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Civic China – A Unique Conformation

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PERSPECTIVE**Civic China – A Unique Conformation****Baocheng Liu***University of International Business & Economics, Beijing, China*

Civil society was first conceived by Aristotle to describe the ancient Greek city-state. It has gained currency as a vital component to democracy in modern political culture and theory. Near the end of the 20th century, its popularity resurged largely denoting an emergent social phenomenon in Eastern Europe that underwent waves of democratic transition. Vast disagreements exist in the interpretation and attitude toward this notion, as well as its application across the globe. Nonetheless, a positive undertone is generally attached to civil society as the hallmark for societal advancement. It is even popularly held that among the forces that constrain state power, before marketization, the most formidable may be global justice saturated in the world of civil society.

Though reminiscent of the parts of Eastern Europe that abruptly broke away from communism typified by massive government planning and intervention in every aspect of social life, China adopted a more gradualist pace of social and economic transformation. China's change unfolded top-down, marked by its Reform and Open-door Policy at the end of 1978, when the socialist government gradually loosened its grip on the economy. This resulted in a boom of private enterprises (both domestic and foreign) and unleashed the power of the market. However, rapid economic growth is not accompanied by civic vibrancy, although it has quietly fertilized its requisite soil. The "four modernizations drive" introduced by Deng Xiaoping in 1979 – industry, agriculture, national defense, and science and technology – guided China's pursuit of modest levels of affluence (*xiaokang*, \$1,000 per capita by the end of 20th century) made no mention of democratization. On the contrary, democratization was largely a subject of prevarication and at times even considered as a contravening force, and hitherto mavericks were repressed or prosecuted. Until today, in spite of the country's colossal economic size and high global visibility, civil society continues to play a subordinate role in Chinese society. Nonetheless, the salient Chinese model of development, relying on an authoritarian regime, has arguably gained credibility. Seeking economic prosperity on the merit of political stability, particularly when it is viewed against the upheavals that took place in Eastern Europe during its dramatic transformation that began in the 1980s, and more recently the looming financial contagion in some developed economies, whose governments are blackmailed by interest groups, many of whom dressed in the costume of civil society.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are the backbone of civil society. They are formed by engaged individuals with common interests, independent of government and usually operating on a non-profit basis. By official definition in China, NGOs are referred to as social groups (*shehui tuanti*). The burgeoning number of NGOs per capita is nevertheless substantially lower than most other countries, regardless of economic development. The primary reason for this is the government's ambivalence toward NGOs. The noticeable regulatory inconsistencies explain their uneven pattern in number and dynamics along different chronological phases and geographic regions (due to different attitudes of local governments). On the one hand, their positive and auxiliary role in social management is gaining recognition from the government but, on the other, they are often distrusted as a potentially disruptive force, thus having to be controlled by high threshold registration and regular inspection under plural lines of institutional supervision. The Ministry of Civil Affairs and another government agency have authority over the applicants' business. In addition, restrictive approval and vigorous

censorship over mainstream and alternative media and press are always placed on top of the government's agenda for the sake of political stability. Albeit the control, the number of unregistered organizations¹ that function as NGOs has multiplied because of the real need in society, and the financial and organizational capacity to operate NGOs has thrived. Under a mandatory system, peoples' identity was defined and confined in the unit from cradle to grave. With market deregulation, individuals' freedom is reflected by the fact that they are transforming from a "unit person" into a "social person". Now that the majority of NGOs operates in a mutated format, a vast gap is left between official statistics and the real number of NGOs in existence. Government and NGOs need to go through a considerable learning curve before they can build the mutual trust and work together more effectively.

The year 2008 marked a climax of activities of Chinese civil society, triggered by the Wenchuan Earthquake and the Beijing Olympic Games. Donations and volunteerism were unprecedented. Since then, the attitude of government toward social organizations has experienced noticeable change. The 12th Five-Year Plan (2011-2015) documented innovations in the social provision model, emphasizing communal autonomy and the synergy of social groups in social management. In August 2012, China amended its Civil Procedural Law and, for the first time in history, legitimized class action by civil groups against environmental offense.

As China is celebrating its 65th year of the People's Republic on the first day of October, its modern history can be divided into three distinct phases. The first 30-year period (1949-1979) under the rule of Mao Tsetung introduced national independence and unity, but ended in political turmoil and economic hardship. The second 30 years, Deng Xiaoping's program of open-doors and reform, marked by its explosive economic growth and globalization, saw the rise of China, but also an emergence of wealth polarization and rampant corruption. The current period is opening a new chapter for the awakening of the Chinese mind, based on subtle and gradual social reform; less militant and political, more civil. – It enlivens this nation and carries it toward the China Dream by five civilizations: political, economic, cultural, social, and ecological.

Every major wave of technological revolution will not only elevate productivity to a new height but also bring about new modes of production and changes in social constructs: national values, life style, and the political landscape. The surge of social media based on information technologies has created an entirely new and powerful platform for online participation through instant and voluminous information sharing, essential for public voices and activities of NGOs. This has proven to be the strongest force behind the reconstitution of social infrastructure, hence the change of the rules of the game between the state, markets, and civil society. Although subscription to the official print media is still mandatory for the non-private sectors, typical vertical communication between the state and its citizens is increasingly replaced by horizontal communication between citizens.

To some, the democratic progress in China is considered too slow. The new government under Xi Jinping is sometimes seen to be recentralizing state power, at least in the short run. However, the current crusade against corruption, for example, is aimed at restoring popular confidence in the Communist Party and state. During phenomenal economic growth periods, it cannot be denied that corruption oiled the wheel of bureaucracy at times, ironically an organic product of excessive state power in the allocation of economic resources without an adequate counterbalance by civil society and complemented by a free media. Concurrently, the new government is committed to a more transparent and accountable political environment

¹ The number of unregistered NGOs is estimated at 1.5 million (Chinese civil society: Beneath the glacier, *The Economist*, 12 April 2014).

for all constituencies, while the market is allowed to play a major role with deepened reform, steadfastly moving toward regional and global integration. Bolder steps toward social reform and deregulation are needed but a reckless elimination of a long-established, half-functioning system may turn out to be damaging and costly. As Chinese Premier Li Keqiang explained at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2015: “to be a good skier, one needs to do three things: go at the right speed, keep balance and be courageous.” This holds true also for the Chinese economy, and even truer for its social management, considering the immense challenges that lie ahead.

What configuration, what architecture shall Chinese society adopt? Maybe a revived march toward a liberal market economy and a dedication to global inclusiveness, with younger generations passionately emulating western lifestyles? Will China replicate or succumb to the western model of polity and democracy – a propensity vigilantly guarded against by Chinese rulers? As former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew put it, “It is China’s intention to become the greatest power in the world – and to be accepted as China, not as an honorary member of the west”². This may obliquely explain the awakened sense of destiny nested in the China Dream.

History is paved with, and shaped by, vicissitudes. Its ebb and flow neither happens in a linear nor in a cyclical pattern; it is a spiral. For every empire, state, or organization, ascent may be stirred by gladiatorial leadership under special circumstances, but its sustainability, ultimately, relies on a common bond, animated by a collective conscience and shared willpower.

² Graham Allison Robert, D. Blackwill, Singapore's eminence sees China rising and India falling. *The National Interest*, March 1, 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/lee-kuan-yew-grand-master-asia-8169>