

Pluralism in the Chinese Political Community: A Nisbetian Perspective on the State of Chinese Non-Governmental Organizations and Civil Society

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China, notorious for cracking down on dissidents and the social groups of which they are a part, has recently permitted some non-profits to function openly in Chinese society. The work of the American sociologist Robert Nisbet helps us to understand what this might mean for the trajectory of Chinese political society. Dr. Luke C. Sheahan is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Duquesne University and a non-resident scholar at PRRUCS.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, China has witnessed the steady rise of civil society institutions driven in part by policy changes initiated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) have proliferated in recent years and, while eschewing democratic reform, the Chinese government has allowed these groups wide latitude in affecting Chinese social and political policy. These are promising signs of social reform although they must be considered in light of the CCP's refusal to grant religious and human rights associations equal status to other social organizations and the continuing suppression of dissident groups such as the Uighurs in Western China.

To analyze the efficacy of the recent reforms, this paper considers the question of what the twentieth century American sociologist Robert Nisbet would think about the recent resurgence in Chinese civil society. Nisbet's work was characterized by the humane concern for the alienated individual, the person bereft of meaningful social bonds, lonely and adrift in a society that seems cold and meaningless, and he connected the social and psychological fate of that person to the exercise of political power over social institutions. In light of the CCP's traditional opposition to civil society organizations, Nisbet's work is a helpful lens through which to analyze the liberalization of the Chinese government's treatment of social groups. I am especially, but not exclusively, interested in how it treats organizations and associations, such as non-profits based both nationally and internationally.

Robert Nisbet was a prominent twentieth century American sociologist and public intellectual.

He is most famous for authoring *The Quest for Community* (1953),¹ his analysis of the political causes of the decline of community and increase in alienation in modern nation-states. He received his degrees from the University of California-Berkeley, finishing his dissertation in 1939. He taught at Berkeley until 1953 when he was appointed Dean at the new Riverside campus. He also held academic appointments at the University of Arizona and the Albert Schweitzer Chair at Columbia University. He delivered the Jefferson Lectures in 1987. Nisbet authored more than twenty books, mostly focusing on the nature of community, but also covering the history and methodology of sociology as well as "developmentalism" as a theory of historical change.

Nisbet's work on pluralism and the social group, which was the topic of most of his books, including *Quest*, is arguably the most incisive of twentieth century thinkers who considered the topic. His analysis of the "political" causes of alienation provides a helpful way of thinking through government policy in relation to social groups and non-governmental organizations. Bringing his perspective to bear upon recent developments in Chinese social reform that have led to an expanded civil society will help to clarify to what extent these developments allow for the sort of communities that

¹ Robert A. Nisbet, *The Quest for Community* (New York: Oxford University Press. Republished in 1962 by Galaxy Book, New York under new title: *Community and Power*. Reissued in 1969 under original title: *The Quest for Community*. Reprinted by Institute for Contemporary Studies, San Francisco with a new preface in 1990, and by ISI Books, Wilmington with a new introduction in 2010.).

Nisbet believed important, ones that integrate individuals into meaningful social bonds, or whether the appearance of civil society reform is window-dressing on continued authoritarian policies. It should be noted that window-dressing on authoritarian policies is not a problem for this analysis as long as the effect of the states's affected behavior is good for the types of social groups that concern us.²

My analysis will proceed as follows. I will begin by defining the seven characteristics of Nisbet's idea of the social group. Then I will describe the juxtaposition Nisbet makes between the "political community," with its fundamental foundation of individual and central power, and the "plural community," with its orientation toward a variety of social and political authorities. During this discussion I will define the six tenets of Nisbet's plural community. Then I will outline a brief history of civil society groups in China since 1949, with special attention paid to the last two decades. I will close with an examination of these reforms in terms of Nisbet's six principles of pluralism, asking how the reforms contribute to—or detract from—a plural society.

The Political Community and the Plural Community

Nisbet defines a community as having seven characteristics: *function*, *dogma*, *authority*, *hierarchy*, *solidarity*, *status*, and *sense of superiority*.³ A plural society secures these seven characteristics for a variety of groups. I will explain each quality and then I will discuss the political community and the plural community. The first quality of Nisbet's community is *function*. Every group has a function it performs. An orchestra exists to play classical music, a kinship group exists to beget and to socialize children, and a religious organization exists to organize the proper worship of the divine power. Every community

² See Jonathan R. Stromseth, Edmund J. Malesky, and Dimitar D. Guerguiev with Lai Hairong, Wang Xixin, and Carl Brinton, *China's Governance Puzzle: Enabling Transparency and Participation in a Single-Party State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 249.

³ The following discussion of the seven characteristics of a community is drawn from Robert A. Nisbet, *The Degradation of the Academic Dogma* (Basic Books, 1971), 43-5.

endows its function with a "sense of some transcending purpose," making it a *dogma*. The function is not just something that the group does, but a transcendent value, a good that the group pursues. Function and dogma are the two essential qualities of a community. From them are derived all the others.

A group must have the *authority* to perform its function and to uphold its dogma. Authority need not implicate power or force, but it is the ability of a group to enforce the imperatives of its dogma, to perform its function by guiding its members in the direction appropriate to the group's goals. Authority requires for the most part voluntary submission by the members of the group to its claims because they find the assertion of authority legitimate. Which means that the authority of the group is exercised for the purpose of the group's function according to the claims of its dogma. *Hierarchy* means a stratification of role and status. Within the group there must be a sense that some roles and some values are more important than others. Even something as basic as "chair" and "member" denote differences of status and authority. Through hierarchy, some members are given the ability to exercise the authority of the group, to enforce its dogma and determine how it performs its function.

The quality of *solidarity* connotes a sense of "we," of community in a real sense. There is a notion that the group acts in unity with others in the group, that they are performing the group's function together, apart from the rest of society. *Status* means that members are devoted to the group for reasons beyond any merely material interest. Membership in the community matters. Nisbet uses the term "honor" interchangeably with status to communicate this property and to indicate the internal value membership holds to the individual. Last is a *sense of superiority*. Members of the group believe that their group is valuable in comparison to other groups. Their group is superior "measured in terms of what one's own community does and is and what the rest of the world does not do and isn't."⁴ This need not connote a bigoted sort of superiority, but merely a sense among members that what they are doing with their group is more valuable than what they could do with other groups.

These qualities of community make an organization psychologically and morally significant in the lives of its members. Members are devoted to

⁴ Nisbet, *Academic Dogma*, 45.

the group because they believe the function and dogma of the group are important. But they can only be salient in the lives of the members if the group's hierarchy tasked with exercising authority within the group may enforce the dogma and ensure the performance of its function. Only in this way can members of the group have the sense of solidarity and status that comes from being part of a group whose dogma they believe true and function they believe valuable. Out of this, members get a sense of superiority, a sense that they are involved in something valuable and important.

