

Challenging state power in China: the formation of new citizen norms in emerging civil society

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1. Program design

The rise of China in our time is of paramount importance to the world's future. This phenomenon already spurs changes in, and brings challenges to the hitherto unipolar world order, international politics, the world economy, and global civil society. The purpose of this program is to investigate the challenges against Chinese state power that emanate from two different sources. First and directly, from changes occurring in an expanding and increasingly globally connected civil society powered by social media activism and communications technology. Second, and indirectly, from actors inside the party-state apparatus, resulting from exposure to new information channels and the alternative ideas that flow through them. A central tenet of this program is that it is the structural and normative changes in China's society and political institutions that shape the China – democratic, nationalist, authoritarian, or other variants – that other states will have to face, confront, and cooperate with. The hypothesis is that actors in both state institutions and society reorient their values and form new

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citizen norms due to interactions in transnational and national social online and offline spheres, engagement with civic discourse, and encounter with activism in domestic social space, both on and off communications networks. Guided by the overarching research question – *how is the balance of power between Chinese civil society and party-state institutions changing under pressure from ongoing globalization, increased use of communications technology and social activism* – this program will achieve two goals: First, it will collect extensive empirical evidence in four issue-areas of crucial relevance and importance for understanding civil society's emergence:

- The social arena of new citizen activism
- Party-state institutions and government bureaucracy
- Mainland Chinese business communities
- The overlapping areas of transnational Chinese networks, the global human rights movement and PRC citizens

Second, it will contribute to, and draw upon, three theoretical debates:

- i. The nature of civil society in a non-Western context such as China
- ii. Civil society's and new social media's role for democratization
- iii. The role of global civil society and Chinese transnational links in underpinning party-state corporatism, state nationalism, and China's emerging civil society

2. Civil society in China: the research field

During the 1980s and 1990s, civil society in Mainland China was described as non-existing or emerging. Due to its fragmented character and dependence on the par-

ty-state, it was argued that Chinese society would hardly transform itself into a driving force for democracy (White, Howell, and Shang 1996). That culture does not condemn Chinese societies to perpetual authoritarianism, however, has been clearly shown in studies of Taiwan (Weller 1999). A common argument for the long-time status quo in state-society relations in China is that economic growth performance won back legitimacy lost in the aftermath of the Tiananmen massacre in 1989. From then on, the people of China was encouraged and compelled to focus on personal wealth creation and refrain from collective political participation. As a result, the technocratic and pragmatically oriented party-state has dominated the formal political process. On the other hand, in line with modernization theory, there is the argument that with an increase in post-material values, such as environmentalism and feminism, a new young generation of "critical citizens" will eventually take hold (Wang 2005). The regime enhancing effect of economic progress, however, seems to still outweigh the expected regime eroding effects of generational and ideational change. Regarding this inertia, the current situation has been labeled "authoritarian resilience" and "China's trapped transition" (Nathan 2003; Pei 2006). These labels illustrate the fact that civil society in China is yet in a formative and emerging stage, even if the amount of registered nongovernmental organizations increased from a mere 4,446 in 1989 to staggering 387,000 in 2007. Although some of these manage to uphold quasi-autonomy, it is a fact that NGOs are heavily monitored by the party-state and meet significant institutional barriers such as a cumbersome registration process with the state (Chan 2005; He 2007). Thus, the civil society model

has been judged unsuitable to describe Chinese realities (Madsen 1993). Many of these scholars use models of corporatism to explain the state's continued containment of civic associations. Others have tried to escape normative assumptions inherent in models of an idealized public sphere and civil society (Brook and Frolic 1997; He 1997). Not fully embracing either corporatism or the civil society model, "dependent autonomy" has been proposed to explain continuity and change in state-society relations (Lu 2009). So far, China's government manages to contain most efforts to "push the limits" on the part of state-owned media. The elasticity of what I have termed a "social contract on Internet use" (2006), at times yields space for freedom of speech and social agency. Based on my own research on the Chinese media system and the Internet, I have found that the dependency of state-owned media organizations on political power need not be just an obstacle for expanding freedom of speech, as their alignment with powerful political patrons can push the envelope on investigative journalism more than new media organizations (Lagerkvist 2006; 2010 forthcoming). Taken together with new social activism performed by youth and citizen journalism contributes further to the unlocking of the Chinese public sphere (Lagerkvist 2006; 2009). As citizen activism is currently emerging on Chinese communications networks and the Internet, overly optimistic scholars have argued that the Internet is creating civil society, leading to "China's long revolution" toward democracy (Yang 2009). It is clear, however, that there is a significant difference between the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century in that the "apolitical" void and deafening silence after Tiananmen has transformed into a more restive and

