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Let Many Civil Societies Bloom: The Rise of Consultative Authoritarianism in China

Jessica C. Teets*

Abstract

In this article, I analyse civil society development in China using examples from Beijing to demonstrate the causal role of local officials' ideas about these groups during the last 20 years. I argue that the decentralization of public welfare and the linkage of promotion to the delivery of these goods supported the idea of local government–civil society collaboration. This idea was undermined by international examples of civil society opposing authoritarianism and the strength of the state-led development model after the 2008 economic crisis. I find growing convergence on a new model of state–society relationship that I call “consultative authoritarianism,” which encourages the simultaneous expansion of a fairly autonomous civil society *and* the development of more indirect tools of state control. This model challenges the conventional wisdom that an operationally autonomous civil society cannot exist inside authoritarian regimes and that the presence of civil society is an indicator of democratization.

Keywords: China; civil society; authoritarian politics; policy learning

The associational revolution that began in the early 1990s in China introduced the idea of a relatively autonomous civil society, departing from traditional forms of social organizations such as kinship groups and corporatist federations.¹ In this article, I analyse the state–civil society relationships that developed over these last two decades, interwoven with examples from Beijing to explore the motivations prompting government officials to allow the expansion of civil society. I use examples from Beijing due to its status as both the capital of China and a distinct city-province, which means that local officials are exposed to national and international pressures in ways not experienced by cadres in other provinces; it thus serves as both a mirror and microcosm of national political trends. I argue that local officials' ideas about civil society play a causal role in determining the evolving relationship between the local state and groups: specifically, that both “strategic” ideas, such as the material benefits and disadvantages of group activity, and “modular” ideas, derived from successful

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¹ Wang and He 2004; this term is derived from Salamon 1994.

international and domestic state–society models, influence the current development of a “consultative authoritarianism” model in Beijing.²

Through fieldwork in Beijing and over one hundred interviews in four other provinces beginning in 2006, I find that the “strategic” idea of civil society assistance with the delivery of public goods and the “modular” idea of a “small state–big society” derived from Western regulatory states together have created positive feedback for the idea of local government collaboration with civil society groups. As I explore in the case study of Shining Stone (*Canyu shi* 灿雨石), decentralization of public welfare to the local government and the linkage of promotion to the delivery of these goods generated a strategic idea of civil society development benefiting the career advancement of local cadres. Additionally, this strategic idea was supported by the regulatory state model, such as seen in the US, of a large public welfare role for social groups and a regulatory role for the local state.³

However, during the same period competing “strategic” and “modular” ideas undermined this cooperative relationship and advocated more of a confrontational relationship. The “strategic” idea of civil society challenging social stability – the maintenance of which is a vital component of cadre promotion – was formed both from domestic experiences and from the international examples of civil society opposing authoritarian regimes, such as the colour revolutions in the former Soviet Republics and more recently the Arab Spring protests. Moreover, this more confrontational relationship outcome was also supported by the increasing popularity of the “modular” idea of state-led development after the successful Olympics in China, which contrasted with the rocky Asian Games in India, and strong economic growth in China during the global economic crisis, which contrasted with economic decline in the US.

This feedback undermined but did not destroy cadres’ idea of a collaborative relationship with civil society. In fact, these contradictory ideas interacted to encourage convergence on a new model of state–society relationship in Beijing, which I call “consultative authoritarianism,” that encourages the simultaneous expansion of a fairly autonomous civil society and the development of indirect tools of state control. This model is being used in Beijing as a “social management” pilot and increasingly appears to be the model for a new proposed national law regulating the development and activity of civil society.⁴ National ideational convergence on this model of consultative authoritarianism challenges the conventional wisdom that an operationally autonomous civil society cannot exist inside an authoritarian regime, and also that the presence of civil society is an indicator of a process of democratization. In fact, as I illustrate in this article, the expansion of civil society in China is not leading to a process of democratization

2 I do not have the space to discuss ideational models; one of the best overviews is Blyth 1997. Additionally, due to space constraints I only examine the influence of cadres’ ideas here, but in other publications also include those of group leaders.

3 Lian 2010.

4 Chen 2011.

but rather to better governance under the conditions of authoritarianism, which in turn is increasing citizen satisfaction with the regime.⁵

The Associational Revolution in China

Chinese civil society has grown dramatically since the early 1990s in the number of registered groups and their participants, from about 400 registered groups in 1986 to over 400,000 by 2006. In fact, despite crackdowns on organized social groups during the 1989 Tiananmen protests and again with the 1998 *falun gong* protests, civil society has grown even more dramatically and diversified its activities since the mid-1990s. Most scholars believe the number of active groups far exceeds the 400,000 registered groups reported by the ministry of civil affairs in 2006, with some estimates as high as eight million registered and unregistered groups.⁶ While both foreign and domestic groups have proliferated, the government does not provide separate figures for registered foreign groups. In 1995, Jude Howell suggested that 15 international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) existed in China, including Médecins Sans Frontières, the US Peace Corps, Oxfam Hong Kong, and Save the Children.⁷ More recently, Hsia and White estimate that at least 50 registered organizations have a long-term presence in China, and approximately 150 international NGOs lack permanent registration but fund development work in China through local partners.⁸

