This paper is a study of environmental civil society organizations (CSOs) in the PRC and their influence in the decision-making process. It uses the analytical framework of civil society and democratization, and the variable of economic development to analyze CSOs' activities in a Special Economic Zone (Xiamen) and an interior less developed area (Kunming, Yunnan Province). Starting in 1978, the Chinese Party-state has planned and guided the transformation from a planned-to a market economy. This transition has been coupled with a continuing political control of the Communist Party. Economic development allowed the emergence of a middle class that started to organize groups for the advancement of their interests. The question arises about the capability of the authoritarian government to control the social space once it has opened the economic space.

CSOs in China pursue the long-term goal of participating in decision-making, but face legitimacy gaps which they try to fill with engagement on mid-term goals such as environmental education and short-term goals such as increasing scientific knowledge about environmental issues and local conditions. They act at the inter-mediation and accountability levels advocating policy change, giving suggestions to local governments, acting as watchdogs for government transparency and putting pressure for law enforcement. The analysis of two incidents in Xiamen and Yunnan show how CSOs reacted differently to government development plans, and the reasons why.

Introduction

The role of civil society in processes of democratization has been considered crucial in countries in Eastern Europe and Latin America (Linz and Stepan 1996). Civil society as a normative aspiration and a style of organization had great capacity to mobilize the opposition to military-led authoritarian regimes in Latin America, especially Brazil, and functioned as vehicle for asserting the autonomy of people and groups against the state in Eastern Europe, especially in Poland and Czechoslovakia. In East Asia, civil society was crucial for the transition to democracy in Taiwan and South-Korea (Diamond 1996), where it led the resistance to authoritarian rule, initiated the oppositional political party, advocated reforms, and produced a counter-narrative that emphasized democracy (Alagappa 2004).

The events of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc revived the concept of civil society that originated in European Enlightenment, displays a variation of uses and definitions,
and has been applied to analyze transformations of a wide range of social worlds. Civil society is conceived as a realm distinct from the economic society and the political society, yet interconnected to and able to generate both of them (Cohen and Arato 1992). Civil society, whose central institutions are the public spheres of societal communication, voluntary association, and the private understood as autonomous individual judgment, is instrumental in defending society against the intrusion of state and capitalist market, and has a key role in democratizing the state and influencing its politics and policy. Key themes are political participation, communicative action, and the formulation of a public will to influence politics and policy of the liberal-democratic state (Habermas 1989). This tripartite formulation of civil society liberates the potential of civil society as opposition force to authoritarian regimes and its critical force for further democratization in liberal democracies.

Democratization theory focuses mostly on the state and elites, and has not reached an agreement yet for what is needed first for democratization. Some scholars argue that economic growth is the basis for democracy, some other argue that the strengthening of political institutions is the first necessary step to strengthen democratic procedures, and in turn the economic society, and the working of the market (overview in Bunce 2000). Moreover, the formation and consolidation of a middle class is considered a favorable condition for democratization (Lipset 1959, Pye 1990).

Democratization processes in Europe, Latin America and Asia started under different political, economic, and social conditions. They started with political liberalization in Southern Europe, with simultaneous political and economic liberalization in Eastern Europe, and with economic liberalization in East Asia. In East-Asia after the state has directed economic development, democratization processes started in South Korea and Taiwan, but not in Singapore and Malaysia. China is country that has liberalized the economy, inserted market mechanisms, experienced sustained economic growth since almost three decades, and the rise of an urban middle class (especially in the coastal areas). Despite these changes, China's political system has remained authoritarian. As we have seen, civil society is the category that links the economic and political spheres. How are the three spheres interconnected in present-day China? What are the consequences
of remarkable and prolonged economic growth on the political sphere? According to the literature, rapid economic growth can lead to the crisis of an authoritarian regime, especially if the regime has been started on exceptionally bad economic conditions. Moreover, civil society organizations have rapidly increased in number, and protests against the government on different issues are often reported in the national and international media. By connecting the literature on democratization and the literature on civil society I try to answer the following questions: Under what conditions can civil society be a democratization force in an authoritarian polity such as China? Is the party-state able to control political and social spaces after it has opened the economic space to market forces? How does the political space change? What is the role of civil society in this change?

