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# Civil Society in China
# in the Eyes of a Polish Researcher of Civil Society

*Abstract:* This article is situated in the humanistic sociology and social anthropology approach. In this approach, civil society is viewed as a society's style of culture with respect to individual participation in group life based on common moral order. Its objective is to try to determine the extent to which western conceptions of civil society can be transferred to Chinese culture. It also strives to reconstruct civil behaviour patterns in China from a historical perspective. The basic tenet of this article is that, in the course of its evolution, Chinese culture developed various motivation and action patterns which may be the beginnings of a civil engagement. It is possible to formulate such a tenet on the assumption that civil society in contemporary China is largely based on tradition. It is tradition which defines the forms of non-institutional, self-organizing "second society." One of the consequences of the adoption of this tenet is this article's focus on analysis of the barriers against, and opportunities for, further development of civil society in contemporary China.

*Keywords:* civil society; civic engagement; social organizations; non-governmental sector; political system; post-communism.

## Introduction

Contemporary China is an example of a complex socio-political system which is undergoing profound political and social transformation. This process is different from the one which has been taking place in Central European post-communist societies, however. It is even sometimes called "the unique reform pathway" or "a precedent on a world scale" so as to underscore the uniqueness of the decisions which the Chinese authorities have made in their search for appropriate political, social, economic or cultural solutions and which have led to reconstruction and diversification of the party state structure (Staniszkis 2003). In such European countries as Poland, Czech Republic or Hungary, the transformation priority was democratisation, i.e., the process of linking the anticommunist opposition with the governing system, pluralisation of the political scene, privatisation and reprivatisation of property which had been nationalised during the socialist "revolution," development of market economy and liberal economics, reform and reorganization of the legal system according to the requirements of the new socio-political order, de-partying of state institutions (the public prosecutor's office, courts, army, police, local self-governments etc.), establishment of new social institutions (social and civic dialogue, nongovernmental and watch

dog organizations), and restitution of civic culture as an expression of an emancipating society's need of self-determination (Słodkowska 2006). In China, the reformers' priority was to break away as radically as possible from centrally planned economy and establish a free-market economy, and only gradually (and in a controlled way) to introduce the remaining elements of transformation including those pertaining to social self-organization, that all-important determinant of civil society, i.e., the legal regulations on social organizations and on foundations legislated respectively in 1993 and in 2004.

This article is mainly about attempts to reconstruct the most important elements of the Chinese interpretation of civil society. This interpretation involves basing the concept of civil society on the "root concept." According to this concept, transformation of the "party state" was to involve giving society sovereignty whilst making the authorities a group of institutions whose role was to administer the ongoing economic and political processes in society's name. (In particular, the authorities were to be responsible for resolving social conflicts, coordinating the realization of various group interests and organizing the conditions in which society's vital needs could be satisfied).

From the point of view of Eastern European countries which were discarding communism as the state system, the concept of civil society, retrieved from the junk room of the history of social and political ideas, was to be the foundation of transformation and its outcomes, or at least its "anchor" (Taylor 1994). This is why I would like to take a closer look at the Chinese interpretation of the civil society idea and—assuming that this interpretation is one of the elements of transformation—to see whether it is rooted in the social, political and civilizational changes which have already taken place as well as those which are currently under way in China.

When one enquires about civil society in China one may be offered the metaphor that it is like a "wheat field" which gladdens the farmer with its abundant harvest and where the effect depends mainly on how carefully the seeds have been prepared for planting. This way of thinking—which is popularised and officially supported in Chinese public debate—may impress westerners, including researchers, as a specific Chinese attempt to explain difficult and controversial issues by harmonising them. Although I think this makes it difficult to gain a proper understanding of what civil society means, I think it is a valuable explanation because it is a good illustration of the uniqueness of the Chinese political transformation. It is very likely, however, that western ideas of civil society and Central European approaches to post-communist reform have provided Chinese intellectuals to a certain extent with the impulse to treat various institutions of civil society, especially civic culture and the public sphere, as a good and effective "weapon" in society's bloodless struggle with the authorities for independence. [1]

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[1] The modern evolution of the idea of civil society in Europe and North America was oriented toward development of mechanisms for the protection of society against tyranny (particularly the tyranny of dynastic monarchy but also the oligarchy of influential "corporations"). The idea evolved from concentration on natural rights and liberalism (Adam Smith), through legalism and the concept of just law which emerged from public discourse [unjust law can lead to civil disobedience] (Immanuel Kant, David Hume),

