

Social Associations

Shèhuì tuántǐ 社会团体

Official social organizations in China are subject to the supervision of the state, but they may exhibit considerable independence as long as they do not present a challenge to the state. In addition, many non-governmental organizations monitor the environment, the treatment of ethnic minorities, and the protection of cultural relics. Even illegal trade unions have been formed in recent years.

In the People's Republic of China (PRC), associations of people with similar interests can be broken down into four basic types: state controlled (such as the so-called mass organizations), state supervised (such as professional and entrepreneurs' associations or hobby-based organizations), informal (organizations of fellow townspeople and clan members), and illegal (secret societies, underground groups, opposition groups, and criminal organizations). While the state-controlled organizations have existed for almost the entire history of the PRC, the other three types have begun to reemerge only in the course of the reform process. The reasons for this reemergence have been the development of new social classes and an increasing division of labor and specialization in the process of economic reform.

Emerging Special Interest Groups

Since the 1980s, new groups with special interests have been forming professional organizations and interest

associations. Along with formal groups, there are now informal ones, and to the traditional organizations have been added modern ones (women's and environmental groups, for example). This development started in rural areas, where it was encouraged by the return to family-based economic structures and the withdrawal of the state from the running of villages. Often traditional organizations (such as clans, religious and temple organizations, or secret societies) reemerged. Farmers began to form traditional unofficial organizations and interest groups, most often regional groupings, and gangs of beggars emerged.

Illegal trade unions of migrant workers have developed, organizing strikes and demonstrations. In addition, business associations, hobby associations, and sport clubs have developed in urban areas. Although the non-state organizations are, to an extent, based on traditional structures, their emergence demonstrates a growing need on the part of the population for independent organizations.

According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs, which is responsible for the registration of associations, at the end of 2005, some 320,000 non-state organizations from the county level upward had been registered, including federations, non-government organizations (NGOs), and government-organized NGOs (GONGOs). These figures do not include associations at the township and village level, as they are not required to register. However, the term association is imprecise in China, as it encompasses organizations founded by the party/state as well as those set up by citizens. Organizations set up by citizens must register and adhere to the Regulations



The Haikou Environmental and Resources Center rents office space to NGOs in Hainan Province and provides as well an environmental library and a meeting space for student groups. PHOTO BY WEN BO.

Concerning Registration and Administration of Social Organizations.

According to official Chinese data in 2005, more than 2,000 NGOs existed, all emerging since 1990. They are involved with environmental protection, endangered animal species, fringe groups, AIDS sufferers, ethnic minorities, protection of cultural relics, consumer issues, or nature and landscape preservation. Some NGOs are involved in the extension and enhancement of grassroots elections, participation in urban neighborhood communities, or the improvement of the labor conditions of rural migrant workers.

Although most associations are concerned with sports, health, recreation, professional, cultural, scientific-technical, and other activities, in recent years social

organizations and foundations have emerged that are active in a broad range of more politically sensitive fields. Most notable is the environmental domain, where an increasing number of student groups have come forward to watch and monitor events. They originate in mainly larger cities and areas affected by evident ecological crises. According to reports in 2006, such groups existed at 176 universities in twenty-six provinces.

Beyond official associations are informal organizations like underground NGOs or informal networks. Some are traditional clans, hometown associations, secret societies, or beggar's guilds. Hometown associations are active in China's larger cities. They gather people from the same township, county, or province and act as interest organizations. They partly control entire markets, live

together in common living quarters, and provide mutual support. They function as self-protecting organizations of worker migrants and sometimes even as prototrade union organizations.

Religion is a contested field. The officially recognized religious communities are strictly controlled by the state. More traditional ones, such as temple associations and the sects and underground churches that have spread in recent years, may function as social pockets of resistance. But they are not tolerated by the party/state and, therefore, unable to affect the development of civil society.

Chinese associations and NGOs clearly differ from their counterparts in Western societies. To begin with, as long as such associations do not pursue political or politically sensitive objectives, the party/state takes a benevolent attitude since they address issues at the local level that the central state is unable to solve. Associations generally have a rather ambiguous character in China. On the one hand, they are subject to the supervision and control of the party/state. On the other, they may exhibit certain elements of independence as long as they do not challenge the party/state. In a society like China's, interconnectedness between social associations and the party/state are helpful, as they contribute to problem solving through informal channels and by informal bargaining. The Chinese "bargaining society," in which interests of social groups are bargained in an indirect way, requires such interconnectedness to enforce interests more easily.

Social Associations as Mediators

The role of social associations as mediators between state and society is nothing new in China. Traditional organizations were based on shared occupations, intellectual fellowship, family ties, or common regional origin. Particularly in rural areas, secret societies or farmers' interest groups were important. Most secret organizations promised their members a heavenly state of happiness and tried to establish an egalitarian society built on the principles of morality and higher justice.

The guilds, for example, which had existed for centuries, were mostly structured like families and stood for particular interests, but they never had an impact on China's political history. They adapted themselves to the

requirements of the government bureaucracy, which controlled towns and markets, and sought to negotiate and petition their way rather than seek confrontation. They offered their members material advantages, supporting them in times of need, and represented their interests in dealings with the authorities. Through a strict code of rules, the guilds obliged their members to fulfill their duties to the state, especially since the guilds were held responsible by the authorities for their members' behavior. The guilds financed themselves primarily through self-imposed goods taxes. Every guild was headed by a paid state official who could negotiate with senior officials and was officially recognized as a representative of the organization. This structure, which was easily adaptable to the supervision and control structures of the Communist Party, is in some ways similar to the structure now used by private social organizations in the PRC.

