



The Role and Future of Civil Society in a Transitional China

Ying YU
Durham University

In a dynamic and diverse world politics, China's political transition is deeply paradoxical: it has a very strong private sphere, a vibrant but fragmented civil society, a monolithic but a most faction-ridden and corrupt state because of the way that the other two spheres penetrate it. Based on the argument that China's political transition and democratisation is not just about opening the state and rendering it accountable and transparent but also about transferring 'power' between the other spheres, this paper focuses on the characteristics, development, cleavage and potential of civil society during this multi-way transitional process especially within the contemporary popular contentious politics demonstrated through the cases of intellectuals, labour and religious groups' contentions. On one hand, most contentious activities take place spontaneously, to an extent reflecting the absence of particular organisations or structure and further the weakness and problems of civil society in general. On the other, contention is not just about group mobilisation and articulation, but about how the political context or space shapes these processes and channels them and how the power is balanced, negotiated and transferred among different social and political forces, which as a whole nurture the bases for a vigorous civil society and delicately surmount its cleavages. Thirdly but not lastly, as the strength of people in aggregation, expression, participation, organisation and action during the political contentions is highlighted, people's increasing consciousness of agents and demands for autonomy would exactly inspire a promising future for the civil society.

Introduction

China's reform-opening since 1978 is pragmatic and revolutionary, bringing dramatic and qualitative changes from the economic realm to every aspect of people's social life and to the Party-state system. Especially in the new millennium of globalisation, China's politics has been quite different from the totalitarianism two decades ago as a post-totalitarian regime, trying to accord its steps of modernisation. However, the deepening of Chinese domestic reforms and external integration into the globalising world requires more urgently political transition with more consciousness, initiative, support and action from the state, social and private actors (Zheng, 2004; Guthrie, 2006).

It can be observed that the retreat of state power from economy, mobility and other social welfare arenas, the diversity of culture with looser ideological control, the emergence of village elections and grassroots associations, the construction of domestic legal system and the integration into international treaties and laws and rules all demonstrate China's passive and positive adaptation to the transferring economic, social and cultural realities (Perry and Selden, 2003). However, will this progressive process necessarily lead China into a democratic state? The present situation with numerous cases of poor human right records, repression of contentious activities, violation of religious and press freedom, rampant institutional corruption, benefit-driven value system might disappoint the democracy advocators.

The complexity and contradiction within China's political transition is

ascribed to the inherent overlapping and interaction of three spheres: private sphere, civil society and the Party-state, which is also signified in the transitional individual-social-state relationship. The strong private sphere was historically introversive, family-centered and dominated by patriarchy, hierarchy and traditional morals and rituals, and was once totally ideologically and organisationally controlled by the Party-state before reforms (Hook, 1996). Under the impact of comprehensive modernisation, part of this sphere, with increasingly emerging mass organisations and interest groups of all kind, with the inserting modern values of autonomy, cooperation and trust, is extending from familial and quasi-familial relationships into civil society. Civil society itself is vibrant and active but weakened by deep cleavages due to the private barriers, state interference and enlarging social inequality: urban-rural, north-south, class, wealth, education, age, ethnics, religion and relationship to power structures.

Party-state is the defining characteristic of the Chinese political system since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is always dominant and interlocked with every level and aspect of the state governance with the purpose of ideology and organisation (Dreyer, 2000). The Party-state appears monolithic but is one of the most faction-ridden and corrupt states in world politics because of the way the private sphere penetrates it and the fact that the immature civil society has not yet constituted an effective balance and check to the state power. Therefore, China's political transition and democratisation is

not just about opening the state and rendering it accountable and transparent, but also about transferring 'power' between the other spheres.

Instead of the idealistic pursuit of political democracy, this paper adopts a dynamic and holistic rationale by taking into account both the progression and shadow of Chinese politics to investigate the manifold changes in the individual-social-state relations and spheres with the focus on the pragmatic development of civil society, contention and mass participation rather than emphasizing only the transition of state to a democratic regime. The paper portrays civil society itself – its conception and development with Chinese characteristics. The main argument focuses on the fragmentation and potential of civil society through the contentious activities of different groups in contemporary China. The conclusion will be drawn to indicate a prosperous future of the Chinese civil society.

Civil society with Chinese characteristics

The definition of civil society itself is diverse and debatable. Civil society essentially refers to the set of institutions, organisations and behaviors situated between the state, the business world, and the family. Specifically, this includes voluntary and non-profit organisations of many different kinds, philanthropic institutions, social and political movements, other forms of social participation and engagement and the values and cultural patterns associated with them (Edwards, 2004: 54). It is also argued that civil society retains a

distinctive character to the extent that it is made up of areas of social life, which are organised by private, voluntary or autonomous arrangements between individuals and groups outside the direct control of the state while capable of influencing public policy (Held, 1987: 281; Lindau and Cheek, 1998: 4). Therefore, the growth of civil society acts as a crucial counterweight to authoritarian tendencies and forces within the state.

