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Auto-Organization in Chinese Society

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The concept of civil society pivots on the post-eighteenth-century habit of distinguishing the realm of the political—"the state"—from the realm of the social—"society."[1] This distinction between state and society has grown out of the historical experience of state formation under European capitalism. It is explained as a process of social forces from below progressively limiting state power above: through elite challenges to the power of sovereigns (in the process of constitutionalism), through the ascendancy of market principles (in the form of capitalism), and through the pressure of public opinion on state decisions (in the realm of what has been called the public sphere).

The state-society relationship is regarded as a source of stability in Western societies; it is just as regularly viewed as a source of instability in authoritarian regimes in the Third World. Where democracy has failed, its failure has been attributed to blockages or imbalances in this relationship, and proposals to remedy these problems alternately identify the state (on a spectrum ranging from authoritarian to democratic) or society (ranging from vertical to horizontal) as the principal locus of dynamism—or as the barrier in need of removal—for broadening the political process and enhancing regime stability in the Third World. Among Western observers, pragmatists favor accepting the power of the state over society in their proposals for Third World political development; interventionists argue in favour of strengthening society against the state.

Analyzing the structure of power in China as a relationship between state and society can provide insights into how power is distributed

and how its exercise is alternately publicized and hidden from view, thus creating the sort of instability that is essential for power to be effective. Yet, predicating power on a clear distinction between state and society poses difficulties in the Chinese context. The state has been a far more conspicuous element in constructions of the moral world in China than in the West, where the demands of society for representation both within and against the state have been strong.[2] A view that polarizes society against the state derives from a conception of society as larger and morally more legitimate than the state. In China, by contrast, the concept of society as a locus of legitimate public action has little moral terrain on which to stand that has not already been appropriated by the state or effectively delegitimized by state ideology.

The apparent weakness of Chinese society vis-à-vis the state may reflect an ideological blind limiting people's ability to recognize the full extent of their subordination to the state—a blind that only an externally situated analysis can raise. On the other hand, the notion that society in China is "weak" may signal an unwarranted assumption about universal norms regarding state and society that simply do not apply within Chinese political culture, leading us to conclude that what *is* there signifies an absence of what *should be* there. Both are misperceptions, and both affect how we think of China. Political regimes in China have indeed succeeded in building and communicating an effective ideological casing, in short, have instilled a conviction in the necessity and benignity of a directive state, that blocks an effective critique of state power from within the Chinese world view. That conviction has been formative in determining how actors within the setting imagine, broker, and pursue political opportunities. It can be left out of the analysis only at the risk of missing how Chinese orient themselves to issues of power.

The internationalization of human rights discourse since the 1980s has to some extent altered the terms through which the Chinese government must enunciate its legitimacy. International criticism of the government's human rights record over the past decade has exposed the regime to internal, society-based scrutiny that it has not been able completely to deflect by appealing to a culturally sanctioned tradition of the legitimacy of the state over society. Although this criticism derived originally from assumptions that may have had little to do with long-established Chinese notions of state and society, it is beginning to

draw on alternative moral expectations and submerged historical memories within Chinese traditions that recognize the power of society and are not dependent on Western constructions of human rights or the rights of society against the state.

The concept of civil society not only derives from a European tradition of political thought, but has much to do with contemporary critiques in the West of the erosion of critical and communicative action in advanced capitalist society, and little to do, it would seem, with China. From another perspective, however, the concept provides a comparative ground from which to ask new questions. To broach the concept with respect to China, it is essential to bear in mind two cautions offered by China historians. One, put forward by Philip Kuhn, cautions that civil society is a model, not a reality. He points out that the "West" from which Jürgen Habermas, among others, elaborated the concepts of the public sphere and civil society is not the historical West but its theoretical double. Habermasian constructions of civil society and the public sphere are ideal types, not direct transcriptions of concrete historical formations (Kuhn 1994: 305–307). Since the concept of civil society is simply that, a concept, we should not think of Europe as "having" civil society; rather, civil society is a concept that provides a certain analytical perspective on Europe. In the same vein, China does not "have" civil society, however many of the elements associated with this European-derived concept can be traced in the Chinese past and present. Civil society in China is not a reality but a concept.

The second caution, which Bin Wong (1993: 44–45) has urged, considers the implications of importing wrong assumptions into the task of writing social theory. He advises that comparative history should not be undertaken on the presumption that similarities signify parallels or convergences. To avoid a Eurocentric unilinearity, comparative history must allow that profound historical differences can underlie similarities and must grant what is distinctive in the historical trajectory of Chinese society as much theoretical weight as what is distinctive about the history of European society. Otherwise, while picking out new historical possibilities as we look at China from a Western perspective, we may fail to see those that lie closer to the heart of the Chinese experience. The comparativist's task is to take the European and the Chinese historical experiences and read equally from both of them when constructing general models of state and society.

Auto-Organization

A recent definition characterizes civil society in part as "the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, [and] autonomous from the state" (Diamond 1994: 5).[3] The present chapter has been written not to evaluate China in relation to this definition but, more modestly, to reflect on one element of that definition, the voluntary, autonomous organization of social life, as it might apply to China.

The Chinese state over the past three millennia has been active recurrently and conspicuously in organizing people into social units or "communities." An early ideal for the state modeling of community units, still alive in Chinese cultural memory, is the ancient well-field (*jungtian*) system. According to this system, arable land was divided into units of nine equal parcels distributed among eight households, each getting one parcel to cultivate and all holding joint responsibility for cultivating the ninth and tendering its product as tribute to an overlord/state.[4] Although the well-field model rested on the existence of natural communities predating the formation of the state in the second millennium B.C.E., it accepted the state's right to override social arrangements.

Not all organizing throughout Chinese history has been at the behest of the state, however. Chinese have recurrently formed communities that are neither under the direction of the state nor bound to such state functions as revenue extraction. This process of autonomous group formation, or auto-organization, has gone on within Chinese society since the emergence of the state, often out of its sight, and sometimes in tandem with (even in cooperation with) state interventions at the local level. Auto-organization has been an important factor shaping the lives of Chinese. It has contributed to the formation of the particular historical relationship between state and society that pertains in China today, rendering that relationship more complex and more disjointed than is usually acknowledged.