It is necessary to stress at this point that, as far as imperial and post-imperial China is concerned, it is hard to apply the western concept of "public sphere" (for example as Jurgen Habermas understands it) or "private sphere." It is worth adding that Barringtone Moore's (1984) classical approach to this issue actually questions the very existence of private space (for example the family) where the individual can seek refuge from the "intrusive" institution of power. It is worth recalling that in the dynastic days every traditional Chinese family (Teufel-Dreyer 2000) was an "imperial cosmos" where the head of the dynasty had authoritarian power and relations within the family were based on blood bonds, age and wealth hierarchies. The entire family system was held together by bonds of trust and respect for authority and significant family members. This institutional model survived the communist days almost unscathed and a number of its elements can still be found today (mainly in the ways in which family authority is practised in rural families or urban families of rural origin).

Private and public life in China is based on the Confucian principle of seeking harmony and reducing tension without confrontation or conflict. No special place is therefore allocated to the public sphere (the main arena of conflict with authority) just as there is no place in which to seek protection within the sovereign private structure (the family).

In China—and I must make this very clear—any reference to civil society is closely related to the concepts of state and we may say that civil society is definitely (pro)state. There can be no question of conflict over society's sovereignty. That would weaken state authority, which even in old and mature democracies would lead to alienation and various, more or less pronounced, forms of dictatorship. There is instead the struggle to encourage citizens to strengthen state power, i.e., to develop a "grassroots state" (see Shen Yuan's short essay, in this volume).

Theories of civil society seem to be taken seriously and are widely discussed by both the intellectuals and the Chinese authorities' advisors. Models of civil society derived from Hegel's tradition (emphasising the need to reduce the egoistic strivings of interest groups by powerful state structures) are particularly attractive for them, as are concepts of building on the foundations of socially rooted political communities which establish civic states according to Marxist tradition (Ma Quisha 2006). The second approach is definitely becoming "sinologised." This process is based on a concept expressing the Confucian principles of political harmony, i.e., unification of the civil community and the state authorities.

I would like to focus in my analysis on the normative conception of civil society, that is civil society as a specific construction of institutional behaviour patterns, values

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the institutionalized system of mediation of the satisfaction of human needs and adoration of the state as a weapon with which to fight egoistic particularism (George F. Hegel), a political civil community negating the bourgeois state, diversity of interests and corporatism (Karl Marx), civic institutionalism as a warranty of social and welfare order (Antonio Gramsci), reconstruction of the public sphere and defence of the civil sector's independence from the market and the state (Jurgen Habermas, Peter F. Drucker, Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato), to the concept of social self-organisation, trust and social capital (Robert Putnam). Evolution of the concept of civil society is based on the assumption of rational human judgement which is capable of identifying and defending the individual's natural right to agency, safety and freedom within the community.

and procedures rooted in the culture of public life. (These institutions, let me add, organise forms of communication and activity in a space which belongs to neither the state nor the private domain of the citizens such as the family or social circle.)

This "Chinese way" (i.e., the systemic transformation I am analysing here) will probably lead to a form of authoritarian rule supported by various democratic institutions and market economy. Although the civil society concepts are sometimes highlighted in political debates in China and sometimes left out, they are just as important and essential for the "Chinese way" as they were for Central European post-communist countries during their transition from state socialism to capitalism and democracy (Staniszkis 1999). As far as China is concerned, various concepts of civil society (and attempts to implement them in social and political life) mainly serve to strengthen and legitimize power. Consequently, these concepts and their realisation may undergo significant changes.

In the following analysis I would like to take a closer look at the most important differences between "European" and "sinologized" approaches to civil society. Two reservations must be made, however. First, I do not intend to make a moral evaluation of the political system in the People's Republic of China nor to criticise the deficiencies of Chinese society's civic culture. Second, when discussing the current situation in China I mean to concentrate on making the term "civil society" more precise.[2]

### The Ideological Project

Let me begin my reconstruction of this project with a brief albeit indispensable recapitulation of the most important elements of European theories of civil society. The idea first made its appearance in antiquity in Greek and Roman political ideas. It was later incorporated by Christian philosophy (mainly in the writings of St Thomas Aquinas), developed in the Enlightenment and quite recently in such important trends of social philosophy as neo-Marxism or institutionalism. For example, Central European intellectuals and reformers incorporated these developments in their more or less theoretical diagnoses and prognoses of socio-political change in Central-Eastern Europe in the nineteen-eighties and nineties.[3]

In European academic discourse—presented here extremely laconically, unfortunately—the concept of civil society adopts various forms.