While robust civil societies are embedded in Western states with mature capitalist economies, liberal democratic political systems and well developed legal systems characterised by rule of law and a modern bureaucratic administrative system, the concept of civil society was adopted in China first by academics with different translations to convey some parts of the broad connotation according to the changing social realities (Wang, 1991; He, 1997; Deng, 1997; Liang, 2001; Zhang, 2002): the version of *shimin shehui* (urban people's society) highlights the role of urbanisation and commercialisation in creating a social force of its own to promote China's economic and political modernisation; the description of *gongmin shehui* (citizen's society) emphasizes the public and civic awareness and a participatory culture that are crucial for building a Chinese citizenship conducive to China's political future; the talk of *minjian shehui* (non-governmental or popular society) stresses non-governmental organisations, popular participation and mobilisation and public sphere where private people can exchange opinions on matters of public importance free from the hand the state (Tai, 2006: 60-2).

As the debate about the new concept of 'civil society' became heated with increasing media discussion and academic awareness since early 1990s, both the official discourse and the public opinion found that it can cover an extensive arrange while reflecting its original meaning. This paper mainly adopts and combines the conceptions of *gongmin shehui* (citizen's society) and *minjian shehui* (non-governmental or popular society) to understand the characteristics of Chinese civil society and to grasp its complicated relationship with the private sphere and the Party-state within the political transition and power reconstruction.

The development of civil society during the political transition

Potter et al. (1997) in their work *Democratisation* illuminate the types or levels of democratic status in Table 1 by highlighting the two critical variables of 'state' and 'civil society'. What's more, the authors put China in the category of 'authoritarianism' (Potter et al., 1997: 38) according to the classification standards (see Table 1). Ten years after Potter et al.'s classification, China is constantly undergoing a historic economic and social transformation that is reshaping the nature of individual-social-state relationship and political life. Marketisation, commercialisation, industrialisation, urbanisation, decentralisation, bureaucratisation, secularisation, diversification as well as globalisation not only change the balance and competitions of existing social forces but also provide the environment and soil to nourish new classes,

associations and cultures in favour of more autonomy, freedom, protection of rights and access to power and profit (Moody, 1995), which as a whole contribute to the establishment and solidity of an energetic civil society.

The development of civil society is actually a struggling process in Chinese political realities and it would be biased only to sing an optimistic praise on the favourable facet while turning a blind eye to the limitations, barriers or adverse side. In order to comprehend the Chinese characteristics of civil society, this section will begin with the variety and diversity of civil society organisations, with attention drawn upon the difficulty of registration. On the other hand, behind the organisations as well as popular participation and mobilisation is the change of political culture and power structure, which not only indicate the evolvement of civil awareness and strength but also point out the interference of private and state sphere.

The proliferation of organisations

Chinese civil society organisations include a range of groups, such as national mass organisations created and funded by the Party-state authorities, smaller citizen associations registered under national regulations, and loose networks of unregistered grassroots organisations (White et al., 1996; Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 2005). During the reform era there are newly-emerging mass societies and associations proliferating into many fields with diverse titles and definitions. The Chinese organisational

forms that most nearly correspond to the Western concept of a nongovernmental organisation are social organisations (SOs) (*shehui tuanti*, including academic, professional or trade organisations as well as voluntary associations of individuals with a common interest), nongovernmental and noncommercial enterprises (NGNCEs) (*minban feiqiye danwei*, nongovernmental service providers), and foundations (*jijinhui*, nonprofit and non-governmental organisations managed through the use of funds voluntarily donated by foreign and domestic social organisation) (Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 2005).

In the early and mid 1990s scholars at home and abroad argued that a uniquely Chinese version of civil society allows for greater intrusion of the state into social organisation (Wakeman, 1993). Most of the registered CSOs are called government-organised nongovernmental organisations (GONGOs)ⁱ under the guidance and control of the state; many others are officially registered as businesses because the registration process is easier while others simply remain unregistered rather than to face the hassle of registration, which are all characteristically made in China. According to official Chinese statistics, the number of registered civil society organisations increased from 288,936 in 2004 to 317,000 in 2006, but one Chinese source estimates the number of unregistered organisations to be as high as three million (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2004; 2006; Zhao and Dong, 2005). It is the strict registration regulations that drive many CSOs to operate without government registration.

However, in practice, unregistered groups generally experience little or no government interference as long as they avoid financial misdeeds or overt political challenges.

The flourish of civil society has been firstly and obviously presented by the proliferation of civil society organisations. However, civil society is not only about organisations according to either the Western and Chinese interpretations or realities. Some argued that China does not lack associations, organisation in all aspects of people's daily life, but still lack for the underlying value akin to Habermas's 'civil society' – a humane society (Lindau and Cheek, 1998: 6). However, the next two points demonstrate some delicate and profound changes in political culture and power structure as well as stubborn obstacles.