Nisbet juxtaposes two types of community, the political community and the plural community. The first is predicated upon the ideal of sovereignty as an absolute relationship between the individual citizen and the state. To put this in terms of Nisbet's community: at the center of the conception of the political community is a *dogma*, the sovereignty of political power, and *function*, to preserve the supremacy of political power. These trump the dogmas and functions of all other groups, which only exist to the extent the sovereign concedes their existence. The *authority* of the political community is absolute over all other authorities, the *hierarchy* between sovereign and citizen and the consequent equality of all citizens under the unitary political power is clear and unquestioned, trumping all other relationships in society. Citizens are to find their *status* and *solidarity* with each other as fellow citizens of the state and *sense of superiority* only from their membership in the political community. Nisbet writes, "The idea of sovereignty, which clearly implies but one absolute power lying in the social order, with all relationships, all individuals indeed ultimately subject to it, has been the characteristic approach to the political community...since the time of Cleisthenes."⁵ Derived from the political theory of Plato and the historical development of ancient Athens, the political community emphasizes centralized direction from a single source of absolute power. All organizations, whether based on neighborhood, religion, or kinship must ultimately be under the direction of the central authority. The political community need not be totalitarian or authoritarian. It need not be a dictatorship. The political community can be democratic and permit a wide swath of freedom. But

the important point is that in the final analysis the absolute power of the political state is unquestioned and the highest value in the polity. Other associations may exist, but they exist only to the extent that they bolster the central political power.

Nisbet relates the political community closely to the military community. The military community is defined by discipline toward a single purpose: war. The reason the military community has such a unified aim is the threat of a foreign enemy which requires that all loyalty between individuals be given to the military commander.⁶ Individualism and centralization are essential to the military community because the military commander must centralize authority in order to carry out the important goal of repelling a foreign threat and, concurrently, individuals must give their full and undivided loyalty to the central military power. Centralization of power and individualization of social aggregates go hand-in-hand in the military community.

The centralization of power for the purposes of war is closely linked historically and sociologically to the emergence of the political state. Nisbet writes, "The state is indeed hardly more than the institutionalization of the war-making apparatus; its earliest function everywhere is exclusively military; its earliest rulers, generals and war lords."⁷ In the political community the cohesion and loyalty of the combat unit is transferred to the political state. Political sovereignty is little more than the centralized and absolute authority of the military commander relocated to a political figure or institution. This is true in modern China, where the military leader Mao Zedong transitioned to political leader of the People's Republic of China.⁸ Upon taking command, his regime militarized the country, suppressing traditional associations and centers of loyalty. The relation between these two communities continues even today where the political state enjoys the most power when it is at war. State initiated social and political reforms are easier to implement in times of war and in times of crisis than during times of peace. There remains long after the founding of the political state a strong affinity in structure and purpose between the military community and the political community.

⁵ Robert A. Nisbet, *The Social Philosophers: Community and Conflict in Western Thought* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, Inc., 1973), 386.

⁶ Nisbet, *Social Philosophers*, 14.

⁷ Nisbet, *Social Philosophers*, 93.

⁸ Nisbet, *Social Philosophers*, 89-90.

In contrast to the political community, the plural community is based upon a plurality of associations, of governing authorities, that make claims upon individuals, only one of which is the political power. The legitimacy of the claims of the political state must be balanced against those of religion, kinship, neighborhood, and whatever other interests may lay claim to persons' minds and hearts. Derived in its beginning from the political thought of Aristotle, who believed that the polis was inherently plural, with rich and poor, artisans and farmers with all their diverse interests and needs living together in the same political community. What distinguishes these two types of community is a vision of the good. The political community places the good in the ideal of a unified community under the single authority of the political state and the plural community places the good in a plurality of associational authorities, which may not be hierarchically ranked by a central power. There will be wide diversity among the populace in how these goods are ranked. Some will place their religious affiliation above that of their neighborhood, and vice versa. The political authority must compete with various social authorities for the ultimate allegiance of individuals. There is a sense that the political community is one authority among many, even if it is the first among equals.

Nisbet describes six features of the plural community. The first tenet is *plurality*. This is basic, but it means that in contrast to the focus upon unity in the political community, a plural political society recognizes a plurality of communities within it, and sees itself as a sort of "community of communities." There is a diversity of goods that may be pursued by different communities in different ways and therefore the plural conception of community necessitates a policy of freedom from the central power so that citizens may pursue those goods in community with others. Nisbet writes, "The nature of man cannot be confined by any single value, expressed by any single kind of relationship. The potential diversity of the human mind must be matched by a diversity of types of community within the social order, each as autonomous as possible within its own sphere of function, each with a measure of authority of its own based upon its unique function and no more disposed to transgress upon the function and authority of any other community than to have its own function and authority invaded."⁹ Plurality of this sort implies plurality of membership in various associations and organizations as well as diversity of belief. "Such

⁹ Nisbet, *Social Philosophers*, 388.

diversity is no more indeed than the cultural accompaniment of social plurality."¹⁰

The second quality of the plural community is *autonomy*, by which Nisbet means "functional autonomy."¹¹ Groups must be given the proper scope of autonomy so as to fulfil their function. "[E]ach group or community within the larger community should be endowed with the greatest possible autonomy consistent with performance of its function and with performance by other groups and communities of the functions embedded in them by tradition or plan."¹² These groups include religious organizations, families, labor unions, corporations, educational institutions, and the like. Each association, each organization has a specific function. It must be allowed the autonomy, the self-government necessary to fulfill that function. This means freedom from other associations as well as freedom from political power.

The third element of the plural community is *decentralization*. Authority ought to be dispersed throughout various social authorities, such as communities and associations, such that as little as possible is centralized in one place, whether that be one governing body or one person. The function of an organization cannot be performed when the power to perform it is centralized within the political state. Essential to decentralization is the "delegation of authority to the associations and communities composing the social order."¹³

The fourth quality is *hierarchy*. By hierarchy, Nisbet means the "system of stratification of function and responsibility" within the organization. This is seen as not only inevitable, but good in the plural community. Just as the plural community is perceived as a "community of communities," so the relationship between its citizens is perceived as a 'chain of being,' which rises from the smallest possible communal link at the bottom to the most important—in the cultural as well as political sense—at the top."¹⁴ The vertical ranking of roles is just as important as the horizontal in terms of social structure.

¹⁰ Nisbet, *Social Philosophers*, 388.

¹¹ Nisbet, *Twilight*, 215.

¹² Nisbet, *Social Philosophers*, 388.

¹³ Nisbet, *Social Philosophers*, 389.

¹⁴ Nisbet, *Social Philosophers*, 389.

The fifth quality is *tradition*, by which Nisbet means “the customary and the habitual,” the passing down of practices central to the association. Tradition need not denote long usage, although it often does. Rather tradition means a set of practices that “emerg[e] from community, from consensus, from a stable base of social interaction that makes law in the formal and prescriptive sense unnecessary.”¹⁵ Groups have their own way of doing things that grow out of their members’ cooperative actions that perform the group’s function. These traditions characterize the group in an important sense, giving continuity and familiarity of habit to group action.

The sixth and final quality is *localism*. By this, Nisbet means that the plural community emphasizes “the family, neighborhood, small community, and local association.”¹⁶ Localism implies a sense of place and, in a manner similar to decentralization, a bias for solving problems at the point closest to the people who are most affected by the problem. Localism is also the biggest antidote to the social scourge of alienation, the rootlessness of many citizens of the modern nation-state.¹⁷

These six qualities characterize a plural community, one that recognizes a plethora of values among its populace and a variety of groups pursuing different functions free of government interference. We can think about these qualities of the plural community as a set of standards against which political policy can be measured to determine how well it secures the independence of associations and institutions under its authority. If we formulate these six principles of pluralism as a series of six questions regarding the treatment of civil society and the associations operating there, we can get a sense for what Nisbet would say regarding the rise of the NGO sector in China and the Chinese state’s recent

treatment of associations. Since “plurality” is the guiding principle of the plural community, I will consider that central tenet last, as a summary of how well the other five standards are met.

First, how much functional autonomy does the Chinese state allow NGOs?