Auto-organization also testifies to the presence within Chinese society of horizontal integration, which political science scholarship tends to neglect. A common model of Chinese society, derived from the perspective of its elites, identifies local corporatism, the organizing of power among functionally differentiated groups (Fewsmith 1985: 163–65; Thompson 1995: 58), as the way in which Chinese usually group

themselves in the local setting. Local corporatism stresses the vertical integration of ordinary people, who surrender their political voice to their elites. It minimizes the capabilities and opportunities that people exercise regularly to communicate horizontally and form cooperative bodies. Local corporatism has been a characteristic structure of Chinese society in the imperial period and beyond, shaping fundamental assumptions about social action, notably within kinship networks. But it does not exhaust the principles by which people group in China or anywhere else.

In his study of contemporary Italy, Robert Putnam has noted distinctive variation in the structure of local political life. At one extreme are the civic communities he tends to find in northern Italy, which are "marked by an active, public-spirited citizenry, by egalitarian political relations, by a social fabric of trust and cooperation." At the other extreme in southern Italy he sees places "cursed with vertically structured politics, a social life of fragmentation and isolation, and a culture of distrust" (1993: 15). Putnam regards the second type of local society, in which "force and family provide a primitive substitute for the civic community," as a "second-best, 'default' solution" to the challenge of building social integration (1993: 178). This negative evaluation does not induce him to elevate the latter to the status of what may be considered "typically" Italian. Both civic and uncivic communities exist in Italy, and do so across a range of possible modes of social integration that vary according to local habits and strategies for survival that Putnam traces back a thousand years. I would argue in a similar vein that, while the clientelistic fragmentation of local corporatism can be traced in Chinese society, it is also possible to identify over the same fabric consistent patterns of associative behavior based on voluntary cooperation. This chapter is intended to expose the presence of auto-organization as a more cooperative principle of social integration at the local level as it has been exercised and remembered over the past four centuries.

The case study for this chapter is Shanghai. Shanghai has had a well developed civic culture in the twentieth century, but it has also had something like a civic culture going back at least to the latter half of the sixteenth century. In a text written in 1606 to honor the restoration of the Confucian shrine at the county school, a local elder recalls a time when Shanghai was characterized by a higher level of distrust, gang justice, and fraud than any other county in the region. He asserts

that the zealous administration of local officials in recent years has helped greatly to inspire popular trust in the gentry, who in turn have stabilized local society (Shanghai 1980: 467–468). As if to affirm the commitment of the next generation of gentry to this stabilizing process, the names of all 267 students registered in the Shanghai county school have been entered on the stele on which his text is inscribed. The way in which the author formulates his observation suggests that a transition from uncivic to civic community may have taken place during his own lifetime, although more evidence is needed to confirm this impression.

In the seventeenth century, the sphere of public commercial organization in the city of Shanghai developed rapidly, leading to a marked growth in formal trade and native-place organizations in the eighteenth. This growth not only continued but increased after Shanghai's designation as a treaty port in 1842, resulting in a productive mix of Chinese- and Western-style association building through the latter part of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. Because of its treaty-port status, Shanghai has been singled out as an exception to Chinese patterns of urban development, largely because of the transformation foreigners view as having been brought about by them. Prior to their arrival, foreigners considered Shanghai an insignificant town where the "feudalistic, seclusionist, and anti-commercial" character of China was faithfully reproduced (Barnett 1941: 11). By going back before 1842, I will show that a process of civic-community formation was already well underway. I will also argue that the later fluorescence of associational life in Shanghai cannot be adequately assessed without a recognition of the depth of historical experience that lies behind treaty-port Shanghai, although I acknowledge that we do not yet have a sufficiently dense body of research on Shanghai society to demonstrate this hypothesis conclusively.

I will begin by reconstructing, in brief outline, aspects of auto-organization in Shanghai during the late-imperial period, from the sixteenth century to 1911, to adumbrate the historical foundation on which associational life in the twentieth century came to be built. My focus, however, will be on the Republican period (1912–1949), when some of the political limits on auto-organization were removed. I will also briefly consider the submergence and resurgence of auto-organizational activity during the People's Republic. Empire, republic, and people's republic differ in their constitutions, each adopted distinct principles and institutions to order public life and distribute political

Table 1.1

Principles of Auto-Organization and Selected Historical Types

	Principles	Late-imperial types	Republican types
1.	Locality	Village society	Village committee, street union, district association
		Native-place association	Fellow countrymen's association
2.	Occupation	Guild	Trade association, chamber of commerce, occupational association, trade union
3.	Fellowship	Religious society	Religious society, church
		Benevolent society	Benevolent society, charity, improvement society
		Literary club	Dramatic society, choral society, book club, athletic club, women's association, youth group
		Academy	Private school, university, student union, alumni association, research society
4.	Common cause		Policy advocacy group, political party

power. What will be striking is the extent to which auto-organizational activity and types crossed the political divides of 1911 and 1949, as well as the degree to which Western practices of and discursive frameworks for social organization have played only a secondary role.

Based on a survey of sources from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, I have identified four principles beyond kinship by which Chinese have constituted groups: (1) locality; (2) occupation; (3) what, for want of an established terminology, I shall call fellowship; and (4) common cause.[5] These principles vary in their degree of voluntarism, with locality at one end of the spectrum creating associations assembled from largely pre-established ties, and common cause at the other end grouping people on a more voluntary basis. There is nothing absolute or final about this heuristic typology. I offer it merely as a way of summarizing under an extremely loose rubric certain characteristics of Chinese social life that appear to extend over time. The four principles and some historical types are listed in Table 1.1.

Late Imperial Practices

Locality was a basic marker of identification for all Chinese in the late-imperial period. Living together in the same place provided the most obvious foundation for the identity of the group. Based on that foundation, members of a village joined together as members of the village "society" (*she*), which was struck and dissolved as necessary to conduct religious festivals, organize local projects such as irrigation, and coordinate labor for crop watching. People did not choose their locality, though even as a nonelective identity, locality provided the core context for transcending the tighter ascriptive ties of kinship, tying the lived community together, and bridging the large horizontal gaps to outside villages.