**Background and previous research**

In China the retreat of the party-state from the economic space has caused massive social changes. Some changes have been promoted by the central government by design (for example, cessation of provision of social services in the countryside, establishment of village elections, administrative decentralization), but some other changes can not be explained with changes initiated by the central level. The changes in the social structure and in the distribution of power between state and society have altered the principles organizing society, and the ways society interacts with the state apparatus. In some issues (for example, religion and environmental problems) the state is contrasted and criticized by citizens and civil society organizations (CSOs). The Chinese government has made very little political concession in the direction of democratic practices (village elections), and faces challenges related to the drawbacks of rapid economic development (massive internal migration, environmental disasters, growing income and regional inequalities) that may undermine its legitimacy as a provider of economic prosperity. The Chinese government has in some limited cases not tackled these tensions with the usual means of repression. Some incidents have shown that the Chinese government is willing to accept concerns expressed by citizens and CSOs. The dynamics and motivation underlying this behavior can be unveiled by focusing on organized civil society, embodied in CSOs, activities, structures, goals, achieved results, and their
interaction with the government.

The analysis is conducted over CSOs pursuing environmental protection, an issue area that is supported by the central government (rhetorically, some observers argue, for reasons of international reputation, but also institutionally with a new body of legislation), but disputed at the local level where officials tend to favor economic interests over broader social interests (because their career advancement is evaluated on parameters of economic growth, and they more often than not have a personal economic interest in the local businesses). This focus allows to shed light over conditions allowing CSOs to gain legitimacy to influence policy-making, and the government to accept CSOs' cooperation and suggestions.

Given the focus of this conference and for brevity reasons, I will briefly present the background of studies of civil society in China, and skip democratization theory and civil society theory. Studies of civil society in China, situated mostly in the Tocquevillean tradition, concluded that CSOs autonomy from the state is limited, and that therefore civil society is “state-led” (Frolic 1997). They have nevertheless discovered relaxing vertical control and penetration, and an increased capacity of society to organize itself and to have its rights articulated and defended.

This “state-dominated” approach has been complemented by a social approach that focuses on the ways in which citizens interact and how diverse interactions are between CSOs and the state (Watson 2008). The main findings suggest that the number and types of CSOs increased dramatically responding to social needs and changes in society, that the space of association is contested between CSOs (society) and the state (CSOs strive against the state for autonomy and recognition, while the state tries to regulate the space with legal and administrative -mostly restrictive- measures), that the state encourages service providing initiatives by the associations, especially health care providing, and finally that on one side associational life in China is not dissimilar to that of other countries, but on the other it is influenced by the authoritarian polity and the patterns of Chinese culture. Recent studies have shown that CSOs and grass-roots movements have been successful in reversing or changing altogether policy outcomes, in a manner that can be considered a success for Chinese societal actors. This has happened often in thorny issues, such as
environmental health (Gilbert 2009), in both urban and rural, rich coastal and interior poorer areas. In particular, drawbacks (“externalities”) of remarkably quick economic growth, such as environmental degradation and inequality, are issues of contestation for Chinese society.

In an authoritarian polity, CSOs can have double attributes for the government. On the one hand, they are potential enemies because they are the strongest carriers collective behavior. On the other hand, they can play an instrumental role by proving public goods to society and therefore share responsibilities with the government (Kang & Han 2008). In China, particularly at the local level, government officials are suspicious of organizations because they are afraid that their activities interfere with their regular work and may undermine it (Lin & Lin 2007). They tolerate CSOs if they do not draw much attention on failings of local officials or do not overstep the (often fuzzy and shifting) political line (Spires 2011). Local governments in China are strained between economic growth and environmental protection. Officials more often pursue economic growth goals over environmental protection, and therefore are suspicious of organizations that press them to balance these needs (Mol & Carter 2006). From this follows that if organizations do not challenge official rules, the government tolerates them. Nevertheless, it is disputable that CSOs in China would be quiet providers of social services or strive for survival without trying to alter the political space in which they operate. As we have seen, some incidents revealed CSOs attempts to broaden the political space and participate in policy-making. Under which conditions does this happen? What are the interactions of CSOs and the Chinese state that enable these changes?