rights-seeking period. The trend of increasing citizen activism may continue in the years 2010-2020, due to the rise of a larger, well travelled, and highly educated middle class. Therefore, I contend that it is likely that discontent over current corporatist arrangements will lead to a more contentious political climate, due to new citizen activism and changes of social norms in emerging civil society (Lagerkvist 2009; 2010 forthcoming). A problem with scholarly works on China's emerging civil society is their overly descriptive character, sorely lacking empirical evidence, and therefore not bridging the gap between theoretical postulations and conclusions. Thus, the first goal of this program is to collect an empirical base.

3. Program description

Today, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the Chinese context rarely strive for independence from the state. And apart from a minority of liberal intellectuals in China, such as the Charter 08 group, who would rather have a more Western-style clear separation of state and society, few Chinese seem discontent with the existing political system bent on maintaining social stability. The Chinese party-state has developed a pragmatic and instrumentalist framework for state-society relations: traditionally controlled mass organizations such as trade unions as well as quasi-NGOs founded by the state. Very few newly formed civic associations seek autonomy from the state. To the contrary, many strive for having strong state institutions as their registered sponsors for legitimacy, protection, and support. Yet, there is an increasing tendency of non-sanctioned social activism among many groups in society, ranging from peasants

and migrant workers and city intellectuals. Growing income equality, social divides, and a stalled political reform process are the reasons generating and fueling discontent. Important structural reasons also undergird this trend. Among the most salient is the fact that the Chinese state no longer is the country's largest employer. And the party-state does not control all politically sensitive information disseminated on the new communication networks. Countervailing against this trend in society are party-state strategies invoking historical, economical and political arguments for social stability. The constant reference by state authorities to political chaos in recent history, and the legacy of the Tiananmen massacre as a political cul-de-sac are historical "slow-downers." The success story of rapid economic growth over the past three decades has generated legitimacy for the Communist Party. The political factor concerns the continued ability of the party-state to adapt itself to changing social reality (Shambaugh 2007), ranging from a revamped propaganda apparatus (Brady 2008), to a focus on limiting social and economic divides. I have shown elsewhere how the party-state has strived to contain Internet businesses and users and seeking to embed them in existing structures of social and political control, with the sharper edges of subversive Internet use cut off (2009/2010). I also argue, however, that even with cut-off edges, Internet use, online public opinion, liberal-minded officials, and independent-oriented media practitioners do, indeed, shape social processes bringing change to China. Thus, the current social contract between the party-state and civil society to some extent makes freer speech possible, while simultaneously the same contract contains the pace of change. Therefore, I believe that the enabling environ-

ment conducive to media freedom and democratization already exist in contemporary China. What needs to be better understood, however, is how path-dependent this change is. The emancipatory role from clever use of new Internet and communications technology exists, but somebody must fill that role, and the potential of use of technology needs to be qualified by contextual factors such as possible path-dependent value changes in political and civic culture (Inglehart 2003; Putnam et al 1992), the power of limiting and conservative political institutions (Jackman and Miller 2005), and citizens' formation of new social norms. The crucial factors determining the validity and longevity of China's censorship technologies are likely to be time and political will. Thus, the overarching research question, – *how the balance of power between civil society and the party-state changes through use of communications technology and citizens' activism* – relates to the hypothesis that formation of new citizen norms transform an already "attentive public" (Roseau 1961), into an "active public," going from being "stand-by citizens," (Amnå 2010) to actually "do citizenship" (Dahlgren 2009) by increasing use of social media and communications technology. My own research shows that, especially among young Chinese, agency and activism is on the rise with clear implications for formation of social norms (Lagerkvist 2009). The current social contract between state and society is uneasy, with an ongoing complex interplay between different interests and actors. Arguably, this contract is increasingly under attack through globalization of the national economy, social pluralization, burgeoning conflicts of interest, and usage of new communications technology. This program will yield knowledge on the stability of this equilibrium, whether the contract

