Some Observations on a Chinese Public Sphere

Mary Backus Rankin

Modern China 1993; 19; 158
DOI: 10.1177/009770049301900204

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MARY BACKUS RANKIN
Washington, DC

The question of whether China ever had a public sphere or civil society attracts our attention, but has also become vexed, because it is relevant to the contemporary issue of how (or whether) democratic reforms can be introduced into the People's Republic of China. Other problems arise from the specific associations of these terms with the histories of modern Europe (especially Western Europe) and the United States. Civil society did not develop along one path even in Western democracies, and one cannot expect any of the Western patterns to be duplicated in the very different Chinese historical contexts. This is not, however, to say that state dominance was complete or inevitable. I will argue that from the late Ming onward there was a continuous, slowly developing, public sphere in China involving both state and social power, but it was different from the beginnings of civil society in the West. Some institutions and practices characteristic of civil society appeared in the late nineteenth century and expanded during the first three decades of the twentieth century. A full civil society did not emerge, in part because of the extremely unfavorable historical context of the 1930s and 1940s. Even if it had been successfully established, however, the form would have diverged from those in Western democracies.

DEFINITIONS: CIVIL SOCIETY AND PUBLIC SPHERE

To what extent can either "civil society" or "public sphere" be applied to Chinese history? Before the twentieth century, the issue is

MODERN CHINA, Vol. 19 No. 2, April 1993 158-182

not so much whether some of the same institutional patterns existed in China and the West, but whether the terms are flexible enough to be applied to the different state-societal relations of these two cultures. Are they useful in analyzing the Chinese relationships?

Civil society has been a major theme of Western political theory since the early seventeenth century. It has been defined in many ways and has also assumed different historical forms under "weak" states like England or "strong" ones like France or Germany. Although this complex record cannot be reviewed here, an essential core seems to be the existence of social associations not dominated by the state and capable of affecting official policy.[1] We now elaborate by citing institutions and practices of Western democracy: private individual, group, and property rights; means and places of communication for forming and freely expressing public opinion; institutions and processes for individual and group political participation; legal guarantees of all these rights, institutions, and activities; and constitutional limits on state power. In liberal theory there is also a general assumption of conflict between governmental and private interests, reinforcing the conviction that formal boundaries must be established to limit state authority (Keane, 1988a: 14; Cohen, 1983: 255). These attributes reflect Western history, and one finds only fragments of such a civil society in late imperial China. Therefore, it seems better not to use this term until Western institutions and ideas appear in the late nineteenth century.

The concept of a public sphere, on the other hand, is less embedded in either Western political theory or historical literature and is more adaptable to other parts of the world. It largely derives from Jürgen Habermas's (1989) interpretive analysis of the historical origins and subsequent transformations of bourgeois public spheres in England, France, and Germany. For the most part, Habermas identifies the rise of these historically specific public spheres with civil society, and puts particular emphasis on the emergence of rational public debate. However, his sometimes ambiguous use of the term, public, also reflects the broad and sometimes contradictory range of meanings that have come to adhere to this word. It may denote the state, civic associations and activities outside the state, consensual or broadly held opinions and values, publicity to project status or aura, openness and common

availability, or the existence or pursuit of some general good (Rowe, 1990: 309-318). Moreover, despite cultural and conceptual differences, the Chinese term, *gong* or public, independently acquired a range of meanings that partially overlap Western usage. Most important for our purposes, from the seventeenth through the nineteenth century, a vocabulary developed that extended in practice the use of public to the extrabureaucratic activities of men involved in local affairs and linked it to words suggesting solidarity and common efforts, involvement of the people (elites) as well as officials, and social autonomy (Rankin, 1990: 36-54).

Given the wide range of the term and the use of "public" outside of Western contexts, one may conceive of the public sphere as a broad category and treat Habermas's model as one specific manifestation. Even if the details of the bourgeois public sphere do not fit Chinese history, the idea of intermediate arenas in which open, public initiatives are undertaken by both officials and the populace seems useful in understanding relationships between the two. Such spheres require a state presence, a degree of autonomous or voluntary social involvement, some social impact on policy, and a legitimizing idea of the common good. They are distinguished both from direct state administration or coercive control and from private spheres, particularly of family or other kin groups but also of individual businesses, apolitical friendship networks, and other activities that do not concern matters of common interest. This division is suggested by the distinctions drawn in Chinese texts between official (*guan*), public (*gong*), and private (*si*) activities (Rankin, 1986: 15-16). In reality, public spheres are often poorly bounded arenas, better conceived as numerous overlapping circles and interpenetrating state and social presences than as a segment of a line between state and private poles.[2] Participants inevitably pursue mixtures of private and public interests, sometimes virtuously and sometimes in corrupt or unsanctioned ways. In part because of their ambiguous positions, these spheres are places where new power and relationships can be created.

THE CHINESE LATE-IMPERIAL PUBLIC SPHERE

Using this general definition there was a public sphere in China tracing back to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries

(Rankin, 1990; Rankin, forthcoming). The center of this sphere lay in the many faceted voluntary involvement of local elites in running local affairs outside of bureaucratic frameworks. There were other public manifestations in the late Ming that appear more like the beginnings of Western civil society, including the contentious urban politics (von Glahn, 1991), the intellectual critiques of autocracy and bureaucracy, and the reformist politics of literati networks linked through the Donglin Academy and Restoration Society (*Fushe*). These did not persist into the Qing, however, and they had less impact on the sociopolitical structure.

