the EPA explained, “I feel that these groups and even society at large is more influential since 2005 as part of the Harmonious Society laws and rules [hexieshehui 和谐社会]. Society regulation of government has increased as has the need for the government to take into account public opinion, which is often expressed to us through social groups.”

Partnerships then increase the trust between local state and civil society, enlarging the public sphere and empowering future civil society activity for service delivery and advocacy.

**Kunming Case—Partnering with the Health Bureau**

Kunming (昆明) is a prefecture located in central Yunnan province comprised of Kunming, the capital city of the province, as well as the surrounding counties and townships. It is one of the wealthiest and largest prefectures in the province. While Kunming contains a number of environmental and cultural groups, health-related groups are the most prevalent civil society organizations. Yunnan neighbors the “golden triangle” and battles the drug and human trafficking occurring on its borders. The government blames this easy access to drugs for the problems with drug addiction and HIV/AIDS seen in Kunming and other cities. The local health bureau initially dealt with HIV/AIDS (aizibing 艾滋病) through establishing an office to administer all HIV/AIDS programs, and through providing testing and treatment at state-owned hospitals. Testing and treatment at the hospitals required registration with an identity card, which meant that many people chose not to receive testing or treatment for fear of being arrested. This was a valid concern as local police frequently attempted to meet quotas for arrests by waiting in front of the testing and treatment clinic to arrest suspected drug offenders.

In the early 2000s, many health-related groups formed in Kunming, both domestic NGOs and INGOs. While some of these groups represented sex workers and others drug addicts, all presented their projects as impacting the health of broader society in Yunnan. In this case, I outline the interactions between an INGO, Kunming’s Health Bureau, and a smaller domestic NGO to illustrate how partnerships around HIV/AIDS testing and treatment create access to policy makers and thus allow for indirect advocacy by civil society groups.

89 Interview with local EPA official, Lijiang, 4/1/2007.
90 Interview with Chinese staff member at health-related INGO, Kunming, 6/4/2007.
The INGO and domestic group partnered with each other to combine the international resources of the INGO with access to this vulnerable population through the domestic group. These two groups then partnered with the local Health Bureau to create clinics separate from the state-owned hospitals that specialized in HIV/AIDS. The medicines and technology are expensive, so the Health Bureau was happy to allow the groups to supply these resources. Additionally, because the clients trusted the domestic group, they were willing to receive testing and treatment, thus enabling the local Health Bureau to claim increased treatment numbers as their success while not using any government resources. One interviewee at the INGO argued that “groups are influential at the local level, below the provincial level, because they can access populations that do not trust the government and have access to resources that the lower levels of government do not have.”

The INGO-NGO chose to partner with the state for two reasons. First, the Health Bureau secured all necessary permits and also instructed local police to avoid the clinics. Second, the groups used their access to policy makers in the Health Bureau to indirectly advocate for changes in Kunming policy toward HIV/AIDS. Through trainings, research briefs, and site tours, these two groups were able to convince the Kunming Health Bureau to approach HIV/AIDS differently than other provinces in China. The groups advocated for anonymous HIV/AIDS testing and care, which creates less fear among drug users or sex workers. Also, the groups advocated treating HIV/AIDS as a public health concern rather than a legal issue. This approach differs dramatically from other provinces, such as Hubei. As one staff member noted, “We do not have a mandate for advocacy, but I believe that groups do influence government policy indirectly through pilot projects and informal discussions with government officials. By gaining officials’ trust and then offering outside funding and best practices we play a role in influencing thinking and policy.” The partnership between international and domestic HIV/AIDS groups and the Health Bureau generated increased pluralism in the policy process through indirect advocacy.

**Simao Case—Partnering with the Local Government**

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92 Interview with domestic NGO staff member, Kunming, 6/6/2007.
93 Interview with Chinese staff member at INGO, Kunming, 5/30/2007.
Simao (思茅) is a prefecture located in southern Yunnan province comprised of Simao city as well as the surrounding counties and townships. It is a middle income and population prefectures in the province concentrating mostly on agriculture—especially its world famous Puer tea. While Yunnan contains a number of farmers’ cooperatives and cultural groups, ethnic groups are the most prevalent civil society organizations. Simao prefecture is one of the most ethnically diverse areas in China, with over 24 different minority groups. While minority regions consistently are important due to social stability concerns about separatist movements, these areas are becoming more important in the local economy due to “ethnic” tourism. In this case, I outline the interactions between two different ethnic groups and local government officials to illustrate how partnerships on issues of preserving ethnic culture and identity created a limited measure of accountability to these groups.