Domestic groups are comprised of social organizations (*shehui tuanti* 社会团体), popular groups (*minjian zuzhi* 民间组织) and non-profit groups (*feiyingli zuzhi* 非营利组织) mostly engaged in service delivery and community development. Although the numbers of groups and participants are increasing, most grassroots organizations are understaffed, with 72 per cent having fewer than ten staff and insufficient volunteers.⁹ These capacity problems are exacerbated by the lack of funding sources – domestic sources due to regulations restricting fund raising and international sources because most international funding goes to larger, more established groups or Chinese branches of INGOs.¹⁰ Surveys of civil society in China reveal the rapid growth of these organizations in sheer numbers, participation and diversity of issue areas; however, groups face significant challenges with capacity issues and mostly operate at the local level, with only 6 per cent of surveyed groups conducting interprovincial activities.¹¹

In addition to concerns about the capacity of this emergent civil society in China, questions likewise have been raised about this emergent civil society's autonomy from the state. The majority of analyses conducted in the 1990s

5 Others have argued that China is improving governance not democratizing. See Nathan 2003.

6 Wang and He 2004.

7 Howell 1995.

8 Hsia and White 2002.

9 Xiong and Qin 2008.

10 Simon 2009.

11 Xiong and Qin 2008.

concluded that these associations were not fully autonomous from the state, and operated as a corporatist extension of the state apparatus.¹² In fact, in 1996 an official in the ministry of civil affairs estimated that less than 50 per cent of groups were self-organized, self-supported and self-governed.¹³ More recent analyses of Chinese civil society still debate the level of autonomy; however, they reveal more independence among both government-organized groups and grassroots groups.¹⁴ As Yiyi Lu finds, most groups independently locate funding sources, hire staff and run programmes.¹⁵ This debate also occurs inside civil society, and is likewise often expressed in a more nuanced fashion as a continuum of autonomy outcomes rather than a dichotomous category. For example, a group leader contended that he must balance cooperating with the government in return for access to the policy process, with the risk of losing this access if he criticized government actions.¹⁶ Although this is still a contentious debate in the existing literature, many scholars, including myself, argue that over the last decade increasing group activity and professionalization have given rise to a sector comprised of both grassroots and government-organized groups that help deliver goods and participate in policy decisions at the local level, or possess what Wang calls “operational autonomy.”¹⁷ While civil society autonomy is not the main focus of this analysis, it clearly is a part of the overall state–group relationship outcome that I seek to explain. Thus, in the rest of this article, I explore how cadres’ “strategic” and “modular” ideas of civil society influence the current state–society relationship outcome of “consultative authoritarianism,” beginning with the ideas that support a more collaborative relationship with autonomous groups.

Motivating State–Society Cooperation: Decentralization of Public Goods Provision

My contention that a relatively autonomous civil society is emerging in China raises the question of why local officials allow such an expansion in an authoritarian state. In contrast to most of the literature which posits the expansion of civil society as an indicator or precursor of democratization, I argue that the decentralization of public goods and linking of the provision of these goods to promotion generated the “strategic” idea among local officials that civil society expansion might benefit them, which was further supported by the regulatory state–society model provided by Western industrial states.¹⁸

12 Brook and Frolic 1997; Chamberlain 1993.

13 Ma 2002.

14 Howell and Pearce 2002; Saich 2000.

15 Lu 2007.

16 Interview with director of grassroots group, Beijing, July 2007.

17 Wang 2006.

18 Diamond 1994.

Beginning in the 1980s, the central state increasingly decentralized fiscal policy to local governments under the slogan of “cooking in separate kitchens” (*fenzao chifan* 分灶吃饭). The central government transferred to local governments the primary responsibility for the provision of public goods such as education, health care, infrastructure and social security programmes like unemployment insurance. Consequently, the Chinese fiscal system is highly decentralized, with the central government accounting for only 30 per cent of total budgetary expenditures, and the remaining 70 per cent distributed among four sub-national levels.¹⁹ In comparison, sub-national governments account on average for only 14 per cent of total budgetary expenditures in developing countries, and 32 per cent in developed countries. As Christine Wong notes, this model of decentralization is even more notable because China is one of the only countries in the world to assign responsibility for providing vital social services such as social security, basic education, health care and public safety to local governments.²⁰

Decentralization gave local government limited political devolution alongside more significant administrative and economic devolution, and was intended to increase the ability of local governments to regulate local markets and provide public services to society.²¹ However, local governments do not possess the necessary fiscal autonomy to meet these unfunded mandates. The central government restricts the ability to tax local populations and to secure bonds or loans through fiscal budget laws, so local governments cannot issue debt and should not run fiscal deficits. Nevertheless, with the demands on local governments increasing while fiscal transfers from the central government remain low, most provinces operate a budget deficit, tax illegally, or borrow using special financial vehicles to fund social programmes through extra-budgetary revenue.²² This gap between responsibilities and funding represents one mechanism motivating local governments to view an emerging civil society as a source of potential partners in securing international funding and innovative models to bridge the resource gap and solve welfare provision problems.