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[2] This author must ensure Readers, however, that he is not immune to the moral evaluation of the behavior of the Chinese authorities and does not shy from such evaluation.

[3] In public discourse the term "civil society" refers to the community of a country's citizens which takes active part in the governing of the country within legally defined limits. This active co-governance is also based on the principles of individual empowerment, respect for the individual's primordial rights and execution of individuals' constitutional and legal responsibilities toward the community. This definition is present in media debate and used in communication between the political sphere and the sphere of individuals' everyday life. In cultures where representative democracy is the accepted form of governance (i.e., in mature European and American democracies), this reconstruction of the meaning of civil society is actually the foundation on which civil identity rests, democracy's unique founding myth or a cultural given, consolidated in processes of socialization.

First, it is used to explain the relations between sovereign society and the state authorities and define its normative limits.

Second, it is a norm which defines the place of social representation vis-à-vis the state authorities and the market in case of conflict or crisis, caused for example by a change of the social *status quo* (this applies to societies in which the system of governance, democracy, enables individuals and groups to defend their sovereignty and participate actively in processes of change).

Third, it refers to social self-awareness, empowerment and freedom expressed in its regulating and controlling functions with respect to the market and the state (Shils 1994).

Fourth, the civil society concept refers to the system of institutions and mechanisms which enable the articulation of group interests (for example, those of marginalised or excluded groups), mobilisation of actions in defence of values which are significant for community cohesion, identification with and reaction to threat to the existence and smooth operation of the self-organising community, all independently of the state authorities and economic structures.

"Civil society" is also a moral idea referring to the social conduct of individuals and groups, legitimising their public presence, participation in political decision making and self-organisation in matters which are important for them personally or for their social environment. This conceptualisation of the presence of specific individuals and groups in society is the outcome of two immutable moral principles: the principle of individual sovereignty and the principle of individual empowerment.

Such ethical interpretations can be found in the twentieth-century Polish sociological ideology. In these conceptualisations of civil society, the most important thing is the individual or group's choice of behaviour patterns and values from the repertory of potential values available to a given society at a given time (Siciński 2002).

As far as the researcher of civil society is concerned, one of the most interesting approaches to the choice of civil behaviour patterns and values is the one proposed by Maria Ossowska (1983), founder of the sociology of morality, a sub-discipline of sociology deeply rooted in the philosophical context. Her book "The model of the citizen in the democratic system" contains a catalogue of normative civil traits which, in my opinion, could serve as the foundation for an ethical project for models of citizenship.

In the wake of Maria Ossowska's ideas, this catalogue could include such normative civil virtues as: open-mindedness (the ability to change one's opinions when confronted by the facts), criticism which inoculates against "intoxication" by persistently demanding explanations; intellectual integrity (as opposed to hypocrisy and all sorts of "self-deception"), self-discipline in the name of something, for example realisation of goals requiring prolonged effort; the ability to make choices, aesthetic sensitivity because it facilitates ethical culture (the choice between a moral and amoral act is often a matter of aesthetic sophistication), sense of humour which makes it more difficult for dictatorship to take hold of society, tolerance of other people's needs and opinions.

According to this catalogue, citizens are also obliged to think independently, improve their conditions of life, view civil courage as the basis of their actions, even at the price of jeopardising one's interests or personal safety. Finally, citizens should

possess a set of traits jointly covered by the umbrella term "socialisation," such as: the ability to overcome one's egocentricity and egoism (Maria Ossowska thinks that these two moral orientations are necessary but not sufficient conditions which must be fulfilled if we are to consider a person to be socialized), the ability to make sacrifices for the common good (social service to which citizens in democratic systems should feel obliged), the ability to cooperate with other people on equal terms (forms of cooperation undertaken in order to dominate others, exploit them, showing no concern for other people's interests and the common good) are out of the question.

