

Introduction

The Civil Sphere in the Cultural and Political Transformations of Modern East Asia

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Civil sphere theory (CST) aims to describe and explain the moral codes and institutional foundations of democratic solidarity as it manifests itself within a distinct social sphere. The civil sphere is a space, as much symbolic and aspirational as institutional and physical, within which people perform and enact democratic values, forming a community that includes and excludes on the basis of binary codes that define civil and anticivil motives, relations, and institutions and that negotiates and pushes its boundaries in relation to other spheres, such as the market, the state, professional domains, religion, and the family. Civil spheres and their boundaries are underpinned by ideals that are expressed and shaped through the media and that are enforced or suppressed through legal and political institutions. These boundaries and institutions are the subject of constant negotiation and struggle, leading to the expansion or contraction of the civil sphere, to the incorporation of more democratic norms into noncivil spheres, or to the incursion of antidemocratic practices into the civil sphere. Social movements, crises, and scandals are moments when these tensions reach critical levels of intensity as different groups and actors struggle over the definition of the cultural codes, and the resolution of such tension shifts the boundaries of democratic civility, for better or for worse.

CST was developed in the United States, through a study of the historical and structural dynamics of the exclusion and incorporation of women, blacks, and Jews into the American and European civil spheres (Alexander 2006). As a sociological theory, it built on delimited empirical research, but its aspirations are universal. Can CST realize its generalizing ambition through application to empirical realities beyond the American and Western contexts? Can it shed light on the dynamics of societies with very different histories and cultural values and traditions (Alexander 2015)?

This book aims to engage CST with East Asian social realities as part of a multivolume project that has also covered Latin America, Europe, and general phenomena of radicalization (for Latin America, see Alexander and Tognato 2018). The aim of this project is to deepen and make more systematic such

efforts to “deprovincialize” CST. Regional foci pose distinctive empirical challenges that offer new opportunities to enrich and refine the original theoretical framework. This book explores the application of CST to cases from Japan, mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea, bringing together efforts by sociologists based in East Asian academic institutions. The studies include social movements such as the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong (2014) and the wave of candlelight protests that led to the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye of Korea in March 2017; the cultural codes of civility in China, in cases ranging from online fiction to folk religion; the shifting definitions of cultural codes and locations of institutional boundaries in the civil spheres of South Korea and Japan; a cross-border labor rights movement involving mainland China, Hong Kong, and the United States; and a transnational peace movement spanning China, Korea, and Japan.

When applied to East Asia, CST must take into account the following three sets of problems: (1) how the cultural codes of the civil sphere relate to long-standing “traditional” values and moral codes, (2) the role of East Asian developmental states and authoritarian regimes in the shaping and emergence of the civil sphere, and (3) the relationship between the civil sphere, associational civil society, and democratic transitions.

ASIAN CULTURAL CODES AND THE CIVIL SPHERE

This project might be questioned as yet another attempt to use Asian cases as grist for a Western theoretical mill (cf. Wang 2011). One might risk applying a distorting lens to the empirical reality of East Asian societies, leading one to seek Western-style civil spheres and assuming that all fully developed civil spheres would operate in the same way as in the United States and, in the absence of US-style civil spheres, to define the differences in terms of a “lack” or “deficiency” and then, often unconsciously, to assume a normative and teleological standard. Such a lens has often been put to use in Western discourses about science, industrialization, individual autonomy, and democracy in the “modernizing” East (Metzger 2000).

One answer to this challenge has been to stress the otherness of East Asian cultures, describing how incommensurable local cultures and histories are with civil society, now taken as a foreign theoretical implant. Such an approach, consciously or not, resonates with intellectual and ideological currents that seek to reject Western values or to construct a national alternative to them. This raises the immediate question of indigenous Asian equivalents or alternatives to the civil sphere (Chambers and Kymlicka 2002; Weller 1999). Indeed, far from the stereotypes proffered by modernization theory, historically, East Asian societies were complex, deeply cultured, highly organized, and horizontally integrated, even if also deeply stratified.