Living away from a common locality also united people. As Chinese became more systematically mobile, sojourners from the same province or county formed native-place organizations in increasing numbers in the Qing dynasty. They did so to pool resources and provide themselves with social support and services that they otherwise lacked as sojourners. Such groups had existed on a less formal basis prior to the formation of corporate native-place associations. Sources from Shanghai indicate that, already in the Ming dynasty, out-of-county residents clubbed together in loose affiliations or "groups" (*bang*) of people sharing a common origin. Northerners tended to group by province—for example, we know that there existed *bang* of coprovincials from Shanxi and Shandong in Shanghai in the late Ming dynasty—while southerners, who were more numerous, associated by prefecture. In the seventeenth century, such groups began combining resources to establish such sojourner institutions as nonlineage cemeteries (Shanghai 1980: 194). By the eighteenth century, native-place associations in Shanghai were constructing "guildhalls" (*huiguan*) in which social and ritual functions made public declaration of the solidarity of the group and strengthened its authority in local society (Shanghai 1980:235). The term "public office" (*gongsuo*) came into general use in the nineteenth century to signify the offices that native-place associations maintained to handle their members' affairs, especially after 1850, when the number of native-place associations putting up buildings expanded conspicuously (Negishi 1951: 6). Although native-place associations acted to serve the needs of their members only, in doing so they contributed to the weaving of the increasingly dense

network of public services that constituted Shanghai's urban public realm in the nineteenth century.[6]

Occupation was a second principle of group formation. It operated principally among urban artisans and merchants who belonged to "guilds" (*hang* or *hui*) distinguished by the goods they made or traded. Manufacturing guilds were well established before the Qing dynasty, but the institution of the "trade guildhall" (also *huiguan*) for merchants who were not from the same locality proliferated during that dynasty as commercial life became more complex. Shanghai's maritime merchants furnish an example of a commercial guild that declared a corporate identity not explicitly based on locality. These merchants enter the historical record in 1715, when they pooled their resources to construct the Commercial Shippers' Guildhall (Shangchuan huiguan). The stele recording the original building of the guildhall does not indicate whether these merchants associated as a guild prior to erecting this sign of their corporate identity (Shanghai 1980: 197); likely they did.

The state looked favorably on guilds as a means of guaranteeing its own interests, for it could off-load onto them such matters as taxation and urban control rather than trying to ramify its own control mechanisms into every nook of urban society, which was naturally resistant to the reach of the state. The state's interest in supporting this form of social organization was reflected in the willingness of local officials to intervene whenever the commercial interests of guild members were threatened by interlopers. When the chandlers of both the Ningbo and Shaoxing *bang* found their members being subject to extortion by self-appointed "heads of the trade" (*hangtou*), who fraudulently claimed they were collecting legitimate taxes, they appealed successfully to the Shanghai magistrate's office in 1868 for a writ of official protection (Shanghai 1980: 131).

Among merchants, occupational and native-place identities often overlapped, as did the institutional forms they constructed, guildhalls and public offices. Ningbo offers a good example. Sojourners from Ningbo who were prominent in Shanghai banking circles founded both the Shanghai Money Trade Guild (Shanghai qianye gongsuo) and the Ningbo Native-Place Association (Siming gongsuo) in the latter half of the eighteenth century. As institutions they were distinct, but their memberships overlapped extensively. Susan Mann has concluded that, by working through both associations, Ningbo bankers were able "not only to create an important monopoly in Shanghai commerce, but to

exercise a powerful influence in the financial structure of all China" (Jones 1974: 78). More recently, Linda Johnson has argued from a broader perspective that guilds did not inhibit competition, serving more to broker trade than to monopolize it. She sees the cumulative effect of guild organization as positive in fashioning civic Shanghai in the nineteenth century. Guilds "created public spaces and served public interests" and "thus contributed to an evolving sense of a common civic identity quite distinct from paternalistic government supervision" (Johnson 1995: 154).

Fellowship, the third principle of group formation, was the basis of organizations formed on the strength of shared interests rather than non-elective ties. One was not born into a fellowship group, although the social situation of the fellowship group meant that ties of kinship, locality, occupation, and business all shaped and influenced membership. The fellowship principle produced the richest array of auto-organizational forms in the late-imperial period. "Devotional societies" (usually *hui*), which were organized to promote the worship of a particular deity, encourage religious devotion among members, and mobilize funds for temple building, became quite popular among local gentry in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Brook 1993a: 103–7). Closely associated historically were "benevolent societies" (*tongshan hui*, *tongshan tang*), which were organized to carry out charitable work; these were increasingly popular with local gentry in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Infant Protection Bureau of Shanghai in the 1870s is a late example. Funded by local gentry with extensive experience in managing charitable enterprises, it was organized explicitly to compensate for the failure of local officials to take seriously or deal effectively with what local elites perceived to be unacceptably high rates of infant mortality, especially for girls (Fuma 1995: 51–52, 58).

The most common, and most characteristic, friendship-based association within elite circles was the literary club. Lu Shen (1477–1544), the leading figure in the local gentry of Shanghai in the 1520s, formed such a club or society among the leading Shanghai writers and calligraphers of his time. So, too, Dong Qichang (1555–1636), native to Shanghai and recognized as the greatest painter of the late Ming dynasty, formed a poetry society in his younger days and later in life was a member of a Buddhist Lotus Society with eminent scholars in the nearby prefectural capital of Songjiang (Dong 1630: 1.36a, 4.54a). A literary club could be no more than a trivial exercise in socializing

among a closed class faction, but it could also be critical to the process by which a politically unenfranchised gentry built horizontal social ties, providing them with a forum for public discussion and giving them a presence in local affairs and influence with state representatives (Brook 1993a: 38–43).