Second, is the Chinese national state decentralizing its functions? This can be understood both as decentralizing functions *downward* from national to local governments (also a feature of localism) as well as decentralizing *outward* from political to social authorities, allowing social organizations to fulfill functions normally considered under the aegis of the state.

Third, to what extent does the Chinese government intervene in the internal hierarchy of the associations? Are they permitted an internal hierarchy of values and roles free of government interference?

Fourth, to what extent does the Chinese government permit *tradition* among associations and civil society at large? Recall that tradition need not be long standing. It means simply that the informal practices that grow out of the interaction between members of the group are free to develop as they will.

Fifth, to what extent does a policy of *localism* guide government policy?

Last, all these questions considered, to what extent is *plurality* a recognized fact of Chinese political policy?

In a definite sense, China is the epitome of Nisbet’s political community, rule by a centralized power that restricts and suppresses groups. However, recent reforms in China’s policy toward both domestic and international Non-Governmental Organizations indicates that there is a growing pluralism to the structure of China’s political community. The proliferation of civil society groups suggests that the regime is intentionally loosening its grip upon civil society. Furthermore, these civil society groups have the ability to affect political policy. This suggests a pluralization of the Chinese political community.

Chinese Civil Society: A Western Concept?

¹⁵ Nisbet, *Social Philosophers*, 389.

¹⁶ Nisbet, *Social Philosophers*, 390.

¹⁷ A problem that concerned Nisbet for much of his career. The opening chapter to *Quest* is about the individual adrift, insecure, in modern society. Similarly, on the opening pages of *The Social Philosophers*, Nisbet writes, “There is the fear of the social void, of alienation, of estrangement from others, even from one’s own self, of loss of identity, of great open spaces of impersonality and rejection.” See *Quest*, 1-18; *Social Philosophers*, 1-2.

In some important ways this mode of analysis can be seen as an imposition of Western ideas of civil society upon Chinese political and social order. Linguistic difficulties are tied to conceptual difficulties. For example, consider the term “civil society.” In the west, we have a definite sense what we mean by that term. We mean the social realm of interaction where persons form their pre-political habits and predilections that in turn affect their role as democratic citizens. The state generally does not interfere even though the manner in which its citizens are molded by civil society in great part determines the character of the regime. But does that term have a corollary in China? One scholar writes, “Chinese has no precisely equivalent term for civil society. The English term has been rendered into several distinctive Chinese translations, and it is an open question as to which best conveys the meaning of civil society.”¹⁸ To what extent do Western scholars tend to impose their own understanding of civil society upon China, distorting the nature of what is found there?

The first time Chinese scholars translated civil society it was as “gongmin shehui,” in a challenge to the CCP’s definition of citizen, which it associated with “qunzhong,” meaning “masses,” a particularly politicized term. “Gongmin” means literally “public people,” a society (“shehui”) of people who are public minded and who take responsibility for the public good.¹⁹ “Qunzhong” is associated with political mass movements, especially those which supported the CCP. The “masses” were what Mao’s CCP called the core groups of its followers. This term for “mass society” ought to be distinguished from “civil society,” but it is unclear in what way. The term gongmin shehui does imply a social dimension distinct from the political dimension and one that might even be arrayed against it. Certainly, that was the context of the origin of this term in China in the late 1980s.²⁰ It further has democratic connotations, implying self-rule. Another term for civil society is “shimin,” which means “townspeople.” Historically, this term has had little political connotation, but nonetheless distinguishes its subject from the political state. “Minjian” means “popular,” and has a stronger historical connotation

of contrast between civil society and the state. The term “Minjian shehui” was popular in Taiwan *because* it implied an anti-state stance.²¹

This discussion demonstrates some philological difficulties that may conceal deeper conceptual issues in discussing civil society in the Chinese context. Taiwanese activists chose one rendering of “civil society” for their particular political purposes. Mainland Chinese chose another to reflect different political goals, namely, a more interactive relationship between civil society and the state. This concern is especially relevant to this inquiry as I am explicitly taking the standards of pluralism from a prominent twentieth century Western scholar that he developed out of the thought of Western social philosophers and using them to analyze the NGO sector of an Eastern country. This does not mean that this inquiry is ill-fated, but it does mean that it behooves us to recognize the philological difficulty at the outset.

When I use the term “civil society,” I am using it in reference to Nisbet’s concept of the plural community, so I mean civil society as the realm of non-political interaction between individuals where associations are formed in formal and informal ways for a variety of purposes. Those purposes need not be anti-state. A great deal of the time they will be distinctly non-political, working alongside the state for the same social purposes or working without the state’s knowledge for solutions to social problems the political powers may not have yet identified. There is an important sense in which the associations of civil society are more fundamental than the state. They are prior to the state philosophically if not historically in the Chinese context because they are both closer to the people, shaping their lives, but also constitutive of the people. They are the very social instantiations of persons’ needs and wants in concrete social reality. The important point is not that the associations in question are anti-state, but that they are *non-state* and that they are plural—there are many of them, not one. They have their own goals—functions and dogma—that are distinct in origin from the state, but need not be anti-state. Social problems are often a concern of both political power and social authorities. Those goals do not need to be anti-state, but they do need to be freely formed so that they organically grow in response to the needs of persons created by the particular historical circumstances. It is perfectly fine from the pluralist perspective if the goals and

¹⁸ Qiusua Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations in Contemporary China: Paving the Way to Civil Society?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 18.

¹⁹ Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations*, 19.

²⁰ Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations*, 20.

²¹ Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations*, 21.

work of these associations correspond to state policy prerogatives. The important point is that the group in question is able to pursue them.

This struggle to define civil society in China is reflected in the relatively recent definition of non-governmental organizations by the Chinese government. Scholar Qiusha Ma writes, “On the whole, NGOs are very new to China and are gradually becoming an independent sector that is distinctive from the state and businesses, and they are non-governmental in their unique roles and organizational operations.”²² In fact, social organizations were only defined for the first time in 1998 as “non-profit organizations that are voluntarily founded by Chinese citizens for their common will and operated according to their charters.” Also, they “cannot engage in for-profit activities.”²³ I am especially interested in how the Chinese state treats these organizations today. While our standards drawn from Nisbet’s pluralism imply separation between the political and the social, it need not connote confrontation nor does it denote democratization. The political state’s motivation in pursuing social pluralism is less important than is the fact of the state’s recognition of social pluralism in the form of legal allowances for group formation around a diversity of goals. It all depends whether the political power, democratic or authoritarian, values plurality in society and whether it permits a great degree of functional autonomy, decentralization, hierarchy, tradition, and localism. Two further points should be made. Democratic societies may be politically monist in ways that a particular authoritarian society is more socially pluralist.

The History of NGOs in China

Scholar Guosheng Deng divides the history of post-revolutionary China’s nonprofit sector into four phases.²⁴ During the first phase, from 1949-66, a number of academic, arts and public organizations are founded. However, during this period many are either co-opted by the government or formed at its behest. The second phase, from 1966-78, is the

Cultural Revolution and there is a crackdown on associations and the activities of existing organizations largely cease and new organizations are not permitted to form. The third phase, from 1978-95, is China’s Reform Era. The liberalization of economic organizations of various sorts parallels the liberalization of the market and various industrial and economic associations emerge in response to China’s policies of economic liberalization. Since 1978, the Chinese economy has averaged 9.9% growth. But, economic growth has produced social dislocations and environmental costs that the country has struggled to contain. It became apparent to the Chinese government that certain NGOs may have a competitive advantage in helping to alleviate social ills resulting from a growing economy and an urbanization of the population (from 17.9% in 1978 to 53.7% in 2015).²⁵ This is probably why the most active nonprofit organizations are those focused on education, social service, and health.²⁶ Since certain NGOs were well situated to deal with those issues, the government has encouraged their formation. Also, as the Chinese people have become wealthier due to economic liberalization, they have the resources to start and to support NGOs in a way that they didn’t before.²⁷ The crucial point is that the Chinese state has learned that the benefits of the sort of pluralism it allowed in the economic realm may have a corollary in the more strictly social realm. This is an important point. The Chinese political power is recognizing that a variety of social authorities acting in a social realm distinct from the state may have a salutary effect upon Chinese society at large and they may accomplish social objectives more efficiently and more effectively than the national Chinese state, just as businesses and economic association did in the economic realm.