The change of political culture

It is certain that political culture plays a significant role in the political transition as the ideology, belief, value and other cultural factors function underneath the political relations, behaviors and institutional reforms. The change of political culture is both a necessity for and in turn a result of the development of civil society. Four cardinal principles of socialism, dictatorship of the proletariat, the dominant and 'cover-all' party leadership, and Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought have been vague in China since 1979. Deng Xiaoping Theory, the newly-added Jiang Zeming's talk on Three

Representatives and the latest Hu Jintao's advocacy of Harmonious Society in the political orthodox of Chinese system has given more respect to individual rights and interests, deemphasized the ideology to urge people to pursue unrealistic egalitarian goals, and highly valued citizens' participation and state-led civil society in order to maintain the regime and regulate the conflicts of interests. Mainstream political culture including official ideology and media has gradually evolved to endorse freedom, pluralism, and openness in the wake of the enormous social changes of the 1980's and 90's while the popular culture is even more individual, multiple and inclusive.

Since Chinese civil society is less independent than its Western counterpart, it has created its own developing path and pace during the economic liberation, in the loosening cultural environment and under the sponsorship of the government while slowly exerting its essential humane, free, democratic and autonomous value onto the state and public culture. Nevertheless, along with its expanding to play a more and more significant role, civil society has been faced with the serious problems of Chinese political culture: lack in the rule of law, the misconception of Chinese democracy and the worsening tendency of egoism. These are also representing the dominance of state and private sphere over civil society in certain parts of the cultural and value realms. In China 'the rule by law' is prevailing in the value system, with law used by the state as an instrument for social control (Keith, 1994) and with direct influence of the CCP on the legislative process. Thus 'the

rule of law' fails to be realised as the very foundation of human rights and a means of restraining arbitrary actions by those in power (Zheng, 1999). The absence of rule of law may easily lead to injustice, abuse of power, power-money exchange and the rule of man. Moreover, the lack of policy regulations and the imperfect legal environment can be an especially negative factor such as state interference and private penetration to discourage the establishment of civil society organisations in practice.

Due to rising economic success and development without adopting the Western model of liberal democracy, Chinese leaders and authorities are now much more confident in condemning the hypocrisy of Western interference in the third world in the name of human rights and democracy (Antlöv and Ngo, 1999). The once sacrosanct principle of liberal democracy as the yardstick of modernity and human rights is being questioned as representing no more than the imposition of Western values and standards over developing nations like China. On the other hand, within China the superiority of socialist democracy over capitalist democracy and the critiques by new nationalism on foreign bourgeois liberalism (Fewsmith, 2001) are still disseminated among the mainstream media and domesticated to the new generations from elementary schools to postgraduate studies with the compulsory school course of politics. The promotion of socialist civil society with Chinese characteristics in official discourse (Chen and Hu, 2004; He, 2006), fears of political disorder and affiliated concerns about the disintegrative effects of political competition have

to some extent distorted the liberal democratic spirits of authentic civil society and further attenuated support for social movement and democracy (Lindau and Cheek, 1998: 8).

If the above two obstacles are largely from the state sphere and mechanism, then decline and even destruction of trust and credit have been attributed to the egoism in the private sphere. The ill-regulated money-driven market, the bankrupt of communist collectivism and the misuse of *guanxi* (informal relationship or connection - detailed below) have greatly motivated a prevailing pursuit of egoistic interest by taking advantage of others or even at the cost of others, which has significantly devastated the trustworthy relationship between people. Therefore, Chinese civil society is undergoing the painful growth process in resisting the powerful cultural hindrance and actively taking the challenge and responsibility of its own to deconstruct and reconstruct the political culture and ideals. Especially when the CSOs and the public discourse initiate the criticism on social-cultural malfunctions and problems and offer various alternatives to uphold justice, equality, trust, cooperation and individuality, they also try to change the unhealthy social psycho or ethos of cynicism and indifference generated along with the problematic realities and in the face of bitter reform-era disappointments.

The change of power structure

While the imperial and communist traditions used to organise society from

the highest authority downward, civil society is built from the grassroots citizenry upwards. The key purpose of the development of a strong and vibrant civil society is the provision of alternatives in social, cultural, and economic life to balance the strong state power (Brook, 1997; He, 1997). However, what is special in China is that China also has a strong private or family sphere with familial and quasi-familial relationships extending into civil society and also penetrating into the state sphere, which results in the weakness and distortion of civil society and serious corruption and faction in the state. Therefore, the private sphere must become weaker, or at least subordinate to legal equality; civil society must be strengthened but also its cleavages surmounted; and the state sphere opened and the disguised pluralism of factionalism transformed into the open pluralism of a multi-party system.

The proliferation of different organisational forms stems in part from the fact The Chinese state has only recently decentralised some of its power of direct control but concentrated on creating a comprehensive system of governance for the large number of private voluntary organisations. Take the village election for example; the public and intellectuals demand democratic participation and special attention on the election of representatives for the people's congress at different levels. When individuals collectively take civil and legal actions to reflect the needs and interests of the public, they have been entitled the power to balance and check the state and to exceed the

narrow or selfish interest of egoism. Then it has come out the successful practice of the democratic election in the rural areas – ‘grassroots election’ and the village committees that have been the local autonomous organisations elected and operated by the farmers themselves are established widely at the grassroots level. It is also interesting that the government sometimes uses organisations as a sort of channel of social control, while the organisations often expand their power through the support of authority (Wang, 1998). Optimistically a balance of power among the three spheres is in the process of establishment and a healthy relationship of individual-social-state is possible.

