

When there is a Cleft in the Public Sphere: a Glimpse of the Suppressed Mainland Civil Society Today

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In the field of sociology, the concepts of “civil society” and “the public sphere” refer to two different levels and are often mentioned in the same breath. The former denotes a wide scope of civil organizations and connections beyond the state and the market, covering cultural institutions, academic units, the media, sports and leisure clubs, grassroots concern groups, religious organizations, trade unions and so on.¹ The latter usually refers to civil society’s networks of discussion concerning issues of public interest, which take place in the form of civic gatherings as well as new and traditional media. The former may be called the latter’s physical base, and the latter may be called the former’s functional manifestation.

Civil society in mainland China, which has become fairly vigorous throughout the last decade, is under heavy pressure from the authorities in recent years, and even the term “civil society” is not allowed to be used for discussion.² Human rights lawyers have been arrested and prosecuted. Non-governmental organizations have

* Abridged footnotes below; please refer to the Chinese version of this article for the full citation of resources, mostly in Chinese.

¹ Jürgen Habermas, “Further reflections on the public sphere” (trans. by T. Burger), in C. Calhoun (ed.) *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1993), 421-461.

² A widely publicized CCP internal document in 2013 lists “civil society” as one of the “seven taboos.” The author cites the BBC article in Chinese: http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/china/2013/05/130513_china_politics_ideology.shtml

been severely restricted. In the public sphere, this kind of pressure can be seen when some active media have been slammed one after another over the past few years, for instance government censors rewrote the *Southern Weekly's* Chinese New Year message in 2013;³ some popular internet celebrities have been prosecuted and asked by the authorities to make public confessions on television;⁴ *Yanhuang Chunqiu* (a liberal monthly journal sometimes translated as *China Through the Ages*) announced the closure of its publication in 2016;⁵ and in the same year, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping required that media run by the party and government must have the party as their surnames (namely to toe the party line).⁶

With civil society coming under heavy pressure, will it bring about the demise of the public sphere? Lei Ya-wen, assistant professor of sociology at Princeton University, in her latest book, *The Contentious Public Sphere: Law, Media, and Authoritarian Rule in China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), analyzes the change in supervision and ecology of the public sphere in mainland China particularly regarding the Internet in recent years. She points out that Xi has elevated the importance of internet security to the height of an ideological struggle, and strengthened control over the Internet through a large-scale combination of legislation and enforcement by government departments. However, if the media and other intermediaries are willing to speak for the weak, advocate social welfare and mobilize public support, the

³ RTHK, *Media Perspective* [香港電台, 《傳媒透視》], http://rthk9.rthk.hk/mediadigest/20130205_76_122951.html (in Chinese)

⁴ Chris Buckley, "Crackdown on Bloggers is mounted by China," *The New York Times* (September 10, 2013), <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/11/world/asia/china-cracks-down-on-online-opinion-makers.html>

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/icablenews/videos/533020833556656> (in Chinese)

⁶ *Mingpao* report in Chinese (February 20, 2016): https://news.mingpao.com/pns/dailynews/web_tc/article/20160220/s00013/1455903787214

public sphere can still deal with societal problems. In other words, if the Chinese government can interact positively and meaningfully with public opinion, China's public sphere still has a chance to become a platform for consensus building and social integration.

Lei asserts that the democratic aspect of people's lives—such as public opinion and activities in the public sphere—should not be underestimated or overlooked even under authoritarian rule. She points out that although the Chinese government tried to control and suppress public opinion in the late 2000s, people still had high hopes for it becoming a social and political force that regulates authoritarian rule, and demands accountability from the government. At that time, the Chinese government's response to public demands reinforced popular confidence in the power of public opinion, so much so that some scholars heralded the Chinese government's "responsive authoritarianism." Even if the crackdown in recent years has revealed the authoritarian and draconian side of the regime, Lei maintains that the great strides made in the public sphere of China in the past would not be canceled out once and for all, nor should they be overlooked (pp.218-220).

Looking back at the recent development of Chinese society, this argument is not unsupported by actual examples. Last November, when a blaze broke out at Xinjian'er Village, which is located near Xihongmen Town in Beijing's Daxing District, it left 19 dead and eight injured. Subsequently, the Beijing government launched a 40-day campaign to identify and remove potential safety hazards. A large number of grassroots dwellings were detected as failing fire safety standards; the water supply and electricity were cut off, and the buildings were forcibly demolished. The crackdown forced hundreds of thousands of residents to leave their dwellings immediately in cold weather. Some local NGOs wanted to give them a helping hand but were barred by the government. A considerable proportion of those residents were low-income migrant workers, who went to Beijing from other provinces and mostly worked in low-end industries. They are called the "low-end population" in several official documents. Even though the authorities denied it, mainland Chinese netizens were able to find the words "to evict the low-end population" from online screenshots of official banners on the streets and from many

municipal policy documents obtained from the “human flesh search engine” (massive collaborative research and dissemination using internet media and social networking). At this point, public opinion burst into an uproar. Some evicted grassroots workers launched rallies and demonstrations. Local residents offered help to the displaced, regardless of the official ban. Many mainland scholars even signed an open petition for condemnation in the shadow of political pressure.⁷ Later on, some mainland media that have been closely monitored by the authorities in recent years, including the *Global Times*, had no choice but to criticize the government’s handling of the incident.⁸ The party secretary of Beijing also had to visit migrant workers in front of media cameras.⁹

The incident reflects not so much the authorities’ carelessness in its exercise of internet control as it touched the bottom line of common human values. As a result, the public sphere gained an opening or a cleft.