In 1989, China established the Division of Social Organizations under the Ministry of Civil Affairs to register these new groups.²⁸ An official recognition of social organizations indicates a movement toward social pluralism, but it happened at an unfortunate time internationally. That year the world witnessed a number of protests and revolutions against communist governments, especially in

²² Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations*, 77.

²³ Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations*, 79.

²⁴ Guosheng Deng, “The Development of China’s Nonprofit Sector since 1995,” in Chien-Chung Huang, Guosheng Deng, Zhenyao, and Richard L. Edwards, ed., *China’s Non-Profit Sector: Progress and Challenges* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2014), 3.

²⁵ Stromseth et al, *China’s Governance Puzzle*, 2.

²⁶ Xiaoyong Huang and Liquiang Cai, “A Major Breakthrough in the Development of the Nonprofit Sector in China,” in Huang et al, *China’s Nonprofit Sector*, 56.

²⁷ Deng, “China’s Nonprofit Sector,” 8.

²⁸ Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations*, 62.

Eastern Europe, at the same time that China had the Tiananmen Square protests. The government clamped down on student groups and other organizations out of fear that freedom for organizations would fuel anti-state activity with outcomes similar to those in Eastern Europe. State registration requirements were inspired by this development. While China had learned that Non-Governmental Organizations can have a salutary effect on society, solving social and environmental problems, they can also “mobilize citizens to challenge the state,” as they had done throughout the world in the late 1980s and 1990s.²⁹ While China allowed a certain social liberalization in the NGO realm, it was certainly not interested in democratization or a liberalization of the political realm, which would entail challenge to the CCP’s monopoly on political power.

During the fourth phase, from 1995 to the present, NGOs have proliferated, playing new social and economic roles. In 1995, Beijing hosted the United Nations’ World Conference on Women and it introduced a number of International NGOs to China. The first NGOs founded after 1995 were primarily focused on the environment, women’s rights, and poverty.³⁰ Most of these did not register and were largely left alone by the national and local governments, as long as they did not oppose government policy. However, many of them were founded by government officials or by persons appointed by the government. While they were technically non-government organizations, they operated as *de facto* government departments because they were founded by persons closely tied to the government and the purposes of these organizations were closely tied to government prerogatives. After 2000, the NGO sector continued to expand with various umbrella groups forming, such as the China Association for NGO Cooperation, the Institute for Environment and Development, and the NGO Information Center, which helped to train non-profit employees for grassroots organizations. Funding for these groups comes mostly from international organizations.³¹ Various NGO’s have split apart to specialize in various areas and NGO’s with the same issue focus have begun to network informally through conferences and mass media (i.e. environmental groups associating with other

environmental groups, public health NGOs work with other public health NGOs, and so on).

These developments are salutary but they must be set against the treatment of other associations, especially those that are religious. Among the most notorious incidents involving religious groups is the treatment of the Falun Gong, a group with spiritual practices featuring Qi Gong and other ancient eastern meditation practices. The Chinese government was alarmed when the group gained a large following in the 1990s even among CCP members. Members of the Falun Gong held a public demonstration in front of a government compound that triggered a crackdown on all unauthorized religious groups. The Falun Gong was accused of being a cult and secret social organization, an alarming threat to the CCP because that is precisely what the CCP had been prior to its rise to power in the late 1940s. In 2002, thirty-three Catholic bishops and priests were arrested or disappeared and at least 1200 churches were destroyed in one province alone.³² It is thought that many members of the Falun Gong remain in reeducation campus.³³

The recent treatment of the Uighurs, a religious and ethnic minority in the province of Xinjiang in western China, is even more egregious. The Xinjiang region is considered semi-autonomous, but it was essentially annexed by China in 1949. The Uighurs there are ethnic and religious minorities, distinct from the dominant Han Chinese and religiously Muslim, dissenting from both the atheism enforced by the CCP and traditional Chinese Confucianism. Current estimates are that at least one in ten members of this group is in a government internment camp. They are taken from their homes without trial and sometimes without their family even being informed. Relatives simply stop receiving calls and text messages.

The government claimed that these compounds are “vocational camps” aimed at assimilating the minority population into the dominant linguistic and cultural practices of China for the sake of their economic well-being.³⁴ The

²⁹ Jessica C. Teets, *Civil Society Under Authoritarianism: The China Model* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 94.

³⁰ Deng, “China’s Nonprofit Sector,” 4.

³¹ Deng, “China’s Non-Profit Sector,” 5.

³² Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations*, 70-1.

³³ Andrew Jacobs, “Behind Cry for Help From China Labor Camp,” *The New York Times*, June 11, 2013. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/12/world/asia/ma-n-details-risks-in-exposing-chinas-forced-labor.html>.

³⁴ Ivan Watson and Ben Westcott, “Uyghur refugee tells of death and fear inside China’s Xinjiang

government documents describe the camps as “transformation through education” centers.³⁵ Evidence indicates that the camps are effectively prison camps aimed at reeducation of the Uighars to force assimilation into the dominant culture through practices such as forced chanting and singing, mandatory language classes, forced written confessions, and the like.³⁶ Persons are reported to the government if they pray, refrain from alcohol, grow a beard, or encourage others to do the same because of the association of these practices with devotion to Islamic teaching.³⁷

On the purpose of the camps, one person said, “They want to erase, erase, erase your identity and our culture and to melt them into Han Chinese.”³⁸ Reports emerging indicate that the internment program “holds Muslims and forces them to renounce religious piety and pledge loyalty to the party.”³⁹ One woman was forced to say in front of a camera, “I am a citizen of China and I love China. I will never do anything to harm China. China has raised me. The police never interrogated me or tortured me, or even detained me.”⁴⁰ One former inmate described the goal of the camp saying, “In the end, all the officials had one key point. The greatness of the Chinese Communist Party, the backwardness of Uighur

camps,” CNN, January 21, 2019.

<https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/18/asia/uyghur-china-detention-center-intl/index.html>. Last Accessed April 18, 2019.; Mark Doman, Stephen Hutcheon, Dylan Welch and Kyle Taylor, “China’s frontier of fear,” ABC News, October 31, 2018.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-11-01/satellite-images-expose-chinas-network-of-re-education-camps/10432924>.

³⁵ Chris Buckley, “China is Detaining Muslims in Vast Numbers. The Goal: ‘Transformation.’” *The New York Times*, Buckley, Times.

³⁶ Buckley, “Detaining Muslims.”

³⁷ Buckley, “Detaining Muslims.”

³⁸ Doman, et al.

³⁹ Chris Buckley and Austin Ramzy, “China’s Detention Camps for Muslims Turn to Forced Labor,” *The New York Times*, December 16, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/16/world/asia/xinjiang-china-forced-labor-camps-uighurs.html>.