The experience of decentralization in China has led to the creation of unfunded mandates and high levels of local debt.²³ In addition to this resource gap, the linkage of public goods provision to promotion further motivates local officials to cooperate with civil society to deliver public services. The target management responsibility system (*gangwei mubiao guanli zerenzhi* 岗位目标管理责任制) prioritizes economic targets like public goods provision to evaluate cadre performance and determine promotions and pay. Although there is debate over which performance criteria actually result in promotion, the two most important goals are economic development and social order.²⁴ When the work-unit system

19 Park et al. 1996.

20 *Ibid.*

21 Qian and Weingast 1996.

22 Li 2006; Wong 2007.

23 Frazier 2010; Cai and Treisman 2002.

24 Whiting 2001; Landry 2003.

of welfare disintegrated, social intermediaries became necessary to provide health and other welfare services.²⁵ As a senior official in the ministry of civil affairs succinctly explained, “The government cannot totally manage health, culture, social welfare and education. In the future China will have a big society and a small government. Social organizations will play a big role.”²⁶ According to interviewed local officials, this pressure to provide public goods motivated collaboration with civil society because officials could access international funding and resources to further their promotion goals and increase welfare in the local community, and if the collaboration appeared to lead to unrest, they could simply shut down the whole project.²⁷ As one official explained, partnering with these groups opened up a new line of finance with little risk, unlike common extra-budgetary channels such as increasing fees and taxes or selling land, both of which create social protest.²⁸

The decentralization of public goods provision corresponded with an increase in international funding sources for civil society groups. Beginning in the early 1990s, international funding agencies and INGOs began to work in China, often explicitly excluding local governments and funding grassroots groups.²⁹ The World Bank and other international funding agencies, such as the Ford Foundation, wanted to fund development through more bottom-up initiatives.³⁰ Together this environment created limited space for the legitimate functioning of civil society groups in service delivery as well as raising the capacity among these groups to undertake expanded projects in the poorest areas. As one group member explained, “my organization’s role is service delivery – providing services that the government cannot provide. While government investment in health is increasing, the majority goes to the cities – with 80 per cent of the funding serving 20 per cent of the population.”³¹ In order to take advantage of this new funding stream, local officials partnered with existing groups or supported the creation of new groups, as I later illustrate with the Shining Stone case.³²

Motivating State–Society Cooperation: the Regulatory State Model

In addition to this “strategic” idea of collaborating with groups to provide public goods, the Western regulatory state model supported this type of cooperation. Beginning in 1979 with the initiation of economic reform, elites engaged in a national debate over developing a regulatory state. The regulatory-state model consists of transitioning governing institutions from a producer function to

25 Howell 2004, 144.

26 Howell 1995, 10.

27 Over 100 interviews conducted by the author with academics, officials, and civil society leaders in Beijing, Yunnan, Jiangsu and Sichuan provinces between 2006 and 2010.

28 Interview with retired health bureau (*weisheng ju*) cadre, Yunnan, May 2007.

29 Mathews 1997; Salamon and Anheier 1996.

30 Sanyal 1994.

31 Interview with founder of health-care association, Simao, Yunnan, February 2007.

32 Foster 2001.

more of a regulatory function, similar to advanced industrial models found in the West. Many Party leaders, like Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 and Jiang Zemin 江泽民, believed that economic reform required restructuring state institutions designed to *produce* market goods to become institutions designed to *regulate* a combination of state-owned and private firms producing market goods. This idea of a regulatory state dominated local policy in Beijing, as well as nationally, during the first 20 years of economic reform. Reforms were initiated that consisted of developing regulatory institutions and policies, building a professional and technocratic civil servant corps, decentralizing fiscal and public welfare functions to lower levels of government, and expanding the private sector composed of both firms and civil-society organizations.³³ As Wen Jiabao 温家宝 – another proponent of this regulatory-state model – asserts, as the state withdraws from its former responsibilities, civil society develops to mediate problems associated with development and globalization.³⁴

The regulatory-state model patterned after advanced industrial economies such as the US and Germany supports this idea of a collaborative role for civil society, where the state provides a supportive legal and fiscal structure, and groups provide public goods, mediate social unrest and promote good governance. For example, in addition to a tax-exempt status, the US government supplies approximately 56 per cent of civil society groups' funding, and the German government supplies 65 per cent.³⁵ The US and Germany, as developed capitalist states, represent examples of China's potential future that many policy makers use to discuss how the state, society and economy might evolve over time.³⁶ However, while this collaborative state–society model might be the ultimate goal, the methods of transition and process of reform are debated between advocates of the regulatory state and New Left (*xin zuopai* 新左派) models.³⁷

Throughout the reform era, officials proceeded with economic restructuring by “crossing the river by groping for stepping stones” (*mozhe shitou guo he* 摸着石头过河), which implies that change occurs by moving slowly from one stage to another after recalibrating the strategy to adjust for any negative effects. Officials also apply this approach to political reform, especially the development of civil society, by encouraging civil society groups to solve social problems without threatening Party hegemony. For example, Wen Jiabao recently called on Shenzhen to serve as a pilot for political reform, and in response local government officials initiated a system of contracting the provision of public goods out to civil society groups.³⁸ As illustrated in the following case study, both

33 See Dali Yang (2004) for a comprehensive overview of administrative reforms.

34 Sijin Wang 2011.

35 Salamon 1996.

36 I first heard this during a civil society conference at Peking University's Civil Society Research Center, 15 January 2007, and then again at a staff research meeting at Tsinghua University's NGO Research Center, 2 June 2008.

