Research Note

The Chinese Discourse on Civil Society

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In recent years the concept of civil society has gained scholarly attention world-wide. It has found numerous advocates in the West, such as John Keane who suggested democratizing European socialism by defending the distinction between civil society and the state; Michael Walzer who proposed synthesizing socialist, capitalist and nationalist ideals under the rubric of civil society; and Daniel Bell, who called for a revival of civil society in the United States as a protection against the expanding state bureaucracies. In 1992 alone, at least three books on the subject appeared. In Eastern Europe, proponents of the civil society concept – like Vaclav Havel, George Konrad and Adam Michnik – have been credited with developing an extremely useful theoretical tool for overthrowing Stalinist authoritarianism. A volume consisting of case studies of seven former or present socialist countries found that the notion of civil society is generally applicable to the study of Communist systems, as long as the influence of different cultures and traditions of individual countries are fully acknowledged. The civil society paradigm, despite its basic European orientation, has also been recognized as applicable to the study of developing countries.

Western China scholars also seized upon the concept of civil society in their recent research. Stimulated by the 1989 pro-democracy demonstrations in China, the translation of Habermas into English and the attention paid to civil society in Europe, Western sinologists began to explore


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whether civil society had developed in The People’s Republic. Notable scholars in this regard include Heath Chamberlain,9 Joseph Esherick and Jeffrey Wasserstrom,10 Thomas Gold,11 David Kelly and He Bao-
gang,12 Philip Huang,13 Richard Masden,14 Barrett McCormick et al.,15
Clements Ostergaard,16 Margaret Pearson,17 Elizabeth Perry,18 Lucian
Pye,19 Mary Rankin,20 William Rowe,21 Vivienne Shue,22 Dorothy

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Protest and Political Culture in Modern China: Learning from 1989 (Boulder: Westview
Building a Nation-State: China after Forty Years (Berkeley: University of California at
Berkeley, Centre for Chinese Studies, 1990), pp. 125–151; and his “The resurgence of civil
12. David Kelly and He Baogang, “Emergent civil society and the intellectuals in China,”
13. Philip Huang, “‘Public Sphere’/‘civil society’ in China?” Modern China, Vol. 19, No.
15. Barrett L. McCormick, Political Reform in Post-Mao-China: Democracy and
Bureaucracy in a Leninist State (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); “The impact
of democracy on China studies,” Problems of Communism, Vol. 40, No. 1–2 (January–April
democracy movement: a review of the prospects for civil society in China,” Pacific Affairs,
16. Clements Stubbs Ostergaard, “Citizens, groups and nascent civil society in China:
17. Margaret M. Pearson, “Managers in China’s foreign sector: do they represent an
emergent civil society?” paper prepared for delivery at the 1991 Annual Meeting of the
American Political Science Association, 29 August–1 September 1991.
18. Elizabeth J. Perry, “State and society in contemporary China,” World Politics, Vol. 41,
No. 4 (July 1989), pp. 579–591; “China’s long march to democracy,” (co-author with Ellen
V. Fuller), World Policy Journal, Vol. 53, No. 4 (Fall 1991), pp. 663–685; and her “Labor
divided: sources of state formation in modern China,” in Joel S. Migdal, Atul Kohli and
Vivienne Shue (eds.), State Power and Social Forces: Domination and Transformation in
Asia, Africa, and Latin America (forthcoming).
(Fall 1990), pp. 56–74; “The state and the individual: an overview,” The China Quarterly,
No. 127 (September 1991), pp. 443–466.
3 (July 1990), pp. 309–329; “The problem of civil society in Late Imperial China,”
22. Vivienne Shue, The Reach of the State: Sketches of the Chinese Body Politics
(Stanford: Stanford University Press 1988); and “Powers of state: paradoxes of dominion Chia
1949–1979,” in Kenneth Lieberthal, Joyce Kallgren, Roderick MacFarquhar and Frederic
Wakeman, Jr. (eds.), Perspectives on Modern China: Four Anniversaries (Armonk: M. E.
Solinger, David Strand, Lawrence Sullivan, Frederic Wakeman, Jr., Gordon White, and Mayfair Yang. These scholars produced a literature that has affected thinking about contemporary China. In general, they have tended to the view that Chinese civil society has been increasingly vibrant since the introduction of reform in the later 1970s, though it is still far from being fully developed.