There are strong notions of “civility” in the Confucian tradition that remain deeply embedded in the values of East Asian society. What are the legacies of

these millennia-long cultures and social structures for the formation of contemporary East Asian civil spheres? There has been much debate as to whether such “Confucian values” can be considered to be civil in the modern sense of a democratic society (Bell 2000, 2006, 2007; Chan 2013; Duncan 2002; Hahm 2004; Kim 2010; Madsen 2002; Nosco 2007; Rosemont 2007). For some, Confucianism is associated with hierarchy, authoritarianism, and collectivism, values that are opposed to the egalitarianism, democracy, and individualism that are the foundations of a modern civil society (Bell et al. 1995; Huntington 1996: 103–9). But for others, Confucianism can be seen as an Axial tradition that contains within it elements of reflexivity and ideals of justice that can be the foundations of a democratic civil order (Bellah 2011; Schwartz 1975).

These debates, however, exist primarily at the level of abstract conceptualization – given that a fully developed and empirically existing contemporary alternative to civil society that is not coextensive with or fully controlled by the state, within a modern Asian context, has yet to be articulated into a coherent body of discourse and institutionalized practices. A variation of this approach, then, is to seek indigenous or premodern precursors, equivalents, or alternatives to civil society within the history and culture of Asian societies and to trace how they continue to exist today and understand their influence (Weller 1999). But this literature is primarily normative and abstract, or it reads “civil society” into historical or ethnographic cases. The risk of such a move, however, is to posit that “traditional” or “Confucian” forms are either dichotomous with or historically separate from more “Western” forms of civil society (Metzger 2000).

Many of the case studies that follow are highly attentive to moral codes informed by traditional value systems, often labeled as “Confucian.” But rather than outlining alternative normative ideals or demonstrating parallel tradition-based alternatives to civil society, these cases demonstrate the intertwining of Confucian and Western discourses in contemporary Asian societies that are structured by modern states, markets, and legal regimes (Madsen 2007). These discussions suggest that traditional discourses shape the formation of East Asian civil societies – but not as distinctively Asian communal spheres. The contributors to this book continually identify the intertwining, the overlaps, the ambiguities, and the tensions among the moral codes that are shaping East Asian civil spheres.

Indeed, after more than a century of modernization, reforms, revolutions, state-building, and capitalism, Western-inspired discourses, movements, and institutions have become an integral part of the East Asian landscape and fully incorporated into the mainstream of East Asian cultures. Civil societies and civil spheres with institutional configurations comparable to those in the West exist in Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan, and many of their elements exist in mainland China. However, these civil spheres have their unique structures and dynamics.

DEVELOPMENTAL CODES AND THE CIVIL SPHERE

A key dimension of the dynamics of modern civil spheres in East Asia is that they have emerged out of postwar political regimes founded on developmentalism. Although the nature of political regimes differed – military regimes or martial law in South Korea and Taiwan, democracy in Japan, and colonial authority in Hong Kong – all these states shared a developmentalist ideology, according to which the primary concern for Asian societies has been to create the conditions for rising out of poverty and promoting economic prosperity within a context of political and social stability (Chang 2012; Kim 2013; Yoon 2016). China, with its market reform policy in 1979, also embarked on the path of state-led market developmentalism after decades of planned development inspired by the Soviet model, inflected by Maoist campaigns and political revolutions.

Following these trends, much of the literature on East Asian societies has focused primarily on economic modernization and the role of the state in its promotion. This scholarship on the “developmentalist state” has devoted much attention to specifically East Asian configurations of state, society, and economy. It has focused on the role of authoritarian regimes in developing market economies and how they have steered and adapted to socioeconomic transformations (Johnson 1999). This developmentalist discourse has considered Asian cultural values to the extent that they facilitate or hamper the developmentalist agenda. One approach, going back to Weber, has considered the role of traditional society and culture in preventing the development of capitalism (Weber 1968[1915]). Others, by contrast, have noted how the traditional Confucian values of authority, hierarchy, family, and hard work have contributed to economic modernization and political authoritarianism, fostering a practical, depoliticized mind-set that evinces little interest in democracy or civil society (Tu 1993; Vogel 1991).

