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The Changing Aspects of Civil Society in China

The study of state-society relations is an important component of political science and is particularly useful in characterizing a political regime. This approach is especially fruitful in the study of communist regimes. The rediscovery of the concept of civil society in the seventies can be considered a landmark in the development of research on Central and Eastern European regimes. It is therefore quite surprising that most sinologists have been reluctant to use the concepts that emerged in Eastern Europe in the seventies to analyze China before 1989. Only a handful of European observers of the pro-democracy movement during the late seventies and the early eighties regarded the concept of civil society as useful for the study of Chinese politics.

Strangely enough, the concept became widespread among China specialists and pro-democracy scholars in exile only after the repression of the 1989 pro-democracy movement. In China itself, it became a hot topic when Social Sciences in China, the mainland journal published in Hong Kong, devoted its first issue to a discussion of the concept in 1992.

In the last decade, civil society was widely used by many Western and Chinese observers. But the reality that it covers is very different from the one to which the Eastern European concept referred. Whereas the latter had more to do with strategy, it is now essentially an analytical concept closer to the Anglo Saxon definition developed in the nineties, in which civil society designates nongovernmental organizations.
(NGOs). In the last two or three years especially, many political scientists have devoted considerable energy to compiling exhaustive lists of NGOs in China.¹

In this paper, I will argue that this concept of civil society—referring to an informally structured network of nongovernmental organizations that have a loose relation with the party state—is quite different from the combative structure that developed in Poland in the seventies, in Czechoslovakia in the eighties, and, to a certain extent, in China during the first decade of reform. And I will argue that these associations did not play the same role as the ones that emerged in Eastern Europe and in China in the eighties. In other words, the development of a “civil society” does not mean that the regime is democratizing, nor does it mean that the evolution of China will follow a pattern similar to that seen Eastern Europe.

I. THE SOCIAL PACT FOR REFORM

The Failure of Reform from Outside: The Repression of the Democracy Wall Movement

The civil society strategy appeared after the failure of the institutionalization of a political opposition. In Poland in the seventies, the brutal repression of the worker riots in Gdansk and Sczeczin convinced part of the rebellious intelligentsia that it was impossible to directly confront the party in the political field. The most concerned elements founded the Committee for the Defense of Workers (KOR), which began to help society organize itself and presented itself as a self-limiting social movement. Since the social movements in Eastern Europe “had given up hopes for radical reform of [the power] structures, there was no other alternative but to concentrate the activities of the movements on the democratic self-organizations of social solidarity and cooperation outside the institutional framework of the state” (Markus, 2001).

The Chinese evolution was different. In the People’s Republic, in the wake of Mao’s death and Deng Xiaoping’s rehabilitation, an atmosphere of relative freedom was felt in party circles. In order to legitimate his policy aimed at achieving the “four modernizations,” which
needed the support of the intelligentsia, Deng Xiaoping launched a policy of rehabilitating the “stinking ninth,” based on a stated will to carry out secularization. Many thinkers who had been criticized during the last two decades of Mao’s reign were summoned by Hu Yaobang, who then acted as Deng’s representative in the intellectual field, and asked to devise Marxist foundations for the new policy. Well aware of the legitimacy crisis facing the regime, Hu launched his campaign for “thought liberation,” rallying most audacious thinkers behind his new line. Criticisms of the abuses of the Cultural Revolution were allowed in the official press. After the rehabilitation of the Tiananmen incident of April 5, 1976, and after the third party plenum, at which he defeated the neo-Maoists, Deng launched a conference on theoretical thought, during which the totalitarian nature of the Great Helmsman’s regime—designated under the code name “feudalism”—was seriously denounced. Thinkers who criticized the various aspects of Mao’s rule (without naming the red sun) asked for the institutionalization of free debate as an antidote to the excesses of “modern superstition.” At the same time, the party had relaxed its grip on public expression of opinions, and while discussions were taking place in the Great Hall of the People, in the streets of Beijing, Xian, and Tiananmen, victims of Mao’s campaigns, and especially members of the Red Guard generation, were denouncing abuses by cadres and producing analyses of the regime, asking for the institutionalization of supervision by public opinion. As Ye Jianying said at the time, “Xidan democracy wall is a model of people’s democracy” (Hu Jiwei, 2004: 49).

