Understanding "Public Sphere" and "Civil Society" in the Chinese Context

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Abstract

Why didn't China develop a "public sphere" and "civil society" similar to that of Western Europe? Using a China-centric approach that interpreted China's historical development from China's unique perspective, "public sphere" and "civil society" have two different meanings, and should be analyzed, interpreted and understood in a Sinocentric viewpoint to accurately critique Chinese history and society accurately.

Keywords: Chinese history, governance, public sphere, civil society

Introduction

In addressing the issues of whether China ever had developed a form of "public sphere" or "civil society", it is critical to separate these two terms and define "public sphere" and "civil society" in the context that Jurgen Habermas interpreted them. The public sphere contrasts with the private sphere in that in it is a spatial place where feelings are articulated, distributed, and negotiated by the collective community. Habermas pointed out that this concept of a public sphere existed in England since the 18th century where coffee houses in London became the centers of literary criticism, which eventually led to economic and political discussions. It not only became a place for self-expression, it would become a platform or venue for public opinions and discussions. Under the capitalist system, the new bourgeois public sphere merged the public economic institutions with the private personal feelings to comprise a group of individuals who would debate, discuss and regulate civil society through constructive criticism. Civil society is made up of voluntary civic and social organizations and institutions that form the basis for a functioning society rather than a state-controlled system that used force. [1] Habermas viewed the public sphere as a necessary condition, or precursor to the emergence of civil society. The public sphere had to exist first, before civil society could come into form. In China's case, a similar notion of the "public sphere", known as *gong* certainly existed, but unlike Europe, this Chinese *gong* never developed into a similar model of civil society. Often times, "public sphere" and "civil society" are lumped together, and are expressed in interconnected terms, but the reality is these two terms do not mean the same thing, and are essentially two different concepts. To examine China as a case study, it is important to interpret these two terms in a Chinese context, and not apply the same definitions, ideals, and standards of the Eurocentric model suggested by Habermas.

Understanding "Public Sphere" and "Civil Society"

In the case of Hankow in the 19th century and Beijing during the 1920s, the concept of the "public sphere" was very apparent. William Rowe described Hankow as a vibrant commercial city where focal points of the city such as the Martyr's Shrine, open spaces, teahouses and wine shops linked different sub-communities of diverse origins together and allow the city to develop a sense of vitality and cosmopolitanism. [2] Rowe felt that during the Qing and Republican eras something related to the notion of the "public sphere" had existed because the Chinese political lexicon *gong*, had very similar meanings to the Western counterpart *public*, and in many ways referred to the same things. He argued that this "ancient and highly value-charged term became unprecedentedly energized during the late Qing", when it was referred to a variety of emerging "public utilities" and "public services" outside of direct state control. [3]

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[1] Habermas, Jurgen. The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989.
[2] Symposium: "Public Sphere"/"Civil Society" in China? Modern China, vol.19, no.2 (April 1993): p.84-87.
[3] Ibid, p.142.

Rowe pointed out that imperial China had a venerable tradition of public utilities and public management, as well as "public" budgeting for local infrastructure projects, first introduced in the fiscal reforms of the 1720s. There were also findings of extra-governmental public institutions such as *shecang, pujitang, yuyingtang, qingjietang*, and the multifunctional local self-nurturance organizations known as *shantang*, which had first appeared in the late Ming and proliferated across urban areas by the late 19th century. [4]

However it is incomparable and irrelevant to identify the concept of "civil society" in China under the Western context. Rowe argued that this concept is too value laden and too under-defined to be off effective use. It would be like asking from a methodological point of view, an equally ethnocentric model of using specific examples generated from the Chinese experience, and apply it to the West in their own terms. Rowe asked, for example, did the monarchial West ever develop the ideal of ideal of remonstrating official (*yangguan*) or the principle of government responsibility for guaranteeing the livelihood of the population (*minsheng*) develop as early or fully as it did in China? [5] The reality is that the Chinese and Western experiences are so strikingly different that it would be meaningless to imply the Western concept of "civil society" to measure Chinese historical developments. Another problem is the literal translation of these terms. While public and *gong*, and private and *si* may be translated and defined in similar terms, there is no comparable vocabulary in Chinese to describe the term "civil society" described by Habermas. Because of the inability to effectively translate certain terms across from English to Chinese, it would not be possible to define the exact meaning of "civil society" in a precisely Chinese term.

One can argue that perhaps the closest China ever came to developing a similar model of "civil society" might have occurred in the political arena of Beijing during the 1920s. David Strand's study of city politics in Beijing suggested the potential of an emerging 'civil society" that came very close to Habermas's definition. Public spaces such as teahouses, restaurants, and parks became places for political discussion, the increasing number of professional associations, and the initiatives taken by local elites in the chamber of commerce to mediate demands of invading warlords, and to run city affairs in the absence of a state administration. [6] Strand described Chinese politics as featuring characteristics of an assumption of consensus, a sense of public responsibility, and a fusion of administration and representation. [7] But why didn't "civil society" develop despite this kind of ripe environment?