As several cases in this book show, this developmentalist discourse has itself become a moral code that contributes to shaping the civil sphere and is contested by other moral codes. Indeed, the developmentalist ideology is under strain in the current period because East Asian societies have largely succeeded in overcoming poverty, and middle classes and younger generations are increasingly seeking values other than working hard for the future prosperity of their families (Pekkanen 2004). Civil spheres thus become the arena for the clash and contestation of developmentalist cultural codes and more individualist values that find expression in the democratic civil code.

DISCOURSES ON CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS

A third issue that must be addressed in a discussion of the civil sphere in East Asia is the role of civil society in a democratic transition. Conventional discourses on civil society stress its role in the initial stirrings of democracy, in resistance to authoritarian regimes, and in sustaining a democratic

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postauthoritarian society. In regard to East Asia, civil society has been an established theme for research for several decades, ever since the term acquired currency at the end of the Cold War (Alagappa 2004a). At that time, simultaneous to the collapse of the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe and the rejection of military juntas in Latin America, East Asia witnessed transitions in South Korea and Taiwan from autocratic to democratic regimes, along with the expectation that China's market reforms would lead to similar transformations in mainland China. The role of civil society in these transitions, and in contemporary East Asian societies, became the subject of many debates and investigations (Armstrong 2002; Bunbongkarn 2004; Diamond 1994, 2011; Kim 2000; Vogel 1991). Since then, vibrant and well-institutionalized civil spheres have become integral components of the noncommunist East Asian states. And while the People's Republic of China has not evolved into a liberal democracy with an independent civil society, its social transformations have led to the growth of lively and diversified spaces of public discourse, forms of social organization, and cultural movements (He 1997; Huang 1993).

Scholarship on civil society in East Asia, however, has suffered from the weak theorization of civil society that remains prevalent in the social sciences and in much public discourse worldwide, in which civil society is generally defined as voluntary and nonprofit organizations that exist in the "third sector" outside the state and the private sector. Such discourses often focus on civil society in terms of the quantity and vitality of associations and organizations, seen in opposition to a monolithic state (Alagappa 2004b). Such formulations can illuminate the role of civil society during shifts from authoritarian to more democratic regimes, but they have much less to say about the role of civil society once such democratic societies have been established, beyond pointing to the presence of volunteerism and philanthropy (Imada 2010). Civil society is thus normalized; considered to be an essential and constituent part of every democracy, the concept becomes much less salient, either as normative aspiration or as explanatory framework.

A Tocquevillian discourse emphasizes how voluntary associations contribute to strengthening the social fabric and enhancing social capital (Putnam 2000). Such discourse too often fails, however, to address the relationships between this form of civil society and top-down developmentalist projects of modernization. As some postcolonial critics have noted, *civil society* in Asia often refers primarily to modern, professional nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) rather than to traditional forms of association and sociality, positing a dichotomy between modernizing civil society and more traditional forms of social relationships (cf. Jenkins 2000). Discourses on civil society as social capital and as the third sector also neglect how civil society and NGOs have been promoted in the "developing world" by the World Bank and international development agencies. Instrumentalized as a more efficient purveyor of social services than state bureaucracies, civil society becomes linked to the

management of global capitalism (Edwards and Hulme 1996). These blind spots have led some theorists to question civil society as an extension of the cultural hegemony of Westernizing elites, echoing Gramscian and Marxist criticisms. Such scholars then attempt to construct alternative conceptions that incorporate indigenous discourses and modes of collective action (Chatterjee 2001; Chen 2010). While the contributions to this book offer an alternative to this mode of theorizing, such arguments do have the virtue of moving away from an exclusive focus on organizations and associations toward a focus on how different types of collective action shape and are shaped by different value systems and the interplay between institutional formations.