37 Li 2010.

38 See Wen Jiabao and Hu Jintao's speeches about piloting political reform in Shenzhen (quoted in Lee 2010).

“strategic” and “modular” ideas influenced local officials in Beijing to collaborate with civil society groups to provide public goods.

State–Society Collaboration in Beijing: The Case of Shining Stone Community Action

Beijing is unique in that it serves as both a provincial and national capital; however, the local government in Beijing is organized in a similar fashion to other provinces, with a four-level municipal government, local Party authority held by the Beijing Party secretary, and authority over 16 urban and suburban districts and two rural counties. Beijing is one of the most developed cities in China, with 26 *Fortune* Global 500 companies. This rapid development and urbanization creates a multitude of challenges, such as strained social-welfare provision and a large migrant population without access to basic social services. The registered population of Beijing consists of those holding a permanent residence permit (*hukou* 户口) or a temporary residence permit; as of February 2010, the combined population of permanent and non-permanent residents exceeded 22 million, with the latter category numbering eight to nine million.³⁹ In addition to the difficulty in developing new affordable models to provide these services to residents, a large number of migrant workers (*min gong* 民工) live in Beijing without official residence permits of either kind, which limits access to social services for the migrants and their children. This large population places pressure on Beijing’s local government to provide social welfare services such as compulsory education, health care, unemployment benefits, pensions and elder care services.

Beijing is divided administratively into districts (*qu* 区), supervised by street affairs offices (*jiedao banshichu* 街道办事处) responsible for residents’ committees (*jumin weiyuanhui* 居民委员会) in communities of approximately 2,000 households. Most residents’ committees have six or seven staff members appointed by the street affairs office who have developed various service delivery models as part of the “community construction” initiative. This initiative was established by the central government to encourage local governments to adapt to the rapid changes in service delivery in urban China – including both the influx of rural economic migrants and the wide service gaps left by the collapse of the work-unit model. While Beijing is a wealthy city-province, officials lacked models for service delivery that were not linked to state-owned enterprises, traditional practices of elder care by families, and stable migration practices governed by the *hukou* system.

This difficulty in creating new service delivery models is illustrated by surveys from the Horizon Research Group for 2003 to 2005, which revealed that the majority of Beijing residents are not satisfied with government service, primarily due to an overly bureaucratic approach to welfare, and a “one size fits all” model that does not actually address existing problems.⁴⁰ In response to these problems

39 *China Daily* 2010.

40 Saich 2007.

providing social-welfare services to vulnerable communities in Beijing, domestic and international groups initiated projects to provide many of these services. Local officials allowed the proliferation of these projects at the lowest levels of administration in order to test innovative international models piloted by the groups, and this successful collaboration reinforced the idea of civil society mediating social problems, as advocated by the advanced industrial state model.

One of these groups, Shining Stone Community Action (SSCA), uses a community-participation model to deliver services to migrant communities in the Beijing suburbs, and contends that public participation in China's municipal affairs will increase citizen satisfaction as the government involves citizens in the provision of social services as partners of the local government, thereby giving them some influence in selecting types of services.⁴¹ The founder of Shining Stone, Song Qinghua 宋庆华, joined one of China's original NGOs, Global Village of Beijing, in 1997 to encourage recycling. Five years later, Song formed Shining Stone Community Action, registering it initially as a consulting company due to difficulty receiving permission to register as a civil society group. The group's aim is to develop urban community capacity to sustain participatory governance, and it has received a number of international grants to operate these projects. For example, Shining Stone initiated training programmes for street affairs office staff in Beijing with a grant from the Ford Foundation in 2002. After working in Beijing for seven years, the group was allowed to register as nonprofit in 2009, and currently has seven full-time staff.

Addressing service delivery to the growing migrant population in Beijing, Shining Stone partnered with the Qingyuan 清源 street office to initiate a pilot project in 2007. This office supervises 28 neighbourhoods with a total of 110,000 registered residents and 20,000 migrant workers. Each neighbourhood has its own residents' committee responsible for household registration, public safety, enforcement of the one-child policy, and services for the elderly, disabled and unemployed. SSCA worked with the residents' committees to train government officials and residents in participative methods and project management skills.⁴² Next, using these skills, the participants jointly identified services that were needed and designed a pilot programme to create participatory mechanisms to solve future problems cooperatively. The Qingyuan street office funded promising projects that were suggested by participants, such as a training centre for migrants employed as domestic helpers and a cultural association run by the participating residents and members of the residents' committees. These SSCA-proposed projects assist the residents' committees in meeting the social innovation requirement, outlined by the municipal government, of each committee implementing at least one such civic project by 2010. Many of the projects implemented with Shining Stone assistance address service-delivery problems with either elderly or migrant residents, such as library and kindergarten

41 Shining Stone Community Action website, www.communityaction.org.cn.

42 Geisselmann and Warmer 2009.

programmes for migrant children, community dinners where pensioners can buy a meal for less than one yuan, and training courses for migrants in urban skills such as learning how to use ATM machines.