Oddly, the heated discussion on civil society among Western scholars has not been accompanied by any detailed consideration of the emergence of the idea among Chinese theorists and intellectuals. Shortly after the Beijing massacre, David Kelly noted that in China “very little has been done to develop and theorize what intellectuals in Eastern and Central Europe call ‘civil society’.” A year later, Kelly and He Baogang found some signs of appearance of a “civil discourse” in China. Nevertheless, they concluded that Chinese intellectuals’ consciousness about the emergent civil society and their faith in its development were still weak. Barnett McCormick and two Chinese scholars also noted that “Chinese intellectuals have not addressed the problem of establishing an independent civil society in the same terms as East Europeans.” Similarly, historian William T. Rowe remarked that civil society is not “even an item of contemporary discourse [in China].” While to a certain extent these comments are true, they also reflect the limited knowledge in the West about the extensive Chinese discussion on civil society. As far as I know, the first Chinese publication on the subject appeared in 1986, two to three years before most Western scholars may have assumed.

The purpose of this article is thus to present a preliminary review of the Chinese discourse on civil society. It will show how Chinese theorists have attempted to link this Western concept to the Chinese reality.

30. Kelly and He, “Emergent civil society.”
Origins of the Discourse

The Chinese discussion of civil society can be traced back to 1986, when an article published in *Tianjin Social Science* "unearthed" the concept of "townspeople’s right" (shimin quanli) from Marx’s classical writings. In the liberal environment of the time, it was abstracted without comment in the *People’s Daily*, confirming that it caught official attention. Shen Yue, author of the article, argued that in Marx’s original works there is a term "townspeople’s right," which refers to the right of equal exchange of commodities. In a market economy, this right is supposed to be available to all townspeople. However, since the term has been mis-translated into “bourgeois right” (zichanjieji quanli) in Chinese, it has been equated with the improper privileges of the bourgeoisie. Consequently, it has been denied to Chinese townspeople.

According to Shen, “townspeople” is an economic concept that includes both bourgeoisie and proletariat. The basic characteristic of townspeople, apart from residing in urban areas, was their participation in market economic activities. They were individual owners of commodities, and thus enjoyed greater autonomy than slaves and serfs, who had limited personal freedom, as well as peasants, who were remote from the market. However, private possession of commodities inevitably led to conflicts among them. To settle disputes, a legal system was developed to define individual rights and duties, transforming townspeople into a new social category, “citizens” (gongmin).

In a later article, Shen further explained the origin of the concept of “townspeople.” According to him, the German term “burgerliche Gesellschaft” used by Marx and Engels came from the word “burg,” which literally means “castle” (chengbao). The development of a market economy transformed “castles” into “towns.” Hence, a “town” (chengshi) must be a combination of “castle” (cheng) and “market” (shi). People living in it, or townspeople, were inevitably involved in market activities, though they were not necessarily entrepreneurs. Hence, just as equal market exchanges must be distinguished from bourgeois exploitation, townspeople should not be equated with bourgeoisie. However, this demarcation was obliterated when the term “burgerliche Gesellschaft” was mis-translated into Chinese as “bourgeois society” (zichanjieji shehui). The correct translation, in Shen’s view, should be “townspeople’s society” (shimin shehui).

Shen’s ideas are important in that they imply universality of civil rights. As “townspeople” include bourgeoisie and proletariat, so do "citizens.” Since “townspeople’s rights” are available to both classes, civil rights are also class-neutral. This marks an important departure from

33. Shen Yue, “Zichanjieji quanli ying yi wei shimin quanli” (“Bourgeois right should be translated as townspeople’s right”), *Tianjin shehui kexue* (*Tianjin Social Science*), No. 4 (1986).
the previous rejection of the concept of civil rights on the basis of its "bourgeois nature."