⁴⁰ Sophia Yan, “‘I begged them to kill me’, Uighur woman describes torture to US politicians,” *The Telegraph*, November 28, 2018. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/11/28/begged-kill-uighur-woman-describes-torture-us-politicians/>. Last accessed April 18, 2019.

culture and the advanced nature of Chinese culture.”⁴¹ Another claimed that the government forced the inmates “to do manual labour as well as attend re-education classes where they were forced to praise the government’s policies and express their gratitude for the re-training.”⁴² The government has admitted that the camps are non-voluntary, but it has taken to calling the inmates “non-criminal terrorists.”⁴³ Analysts have identified as many as twenty-eight of these camps.⁴⁴

Chinese policy does allow very limited Islamic practice, but such practices are decidedly individualist. *The New York Times* describes the policy this way, “The officials did not ban Islam but dictated very narrow limits for how it should be practiced, including a prohibition against praying at home if there were friends or guests present.”⁴⁵ The home is where religion is predominantly preserved and passed on to the next generation. The government recognizes that families are often an alternative location of loyalty to the state and a great inculcator of religious belief. Muslim families are broken apart and members taken to the camps. The government sends party representatives to live in the homes of Muslim Chinese to become part of their family and to monitor their activities and lifestyles, to discover what books are in their homes, whether they pray, and whether they drink alcohol.⁴⁶ Scholar Rian Thum commented that “[w]hether consciously or unconsciously, authorities in Xinjiang have recognized the power of families as an alternative source of authority. The kind of extreme party loyalty they want has no room for that.”⁴⁷ The goal of these policies is to prevent Uighars from practicing Islam in community with others. The government is explicitly limiting the ability of Muslim communities and families *to be communities* in Nisbet’s sense by restricting their ability to carry out their function: enabling Muslims to worship together and raise members of the next generation as Muslim.

Both ethnicity and religion are evocative sources of traditional allegiance that are apart from

⁴¹ Buckley, “Detaining Muslims.”

⁴² Doman et al.

⁴³ Rian Thum, “A History of China’s Muslim Internment Camps,” speech at Wellesley College, April 17, 2019.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Buckley, “Detaining Muslims.”

⁴⁶ Doman et al and Thum.

⁴⁷ Quotes in Buckley, “Detaining Muslims.”

and sometimes higher than political ends. The primary relationship of the political community is between individual and state, and the political community will look with suspicion upon any relationship that directs individual loyalty away from the state. This is reflected in the manner in which the Chinese government treats the practice of Islam and non-Han Chinese cultural minorities, especially as these traditions are carried out in the context of families.

The Plural Community in Contemporary China

It is clear in the scholarship that China's motivation for allowing its recent expansion of freedom for organizations is better governance, not democratization and not liberal pluralism.⁴⁸ China scholar Jessica Teets writes, there is a "growing convergence on a new model of state-society relationship in China that emphasizes the simultaneous rise of a relatively autonomous civil society with differentiated state control depending on whether groups are perceived to advance state goals or challenge state authority."⁴⁹ Former vice-president of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee Party School Li Junru argued that the softening of state policy toward groups is a process of "consultative democracy," a fundamental democratization of China even if it does not involve elections.⁵⁰ However, Teets argues that this new system of collaboration between civil society groups and the Chinese government is better described as "Consultative Authoritarianism." China remains undemocratic, especially at the national level, but it has nonetheless established a significant consultative role for groups, granting them an extraordinary amount of autonomy by historical Chinese standards.⁵¹ The "model of consultative authoritarianism, whereby state officials advocate a simultaneous expansion of autonomous civil society and mechanisms of state control to attain a balance between the governance benefits of civil society and the potential dangers of social mobilization for

further political liberalization."⁵² For our purposes, I am not concerned with democratization nor with the government's motivation for instituting pluralist policies, but with the presence of Nisbet's elements of pluralism. So while consultative authoritarianism is not democratic, it may still be pluralist. To understand the extent to which pluralism is part of the contemporary political and social landscape, we can formulate Nisbet's principles of pluralism as a series of six questions regarding the treatment of civil society and the associations operating there. Since "plurality" is the guiding principle of the plural community, I will consider that principle last as a summary of how the other aspects of pluralism are satisfied.

First, how much *functional autonomy* does the Chinese state allow NGOs?

The question here is to what extent can NGOs pursue their function, the central purpose of their group, free of state intrusion. The answer is mixed. Different groups have different rights. A helpful way to understand the treatment of NGOs in contemporary China is to step back and to consider them according to two models: top-down and bottom-up.⁵³ The major difference between top-down and bottom-up organizations is their relation to the state. Top-down organizations are non-governmental but the impetus for their formation is the state, being founded either by the state or by state appointed officials to accomplish objectives explicitly identified by the state.⁵⁴ Ma identifies four categories of top-down organizations:

- These include NGOs that existed before the Cultural Revolution but "carry out political or economic functions assigned by the government."
- Civic organizations that the government founded "to fulfill certain managerial functions or economic needs in the new market economy."
- Professional associations founded by "professionals who work within the state system."

⁴⁸ Stromseth et al, *Governance Puzzle*, 7.

⁴⁹ Teets, *Under Authoritarianism*, 144.

⁵⁰ Li Junru has used this term for some time. Most recently see Li Junru, "Consultative Democracy, People's Democracy," *China Today*, March 1, 2018. http://www.chinatoday.com.cn/ctenglish/2018/zdtj/201803/t20180301_800118954.html.

⁵¹ Teets, *Under Authoritarianism*, 40.

⁵² Teets, *Under Authoritarianism*, 207. This corresponds to what Zhang and Guo call society-corporatism discussed above.

⁵³ This bifurcation is drawn from chapter five of Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations*, 136-66.

⁵⁴ Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations*, 145.

- Trade associations.⁵⁵

Bottom-up associations were established by mostly private enterprises “to protect and represent their interests.” This includes chambers of commerce and similar associations.⁵⁶ Ma examines the development of these types of associations in the city of Wenzhou in Zhejiang Province in Southeastern China. There are four characteristics of bottom-up associations:

1. They were initiated by private entrepreneurs;
2. They are self-sufficient, self-managed, and self-recruiting, with no funding from either the Wenzhou government or county governments;
3. Memberships are voluntary, and private companies join because they consider these chambers of commerce to work for their interests;
4. Private entrepreneurs, often the most outstanding ones, make up the executive boards and the boards of trustees, and they are directly elected by the members of their respective organizations.⁵⁷

Ma’s description of these organizations indicate the level of functional autonomy they have. They are founded at the impetus of the people who need them and they are left relatively alone to carry out their function, which is not state-directed, but serves the interest of their members. In Nisbet’s terms, they are autonomous as to their function.

In Wenzhou, between 1980 and 1996 private businesses increased by more than a hundredfold.⁵⁸ With this explosion in private enterprises, non-profit organizations began to emerge. 114 chambers of commerce were established in the city between 1992 and 2004 to protect the interests of the relatively new businesses in the area. These organizations were founded by businesses, many of which were small family-owned enterprises that needed protection in the form of copyrights, patents, and the like.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations*, 146.

⁵⁶ Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations*, 159.

⁵⁷ Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations*, 159.

⁵⁸ Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations*, 159.

⁵⁹ Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations*, 162-3.

