INTRODUCTION

Civil Society in China

Better Governance under Authoritarianism

THE PUZZLE: WHY IS GREENPEACE IN CHINA?

While conducting research in China in 2006, I was surprised to see the Greenpeace office in Beijing. With its anti-state rhetoric and dramatic whaling interventions, this seemed to be the last group that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) would allow to operate. The presence of a group such as Greenpeace raised the question of how we understand the relationship between an authoritarian state and civil society. Most scholarly and policy analyses describe an environment in which all types of associations are either directly state controlled or highly incorporated into state bureaucracy. However, clearly the story is not simply one of state control and repression, of a David civil society opposing a Goliath state; otherwise, why would the CCP allow a prominent independent group such as Greenpeace to exist?

Poland and the Philippines, why are authoritarian leaders allowing these groups to form and proliferate? I contend that local Chinese officials have learned through direct experience and observation of the experiences of other authoritarian regimes that civil society groups may both assist and threaten nondemocratic governments. On one hand, civil society generates reliable information about citizen dissatisfaction that authoritarian states are unable to access through formal institutions, and it meets these demands through social innovation, thus improving governance and increasing satisfaction with the regime. On the other hand, civil society advocates for more citizen participation in policy making and an expansion of democratic political ideals such as transparency and accountability. This advocacy challenges the opaque and concentrated nature of authority in an authoritarian regime. In seeking to retain the benefits of civil society while mitigating the dangers, Chinese local officials developed a new model of state–civil society relations that combines the pluralistic aspect of democratic governance with the state control mechanisms prevalent in authoritarian regimes.

This new model of consultative authoritarianism (CA) encourages the formation and development of an autonomous civil society while creating new, more indirect methods of state control. Thus, the growth of civil society under authoritarianism is not a unidirectional march toward political liberalization, but rather an interactive and dynamic process whereby government officials and civil society leaders learn from experiences with each other to build a new state-society model that emphasizes both pluralism and control. As I discuss in more detail at the end of this chapter, the normative implications of this new CA model are also nuanced and complex. The more cooperative relationship existing between local state and civil society generates better development outcomes and improves governance through increasing transparency and pluralism in policy making; however, this same relationship also decreases the ability and likelihood of these groups to challenge authoritarian rule and mobilize citizens to resist nondemocratic governance. Although proponents of democratization might be disappointed in this outcome, I argue that the improvement of
human welfare in authoritarian regimes around the world is non-trivial and should not be dismissed in favor of a focus only on sweeping revolutionary change.

Greenpeace-China offers an instructive example of this dynamic process of policy learning that is driving the development of the CA model. Greenpeace-China’s first office opened in Hong Kong in 1997, followed by expansion to Beijing in 2002. One of Greenpeace’s first mainland projects in 2004 was shut down after conflicts with Yunnan provincial leaders over its direct methods to oppose logging; however, in response to the Yunnan campaign, Greenpeace pursued a more collaborative relationship with Beijing officials and the Beijing office continued to operate. This learning process flowed both ways, as officials also learned how the group could assist with state goals, such as using technical expertise to help draft a renewable energy law in 2006. This variation in Greenpeace’s experiences questions the dominant understanding of the oppositional model of state-society relationship described by liberal civil society theories, and it illustrates that this relationship in authoritarian regimes is much more nuanced than previously thought. I find that the relationship between the state and civil society changes from corporatism in the 1990s to a more independent one in the 2000s through a process of policy learning by local officials occurring through two mechanisms: (1) direct experience with emerging civil society groups and (2) observing state-society relationships in other provinces and states.

Interestingly, I also find this process of learning, or policy diffusion, occurring in other authoritarian regimes. In fact, Greenpeace’s experience in China is mirrored around the world, with the rise of a fairly autonomous civil society in authoritarian

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regimes. In this book, I focus on local government learning in response to an emerging civil society in China and then briefly extend this analysis to illustrate policy diffusion in other authoritarian regimes, such as Russia. Whereas this analysis was motivated by the changing state-society relationships I observed in China, I also noticed that China, although unique in many ways, has increasingly converged with other nondemocratic regimes in developing a new relationship with civil society – one that allows more participation in the policy process while creating new tools of state control. In the following chapters, I explore the factors leading to this convergence to understand why China and other nondemocratic regimes would allow, and in fact welcome, civil society organizations like Greenpeace.

