

Rob Weller made a presentation on “civil society.”

I. The legacy question:

A. Possible **linguistic** roots? He starts with a discussion of the term itself and traces the linguistic legacies of “how do you say ‘civil society’ from the Republican period to the present:

1. Before 1900:

(1) 公 as ‘public’ (Rankin): but this clearly raises Fred Weakeman’s issue of how autonomous any of this was (or wanted to be) from the state.

(1) Does autonomy from the state need to be at the core of “civil society” as in most Western definitions? Perhaps a particularly American model of conflict can be seen as a key to democracy?

(2) Data on modern NGOs throughout Asia (and even in the U.S.) shows much less autonomy and less desire for autonomy than ‘civil society’ seems to suggest. NGOs want \$ from the states (central and local), not autonomy

(2) 文明，文化，文武： again, no ideal of “autonomy” can be found in Concepts

(3) 礼 as courtesy, and ritual; these are all ways of dealing with “other” and Ultimately of creating society (still no “autonomy”)

(4) Most of these terms get at the “civility” idea better than most Western Discussions, but little emphasis on “society vs. state” can be found.

2. After 1900, there was a lack of agreement on the Chinese term for “civil society” (unlike so many other terms such as 社会，共和国，自然, etc.): this is significant. There are several potential terms that translate the English word “civil society”:

(1) 市民社会 (bourgeois/market society, in Europe also urban society)

(2) 公民社会 (citizen’s society, still capable of non-autonomous reading)

(3) 民间社会 (clearest statement of autonomy, and most popular in Taiwan)

Note: because of the close association of “民间” and “宗教” which is debunked (although tolerated) in a communist state, Jing has reservations that this term will gain popularity in the mainland. Note also that there is ample critical literature that argues that 民间 is neither nonideological nor anti-ideological (*Introduction, “Chinese Popular Culture and the State,” positions, 9:1, 2001*)

(4) 文明社会, maybe

B. Possible **institutional roots?** Weller then traces the presence of “civil society” in Chinese institutional traditions.

(1) not just the elite institutions that Rowe shows

(2) also local – for instance:

- Lineage
- temple associations (note the original meaning of 社会)
- 关系 ties

(3) social capital, but none of this sets up “state vs. society” either

In conclusion, the 1st big “civil society” problem to rectify is the assumption about “state vs. society” if we want Chinese people to use the term.

II. Influence of authoritarian rule (corporatist model in particular)

A. the state is effective at controlling large organizations through corporatist cooperation or repression. Corporations are loyal to the Chinese state.

a. In Taiwan’s democratization or HK, there is little role of big business

b. but note “proxy NGOs” especially in fields of environment, women’s rights and consumer rights

B. small, local, “traditional” groups tend to survive in the cracks – there are always cracks.

a. lineages (note their comeback in China)

b. temples

c. rotating credit associations

d. often role of women in leading those informal, “traditional” groups. Women have more room to maneuver because those groups are seen as “trivial” and small-scaled ones. The downside of it is that those groups do not have great resources to institutionalize on a big scale

C. So there is a split between authoritarian legacy of controlled “modern” sector and more free sector based in local ties

a. local ones may lack institutional power to effect change

b. but they can be critical in consolidating democracy

In conclusion, the second big problem with the Western concept of “civil society” is that we concentrate far too much on ‘voluntary,’ ‘formally organized,’ and ‘modern’ associations.

II. Social Capital: the idea that social ties foster civil societies. I like social capital, but there are caveats:

A. a problem of internal difference:

1. community has been far too idealized

(a) development literature and policy (World Bank, etc.). The World Bank & co., emphasizes “community participation”

(b) Wen Tiejun in our conference last year romanticizes the idea of village life (not pointing out that there is gender inequality, etc.)

2. Communities have internal differences of gender, age, wealth, etc., and many of these associations repress expressions of internal difference
3. i.e., social capital is not always civil

B. problem of locality

1. especially with authoritarian legacy, many of these ties do not scale up
2. e.g., Chinese temples
3. thought perhaps this isn't such a bad thing.

Major points of discussion:

- strong state + strong society thesis : one does not have to exclude the other. It is possible that the state and society grows proportionately
- ideology of “horizontal networks” embedded in the concept of “modernity” – problematic. Steinfeld cites examples of how “modernity” is more vertical than horizontal
- the linkage between “modernity,” “democracy,” and “economic development” is problematic. Particularly, the naturalized association between (1) modern organizations; (2) civil society; (3) voluntary associations; (4) horizontal network; (5) anti-hierarchical needs to be problematized and broken up.
- Question: what kinds of question should we ask then if we try to understand the evolving relationship between state and society in China?
Steinfeld & others: Perhaps we should ask the following: “rule of law” (法制的问题)
Or, the fair and just delivery of public goods
Or, emphasis should be placed on “horizontal participation as a process not an end product
Or, 社会公正问题
- Where is the place of the “commons” in this discussion of “civil society”?
Steinfeld defines the “commons” as the difficulty of excluding others; It has a low barrier of exclusion. It is over-consumed and under-produced. Weller emphasizes that it is not “scarcity” that matters but “exclusivity.”

The tragedy of the commons – scarce resources, privatized