Some of the participants in the theoretical thought conference often took part in meetings organized by the editors of unofficial journals. Some, such as Yan Jiaqi or Guo Luoji, wrote articles for Beijing zhi chun, an unofficial journal distributed at the wall. Joint pressure was thus exerted by intellectuals inside the system who enjoyed the support of reformers in the leadership, and ordinary citizens who asked for the respect of basic rights. But in March 1979, Deng Xiaoping formalized the limitations imposed on political debate by stating the “Four Cardinal Principles.” Then, from 1979 to 1981, the Democracy Wall movement
was repressed, and its main actors were sentenced to long jail terms—without sparking any reaction on the part of the intelligentsia.

This closing of the wall ended the period of direct participation by citizens in the political field and opened the way for the struggle for a civil society.

Social Stability, a Condition for the Development of Civil Society
The major success of Deng’s new policy was the effective dismantlement of the people’s communes. This policy satisfied the requests of farmers, who represented the vast majority of the Chinese population. By allowing them to sell their produce on the free market, and eventually by proceeding to a de facto decollectivization, the Communist Party succeeded in bringing a long period of stability to the countryside. Until 1985, the rural population’s standard of living grew by leaps and bounds, and it is not until the second half of the 1980s that the situation started to be more in contrast with that of the past.

In the cities, salary increases and the opening of job opportunities by self-employment (the geti hu) considerably alleviated the pressure on the urban population. So did the re-establishment of bonuses for the workers. Since a profound restructuring of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) was not on the agenda, the new leadership enjoyed a large measure of support among employees and workers. This started to change after the third plenum of the twelfth Central Committee in 1984 tried to impose the end of the iron rice-bowl (tie fanwan) by making firms responsible for their profits and losses. The first wave of semi-privatization, which took place in the second half of the eighties, provoked discontent among SOE workers because it allowed some cadres to become quite rich. But not until the end of the eighties did urban dwellers start to listen to the criticism articulated in the newly emerging public space.

A Divided Leadership
Although Deng had clearly stated the limitations on the scope of political criticism, the party summit remained divided between conservatives, who stood for a limited reform of the command economy, and
reformers, who were ready to abandon a large portion of Communist ideology in order to achieve modernization. Reformers themselves were divided between those who thought that bold innovation was possible only in the economic field, and those who believed that the political system had to be deeply reformed. Deng Xiaoping arbitrated between the factions, and was careful not to alienate the conservatives.

As the satisfaction of rural and urban society’s needs provided the necessary stability, it was possible to leave more space for debate and experimentation on the way forward for the political system. The reform faction that steered the course all along the eighties could therefore encourage the intellectuals whose support was necessary to achieve modernization to engage in a reflection on the ways to improve the efficiency of the regime. Debate should obviously remain circumscribed to the elite.

**Civil Society à la Chinese: An Intra-Elite Project**

As they realized that the party was not ready to tolerate the existence of organizations in the field of politics, but that part of the leadership persisted in its policy of secularization and reform, most of the advanced theoreticians who had helped design the new avatar of the official ideology ostensibly opted for collaboration with the reformers. This is quite different from what had happened in Poland, where only after intellectuals had despaired of the possibility to reform the system from inside did they start to develop a civil society.

But at the same time, Chinese intellectuals drew the lessons from the last 20 years of Mao’s reign and tried to create some distance from the leaders by helping develop an embryo of civil society and public space beside the party. Taking advantage of their positions at the head of many journals to which they had been appointed after their rehabilitation, the former “stinking ninth” encouraged debate on the nature of the regime and on the factors that had made the tragedy of Maoism possible. Literary journals were instrumental in helping a generation of writers come of age, and, in turn, these writers, along with the new social science scholars whose disciplines had just been rehabilitated, helped introduce a number of Western theories and weaken the hege-
mony of Marxism-Leninism in public life. Numerous conferences held in universities provided opportunities for discussions about the ways to deepen political reforms. These ideas were relayed to some degree by the media, which had adopted a much freer style.

But the field of ideology was not the only locus of creation. The former Red Guards were very creative in designing new modes of organization, including professional associations that rivaled the old ones and editorial boards of official publishing houses whose members were appointed without the approval of the department of organization of their danwei—boards which were actually quasi-autonomous associations. Since the publishing houses were increasingly asked to be responsible for their profits and losses, they were keen to publish the works of audacious intellectuals. In this sense, the growing importance of the market provided the bold with new freedoms. Many activists organized conferences and debates on all sorts of subjects, including the role of culture in development, the need to fight for the recognition of freedoms of speech and assembly, and the evolution of political regimes in foreign countries.