Shen's argument, however, was criticized by Xi Zhaoyong, a scholar at Nanjing University. According to Xi, although it is true that the German term "burger" could mean both "townspeople" and "bourgeoisie," in most cases Marx and Engels used it to mean the latter. Shen's notion of "townspeople's right" was mistaken because of out-of-context translation. In Marx's and Engels' conception, Xi maintained, the system that replaced European feudalism was clearly a "bourgeois mode of production," not anything called "townspeople's mode of production."

Nevertheless, Shen Yue was not the only scholar who attempted to assert that the "citizen" is a class-neutral concept. Another theorist, Huang Dao, argued that a citizen is the principal component of the state. It is a legal entity that cannot be divided "for any reason nor under any pretext." While civil rights are to be guaranteed by law and protected by the state on the one hand, it is also necessary for each citizen to be aware of his or her duties on the other. Under socialism, such "civic awareness" is based on collectivism, in contrast to the individualistic "bourgeois democratic consciousness." Notwithstanding this distinction, Huang did not suggest that the central ideas of "civic awareness"—observance of law and defence of social order—would vary with social systems.

Two other theorists, Liu Zhiguang and Wang Suli, made a further breakthrough by establishing individualism as the legitimate basis of "civic awareness." They argued that there can be no meaningful existence of collectivity unless individual rights are fully recognized. They quoted University of Chicago political scientist Tsou Tang's idea that in contrast to Western states which are built upon civil societies, the Chinese one is based on a "mass society" (qunzhong shehui). According to Liu and Wang, the term "mass" in its traditional as well as contemporary Chinese usage connotes subordination to rulers, whereas the Western concept of "citizen" is associated with individual rights and equality. As the Chinese general public have customarily identified themselves with "mass," their "civic awareness" has been weak. China's modernization thus calls for raising people's awareness of their civil rights, and a real guarantee of democracy and freedom to the people. By replacing personal rule with governance-by-law, and by establishing a democratic system, the Chinese "mass" will be transformed into a "citzenry."

A somewhat different view was articulated by Ju Mingzhou. While Liu and Wang emphasized citizens' rights, Ju's concern was their duties. But the three theorists were in fact talking about two different aspects of the same issue: the making of a modern Chinese citizenry. According to Ju, it is correct to say that individuals form the basic component of society. "However, it must also be stressed that without society, there is no citizen. Society creates citizens, and [the formation of] citizenry represents perfection of individuals." In Ju's view, a large proportion of the Chinese population are not yet citizens, in the sense that their "civic awareness" is still limited. This is reflected in the widespread contempt for law and decline in social ethics. To ensure economic development and political stability, Ju argued, it is important to construct a "society-oriented culture," one which encourages the submission of individual interest to public good.

Thus, in its initial phase, the focus of the Chinese domestic discussion of civil society was on the creation of a modern citizenry through inspiration of "civic awareness" by the state among the people. This corresponds to the second and third components of civil society defined by Edward Shils - "effective ties" with the state, and presence of "civility." Given the apparent weak "civic awareness" among the Chinese population, the proposed construction of modern citizenry as the first step towards formation of a civil society seems to make sense. While advocating individual rights and freedom, the Chinese domestic discussants of civil society recognized the inevitable existence of the state. The civil society in their mind is one that will maintain a harmonious relation with the state, rather than a hostile rejection of it.

Such a moderate approach to civil society, however, prompted political conservatives to co-opt the idea into the official ideological framework. In September 1986, the Party Central Committee issued the "Resolution Concerning the Guiding Principles of the Socialist Spiritual Civilization Construction," which stated that the Party should promote legal knowledge among the people, in order to "strengthen socialist civic awareness." Guided by this, a team of writers from the National People's Congress, the Central Party School, the Beijing High Court, the State Administration of Industry and Commerce, and some other academic institutions co-published in 1988 a volume titled Gongmin shouce (Handbook for Citizens). According to the preface of this book, participants of the project "received support and encouragement" from the conservative octogenarian leader Chen Yun, who even "checked and approved the
table of contents of the whole book,” and inscribed the title “in high spirit.”