This catalogue puts special emphasis on civil responsibilities in situations of conflict. Even in face of antagonism and conflict, citizens should be chivalrous and know how to win and lose. I would like to close this list of civil virtues based on Maria Ossowska's ideas by pointing out that socialisation is the central feature of such catalogues. This is because the socialisation principle may serve as an important signpost for individuals and groups who happen to be living in democratic mass society.

To revert to Maria Ossowska's own ideas, it is worth stressing that not only did she want to propose a list of simple virtues for consecutive generations of Poles who were developing society and democratic culture despite the numerous historical odds, she also wanted to develop an axiological project for radical reform of the contemporary state—its profound moral and ideological revival. Generally speaking, she was concerned with a general model of the "good state." In other words, not only was her model meant to help to reform Poland and similar socialist countries, it was also a project for more universal interpretation of the principles of "good state" and "good citizen." We may say that by formulating the principles of "good state" and "good citizen," Maria Ossowska was "codifying" the founding myth of democracy and civil society, not only for Poland but also for Western civic culture.

When Maria Ossowska raised the question of models of the "good state" and "good citizen" for democratic times she greatly helped the researcher of civil society and civil culture not only in Poland but also in the West. Thanks to Ossowska I think it is possible to ask how similar models function in China and what the foundation myth of Chinese civil culture was. And whether such a myth exists at all.

The lack of socio-cultural changes similar to the ones which took place during the Enlightenment in Europe which could have weakened the well-established Confucian patterns of interpersonal relations (*wulun*), as well as the uncompleted republican revolution of the Chinese economic and intellectual elite which only partly used western models to build its social identity in 1912–1949, were one of the most important barriers to the development of civil culture as a style of public conduct sanctioned by social values (Ma Quisha 2006). Another less obvious reason was the lack of significant cultural divisions within the reformatory elite in the early Chinese Republic which led to acceptance of mixed authoritarianism (European style) and elements of Confucian culture as expressed in the Guomindang style of governance. (I must add that, due to the reforms, the communist regime reverted to a similar form of governance albeit with fewer Confucian influences perhaps.)

It is noteworthy, however, that although reformatory movements in customs, law, religion or the economy, all of which were elements of China's civil potential,

metamorphosed into various forms of authentic civil involvement at that time, they failed to produce a coherent system of civic models and principles, if only because they were so scattered. Lack of basic, essential concepts for the development of such a system also became evident at the time. This "conceptual void" continues to this day although many heated discussions are now being held in China about civil society, its past, present and future.

It is not easy to give a brief review of the political and philosophical concepts which can be found in the Chinese social ideology of the times of republican revolution and the contemporary state or related concepts of civil society, good state, models of the citizen etc. When reviewing this period it is difficult to find terms either containing the term "civil" directly or alluding to it indirectly(Ma Quisha 2006: 4–47). Let me add that the term "civil society" (*minijan shehui*) was not present in academic discussions until the early nineteen-nineties.

Therefore, bearing in mind the nature of the basic political and philosophical concepts which refer, in contemporary Chinese debates, to the problem of individual involvement in more general social issues (local, regional, national etc.), one could now try to develop a Chinese "citizenisation" project. In my opinion, such a project could utilise the catalogue of personal traits of the model citizen proposed by Maria Ossowska with only minor modifications.[4]

If we scrutinise Chinese social philosophy for concepts similar in content to western concepts of participation in the public sphere (or a sphere unrelated to state authority), we can find several concepts which could be used to develop such a program. With one reservation however—these concepts have little in common with European definitions of civil society. These important concepts are, for example, public interest (*gong*) [common good], mediation (*zhang yong*) [debate], moral order (*zhen* and *dangran*) [shared set of values], harmony (*he*) and the more contemporary harmonised society [social contract](Zhang Dainian 2005).