Although these structures were less “unofficial” than the “home seminars” that were taking place in Prague or Warsaw during the same period, they served a similar function. However, in contrast to what happened in Eastern Europe, most members of these boards, specialists associations, and “salons” were party members who worked outside the apparatus to create an autonomous sphere.

Their lesser autonomy can be accounted for by the fact that, in China, there was no independent structure capable of playing the role of the Polish Roman Catholic Church, which, thanks to its insulation from the party and its international links, had been able to provide institutionalized protection to the actors of civil society. In China, the would-be developers of civil society could rely only on the protection of the most radical reformist leaders, and therefore could not clearly break away from the party.

This protection was provided because the reformist leaders needed new ideas to defeat the conservatives and to consolidate the legitimacy
of their policies. They encouraged the creation of think tanks, which helped devise new policies. The people who worked in these structures, such as the tigaisuo (Research Center on Economic System Reform), did not differ much from those who were active in the universities. A well-known dissident intellectual explains: “Communist Party reformers and intellectuals were very close, for the party was very tolerant during the 1980s. It was absolutely necessary for them to work together” (Bao Zunxin, quoted in Béja, 2004: 110). On the other hand, some party leaders established informal links with leaders of autonomous organizations—for example, Wang Juntao and Chen Ziming, the founders of the autonomous Beijing Social and Economic Research Institute: “One needs to have two ‘wings,’ that is, in practise, one needs to have one hand in the system and one in the pro-democracy movement. During that period, we held meetings that, up to a point, influenced theoreticians and brought many ideas and projects inside the system; we also systematically founded editorial boards, essentially to influence public opinion. On that front, we were quite successful” (Zhang Weiguo, 1994). Collaboration between reformers, establishment intellectuals, and intellectuals outside the establishment worked quite well despite recurrent campaigns against “bourgeois liberalization” that took place from 1981 to 1989.

At the end of the eighties the network of semi-autonomous organizations (professional associations, editorial boards, salons, research centers) constituted a form of civil society—although, at the time, almost nobody in China used that term—that bore some resemblance to the one that had appeared in Eastern Europe a little earlier. This sector was born out of the impossibility of creating a political opposition. But, contrary to what had happened in that part of the world, Chinese civil society was made possible by the protection of the reformist faction, and could not achieve any measure of institutionalization. Besides, it was exclusively an intraelite process, and the actors of the emerging civil society never made contacts with workers or peasants. Intellectuals active in this sphere were working to reinforce the radical reformers and to push them to admit pluralism in society.
The Social Crisis

In the second half of the eighties, the social stability induced by the policies adopted at the third plenum of 1978 started to erode. In the countryside, the authorities that lacked the necessary cash to buy grain from producers paid them with IOUs—which they were in no position to pay. Small-scale discontent began to appear in villages.

But it was especially in the cities that the situation started to deteriorate. The decision to make SOEs responsible for their profits and losses, and the emerging dual channel that allowed the sons of the nomenklatura to make huge profits by trafficking in authorizations provoked discontent among employees of state companies. In the summer of 1988, after the leadership launched the price reform that resulted in high inflation (14 percent), discontent among workers peaked. The social stability that had allowed the reformist leadership to launch experimentation in the political realm was under threat.

This coincided with disappointment among the radical intelligentsia following the dismissal of Hu Yaobang as party general secretary in 1987. Many actors of the civil society started to despair of the possibility to reform the system from inside. This provided the conditions for students to take to the street in the spring of 1989. The majority of intellectuals did not immediately support the students because they were afraid of losing the protection granted them by party reformers who had allowed them to build a semi-autonomous sphere. Nevertheless, they finally decided to take part in the movement. The student demonstrations had a very strong impact on the discontented urban population, which joined the students to denounce corruption and authoritarianism and demand democracy and freedom. This challenge was too much for some of the reformers, and it led to the fall of Zhao Ziyang as general secretary. The actors of the “civil society” who had finally opted for autonomy from the party repeatedly demanded that the authorities enter into a dialogue with them. The party leadership refused, and the activists were defeated.