Depending on the political climate, these groups could further formalize themselves into academies (*shuyuan*). Academies were unofficial institutions that offered private instruction to examination candidates, but also hosted academic discussions on pressing moral and political topics among the scholars of a county or even wider region. Shanghai was not the site of a nationally prominent academy in the Ming dynasty, although the famous Donglin Academy in nearby Wuxi became the focus for a conservative revitalization of Confucianism early in the seventeenth century and a base for challenging bureaucratic and eunuch factions at court. These "experiments in independent moral cultivation," as John Meskill (1982: 138) has described them, occupied a "precarious" niche in the political structure of late-imperial China, precisely because of the ease with which they could become bases for challenging state policies.[7] In times of intense competition for political resources, literary clubs and academies could become the building blocks by which "bureaucratic differences were articulated into extra-bureaucratic social movements" (Wakeman 1985: 92). This sort of politicization was strong in the last four decades of the Ming dynasty, when soft alliances among literary clubs led to the formation of vertically integrated factions interested in challenging the growing power of the eunuch establishment at court.

The fourth principle of auto-organization, common cause, was not available in the imperial era, for the simple reason that the state forbade people other than incumbent officials from discussing affairs of state. In actual fact, many fellowship-based organizations, from religious societies to academies, existed on the strength of a common espousal of public causes or a common aspiration for action. The Chinese state's monopoly of explicitly political resources made negotiating with interest groups within society inconceivable. The only recognized common cause was the cause of the state, and any group that positioned itself for political influence was automatically regarded as doing so for a cause less than that of the whole. Such a group was labeled a *dang*, which would become the term used for political party early in the twentieth century (by Japanese usage in the nineteenth).

Dang could signify nothing more than a tight group of like-minded people: painter Dong Qichang refers repeatedly to his cohort of gentry friends as "our party" (*wu dang*) (e.g., Dong 1630: 1.36b-1.37a, 2.1a). It could also have a derogatory meaning, as when Dong warns of "inferiors grouping together in a *dang*" (Dong 1630: 7.14a). Commonly, the term was used to disparage political cliques. When a eunuch faction within the Ming imperial household arrogated to itself the authority of the emperor, for example, officials were ready to condemn this takeover in terms of *dang*.[8] So too, though, did early-Qing dynasty commentators condemn late-Ming dynasty factions struggling to challenge abuses at court. Looking back at the disarray that led to the dynasty's fall, Tang Zhen refused to listen to the common defense of the reform faction as having been the only option for good men to battle evil. "*Dang* are the mortal disease of the state," he declared in his uncompromising essay, "Root Out Factions." "Fail to control them and the state will perish" (Tang 1984: 449). Tang allows no notion that auto-organization could be a foundation for stability. Stability's only guarantee is a strong state, even if it is a state headed by foreign invaders like the Manchus. The Manchu emperors in turn adopted this interpretation that the Ming dynasty had fallen because of internal factions. They published edicts against forming *dang*, taking brotherhood oaths, or gathering in clubs.[9]

The foregoing glance at social structure in Shanghai reveals a place where the fabric of social and commercial ties became more complex and dense over time. Some of these ties were vertical, as elites created and operated corporatist organizations through which they could dominate local opinion and mobilize the political support of their clients. But some were horizontal, linking together individuals into sociable circles and providing vehicles and scripts for civic action.

The Republican Experience

The formal ban on *dang* came to an end with the fall of the empire in 1911. Even before that collapse, however, the legal framework for auto-organization within Chinese society was changing. The cumulative burden of China's defeat by Japan in 1895, the collapse of the Guangxu reform regime in 1898, and the occupation of Beijing by foreign troops suppressing the Boxer uprising in 1900 pushed intellectuals, and eventually the Qing court, in the direction of limited consti-

tutionalism. In 1902, the regime promulgated the first in a series of edicts that conceded to propertied individuals the right to associate for public purposes. The first such edict called for the organization, by urban officials, of chambers of commerce, although a national code governing their operation was not published until 1914 (Garrett 1974: 217–18). Recognition of the rights of assembly and association in other contexts followed. To tag the new public organizations, the state created the registration category of "legal group" (*fatuan*). It made this status available in 1903 to newly emerging professionals such as lawyers, bankers, and industrialists, who wanted to form associations to regulate their members' activities and promote the elite's ability to intervene with the state in civic matters that affected them.[10]

The forms that auto-organization had taken in the late-imperial period did not suddenly change with the endowment of legal status under a Republican constitution. The imperial-era types continued to exist, sometimes to mutate, and certainly to proliferate in the Republican era. If 1911 marks a shift in Chinese auto-organizational practice, it has to do first with the growth of cities as political centers, and second with the altered position of the state.

The founding of the Republic opened up urban politics. Compared to a century earlier, urban residents had greater opportunities to organize themselves and, through these organizations, to seek to influence municipal and national affairs. The Republican Revolution, the May Fourth Movement of 1919, the May Thirtieth strike wave of 1925, and the anti-Japanese agitations of 1931–1932 and 1937 were only the most prominent of the political crises that engaged large numbers of urban Chinese. Associations of all types proliferated in Shanghai in the 1910s and beyond: fellow-countrymen's associations, student unions, street unions, advocacy groups. Unlike the new political parties, these were not political organizations in the sense that they identified their goal as the capture of state power; rather, they were social organizations. Though *organized in society*, they were *organized for politics* in the sense of seeking to influence state policies in their favor. The presence of these auto-organizations created a new civic politics that changed the face of political life in the cities and further stimulated auto-organizational activity in a way that greatly altered the social landscape of urban China. It did so because of the continuities with the past, not the disjunctures. As David Strand has stressed, and as this chapter argues, urban politics in the Republic were pursued on the

foundation of "a rich associational life which in turn was rooted in long-standing social practices in neighborhoods and occupational groups" (Strand 1994: 310).

The emergence of republican government also marked a shift in the state's relationship to auto-organization. The new state found itself obliged to respond to and interact with social organizations in ways that the imperial regime did not tolerate. A Qing magistrate had had to work informally with interested local groups—the local gentry, merchant guilds, native-place associations—to negotiate the state's concerns with their collective interests, a negotiation that was often obscured by his patronage of their institutions. The Republic did not leave the state's relationship to social organizations on such an informal, ad hoc footing. Anxious to channel public activism in ways that enabled it to direct and control the modernization process without opening political challenges from below, the Republican state recognized the right of people to organize but put regulations in place to set limits on the formation and power of social organizations. A formal registration process enabled the state to decide whether an organization should be allowed to exist and what activities it would be allowed to pursue. While Guomindang and Communist regimes registered organizations above ground, their parties and security apparatuses expended enormous efforts penetrating them from below or setting up rivals, particularly those espousing a common cause that could challenge the existing state. The political stakes in an unstable period were simply too high to permit the autonomy of society.