The basic concept in Chinese thinking about the state and society is probably the concept of public interest (*gong*) understood as a grand community. This concept is beginning to stimulate the search for the founding myth of the self-regulating, moral community aspiring to be a civic cooperative where the state authorities and society depend on each other ("a mutually dependent, holistic system of governance"). "Everything under the Heaven" is for everybody (for general public)—the grand collective. "Everybody under the Heaven" will find a place for himself and "everybody under the Heaven" will receive as many goods (rewards) as he needs and as many as he is able to acquire. As far as the new ideology of Chinese civil society is concerned, this newly discovered schema is based on the assumption of organized relations of unity between state and society. It lacks such concepts as empowerment and individual rights (to existence and self-determination) although we could perhaps find them if we tried very hard and over-interpreted things a bit. According to this doctrine, private interest is realized via public interest or at least with consideration for the latter. The

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[4] Minor modifications because the concepts of models of citizens proposed by Maria Ossowska are founded on the category of socialisation or prosocial orientation.

fundamental difference, to be found in European ideology, between private and public interest is absent. Private interest is important, it is an element of the "heart," but it must give way to the interest of the community and those who govern it. The doctrine says (Zhang Dainian 2005: 311–321)that awareness of this principle by members of the community is essential if a state of harmony is to be achieved—a state which has always been the source of moral order in Chinese culture (let me add that the public interest also determined the most important interpersonal relations—familial, social and public).

Fully aware that this is a gross simplification, we may say that certain doctrinal elements of antique Chinese philosophy seem to resemble some of the components of the catalogue of civil socialization. Their purpose was to civilise interpersonal relations and to channel and neutralise tension, not by means of aggression but by means of tolerance, dialogue and understanding (cf. e.g. Mozi's [480–397 B.C.] philosophy and his concept of non-discrimination [*kian ai*] of human individuals); the goal was to prevent conflict by means of unconditional compassion and acceptance; cf. also the theory of another social philosopher, Xunzi [330–227 B.C,] who was in opposition to the Moists who assumed that it was possible to gain rational insight into other people's motives, one's own anger and resentment, and to overcome them by taking conscious action (Zhang Dainian 2005: 326–329). In the democratic plans of SunYatsen (the founding father of the Chinese Republic) and other twentieth-century reformers of public life in China (including Mao Zedong), these ancient ideas of the great philosophers were supposed to provide the foundation for "democratic" social relations. (Ma Quisha 2006: 34–47).

When we look at the projects of "citizenization" for ancient and more contemporary China, based on various philosophical concepts, we may risk the following conjecture. Emergent Chinese civil culture is largely based on individual moral disposition understood as the harmonisation of egoism and authoritative rule (beginning with the family and ending with the state authorities) rather than on active individual participation in the common public life.

## The Prospects for Civil Society in Contemporary China

When Robert Dahl (1956) discussed models of citizenship as they are understood in western parliamentary-procedural tradition, he actually had in mind legally regulated individual competencies for institutional participation. Understood this way, these competencies are more compatible with the Confucian observation of rituals which is embedded in traditional Chinese social life. Direct involvement in the public sphere incurs costs: one must sacrifice the "interest of the heart" in the name of public interest understood as giving oneself up, not only to the state but also to the community.

In western tradition, one of the conditions of civic involvement is interest in social and political issues. According to this tradition, participants of the public scene must be well informed about the political and social situation, take active part in discussions about social issues, actively participate in the moulding of the decision

process by voting, communicating one's opinions to the officials and taking part in political rallies. In addition to all that, whatever the form of participation, one must be motivated by the wish to serve the common good. We must remember, however, that in western societies only a few citizens (because it is to them that this tradition is referring) are willing and able to meet the demands of this ideal model.

The case is similar in China because here too only some people are capable of such direct participation which could be realised by local communities. Not only are there so many problems to solve but also the level of complexity of public affairs at the national level is so great that many of them cannot be solved by means of direct citizen participation.

The almost complete absence of the concept of civil society in the language of the Chinese politics may be due, for example, to Chinese history's rejection of the dichotomy between sovereign society and the state. Simply put, this means that this opposition does not exist in Confucian culture and is actually thought to be amoral because model society based on this tradition is supposed to be a loyal federation of dynasties, regions etc. In other words, model society is always supposed to based on adoration of, and trust in, the authorities (Teufel-Dreyer 2000).

The concept of "individual" consolidated in Chinese dynastic culture. There was no such thing as an independent private and public sphere and there were no independent citizens and officials in the nation-state. Most importantly, the relations between the various elements of the socio-political system were not antagonistic. For example, Zhang Jing (1998)[5] thinks that it was clearly understood that separation of the people and the authorities in Chinese political culture would lead to chaos and disharmony, it would crack moral unity (*yi, tai yu*). We may risk saying that this moral order was one of the most important consciousness-related causes of the fiasco of republican revolution and the short-lived continental republic in China in 1912–1949.