As opposed to what had happened in Poland after the proclamation of martial law in December 1981—when the actors of civil society
had been able to seek protection from the Church—Chinese intellectuals had nowhere to turn to. Their protectors had been purged, and the party quickly reinstated its hegemony on the political field. It has been careful not to let any kind of political challenge reemerge since. The 1989 pro-democracy movement effectively levied the “coup de grace” to “combative” civil society in China.

II. THE PACT FOR CONSERVATION

The Tiananmen massacre sealed the new pact with the elites. By crushing the attempt at democratization that had developed in society with the help of the radical reformers, the party leadership saved its hegemony. But force was not enough to restore legitimacy. The cause of socialism had lost its appeal among the masses, as was shown by the strong discontent that reigned from 1989 to 1992, when the conservatives had their way. The party therefore had to find a new type of legitimacy. This was achieved by Deng Xiaoping’s trip to the south, during which the paramount leader put an end to the struggle between neo-Maoists and reformers by stating that any policy was good as long as it favored economic development. He explicitly declared that there should be an end to haggling over whether a policy was capitalist or socialist, showing his commitment to the achievement of secularization. He was able to rally the entire leadership behind his project combining the development of a market economy and the reinforcement of dictatorship. And in fact, since 1992, there have been no struggles over political projects in the leadership. A consensus emerged that remains today.

The Risk of Social Unrest: Stability Eclipses Everything

The new agenda had new implications: whereas in the early eighties, economic reform had been supported by the great majority of the population, with only a fraction of the bureaucracy opposing it, since the end of that decade some discontent had appeared in the countryside and in the cities. The new agenda for development, which aimed at transforming the command economy and the large SOEs, was bound to provoke more discontent. In the nineties it became clear that
economic reform would hurt a great number of workers and farmers. It was therefore necessary to maintain a strong repressive apparatus, and to mobilize the support of all segments of the elites. This was achieved by making sure they would be able to raise their standards of living considerably.

Given the risk of social unrest and the consensus that reigned at the summit of the party, it became dangerous to continue to proceed with experimentation in the political sphere. Therefore, the new social pact that the party presented to the intelligentsia was different from the one it had proposed in the eighties. It was not a pact for reform anymore; it was a pact for conservation. This time, the political system had to remain unchanged so that it could enact the new development strategy. Intellectuals would see their standard of living dramatically improve by entering the marketplace, creating private firms, through the revaluation of university salaries, etc. Scholars and professors would be allowed to raise their academic level, to take part in symposiums and conferences abroad, to link with the international scientific community, to do research in foreign universities. But they would do so on the condition that they not try to revive the organizations that they had created in the eighties, whose goal was to push for the transformation of the regime, and, obviously, that they not try to link with the disgruntled portions of the population to help them translate their discontent into political demands. With the risk of social unrest, authoritarianism had to be reinforced. This was expressed in the slogan: “Stability overrules everything else” (wending yadao yiqie).

As time went on, a larger space was granted by the party to society’s initiative. This has led many observers to write that in China, a civil society has been developing. This is a bit far-fetched. In any case, this civil society has been growing in a space designed by the Communist Party, and it still does not enjoy any kind of legal guarantees that would provide for its institutionalization. In this sense, it does not have a larger autonomy than the one that emerged in the eighties and the scope of its action and reflection is much less politically inclined than before.
An Exercise in Globalized Newspeak

Ironically, it was after the Tiananmen massacre that the term the “civil society” made its appearance on China’s intellectual scene. Since the end of the nineties, even the authorities have used it, often referring to it as the “third sector” (di sange bumen). However, it is a completely different concept from the one that had appeared in the eighties, closer to the concept that is prevalent in the West, especially in the newspeak of international organizations. (One could say that the Chinese Communist Party has learned how to use the politically correct language of globalization.)

In effect, since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the cold war, conventional wisdom has it that politics has been increasingly replaced by administration. For administration to be efficient, it has to rely on good “governance.” Free expression of citizens in the public space, which, under the influence of Eastern European dissidents, had been at the center of public debate during the eighties, has given way to discussions among experts on how best to design public policies, and to the newspeak of international organizations. In this approach, mankind’s problems can be solved if one applies the right expertise. Scientism, which had characterized the end of the nineteenth century, has made its comeback, albeit under a different guise, at the end of the twentieth century.