should be characterized as "negotiating the state (Saich 2002)," or a battle between state power and civil society. The focus on the interstices of state and society and how the former is impacted by social norms evolving in the latter is an obvious lacuna in this research field. Thus, the program will investigate the processes of contestation and bargaining between state power and civil society in China – as they are expressed on the Internet and in physical real life. The empirical data gathered from three different issue-areas and social spaces – national and transnational – will make possible an in-depth understanding of how an emerging civil society impacts on China's political institutions and their world outlook. Developments therein have crucial implications for maintaining or upsetting the current balance between social forces and political institutions in China. The *issue-areas* (of which I have previously only devoted attention to the first one; Lagerkvist 2010 forthcoming) are chosen because they encompass both the internal dynamics and the increasingly significant linkages between global civil society and national activism. Each issue-area relates to particular research questions:

- *The social arena of new activism powered by media and communications technology in which party-state actors, activist citizen individuals, and information consumers and producers advocate and contest state policies.* What is the role and significance of citizen activism dressed in new forms such as citizen journalism, "citizen investigation," and "citizen prosecution." Are these phenomena undermining the party-state's position on social stability, in the face of proactive propaganda counter strategies of the state?
- *The party-state institutions and state bureaucracy are undergoing generational change. It is impacted by new social norms and activism in*

civil society, new communications technology, and rising individualism. What do these pressures mean for the cohesiveness of party-state institutions? Are young officials, in both their professional and private capacities, interacting with civil society and expressions of popular culture on communications networks becoming more susceptible to public opinion than their predecessors?

- *Mainland Chinese business communities and their interaction with civil society and party-state actors and perspectives on the state's continued policies on maintaining social and political stability – of either containing use of civil society and the public sphere, or unlocking control policies to realign with international standards.* Are the perspectives of Mainland Chinese business communities in favor of the party-state's continued policies on social stability and information control?
- *The expanding area of relations between transnational overseas Chinese networks, the global human rights movement, and the nascent national civil society inside China.* How, and under what conditions, do the expanding relations between transnational Chinese networks and national civil society impact each other?

4. Theoretical framework

This program is informed by, and will in descending order contribute to, three interrelated theoretical debates in the social sciences. First, the project will revisit the applicability and usefulness of the concepts of civil society and social capital (Cohen and Arato 1994; Putnam 1992; Rothstein and Stolle 2008), in a non-Western context. It has been argued that the interplay between state, market and civil society is much more complex than that posited by a sharp dichotomy be-

tween state and civil society, often oversimplified and at times viewed through a Western ethnocentric lens (Alagappa 2004; Hann and Dunn 1996). In China, overlaps between these sectors and the inherent complexities make it hard to analyze shifts in location and relations of power. Partly, this result from incremental changes, too often simplistically perceived as generated in only top-down fashion. It has been argued that most of China's citizens conceive of social existence mainly in terms of obligations rather than rights (Waksman 1991). Yet, a rights consciousness is growing as both extrajudicial protests and protest within the framework of the law have increased (O'Brien 2006). In part, this is due to the institutional backing of central policies and law reform. Since the concept of civil society focuses primarily on its boundary relations—on its autonomy from the state and the economy, and the powerful regulative institutions—it is easy to fail to consider how civil society works as a communicative space for collective identities, among citizens and social groupings, and between individuals and arms of government (Alexander and Jacobs 1998; Dahlgren 2009). Consequently, democratization in China could be achieved through accommodation and mutual interaction between state elites and society, rather than in outright confrontation (Gallagher 2004). The Chinese setting demands the formulation of new concepts to fully appreciate the dynamic between state-power and emerging civil society. All-encompassing concepts such as NGOs “dependent autonomy” are of limited explanatory value insofar as they merely state the obvious. Thus, the first theoretical ambition of this program is to generate new conceptualizations making possible a nuanced and deeper understanding of how