Both groups formed to protect ethnic culture, religion, music and traditions, and are informal and unregistered. One group sought to partner with the local government to provide funds and a protected cultural status for their temple, while the other sought government financial assistance in building a traditional housing complex to use as a community center. The group leader for the community center project is a retired government official, and used these connections to help garner support from the government. ⁹⁴ Currently, the government gives his group money (more than 300,000 yuan this year) to protect ethnic culture (民族宗教局). The second group leader is simultaneously the head of an informal social group to protect an ethnic culture and an appointed village leader. ⁹⁵ He and the local party secretary went to Beijing four times to secure national protected status for the temple, and finally secured this status in 2006. This protected status means that the temple gets money from the local, provincial and national level for preservation.

The government agreed to partner with these ethnic groups to meet promotion goals. As one local government official noted, partnering on the community center project supports the government’s minority protection policy and helps promote ethnic tourism in Yunnan. ⁹⁶ The party secretary contended that he partnered with the group for two reasons: one, to promote ethnic tourism which will help both the people and help him receive a promotion; and two, to

⁹⁴ Interview with head of ethnic group A, Simao, 2/15/07.
⁹⁵ Interview with head of ethnic group B, Simao, 2/19/07.
promote his local reputation [he called this people’s opinion]. However, the groups desired government assistance not only for purely financial reasons, but to help tie government success to group success. If the government invested in these groups’ efforts to protect their culture, the government was accepting responsibility for the success of these efforts. Both of these leaders felt that partnering with the local government had linked their respective fortunes, and through this linkage is accountability on both sides.98

Conclusion

External events, such as central “small state-big society” reforms and the decentralization of policy-making and social-service delivery to ill-funded local government, created legitimate political space for social intermediaries in China. Simultaneously, improved access to international funding and uncertainty over the proper role of the state in a new “socialist market” system increased the capacity and legitimacy of these groups. In this environment, civil society groups actively partner with local governments to gain access to the policy process to indirectly advocate on behalf of their interests. The interaction between local officials and civil society organizations are expanding this space and creating a larger policy role for these groups. Additionally, the ability to transmit credible information generates some degree of accountability for local officials. The space and capacity for civil society groups to participate in the public policy process is limited, but increasingly leads to greater pluralism and accountability. While these groups do not appear as a force for democratization, they are generating better governance outcomes in China.

Civil society activity in China leads us to develop new conceptions of what associational life needs to look like in order to accomplish the goals intended for civil society—creation of social trust, basis for collective action, and site of citizen participation in politics. An action-based approach allows us to better analyze the dynamic interaction between state and society as well as examine varying outcomes of civil society activity. Civil society in China assists in this reconceptualization because ideas about the role of civil society and the role of the state are in transition. Thus this analysis advances theories of governance and civil society past formal

98 See Lily Tsai for an in-depth examination of how embeddedness in local communities creates accountability for government officials “without democracy.”
institutional analyses and a dependence on a Habermasian model of civil society that does not correspond to actual state-society relationships.

One question for future research arising from an action-based analysis of local state-civil society partnerships is the possibility of a true partnership, implying some level of equality, with such large power asymmetries between state and society. While I argue that the local state is collaborating, not co-opting, civil society, civil society organizations in China are still small and work in a contested space. Future research should examine how these groups are able to effectively maintain true partnerships with local governments.
Appendix
Field Work Methodology

I conducted field work in 2006-7 in four areas in China to see if these groups are in fact playing a role in the policy process, and increasing pluralism and accountability. Three of these cases were within one province in China in order to hold institutions and culture constant across cases. I interviewed over 75 government officials, mass organization officials, and civil society groups. In each case I asked the same set of questions allowing me to compare responses across all 3 cases, and usually conducted each interview three times to allow for the creation of trust. These interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, although some of the interviewees at INGOs wanted to practice their English. By conducting interviews several times with the same people, I was able to ask the same questions in different ways to compare responses for the most truthful response. I also asked for stories (examples) if I was suspicious of an answer or the manner in which it was answered. In some instances I was able to access individuals’ households and not only ask questions but observe behavior.

Case Selection
I conducted my case study analysis in Yunnan, which has the 10th largest amount of registered social groups, and more group diversity—ethnic, environmental, poverty alleviation, healthcare, etc groups. This diversity allows for variation in my independent variable of interest.

Additionally, I chose cases at the prefecture level because this level has a significant degree of community embeddedness but also more responsibility over spending and policy decisions. The provincial level is the most powerful local level of government as far as deciding on policy and spending, but provincial governors are often rotated every 5 years and are making short-term decisions, so they are less embedded in the community. While at the village level, officials are deeply embedded in the community, they also are not an official part of the local governance structure and thus lack independent policy-making and spending power.

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