This analysis challenges much of the current understanding of civil society in authoritarian regimes, namely by asserting that cooperation, not opposition, is possible between the two and that each side learns from experiences with the other. First, I develop a new hybrid model of state-society relationships merging the ideas of pluralism and autonomy in liberal theories of civil society with the idea of state control over group activities in corporatist theories. This model, which I call “consultative authoritarianism,” challenges traditional liberal theories by finding that civil society needs less autonomy from the state to accomplish goals of advocacy and service delivery and in fact increasing channels of interaction with the state might help these groups have more impact on policy making. This is not to suggest that civil society does not need space from the state to accomplish these goals, but that operationally autonomous groups cooperate with the state to provide services and policy advocacy, creating a new state-society model that is not a dichotomous choice between total independence and total cooperation. This model of consultative authoritarianism is increasingly being adopted by authoritarian regimes as a way to enjoy the governance benefits of autonomous groups but still control certain activities that might challenge the regime, and by civil society groups as a way to influence policy making in authoritarian regimes.

As a result of this cooperation, I find that civil society might play a role not in challenging authoritarian governments, as
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liberal theories predict, but rather in making them more durable. Civil society plays an important role in good governance especially under authoritarianism. Authoritarian regimes do not maintain formal channels for receiving citizen feedback about policies, and thus officials often do not know which policies are ineffective or which might be causing grievances to build up that might eventually challenge the regime’s authority. By transmitting information about policies and needs to the government and helping provide goods and services to citizens, civil society improves governance in these regimes, which might serve to extend authoritarian rule. Although my findings challenge the democratic opposition role ascribed to civil society by liberal theories, the role played by these groups in creating better governance should not be overlooked. This is a vital role that directly increases the well-being of the world’s population in meaningful ways.

Second, my analysis highlights the role of learning in the changing relationship and policies toward civil society that reveals an endogenous mechanism for authoritarian institutional change. The existing literature on endogenous institutional change examines the use of feedback loops as the primary mechanism of change; however, authoritarian regimes do not have mechanisms for participation in the policy process, making receiving feedback slow and difficult. So how do authoritarian institutions lacking social feedback mechanisms change without regime overthrow? Much of the current literature examines how these regimes alter formal institutional structures such as legislatures and political parties to access information. However, I argue that change in these regimes is most commonly a result of a process of authoritarian learning,


whereby policy makers’ experiences and observations serve as a feedback mechanism leading to endogenous institutional change.

Although the policy learning literature focuses on this process in democracies, I find that a similar learning process occurs in and across authoritarian regimes as well and in fact that the role of civil society in this process is strengthened in nondemocracies that lack institutional mechanisms for the transmission of information about policy. In democracies, civil society organizations offer only one perspective (or voice) on policy and compete with many other actors, such as lobbyists and media, whereas in nondemocracies, civil society might be the only non-state actor advocating for policy change and sharing information about failed policies. As I find in the case of China, local officials’ learning about the emerging civil society appearing in the early 1990s led to a new state–civil society relationship at the local level first in Yunnan and then in Beijing before spreading to other provinces. In the final section of this book, I trace the process whereby the consultative authoritarianism model diffused to other authoritarian regimes as policy makers observed this seemingly successful model of balancing the benefits and dangers of civil society developing in China.

THE ARGUMENT: THE PROCESS OF POLICY LEARNING

Dominant theories of civil society depict a state-society relationship of autonomy, whereby civil society operates in a separate social sphere from the political one of the state. In democracies, these liberal theories of civil society depict an independent and often conflictual relationship with the state. In authoritarian regimes, these theories predict repressive or incorporated state-society relationships as a result of social threats to state authority.

Corporatism is a state-society model that incorporates all societal groups into state organizations as “transmission belts,” transferring information between state and society. For example, all labor associations would be incorporated into one mass labor organization that is funded and staffed by the government. The characteristics of corporatism are that all social organizations operate as government entities and as such depend on government funding and employees to meet goals outlined by the state. Additionally, there is a lack of competition among organizations for each constituency: “at the national level the state recognizes one and only one organization (say, a national labor union, a business association, a farmers’ association) as the sole representative of the sectoral interests of the individuals, enterprises or institutions that comprise that organization’s assigned constituency.”

The intention of corporatism is to integrate interest articulation into state agencies to control it and not allow social mobilization that might possibly be used against the state. Independent grassroots groups in this system are not allowed to exist, but as in the case of China when these groups began to form in the 1990s, corporatism can adapt by requiring that all groups register and operate under a state agency. However, I argue that during the 2000s, state–civil society relationships in China have changed from corporatism to a hybrid model of consultative authoritarianism that combines the autonomous civil society found in liberal models with mechanisms of state control found in corporatist models. Although corporatism still exists in China, CA is increasingly becoming the dominant model, as seen in recent regulatory changes such as easing registration requirements for groups.