Although its intellectual genealogy differs from postcolonial theory, CST moves in the same direction, looking at the changing institutional configurations within which moral codes are performed by different social actors. The focus, however, is not so much on a defined set of groups as on the shifting contours of the social space within which democratic values are performed and affect other, noncivil spaces. Civil society is no longer an add-on, a third sector, but a social sphere at the core of democratic life itself. The civil sphere thus remains central to any account of contemporary society, not only during a democratic transition but throughout the twisting dynamics that unfold within established democratic societies themselves.

THE CIVIL SPHERE IN THE MODERN HISTORY OF EAST ASIA

The history of this evolution is not simply a unilinear teleological account of the increasing rise and influence of Western-style civil society or civil society organizations. Following the challenge of intense exchanges and conflicts with the West from the second half of the nineteenth century onward, East Asian states, economies, and societies reformed and rebuilt themselves, introducing the elements that form the basis of modern civil spheres: nation-states with legal systems assuming an independent judiciary and equal rights for all citizens; communicative institutions with modern journalism, modern periodicals, and associations; new modes of consumption and economic production; and public spheres of intellectual debate in which Western cultural codes of civility, democracy, individual autonomy, equality, and rationality were hotly debated, adopted by new generations of intellectuals, and inspired many social reforms.

The new codes clashed with Confucian and traditional codes of solidarity, in which norms of highly refined moral and cultural civility were associated with feudal hierarchies, patrimonialism, and patriarchy. Intellectuals, elites, and activists debated the codes and experimented with different combinations, from attempts at syncretism and synthesis to ideological radicalism. Other than Confucian traditionalism and movements of Confucian reform, other responses to the challenge of the West included militarism, nationalism, and revolutionary Marxism. All of these were attempts to reconstruct a solidarity

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that was threatened, if not shattered, by the military and economic power of the West, which had triggered the collapse of traditional forms of political authority and undermined traditional economic relations. They were efforts to build a civility inspired by a mythical past or a utopian future.

A new, more democratic moral code took root at the end of the nineteenth century and early into the twentieth century in the midst of these East Asian debates and reforms. But its legitimacy and influence were tainted by its association with Western imperialism, which was often experienced as uncivil military aggression and ransacking cultural arrogance and as resulting in the establishment of new racial and ethnic hierarchies. The cultural code of democratic civility was, in East Asia, a victim of the exclusionary dynamic that marks the polluted other side of civil binaries, incorporating white Europeans into the sphere of civility, identifying others as excluded members of the “yellow race.” The logical response for many East Asian social reformers was to establish their own exclusive spheres of antagonistic solidarity, adopting the ideology of nationalism that was also on the rise in the West (Najita and Harootunian 1988). And in the face of the powerful empires of Britain, the United States, Russia, and France, this nationalism would need to be produced and defended by strong states and armies. Thus both Japan and China, as the two independent states of East Asia at the end of the nineteenth century, both adopted, albeit in very different ways, paths of collective self-defense and modernization characterized by nationalist ideology and the construction of an authoritarian state.

In Japan, starting with the Meiji restoration of 1868–1912, the state successfully created a hybrid of modern institutions imported from the West while recasting traditional cultural codes of civility into new imaginations of national solidarity (Bellah 2003; Ikegami 2005). The institutions of the modern civil sphere and the democratic code were strengthened in the first few decades of the twentieth century, but this did not stop the country from evolving toward extreme nationalism and militarism in the 1930s and 1940s. Japan’s defeat in 1945 and the imposition of democratic political institutions by the United States created the conditions for a stable and well-institutionalized civil sphere (Kingston 2004; Schwartz and Pharr 2003; Waley 2005). This civil sphere was nested in a developmental state with close ties to industrial conglomerates and an associational fabric that is rich at the grassroots, with few strong, national-level advocacy organizations (Pekkanen 2006). As the chapters by Mayumi Shimizu (Chapter 9) and Yoshie Yanagihara (Chapter 10) in this volume show, the cultural codes of democratic and traditional civility coexist in the Japanese civil sphere, with overlaps and ambiguities between the two. In Chapter 9, on policing, we see how individual privacy has, after democratization, become a sacred domain, with the coercive element of policing being legally and politically separated from the particularistic ideological and political interests of the state. At the same time, however,