For lack of a better, more encompassing, word I use public (extrabureaucratic) management to refer to a whole suite of local elite activities including discussion; sponsorship or establishment of institutions for welfare, education, religious purposes, social betterment, or defense (*tang*, *yuan*, temples, schools, militia, etc.)[3] and any accompanying societies; donation or solicitation of funds; supervision or direct management of both initial construction and ongoing activities and finances; and building or repair of local infrastructure like roads, bridges, dikes, and wharves that did not necessarily require permanent institutional organization. The appearance of this sphere in the late Ming reflected not only the contemporary social and political crises but also less cyclical changes in the state and economy. The familiar developments of commercialization, urbanization, and population growth lay in the background.

Three effects seem to be particularly important both to the beginnings of public spheres and to continuations during the Qing. The relaxation of the extreme centralization of the early Ming and the breakdown of the *lijia* system of rotating compulsory service for tax collection and local needs were prerequisites. When participation in local affairs was no longer a burdensome obligation to be shifted onto those without the status or wealth to avoid it, more prestigious elites might move into this arena—redefining participation as charitable concern for local well-being and using it to enhance their local standing. Second, the spread of literacy increased the number of qualified scholars way beyond the supply of state examination degrees and bureaucratic posts, forcing educated men to define a larger range of respectable occupations and more varied marks of status. Third, a hybrid gentry-merchant elite, sustained by a number of social and

economic resources arose in parts of China. Although connections between elites and the state remained stronger than in much of Europe, the bonds were not all-pervasive. Economic and social changes were altering the character of elites, modifying their relation to the state, and creating larger local needs.

Public management was not widespread in the late Ming, but records from a number of places (particularly the Lower Yangzi and the Canton Delta) show autonomous initiatives by often high-status men (Fuma, 1983; Liang, 1986).[4] Official supervision increased after the Qing solidified its control over China, and imperial policy also might directly affect the founding of local institutions. However, the governmental impact filtered through local officials was decentralized. Local-elite public opinion and social networks were important, and evidence that networks of social leaders controlled local institutions can be found in some seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sources.[5] About the mid- or late eighteenth century, the number of elite-managed associations and activities increased and diversified. As institutions became more numerous, they might develop informal or formal connections or combine functions under one roof. Such interconnections were primarily forged through local social networks, not through official coordination. The increase was cumulatively substantial enough to make local public spheres common by the end of the eighteenth century, particularly in the cities and towns of core areas in the Lower and Middle Yangzi and coastal southern China. During the first half of the nineteenth century, such spheres became more autonomous as the downturn in the dynastic cycle began to reinforce secular trends.

STATE-SOCIETAL RELATIONS IN THE LATE-IMPERIAL PUBLIC SPHERES

The differences between the public sphere outlined here and that postulated by Habermas are obvious. The late-imperial public sphere (or more correctly spheres) was local and had little direct effect on national policy. It was connected to the rise of commerce and a commodity economy, but not to capitalism—and not to a bourgeoisie as opposed to a hybrid gentry-merchant elite. Management rather than

open public discussion was its central characteristic. Relations between officials and elites active in local public affairs were generally consensual rather than confrontational, and elites did not try to define rights against the state or set formal limits on state power. In the absence of open public discourse, the Chinese sphere was not theoretically defined. Even so, one can begin to see how it was shaped and sustained by looking at the relationships of the state, locality, and social elites within it.

THE IMPACT OF THE STATE

The state clearly limited and channeled the public sphere, and this influence appears to have derived more from structure and politics than from particularly pervasive despotism or a dependent political culture placing a premium on loyalty to the state (cf. Birnbaum, 1986, on effects of state structures on workers' movements in four European countries). The Qing government inhibited large ranges of public activity. The autocratic power of the emperor and the capacity for vigorous and unpredictable intervention made political expression and confrontation too dangerous; there were no Chinese equivalents to the British nobility who were independently powerful enough to hem in the throne. The bureaucracy was effective, even if small and underfunded, and because it was already in place, there was not the same impetus as in early modern France to resist newly expanding, autonomous state power. The state dominated spheres like taxation, military affairs, and criminal law that were vital to its interests. Particularly in the eighteenth century, it also assumed dynamic and dominant roles in matters requiring great expenditures or coordination over wide areas—like large-scale water control and major famine relief.

Public activity was, therefore, channeled to the local level where elites found opportunities in numerous niches not occupied by the state. Public management flourished in part because the Qing government remained basically minimalist and noninterventionist. When the state did not adequately expand its bureaucracy and fiscal resources to keep pace with the expanding economy and population, a dynamic arose through which more formal organization outside the bureaucracy created additional public space. This in turn provided places where public discussion combined with public management, thereby

encouraging still more organization. Public participation appeared in a managerial guise that was much better legitimated and safer than national politics.