Will this phenomenon of a “cleft” in the public sphere extend to other members of civil society, such as religious groups? It is hard to confirm at the moment. Since the authorities have been demanding that Christianity be “sinicized” in recent years,¹⁰ local governments have taken steps occasionally to suppress Christian

⁷ See commentaries in Chinese: <http://www.master-insight.com/北京清理低端人口的前因後果/>; <http://big5.ftchinese.com/story/001075421?full=y>

⁸ Some news stories track the about-face of the *Global Times* (in Chinese) :
<https://www.facebook.com/cablechinadesk/videos/vb.265944843550009/1581420402002440/?type=2&theater;>
https://news.mingpao.com/ins/instantnews/web_tc/article/20171210/s00004/1512917989155

⁹ <http://cablenews.i-cable.com/ci/videopage/news/517842/>

¹⁰ In the December 22, 2017 letter to the Catholic and Protestant Churches, SARA (State Administration for Religious Affairs) requested that believers implement the spirit of the 19th Party Congress and the policy of sinicization.
<http://www.sara.gov.cn/xwfb/xwj20170905093618359691/576248.htm>

activities,¹¹ yet different voices are still heard. Last Christmas, for example, there were objections to celebrating Christmas in many parts of China as well as official moves to prohibit the public from celebrating the feast. Some primary schools issued letters to remind parents that the Eight-Nation Alliance which occupied Beijing in 1900 was an invasion of Christian bandits in China; that they should never forget the national humiliation, and thus should not celebrate the foreign festival. There were also internet videos showing people destroying Christmas trees. There were videos, however, of Christians in some areas driving their cars to join a Christmas parade in public, and of numerous people in Guangzhou attending Christmas Eve Mass at Sacred Heart Cathedral, commonly known as the Stone House. The Mass had an intercessory prayer asking the Merciful Lord to grant the authorities the ability “to preserve the weak with justice, to protect the poor by righteousness, and to govern the country with peace.”¹²

Back to the physical world of civil society, it is clear that religious groups are still facing very severe situations. A few Christian churches were completely demolished by the authorities earlier this year.¹³ Nevertheless, the procuratorate finally dismissed an indictment and released Reverend Gu Yuese on Christmas Eve last year. Gu, former president of the Christian Association of Zhejiang and pastor of Chongyi Church in Hangzhou, had mounted high-profile opposition to the government’s demolition of church crosses in the name of a crackdown on illegal buildings in the

¹¹ *Christian Times* reported on the pressure by officials in Jiangxi to replace religious art with portraits of Xi Jinping:
http://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=153089&Pid=102&Version=0&Cid=2141&Charset=big5_hkscs

¹² <http://cablenews.i-cable.com/ci/videopage/news/518433/>;
<http://cablenews.i-cable.com/ci/videopage/news/518572/>;
<http://cablenews.i-cable.com/ci/videopage/news/518571/>

¹³ *Christian Times* (January 18, 2018) reported on the demolition of the huge *Jindengtai* (Golden Lampstand) Church in Shanxi:
http://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=153585&Pid=102&Version=0&Cid=2141&Charset=big5_hkscs

province. The authorities then accused him of economic crimes, but he insisted on being not guilty. Later on, suspicion was aroused when Gu was forced to replace his lawyers.¹⁴

The above examples are obviously uncoordinated. Any example should not be singled out for individual interpretation to make a hasty generalization. But from the viewpoint of the entire public sphere, these examples clearly show that when Chinese civil society is under severe suppression by the authorities, voices from the public sphere are not completely homogeneous. They zero in on the incidents through a two-way communication between the traditional media and the Internet. Sometimes the authorities respond, showing that civil society still has the vitality to uphold its values. The actual organization and connection of civil society can be weakened by various factors, but as a network of interpersonal communication, the public sphere demonstrates that the official line still needs to face common good values and the right-and-wrong as judged by the general public. These criteria and values are universal and cannot be obstructed by any man-made policy.

In fact, regarding the operation of the public sphere, Habermas emphasizes that, through discussion (reciprocally raising validity claims that can be accepted or contested), people discern if the statements and intentions of participants in a discourse are true, right and sincere.¹⁵ If we still perceive the quest and manifestation of these values in China's public sphere today, then mainland civil society's ability to deal with public issues through the public sphere still merits attention.

As history has revealed, many people have to pay a high price so these values can be embodied in the public sphere. However, this phenomenon of a cleft or opening in the public sphere deserves not only close attention by China observers, but also the prayers and the remembrance of many Christians.

¹⁴ Rev. Gu did not plead guilty. He was released after two years.
http://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=153373&Pid=102&Version=0&Cid=2141&Charset=big5_hkscs

¹⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. T. McCarthy (London: Heinemann, 1984), 99.