The critical time period of the late 1920s did not provide the ideal setting because of political situation in China during that time. Three major reasons: nationalism, the changing nature of the state and its relations with local elites, as well as problems arising from fissures within society itself prevented what might have been similar to the concept of 'civil society" from emerging. Nationalism was the most important impetus, as nationalistic feelings tend to gravitate the population toward the need for stability and national security. The Japanese invasion of the 1930s caused a temporary end to political conflict in the interests of national unity. Mary Rankin argued that during this time period the Nanjing-based Republican government used nationalism to establish a modernizing and well-organized police state, and undercut elite-run local governments throughout China. She felt that the economic and political situations of the 1930s were disastrous because the Japanese invasion and Guomingdang dictatorship completely altered the possibilities of a "civil society" from having the opportunity to develop. [8]

While Hankow during the late 19th century and Beijing during the early 1920s had developed a sense of local autonomy, and both elite as well as mass participation in local affairs had been commonplace, such an expression of public views or a sense of community in Shanghai in the early 20th century was not as evident. Despite living in close proximity to one's neighbors amidst a high population density, there was not a strong sense of community and no regular neighborhood associations like the *chokai* in Japan existed in Shanghai.

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[4] Ibid, p.143.

[5] Ibid, p.154.

[6] Strand, David. <u>Rickshaw Beijing: City People and Politics in the 1920s.</u> Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989: p.98-99.

[7] Ibid, p. 291-292.

[8] Symposium: "Public Sphere"/"Civil Society" in China? <u>Modern China,</u> vol.19, no.2 (April 1993): p.172-175.

While neighborhood committees did exist, they were loosely organized, temporary in nature, and often ended in failure in negotiating the interests of the community. [9] This suggested that perhaps the existence of the "public sphere" was more regional than national, and that in particular cities or locations, the "public sphere" became grounds for discussions of local autonomy, but it certainly did not become prevalent throughout China.

There are distinctive differences between the autonomous social organizations in China and the "civil society" in Western Europe. Rowe defended his argument that the commercial guilds and philanthropic associations of 19th century Hankow had consisted of autonomous organizations: institutions, which significantly empowered their own interests. However, in Hankow's case, the balance between autonomy and state control was never clearly defined, so there was always a process of continual negotiation. The Qing state did not have the capability nor the will in command directly every aspect of Chinese society on a routine basis. Instead, it relied on the variety of extra-bureaucratic associations for the mundane tasks of governance. However, by the late Qing (perhaps because of the Taiping Rebellion), the state began to assert far greater claims of responsibility on a broader range of social welfare activities. [10] Rowe's analysis showed that while the state could shift local or mundane tasks to that of the autonomous social organizations during periods of stability, the state could suddenly assert greater force and solidify control on local institutions during times of national crisis or when the national government feels threatened. This is a theme that would occur again and again (i.e. the Nanjing Republican government, and during the Tianamen Square events of 1989).

Philip Huang provided the most convincing analysis of examining "public sphere' and "civil society" in Chinese society by pointing out the critical flaws in the binary opposition between state and society, abstracted from the Western experience as being completely inappropriate for China. His proposal of a trinary conception, with a third realm between the state and society, which serves as an intermediary but over time can be understood on its own terms is the best approach for understanding China. This third realm is what connected the formal state institution to the local levels of society. Under the Qing rule, formal administration of the state only reached down to the county level. For public actions below the county, the state had to resort to unsalaried semi-officials. These sub-county administrative posts, whether at the township or village level were filled by community nominations and state confirmations. These actions and positions stood in between state and society, and are subjected to the influences of both. The third realm carried out the necessary functions of tax collection, judicial administration, and public security. They also coordinated public service activities such as water control, famine relief, and local defense, and in many ways served as the "public sphere", in which local community interests could be enhanced. [11]This third realm was where the state and society could intersect and merge, and this relationship or form of governance certainly differed from the concept of 'civil society", implied by Habermas to describe Europe.