RISE AND FALL

Toward the end of the Qing era (1912), numerous modern groups formed in towns. These included professional organizations, groups of intellectuals, chambers of commerce, trade unions, and students', farmers', and women's groups. The weakness of the state in the late Qing era and at the beginning of the republic made these organizations increasingly independent. The chambers of commerce were thus able to work actively toward the creation of parliaments and the drafting of a constitution. Students', workers', and professional interest groups played an important part in the May Fourth Movement (1915–1923).

As the central government again took control and became more stabilized after 1927, the ruling Guomindang Party enforced a policy that limited the groups' powers. In 1941 a law was passed that tied associations directly to state institutions and put them under state control. With the foundation of the PRC, most organizations were disbanded or changed into party-controlled or party-supervised institutions.

Legalization of Associations

The foundation of academic, professional, social, arts-, sports-, or hobby-based associations has been legal since the end of the 1980s. Hundreds of thousands of associations

and organizations, covering a wide range of social interests, have been created across the country. The 1989 provisional decree offering Directions for the Registration and Administration of Social Associations subjected this rapidly growing trend to stronger state regulation, a move that is similar to the policy previously set by the Guomindang. A revised version of this law was passed in 1998. The rules require an official body (authority, state or party institution, or public enterprise) to make a formal application on behalf of the association and to act as the formal sponsor of the association. Because sponsorship includes a supervisory function—the heads of the sponsoring institution can be held responsible for misconduct by the association—institutions are often prepared to take on this responsibility only in return for material or in-kind advantages or because of personal connections.

Association-State Link

It would be wrong to assume that the connection with state or party institutions means that clubs and associations function as merely quasi-state organizations and represent only the interests of party and state. Social pressure that developed following the extension of a free market, political liberalization, and growing autonomy in society made the authorization of associations acceptable to the party and the state. The connection with sponsoring institutions has resulted, however, in multiple links between associations and the state. Usually associations attempt to articulate and implement their interests through their sponsors. This can be achieved through the common practice of *guanxi* (creating and using connections) or by having well-known and respected officials as honorary members or “consultants” to help the association gain political protection and recognition. In authoritarian societies there is hardly any other way to assert one’s interests. The close connections with state or party institutions also show that independent organizations are not yet possible. In present-day China, it is not the pressure group but the *guanxi* group that solves problems and conflicts and does so by means of patronage. A continuation of this trend is the need to seek help from a powerful sponsoring institution because the connection with an authority or public institution functions as protection and enhances the association’s status.

In a society in which independent parallel structures are not permitted, interest representation and participation in negotiations between the state and interest groups would be impossible without organizations being interlinked in this way. In China a social association’s interests are not so much asserted as indirectly negotiated, and they require such interconnections. On the one hand, only in this way can social groups attain a certain degree of participation in negotiations. On the other hand, associations can influence politics through their sponsor institution. Such semiautonomous organizations can be seen as the forerunners of autonomous economic and political associations. They are two-sided in character because they have elements of both state dominance and autonomy.

A Future for Social Associations

As economic reforms and social change have moved forward, special interest groups have sprung up. The party/state is attempting, however, to bind the newly developing interest groups into existing formal structures. On the one hand, increasing economic liberalization has meant that the state is no longer able to control all social activities, but on the other hand, it does not see the necessity for this as long as the newly developing interest groups do not evolve into parallel political structures.

Unlike in democratic societies, in authoritarian societies the state is the only body with decision-making power. Although such a structure might allow various associations and interest groups to have a voice in discussion processes, state supervision prevents the emergence of parallel organizations acting independently of the state. The continuing reduction of the role of the state in economic matters and further changes in Chinese society will probably mean that social associations will have an increasingly important role in the social and political processes of change.

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Further Reading

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Religious Activities as Social Associations

In China as in all parts of the world, the village community has been the primary source of social and economic interaction. An excerpt from the scholar Chang Liu's 2007 book Peasants and Revolution in Rural China describes how religion works in the village context:

Religious activities were another major category of the village's social activities. Many organizations were set up in the village for this purpose... Of these religious organizations, it was the village-wide ascriptive religious association that organized the village as a whole. It was ascriptive because all members of the village were automatically included in the association. Before the twentieth century, this association was usually the only village-wide organization found in North China villages.

Organizing village-wide religious activities—such as collective prayers, maintenance of village temples,

temple fairs and opera performances, and so forth—was of course the main function of the village-wide religious association. But it was never limited solely to this aspect. Since it was the only village-wide organization, it also served as an ad hoc body to handle secular public affairs of the village. Because of this, it actually took on the role of the village's governing organ. Village public affairs involved the villagers' common interests. These affairs might be generated by matters within or without the village community. Regardless of the source, they had one thing in common: they aroused public concern and necessitated collected choices and responses. Managing these public affairs was therefore a typical political process, carried out within the arena of the village and handled by the villagers themselves.

Source: Chang Liu. (2007). Peasants and revolution in rural China. London and New York: Routledge, 13.

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