Public management flourished to a considerable extent because it did not confront state power; on the contrary, local officials often positively encouraged public initiatives or enlisted social elites to run officially established institutions. Unlike the relationships that prevailed at the center, the mutual accommodations between officials and social elites at local levels did not leave either side clearly dominant. The affinities between officials and local gentry that underlay consensual relationships have often been commented upon, and it is noteworthy that much initial expansion of extrabureaucratic public activity came in welfare—an activity legitimized by widely shared Confucian and Buddhist moral values and undertaken most appropriately in local arenas.[6] Management also did not exist apart from the often-stressed informal roles of gentry as brokers between officials and local social groups. However, it differed in being underlain by formal institutions, often with their own finances, that provided a basis for a more open and distinctive public existence. Through this activity, elites also acquired experience in organizing, funding, and directing aspects of public affairs; experience that not only mimicked bureaucratic governance but also paralleled direction of private business and lineage affairs.

Conflict certainly existed between local bureaucratic and public spheres, as it did between officials and elites in their private capacities. Officials sought to curb extrabureaucratic corruption and excessive autonomy or to limit marginally acceptable, potentially dangerous institutions like militia—and they tended to define the tensions in terms of conflict between state and private interests, even though some involved issues of public autonomy. More important, these tensions were limited in scope and did not usually lead to sustained conflicts. On the balance, the Qing state encouraged extrabureaucratic activity while denying it political purpose. But elites in public affairs had advantages over both local officials, who would soon move to another post, and the yamen underlings, who lacked social standing. If faced with an unsympathetic magistrate, they might fall back on "soft strategies," reasserting themselves after he had gone. In the end,

respectable elites dominated local public arenas not only because they were acceptable to officials but also because of their societal resources.

THE LOCALITY AND PUBLIC IDENTITY

The locality was more than the public sphere's arena of last resort in the absence of national politics. Much of elite status and power was constructed in local arenas; but in addition to being places to pursue private purposes, localities were part of elites' identities and the subjects of their public concern. We need to learn more about the symbolic import of locality, evident, for instance, when upper-degree holders emphasized their local identities by calling themselves *xiangren* or *liren* (men of the township or "village"). We know that it had connotations of community (not necessarily borne out in reality), which could be converted into associational bonds in guilds and native place associations for sojourning merchants, officials, and scholars. Symbolically overlain with sentimental meaning, the locality-as-native-place was a focus of loyalty outside the state and a place that might have to be defended against the state. In these senses the locality was intermediate between state and family, and might provide elites with a reason as well as a place to organize.

The relatively unified value system of Chinese elites, and the convictions that educated men had the right and duty to manage affairs either inside or outside government, might link local activities to larger concerns. Such dimensions were closer to the idea of public than to private, parochial, or particularistic, and locality provided more of a foundation for the public sphere than did private property (cf. Bergère, 1989: 7). I do not believe that the public sphere derived from "feudal" (*fengjian*) theory, but neither is it coincidental that this recurrent reformist strain in Chinese thought emphasized giving local elites a more formal role in governing their home areas. On the other hand, the local character of extrabureaucratic participation has given rise to enduring problems of how to link local initiatives to wider concerns.

THE SOCIAL COMPONENT OF PUBLIC SPHERES

In the absence of legal protections, national politics, and open public debate, the case for a late-imperial public sphere relates to the

organizational potential within local societies. The linkage of public organization to elite social structures was critical to keeping it from being absorbed into state administration in several ways. First, well-developed (or well-recorded) public spheres appear as messy jumbles of officially sanctioned but socially embedded associations and activities with intricacies not easily mastered by rotating officials. Size and complexity reflected wealth and educational levels, local customs, the interests of local leaders, and the place's particular needs. Just as relations between state authority and public management were ambiguous, so was the dividing line between public and private.

Nor were different ranges of public activities well sorted out. Temples, shrines, and festivals were essential elements, but religious rituals also had an integral place in other organizations and temples might provide nonreligious community services. Occupational guilds and native-place associations were part of public spheres in commercial centers, even though they were formed by men from other places and their constituencies were limited, sojourning groups. Even lineages (private, exclusionary kinship organizations) became tangential to the public sphere when they provided commonly available infrastructure or contributed to broader community projects. Activities were legitimized by mixtures of statecraft aims to improve society, Buddhist concepts of charity (*shan*), Confucian humaneness and righteousness (*ren* and *yi*), local pride and loyalty to native place, and competitive determination to exclude the yamen subbureaucracy.

Second, elite public activities interfingered with other cultural and social practices through which they maintained their local positions. Some of the relationships between the elite managers and officials could be characterized by Max Weber's concept of liturgy—the performance of functions by social leaders on behalf of the state (Weber, 1978: 1/194-199; 2/1022-1025; Mann, 1987: 18-21, 91-93). However, public spheres in their totality developed beyond the bounds of an auxiliary and dependent relationship. Extrabureaucratic managers were certainly not displacing officials. Central policies, the weight of the large number of officials in administrative centers, or the energy of a vigorous magistrate all could increase the state presence in local public spheres. But I do argue that it was hard to sustain such official momentum unless it was embraced by local elites, and that significant portions of the growing amount of public space were in local hands.