Unlike Europe, during the late Qing and early Republican period, the third realm consisting of gentry and merchants operated mainly at the local or rural level rather than the national or urban level. This clearly distinguished China from Habermas's bourgeois "public sphere" with its emphasis as an urban and nationwide phenomenon. Huang highlighted the critical differences between China and Europe by arguing that democracy during modern Europe occurred as a result of both modern societal integration and state-making. It emerged out of the dual processes of integration of society into a national public sphere and the expansion of the state through a modern bureaucratic apparatus. In the European context, state and societal power integrated not only locally, but also more importantly on the national level. It was the relative balance of the two forces, or perhaps the superior power of societal development over state-making that set the necessary background for the development of "civil society" and eventually democracy. But in Qing and Republican China, national and societal integration and modern state-making could not reach such an advanced stage because of the involuntary persistence of the rural economy and the village-based society rather than an urban, industrial society. Advances in social integration occurred much more likely at the local level, at the counties, townships, and villages rather than at the national level. [12]

[9] Lu, Hanchao. Beyond the Neon Lights: Everyday Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999: p.20-21.

[10] Symposium: "Public Sphere"/"Civil Society" in China? Modern China, vol.19, no.2 (April 1993): p.147-148.

[11] Symposium: "Public Sphere"/"Civil Society" in China? Modern China, vol.19, no.2 (April 1993): p.227.

[12] Symposium: "Public Sphere"/"Civil Society" in China? Modern China, vol.19, no.2 (April 1993): p.230-231.

Huang concluded that in China's context, state power and societal power overlapped and collaborated through the medium of the third realm at the local and rural level, thus making Habermas's notion of "civil society" obsolete and irrelevant for comparison in China's case. Rackin also concluded due to ethnocentrisms, Western scholars either see a "civil society" similar to the United States or Western Europe, or no "civil society" at all. They do not consider any kind of a middle ground such as the overlapping of state and societal functions and purposes in formal institutions carried out in the local "public spheres" during the Qing. She described this kind of "public sphere" that developed in China to reflect the many aspects of state-societal relations under the bureaucratic monarchy such as autocratic power preventing open political discourse, an effective form of pre-modern bureaucracy with connections to local elites, considerable local autonomy in such locations, and a fairly unitary but flexible value system applicable for trading in different circumstances. [13]

In examining the Chinese social organizations such as chamber of commerce, guilds, charities, etc. to reflect the nature of state and society relations, it seems like the state as a formal institution has much stronger and often times harsher responses to challenges from autonomous groups. Rankin accounted that the state clearly limited and channeled the "public sphere", and this appeared to have derived from structure and politics by placing a premium on loyalty to the state. Because of the autocratic power of the Qing emperors and the capacity for sudden and unpredictable intervention, as well as no Chinese equivalents to the British nobility who were independently powerful enough, bureaucracy was effective. The state was able to dominate large-scale projects such as taxation, military affairs, and criminal law. The "public sphere" was channeled to the local level where elites found opportunities in numerous niches not occupied by the state. Public management on the local level flourished because it did not directly confront state power, since it allowed local officials to encourage public initiatives or enlist social elites to run officially established institutions. The mutual accommodations made by government officials and the local gentry allowed extra-bureaucratic functions such as public welfare to be taken in the local arena. Local elites used these opportunities to acquire experience in organizing, funding, and directing local public affairs, and through this public space, combined with public management that public participation came into place. [14]

In times of national crisis, or when security and stability is threatened, all possibilities for local autonomy could be suspended when the central government attempted to consolidate all forms of political power. The city of politics of Beijing during the 1920s came closest to achieving the possibility of a Chinese version of "civil society', but the poor timing as nationalism directed toward the Japanese invasion allowed the Republican government to strengthen and solidify political power prevented any further developments. Frederic Wakeman argued that despite the continuing expansion of the public realm since the beginning of the 20th century, it has not led to the assertion of civil power against the state. In fact, state coercive power has grown stronger, and Chinese citizens appear to conceive their own social existence in terms of obligation and interdependence rather than rights and responsibilities. [15] In other words, Chinese citizens value stability and national security more than autonomy and a kind of "civil society" described by Habermas. This is perhaps because of the fear for chaos and disorder that could result, or because the notion of a strong state and central government have been pertinent aspects of Chinese society throughout history.

Conclusion

The "public sphere" and "civil society" demand refer back to the concepts of the impact-response model and the China-centered approach. In this case, the impact-response model did not apply because Western ideas of governance were not relevant to China's case, and it was not possible to mimic and copy the Western political structure because of China's specific conditions and situations. The China-centered approach suggested examining China's historical developments from China's unique perspective, instead of applying Western notions and terms to describe China. Philip Huang's third realm model is an excellent example of the need to interpret China's history through the Sinocentric viewpoint. The two terms "public sphere" and "civil society" have two different meanings, and should not be linked together. Only by separating these two concepts, and understanding them in the Chinese context would it be appropriate to interpret, analyze and critique Chinese history and Chinese society accurately.

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[13] Ibid, p.178-179.
[14] Symposium: "Public Sphere"/"Civil Society" in China? Modern China, vol.19, no.2 (April 1993): p.163-164.
[15] Ibid, p.133-134.

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