In the past, urban and community development was strictly controlled by the local government without the participation of community members. However, after the collapse of the former model of welfare delivery, municipal officials are uncertain how to adopt new models of service delivery without being overwhelmed by citizen dissatisfaction as soon as they open channels for participation.⁴³ Additionally, local officials and residents lack practical experience with policy participation. Shining Stone's pilot programmes in Beijing help local officials manage the transition from former service delivery models to a new participatory model based on practices in advanced industrial states, without generating a flood of social unrest and public grievances.⁴⁴ Through its extensive training programmes, SSCA promotes a new understanding of the roles of both state and civil-society actors. According to this model of service delivery, local officials no longer provide all necessary services or use a "one-size" plan, but instead fund and supervise projects proposed and run cooperatively by residents and committees. This collaboration allows committees and community leaders to help the local state mediate between various interests, and does not treat participation as "mass mobilization" in the way that previous models calling for public participation did. In this way, Shining Stone's pilot programme in Qingyuan created positive collaborative experiences for local officials and a model for other communities to follow, both of which reinforce the idea of civil society partnering with the state to mediate social problems.

In addition to creating a stable path for transition to new social welfare models, Shining Stone's projects in Beijing improve local governance, which also positively reinforces the idea of collaborating with civil society. For example, as the Horizon surveys found, many residents view the residents' committees and street offices as intervening in their private affairs and acting in an arbitrary manner with little concern for their needs. The committees often do not investigate diverse needs across communities and use the same programmes in communities with different needs, leading to non-cooperation and occasional outbreaks of protest on the part of displeased residents. As SSCA's founder notes, uniform welfare provision presupposes that every neighbourhood has identical needs, yet this is simply incorrect.⁴⁵ For example, she finds that in contrast to poorer areas, families in richer neighbourhoods have books at home so library use is negligible, thus government funding would be better spent meeting needs identified by the residents rather than providing a library in every community.

Services identified and provided by residents after deliberation with committees and street offices offer better local governance because residents, being

43 Interview with ministry of civil affairs official, Beijing, January 2007.

44 Interview with Beijing municipal representative, Beijing, June 2010.

45 Young and Qian 2006.

directly affected by welfare provision, stress quality and efficiency and understand the local context and needs. As Song finds, “The other day the staff in one neighbourhood were discussing how, when they have to announce a new decision or policy, if they just put up posters (*tongzhi* 通知) to communicate this, people always criticize and complain. But if they hold a meeting to explain and discuss changes with the community, people usually see the point and are supportive, and there is less conflict.”⁴⁶ In addition to satisfied citizens, local officials gain recognition from supervisors through “innovation awards” that many provincial governments award to encourage policy innovation at lower levels. These innovations can then be tested and disseminated by provincial leaders. For example, in Beijing, one district official who partnered with Shining Stone in order to develop a new model for integrating migrant families into their new communities won an “innovation in governance” award with a cash reward and recognition from the municipal government.⁴⁷ This experience reinforces officials’ idea of civil society partnering with the local state to mediate development and globalization problems, such as urbanization.

Shining Stone’s successful collaboration with street offices and residents’ committees in Beijing supports the regulatory-state model whereby civil society assists the state in mitigating social problems through innovation difficult for the state to achieve without public participation. Song argues that collaboration has changed many officials’ ideas of service delivery and more broadly of the role of civil society from the early 1990s: “Some people at the very top understand the need for this, but local government is more generally populated by bureaucrats operating on remote control. Many Chinese officials have their own idea of citizen participation: “We decide, you participate.”⁴⁸ After the first pilot projects in Beijing in 2002, Shining Stone’s model of service delivery spread to other provinces. Throughout 2003, the group trained cadres and community workers across 26 urban communities in Beijing and 22 in Wuhan with funding support from the Ford Foundation, and then trained local officials in Tianjin, Nanjing, and Shanghai with funding from the ministry of civil affairs. In late 2006, Shining Stone secured funding from Oxfam Hong Kong to support a programme to help migrant communities develop a plan for future development in Chengdu, Nanchang and Ningbo.

As illustrated in this brief case study, the participatory model of service coordination advocated by Shining Stone improves community welfare provision in Beijing, and creates a new model of service delivery. This new model is based on state–society co-production of public goods, and as discussed further in the conclusion, has quickly been adopted by other local governments.⁴⁹ However, as I discuss in the following section, both the strategic and modular ideas supporting state–society collaboration were challenged by competing ideas of

46 *Ibid.*

47 Interview with staff member of Shining Stone, Beijing, June 2008.

48 Young and Qian 2006.

49 Jing and Savas 2009.

civil society as a threat to single-party rule and the success of a state-led model in the wake of the global economic crisis and the colour revolutions in the post-Soviet Republics.