We need a broader word for what I am now calling management, and we need to revise the image of men involved in local management as low-status, lower-degree holders whose social ties were insignificant. Some were prominent locally and occasionally in wider circles as well. Those not personally prominent were likely to be part of networks and kin-groups that connected them to the upper levels of society in their localities. Elites' friendship and marriage networks, their informal brokerage functions, their *guanxi*, their roles in lineage structures all tended to strengthen public spheres vis-à-vis the state by overlapping linkages to other sources of power and influence within local society.[7]

Third, managerial institutions were vehicles for public participation not only because of their stated functions but also because they provided locations and reasons for elite gatherings. When elite public organizations increased, so did opportunities for the public discussion (*gongyi*) that was a frequently mentioned aspect of public affairs. One example is found in the societies (*hui*) that were sometimes founded to raise money for an organization and then supervise its operation. It was quite possible to establish apolitical societies for legitimized public purposes, and these groups took on substance by founding a functional institution with a "hall" or other public building (tang, yuan, etc.).

In the Lower Yangzi, a few of the decidedly autonomous late Ming societies continued into the early Qing. If the practice did die out, it was revived in less autonomous contexts during the mid-eighteenth century (Liang, 1986; Fuma, 1983; Wujin Yanghu hezhi, 1886: juan 5). In Guangdong, societies were probably more common or at least more openly mentioned in local sources. Literary societies (*wenhui*) at schools and academies are one manifestation warranting further study, for they appear to have been vehicles for gentry gatherings. Academies and a community school in the famous market town of Foshan in Guangdong province provided places for gentry to meet, conduct sacrifices to the God of Literature, hold discussions, and solidify networks. How far this might go is illustrated by the meeting hall established at the Foshan community school (*shexue*) by a self-perpetuating gentry network. The name and the external image changed, but for many years it appears to have exercised an overarching influence on town affairs. Guilds, too, were social and solidary, as well as trade-regulating, organizations. Members met there, sacri-

ficed, discussed, and managed their public matters (*bangong*), including welfare services for the sojourning members of their trades.[8]

These organizations had the capacity to affect local official policy. The steady stream of petitions from managers to local officials at first glance indicates strong governmental control, but officials quite routinely assented to many of the decisions made by extrabureaucratic managers, repeating the phraseology of petitions. Official approval obviously was not always forthcoming, but the possibility that it was common is suggested by the large number of documents showing official endorsement of elite plans in the documentary compilations of tablet inscriptions from Suzhou and Foshan (Suzhou lishi bowuguan, 1981; Guangdong sheng shehui kexueyuan, 1986).

We may assume that the impact of elites in the public sphere, like their success in protecting private interests, was often the result of connections and negotiations. It also might reflect open and institutionalized public viewpoints and even involve a willingness to confront officials. A good example is the Foshan charitable granary (*yicang*) that was founded in 1795 by three *juren* (provincial)-degree holders and other gentry and "elders" who had managed officially supervised famine relief and the community granary (*shecang*). One of their aims was greater independence, and during the next forty years managers periodically reiterated the provisions in the granary regulations limiting official supervision. The granary, along with the Beidi Temple, was one of the foremost public institutions in Foshan before the Taiping period. It financed other local public activities and occasionally, when an unusually large relief distribution was needed, levied a general contribution on the town's businesses to supplement its regular income from rents. The general managers were locally powerful men who might also be involved in the temple or other organizations. When officials sought to curtail their independence after a riot in the early 1830s, the managers seem to have successfully resisted (Rankin, forthcoming).

I would suggest that embeddedness of public organization in local elite circles of influence opened possibilities for some autonomy from the state, but stopped short of undermining public identity with private concerns. In part this was because of official interventions, but elites founding and running local institutions also consciously (not neces-

sarily accurately) distinguished public affairs from private interests. The momentum, legitimacy, and formal organization of public affairs maintained them as a distinctive sphere.

Local public spheres were not dramatically changing the late-imperial political system. Neither, however, were they trivial by virtue of being incomplete and local. Different as China was from eighteenth-century America, it is perhaps not entirely out of place to remember Tocqueville's comment about the value of associations concerned with small affairs as a barrier to state despotism (Keane, 1988a: 51). In China, public organizations were not nurturing the political freedoms that impressed Tocqueville, but they were enmeshing the state—not just being drawn under state dominance. The ways in which this was occurring were so different from Western Europe that it is all too easy to dismiss them. However, certain patterns of elite public participation were being established based on groups and localities, rather than individuals and private property and on management, rather than open debate.

TRANSFORMATION OF THE LATE-IMPERIAL PUBLIC SPHERE

We cannot know where this public sphere was headed. It was slowly growing in size, institutional complexity, and autonomy. It remained within the existing political system, but elite initiatives were widening. Further evolution is conjectural because the larger context was decisively changed, and long-term trends were disrupted, from the mid-nineteenth century onward. The uncharted path toward civil society, state modernization, revolution, or all three possibilities, ran through a major, escalating discontinuity. Nonetheless, at least in the Lower Yangzi, men similar or identical to those active in the old public sphere were responding to new situations by taking part in interwoven national and local sociopolitical movements at the end of the Qing.

The Taiping and other mid-century rebellions provided the first break (Kuhn, 1970), not so much because of militarization (which was not usually permanent) as because of the shock to the existing balances between state and society when elites suddenly had to operate with significantly greater autonomy and temporarily take on functions in the governmental sphere. The large elite role in reconstruction after

the rebellions forestalled the restoration of previous equilibriums. Soon thereafter, the main catalyst began to come from abroad. Reactions against imperialist intrusions, the introduction of Western institutions, and efforts at reform introduced new processes. Nationalism and the beginnings of the press encouraged initial manifestations of civil society. Public spheres remained primarily localized and managerial, but national issues impinged on local arenas. Something of a public opinion about national affairs began to be created, and high officials were openly criticized. Next came the beginnings of reform and national politics, the large-scale structural transformation of the public sphere by the Qing New Policies, and the rise of a European-like conflict between a centralizing reformist state and politicized elites outside it (Rankin, 1986: chaps. 4, 5, and 7).