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In contrast to corporatism, consultative authoritarianism is a state-society model that allows for fairly independent social organization of many competing groups but seeks to control these organizations through a system of state management. However, in contradistinction to the direct tools used in corporatism, those used here are indirect and consist of positive and negative incentives that seek to punish certain activities while encouraging others. This term “consultative authoritarianism” is my adaptation of Li Junru’s term “consultative democracy (xieshang minzhu 协商民主).” Li argues that an increase in public participation in policy making indicates a process of democratization in China. However, I argue that growing consultation does not indicate a process of democratization, but rather the creation of a new model that encourages independent civil society groups to participate in policy but also seeks to guide that participation through a system of indirect positive and negative incentives. Kang Xiaoguang and Han Heng also contend that this system of incentives, which they call “differentiated controls,” indicates changing state–civil society relations whereby the government uses different tools to control varying types of groups. Groups that are deemed “safe,” such as those formed by government cadres or primarily interested in service delivery, are treated differently from those that might deal with issues of human rights advocacy. This has led to an explosion of civil society groups in China since 2000 – an associational revolution composed of both independent grassroots groups and those with close ties to government agencies.

11 李君如 (Li Junru), Dangdai Zhongguo zhengzhi zouxiang (Trends in Contemporary Chinese Politics) (Fuzhou: Fuzhou renmin chubanshe, 2007), pp. 143–146.
In contrast to corporatism, this CA model is characterized first by a more autonomous civil society, such as grassroots groups or formerly government-organized groups gaining more operational autonomy (i.e., designing projects, securing diverse sources of funding, independent hiring). Second, this model is characterized by a set of positive and negative incentives designed to indirectly control group activities, rather than the direct methods utilized by corporatism such as control over budgets and hiring. Positive incentives include government grants, capacity-building programs, pilot project permits, and access to policy making. Negative incentives include tax fraud charges, volunteer or staff intimidation, and seizure of documents or lengthy questioning of staff by police (喝 茶). As seen in the case studies analyzed in later chapters, repression is the most extreme of the possible negative incentives but does still occur. Many groups focusing on controversial topics or those led by prominent activists in areas such as HIV/AIDS, legal advocacy, and human rights have been closed or had members arrested. Despite a changing political economy in China, local officials are still powerful and able to repress groups if necessary. In fact, the 2012 budget prioritized spending on social stability above that on national defense. However, local officials have developed a toolkit of indirect incentives that make outright repression less necessary.

I contend that the state-society relationship in China is evolving from corporatism to CA in response to a process of learning by local officials. As a result of a changing political economy during the 1990s in which they were expected to deliver public goods and increase development with little control over fiscal policy, officials were searching for ways to achieve expanded goals with less funding. As they learned through direct experience with civil society and observation of other provinces’ and countries’ experiences, one

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emergent policy solution was to partner with civil society groups receiving funding and innovative policies from abroad. The CA model grew out of a desire by these local officials to reap the benefits of allowing the formation of an independent civil society that assists with development and governance goals, while minimizing the danger of these groups mobilizing citizens to pressure the state for political change. As I discuss later, civil society played a large role in shaping perceptions of these benefits and dangers.

THE GLOBAL ASSOCIATIONAL REVOLUTION

The associational revolution experienced in China beginning in the early 1990s was shared as volunteering and associational activity grew rapidly all over the world. As Lester Salamon argues,

We seem to be in the midst of a “global associational revolution,” a massive upsurge of organized private voluntary activity, of structured citizen action outside the boundaries of the market and the state, that I am convinced will prove to be as momentous a feature of the late 20th century as the rise of the nation-state was of the late 19th century.14

This global associational revolution is led by voluntary citizen organizations, such as nonprofit organizations (NPOs), nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), charities, sports clubs, and other interest-based organizations. Scholars often use the term “civil society” to represent this diverse associational life, ranging from large groups such as The Nature Conservancy or Doctors Without Borders to smaller, local groups such as soccer or book clubs.

The civil society sector is a major economic force in the world. In fact, NPOs as early as the mid-1990s accounted for $1.2 trillion in expenditures and 31 million full-time workers.15 In the United States alone, the country’s more than 76,000 grant-making foundations gave an estimated $45.7 billion in 2010, in addition to

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15 Lester M. Salamon et al., Global Civil Society: Dimensions of the Nonprofit Sector (Baltimore: Center for Civil Society Studies, 1999).