civil society emerges in a non-Western post-communist, authoritarian, and market friendly context. For an understanding of how civil society, and especially young people, form opinions toward the social and political system in China social norm theory is particularly valuable (Coleman 1990; Drobak 2006; Posner 2007). Legal regulations and policies are never implemented in a social vacuum and there are always norms operating in society, which the legal norms will compete with or complement (Hydén and Svensson 2008; Haber as 1996). Therefore, the formation of social norms among citizens, media consumers, state officials, and business professionals are key to identifying norm-starters signifying and significant for change in Chinese society. I have analyzed this phenomenon elsewhere (2010 forthcoming), but much more work on a typology of norms and their meaning is needed. Although focused on the emergence of civil society in a non-Western context, I believe that discussions on “the pacted transition” and role of public sphere(s) in Poland (Linz and Stephan 1996; Jakubowics 1991) will yield comparative merit. Especially interesting are the triggering effects of the activism that erupted on the streets of Eastern European capitals during 1989-90. Provocatively, it has been argued that perhaps the velvet revolution was just a “political-journalistic tag” (Ash 2009). This provocation does not lack foundation since analysis of post-communist societies in Eastern Europe, show surprisingly little civic activism (Howard 2003). As this program is concerned with thresholds and conditions for social activism actors in China, comparative references will be drawn from research on East European velvet revolutions and democratization process of the 1990s, and the “color revolutions” of the first decade of

the 21 century in the former republics of the Soviet Union. This body of scholarship is valuable to this program as it also poses questions about what it takes for the prevailing passive discontent to transform itself into active collective action strategies aiming at political reform and democratization.

Second, the program revisits theories about mass media’s role for democratization. Relations between democratization and media are not well researched in either media studies or political science (Lynch 1999:226; Randall 1998:1; Hackett and Zhao 2005:1). One reason is due to the long paradigm of modernization theory that was rightly criticized for assuming simplistic and ethnocentric development models of democratization. Interest in media’s role is limited to the phase when democratic breakthrough is *already* likely to occur. This whole picture of mass media’s democratizing role is bound to change with the advent of the Internet. It is, for example, undeniable that the people of Indonesia made use of the Internet in the struggle to bring down the Suharto regime (Hill and Sen 2005). This necessitates a new look at the media and democratization issue. China is an excellent case to investigate how new media galvanizes civil society through social norm formation, ultimately triggering democratization. What accounts for change in the relationship between the media and democratization is the interaction between macro- and micro-level developments (Gunter and Meghan 2000). Consequently, developments at the level of civil society—individual citizens, bureaucrats, and politicians—are as salient as legal and institutional reform. I contend that it is even more important to fully understand the role of civil society in this problematic,

since I believe it to be a crucial factor contributing to democratization.

Third, the role of transnational Chinese civic and business networks in supporting either state nationalism's goal of facilitating China's rise, or supporting the liberal forces in China's civil society is not thoroughly researched. Previous works on overseas Chinese businessmen have treated the subject matter on the surface (Sheaf 2002), or limited the focus in studying the economic effects of "brain circulation," i.e. homebound migration and the underlying reasons (Saxenian 2007). The issue-area in this program that focuses on transnational business and ideational links between Mainland China and the outside world seeks to acquire new theoretical understanding, to existing transnational studies in this field (Ong 1999). How the linkages, sustainability, and importance of Chinese diaspora and business networks in North America, Europe, and in South East Asia networks for an understanding of how Mainland Chinese norms and culture are impacted and internationalized remain little understood. The ubiquitous global presence of Chinese economic, social, and cultural activity stands in contrast with the perceived non-connectedness between global civil society and the civil society of Mainland China. External agencies and global civil society's impact on Chinese civil society in key sectors have escaped scholarly attention (Howell 2004), and leading scholars lament the lack of evidence-based network studies of global civil society (Anheier and Katz 2006). Thus, this program seeks to conceptualize the linkages between global civic movements such as human rights organizations and business networks to understand their importance for formation of social norms on their partners and interlocutors in China. The abovementioned

debates are gaining new salience in our media age, which necessitates their mutual employment for interpreting new media's galvanizing of civil society and ultimately spurring democratization. Significant contribution to these three debates is the second goal of this project.