The effect on the old local public spheres was two-edged. They expanded quantitatively after the Taiping Rebellion and became more outwardly oriented. When new political and social dynamics appeared (and only then) the prior experience in public organization can be seen as a potentiality, a foundation for mobilizations that would convert structure into action and create new civil structures (cf. Klandermans and Tarrow, 1988: 10). On the other hand, change eventually robbed the old spheres of relevance and legitimacy. Much of their strength derived from elite society, culture, and religion that would be rejected in the twentieth century, making it more difficult to build on the past.

CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society is a very incomplete lens for viewing the whole range of political events during the Republic. However, enough elements of what is called civil society in the West did appear to make it possible to shift the discussion to that topic. Despite the fragility of the Chinese beginnings, development was in some respects quite rapid. It is well to remember that civil society did not spring up full-blown within a few decades of European history either.

Weaknesses of civil society during the Republic have been much noted. Legal protections were not strong, individual rights were not a major focus, topics of political import were aired openly but not

debated with moderated rationality, parliaments were defenseless, and there were no effective constitutions to limit the coercive and intrusive republican governments. All these are aspects of civil society without strong precedents in Chinese history, and their absence casts doubt on the applicability of the concept.

Strengths have been taken less seriously, and even less attention has been given to the possible relevance of a late-imperial public sphere. However, the most vigorous manifestations occurred where a potential had already developed. Associations proliferated. The *faduan* (professional associations) established by the Qing New Policies incorporated the managerial component of the old public sphere, and provided new political tools for social elites (not just for the state). A good deal of civil activity still centered in local urban arenas. There were also major breaks with the past, most notably the press now provided a forum for national debate, open politics quickly developed, and new forms of civil activity were more identified with large cities.

David Strand's study of city politics in Beijing points to some of the evidence of emerging civil society in the 1920s: the enlargement of public space as teahouses, restaurants, and parks became places for political discussion; the increasing number of associations; and the initiatives taken by local elites in the chamber of commerce to mediate the demands of invading warlords and to run city affairs in the absence of a functioning state administration. Strand also makes some provocative suggestions about a Chinese-style politics with such characteristics as an assumption of consensus, a sense of public responsibility, and a fusion of administration and representation. These attributes resonate with characteristics of the late-imperial public sphere (particularly if one substitutes management for administration), and they are not incompatible with a civil society—although one that would have diverged from West European patterns (Strand, 1989: 98-99, 280, 291-292).

It was not so obvious at the beginning of the republican period that a civil society would not develop in China. Subsequent political crosscurrents were intricate indeed, and in the end, of course, a civil society did not emerge. Here I will only look at three aspects of the issue: nationalism, the changing nature of the state and its relations with elites, and the problems arising from fissures within society itself.

NATIONALISM AS AN IMPETUS TO CIVIL ORGANIZATION

It has been frequently said that nationalism undercut the individualism and pluralism that we associate with civil society by persuading intellectuals of the need for a strong state and justifying emphasis on duties to the state rather than individual rights (e.g., Chow, 1960: 360; Schwarcz, 1986: 1). However, nationalism was also a positive factor. From the 1880s through the early 1930s, it repeatedly served to mobilize opposition to governments unable to resist foreign encroachment and to politicize wider segments of the populace.

Patriotic ideas of participation initially envisioned rallying behind a new set of imperial officials who would defend the country. In practice, a consensus never emerged behind one leadership, and nationalism produced a long series of conflicts with governments. Critics of the government during the Sino-French and Sino-Japanese wars argued that the concerned and resolute people (i.e., elites) rather than supine officials should determine policy (Rankin, 1982: 473-474). During the last years of the Qing, nationalism inspired and legitimized private associations and public discourse, and the railway and constitutional movements linked nationalistic political participation to demands for legally guaranteed representation at the national level. An editorial in *Shibao* on July 25, 1910, for instance, characterized the national assembly then being demanded by the constitutionalists in terms of the people rising up to rescue China after the dynasty had abandoned it. Similar conviction that the people had to save China in opposition to the government continued to inspire the May Fourth Movement and other mass mobilizations of the Republic until the Japanese invasion made the need for unity appear overwhelming (Chow, 1960: 106-109; Israel, 1966; Wasserstrom, 1991).

The much used concept of citizenship did not guarantee individual freedoms, and if one phrases the problem in terms of saving China versus individualism then nationalism appears as an impediment to civil society. If one looks at less individualistic characteristics of civil society, nationalism encouraged associations, inspired confrontations with state power, fostered political participation, and stimulated demands for constitutional guarantees and limitations on governmental power. Only when the Japanese invaded in force did nationalism lead to a temporary subordination of political conflict in the interests of

strengthening state and country. I would argue that nationalism, per se, was not much of a hindrance. Insofar as it was, this was less because it inhibited individualism than because it encouraged forms of oppositional politics outside the boundaries of civil society.