Written in a guide-book style, this 560-page publication contains chapters on democracy, rule-of-law, citizens’ rights and duties, public ethics, social discipline, public security, family and heritage laws, rules concerning foreign affairs or foreign nationals, crime and penalty, and right protection. The “socialist” as well as “Chinese characteristics” of the official position over these issues can be found throughout the book, as evident in some of the headings of the entries: “democratic centralism,” “socialist spiritual civilization,” “Lei Feng spirit,” “internationalism,” “collectivism,” “revolutionary heroism,” and “surveillance by the masses.” On the other hand, Western institutions such as universal suffrage, parliamentarism, the multi-party system, judicial independence and equality of law were all said to be capitalist in nature. Such a socialist or “sinified” version of “civil society” does not seem to have been the intention of the scholars who initiated the discussion in China. As mentioned, they wanted to make the idea a neutral one, free of any socialist or capitalist labels.

Despite the above official campaign to create a socialist citizenry, the domestic discussion of civil society seemed to subside for the two years after mid-1990. After the publication of Xi Zhaoyong’s article in May 1990,44 no major piece on civil society appeared in the Chinese press. This quiescence lasted until May 1992, when a Sino-American joint conference on contemporary Chinese history was held in Fudan University in Shanghai. There, Frederic Wakeman, Jr. presented a paper criticizing William Rowe’s45 and Mary Rankin’s46 application of the concept of civil society to China. In Wakeman’s view, there has not been any major confrontation between civic power and the Chinese state. Another scholar, Prasenjit Duara, agreed that there were indications of an emergent civil society in the late-Qing period. But this development was suppressed in the Republican era because of popular demand for a strong state. These views of Western scholars were summarized in the Fudan Journal.47 So far there has been no indication that this has rekindled the domestic debate on civil society.

44. Xi Zhaoyong, “‘Shimin shehui bian xi’.”
Shift of Focus by Intellectuals-in-Exile

On the other hand, a new stage of discussion of China’s civil society has emerged among Chinese overseas since 1990. Major contributors and protagonists in this forum are mostly prominent Chinese intellectuals who were forced into exile after the 1989 Beijing massacre. They have made no reference to the earlier literature, suggesting that they might be quite unaware of the foregoing domestic discussion. More importantly, as will be shown below, their major emphasis has been on the autonomous nature of civil society, representing a shift of focus from the second and third components in Shils’ definition of the concept to the first one – independence from the state.

To my knowledge, Chen Kuide was the first Chinese exiled dissident who employed the concept of civil society in intellectual discourse. A locally-trained Ph.D. in philosophy of science, Chen is a former editor of a Shanghai magazine closed after 1989. In an article published in March 1990, he called for an alliance between intellectuals and entrepreneurs as an important step towards formation of a civil society. Three months later, in another article, he defined civil society as referring “primarily to the public sphere consisting of private enterprises, universities, newspapers and magazines, trade unions, churches, and other social organizations that are independent of the state.” Chen believed that despite the party-state’s attempt to “strangle civil society in the cradle,” the birth of Chinese civil society, which began in the late 1970s, was only temporarily halted by the military suppression.

A year after Chen made the above statements, he presented his deeper thought on the issue in another article. For him, the construction of China’s civil society is extremely important because it provides a third alternative to the seemingly inevitable dilemma between Communist authoritarianism on the one hand and anarchism on the other. He suggested three essential steps for this task. The first is to further decentralize...

48. Part of the information used in this section was obtained from personal interviews with a group of Chinese intellectuals in exile in Princeton, New Jersey, October 1991. I wish to thank the Associates of the University of Toronto Travel Grant Fund for providing financial support for the research trip to Princeton University, Lorraine Spiess (co-ordinator of the Princeton China Initiative) for arranging the interviews, and Martin He and Simon Wong for their assistance in the project.