To provide a sense of the associational life of Republican Shanghai, I have surveyed social organizations that were sufficiently active in the late 1930s to have come to the attention of the Special Branch of the Shanghai Municipal Police (SMP). The SMP was a foreign police agency under the jurisdiction of the Shanghai Municipal Council, which oversaw the administration of the International Settlement. The Special Branch was charged with investigating political matters, such as dissent and sedition, as well as issues that could have international consequences. It became particularly interested in the activities of social organizations in the wake of Japan's invasion of China in the summer of 1937, when many such organizations in Shanghai mobilized to protest Japan's actions, but also used these protests to pursue domestic political goals. From the files of the Special Branch I have culled the names of 153 organizations: (1) eighty-six associations that

Table 1.2

Associations Active in Shanghai, 1937–1941

Type	Active organizations (July–August 1937)	National salvation associations (formed July–August 1937)	Organizations seeking/evading registration (December 1937 to January 1941)	Total
Locality	15	2	2	19
Occupation	34	14	12	60
Fellowship	36	22	7	65
Common cause	1	7	1	9
Total	86	45	22	153

Source: Shanghai Municipal Police files of the Special Branch, 1894–1949: D-7994, 8002, 8039, 8157, 8157(C), 8166, 8350, 8679, 8692, and 8911. RG263, Military Archives Division, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

engaged in public protests or issued statements of opposition to Japan during July and August 1937 (SMP files D-7994 and 8002); (2) forty-five national salvation associations created by existing organizations to mobilize public opinion against Japan and raise funds to support the Chinese army (SMP files D-7994, 8002, and 8039); and (3) twenty-two organizations that either applied or failed to apply to the SMP for registration between December 1937 and January 1941 (SMP files D-8157, 8157(C), 8166, 8350, 8679, 8692, and 8911). In the discussion that follows, I refer to these associations by the English names recorded in the SMP files.

These three sorts of organization are broken down by type in Table 1.2.[11] The first set, comprising eighty-six organizations that came to Special Branch attention in the summer of 1937 sufficiently to be noted in Special Branch records, includes significant numbers of almost every type. Nine native-place associations are conspicuous, from prestigious groups such as the Ningbo Fellow Countrymen's Association (of which many of the prominent bankers of Shanghai were members) to provincial associations representing natives of Anhui, Shandong, Sichuan, and Zhejiang provinces, along with six local Shanghai district associations. The occupation-based associations include eighteen trade associations (as traditional as the Bean and Rice Hong Owners' Association and as modern as the Shanghai Film

Producers' Association), thirteen professional societies (of bankers, lawyers, dramatists, marine engineers, and wood sculptors, to name only a few), and three trade unions. Even more numerous are fellowship groups: five benevolent societies (including the Chinese Red Cross Society), five improvement societies, a sports club, two choral societies, two drama clubs, three reading groups, a vocational school, two alumni associations, ten research societies, and five women's organizations.[12] The sole common-cause group in this set is the Communist Youth League, which operated clandestinely in the region and could not register with the SMP.

The second set of organizations identified in the SMP files consists of national salvation associations that were established by existing organizations in July and August 1937. For this set, the distribution is slightly different than for the previous set. Only two native-place associations came to the attention of the Special Branch as engaged in this sort of organizing; one of these, the Cantonese Educational Circles' National Salvation Service Group, was, in fact, an occupational subset of a provincial group. By contrast, occupational, fellowship, and common-cause groups proved to be far more significant in mobilizing public opinion to pressure the Guomindang regime to oppose Japan.

Many organizations applied, or failed to apply, for registration with the SMC during the Japanese occupation. The twenty-two tabulated in the third column of Table 1.2 are only those for which I was able to find documentation (in most cases, the group's formal application for registration) in the files of the Special Branch. Registration had been required of Chinese public bodies operating within the International Settlement before 1937, and was reaffirmed by an SMP investigation of the status of all organizations in the summer of 1938 (SMP file D-8692).[13] The intention of this investigation was to limit the proliferation of national salvation associations, which the SMC judged as jeopardizing the modicum of independence that the International Settlement strove to maintain after Japan had established control over the rest of Shanghai. Only one application was submitted by a common-cause group, the "Unwilling to Become Slaves" National Salvation Association. It was rejected on 13 November 1937. The deputy commissioner of the SMP Special Branch went on record to declare that he did "not propose to register *any National Salvation Societies* [emphasis in the original], or [news]paper, in the Settlement at this time." He

suspected them, rightly as it turned out, of being Guomindang or Communist fronts (SMP file D-8166). The SMC preferred to prevent auto-organization from moving into the volatile arena of common cause.

To those associations that could gain recognition, however, registration became increasingly attractive as the Japanese army pressured Chinese groups to show support for the occupation. Some had been in existence well before the occupation. Of the two native-place associations that applied (both for counties in the hinterland of Ningbo), the Fenghua association had been formed in 1924 and the Xiangshan association in 1935; presumably, they came forward to register in the summer of 1940 in the hope of gaining some protection through their status with the SMC. Most of the other associations seeking registration were founded in July 1937 or later. This was the month the "Three Lives" (*San Sing* or *Sansheng*) Dramatic Society came into existence, according to its application for registration, dated 20 June 1940. This dramatic society was not an amateur theater group, as the name might have suggested, but a workers' association set up by the managements of three cotton and flour mills, all with the character "life" (*sheng*) in their names, to organize after-hours activities for their employees. These three mills were all that remained of the great industrial empire of the famous Rong family after Japan occupied the parts of Shanghai where the Rongs' other mills were located.

Shanghai Municipal Police registration and surveillance records testify that native-place identity continued to matter as an urban auto-organizing principle in Republican Shanghai, as Bryna Goodman (1992, 1995, 1996) has fully demonstrated. They also indicate that occupation and fellowship were becoming even more prominent in the disoriented political climate of the Japanese occupation, suggesting that Shanghai residents were eager to create lateral social linkages to protect and advance their interests. Mutual aid and "friendship" societies, for example, like the Shanghai Municipal Monks' Adjustment Committee, which was formed on 5 June 1940 and registered seven weeks later, tended to be occupation-based. They assumed increasing importance among the unprotected who faced growing deprivations under the occupation.