THE STATE AND SOCIAL ELITES DURING THE REPUBLIC

The state itself was a clearer obstacle, and its relations with elites changed during the Republic in ways that made it more difficult to establish civil society. This was not primarily because of some vague despotic heritage and authoritarian value system, but because of more immediate circumstances. One recurring, often overwhelming, difficulty was civil weakness in the face of oppressive, or at least intrusive, military or military/bureaucratic power backed by more sophisticated technology. A different kind of problem, suggested by Marie-Claire Bergère (1989: 7-10), was the lack of an effective modernizing state to establish order and provide frameworks in which civil activity could develop. An economic boom favored the expansion of bourgeois power from World War I to the late 1920s, but the potential faded without a supportive governmental structure. In other words, a stronger, reasonably responsible state would have been more conducive to civil society.

Looking back from the republican period, the last Qing decade rather surprisingly seems to have provided the environment most favorable to the growth of civil society. The court and high officials intended that the New Policies should increase state authority and centralize power while strengthening China internationally. However, the chambers of commerce and educational associations, the plans for local self-government, the provincial assemblies, the constitutional program, the legal codes, and the efforts at economic development all created numerous resources that elites might take over and use for their own mobilizations. The mixture of governmental threat and governmentally created opportunity contributed to the politicization of the public sphere and state-societal conflicts.

Elites in railway and constitutionalist movements responded with arguments that would have sounded familiar to eighteenth-century European bourgeoisie. Zhejiangese elites and the Shanghai press,

defending the independence of the provincial railway company in 1910, cited the government's new law codes in arguing that the state should be bound by its laws. They maintained that citizens had rights as well as duties, defended private property against the state, and accused the government of tyranny in trying to take over the railways (Rankin, 1986: 293-294; Shibao, 1910 [9/2/Xuantong 2: 3, 5; 10/28/Xuantong 2: 5]).

Despite its efforts to suppress revolutionaries and despite hostility to constitutionalist critics, the Qing state was quite lenient toward its opponents. Connections with officials, the movement of reformers between governmental office and extrabureaucratic projects, and substantial agreement about what needed to be done (as opposed to how political power should be allocated) provided considerable protection to elites expanding their political and public roles. It was not that the Qing had become so hopelessly weak, but that there were so many reasons for officials not to destroy most of their elite adversaries—even if the government was not prepared to share political power with them.

The late-Qing impetus carried over into the flowering of local assemblies during 1912-1913 (Fincher, 1981), but subsequent suppression showed that support within the state disappeared with the fall of the dynasty. During the Republic, not only were modernizing governments hostile to civil organization, but the dangers of arbitrary military coercion were also combined with a frustrating absence of an accountable national state during the warlord years. It has been argued that when absolutist monarchies in early-modern Western Europe sought both to control daily social life and promote economic production through intrusive regulatory ordinances, these contradictory aims set in motion reactions that governments could not restrain (Raeff, 1983: 167-178, 250). During the ten or so years that economic conditions appeared particularly favorable to a civil society in China, political fragmentation offered opportunities for civil initiatives, but the turmoil undercut possibilities for sustained institutional development.

The Nanjing government certainly appears to have aspired to establish a modernizing and well-organized police state. It made progress toward this goal in parts of China, undercutting elite-run local government in Jiangsu and eliminating local elites from the municipal government in Shanghai. However, immediate political effects in-

cluded demoralization and stagnation of local governments, increased factionalism in local arenas, and the resurgence of politics based on guanxi and patronage that provided well-connected elites with leverage within the state (Barkan, 1990: 209-215; Bell, 1990: 134-138; Henriot, 1991; Bush, 1982). The depth and breadth of Nanjing's control, and the degree of governmental autonomy from social forces seems still more open to debate. Factionalism undercut state effectiveness, social protests continued, and routine use of terror drove opponents to underground revolutionary movements and civil war.

By the time the Nanjing government was somewhat in place, the larger context had become even more difficult. Class and ideological antagonisms had given rise to a revolutionary movement outside of civil society. The international and national economic situation became disastrous at the beginning of the 1930s, and then the Japanese invasion completely altered the political possibilities. Neither a modernizing dictatorship nor a civil society had opportunity to develop during the Republic.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND MASS POLITICS

Strand (1989: 279-283) also suggests that civil politics became more divisive in Beijing during the 1920s, raising the possibility that society itself may have generated even greater obstacles to civil society than those presented by the state. Social fragmentation was certainly a factor. On the one hand, fractures arose within the relatively cohesive (although certainly not conflict-free) elite that had dominated the late-imperial public sphere. On the other hand, class divisions became more manifest as workers became less willing to accord elites the deference given to recognized social superiors.

A closely related second factor was the rapid spread of political participation. In China, as in Europe two centuries earlier, civil society began as the preserve of the nonruling elite. In Europe and the United States, participation in civil affairs eventually broadened, but not until the original participants had acquired political privileges vis-à-vis the state. Chinese workers, however, claimed a part in urban politics during the Republic well before elites had won security. Disaffected intellectuals joined revolutionary parties, and old supports for privilege dissolved before new ones were in place. Strand (1989: chaps.

9-11) shows business leaders in Beijing simultaneously trying to manage urban affairs, buy off warlords whose armies could wreck the city, and discourage restive workers from following union organizers and demanding economic concessions. Political ideologies inserted into class politics made struggles more bitter, elites more fearful, and accommodation of divergent interests less possible.