49. A similar change of focus, according to Chamberlain, can also be found in the Western literature on China’s civil society. This is his major argument in “On the search for civil society.”


52. Hua Yifu, “Cong zhengzhii wenhua de jiaodu kan ‘liu si’ yizhounian” (“A reflection at the first anniversary of the June Fourth Incident from the perspective of political culture”), Jiushi niandai (The Nineties), June 1990, pp. 54–55.

power to local authorities. This will institutionalize regional interest, and thus form shelters for private economic activities and intellectual dissent. Moreover, increased geographical mobility of human resources caused by regional disparity will create horizontal networks, which will in turn weaken the central government’s vertical control mechanism. Chen’s second step is to “routinize” (make independent of political changes) and “stabilize” operation of grassroots economic organizations. This means not only a consolidation of the private economy, but also a de-politicization of state enterprises. When operation of economic undertakings are “routinized,” they will become “micro-structures” that can be expected to minimize social disruption when rapid political changes occur. The final step is to create a “substitutive political force.” This will involve replacement of existing Communist leaders with intellectuals, whose activities in the 1980s have made them vanguards of the construction of civil society.

Central to Chen’s analysis is the detachment of the civil society from the state. As already mentioned, this has also been the major concern of East European scholars. In fact, to a large extent the Chinese exiled intellectuals’ discussion of civil society was inspired by the apparent success of the idea in the former Soviet bloc countries. For example, Liu Binyan, the former investigative reporter of the People’s Daily, praised East European intellectuals for daring “to confront the state and party while maintaining remarkable self-restraint in the course of their long struggle. They worked hard to develop a civil society.” To learn from this experience, Liu argued, “China needs a flowering of all kinds of independent organizations, especially free trade unions, and a strengthening of civil society.”

However, some Chinese intellectuals-in-exile are sceptical about the transplant of the East European concept to Chinese reality. One example is Su Wei, an organizer of various intellectuals’ petitions in the late 1980s. While noting that he has no intention of belittling the idea of civil society, Su recommended that his fellow intellectuals search for “new ideological resources” from China’s own legacy. His view represents the common concern that blind adoption of the East European notion of civil society will reinforce the unhealthy trend of anti-traditionalism, which has been influential among many Chinese intellectuals since the mid-1980s.

56. The strongest voice in this regard is that of Peng Wenyi, a Taiwanese intellectual who migrated to the United States some 20 years ago. According to him, the success of the newly industrializing countries in South-East Asia has demonstrated the ability of Confucian-type collective societies to achieve modernization. Endowed with the same cultural asset, China should also utilize this traditional advantage in its quest for development. Peng condemned the Chinese proponents of the Western individualistic concept of civil society for blind import of foreign ideas, just like the Communists’ introduction of Marxism into China several decades ago. See his “Zuqun shehui yu gongmin shehui” (“Collective society and civil society”), Jiushi niandai, June 1990, pp. 106–107; “Zai tan zuqun shehui” (“On collective society again”), Jiushi niandai, June 1991, pp. 69–71; and “Zhongguo bi wang lun zhi er”
But for Su Xiaokang, the script-writer of the controversial television series *River Elegy*, anti-traditionalism is not a real problem, since it is simply a camouflage to attack Communism. More importantly, in his view, the notion of civil society may provide a common ground to unite iconoclasts (whose real purpose is to criticize Communism) with traditionalists. He noted that independent clan, religious, and trade associations did exist in traditional Chinese society until they were abolished by the Communist regime. Since construction of civil society may result in revival of some of the folk institutions, the endeavour is both anti-Communist and pro-traditional.

Su Xiaokang agreed that it is inappropriate to discuss civil society purely in the East European sense, without relating it to the Chinese context. However, according to him, “in terms of social structure, ideology, economic system, public psychology, and in particular the model of development of civil society, China has more similarities with East European countries than with East Asian ones.” He observed that since the late 1970s, some independent social forces have begun to become detached from the state. The disintegration of Communist control first took place in the cultural sphere, and later in the economic sector, resulting in an “embryonic civil society” that consists primarily of independent intellectuals and private entrepreneurs.