Unfortunately, it does not appear that the same level of development of active bottom-up organizations has happened to the same extent elsewhere in China. But Wenzhou gives a helpful model for what is possible

Ma’s analysis does not cover recent developments where social organizations have been granted a certain level of autonomy in a manner similar to these economic associations. The principles that applied to the sort of economic non-profits, such as chambers of commerce, have been expanded to include social organizations. In 2010, fifty percent of registered nonprofit organizations were educational, compared to one percent each for professional organizations, agricultural organizations, and business service organizations. Cultural organizations constituted four percent and community service organizations almost fifteen percent. This indicates that there has been rapid growth in the number of strictly social organizations compared to those that serve a business related purpose.⁶⁰

Against the functional autonomy granted a variety of economic and social non-profit associations, religious organizations are significantly more constrained. Since 1978, religious organizations have been permitted as long as they must register with the State Bureau of Religious Affairs. This is even true of some faith-based organizations that are not specifically places of worship. So what would be considered in the West a “social organization” with a charitable mission is considered under the Chinese system a religious organization with separate categorization and more limited rights. This creates a curious state of affairs where some faith-based organizations that generally engage in social services and educational activities that implicate their faith, such as the YMCA, register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs. But when it does so, it must only take part in strictly charitable work associated with social services. The organization is explicitly forbidden from taking part in education efforts, despite the fact that education is explicitly part of its mission and plays a routine role in its activities in other countries. Educational activities would insert the YMCA’s religious mission into its work, inculcating religious values in the people the organization educates. But this, in turn, hampers their charitable efforts. For example, while the YMCA runs an elderly home in Shanghai, it isn’t allowed to engage in any educational activity. To put this in Nisbet’s terms, education is an essential function of the YMCA, but it is not autonomous as to that function which is explicitly tied to its dogma, but is explicitly restricted from engaging in the activity at the center of the

in China, a great deal of functional autonomy for non-government associations.

⁶⁰ Huang and Cai, “A Major Breakthrough,” 56.

organization's mission. Furthermore, even though its charitable work is exemplary and quite successful, the YMCA explicitly avoids bringing attention to it because it may be linked to the organization's religious mission and invite additional state interference with the group's activities.⁶¹

The most egregious violation of functional autonomy is the treatment of the Falun Gong and the Uighurs discussed above. These groups are not allowed the requisite self-government necessary to carry out their function. Each has certain spiritual beliefs that form the core of its dogma and a function in facilitating proper spiritual practice of their respective adherents. Neither is allowed to perform that function free of harassment. Respect for the principle of functional autonomy would require that associations in these communities be left free enough to organize worship and practice as they see fit.

Decentralization

Two types of decentralization are relevant here. The first type of decentralization is a transference of functions from the political state to a variety of social authorities. The second is decentralization from central political power to local political authorities. Part of this is the decentralization of oversight of local political authorities from the central political authority to local citizens. The latter is related to the tenet of localism but we will discuss it here because it also demonstrates a decentralization of a function to non-governmental actors, namely, the transference of oversight from the national state to concerned citizens associating with each other around shared concerns with the exercise of local government power.

As a general example of the transference of functions from political powers to a variety of social authorities is the decline of the *danwei*. The *danwei* are the "work units" that governed the lives of Chinese citizens from cradle to grave, serving as economic units, social welfare organizations, and educational institutions all wrapped into one. The *danwei* were intended to replace the traditional social networks of neighborhoods, villages, and kinship groups and to provide all the social and economic services previously received from these groups.⁶² They were not only the places Chinese citizens

worked, but also the places they received services one would have previously received from a variety of sources. One would work at a factory, get healthcare from a hospital or family, education for one's children from a school, and social support from one's neighbors and kin, all run by the *danwei*. It was even within the *danwei* that marriages were celebrated and funerals arranged. They instantiated a centralization of functions from various social authorities to the political state.

But taking on all of those services proved to be prohibitively expensive. Following the reforms of 1978, in the third phase of the nonprofit sector, *danwei* began to shed their social responsibilities. When the state-affiliated organizations no longer provided social services, other for-profit and non-profit organizations stepped into the void. The Chinese government has permitted the decentralization of these services to take place. We can see this as an *outward* decentralization of important social functions from a political institution to non-state institutions, just as the economic reforms decentralized economic functions from state-run enterprises to non-state economic entities. The result is that normal people who continue to work for the *danwei* are not as beholden to it since it is no longer the end-all-be-all of their economic, social, and political existence. These various functions have been *pluralized*, transferred from one political source to a variety of social sources.

An example of the second type of decentralization is the relatively recent Chinese policies of transparency and participation, which decentralized oversight and decision-making by allowing Chinese citizens to monitor their own local governments and to have a say in policy-making, at least at a local level. Transparency is defined as "the provision of information on government activities, processes, and regulations" and "public participation" is defined as the ability to engage in "the formation of government policies."⁶³ These policy changes have significantly altered China's treatment of NGO's with profound implications for the free association of individuals.

Transparency reforms really got underway with the Open Government Information reforms in 2008 mandating publication of some government documents.⁶⁴ These reforms were aimed at reducing

⁶¹ Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations*, 71.

⁶² Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations*, 59.

⁶³ Stromseth et al, *Governance Puzzle*, 5

⁶⁴ Stromseth et al, *Governance Puzzle*, 26.

local corruption, especially the misuse of public funds by local government officials. Government transparency requirements mean that citizens can monitor local government expenses and report malfeasance or protest unwise government decisions.

⁶⁵ For example, in 2010 the state-owned metro corporation in Guangzhou province announced that it would renovate all of the stations on one of its metro lines. A sixteen-year-old who frequently took the metro questioned the necessity of the renovations and tweeted his concerns. He then protested at the entry to the metro with a petition for metro users to sign. Many did sign and join his protest. Because of the attention his efforts brought to this particular instance of government spending, suspicion of government waste increased. Eventually, the plans for the metro renovations were revised to address only the necessary repairs.⁶⁶

Another example occurred when a local government proposed a renovation of the lighting along the Pearl River. An NGO employee started a campaign called “Brain is Brighter,” arguing that the money allocated to the lighting renovation would be better spent on education rather than street lights. He shaved his head and posted a picture online in protest. Eighty-seven people also posted pictures of themselves with shaved heads and thousands others commented and approved of his campaign. The movement was censored, but the protest worked. The government revised its plan, agreeing to spend a sixth as much on the project.⁶⁷

The sort of action taken by these citizens is effective because they had access to government information and there was a civil society that could support the dissenting citizen. Other citizens who shared the concerns of the dissenting person were willing to join the cause as well and local media was willing to cover the protest to bring attention to the particular concerns. While in these cases the associating took place online and they were not the result of the actions of a registered social organization, they nonetheless demonstrate instances of free association for a particular cause against current government policy.⁶⁸ While I am not only

concerned with protecting dissent from government action, the protection of that practice demonstrates an outward decentralization of authority in an important sense. Persons are allowed to associate and to pass judgement on the wisdom of particular acts of government spending.

Several caveats apply to this point. First, the central government has not allowed the same level of transparency at the national level as it has at the local level, even though it may yield similar benefits in terms of better governance. If anything, it appears that what transparency there is at the national level is diminishing.⁶⁹ Second, the motivation of the Chinese government for expanding transparency and participation is not for openness or pluralism as such. It pursues these policies for the same reason that democratic regimes do: participation helps the government both make better choices by providing it with better information and it enhances the government’s legitimacy. People are more likely to comply with government policy when they believe that it has been implemented with their participation.

⁷⁰ This is not a problem for our thesis: decentralization need not be to the detriment of the government to be valuable to pluralism. But it is worth pointing out. Third, these transparency initiatives have not led to more press freedom. The Chinese government worries that unbridled openness will inspire popular anti-government movements. It is one thing to help to clean up local government corruption and another to permit the same level of scrutiny against the regime itself. Nonetheless, requiring open access to local government records is a step in the right direction. It means that the Chinese government is experimenting with liberalizing citizen access to government information, decentralizing the oversight of local governments to the people affected. So far, the results have been beneficial to citizens and to the state. Citizens have engaged and caught local officials in mismanagement and even criminal activity. They did so because they were able to associate (even if just online) around their shared concerns.