Perhaps the most general and serious limitations of civil society during the Republic arose from the many divisive social problems that could not be addressed by public debate, forming legal associations, protecting individual and property rights, or constitutional limits on governmental power. When such problems became political issues, solutions were unlikely to arise from a civil society dominated by wealthy, educated elites. In the current enthusiasm for democracy and private enterprise, it is important to remember that there were strong social reasons for entirely different ranges of politics that had little to do with civil society, including both the revolutionary movements and the militarized strongmen/patronage complexes that flourished in the countryside and peripheries. There were actually many elites in China who were willing to stand and draw a line in the sand, but they often did so within radical movements outside civil society and a good many died in the process.

Mass demonstrations brought into focus the simultaneous promise and weakness of civil society during the Republic. Beginning on a relatively small scale at the end of the Qing, these demonstrations became a fixture of the public sphere from the May Fourth Movement onward. In the face of dangerous and unpredictable state power, such mobilizations served to bring together diverse groups, publicize causes, and put pressure on governments. Participants enjoyed both a sense of empowerment and the relatively safe anonymity of a crowd. Movements might spread quickly from city to city, and some forced changes in governmental personnel and policy. They might also further specific aspects of civil society, as in the wave of new associations following the May Fourth Movement. However, the mass demonstrations were in many respects a substitute for civil society. They were adapted to the conditions of the time, but they had the weaknesses of their advantages. These were moments of high, but unsustainable, drama. Demonstrations produced no lasting political

coalitions. They might shake governments, but they could not create continuing limitations on state power.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In sum, I argue that there were local public spheres in parts of China during the Qing. The large differences between these Chinese spheres and those that arose in early-modern Europe were produced more by state-societal relations than by the nature of economic development. Calling attention to the importance of the state is not, however, tantamount to proclaiming inevitable state dominance. Elites outside the bureaucracy were able to represent their interests and that of their localities. Institutionalized complexes arising around management of local affairs tied into the informal sources of elite power and added formal organizational dimensions to elite resources in a public sphere.

The evolution of the late-imperial public sphere and its relation to incipient civil society in early twentieth-century China, requires careful sorting out of secular trends, cycles, and discontinuities. The expansion of the managerial public sphere was driven by long-range economic and demographic factors. However, it was also affected by deliberate governmental policy to encourage limited social initiative in economic and social matters and to keep the bureaucracy small. This nondevelopmental approach to governance left the space for this particular public sphere.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the kinds of fiscal, social, military, and environmental stresses associated with the declining phase of dynastic cycles certainly reinforced the effects of secular trends. It was, however, the major dislocations of state-societal relations during the second half of the nineteenth century that connected the old public spheres to beginnings of civil society. Ironically, the cumulative effects of changes in context and structure were so large that the previous experience was easily discounted by reformers seeking modernity, and indeed the retrievability of elements of this past remains a largely unexplored question.

The issue of civil society in the twentieth century presents a different range of problems than that of the old public sphere. Circum-

stances had changed, Western institutions and ideologies were consciously used, modern techniques were adopted, and the milieux in which local elites operated was again disrupted. Politics were not defined by civil society. On the other hand, there seems no reason to deny that there were some substantial manifestations, and it seems a mistake to identify civil society too closely with individualism and intellectuals. Historical contexts changed before the premodern, late-imperial public sphere ran its course, and the same is true of republican period state-societal relations.

Controversies over whether China ever had a public sphere or a civil society arise not only from differing interpretations of state-societal relations but also from the difficulties of rethinking these Western concepts in Chinese contexts. One set of small, but provocative, issues is almost terminological. There is a lack of appropriate English-language words to describe some of the socially based activities. I have used management, which is useful in distinguishing extrabureaucratic activity from administration by officials, but it is too narrow a term to cover all aspects of local public activities—and only by considering these as a whole does it make sense to talk about a public sphere. Moreover, "manager" is often assumed to imply a person of low status, probably prone to corruption. Not the stuff of a public sphere, but also, I maintain, not an adequate characterization of the people involved. Autonomy involves similar problems of meaning—it is too strong a word, but alternatives like voluntary are also not altogether appropriate.

A more general issue has to do with absolutizing concepts and opposing dichotomies. We contrast state control and autonomy as exclusive alternatives. Something is either public/state-associated or private. There must be a complete civil society close to one of the patterns in the United States or Western Europe or no civil society at all. A public sphere must include everyone or it is not public. This categorizing affects views of state and society. We have trouble articulating the middle ground of this relationship; but during the Qing this middle ground may well have been what kept the system going. One wonders whether it was not preserved because of built-in ambiguities and because there was more latitude for social initiatives in practice than in theory. Overlapping state and societal purposes were expressed in formal institutions in local public spheres. These pur-

poses were not always identical, but elites seeking roles in public affairs were often better served by using connections than clarifying distinctions.