However, considering China’s lengthy, complex and sophisticated cultural traditions (Moody, 1995) as well as the growing popularity of egoism, the strength of the private sphere would still wield its influence with the Chinese characterised informal relationship or connection – *guanxi*, which is prevailingly applied in all aspects of life. This term covers a broad range of activities and stratagems held to be widespread in Chinese business and always interfered with political power, from advancing the interests of friends and family, or performing service for past or future favours, to outright bribe-taking (Gold, 2002). When the complex chains of obligation created by the exchange of favour have developed to a delicate direction and when the private sphere is penetrating into the Party-state without proper power checks or surveillance from society, the practice can easily be turned into corruption and replace the normal political and economic operations. On the other hand

not so destructive, the patriarchal or familial relation tied by blood as another dimension of *guanxi* would create an attenuated citizenship that has encouraged paternalism and elitism (Lindau and Cheek, 1998: 9) and thus inhibit the already difficult process of building up of mutual trust-based cooperation and supporting networks among strangers within civil society, which would weaken the sociality and universality of civil society and marginalise volunteerism and autonomy to be government-oriented.

The pressure and restriction of a still strong state also cannot be ignored. Chinese government would like to establish governmental organisations to form a civil society under control and takes various approaches and policies to restrain other interest groups, non-governmental organisations or religious associations. In order to minimise the risk, most of the middle class are likely to be a member of the organisations legalised and promoted by the government rather than joining or setting up an NGO to protect their vested interest. The construction of urban communities and rural villages is also intervened by the government and the Party or directly managed by the nominated administration in some areas, which leads to the bad effect that elections are not concerned about choosing governments (Antlöv and Ngo, 1999).

In general, when a vibrant civil society with its associational proliferation and civic merits is becoming a social reality in China out of the merely controversial concepts or illusory ideals, though with Chinese characteristics to be more interfered by the state arbitrary power and to be more fragmented by

egoism, it has begun to transform the political culture and power structure in favour of democratisation of China. Moreover, problems and hindrances can sometimes turned into motivation and impetus for development, as kindled in contentious politics.

Civil society in contentious politics

Chinese civil society is presented in the popular contentious waves and it obtains fresh and powerful sources and energies from the self-consciousness, mobilisation and contention of different social groups. Contention rather than social movement is used here because contention is a broader category and adopts the viewpoints from political science compatible with the sociological perspective within the terrain of social movement; roughly, contention refers to collective political struggle (McAdam et al., 2001). Joseph Schumpeter (1947) argues that contestation and participation define democracy. The increasingly serious problems throughout the economic reforms including corruption, inequality, poverty, capitalist exploitation, unemployment, insecurity, injustice, value vacuum, environmental destruction and so on weaken the legitimacy of communist government (Chang, 2001). Meanwhile, the lack of corresponding political reform has also brought forth other social economic and political problems such as the violation of human rights, religious and press freedom, and the repression of dissidents. All of the problems at the end become the chief causes of collective grievance leading to a baffling array of disorderly social protests and contentious activities. Three social groups – intellectuals,

labour and religious groups have been selected as study cases depending on their unique attributes and positions in the changing society, their manifest tendency to express their grievance, their associational basis, their frequency of taking actions and their influences.

Firstly, intellectuals, regarded as having the power of knowledge in this Information Age, contain students and scholars in higher institution and universities, academic elites in all fields, writers, freelancers and dissidents both at home and abroad, who have usually gained high education, been sensitive and responsive to the changing world, had a more substantial understanding of democracy and attached much more importance to freedom of speech and publication, which is never fully enjoyed in China under the strict authoritarian censorship. All these determine that they have the potential to be the tower of strength in Chinese civil society and public sphere, and their contentions are likely to be political protests against the communist government taking both action and non-action forms. Intellectuals and students are the most active actors who are radical in political thoughts and in practice they have also established many pro-democracy or human rights advocacy social and political organisations domestically and internationally especially since 1989 movement such as Human Rights in China (National Endowment for Democracy, 2004), one of the premier advocates for international human rights standards in China.

Secondly, labour consists of farmers, workers and migrant workers who

have been marginalised and disadvantaged due to the opportunity and distribution inequalities during the reform era and the restructuring social stratification. Let alone the miserable life experience of lay-off workers and deprived farmers, millions of migrant workers from rural to urban cities in particular live precarious lives with irregular employment, poor wages and working conditions, and absence of social welfare (Solinger, 1999). However, all these unprivileged labourers are beginning to constitute an active social force in the civil society by forming associational networks offering mutual aid, friendship and solidarity. The demands of labour become increasingly concrete, for instance, about social security for re-employment to laid-off workers and they disapprove of the large income gap, and call for anti-corruption campaign. Their protests, often resulting in riots, are mainly for economic purposes, environmental issues, welfare and medical care, children's education and local politics. Moreover, recently the authorities have paid greater attention and surveillance to these 'collective actions' (a delicate phrase rather than a protest-related vocabulary chosen by the governmental media).