It is quite ironic to note that the end of totalitarianism for a large part of our planet has given rise to an increasing depoliticization of the public space. Dissident intellectuals the world over have been replaced by experts, whose legitimacy for action in society is based on “scientific” knowledge. Putting forward the increasing complexity of the problems faced by countries nowadays, most government leaders tend to reduce the space for public debate and to expropriate citizens from participation in controversies. In democratic countries, political participation is more and more reduced to voting every four or five years, and ordinary citizens feel increasingly estranged from political life. This disenfranchisement helps explain the decreasing turnouts that have characterized elections in most advanced democracies. In this sense, the Chinese Communist Party, which has not gone through the
troubles of democratization, has demonstrated an impressive capacity to speak the language of modernity.

In the world of “governance” there are no more political programs, only concrete problems that must be confronted with “public policies.” Technocrats need trustworthy information, which they know the bureaucracy is unable to provide. In France, the United States, and Western developed countries in general, consultations with “users” and experts are occupying an increasingly large space, which is to the detriment of public debate by the people’s representatives in parliaments. In China, one can observe the emergence of a growing number of committees, and in this sense the regime is becoming increasingly similar to other modern states. The multiplication of committees appears to be one of the characteristics of governance in these countries.

In democratic societies, NGOs, which constitute “civil society,” are becoming powerful actors, whereas more traditional organizations, such as political parties and unions, have seen their roles decrease. This civil society, however, is not the combative one that we have discussed earlier whose objective was to give life to social actors. The NGOs that comprise it today are mostly humanitarian associations or one-issue groups that seek to lobby government to enact public policies that will help resolve specific problems. Instead of putting problems in political terms—in terms of choices that can be debated in public by citizens—governments tend to put them forward as technical problems, and tend to create structures of consultation to help solve them. Citizens are being replaced by “users.”

The Chinese Communist Party has shown a remarkable ability to adapt to this evolution of the modern state and its leaders have enthusiastically rallied behind the new themes of governance, and even civil society, allowing international NGOs to settle on its soil (including organizations such as Médecins sans frontières, Oxfam, and the Ford Foundation). It has also started to allow the development of Chinese NGOs (as we shall see, however, these are acting under serious constraints). In return, international government and nongovernmental organizations congratulate themselves on this leap into modernity by a regime that seemed so reluctant to recognize such organizations.
A Source of Modern Identity for Chinese Intellectuals

The majority of Chinese intellectuals have also shown considerable enthusiasm for these new ideas. They see them as a way to emancipate themselves from the traditional model of the Confucian (or the pro-democracy) intellectual—whose action is based on morals—to become “modern” professionals, specialists who play a determining role in the modernization of the country. In effect, as they take part in the various committees set up by local and national governments, they can put their knowledge to use and help adapt policies to the needs of society.

Since June 4, 1989, and even more since Deng Xiaoping’s trip to the south, the majority of the intelligentsia has been convinced that it has to collaborate with the party to make China a prosperous and powerful country. In return, the party gives them consideration; former party General Secretary Jiang Zemin has even included the intelligentsia in his “three represents” (the party represents the most advanced productive forces, the most advanced culture, and the interests of the whole people). Whereas during the eighties, intellectuals had to fight for democracy if they wanted to be regarded as modern, things have changed with the advent of the postmodern state. Now there is no contradiction between the regime and the intelligentsia. The latter do not have to fight for the transformation of the former to attain the common goal of modernization. Collaboration is not only possible—it is desirable if one wants to help China regain its prominent position on the international scene.

However, the CCP does not go so far as to set up consultative structures of the Hong Kong type, where ordinary citizens are directly consulted by the administration on solving problems that the state must address. The various echelons of the party state have chosen to ask experts to carry out studies in order to gather information on the opinions of the social groups targeted by the policies they want to enact. But, of course, the input from scholars is not binding for the leading cadres, who use it at their discretion.

However, scholars are satisfied that the government consults them when it comes to designing new policies. They see it as a kind of recognition that they are a positive factor in the struggle for modernization. On the other hand, this new relation to the authorities allows
them to conciliate the role of the “modern” intelligentsia—whose legitimacy is founded on expertise—with the more traditional functions of the literati, such as the “counselor to the prince”—a model that is part of their identity—and the “spokespeople for society,” which is at the heart of their legitimacy.