It is important to stress that such views of the public sphere are closely connected to the idea that there was substantial social autonomy in late imperial China. State dominance was not inherent in all interactions with society, and culture was not molded only by the state. Examination degrees were important in defining elite status, but were always combined with mixtures of wealth from land or trade, social resources in the form of kinship ties and personal connections, and cultural displays to nourish local dominance (Esherick and Rankin, 1990: 7-12). The kind of public sphere that developed in China reflected the many ingredients of state-societal relations under the bureaucratic monarchy: autocratic power that prevented open political discourse, an effective premodern bureaucracy with connections to social elites, considerable local autonomy, and a fairly unitary but flexible value system applicable in different ways under different circumstances. Management provided opportunities for legitimate, formal public participation in local arenas where community and private interests interacted and where the state shared the field with social elites.

NOTES

1. On the history of civil society in Western thought see Keane (1988a and 1988b). On essential elements of civil society see Taylor (1990).

2. The state-societal relations in the managerial public sphere fall between the relationship posited by Charles Taylor's (1990: 98) minimal definition of civil society as requiring only some associations free of state power and his stronger definitions in which associations significantly determine state policy or society structures itself through its own associations. Drawing comparisons with the relationships suggested by Taylor does not, however, mean the Chinese public sphere was characterized by institutions or methods of civil society. Note also that a state presence is integral to the concept. Frontier or peripheral areas in China where state power was minimal would not normally be considered to have a public sphere.

3. The terms used for extrabureaucratic and official institutions are unfortunately not mutually exclusive. Halls (*tang*) were very often established by social elites. *Yuan* (a public institution—most frequently used as part of the word for academy, *shuyuan*) might be established by either officials or social elites. Bureaus (*ju*) often were governmental organs attached to the bureaucracy, even when run by local men. However, particularly in welfare, there were organizations called *ju* that were unquestionably founded and run by local men. E.g., Qi Biaojia

(1835: 2/6b) for the late Ming; *Zhouzhuang zhen zhi* (1882: 2/16b-20a) for the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The numerous functions performed by extrabureaucratic organizations include localized water control, construction and maintenance of roads, bridges, and wharves; fire control, lifesaving, and ferry service; education; support of religious observations and festivals; regulation of trade and charitable aid for poor merchants and workers; welfare services for the poor like famine relief, the operation of granaries, dispensing medicines to the sick, operation of homes for the aged or foundlings or direct support for infants of poor families, provision of coffins and charitable graveyards, care of beggars, and collection and burial of corpses from roadsides; reinforcement of Confucian social norms by supporting poor widows, correcting wayward boys, erecting shrines, giving lectures, or reverentially burning waste paper with writing on it; Buddhist-inspired freeing and protection of birds and fishes; and local defense.

4. Neither Liang Qizi nor Fuma Susumu use the term *public sphere*, but their impressively detailed articles on welfare point strongly in that direction. Fuma (1983), Liang (1986), and their many other articles are essential reading.

5. Some of the best information comes from Foshan, Guangdong (Faure, 1990; Rankin, forthcoming). These articles use information from *Foshan zhongyi xiang zhi* (1752, 1830, and 1923) and *Ming-Qing Foshan beike wenxian jingji ziliao* (Guangdong sheng shehui kexueyuan, 1986).

6. Whereas the Buddhist notion of charity (*shan*) might be applied to almost all extrabureaucratic activities for the benefit of the community, it particularly meant aid for the poor. The Confucian *ren* (humaneness) was also often used in that context. Thus religious norms reinforced the social necessity of making some provision for the indigent. Quasi-religious values also permeated the activities to reinforce Confucian social morality through such organizations as homes for poor widows.

7. Smith (1992: 72-77) shows how Qi Biaojia and his wealthy literati and merchant associates in Shaoxing, Zhejiang, at the end of the Ming demonstrated their culture and aesthetic sensibility through building elaborate pleasure gardens, while some of them also formed public charitable organizations. Each range of activity involved conspicuous use of wealth, and each reinforced the other in adding to their local reputations and social positions. Even the private gardens had broader dimensions as literati meeting places and objects of local pride. This kind of interlocking private and public construction of local power was not orchestrated by the state.

8. Information on Foshan literary societies, schools, and academies is found in *Foshan zhongyi xiang zhi* (1752: 3/5a-b, 7b-8a; 10/28b-29a, 31a-33a, 41a-42b, 53b-56a; 1830: 12B/14a-15b, 29a-30b, 43b-45b), *Ming-Qing Foshan beike* (Guangdong sheng shehui kexueyuan, 1985: 27, 428); and Faure (1990: 15-18, 22). Documents in *Ming-Qing Suzhou gongshangye beike ji* (Suzhou lishi bowuguan, 1981: 39, 362) indicate that the character and purposes of guilds and *huiguan* were manifested through interwoven practices of meeting, sacrificing, feasting, discussing, and managing. Uses of *gong* identified with extrabureaucratic management in Rankin (1990: 40-43) often appear in documents concerning these trade organizations in the Suzhou collection (e.g., 136, 164, 362, 351-352, 355-356). Such usage can be found in the early eighteenth century, but became more common after 1800 and probably still more so after 1865.

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Mary Backus Rankin is an independent scholar of modern Chinese history. She is the author of Early Chinese Revolutionaries: Radical Intellectuals in Shanghai and Chekiang, 1902-1922 *(Harvard, 1971), and* Elite Activism and Political Transformation in China: Zhejiang Province, 1865-1911 *(Stanford, 1986), and is coeditor, with Joseph W. Esherick, of* Chinese Local Elites and Patterns of Dominance *(California, 1990).*