Compared with origin and occupation, fellowship emerged as the dominant auto-organizational principle at the time. Shanghai during the late 1930s was a time and place when almost any interest espoused in common was sufficient to bring individuals together to share and

protect mutual concerns or to promote ideas within society. The old-style religious and benevolent societies continued to function past the imperial period, but alongside them appeared modern organizations like the Chinese Red Cross and the YMCA. The old elite literary clubs left no traces in the SMP files, but in their place emerged drama clubs, choral societies, sports clubs, reading circles, alumni associations, and improvement societies promoting causes from Esperanto to literacy in Chinese characters. Many were specifically for women or youth, and most were founded before the emergency of 1937. These associations constituted an emerging structure of social cooperation and civic responsibility that was far broader than the associational fabric of late-imperial society, when membership in groups that extended beyond the confines of kinship or locality tended to be limited to those of elite status.

The principle of common cause was least invoked in the associational realm in the Republican era. As noted above, the only explicitly political organization that appeared in the first set of organizations for the summer of 1937 is the Chinese Communist Youth League. From another perspective, however, all of the forty-five national salvation associations could be interpreted as common-cause bodies, even though I have categorized all but seven according to the identity of their parent association. Their sudden appearance signals that common cause, suppressed by state authorities in periods of normalcy, could become an important organizing principle under conditions of sudden emergency or extreme political instability. In place of overtly political entities, the Japanese invasion stimulated the formation of higher-order associations of previously separate social organizations. Benevolent societies grouped together to form the Federation of Various Benevolent Societies for Famine Relief, women's associations joined forces to create the Shanghai Various Women's Organizations' Joint Office (under Guomindang sponsorship), and student unions linked to create the University Students' Friendship Society. Not surprisingly, given its desire to avoid offending Japan, the SMP declined to register any of them.

The State-Socialist Experience

Since taking state power in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party has been successful in stifling auto-organization in Chinese society. It has dominated associational life and disciplined most people to accept

Party-led organizations as the appropriate vehicles for mobilizing social action and public opinion. Until recently, all organizations that existed did so under Party tutelage. The leeway for such organizations (conceived and confined as elements of the Party's "United Front" with non-Party elements) was somewhat greater during the state-corporatist phases of the 1950s and 1980s. During the Cultural Revolution in the mid-1960s to mid-1970s, state and society were deemed coterminous. Briefly during the first year of the Cultural Revolution, socially based Red Guard organizations sprang up in Shanghai, although most existed by virtue of covert support from a Party faction and all were eventually suppressed. Under the extreme conditions of that time, any sense of legitimate space between state and society was eliminated. To argue for autonomy was to argue for the uncoupling of society from the state, a claim judged as treasonable to the nation.

The political reform program of the 1980s moved in the direction of distinguishing the Party and government, with the Party providing the rules by which the state would exist and the government charged with operating the machinery of state efficiently. This distinction was not one of state and society, but it did open some spaces within the flows of political power. One of these points of opening was the "mass body" (*qunzhong tuanti*). Prior to the late 1980s, these mass organizations were formed, directed, and managed by the Communist Party as adjuncts of state control. As part of the political reform program announced at the Thirteenth Party Congress in 1987, the relationship between Party organs and mass bodies was to be adjusted such that "each manages its particular functions and [the relationship] moves by stages toward systematization." More particularly, both the Party and government were called on to make fuller use of "mass bodies and basic-level autonomous organizations of a mass nature" in order that "matters concerning the masses are handled by the masses themselves according to law."[14]

That "masses" (*qunzhong*) and "autonomy" (*zizhi*) should be juxtaposed in this statement points to contrary lineages in the political reform position. "Masses" designates non-Party people whose political rights are determined by the Party; in the lexicon of Chinese Communism, the term is meaningless in the absence of the Party that gives it meaning. "Autonomy" on the other hand, indicates at least nominally the absence of higher authority in the decision-making process within the body. What it asks to be absent, more specifically, is the Party. The

political reform removed the Party's right to intervene in social entities, however. Despite the reference to autonomy, it did not declare that power would be dispersed away from the Party. Rather, it rephrased the authority of the Party in the abstract form of "law," in accordance with which Party-created bodies were obliged to act. The rephrasing opened some space between Party organs and mass bodies without fully recognizing a civil society interposed between the masses-as-society and the Party-as-the-state.

However circumscribed, in Shanghai the reform program has seen the activation of occupational groups previously kept on close Party rein. Unions have become more vigorous in the protection of their members' interests, and trade associations have expanded membership as commerce and industry have grown. More visibly, the reform program has also seen the proliferation of legal organizations based on fellowship. Associations of common interest such as soccer clubs, photography clubs, and stamp-collecting clubs have blossomed since the mid-1980s, often by emerging from under the Party-dominated work units within which they previously nested.

Common interest has been accommodated by the reform regime, but common cause has not. Among the principles of auto-organization, this is the least easily invoked, inasmuch as common cause tends to proclaim an autonomy that can too readily serve to mark resistance to the Communist Party's hegemony over initiatives in the public realm. This potential came abruptly to the fore during the Democracy Movement in the spring of 1989, when students and workers formed "autonomous associations" (*zizhihui*) to promote calls for the reform of China's political system. Occupation and fellowship were regularly invoked as the principles governing this brief phase of auto-organization, yet the purpose of organization was consistently to promote not corporate interests, but interests in the public realm.

The process of autonomous organization began in Beijing during the first week of the Democracy Movement (the third week of April 1989) and extended to Shanghai shortly thereafter. Students first formed autonomous student unions by school that were distinct from those the Party organized for them, but quickly combined these separate bodies into the Autonomous Union of Shanghai College Students. Like the Beijing Federation of Autonomous Student Unions on which it was modeled, this organization was weakly integrated, vulnerable to factional splitting, and unable to firm up its goals. Even so, it succeeded

through May and early June in mobilizing public opposition in Shanghai to the government's refusal to negotiate with the students in Beijing and in exercising a measure of coordination over the movement.

