The Dawn of Civil Society in China

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Civil society, as David Held (1987: 281) defines it, "retains a distinctive character to the extent that it is made up of areas of social life – the domestic world, the economic sphere, cultural activities and political interaction – which are organized by private or voluntary arrangements between individuals and groups outside the direct control of the state." As far as political interaction is concerned, civil society and the public sphere emerge when individuals and groups begin to speak out against their rulers or demand a government response to social needs. To judge whether there is a civil society in the Western sense or a trend towards such a civil society, in China, one needs to identify this public sphere.

Jürgen Habermas (1989) puts forward the concept of "public sphere" as a particular kind of space in which citizens can freely discuss public affairs and participate in political activities outside the control of state power. This public sphere not only allows those lower in the social hierarchy to access information by contacting others, thereby weakening the dominant power holders. The "bourgeois public sphere" of Britain in the 18th century was marked by the springing up of newspapers and cafés as information exchange platforms for independent individuals, free to choose their topics, and open to everyone. Similarly, Chinese people in the 1920s could read the well-known newspaper *Shun Pao* or condemn the Chinese political chaos at that time in teahouses (as described by the famous author Lao She). Although China's public sphere arose much later than that of Britain, its relation to the initial development of capitalism is quite similar. This is evidence that modern China does not lack a public sphere, or at least a pro forma tendency to develop such a civil society.

Two important indicators in Habermas's discourse of the public sphere are the quantity of public participation and the quality of rational and critical discourse. In his specific analysis of the public sphere, the equal and free access for participants is a fundamental feature. However, in China's current pubic space, participation is skewed and inequality. Not all members of the public are able to enter the designated space. Structural imbalances enable an elite minority of the population to take advantage and manipulate the resources of social discourse; vulnerable groups accounting for the majority of the population are marginalized. In

recent years, the quality of discussion about political issues in the Chinese media has gradually improved, owing to the power of critique. A landmark event in Chinese media (especially the Internet and newspaper) was the Sun Zhigang incident of 2003.[i] This represented an advance of the popular will in the public sphere, and thus a demonstration of the force of civil society. Nevertheless, the Chinese social structure can still be characterized as "strong state - weak society", a situation which greatly constrains the media vis-à-vis the government.

This social structure operated well enough in the early reform period (from the 1980s) when (from the perspective of political science) a strong state was able to dictate the integration of national resources to secure the expansion of modern infrastructure and public works at low cost. China has now passed this phase and has become a society of increasingly diverse interests, which sorely misses the intermediary organizations necessary to coordinate and communicate between different interest groups and the government. When civil organizations are blocked and social needs, such as faith, justice, communication and social security, cannot be guaranteed, members of society, especially the underprivileged, develop a hunger to exercise freedom of speech. The full development of civil society is a prerequisite for the harmony and integration of a pluralistic society. The biggest disadvantage of China's current "strong state - weak society" system is that the "weak society" congenitally lacks the ability to check and balance the state power. As a result, the system breeds corruption and social injustice among the government officials with impunity. The effective development of civil society can restore societal control and establish a more balance between the state and society.

Thomas Metzger (2001) argues that the different traditions of political culture in China and the West give rise to different types of civil society. He likens the traditional relationship between individuals and government in China as a "top-down" model, while that of the West is a "bottom-up". The former emphasizes the function and responsibilities of the honest scholar; the latter highlights democratic selection and supervision of leaders. This is of course too simple and even arbitrary, because people in the European Middle Ages also relied on supposedly wise leaders, while uprisings and changes of dynasties reflected the people's choices at various moments in China's long history. The differences between traditional Chinese and Western political cultures are not so great as to hinder Chinese progress towards civil society in the modern Western sense.

The local government's demolition announcement in the old street of Shishi.

When it comes to the relationship between the government and people in China, changes may be under way. Let me outline a real incident that happened in a fourth-tier city, Shishi, in order to understand the tension that can arise between the local government and citizens, and the role of the social media in such contestation. In September 2015, the local government of Shishi announced a plan for the demolition of an old business street and sent an excavator to the site. The businessmen rushed into the street and blocked the giant machine successfully. Many people took photos and posted them on social media, such as Microblog and WeChat. After countless "likes", forwardings and interactive comments, a group for the protection of the old street was organized in a week and led by a temporary committee of the shopkeepers on that street. Not only did the group protest outside the local government building – it also appealed to the higher authorities for help. After standing on the street for three months, the excavator was eventually obliged to retreat; the local authority's concession was interpreted as a sign of its goodwill, and of good governance more generally.

For Yu Keping (2006) this is the ultimate purpose of the development of civil society everywhere. Ever since countries and governments appeared in human history, "good government" or "benevolent government" has always been a desideratum of political theory. But the traditional political ideal of good government is, in the era of globalization, facing a severe challenge from the popular concept of "good governance". In a nutshell, good governance is a social management process to maximize the public interests. The essential characteristic of good governance is a novel relationship between the political state and civil society, i.e. harmonious co-management of both government and citizens in public life. One of the basic elements of good governance is public participation, which means not only political participation but also other kinds of participation by citizens in the public spaces in which they live a significant part of their social lives.

At present, although citizens are not completely free to participate in the discussion of public affairs and political activities in China due to the strict censorship, at least in the public sphere, the previous monotone opinions and the domination of discourse by government have already

broken. Different voices are emerging to supervise and critique the party and political system at various points. In the Habermasian framework, this change can be clearly interpreted as an expansion of the public which is in the process of releasing itself from the constraints of state monopoly, initially by developing ability to dialogue with the party and later by transforming itself into a "third sector" to reconstruct the field between state and society. In other words, this third sector is an arena located between the "public" and "private", akin to Western civil society. In China, the social media are the key to this new dawn.

References

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Note

[i] The Sun Zhigang incident (孙志刚事件) refers to the death of the migrant worker Sun Zhigang in Guangzhou, as a result of the physical abuse he suffered while being detained under China's custody and repatriation (C&R) system. The case received massive attention in the media and on the Internet in China, resulting in the abolition of the C&R system by the national government. As a result of this term, the expression "公民社会(gongmin shehui)", or "Civil Society", became much more widely known and discussed by scholars and media. Some Chinese media even marked the year of 2003 as "the initial year of civil rights (公民权利) in China".