Undermining State–Society Cooperation: Stability Maintenance and Colour Revolutions

As illustrated by the Shining Stone case, collaboration with civil society helps local officials solve development issues and improve governance; however, officials must balance these benefits with social stability concerns. The target management responsibility system prioritizes *both* economic development and social order goals for officials. Concerns with social stability, or perceived anti-state activities, permeate the Party leadership and all levels of government in Beijing. Statistics illustrate growing numbers of “mass incidents” such as demonstrations, protests and riots throughout the 2000s – totaling 87,000 in 2006, an increase of 6.6 per cent from 2005.⁵⁰ Since 2008, central government officials have expressed rising concern about protests in the minority areas of both Tibet and Xinjiang in western China, and local officials in Beijing worry about the possibility that growing income gaps and unemployment among the migrant population and recent college graduates might trigger increasing unrest.⁵¹ In fact, the most recent national budget showed more spending on “stability maintenance” than any other category, including public goods, and equivalent to national defence.⁵² Thus social stability is the paramount goal of the Party leadership, with “instability” broadly defined as social unrest which might threaten economic development and the Party’s political hegemony.⁵³

The ability of civil society organizations to mobilize citizen action against the state is well understood in Beijing after the colour revolutions and the Arab Spring, and local officials must balance the benefits of partnership with concerns about social mobilization and instability. The confrontational role played by civil society groups in the colour revolutions during the 2000s reinforces desire for more state control over group activity. As Deyong Yin notes, a constant concern of the Chinese government is that NGOs supported by governments of Western countries may subvert the rule of the Chinese Communist Party through “peaceful transformation”; this concern encourages officials to pay particular attention to groups with funding from overseas foundations or foreign NGOs, to prevent a colour revolution in China.⁵⁴ As one staff member of a Beijing group noted, “After the colour revolutions government officials have frequently visited our office and invited me to have tea to discuss the goals and strategies of the group.”⁵⁵ She

50 Tanner 2004.

51 Ford 2009.

52 Tsinghua University report, cited in *New York Times* 2010.

53 Interview with faculty member of Central Party School, Beijing, June 2007.

54 Yin 2009.

55 Interview with staff member of domestic NGO, Beijing, February 2007.

contends that the colour revolutions led local officials to attempt to learn about all unregistered groups' "intentions and organizational structure."⁵⁶ With increasing unemployment in both migrant and recent graduate populations in Beijing, local officials fear the ability of civil society groups to mobilize and link these populations, as seen in the youth movements during the colour revolutions. In fact, President Hu Jintao issued a joint declaration with President Putin where he stated that the imposition of "alien models of social and political systems" was deemed "inadmissible," and suggested that the Belarusian strategy of crushing potential social mobilization was the way to maintain stability.⁵⁷ Most recently, the Beijing government responded to suggestions in online chat rooms that there be a "Jasmine Revolution" modeled after the Arab Spring protests by closing several civil society groups, arresting known dissidents and physically repressing any large gatherings in the city.⁵⁸ This response illustrates the "strategic" idea held by many officials that civil society is not a partner and in fact may mobilize society to oppose an authoritarian regime, which challenges the idea that the local state should collaborate with these groups to coproduce goods.

Undermining State–Society Cooperation: the Successful State-Led Model

In addition to fears of instability, the successful 2008 Beijing Olympics and weathering of the global economic crisis generated feedback undermining the idea of collaborating with civil society. In fact, the ability of local officials to hold the Olympics despite international and domestic "disruptions," and to maintain strong economic growth despite a global economic crisis, increased the prominence of ideas that imagined a larger, more active state role than under the regulatory-state idea, which was delegitimized by the decline in the US economy during the economic crisis. Since 2008, many officials have discussed the "rise" of China and "decline" of the US as evidence of the superiority of a state-led model.⁵⁹ In Beijing, the local economy was not as tied to exports as the coastal cities in the south, and thus felt less of a manufacturing impact. Instead it suffered the decline of the construction sector and hiring freezes by multi-national corporations, which disproportionately affected migrants and recent college graduates. After central and local officials implemented a stimulus package, Beijing experienced a surge in consumer sales and a slow resurgence in building. In fact, local GDP increased by 10 per cent in 2009. In response to these successes on the part of state leadership, the New Left idea of the superiority of a state-led model challenged the hegemony of the regulatory-state idea.⁶⁰

56 *Ibid.*

57 TASS 2005.

58 Jacobs 2011.

59 Jisi Wang 2011.

60 Mishra 2006.

New Left ideology is characterized by an emphasis on the state's power to redress the problems of injustice and other negative effects of privatization, marketization and globalization. Following the Marxist tradition, New Left theorists believe that the capitalist mode of production is grounded in exploitation, and that a civil society developed under capitalism is simply a vehicle for ensuring the dominance of capitalist interest groups.⁶¹ Thus, the New Left advocates the development of new state-controlled mechanisms for participation, and distrusts current civil society in China as representing dominant capitalist interests at the expense of social justice. However, New Left ideas differ from Maoist ideology, where civil society was incorporated into the state, in instead promoting state guidance of fairly independent civil society to help the state meet goals coupled with strict controls on groups that attempt to promote special interests or pursue a role outside of the one envisioned by the state. In fact, the head of the ministry of civil affairs policy office recently published an article calling for state guidance of autonomous groups to avoid the “bad” civil society seen in many Western countries.⁶²