Thirdly, religious groups include all the underground churches and fellowships and religion-related associations, which are excluded from the governmental religious networks, resisted rigidly and persecuted ruthlessly. As a socially and morally reforming force, this group is spreading quickly in China both in quantity and in quality by way of Internet and modern media and involving people of all regions and all kinds of groups, professions, status and

hierarchies. Unauthorised churches have been built up in many parts of the country and unofficial religious practice is flourishing, although the Chinese government places restrictions on religious practice outside officially recognised organisations (U.S. Department of State, 2004). Their grievances stem from the government's violations of their religious freedom, but rather than passive tolerance, they have also taken peaceful actions to protest and appealed to the international society.

The state would show different faces to different challengers and may be more or less inclined to support or suppress particular movements (McAdam et al., 1996) for its special interest and to impose its legitimacy and authority over the country. White et al. (1996) argue that the state has practiced three strategies – cooperation, toleration and repression to cope with civil society organisations; the same mechanism also applies to the context of contentious politics. As for the patriotic movements with nationalist sentiments, such as anti-America or anti-Japan or anti-Taiwanese independence protests, the government would cooperate with actors and organisations and even provide material support in order to guide the pace of the action to achieve the governing goal. As for the single-event or small-scale regional protests with similar-background actors, the government would to some extent tolerate and try to appease people's dissatisfaction and relieve their grievance. However, as to the cross-regional, cross-group and large-scale movements or to the political dissidents, the authorities would not hesitate to repress as in the case

of 1989 students pro-democracy movement and 1999 *Falun Gong* spiritual movement. The divided state strategy is rather successful in cracking down on any attempts to generalise them across space or organisation (Gries and Rosen, 2004). But it is also worth noting that the Chinese Government's detention and mistreatment of dissident and even appealers, its restriction on the expression freedom, and its repression on democratic or religious activities has been one of the biggest barriers to China's democratisation.

Another significant fact is that the central and local governments react differently to contentious activities. When it comes to carrying out the policies or commands from the central, the local governments in fact have created their own space to bargain and consider for the regional profits and some even overtly agree but covertly oppose to the central indication (Chen and Ma, 2002). The responses are also differentiated from place to place depending on the regional development of economy, politics and society. It is evident that there is the emergence of real grassroots civic discourse wherein contentious activities at the local level can affect the political leadership and there is the possibility of a mutual dialogue rather than a strictly top-down communicative interaction between the leaders and the citizens and within the government among its various branches or competing factions (Kluver and Powers, 1999).

In consequence, the strategic governmental responses have both positive and negative influences on the multifaceted development of diverse contentious activities. As under the new leadership of Hu Jintao on the

construction of harmonious society by initiating new policies to solve the rising social problems; surely, the state would not support social mobilisation but to assure and expand its power. Nevertheless, each new policy initiative produced new channels of communication, more organised networks of citizens and more unified cognitive frameworks around which insurgents could mount claims and organise. So it is easy to conclude that 'these policies shaped arenas for the construction of social contentions, and these contentions – or the fear of the contentions – shaped the way the national state evolved' (Zheng, 2004: 87). Although the Communist Party of China has adopted some positive measures in hope of preventing the expansion of the social conflicts, the situation still falls short of the expectations of people and society. So the issue is that popular protests and contentious activities still arise so frequently despite tight political control by the government.

Reflections on civil society

Social contentions reveal the diversity and cleavages of civil society. On one hand, most contentious activities take place spontaneously, to an extent reflecting the absence of particular organisations or structure and further the weakness and problems of civil society. On the other, contention is not just about group mobilisation and articulation, but about how the political context or space shapes these processes and channels them and how the power is balanced, negotiated and transferred among different social and political

forces, which as a whole nurture the bases for a vigorous civil society, delicately surmount its cleavages and adjust the individual-social-state relationship. As the strength of people in aggregation, expression, participation, organisation and action during the social contentions is highlighted, civil society would be positively inspired by people's increasing consciousness of agency and demands for autonomy.

From the social contentions of different groups it can be observed that the functions and roles of civil society have been diversified and played by a variety of components with their political consciousness enhancing, which makes civil society itself so vibrant while at the same time the cleavages within the civil society are deepening with reference to social classes and groups, regional differentiation, age groups, ethnics and religion and possibly leading in turn to the stratification, contradiction and exclusion within social contentions. As the market economy serves as the major driving force in China's social stratification, China is now experiencing critical class structural changes and social re-stratification, which produces class pressure in democratic movements. For example, wealthy classes in the coastal developed regions and large and medium-sized cities, including a number of millionaires and some billionaires, giving rise to a good deal of angry condemnation and arguments in debating. It should be pointed out that some social phenomena have caused conflicts between employees and employers and dissatisfaction towards the government by certain social classes. These phenomena include the widened income-gap, the exploitation of the workers by entrepreneurs, the illegal counterfeit activities of some

private businessmen, the extravagance and waste of the wealthy classes, and corruption by many officials.