**Research design**

This project tries to answer these question by investigating strategies that environmental CSOs employ to participate in policy-making, under what conditions they succeed, and what factors make an authoritarian government accept to cooperate with CSOs. Economic development is the independent variable to observe how the political and the social spheres interact. In more developed Chinese coastal areas the progressive formation of a middle class with higher education, more international contacts and information about the outside world, and more exposure and use of non-traditional media is presumably less willing to accept decisions imposed from above and more
willing to organize in interest groups and participate in decisions. For this reason, a Special Economic Zone (Xiamen) is compared and contrasted with a less developed interior area (Kunming in Yunnan province). The focus is on independent/grassroots CSOs not founded nor funded by government structures. Environmental protection is a thorny issue in China: it is promoted by the national-level authorities, but still subdued to growth discourses, but it is hampered practically for enforcement problems at the local level, where economic development is greatly emphasized by officials, whose performance and career advancement is evaluated mostly on growth parameters. At the same time, numerous pollution incidents have caused health problems and subsequent protests; environmental protection and fight against pollution is arguably about human rights to health. The methodology is qualitative, based on fieldwork where I conducted interviews with CSOs' leaders and officials, government officials, and internal documents obtained from them.

**Findings**

In China CSOs strive to gain substantial legitimacy from both the state and society at the local level (besides formal acceptance given by regulations issued by the central level). The Chinese state is suspicious of organizations out of social stability concerns. Chinese society is suspicious of organizations out of lack of knowledge about their characteristics and aims. This is particularly apparent in less developed and rural areas where organizations are not distinguished from government offices, which enjoy a high degree of suspicion.

Chinese CSOs in the areas under analysis adopt strategies to balance between survival, effective functioning, and pursuit of their long-term goals. Their long-term goal is to participate in policy-making, and employ short-term and medium-term strategies to achieve it. Short-term strategies are related not only to what is quite obviously improving organizational capacity, but also knowledge building about local specific conditions and/or updated environmental issues of broader relevance. Specific projects and scientific knowledge are the tools upon which CSOs build their

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1. The first four SEZs were founded in 1978 just after the reforms were launched by Deng Xiaoping. SEZs are listed separately in the national planning (including financial planning), have province-level authority on economic administration, and have local congress and government with legislative authority. The special status of these areas require more complex public policies that have to meet with rapid social and economic changes.

2. Improving organizational capacity is necessary since many organizations are rather newly-established. I consider capacity building a process underlying the life and work of Chinese civil society organizations, that is long-lasting (also for longer established organizations) and not achieved once and forever. For this reason, I consider Chinese
long-term goals and their legitimacy with the state. CSOs cooperate with government offices on specific projects, provide or exchange information, provide education and awareness projects for citizens and government officials, and organize round-tables on updated environmental issues. Overall, they are not willing to engage in politically risky activities such as gatherings or protests, and more often they use legislative tools (for example, participation in public hearings) to promote their policy position. The key difference in CSOs in their ability to cooperate with government offices is the access they have to government itself. This access is facilitated by personal connections between CSOs leaders and government officials; alternatively, it is built with informal strategies, such as sending recommendations or letters to attract attention on specific problems. Government officials acknowledge that they need information provided by CSOs because it helps them to tackle specific local situations.

In Xiamen, the PX incident of 2007 suggests that CSOs prefer to maintain a low profile and non-confrontational approach, work on awareness and consultation, and refrain from mobilizing society. Nevertheless, they try to influence policy by stressing the importance of exploiting legal channels, such as participation in public hearings for construction projects. Peaceful protests against the building of a petrochemical factory in the city of Xiamen led the government to first declare a halt to the entire project, and then to move the project to another city but in an area far away from the city. An estimated number of more than 10,000 people marched in front of the city hall, loosely organized and informed through Internet blogs and cell-phones. CSOs did not organize nor participate in these marches as groups, but members marched as private citizens. CSOs agreed on the fact that “protests” diminish their reputation in front of the government and may frustrate years of efforts in education and awareness raising.