In twentieth-century China the relations between citizens on the one hand and the state and state authorities on the other hand, which was based on moral acceptance of authority, was quite visible in everyday life but weakened under the influence of the widening autonomic private sphere, mainly by means of consumption and market activity. When this happened, other activities in the space between the family, local community and the public sphere, gained significance.

Despite the deep entanglement of everyday conduct in the Confucian moral system, during the first phase of modernisation in China reformative movements (e.g., the May Fourth Movement, Reform Movement, New Culture Movement, or even the Communist Party) changed many patterns of behaviour by teaching new "secular" lifestyles in an already dual order (society versus the state authorities). When Chang Kaishek's nationalists and later Mao Zedong's communists came to power, political religions reverted to their old, familiar strategies of social harmonisation by creating

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unity and they reinstated Confucian patterns of public presence despite the fact that the Communist Party of China had never referred to them directly and had even rejected them by condemning Confucius. Confucian forms of conduct were more legible to the public than European patterns and that is why they were good conveyors of Chinese communist ideology.

The end of the Mao era and beginning of the era of reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping's political powerbase was a time of gradual empowerment of Chinese society (Liu Xiaobo 2005). One symbolic event which anticipated the expansion of sovereignty of the people were the demonstrations at Tiananmen Square in June 1989. The demonstrating citizens were aware of their empowerment and dared to discipline the state authorities morally. "To discipline the authorities" meant to remind them of their responsibilities as a patron of the people, not—as is widely propagated today—to overthrow them ( Fairbank 2004). For example, Yu Kemping (1993), now one of the leading ideologists of democratisation in China (vice-director of the Central Translation Bureau and advisor to the state administration), already observed in 1993 that civil society was a historical necessity and was a practical issue rather than a theoretical exercise.

The conceptualization of civil society in China is tiny connected with the term "constructive relationship" (*liangxing hudong*). Constructive relationship means permissibility of state intervention in sovereign civil society (Deng Zhenglai and Jing Yuejin 1992). Such intervention was to take place not in the name of any political-party particularity but in the name of rationality of the decision making process. The Confucian principle of non-duality and anti-antagonism in state-society relations remains intact in such a conceptualisation. (Hence we have only a superficial incorporation of the western cultural model rather than its assimilation as the aforementioned definition would suggest.)

The basic problem of the Chinese project for civil society seems to be lack of citizen involvement in the public sphere. Chinese citizens tend to retreat to the family and its environment (*familiarism*) and social influence circles (*guanxi*). This practice ensures economic success (Gold , Guthrie , Wank, (eds.) 2002) but is also a major cultural barrier to the development and functioning of civil society (Ma Quisha 2006).

Meanwhile, the state is not interested in activating its citizens. (On the contrary, it makes public civil activity difficult by, for example, imposing complicated procedures for the establishment of civic organisations.)

The Confucian patronage system also operates in the sphere of civic and non-governmental organisations. These Government-Directed NGOs or Party-Directed NGOs (sometimes called "sponsor organizations") "extend their patronage" to organisations which have to be registered if they want to be subsidised, which means that they have to become satellites.

Other organisations which want to retain their programmatic sovereignty either do not have to be registered (Non-Registered NGOs) or are forced to make alliances with international organisations (International-Directed NGOs).

Lack of stability of the cultural and legal framework for social functioning "outside the family" deepens people's unwillingness to act on behalf of the common good.

This stalemate could be overcome were a new middle-class culture to develop, a culture based on diversification of free-market interests and activity. Perhaps this economic aspect of the everyday life of the Chinese middle class will help its representatives to become aware of the need to emancipate by establishing autonomous social organisations and developing civic social movements, not only to defend this class's group interests but above all to defend its style of life.

The socio-cultural movement, presented above as a significant and valuable social change in contemporary China, is not the first one of its kind in Chinese history. The last years of the empire and the early years of the republic developed a limited civil society, restricted to the gentry and intellectual elite. This movement included local self-governments and municipal authorities as well as the commercial, political and scientific societies whose influence was growing. They organised a great variety of formal and informal civil conferences.