While New Left ideas were gaining in popularity, the perceived failure of the US-style regulatory model has greatly undermined neoliberal reformers in China who would like to see a more complete dismantling of the state-owned sector and rise of non-state actors such as civil society.⁶³ The rising influence of the New Left in the “harmonious society” policies adopted in 2005 illustrates the ideational challenge to the regulatory-state ideas of the 1990s.⁶⁴ Thus, events in the last decade undermined the idea of civil society as a partner advocated by both the Western regulatory-state model and successful collaboration experiences such as with Shining Stone. The interaction of these conflicting ideas created a new state–civil society model which simultaneously allows for the expansion of relatively autonomous groups *and* the development of indirect state control mechanisms.

The Rise of “Consultative Authoritarianism”

These strategic and modular ideas influenced the development of a new model of state–society relationship, what I call “consultative authoritarianism,” which merges the regulatory-state idea of a relatively autonomous civil society collaborating with the state to solve social problems with the New Left idea of state guidance of groups to protect society from narrow interest groups and social instability. This model is characterized by two main aspects – a pluralistic society participating in policy formation and implementation, and the use of multiple indirect tools of state control. As I explain below, while the goals of this

61 Hui Wang 2001, 185.

62 Zhou 2011.

63 Bo and Chen 2009.

64 Huang 2011; He Li 2010.

consultative authoritarianism are the same, the social pluralism and differentiated state control present in this model distinguish it from earlier corporatist models.

The first distinctive characteristic of this new corporatist model is the existence of officially tolerated social pluralism. Unlike the corporatist model described by Jean Oi, groups no longer serve as appendages to the state, but possess independent staff, resources and projects.⁶⁵ In fact, Jude Howell finds that most groups receive little government funding other than perhaps free office space; the majority of groups were started voluntarily from below, although some also involved officials in activities in order to informally access resources and contacts, enhance the prestige of the organization and gain political protection for activities.⁶⁶ Groups are required to register with the ministry of civil affairs and a supervisory agency, but these regulations have not substantially limited the expansion of civil society in China to date. Attempts to restrict the space and range of organizational activity through registration have turned into a “facade of monopoly.”⁶⁷ For the most part, these groups establish independent projects and strategies, and any cooperation with local government is due to mutual recognition of comparative advantage: “We [the Yunnan Reproductive Health Association] need a government network, like the women’s federation, for this makes our work convenient. It helps us to organize a focus group discussion or visit households. So there is a cooperative relationship.”⁶⁸ Local government often collaborates with unregistered groups, as the SSCA example illustrates. As Wang finds, these groups possess operational autonomy.⁶⁹

Additionally, there is more pluralism in this model than offered under corporatism, with multiple groups competing inside one policy space or region. Under the corporatist model, the state only recognizes one organization, such as the women’s federation, as the sole representative of the interests of the individuals or businesses comprising that organization’s constituency. It is only through this channel that incorporated organizations may participate in the policy-making process to help implement policy for the government. This former model of corporatism limits the number of actors participating in the policy process and thus controls the actions of the members. However, since the early 2000s, multiple groups representing the same constituency in a region have proliferated, and some groups such as environmental NGOs increasingly link members across the country through online forums and resources.⁷⁰ These groups and practices have proliferated to such an extent that the director of one group engaged in linking civil society actors across regions argues that the official federations now view grassroots groups as policy and resource

65 Oi 1992; Chan and Unger 1995.

66 Howell 2004, 157.

67 Howell 2004, 158.

68 Cited in Howell 2004, 159; interview with Federation staff, Yunnan, June 2007.

69 Wang 2006.

70 Ho 2001.

competitors.⁷¹ These groups also participate in the whole process of policy making including policy formation, and no longer just in policy implementation as seen with the former federation model.⁷²

The second distinctive characteristic of this new model is the type of control mechanisms used by the state. These mechanisms are called “differentiated control” by Kang Xiaoguang 康晓光, who finds that the state increasingly uses more sophisticated and indirect methods to create positive and negative incentives encouraging groups to work toward meeting state goals.⁷³ The example of a group called 1KG More (*Duobei yi gongjin* 多背一公斤) illustrates the positive incentives used under the consultative authoritarianism framework.⁷⁴ The founder of this grassroots group set up an online network on QQ to coordinate between needy rural schools and potential urban donors. Since 2004, thousands of urban citizens have participated in 1KG More’s network by carrying a kilogram of books or other school supplies in their luggage to distribute to children in the impoverished rural areas they visit, and at the same time to share information on the website about the condition of rural schools.

This group helps the local government in Beijing and two other provinces address problems with income inequality between rural and urban areas, such as gaps between rural and urban education. According to the group’s founder, “By combining travel with doing good, we hope to change the reality of the imbalance of education between rural and urban areas in China. Although enrolment in higher education is increasing, the proportion continuing their studies in rural areas is far lower, and education standards are much poorer.”⁷⁵ Since 2004, when the network started, ten thousand 1KG More “volun-tourists” have collected detailed data on over 600 rural schools, distributed books and stationery benefitting at least one million people, and developed new sites representing almost all major Chinese cities.