Seeing no hope of a return to power of the radical reformers eager to transform party rule, the majority of the intelligentsia has abandoned the struggle to create an autonomous civil society and most of its members have accepted the function that the party state has designed for them. Under these circumstances, many intellectuals, especially economists and sociologists, enjoy real consideration from the authorities. They help develop the new kind of “civil society” encouraged by the party state.

**A New Avatar of the “Counselor to the Prince”**

Let us take the example of sociologists. Government at various levels often asks them to take part in a variety of advisory committees. They can make their voices heard when the local authorities tackle problems, like the situation of the mingong (migrant labor) or juvenile delinquency. For example, in the spring of 2002, the National People’s Congress put the defense of vulnerable groups (ruoshi qunti) at the top of its agenda. This decision has given rise to the creation of large-scale research programs on increasing social polarization. In the last couple of years, many research papers have been written by sociologists on the fate of the mingong in the cities. Whereas the denunciation of the negative effects of the hukou (household registration) system by some radical sociologists in 1988-1989 had not led to any concrete change to that system (cf. Gong Xikui, 1989), participation by mainstream sociologists in the various committees set up by the local and municipal governments bureaus in charge of migrant labor (wailai renkou guanli ju) has, in certain cases, helped improve the situation. The sociologists justify their propositions for change with arguments based on economic efficiency; they explain to bureaucrats that relaxing controls on hukou removes the discrimination between rural and urban populations and will help set up a modern labor market that will ratio-
nally allocate the workforce to available jobs. Their arguments have convinced some leading cadres, and many municipalities have set up a system of “provisional hukou” that allows mingong who have a work contract and accommodation in the cities to enjoy almost the same rights as urban dwellers. More recently, their lobbying in the various committees has helped convince cadres of the necessity to do something about the education of migrant workers’ children. For instance, under the pressure of sociologists from the Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences, schools for children of migrant workers have rapidly developed in Chengdu. Sociologists’ opinions are obviously not the only factor that has allowed these improvements, but they have played an undeniable role. These recent successes show the efficiency of this type of intervention.?

However, from the point of view of party state-society relations, one must note that the position of intellectuals has changed since the eighties. Now they intervene as experts inside the system. They reject the Solidarity model of civil society for reasons of efficiency, and do nothing to favor the autonomous expression of the social groups they try to defend. Nor do they encourage them to set up the associations that would enable them to defend their interests. Of course, they are well aware that the party state will not tolerate the creation of autonomous organizations by the citizens themselves. Besides, the traditional elitism of the intelligentsia leads it to regard action by the working people with diffidence. Being themselves as wary of disorder (luan) as the political leaders, the intellectual elites wilfully agree to silence the ordinary people, whose “quality”—a term meaning a mixture of level of education, politeness, and urban behavior—is too “low” to be able to run the government (renmin de suzhi taidi is a common phrase even among the most pro-democracy intellectuals). They therefore submit to the government’s requirements. By prohibiting public debate and political participation by citizens and by instituting mediation through experts, the party state is succeeding in transforming political problems into purely administrative questions, or, to use a “modern” phrase, into questions of “governance.” The majority of the intelligentsia has enthusiastically accepted this transformation.
The Revival of Paternalism

In sum, many intellectuals who, in the eighties, would have worked within semi-autonomous organizations, are now very active in what the party state terms “the third sector” (disange bumen). The so-called nongovernmental organizations that compose this sector are supposed to design solutions to social problems that the party state cannot solve for lack of resources—or for lack of will—but under its control. The Communist Party looks as if it is returning to nineteenth-century paternalism as it itself is developing ideas reminiscent of the ones that had emerged among Christian industrial magnates. This is especially ironic since the theoreticians of socialism, such as Marx or Proudhon, had denounced this ideology with great vehemence. By eulogizing the concept of charity, the vanguard of the proletariat asks the privileged to help the victims of modernization without affecting the social structure, while trying by all means to prevent the emergence of the disgruntled as a political actor capable of contributing to political life, and maybe transforming it. The creation of this web of associations with the benediction of the party is also reminiscent of the action of the Qing dynasty, which allowed the gentry to create organizations whose function was to solve the social problems induced by natural disasters.