However, despite the sprouting of these heterogeneous organisations and movements in the early twentieth century, the true basis on which civil society developed— and I must say this very clearly—was the family and the *guanxi* network within the inchoate middle class. One of the serious barriers to the spreading of models of citizenship in republican China was the elite nature of reform circles which also seems to have been one of the major causes of the downfall of the republic and the breakdown of the culture of inchoate democracy.

Having drawn attention to the historical context created by republican China I shall now go on to discuss present interpretations of civil society in cultural and moral terms. Four types of the cultural style called civil society can be identified in China today.

The first type is the "decreed type." It involves activities which engage citizens in various projects which comply with the constitution and state law (e.g., the system of elections to the National People's Congress).

The second type is the "licensed type" which involves patronage-type social organisations.

The third type is the "imitative type." In this type citizens' activities are located in alternative public space, "between the family, social circles and the official public sphere" (e.g., political critics' clubs, domestic churches or underground literature and art).

It follows from the foregoing reconstruction that one must consider the problem of the self-organisation of Chinese society not only in the political context but also, just as importantly, in the context of the country's unique cultural tradition.

One must not forget, however, that in China, the structure which determines social life as a whole is the party-state, the inseparable state-and-communist-party structure, and that the party-state controls every form of social activity.

Nevertheless, Chinese sociologists, including Shen Yuan,[6] drew attention to the inchoate independent social initiatives in three grand social collectives: the emer-

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[6] Shen Yuan, Ostrowska Antonina, Gawin Dariusz, Gliński Piotr, Kościański Artur, "Samoorganiza- cja społeczeństwa chińskiego w okresie transformacji. Rozmowa studyjna" [Self-organization of Chinese

gent middle class, the peasantry and the workers. It is noteworthy that social self-organisation in each of these three collectives was triggered by social conflict.

As far as the middle class is concerned, the bone of contention was ownership law, particularly the right to own real estate, especially apartments. [7] Another topic which is attracting the attention of researchers of civil society in China are examples of self-organisation among people who were dispossessed during the violent investment-modernisation process which has recently been taking place in large cities all over the country. The dispossessed receive symbolic compensation and are mandatorily moved to distant suburbs. Those who feel that they have not been given sufficient compensation have formed informal groups and are suing the state and demanding higher compensation. These disputes have been going on for years and so far none of them seem to have been finally resolved.

As far as the peasants are concerned, in addition to problems of dispossession resulting from infrastructural projects (such as plans to construct motorways), another source of conflict motivating people to self-organise is the completely unregulated matter of individual land ownership in the Chinese village. [8]

The third grand collective which has attracted the attention of Chinese researchers of social self-organisation are the workers. Workers have been meeting regularly and these meetings have led to the development of informal structures whose aim is to fight for workers' rights. (Let me add that representatives of international organisations, American institutions and circles interested in the protection of workers' rights also take part in these meetings.)

When attempting to summarise the foregoing outline of three collective efforts to self-organise socially, we must bear in mind that none of them has been conducted on a mass scale. On the contrary, in Chinese social reality, dominated on the one hand by state-party structures and on the other hand by international corporations, attempts to develop an authentic civil society are marginal (Beja 2005).

### Concluding Remarks

It looks as if there are too many rather than too few theoretical and practical ideas concerning civil activity in China. This excess of ideas can be observed in such areas as civil society, civil culture and social involvement. In other words, there are too many

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society during the transformation. A study conversation]. Qinghua University, 28 September 2007. It is worth adding that many aspects of ongoing political and economic reform in China were discussed during this conversation, which was really an academic seminar. Several different visions of civil society were confronted: the Polish participants represented the liberal vision and the Chinese participants represented the pro-state vision. This was an extremely inspiring interchange and the present text is one of its fruits.

[7] Shen Yuan and collaborators are studying a new phenomenon, so-called ownership housing cooperatives , which are groups of apartment owners who are in conflict with the administration over lack of official acknowledgment of their ownership rights. There are 36 such cooperatives in Beijing. The authorities issues a decree subordinating the operations of these cooperatives to direct supervision of so-called street committees, i.e., the lowest level of party-state administration.

[8] The land belongs to the village local authorities whereas in Mao's days village people's communes accumulated land and were the basic agricultural organisational unit prior to Deng Xiaoping's reforms.

normative projects saying how civil society should be developed and how it should function and it would be good if there was more balance between the ideology and practice of civil society.