In Kunming CSOs concentrate their work in the rural areas of the city and in the province. They work on farmers' livelihood improvement, community empowerment and social justice (for communities affected by dam-building), and propose counter-narratives to development (for example, ecological agricultural development). Much in the same fashion that happens in more organizations in the process of capacity building on several issues, but do not focus on these issues specifically.
developed areas of the country, access to state offices and management of common projects depends from the single CSO's ability to cultivate personal relationships and mostly restless activity of informal contacts with government authorities. The incident of the Nu River Project (opposition to the building of 13 dams along the Nu River in North-West Yunnan) suggests that Chinese CSOs are able to change development policies if they cooperate among themselves and form a network to disseminate information and advocacy to target all possible levels (in this case, local, national, international), involve “friendly” media, and employing also unorthodox means of publicizing their concerns, but being very careful to remain inside legal boundaries (for example, a peasant activist was introduced to speak in an international conference on dams and development hosted by the UN). Moreover, CSOs disseminated information about the project to the involved communities.

**Analysis of findings**

CSOs aim at building for themselves a reputation of trustworthy and skilled organizations that can become government partners in formulating policy for environmental protection. In this way, they acquire legitimacy beyond the legal terms that regulate their existence. The role of civil society in political change towards democratization in China is particularly evident at the intermediation and accountability levels: they advocate policy change, and act as watchdogs to ensure transparency and accountability of government decisions, and law enforcement. In less developed areas they work on social justice and empowerment of communities and their involvement in the management of common goods (ex. watershed management).

The comparison of the PX case in Xiamen and the Nu River Project in Yunnan suggest that the Chinese government is willing to change its policy due to consideration for social stability, and the fear of the spread of more protests. The role of CSOs in these two cases is different: side-lined in Xiamen (even if more substantial in disseminating information about legal remedies); more incisive in the Nu project because CSOs' joint efforts obtained that in the absence of information about resettlement and public participation in the decision-making process, the project was stopped with a decision declared from Premier Wen Jiabao. In other projects in Yunnan province empowerment of local communities, joint management of public goods and mediation for better
resettlement conditions for communities affected by dam-building suggests that CSOs are crucial in advancing the interests of marginal people and contribute to maintaining social stability.\(^3\)

**Conclusion**

Chinese CSOs envisage for themselves a self-limiting role, do not aim at changing the political system but at participating in policy-making in the long run. While the party-state vertical control on social spaces is relaxing, and new challenges emerge from rapid economic growth, the number and scope of CSOs increases rapidly. CSOs strategies to access government structures are those of developing good relationships with local government officials through personal relationship and/or informal methods (such as suggestions, organization of round-tables, letters), pursued through the building of solid scientific knowledge about specific or local issues that they can exchange with government offices. CSOs also stress the recourse to legal means to tackle environmental issues.

The government is willing to accept CSOs' suggestions and cooperation because it recognizes the value of information and scientific knowledge they can provide. As a consequence, the impact of CSOs on political change occurs at the inter-mediation and accountability levels: they advocate policy change, and act as watchdogs to ensure transparency and accountability of government decisions, and effective law enforcement. As some incidents have shown, in economically developed coastal areas and interior under-developed areas CSOs stayed at the forefront of opposition in different ways. In Xiamen, CSOs worked behind the scenes and concentrated on information dissemination mainly about legal means to challenge the PX project, while in Yunnan CSOs united in a network that advocated policy change at different levels, and were effective in articulating interests of dam-affected communities.\(^4\)

This research shows that the relationship between the Chinese state and CSOs is continuous

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\(^3\) This conclusion stems from the observation that in places where violent demonstrations and riots against government inaction following environmental disasters, heavy pollution, health damage, or livelihood issues there were no CSOs involved. I am aware that this point need more research to be connected to the activities and scopes of CSOs in China.

\(^4\) A crucial difference in these two cases is information: Xiamen citizens were able to gather (blocked) information through the internet, and disseminate it using the Internet and cell-phones, whereas in Yunnan CSOs informed the farmers communities who would be affected by the dams about the project and related risks. In short, we can say that Xiamen residents, more educated and more familiar with non-traditional media of communication (more difficult to control), could get organized and express their concern and opposition without the mediation of CSOs.
process of negotiation that challenges the Communist Party's assertion that it can encompass all legitimate interest groups, that environmental protection is one of the field in which the CCP's legitimacy in providing economic prosperity is challenged in both developed and underdeveloped areas, that China is not unitary country, but a complex system in which local-level socio-economic and political conditions create different responses to issues.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