Historical and cultural factors have also shaped age, ethnic and religion differentiation as different generations with different experience of the historical periods may have wide gaps in perspectives, knowledge, perceptions, concepts, value systems and culture. Notably young people have become a more apolitical generation, who believe neither in dogmas of Marxism and Leninism, nor in the future of complete westernisation. Comparing urban residents with farmers, young people with elder people, classes of higher education level with those of lower educational levels, people in developed coastal area with those in backward mid-west regions, they usually have different demands for autonomy and freedom, with cleavages shown during their mobilisations, contentions and social movements. It is noticeable that there are some unstable forces who are also the weak groups: laid-off workers, migrant workers, religious groups, dissidents and intellectuals under repression. However, it is difficult to integrate one with another to form a broader social network and mobilise more resources to claim people's rights, to overcome the participatory barriers and to limit the authoritarian power.

It is argued that the establishment and development of various associations and interest groups would provide the organisational basis for collective democratic movements and social movements by furthering participation, trust, and civic virtue among citizens (Ertman, 1998). In China especially during the

waves of most frequent labour disputes and other observable contentions, their occurrence shows a large extent of spontaneity rather than being organised, which has further exposed the weakness and cleavages of an immature civil society. On the other hand, even if there are no particular organisations or structure for social and political contentions, politics is also taking place spontaneously. There provides a mode that the first unorganised contentions can be moved into several possible processes: being repressed by the government then silence; or being repressed and then shouting loud together to form some formal or information structure to plan for the next contention; or being guided or channeled by the government and then join the governmental or semi-government association to further protect their right. The civil society organisations then have communications and interactions with the social contentious mobilisation in the latter two scenarios, with associational relationship under construction. For example, the newly-flourishing NGOs, having primarily arisen through the commitment and empowerment of citizens in the political transition, can be fruitfully set up to have the dialogue and negotiation with governments, to meet the emergent or long-term demands of different social groups and to surmount the cleavages of civil society.

What is impressive is that the growth of civil society frequently involves the mobilisation of independent media, which can bring pressure to bear on authoritarian states since the media is an important tool for free expression, democratic propaganda and public sphere extension of a full range of political

interests and viewpoints (Potter et al., 1997; Randall, 1998). Long under the dominance of the ruling Communist Party and used almost entirely as a propaganda vehicle, China's media has now been driven by the profit motive, inclined to pursue news of interest to the public, sceptical of party and government authorities, confident of their own abilities and leverage and becoming more autonomous and more diverse in political content (Hazelbarth, 1997). What's more, in the contemporary times of information, the Internet websites and fora serve as the largest underground media with its unique advantages of freedom, openness and anonymity (Zheng, 2004). For instance, the *Falun Gong* has formed a world wide network connected by modern communication to stage continued protests within China and conduct Internet and telecommunications offensive against the CCP from overseas (Gries and Rosen, 2004). The transformation of the media to a great extent enlarges the public sphere, influences political culture and power structures, provides the public with information to qualify for democratic participation and favours the development of both social contentions and civil society during the process of mobilisation and interrelated framework.

The strength of people lies in their increasing self-consciousness as agents, their demands for a better world and their aggregation, expression, participation, organisation and action during the social contentions. People currently demand for greater autonomy and freedom in job-searching, commercial business, demand privacy and communication in personal and

social life, for social security and guarantee, for freedom of belief and press, etc. Moreover, the rapid development of the society and the deterioration of the ecological environment lead to some new demands, such as a cleaner environment, reducing traffic noise and pollution by urban wastes.

Among the ebb and flow of social contentions with different causes and motives, *justice* and *equity*, which deny political and economic privileges, especially against using privilege of power as a tool to make profit or other goodness for themselves, has been the core value of the mainstream culture to construct a harmonious society and to solve social problems. Equal opportunities for employment and justice in income distribution are demanded, while gaining profits and influence only through capital or family status is opposed strongly by ordinary people. Equality measured by human and civil rights is also demanded today, more than that in the past. Instead of demanding help from the CP committees or branch-secretaries, more and more people prefer to consult a lawyer when they find their rights being violated. People also demand justified market competition and unitary policy, and oppose the discriminated policy toward different regions, provinces, cities, and working units.

To explore people's strength demonstrated in the social contentions when the government views any political dissent as a hostile act and certain sensitive outspokenness is often dangerous, the *wenquan* (defend rights) (Beach, 2005) movement is a case in point. Those *wenquan* lawyers were

Lucy

Comment: ?

partially empowered by the extending movement and the concept that has helped define a growing consciousness of constitutional rights among scholars, lawyers, dissidents, and others. They are more assertively defending the constitutional rights of individuals especially of the weak, disadvantaged and powerless. The participants in the contentions then include and mobilise different social groups to achieve the common goal, which not only reflects the awakening and ongoing maturation of Chinese civil society, but also provide the mutual-supporting base for the further development of a healthy civil society. In addition, their demands for the rule of law, most often expressed in online forums, have largely escaped official censure because they often address issues falling within the government's own evolving policies – such as legal reform, and anticorruption efforts. It is well displayed that the people's wisdom is good at using this ambiguity to create a space to advance their own interests and rights.