This unbalance sometimes leads to tension and conflict between those who want to implement new ideological projects, those who want to develop traditional solutions and the existing civic culture, and those who "simply" want to practice citizenship. The main axis of the conflict seems to run between the proponents of imitative democracy (introduction of models which have been well-tested elsewhere) and the proponents of citizenisation aimed at inclusion of the people in the governance process based on existing models and potentials (the republican idea of shared responsibility and self-determination).

In my opinion, these are very creative conflicts. They help us to test new or revitalised behaviour patterns and institutions. However, critiques of the concept of civil society are less appropriate when we consider the practical side. Ideologists and theorists of civil society tend to neglect practicalities. Meanwhile, it would be very advisable if the theoretical and practical approaches complemented each other because too many ideas lead to ideological confusion and ideological confusion makes it difficult for individuals and groups to make good decisions concerning how best to participate in civic life.

Surfeit of ideas is also connected with another important issue—often mentioned in discussions and analyses—the rift between social reality and projects for the solution of theoretical and ideological problems.

There is a great need to achieve proper balance between theory and ideology on the one hand and practice on the other hand when discovering the real world and defining the goals of social change (the problem of social engineering). I am therefore convinced that one of the basic objectives in the effort to develop theories and consistent ideologies of civil society should be reflection on the relations between the concept of civil society and ethics. In other words, we should always try to find out what civic ethic we are dealing with in a particular society and what models of civic participation are necessary and feasible.

When diagnosing moral practice and civic pathology in China or, for example, in Poland where I myself am studying civil society, we should try to describe the deformations and do our best to "practically extinguish" bad models and promote "good" ones rather than concentrating on feasible plans to imitate the rules of Anglo-Saxon democracy, appropriate as they may be, in different cultural and political conditions.

Contemporary, autocratic China needs civil society, mainly as a mechanism of bloodless social conflict.[9] Conflict management and fostering realisation of the important needs of various social groups (including ethnic groups) is the next phase of change, following economic transformation. As we have learned from the experience

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[9] I am not talking about democratisation, that is transferring models of western political regimes. I am talking about how best to manage the tensions which arise in the contexts of increasingly numerous and widespread social divisions (economic, ethnic and cultural) rooted in Chinese dual society (town and country).

of Central-Eastern European countries (Staniszkis 1999, Bryant, Mokrzycki 1995), transformation leads to new social divisions and new tensions.

Civil society is capable of interrupting acute phases of conflict by means of dialogue and negotiation. The Confucian approach to state-society relations "pushes" the authorities toward unequivocal reaction to conflicted society (or more precisely, social pressure groups) in search of possible areas of independence. Lack of an institutionalised public space for social and civic dialogue (e.g., a dialogue commission or non-governmental negotiation centres) as well as failure to empower society-as-sovereign and to empower the authorities-as-administrator are the most serious barriers to the development of civil society in China.

Generally speaking, the European idea of civil society is not working very well in China. The model which is best fitted to Chinese society's cultural traditions merely encourages the development of enclaves of civil society such as NGOs; the perpetuation of local civil activity referring to the tradition of self-organisation around religious communities (mainly the Christian church); traditional village communities (self-defence and *guanxi* capital which is "making its way" into the public sphere); and the "resurrecting" social networks which once emerged spontaneously in response to significant social problems and are now becoming "extinct" for various reasons.

This last element, i.e., the "resurrection" of spontaneous social networks, featuring occasional attempts to build a civil society, is contradicting the idea of co-governance as a process of reflective dialogue leading to reinforcement of the "grass-roots state" and harmony in the country. Spontaneous self-organisation at both local and national levels is just a bypass which, by helping individuals and groups to communicate better, withstands the purely instrumental treatment of the civic sphere and its colonisation by the Chinese state.

The presence of sporadic civic activity also shows that, despite the reduced role of the culture of self-government and self-organisation (Hough 1977) the traditional values of [semi]republican civil society are still not extinct, either in China or in post-communist Poland.

The need to cooperate and accept responsibility for one's own life are now the dominant motives underlying this activity as exemplified by the Chinese people's spontaneous outbursts of self-help (e.g., following the Sichuan earthquake). I am deeply convinced that these examples of self-help and self-organisation are not just emotional reactions, they are the effect of *guanxi*, but they are also demonstrations of collective values. The Chinese people can remember that they share a certain moral order without having to refer to any state or party ideology.

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