⁶⁵ Stromseth et al, *Governance Puzzle*, 30, 34.

⁶⁶ Stromseth et al, *Governance Puzzle*, 113-15.

⁶⁷ Stromseth et al, *Governance Puzzle*, 128-30.

⁶⁸ Associating online is an important new iteration of the right of association. See John Inazu, “Virtual Assembly,” *Cornell Law Review*, 98:1093 (2013). Inazu grounds constitutional protection for this

activity in the American First Amendment right of assembly.

⁶⁹ Stromseth et al, *Governance Puzzle*, 57. For example, the national government was more transparent about its 2008 budget than its 2012 budget.

⁷⁰ Stromseth et al, *Governance Puzzle*, 10-11.

Third, to what extent does the Chinese government intervene in the internal hierarchy of the associations? Are they permitted an internal hierarchy of values and roles free of state interference?

The ability to recruit and to decide one's own leaders is essential to the autonomy of associations in the western world. But China retains an ability to have a say in some of these internal decisions. On the one hand this is an infringement on the internal autonomy of the organization and its ability to make decisions based upon its own hierarchy of personnel and values. On the other, the people appointed often have expertise in the subject area. Some even maneuvered their careers to be appointed to the position because of their interest in the NGO's subject area.

When the Chinese government intervenes in the internal hierarchy of an organization it is generally in response to what looks like corruption or malfeasance on the part of members of the organization. For example, in 2011 an employee of the China Red Cross Association had posted on social media indicating she had high income and a wealthy lifestyle, but she should not have had extensive personal resources given her position in a non-profit. China Red Cross is the largest humanitarian organization in China.⁷¹ While it is an NGO, it has the full support of the government and even special legal rights. As it turned out, the young woman's wealth had nothing to do with her position at the China Red Cross, but it brought scrutiny to the non-profit world and confirmed in the minds of some that nonprofits were suspect because they operated apart from the state.⁷²

Despite a more general openness to International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs), in 2016 the registration of INGOs was moved to the Ministry of Public Security and away from the Ministry of Civil Affairs. These groups are now subject to greater scrutiny, which includes interrogation of any employees of these groups at any time.⁷³ Some observers have noted that this looks like the return of

Maoist policies, certainly it reflects a violation of the pluralist principle of hierarchy.

Fourth, to what extent does the Chinese government permit *tradition* among associations and civil society at large?

Tradition need not be long-standing. Here, it just means the internal norms of the group, often informal, that emerges from the interaction between the group and its members and between the groups and members of the civil society at large. While many NGOs may organize around issue areas with internal practices consistent with their work, traditions that emerge from dissenting communities seem especially suspect. Tradition is an important way in which communities create a sense of belonging for their members. It appears that the internal practices of many NGOs are left alone, with notable exceptions.

While we discussed the YMCA in terms of functional autonomy, it is also an interference with tradition to not permit the YMCA to engage in its own traditional practice of education in carrying out its activities. More egregiously, forbidding various religious practices, such as growing a beard, praying, and refraining from consuming alcohol, and other traditions associated with Islam is a violation of this principle. It is clear that the traditions attached to religious groups are suspect because of their role integrating persons into the religious community. The state will intervene if it believes the traditions will unduly direct the loyalty of the individual to a group at the expense of its loyalty to the state. Additionally, some of the activities in the Uighur internment campus such as forced chanting and singing are essentially attempts to impose traditions consistent with the dominant political values upon the dissenting community as a replacement for the practices traditionally associated with Islam.

Fifth, to what extent does a policy of *localism* guide the central government?

A policy of localism does seem to be guiding some Chinese policies in regards to NGOs. As I discussed in the section on decentralization, the national government has allowed a great deal of local control over how to interact with NGOs.⁷⁴ In Wenzhou there has been a salutary expansion of freely formed "bottom-up" NGOs. While this

⁷¹ Huang and Cai, "A Major Breakthrough," 67-8.

⁷² The woman was actually not directly affiliated with the organization. See Ming Hu and Chao Guo, "Fundraising Policy Reform and its Impact on Nonprofits in China: A View from the Trenches," *Nonprofit Policy Forum*, Vol. 7, Issue 2 (2016), 217; Stromseth et al, *Governance Puzzle*, 21.

⁷³ Stromseth et al, *Governance Puzzle*, 22.

⁷⁴ Stromseth et al, *Governance Puzzle*, 286.

confirmed the principle of functional autonomy, it also demonstrated the localist principle. The national government permitted the local governments to allow freedom to form organizations as they saw fit. While no province or city went as far as Wenzhou, the fact that it was allowed to do so demonstrates the presence of the principle of localism in national Chinese policy. Also, the practice of allowing citizens to participate in governance by monitoring local government expenditures is another part of localism. Provinces have a remarkable amount of autonomy in how they permit transparency and participation. Guangzhou province has pursued a much more aggressive policy than some other places. In 2002, it first implemented the Open Government Information initiative and passed a “right to know” statute, something similar to the American Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), the first of its kind in China. It also implemented evaluation measures to ensure that its transparency laws are being followed and it provides clear guidelines for how citizens may request information about government activities and expenditures.⁷⁵

However, even this localist interpretation must be balanced against a holistic account of the motivations and actions of the government in making this policy. Historically, corruption in China has led eventually to revolt and the fall of the ruling dynasty.⁷⁶ On the one hand, this means that the state only permits the pluralism that corresponds with its own power. It will allow citizen access to local government activity because it helps the central regime keep tabs on local officials and it keeps people loyal to the central regime. This cuts against Nisbet’s idea of localism in a certain sense. It is of course a good thing that corruption at the local level has been reduced and no doubt many of the local officials who were pilfering from government coffers were not doing right by the local people. But allowing citizens to monitor local governments frees the central government of that burden and it creates a sort of alliance between the central government and the individual citizens against their local governments. I think the policy is clearly a good one, but the structure the policy encourages is an affinity between individuals and the national state, rather than between individuals and the local government. This is a subtle but distinct reflection of the political community in a certain sense. Local citizens are made to feel a part of the larger whole through this

effort at the same time that the central state is better able to keep tabs on local governments. All that aside, this policy is also a good way for local citizens to work with each other to hold their own local government accountable and therefore, on the whole, reflects a localist perspective as well as a decentralist one. It allows citizens to associate, even in small ways, against government action.

In addition to a violation of functional autonomy, decentralization, and tradition, the treatment of the Uighurs is also a violation of the localist principle. The Uighurs are largely confined to the Xinjiang province. The Chinese political community is primarily interested in intervening in the internal affairs of an ethnic and religious minority group that dissents quite strongly from the dominant cultural and religious strains of the country. The national government’s refusal to permit them local autonomy despite the fact that the province is actually a protectorate and not part of China proper indicates a refusal to honor localism. The logic of the localist principle is that if a local culture is more distinct from the dominant culture it ought to have even more autonomy, more of an ability to be itself precisely because it is different from the overarching regime. Erkin Emet, secretary of the World Uighur Congress and a language professor at Ankara University, described the purpose of the camps, “China’s way of assimilating [the Uighurs] is to make them forget their original culture and then replace it with Chinese culture... [so it becomes] one culture, one nation.”⁷⁷

Last, all these questions considered, to what extent is *plurality* a recognized fact of Chinese political policy?