Students in Shanghai and Beijing were keen to mobilize worker support and distributed pamphlets praising workers for their support and reminding them of the heroic struggle of Polish workers to create Solidarity and remake the Polish state. A small number of workers responded by setting up the Shanghai Autonomous Federation of Trade Unions. This union aspired to occupy a structural position parallel in the movement to the students' federation, and indeed to enact the inspiration of Solidarity in China. This was the parallel that most alarmed Chinese Communist Party hierarchs, who feared the emergence of an independent working-class organization far more than they anguished over declarations of autonomy from students who, as future elites, could more easily be reincorporated into the state after the protests were over (Brook 1992: 85).

In addition to these umbrella groups, the Democracy Movement saw the proliferation of many more common-cause organizations in Shanghai: the China Youth Democracy Party, the Shanghai Patriotic Workers Support Group, the Chinese Autonomous Civil Rights Union, and the Patriotic Volunteer Army, to name only four.[15] By virtue of their declarations of autonomy from Party systems, all these groups marked a radical departure from the forms of occupational organization that had prevailed under the earlier state-corporatist and state-dictatorial phases of the People's Republic. In form and gesture they were strongly reminiscent of auto-organizational practices in the Republican era, although most participants were unaware of these precedents (Esherick and Wasserstrom 1990). They also proved to be painfully vulnerable to state suppression (Warner 1991: 228–29).

The suppression of June 1989 marked an abrupt setback to common-cause organizing. Continuing vigilance has meant that organizations such as the Shanghai Human Rights Association, which was suppressed as soon as it became public in 1994, cannot hope to secure legal status (Amnesty International 1996: 50). Outside of common cause, however, organizational life has not dimmed. Occupation in particular has gained ground as a principle of organization in the 1990s, attested to by the growing vitality of professional associations and trade unions. Indeed, it will be necessary for auto-organization to expand its presence within the emerging structure of state-society rela-

tions under China's current economic reform program for that program to work. This necessity arises not from the moral claim of the individual for the right to associate, but, more crudely, because horizontal social bonds, and the sense of civic investment they generate, contribute directly to economic and institutional performance by improving infrastructure and mobilizing subjective capacity. Both market and state operate more efficiently if economic growth is coupled to participation in civic life. As long as the government pursues development policies that demand this efficiency, it will be obliged to cede some space for the operation of independent corporate bodies. This cession is regarded variously as marking a resurgence of state corporatism, as signalling a departure from the state-corporatist model (as Yunqiu Zhang argues in this volume), and as generating a structural hybrid in which state and corporate bodies mingle (as B. Michael Frolic argues in his chapter). Where future auto-organizational impulses will lead remains not simply to be seen but to be interpreted and contested. That contest will intensify as "socialism with Chinese characteristics" emerges from behind its obfuscating label.

Some Characteristics of Chinese Auto-Organization

The evidence presented in this chapter suggests that we can identify four characteristics of auto-organization, derived from the Chinese experience but perhaps salient in other cultures as well.

The first is the responsiveness of auto-organization to crisis. The disruption of order provides an opening for initiatives from below, and associations have shown themselves to be responsive to that opportunity. This responsiveness produces impressive results at critical moments, but its corollary, the dependency of auto-organization on crisis, suggests that a consistent presence of auto-organizations has proven difficult to sustain on a day-to-day basis. This difficulty should be attributed not to the nature of Chinese society, but to the presence of sometimes violently repressive regimes during the twentieth century. That repression again need not be regarded as characteristically Chinese. It would be better traced to the instability of the modernizing state, which finds itself unable to negotiate with particular interests because of its constant fear that at each point of negotiation its legitimacy or hegemony will unravel.

The second characteristic of Chinese auto-organization is a readi-

ness to combine into larger entities, again notably at times of crisis. Just as the Beijing Federation of Autonomous Student Unions was founded soon after the start of the Democracy Movement in 1989, so the Shanghai Students' Union emerged within four days of the May Fourth demonstration in Beijing in 1919 (SMP file IO-6691). It, in turn, became affiliated with a national students' association. (National combination proved hugely difficult seventy years later, in large part because of the state's more effective means of social control.) Street unions demonstrated a similar process during the 1919 movement, combining at the national level in the Amalgamated Association of Street Unions. Above these and other citizens' federations emerged the National Organizations' Union of China (SMP file IO-3524). Crisis had the same impact on the elaboration of associations during the May Thirtieth Movement in 1925, when the Shanghai General Trade Union was formed; and again during the crisis provoked by Japan's attacks on China in 1931–1932 (Henriot 1993: 66–78). Finally, as we have seen, the public outcry against Japan's invasion of China in 1937 generated a surge of alliance building with the creation of a national salvation association for almost every constituency in Shanghai: students, cadets, women, merchants, vocational workers, cultural workers, reporters, editors, professors, youth, even children (SMP file D-8122).

Combining of organizations takes place also *among* different types of association as well as *within* the same type, again at moments of crisis. This third characteristic of Chinese auto-organization was evident in the 1911 Revolution, and again in the May Fourth Movement in 1919, when student unions, chambers of commerce, native-place associations, trade associations, and even the Boy Scouts coordinated their efforts to a common purpose (Goodman 1992; Wasserstrom 1992; SMP files IO-6691, D-4656). Japan's invasion in 1937 led to even broader alliance formation, as the many national salvation groups pyramided into the "Unwilling to Become Slaves" National Salvation Association.

Although not free to be fully political, the auto-organizational sphere in the Republican era was nonetheless, to use a phrase introduced early in this chapter, *organized for politics*. This is the fourth characteristic. Social organizations understood that their purpose was to influence the state. They might not be able to work explicitly for the institutionalizing of a legal order, and they might wisely shrink from adopting explicitly political forms or platforms. However, they could

intervene to scrutinize state actions in the public realm and to agitate for an improvement in governance. Aware of the political character of such interventions and the force of repression such politics can unleash, Chinese have shied away from common-cause entities in preference for bodies that did not declare political aims. Of the four different types of auto-organizations outlined in this chapter, those based on fellowship seem to have contributed most forcefully to the process of bringing the Chinese state within an accountability based on a shared set of rules (however much the rules themselves may have been contested), at least in the Republican period. Occupation-based associations by contrast have been least likely to mobilize citizens to make demands on the state. Craft guilds and workers' associations might do something of this sort when demanding fair treatment from employers, thereby nourishing an awareness of rights and their place within the larger structure of legal norms. But it is difficult to argue that they were able to make significant contributions toward establishing a larger structure of legal norms by which they could guard their autonomy, except insofar as they gave their members a taste of what collective action could achieve.