An important feature of Su’s thinking is his inclusion of the illegal Triad Society as an important component of civil society. This is perhaps related to his personal experience of escape from China through the help of smugglers. In his first discussion of civil society, as well as in my interview with him, Su mentioned the role of the Triad Society, but did not equate it with civil society. However, in a more recent article, he explicitly emphasized the indispensable function of the Triad Society as a counter-structure to the establishment. According to him, the present Chinese civil society is characterized by three major features: the filling of social “crevices” caused by state decay by traditional clan, religious and underground forces; the decline of political participation to an all-time low level; and the fundamental collapse of social ethics. In

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Footnote continued

(“On the view that China will definitely perish, part 2”), *Jiushi niandai*, May 1992, pp. 88–89. Peng’s argument is not discussed in the main text because, as a Taiwanese, he is beyond the scope of this paper which is on the views of the mainland Chinese intellectuals. For a critique of Peng’s opinion, see Chen Kuide, “On the misleading notion,” pp. 23–25.


58. The assistance given by Triad Society in the escape of Su and other dissidents from China was featured in the British Broadcasting Corporation’s television documentary *Operation Yellowbird*. I am indebted to Paul Ng for providing me with a chance to watch this film.


particular, he referred to an official report that there are now more than 1,800 illegal secret societies in China, the largest ones with memberships of over 10,000. They control land, farm prices and sales of agricultural products in many villages; organize tax revolts; practise usury; establish underground military and law-enforcement crews; and smuggle people, guns and drugs. On the other hand, from 1990 to 1991 at least 1,000 formal applications for legal public assemblies and rallies were rejected by the authorities, and 28 academic gatherings by non-official organizations were banned. Comparing the weak civil activities to the increasingly powerful illegal societies, Su concluded that “in China only the illegal ways are viable.” This is by far the most radical version of civil society that has been articulated by Chinese theorists.61

Su has also noted that the expectation for enlightened leaders to introduce reforms from above has prevented Chinese intellectuals from paying sufficient attention to the emergent civil society. His view received an immediate response from Chen Yizi, a former adviser to Zhao Ziyang. “When all people are denied a basic property right, and when their right to survive is completely controlled by the party-state, how can a civil society be formed?” Chen asked.62 While this question seems to be commonsensical, it recalls the Hegelian view that the right to private ownership of property is a central and indispensable feature of civil society.63

The case of Zhang Langlang, another dissident-in-exile, provides a good illustration of the relation between private economy and civil society. After his release from nine-years’ political imprisonment in 1977, Zhang entered the advertising business, one of the fastest growing industries in China, and later established his own companies. He used the money he made to finance a quasi-independent art publication, *Fine Arts in China*, which has been described by one foreign scholar as “the best source for ‘avant-garde’ art” and the “single most important institution in fostering the new art movement” in China.64 The publication survived the


Party’s ideological surveillance by not touching on any politically sensitive issues. For Zhang, given the complete control of the Communist Party over the realm of politics, to create and expand a de-politicized grey area for private activities is equivalent to a weakening of the Party’s power. Although he did not use the term civil society before he left China in 1989, he regarded his previous de-politicization effort as the first step towards the ideal.65 Unconsciously, Zhang has followed the East European dissidents’ strategy of repudiating the ubiquitous mendacity propagated by the regime through complete avoidance of politics.66

Zhang’s apolitical approach was influential among a number of readers of *Fine Arts in China*, including students and faculty members of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. When they were asked by the 1989 demonstrators to make a Goddess of Democracy statue to be erected in Tiananmen Square, they attempted to de-politicize the request by handling it as an ordinary commercial order.67 The fact that *Fine Arts in China* could not survive the post-June 1989 crackdown spoke for itself.