In the 1990s, both for fear of repression and because they accepted the new social contract proposed by Deng Xiaoping, the intelligentsia renounced the ferment of an autonomous civil society that eventually could set up a dialogue with the party (the Solidarity model); the most concerned scholars have instead immersed themselves in participation in GONGOs (Government-Operated Non-Governmental Organizations) active in rural education and health—sectors that have been abandoned by the government since it launched the reforms. These organizations are often closely linked to the party’s “mass organizations.” For example, the famous Hope project (Xiwang gongcheng), which helps develop schools in backward rural areas, operates under the auspices of the Communist Youth League whereas Dagongmei zhi jia, the House of Women Migrant Workers, which helps organize cultural activities and legal education for migrant women in Beijing, is closely
linked to the All China Women’s Federation. But these organizations of the twenty-first century enjoy a much smaller degree of autonomy than their Qing counterparts inasmuch as they act in an environment that is strictly controlled by the party state.

In other words, one could say that the intelligentsia, which, during the eighties, had been seeking to reform the political system in order to promote society’s prosperity and the institutionalization of its autonomy, now tends to accept the technocratic discourse of the party state. Instead of helping the weakened categories organize in order to be able to defend their interests, it tries to help them out by providing charity. This is a much less perilous road. It does not put intellectuals in opposition to the party state yet still protects their image as defenders of the weak. The intelligentsia is all the more confident that this is the right path to follow since presenting social problems in terms of “poverty alleviation” is strongly encouraged by international organizations, whether governmental or not (cf., for example, Cheung, 2004). This apolitical approach holds that public policy can solve the problems of “poverty,” which is presented as a result of some kind of fatalism rather than the consequence of the nature of the sociopolitical system.

**A Corporatist Model?**

The rationale behind the encouragement provided by the party state to the third sector is the view that, with the development of the market economy, the state should not try to intervene in all aspects of life, especially in the economy. The new official discourse calls for a “big society, small state” formula. But it reserves to the party the right to launch the NGOs that represent society. We have seen how NGOs have been created to help the disgruntled. It is interesting to note that no party leader has ever acted to create a mingong association, for example, whereas it has encouraged businesspeople to enter the Chambers of Commerce (shanghui). In other terms, as in Mussolini’s corporatist model, the state decides which social categories exist and can be represented, and it itself creates the non-governmental organizations that will represent them. The establishment of any such association is subject to its authorization.
However, the situation is not so clear-cut, and sometimes the party is obliged to acknowledge the existence of associations it did not help promote. The case of the Aizhi Action Project is interesting. It was founded by Wan Yanhai, who wanted to attract the attention of the population on the serious development of AIDS in China at a time when the government refused to recognize it. When Wan posted detailed information on the AIDS situation in Henan province in August 2002, provoking outrage worldwide, the authorities arrested him (Becquelin, 2002). However, when the UNAIDS functionaries, and a great number of AIDS-related NGOs worldwide protested this measure, the government freed Wan, and allowed him to register his association under company law (“China Permits,” 2002).

This shows that the party is not omnipotent, and that it can be forced to recognize organizations that it fought. Obviously, this could not have happened in the case of a political party or of an autonomous trade union. But this example shows that the economic sphere can provide a space for the emergence of associations that might become the basis for the development of a civil society in the “combative” sense of the term. Already, many scholars and activists have created firms that actually do carry out research on sensitive problems such as education, accommodation, and the integration of migrants. There is no comprehensive research on these firms, but it would be interesting to have an idea of their scope. If it is substantial, this could point to the possibility of a politicization of the economic sphere and provide better foundations for the eventual development of civil society.

However, recent experience shows that the party is quite reluctant to completely forsake its control of the third sector. The authorities are particularly wary not to let political dissidents try to use these associations either to achieve their agenda or only to establish contacts with ordinary citizens through them. The case of one of the largest associations for the protection of the environment is quite enlightening. In the winter of 2003, the Ministry of Civil Affairs pressured the board of the group Friends of Nature into expelling the writer Wang Lixiong, who had become famous for his acute denunciation of Chinese rule in Xinjiang and Tibet. Although Wang was a founder of the associa-
tion, he was fired by its other leaders—who did not convene a meeting of the board in doing so, which violated the organization’s statutes. This shows that pressure by the authorities can succeed in eliminating the people whom they consider dangerous. It points to the very tough limitations that the party can impose on third-sector associations (Liu Xiaobo, 2003; Human Rights in China, 2003). But it also shows that the authorities can convince most leaders of even outspoken autonomous organizations to enforce their ban on dissidents. These leaders prefer to keep avowed dissidents out so that they are not subject to pressures from the security organs, and this results in the increased isolation of these political activists. They do it in good faith, in order to be able to further their causes, but, through this kind of self-censorship, they help the party enforce its ban on open dissent.