Conclusion: the future of civil society in China

China in the new millennium is experiencing political transition and individual-social-state relationship reconstruction both from top down and from bottom up to a further and deeper extent. In the complex context of political transition and on the platform of contentious politics in China, most of the contention in Chinese politics reflects this paradox of individual-social-state relationship: the strength of the private sphere; the fragmentation of the civil

society; and the factionalism and corruption of the State sphere. Unlike Western developed countries, which would encourage contestations to occur and then be able to take responses, make policies and provide guidance, Chinese government would rather set restrictions and as a result force most popular or organised contentions to be illegal and underground and more out of control. So at present, China is confronted with a major problem: without an efficient mechanism of supervision and constriction, the contradiction cannot be solved from the deep root of the unbalanced power relationship among private, social and state sphere. The emergence and development of civil society has been deeply embedded in this tradition, contradiction and restriction since the state has still worried that the quasi-familial relationships of the private sphere and the fragmentation of the civil society would destroy its authority and the private sphere is still swaying between individualism and egoism in the cultural and power arena.

However, civil society has essential values of democracy, freedom, human rights, justice and equity to limit the authoritarian or privileged power and to protect the right of the minority, the weak, the poor, the disadvantaged and the powerless. Thus civil society in China indeed has the merit and prospect to act as a system of checks and balances on the State as well as on the private sphere. On the basis of promoting public cultural and media change, voluntary forming of associations, and social contentions, civil society will contend with money and power to meet the demands of social reproduction, social

integration, and development of individuality (Jing, 1993). It is expected that civil society in China should be dispersed into wider, more diverse networks of interaction, and to dispense literacy, knowledge, income and other organisational resources across wider segments of the population thereby to increase the potential for mediation of private interests and for protests that can challenge authoritarian regimes (Diamond, 1992). Moreover, the reassertion of individual agency and the growing strength of ordinary people would contribute to the participation of all classes and strata, to the modernisation and democratisation of political system, to the further development of civil society, and to China's integration and involvement into the international community and playing its constructive role.

In conclusion, the future of Chinese civil society is under great pressure yet full of bright expectation, struggling to be mature, sophisticated and interactive between the private sphere and the Party-state with cooperation and contention coexisting. The growth and development of civil society will put more emphasis on people themselves; on the promotion of the public and civic awareness; on the internalisation of civil society values and ideals; on the popularity of participation and participatory culture; on the elimination of discrimination along with cleavages and on the capability to check the power of the Party-state. The sources of nourishment will come from the globalisation, marketisation and China's political transition, from the changing cultural environment and power structures, from the mass media and the world wide

web, from critical activities by such social groups as intellectuals, labour and religious groups organisationally or spontaneously and from the appeal and demand of every individual person. In turn the evolving civil society is also greatly influencing and shaping the grand transitional process, the media mobilisation, the contentious politics and people's consciousness. It is further remarkable that there is also an increasingly stronger connection between international society and the prospects of Chinese civil society: international media and society has begun to pay greater attention and even played an actual part in the various contentious activities. Chinese NGOs could play an increasing role in the cooperation with international NGOs and donor organisations. The involvement of international forces promotes the development of civil society in China to a direction of integration into global civil society.

Table 1 Liberal democracy, partial democracy, and authoritarianism

	Liberal democracy	Partial democracy	Authoritarianism
State	Accountable government	Limited accountability of government to citizens through election	Dominant state and government not accountable through elections to citizens
	Free and fair competitive elections	Unfree and unfair competitive elections	No competitive elections
Civil society	Civil and political rights	Rights to freedom of expression curtailed	Severe restrictions on individual civil and political rights
	Associational autonomy	Associational autonomy more or less compromised	Autonomous associations and organisations critical of the state virtually nonexistent

Source: for liberal democratic criteria (Dahl, 1989: 221 in Potter et al., 1997: 5)

ⁱ For a rich and insightful overview of this form of civil society organisations and social movements see Morris-Suzuki, T. 2000. 'For and Against NGOs: The Politics of the Lived World,' *New Left Review*, March-April 2000, pp61-85. The conception has also been used in Colás, A. 2002. *International Civil Society: Social Movements in World Politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press, pp79, 163.

References

- Antlöv, H. and Ngo, T. Eds. 1999. *The Cultural Construction of Politics in Asia*. Richmond: Curzon.
- Beach, S. 2005. 'The Rise of Rights?,' http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2005/05/rise_of_rights.php. Assessed November 25, 2006.
- Brook, T. and Frolic, B. Eds. 1997. *Civil Society in China*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.
- Chang, G. 2001. *The Coming Collapse of China*. New York: Random House.
- Chen, G. and Ma, G. Eds. 2002. *Chinese Conflict Management and Resolution*. Westport, Conn.: Ablex Pub.
- Chen, Z. and Hu, C. 2004. 'On the Inevitability and Cultural Way of Socialist Civilian Society in Contemporary Era,' *Journal of Nanchang University (Humanities and Social Sciences)* 2004:5.
- Congressional-Executive Commission on China. 2005. 'Chinese Civil Society Organisations,' <http://www.cecc.gov/pages/virtualAcad/rol/ngosumm.php>. Assessed November 15, 2006.
- Colás, A. 2002. *International Civil Society: Social Movements in World Politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Dahl, R. 1989c. *Democracy and Its Critics*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Deng, Z. 1997. *State and Society: Studies in Chinese Civil Society*. China: Sichuan People's Press.
- Diamond, L. 1992. 'Economic development and democracy reconsidered,' *American Behavioral Scientist* 35(4/5): 450-99.
- Dreyer, J. 2000c. *China's Political System: Modernisation and Tradition*. New York: Longman.
- Edwards, M. 2004. *Civil Society*. Cambridge, England: Polity Press.
- Ertman, T. 1998. 'Democracy and Dictatorship in Interwar Western Europe Revisited,' *World Politics*, 50 (3): 475-505.
- Fewsmith, J. 2001. *China since Tiananmen – The Politics of Transition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gold, T. et al. Eds. 2002. *Social Connections in China: Institutions, Culture and the Changing Nature of Guanxi*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gries, P. and Rosen, S. Eds. 2004. *State and Society in 21st Century China: Crisis,*