5. Methodology

It is inherently difficult to make judgments about Chinese statements that may be the result of a rational choice or the outcome of clever and persuasive state information/propaganda. The most likely reason for Chinese society's prolonged acquiescence to state control and seemingly tacit acceptance of the current political status quo is a subtle mix of various social, political, and media trends. Explanations vary from "false consciousness," "no alternative frames of reference," search for "psychological coherence," "public lies and private truths" (Nathan 2003; Morley and Robins 1999; Kuran 1995). It has been argued that China's economic reform has created disincentives to oppose the authoritarian political status quo. I suspect that this argument is flawed, as there is indication that surveys published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) are skewed (Rosen 2010). This calls for renewed efforts at examining the party-state's legitimacy, and certainly suggests the merit of conducting in-depth qualitative research in an authoritarian country such as China, working through personal networks generated over time. By digging into the layers of meaning, excavated through "thick description" and situated in the socio-historical contemporary context (Geertz 1973), more informed conclusions may be drawn. In this program, thick description means a contextualization of actors and

their intents in a state–society matrix where control, freedom, decision makers, and the public interact. It is difficult to measure the extent of autonomy of social organizations and communities in the Chinese authoritarian context, full as it is of yeasty and informal regulations. Therefore, it is not the objective of this program to measure the autonomy of the elements and groups that form public opinion. This suggests that examining the mind-sets and mind-frames of the political and intellectual elites that govern the conditions enabling the containment or unlocking of the public sphere, and ultimately, the potential emergence of a vibrant civil society contributing to democratic political participation, is a better approach to the analysis. This program is qualitative and ethnographic in character, with an ambitious empirical aim seeking to conduct between an estimated 80 in-depth interviews with informants relevant to the four issue-areas chosen for closer scrutiny to better understand the overlapping sectors of party-state, civil society, the market and how interaction, negotiation, contestation between social norms between these sectors lead to social change and potentially political liberalization. I contend that the ambition to carry out all these interviews is important to acquire the thick description needed to explicate the dynamics of state–society relations in rapidly transforming social setting such as contemporary China. Moreover, given the complexities and contradictory trends inside party-state institutions, the business world, and different segments of civil society, it is important to contextualize the interviews by analyzing a range of academic journals, research monographs, and policy documents having bearing on the four issue-areas selected for study. It is expected that the combined use of methods will yield

balanced and representative results. My previous successful experiences of qualitative ethnographic in-depth interviews to decode official jargon in China, inspires me to employ this methodology also in the four issue-areas chosen for this research program. Fluent in Chinese, I will interview identified informants in China, whom usually point to other knowledgeable interlocutors. Among those already identified include persons working at the Central Party School in Beijing, officials in charge of the Internet Bureau of the State Council Information Office, officials at the Ministry of Civil Affairs, large media conglomerates and private companies in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, the provinces of Shandong and Hunan, individual citizen activists, and NGOs involved in environmental and health issues. In North America and Europe I will interview Chinese business professionals and executives in the ICT-industry, and multinational staff of Amnesty International, Human Rights in China, Reporters Sans Frontiers.

6. Fieldwork and collection of data

During 2011 I will delve into the impact of new sorts of citizen activism that undermines hegemonic state power views and how this dynamic affects the politics of the state vis-à-vis society. I will conduct 20 interviews with informants describing themselves as independent “citizen journalists,” “citizen investigators,” and “citizen prosecutors.” For this study I will make three fieldwork trips to China. In 2012, I will investigate the expanding relations between transnational overseas Chinese networks, forming a part of global civil society and the nascent national civil society inside China. Primary focus will be on ethnic Chinese working in the ICT in-

dustry in Europe and California, and ethnic Chinese activists working in New York; London and Paris for the human rights organizations Human Rights in China, Amnesty International and Oxfam, and Reporters sans Frontiers. With this category of informants I plan to do 20 interviews, 10 in Europe and 10 in the United States. During 2013, I will conduct 20 interviews with managers of private companies, primarily in the new media sector to understand the role of Mainland Chinese business communities and their stance and perspective on the party-state's continued policies of either containing or controlling civil society. In 2014, I will attempt to uncover the significance of generational change inside the party-state institutions and bureaucracy. I will conduct 20 interviews with key informants inside party-state institutions, many already identified over a decade of research in several of China's provinces and most important cities. During the final year of the program, 2015, I will summarize the findings of all the four in-depth studies into a monograph published by an international academic publishing house.

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