These developments show the ability of the Communist Party to integrate large numbers of activists who might otherwise have become dissidents by leading them to believe that they can act more efficiently if they accept the limits it has designed, and especially if they abstain from linking the social problems they are trying to solve to the political situation. Moreover, these activists, in their search for efficiency, accept maintaining a break with political dissidents, thus enforcing the party policy and consolidating its legitimacy.

However, it also shows that just as Mao Zedong’s action in order to “educate the successors to the revolutionary cause” ended up in creating a generation of blasé or opponents, the tolerance for NGOs, however limited their scope of action, may have undesired consequences. Some of the leaders of these seemingly respectful organizations have no illusions as to the nature of the regime, and use legal aid and other attributes to heighten the political awareness of the social categories they are working with. Sometimes their action results in the multiplication of conflicts in which the “vulnerable groups” use a wide variety of methods to defend their rights.

China seems to be evolving along the same lines as the developed world as a consultation of users, recourse to experts, the increasing role of a “civil society” in the narrowest sense of single-issue NGOs or charity organizations are replacing the social movements of yesteryear and
marginalizing the political intervention of social actors. Is China, therefore, really entering the mainstream of modernity? Will it be able to make a direct transition from totalitarianism—the matrix (and the instruments of control) of which continues to exist—to postmodern governance without going through the stage of democracy? The present regime seems to be evolving toward a kind of post-political authoritarianism that enjoys the support of a large proportion of the elites, including the intelligentsia. It is the first time since 1949 that elites in all fields, whether economic, political, or intellectual, have supported the project proposed by the party state. One interrogation remains: Will this pact among the elites be strong enough to resist eventual pressure from the “toiling masses”? Or will these be able to organize and attract the support of part of the intelligentsia in an attempt to change the political system so that it takes their interest into account? This question might well plague the evolution of the political regime of the People’s Republic of China for the decades to come. Some indices seem to indicate that disenfranchised groups such as farmers are beginning to organize collective protests. Although these protests remain circumscribed at the village or township level, they tend to develop in certain regions, such as central China.1

Be it in the eighties, when the organizations that the intelligentsia had set up were fighting for a radical transformation of the party’s rule and for democracy, or in the nineties, when it was working for the development of NGOs, action by intellectuals has always taken place in a space that was designed and structured by the party. In the eighties, it depended on an alliance with the fraction of radical reformers for its possibilities of expression; since June 4, it has restricted its discourse to the one that is officially tolerated by the authorities. If no social group is in a position to overcome these limitations, it will be very difficult for a vibrant civil society to consolidate in China.

NOTES
2. The cardinal principle, which insisted on the leadership of the party, was clear to everybody.

3. The failure of the anti-bourgeois liberalization campaign in 1981 convinced the liberal intelligentsia that at least part of the leadership (especially Hu Yaobang) was ready to protect bold initiatives in the ideological field, and to pay the price of a clash with the conservatives.

4. There was nothing like the 1980 Gdansk agreement, whereby the Polish government acknowledged the existence of Solidarity. When, during the 1989 pro-democracy movement, the students’ autonomous organizations asked for a public dialogue, the authorities bluntly refused.

5. After 1987, many cadres’ children started to sell at market price raw materials and machinery that they had bought at state prices, reaping huge profits in the process. The success of these companies (pibao gongsi, or attaché case companies) outraged ordinary workers because their managers needed no other skills than to be able to use a network of relationships (guanxi wang).

6. One can compare the function of this massacre with the repression of the “June Days” (journées de juin) after the 1848 revolution in France. This massacre provided the conditions for the social pact that supported the Second Empire, during which France became an industrial power.

7. See the article by Chloé Froissart in this issue, which details the changes in legislation for migrant workers and the new party discourse after the sixteenth congress.

8. See Chloé Froissart’s article.

9. “If intermediary organizations are not developed, it is impossible to enact the reform of institutions. . . . The development of a socialist market economy necessarily elicits an autonomous society beside the state” (Wu Jinliang, 2001: 20).

10. Just before, the authorities had resorted to a number of means to silence Dr. Gao Yijie, who had tried to attract its attention on the seriousness of the situation.

REFERENCES