Contention, and Legitimation. New York: Routledge Curzon.

Guthrie, D. 2006. *China and Globalisation: the Social, Economic and Political Transformation*. London: Routledge.

Hazelbarth, T. 1997. 'The Chinese Media: More Autonomous and Diverse – Within Limits,' <http://www.cia.gov/csi/monograph/425050797.html>. Assessed November 22, 2006.

He, B. 1997. *The Democratic Implications of Civil Society in China*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

He, C. 2006. 'Civil Society, Socialism and Socialist Civil Society,' <http://www.tecn.cn/data/detail.php?id=11158>. Accessed April 2, 2007.

Held, D. 1987. *Models of Democracy*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

Hook, B. Ed. 1996. *The Individual and the State in China*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Jing, Y. 1993. 'Summary of the Conference – Civil Society and Modernisation in China,' *Chinese Social Sciences Journal (Hong Kong Edition)* 5: 197-8.

Keith, R. 1994. *China's Struggle for the Rule of Law*. London: St. Martin's Press.

Kluver, R. and Powers, J. Eds. 1999. *Civic Discourse, Civil Society, and Chinese Communities*. Stamford, Conn.: Ablex Pub. Corp.

Liang, Z. 2001. 'Mingjian, Minjian Shehui and Civil Society: Another Exploration of the Concept of Civil Society,' *Contemporary China Studies* 79 (1): 123-40.

Lindau, J. and Cheek, T. 1998. *Market Economics and Political Change: Comparing China and Mexico*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

McAdam, D. et al. Eds. 1996. *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: political Opportunities, Mobilising Structures, and Cultural Framings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

McAdam, D. et al. 2001. *Dynamics of Contention*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Ministry of Civil Affairs. 2004. 'Ministry of Civil Affairs Releases 2004 Statistical Report on the Development of Civil Affairs Work,' <http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/PI-c/859912.htm>. Assessed November 23, 2006.

Ministry of Civil Affairs. 2006. 'Ministry of Civil Affairs Releases First Quarter 2006 Statistical Report on the Development of Civil Affairs Work,' <http://www.mca.gov.cn/news/content/recent/200642182431.html>. Assessed November 15, 2006.

Moody, P. 1995. *Tradition and Modernisation in China and Japan*. Belmont, Calif.:

Wadsworth Pub. Co..

National Endowment for Democracy. 2004. 'International Spotlight Lends Hope to Human Rights in China,' <http://www.ned.org/publications/articles/jun04Spotlight.html>. Assessed November 20, 2006.

Perry, E. and Selden, M. Eds. 2003. *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*. London; New York: Routledge.

Potter, D. et al. Eds. 1997. *Democratisation*. Malden, Ma: Polity Press/Open University.

Randall, V. Ed. 1998. *Democratisation and the Media*. London: F. Cass.

Schumpeter, J. 1947. *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. London.

Solinger, D. 1999. *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Tai, Z. 2006. *The Internet in China: Cyberspace and Civil Society*. New York: Routledge.

U.S. Department of State. 2004. 'Background Note: China,' <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/18902.htm>. Assessed November 20, 2006.

Wakeman, F. 1993. 'The Civil Society and Public Sphere Debate: Western Reflections on Chinese Political Culture,' *Modern China* 19(2): 79-92.

Wang, S. 1991. 'Some Reflections on Civil Society,' *21st Century* 8: 102-14.

Wang, Y. 1998. 'Civil Society in China: Concept and Reality,' in *Global Thinknet Project International Comparative Study on Governance and Civil Society* held by Japanese Center for International Exchange (JCIE).

White, G. et al. 1996. *In Search of Civil Society: Market Reform and Social Change in Contemporary China*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Zhang, Z. 2002. 'An Overview of Civil Society Research,' *Contemporary China Studies* 79 (4): 89-102.

Zhao, L. and S. Dong 2005. 'New Regulations on Social Organisations to be Issued This Year: Civil Society Organisations to Receive Appropriate Encouragement,' <http://www.nanfangdaily.com.cn/zm/20050519/xw/szxw2/200505190006.asp>. Assessed November 17, 2006.

Zheng, Y. 1999. 'From Rule by Law to Rule of Law? A Realistic View of China's Legal Development,' *China Perspectives* 25 (September-October 1999): 31-43.

Zheng, Y. 2004. *Globalisation and State Transformation in China*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