traditional concerns with political conformity and cultural homogeneity have continued to support the intrusion of policing into private life. So the police in contemporary Japan are viewed as both civil and anticivil at the same time. In Chapter 10, on surrogacy, we see how the notion of autonomy can be positively appraised under the democratic civil code or, conversely, as anticivil, as a domain of selfish interest that undermines broader solidarity as defined in the traditional code. In framing surrogacy, Japanese communicative institutions have shifted back and forth from one coding to the other, powerfully influencing civil-sphere actions and sentiments, despite the fact that the practice has not been outlawed by the civil sphere's regulative institutions.

In China, militarism and authoritarian nationalism dominated much of the first half of the twentieth century, but this did not stop the institutions and cultural codes of the modern civil sphere from becoming well established. The cities of Shanghai and Hong Kong, under Western colonial administration, while not democratic in a political sense, were important centers for the press, publishing houses, civil associations, and social movements and constituted crucial pillars for a Chinese civil sphere. But, in the lively competition of ideologies and associations that flourished during that period, it was ultimately a revolutionary rejection of both feudal and bourgeois civility that became hegemonic with the victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which aimed to build a new form of solidarity defined by democratic centralism, dynamized by mass movements and inspired by socialist utopianism. During the Maoist years, from 1949 to 1979, the civil sphere in China disappeared, but in the new era of post-Mao reforms, there was a strong yearning for a return to civil solidarity, either by idealizing the civility and democratic institutions of the West or by lamenting the destruction of traditional civil virtues. With the explosion of new communicative media, the gradual strengthening of legal institutions, the growth of lively intellectual spaces, and the multiplication of popular associations and cultural movements, the conditions for a resurgent, if distinctively different, form of civil sphere emerged (Brook and Frolic 1997; Kuah and Guiheux 2009; Ma 2006; Rowe 1990; Yang 2002). It is "virtual" or "subjective" (Khoshrokovar 2015) in the sense that it has neither an institutionally guaranteed autonomy nor a national reach. Yet it possesses sufficient channels for the circulation of cultural codes and moral ideals that shape public opinion and have the capacity to criticize "uncivil" actors and institutions, shaping the behavior of groups and institutions in what David A. Palmer (in Chapter 6) calls *microcivil spheres*. Palmer suggests that despite its attempts to control the discourse of civility, the Communist Party cannot monopolize it. Several moral codes – derived from traditional values, Western-derived norms, and the revolutionary tradition – now shape peoples' moral ideals and judgments, and microcivil spheres can open up when social actors negotiate the overlaps and ambiguities between official and popular formulations of these codes. Xiaoli

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Tian (Chapter 8), however, demonstrates the limits of such possibilities, examining the moral worlds of Chinese online fiction, a massively popular genre read by hundreds of millions of mainlander people. While she finds that the fantasy worlds of online fiction reveal deeply anticivil, Hobbesian values, she suggests that a “shadow civil sphere,” through its deep cynicism, reveals an underlying commitment to powerful ideals of justice and equality so absent in the readers’ real-life experiences.

Many of those readers of online fiction are migrant workers in the huge industrial zones, who labor to assemble products for global consumption. It might be surprising to many Western readers that labor rights groups have become increasingly active in the factories and residential zones of migrant workers, sustaining ties with international networks, especially via contacts in Hong Kong. Pun Ngai and Kenneth Tsz Fung Ng (Chapter 7) explore how a transnational campaign for civil repair was initiated among workers in Foxconn factories in South China. Led by students and organizers from Hong Kong, who translated the particular needs and grievances of Foxconn workers into the moral codes of a transnational civil sphere, these campaigns reverberated back and forth between China and the United States, persuading such corporations as Apple and Foxconn to adopt more civil practices in their treatment of workers.