Auto-Organization and the Chinese State

The notion of civil society emerged in European social theory toward the end of Europe's absolutist phase. This was a time when intellectuals were looking ahead to understand the outcome of bourgeois challenges to the oligarchic state. It was believed that the failure of such challenges to occur—and China has been the popular example from Hegel through Marx to Weber and on to Deleuze—led to despotism. China's record as a warlord state during the first half of the twentieth century, and as a party-state through the second, seems only to confirm this analysis. And yet the Chinese state has not in this century, nor in any other, been successful at despotism for more than a few years. Despotism is a theoretical imaginary based on the unrealistic notion of absorbing all power to the center, an arrangement that can only be temporary and is always incomplete. Auto-organization is evidence of the incompleteness of Chinese despotism, and may provide some of the historical counterweight to its realization.

It is something of a commonplace to observe that Chinese political culture favors dependent relationships rather than assertions of inde-

pendent moral decision, and that Chinese moral culture favors harmonizing the individual with society, and doing so within the larger moral goal of harmonizing society with the state. In a recent essay on the relationship of academies to the late-imperial state, Thomas Lee argues that Confucianism furnished intellectuals with the ideal of intellectual autonomy and moral independence within this larger framework of vertical harmony. The pursuit of moral independence drove academy intellectuals at moments of crisis to speak out against the moral failure of the monarch or those close to him. Lee sees the resolution of this tension in intellectuals' willingness to rate the omnipotence of the emperor more highly than the life of the critic, whose commitment must in the end be regarded, in Lee's view, as "irrational." The intention of critique was to remonstrate, never to stake a claim against the authority of the emperor over his subjects or, more abstractly, against the authority of the state over society. The academy movement, and most other expressions of auto-organization, should be viewed "in terms of successful involvement in moral government, rather than in terms of separation from it, and much less even in terms of a search for a legally sanctioned separate sphere of action." Lee is willing to accept that "something resembling a 'civil society' " existed in China before the eighteenth century, but "only briefly and only in difficult times." The occasional eruption of civil society signalled not a step toward something new, but a temporary systemic failure that only confirmed the more fundamental commitment to "mediation, harmony and unity in community rather than a carving out of an autonomous sphere for action" (Lee 1994: 118, 119, 133–35).

Such descriptions of Chinese culture may be sensible, and they are widely replicated by scholars who advocate a "China-centered" approach to questions of state power. But they conceal more than they expose and render themselves vulnerable to confirming ideological claims rather than probing the political basis on which such claims are erected. The recurring reversion to a fundamental commitment to harmony that Thomas Lee describes does not rule China out of an analysis that attributes this reversion to the instability of the Chinese state rather than to the "weakness" of Chinese society. Lee, after all, implies the instability of the state (in the unstable person of the emperor) when he observes that the Confucian commitment to harmony is ultimately "irrational" in exposing the official who is uncompromising in advocating of good government to execution.

Autonomous organization in the public realm has been construed by contemporary East Asian elites as potentially corrosive of the stability of the state. The analysis in this chapter suggests that the truth runs very much the other way. Auto-organizational activity increases in times of political crisis as a response to the breakdown or compromise of proper state functioning, not because society has somehow detached itself from the polity, but because a regime has failed to meet economic or political challenges. Auto-organization does not destabilize regimes. Destabilization occurs when the state acts in ways that cause its authority to appear merely oppressive and its legitimacy unsupported. Social organizations strive to reconstruct that stability, albeit on a basis different from that of state organs. Rather than polarizing society from the state, auto-organization patches ruptures between the two, anticipating breakdowns and rebuilding fallen bridges. It compensates for the recurring failures of the state, which are inevitable even under the most perfect of Confucian or communist constitutions.

The role of the state in China, thus, is crucial to social initiatives and social outcomes. To fault Chinese society for stubborn localist, isolationist, or corporatist habits that interfere with the formation of a mature public sphere or strong civic culture in the twentieth century (or earlier—in other words, for lacking sufficient vitality to sustain its own integration—is to ignore the terrific pressure that Chinese state bodies, by judicial and extrajudicial means throughout most of this century, have exerted to maintain political power when challenged by its elites to do better (Brook 1992: 204–9). If Chinese society appears riven by structural weaknesses, with the power of small organizations to combine more than matched by their tendency to factionalize and fall apart (Strand 1994: 321), we would do well to remember that groups in European cities prior to the full development of civil society were probably as vulnerable to factionalism, scandal, and repression. On the other hand, beating a retreat into the comfortable zone of historical comparison does not do away with the fact that the autonomy of civil society in Republican China was limited by "the absence of a reliable state to deal with," an absence that ultimately opened China to "illiberal solutions" (Strand 1994: 329). Nor does it cancel out the fact that the Chinese state today pursues a conscious strategy of incorporating those intermediate social organizations that bolster its position and repressing those it considers dangerous (White 1996: 219).

Despite the restrictions that state authorities have imposed on auto-

organization during the past century, the memory of associational linkage has not been eradicated. With the current shift to close economic calculation, there is every reason to anticipate the reemergence of social organizations of the sort that thronged in urban China in the 1930s, although the conditions of their existence have yet to be fully negotiated. As these organizations reemerge, they will unavoidably come to act in ways that, at some point, will be construed as political; and the Chinese state will respond in ways intended to restrict their independence of action. The process of ramifying the organizational fabric and strengthening the social capital of Chinese life will be to the organizations' and state's mutual benefit, for it will multiply the bases of stability and link citizens more effectively to their state. Within the current political environment in China, this development will come only through a judicious balance between cooperation and critique. If the path seems narrow, it is one with which Chinese in this century have been made intensely familiar.