The rise of the NGO sector in China is not the result of a policy of pluralism or the right of association per se, but a result of the needs and wants of the political regime.⁷⁸ Even certain reforms that appear to provide limitations on the political community are arguably still done to stabilize—and not to pluralize—the political community. This is not disconcerting in the sense that a lot of pluralism in the West is defended on the grounds that it provides better democratic governance. The administrative state is growing in China, but it looks in some ways like the New Deal of the 1930s. The government does a lot, but through transparency efforts similar to the

⁷⁵ Stromseth et al, *Governance Puzzle*, 121-2.

⁷⁶ Stromseth et al, *Governance Puzzle*, 33.

⁷⁷ Doman et al. Emet believes that thirteen members of his family are currently interned in these camps.

⁷⁸ Ma, *Non-Governmental Organizations*, 47.

American Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) citizens can keep track of what the government does.

⁷⁹ Furthermore, these reforms are still an advance for pluralism in an important sense. They demonstrate a recognition on the part of the Chinese government that good government must respect the fundamental social pluralism present in a country. Rather than undermining the political community, pluralism stabilizes it. A regime ruling a country the size and population of China must recognize the inherent pluralism of its people if it is to govern effectively. Transparency reforms show that the regime recognizes this truth at some level.

One extraordinary fact is that civil society groups have largely been responsible for the change in policy of the government toward NGOs. They have worked to be collaborative rather than combative, working with the Chinese government to demonstrate that they have the same goals as the state. This has largely happened at the local level where civil society groups have been able to work with local officials to alter public policy. As one scholar writes, “The fact that civil society groups have begun to fundamentally alter relationships with local officials and influence public policy in a system that legally does not allow for public participation in less than two decades is a remarkable finding.”⁸⁰ Two points are worth emphasizing here. First is that it is true that groups must have a basic coherence with state policies. Sometimes this is simply framing the issue. LGBTQ groups, for example, must frame their own work not as a human rights issue, but as a public health issue.⁸¹ But, second, is that these organizations are acting outside of state impetus. They are the ones taking the initiative with the state responding accordingly. This reflects an underlying pluralism to Chinese society and a tolerance for pluralism by the Chinese government. It may have more limits to the tolerance of goals that do not correspond with government policy than what we generally find in the west, but it demonstrates a fundamental pluralism in an important sense.

This means that the Chinese people are becoming accustomed to thinking in plural terms, of a variety of associations carrying out diverse

functions.⁸² For example, philanthropic activity is increasing. Since some NGOs are able to seek support from individuals, the activity of asking and receiving has encouraged private donations such that donating and participating in civil society groups is becoming the norm. This is remarkable considering that with the rise of the *danwei* system “The ethics of charity and mutual help also withered, and a wealth of social capital was lost as the old groups faded.” This is reversing. Many Chinese citizens engage in microphilanthropy, the use of social media for targeted charitable purposes such as free lunches for students in impoverished locales.⁸³ The popularity and success of these sorts of programs indicate that the Chinese people tend to think in terms of social engagement to solve social problems through free associations in various ways. Some microphilanthropy efforts are unorganized and merely require donations from individuals and others are highly organized and constitute collective-action or even a social movement.⁸⁴ This is the pluralist mindset at work. The Chinese people are becoming more accustomed to thinking in terms of civil society, in terms of formal and informal social organizations. Whether they would use the term or not, they think of their society as a plural society, one where individuals are members of the state, but also members of various social groups which can make claims upon their time and resources.

An additional point is worth making about pluralism in Chinese society: the proliferation of illegal groups. 675,000 NGOs are registered with the state. But an estimated three million exist but are unregistered.⁸⁵ Strict registration requirements are burdensome for groups, making it easier to be a for-profit group or to operate outside of the law. One scholar writes, “evaluation procedures and complex reporting systems limit the independence and social integration of nonprofits.”⁸⁶ This makes difficult effective analysis of the Chinese non-profit sector because there is a wide-swath of the sector that is underground or masquerading as for-profit. It is a problem that affects even the regime’s ability to understand the scope of its own society, as one

⁸² Stromseth et al, *Governance Puzzle*, 298.

⁸³ Li Feng and Xiaoguang Kang, “Microphilanthropy Transforming China,” in Huang et al, *China’s Nonprofit Sector*, 179.

⁸⁴ Feng and Kang, “Microphilanthropy,” 187.

⁸⁵ Stromseth et al, *Governance Puzzle*, 21.

⁸⁶ Peifeng Liu, “NonProfit Legislation in China,” in Huang et al, *China’s Nonprofit Sector*, 84.

⁷⁹ Stromseth et al, *Governance Puzzle*, 40-1.

⁸⁰ Teets, *Under Authoritarianism*, 158.

⁸¹ Timothy Hildebrandt, *Social Organizations and the Authoritarian State in China* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 14.

scholar writes, “Currently, the government does not fully comprehend the level of societal pluralism or its impact on civil society in China.”⁸⁷ But it also suggests that there is a vibrant social pluralism in the Chinese state even beyond what we are able to study and evaluate.

Conclusion

Many models of civil society envision the interaction between groups and the state as being all or nothing. Either a group is a state agency or it is completely autonomous from state power. But the Chinese model could be described as more of a continuum.⁸⁸ The Chinese government is largely interested in protecting its own power while admitting that civil society groups may have a comparative advantage to government agencies.⁸⁹ “This is the fundamental balance of government decision making in Beijing—encouraging the ability of civil society groups to solve social problems without sacrificing political control, often discussed as ‘social stability.’”⁹⁰ What emerges from this discussion is that the condition of Nisbet’s plurality in contemporary China is complex, with government actions taking contradictory movement both toward pluralism and away from it toward a more rigid political community. In each of the five principles discussed above we could readily identify both increasing respect for pluralism as well as reasons for concern.

Much of the Chinese government’s opposition to civil society groups is due to its concern that such groups will undermine the regime’s power. The story of China’s recent liberalization of policy toward autonomous organizations is the story of the Chinese state learning from other regimes around the world as well as the success of pluralization at a local level. Some local governments have benefited greatly from working with NGOs. The model of civil society seen in the United States is open where most civil society groups work either with the administrative state or towards the same goals, such as mitigating poverty.⁹¹ Still, the Chinese government exercises significant control over associations. “Chinese social organizations are neither wholly autonomous nor completely bound by state control. They are granted

enough space to meet their own, often narrowly defined goals, but not so much autonomy that they might challenge state interests. Social organizations work to further their own goals; at the same time, they often work to assist the government in implementing its policies.”⁹² It isn’t a zero sum game. There are elements of both the plural community and the political community in the Chinese treatment of social organizations and associations.

The slogan in 1978 was “controlling better by controlling less.”⁹³ A similar statement could be made about the liberalizing of the social realm through the permissiveness of group formation. The same salutary results of freedom for economic associations that accompanied economic liberalization may be true of social pluralization. The decentralization of the market encouraged the growth of groups to address certain problems created by economic liberalization. A similar decentralization of functions and pluralization of society will allow for an *associational* response to address problems in the *social* market.

⁸⁷ Liu, “Nonprofit Legislation,” 88.

⁸⁸ Teets, *Under Authoritarianism*, 56-8.

⁸⁹ Teets, *Under Authoritarianism*, 98.

⁹⁰ Teets, *Under Authoritarianism*, 87.

⁹¹ Teets, *Under Authoritarianism*, 39.

⁹² Hildebrandt, *Social Organizations*, 1-2.

⁹³ Stromseth et al, *Governance Puzzle*, 168.