Chapter 7 shows the role of Hong Kong as a node, constituting a transnational civil sphere linking China and the world. Hong Kong long occupied this position as a British colony in China, as a base from which figures and movements such as Sun Yat-sen and the early Chinese labor movement planned and launched strikes and revolution within China, becoming an important component of China’s republican civil sphere. Following the establishment of the People’s Republic on the mainland in 1949, Hong Kong remained a safe haven for Chinese dissidents, intellectuals, and refugees, even though colonial rule in the territory involved a form of light authoritarianism associated with a developmental capitalist ideology, promoting a moral code of traditional familism, hard work, and pragmatism within a depoliticized market economy. The free press, associations, and the legal system, however, allowed for the constitution of an increasingly vibrant civil sphere, within which leftist associations, media, and trade unions, with underground affiliations to the Chinese Communist Party, combined socialist and democratic moral codes to push for increased workers’ rights and social protections. Following the 1989 Tiananmen movement and the reversion to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 under “one country, two systems,” the democratic code and the vitality of an independent civil sphere became increasingly central to Hong Kong’s identity, gradually displacing the “Hong Kong values” of hard work, pragmatism, and efficiency, which reflected the dominant Asian developmentalist code of the postwar years (Cheng 2016; Ku 2009; Kuah and Guiheux 2009; Ng and Wong 2017). The tensions and ambiguities between the two codes are vividly analyzed by Agnes Shuk-mei Ku in Chapter 4, which

examines how a civil value such as the rule of law is understood in the developmentalist code as referring to a strong emphasis on law and order and on the role of the state in enforcing social stability and harmony, whereas the democratic code understands rule of law as referring to the independence of the judiciary and legal protections for human rights and freedoms. Ku's study shows how the performance of civil disobedience, in the conflict over the Public Order Ordinance in 2000 and in the Umbrella Movement of 2014, can be cast as a civil act according to the democratic code or as anticivil act that undermines the rule of law according to the developmental code.

Regardless of the cultural code through which its meaning is understood, the rule of law is widely perceived to be at the core of Hong Kong's identity, in contrast to mainland China, which is seen to be lagging behind Hong Kong both in terms of law and order and in terms of a judicial independence that protects rights and freedoms. Either way, Hong Kong developed an identity that rests on Hong Kong possessing elements of a civil sphere that are lacking in the noncivil mainland. The sense of being more advanced than China, of representing the ideal of economic, social, and institutional development toward which China collectively aspires, allowed Hong Kong to acquire an identity that is at once distinct from that of China and connected at the hip, an advanced part that the rest of China eventually will follow. Thus, in the reform-era Hong Kong civil sphere, China was defined as lacking civility but as advancing toward the civility that Hong Kong incarnated. This view was largely shared in China as well, so there was, in effect, a consensus, both in China and in Hong Kong, about Hong Kong's distinct identity as part of China.

This broad consensus began to fray in the second decade of the twenty-first century, however, when Hong Kong ceased to appear as the telos goal of China's developmental trajectory. When Hong Kong became increasingly irrelevant to China's economic development, and when it became obvious that China's market reforms were not leading toward liberal democracy but rather toward a reinforced authoritarianism, China began exercising increasingly heavy-handed interventions in Hong Kong affairs. In the cultural codes of Hong Kong's civil sphere, mainland Chinese no longer represented a group subject to civil incorporation, no longer framed according to the scenario in which a Hong Kong-style civil sphere would eventually be replicated in all of China. Rather, China came to represent a positively anticivil threat to Hong Kong's identity, defined for increasing numbers of Hong Kong people as politically, even ethnically other. In Chapter 5, Andrew Junker and Cheri Chan, through an analysis of the tense and conflicted internal dynamics of the Umbrella Movement, conceptualize this new form of identity politics in Hong Kong as a populist, potentially anticivil force. It represents, they argue, a specifically Hong Kongese version of the internal contradictions that mark every effort at establishing civil universalism. Civil spheres always define themselves in opposition to outsiders, but in the process, they risk becoming ethnically, politically, and regionally particularistic themselves.