1KG More initially earned its income by offering corporate social responsibility consulting to businesses; however, the Beijing municipal government recently supported this network as a way to encourage a charity approach to help rural schools by using three main positive incentives – social incubators, government grants and new registration laws. The Beijing municipal government funds a privately-run incubator programme, the Non-Profit Incubator (NPI) established by Lü Zhao 吕朝 in 2006, which trained 1KG More staff members in professional project management, auditing and accounting skills and grant writing.⁷⁶ Additionally, the municipal government eased registration regulations for selected groups (which now only require registration with the local bureau of civil affairs and no longer require a supervisory agency) and also initiated a grants programme

71 Interview with director of civil society group, Beijing, July 2007.

72 Mertha 2009.

73 Han and Kang 2005; interview with Kang Xiaoguang, Beijing, July 2010.

74 Interview with head of a capacity-building group working with 1KG More, Beijing, June 2010.

75 1KG More website: <http://1kg.blogbus.com/>.

76 Interview with Fudan University professor, Shanghai, July 2010.

in 2010 of 300 million yuan (US\$44 million) to fund groups proposing social innovation projects. The grants and incubation experience allowed 1KG More to expand into physical offices in Beijing and Guangzhou. These positive incentives “guide” groups toward areas in which the local state would like to see them working, such as social innovation to solve welfare-provision problems.

However, this model also uses negative incentives, as evidenced in the example of the INGO Oxfam. Oxfam successfully partnered with many local governments to undertake poverty alleviation programmes; however, when it attempted to link together college student volunteers with migrant workers in Beijing – two sensitive populations, given high unemployment rates – the ministry of education instructed all Beijing universities to stop collaborating with Oxfam.⁷⁷ Oxfam was allowed to continue operating its poverty alleviation programmes including those with migrant populations, but *indirect* control mechanisms such as cutting off the supply of student volunteers were used to “guide” the group back onto a more service-oriented path and away from anything potentially disruptive of social order. Oxfam closed down this programme due to lack of student volunteers, which illustrates the more nuanced and indirect tools of state control that local officials use to balance the strategic ideas of meeting development goals and maintaining social order. Unlike the former model of corporatism, autonomous civil society groups are expanding in size, scope and significance; however, government control over these groups, while still present, is increasingly nuanced. As these examples illustrate, competing ideas among local officials in Beijing – about the perceived benefits and dangers of this emergent civil society and about which type of state model to follow – influence the development of this new model of consultative authoritarianism.

Although variation still exists across provinces and over time in the degree of collaboration or confrontation found in local state–civil society relationships, there is increasing evidence of a national convergence on this model as seen in the use of the Beijing model of “social management” to develop new national regulations for civil society by 2012. As the minister of civil affairs recently announced, “The ministry will take Beijing’s experiences as reference and promote them, but the steps will not be as wide-ranging as Beijing’s.”⁷⁸ Thus this consultative authoritarianism model might be adopted nationally as early as next year and serve to promote the growth of operationally autonomous groups and further indirect social controls.

Implications of Consultative Authoritarianism: Better Governance under CCP Rule

While this article primarily relied on examples from Beijing, these local officials serve as both a mirror and microcosm of political trends occurring nationally.

⁷⁷ Interview with Renmin University professor, Beijing, July 2010; interview with Fudan University professor, Shanghai, July 2010.

⁷⁸ Le 2011.

Across all provinces in China, the decentralization of public welfare to local governments and the linkage of promotion to the delivery of these goods created the motivation for officials to collaborate with an emerging civil society in the 1990s. The “modular” idea of coproduction represented by the Western regulatory-state model supports this idea of collaboration. However, other “strategic” and “modular” ideas, such as the perceived role of civil society in the colour revolutions and a successful state-led development model, undermined this collaborative relationship model.

The interaction between these conflicting ideas influenced the emergence of a new model of state–society relationship in China – “consultative authoritarianism” – which promotes the simultaneous expansion of a fairly autonomous civil society and the development of more sophisticated and indirect tools of state control over this civil society. Li Junru, a leading Party theorist, advocates the use of “consultative democracy,” which is a system whereby the CCP builds consensus around policy decisions through deliberation and consultation with relevant constituencies. I argue that this new state–society model in China encourages this type of consultation with civil society; however, this is *not* democratization but rather a sophisticated authoritarianism that uses more indirect tools of social control. The rise of consultative authoritarianism in China demonstrates an alternative to Western models of both civil society and regulatory state – one that balances the expansion of civil society with more sophisticated state control.

In contradistinction to existing literature on civil society, the social management pilot in Beijing provides evidence that an operationally autonomous civil society is emerging in this authoritarian regime; however, the expansion of civil society does not appear to be leading to democratization but rather to a more resilient authoritarianism and better governance. The increased provision of public goods and pluralistic policy-making creates the conditions for better governance under authoritarianism, which challenges our current understanding of civil society in China and should provoke more study of the implications of this new consultative authoritarianism model.

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