Another Chinese user of the concept of civil society is Kong Jiesheng, a well-known writer of “wounded literature.” In a personal interview he said that gatherings of Chinese people in bars, karaokeas and *qigong* classes, as well as performance by street artists, are signs of the formation of a “public sphere” in Habermas’ sense. He expected that further formal institutionalization of this public realm of life will result in an expansion of civic power against the state.68 Elsewhere, referring to the “underground” activities of a cultural salon in the early 1960s, Kong claimed that a primitive form of civil society in China already existed at that time.69

In short, among exiled Chinese intellectuals civil society has become fashionable. The common emphasis has been on independence from the state. This is understandable, given that they were all repressed by the Chinese party-state. But in fact how realistic is this rejection of the state? An American-trained Chinese scholar, now a professor of politics at Yale

68. Interview with Kong Jiesheng, conducted at Princeton University on 18 October 1991. The historian Philip Huang, however, argued that the Habermas’ notion of development of civil society from public sphere is basically a European formula that may not be applicable to China. According to him, the history of Ming-Qing China demonstrated a dissociation, rather than association, between expansion of public realm of life and assertion of civic power against the state. Philip C. C. Huang, “The paradigmatic crisis in Chinese studies,” *Modern China*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (July 1991), pp. 299–341, at 320–22.
69. Kong Jiesheng, “Zhan jian hou yu gushi yiren” (“A convict awaiting execution and a story teller”), Zheng Ming (Contend) (August 1991), pp. 66–68. This article is a special feature on Zhang Langlang, the artist-entrepreneur mentioned above. In the interview by the present author, Zhang admitted that most members of Zhang’s group were scions of high officialdom. Their ability to form such a “secret” organization, and their access to prohibited publications and works of art were part of the privileges of these “nobles,” not a real indication of an emergent civil society.
University with no apparent association with the Chinese political exiles, reminded the dissident intellectuals that the state is still required to clean up the social and economic evils of civil society. Moreover, as a Western scholar rightly remarked, no matter how powerful the idea of civil society is as a focus for resistance to Communist regimes, it offers no adequate political model for the long-term construction of a healthy political community.

Conclusion

Since 1986, there has been a theoretical discourse of civil society in China. Protagonists of the discussion can be divided into two major groups: domestic theorists and exiled intellectuals. The former have focused on the making of a modern citizenry, consisting of law-abiding and civil members of society. Existence of this entity presupposes the active involvement of the state. The relation between civil society and the state was thus seen as an intimate and harmonious one. This contrasts sharply with the basic orientation of exiled intellectuals, whose primary concern has been creation of a private realm that is independent of the state. There has been no mention of law, order and civility. Even illegal societies are included as a constituent of civil society. The term “civil” becomes redundant. This is highly inappropriate. As one sociologist noted, the word “civil” has a number of very important and interesting social, historical and interpretative loadings. It “refers to a condition of education, refinement and sophistication as opposed to a condition of barbarism.” Another China scholar remarked that among the whole range of quasi-autonomous associations that have appeared in China in recent years, some are certainly more “civil” than others. “Those with the quality of ‘civility’ might eventually contribute to the creation of a democratic public sphere, [whereas those] without it may simply push China closer toward anarchic fragmentation.”

Borrowing the idea of civil society from East European dissidents, the Chinese theorists-in-exile seem to be suddenly strengthened by “the power of the powerless.” However, unlike their East European counter-

70. Wang Shaoguang, “Guangyu ‘shimin shehui’ de jidian sikao” (“Some thoughts on ‘civil society’”), Ersihui shiji (Twenty-First Century), December 1991, pp. 102–114. This argument is the opposite of that of Adam Smith and many others, who thought that civil society could clean up the feudal evils of the state. See Albert Hirschman, The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). I am indebted to an anonymous referee for pointing this out.


73. Tester, Civil Society p. 9.


parts who have been using the idea to build parallel structures within the system, the Chinese dissidents are advocating the concept in foreign countries. Without a domestic presence, their construction of civil society can only remain at a theoretical level. The government’s censorship system, though weaker than before, is still effective in preventing translation of external voices into internal influences.76