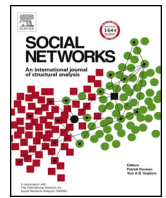




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Social Networks

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/socnet



State power and elite autonomy in a networked civil society: The board interlocking of Chinese non-profits

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Board interlock
NGO
Civil society
Elites
State corporatism
State power
State–society relationship
Social network
People's Republic of China
Non-profit foundations
Common knowledge

ABSTRACT

In response to failures of central planning, the Chinese government has experimented not only with free-market trade zones, but with allowing non-profit foundations to operate in a decentralized fashion. A network study shows how these foundations have connected together by sharing board members, in a structural parallel to what is seen in corporations in the United States and Europe. This board interlocking leads to the emergence of an elite group with privileged network positions. While the presence of government officials on non-profit boards is widespread, government officials are much less common in a subgroup of foundations that control just over half of all revenue in the network. This subgroup, associated with business elites, not only enjoys higher levels of within-elite links, but even preferentially excludes government officials from the NGOs with higher degree. The emergence of this structurally autonomous sphere is associated with major political and social events in the state–society relationship. Cluster analysis reveals multiple internal components within this sphere that share similar levels of network influence. Rather than a core-periphery structure centered around government officials, the Chinese non-profit world appears to be a multipolar one of distinct elite groups, many of which achieve high levels of independence from direct government control.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Board interlock and state power

When the boards of different organizations have members in common—when their boards *interlock*—they can synchronize both their values and behaviors in the absence of explicit central control (Fennema and Schijf, 1978; Mintz and Schwartz, 1981; Mizruchi, 1996; Davis and Greve, 1997; Michael Dreiling, 2011). Organizations that share key members in this fashion can reap the benefits of network connections and solve coordination problems (Pombo and Gutié, 2011; Faulk et al., 2015).

Board interlock is widespread in free-market societies, where it emerges in the business sector as means for coordinating decisions and building social influence (Davis, 1996). In many countries, it

spans multiple sectors, and links together the nonprofit, commercial, and political worlds (Moore et al., 2002; Barnes, 2017). In the donation-based charity sector, board interlock helps coordinate of efforts and share of information (Galaskiewicz et al., 2006), and enhances both a nonprofit's perceived legitimacy and its capacity to acquire resources (Esparza and Jeon, 2013). Among ethnic associations, the “broker function” of board interlock generates and spreads political trust, helping to build stronger civic communities and strengthening trust towards government (Fennema and Tillie, 2001).

Much less is known about the political implications of board interlock under authoritarian governments. For a government concerned with the dangers of independent agents, interlock may be a benefit, because the resulting coordination reduce the independence between organizations and make non-government agents easier to control. However, these benefits exist only if the government maintains control of the most central organizations in the resulting network. If it does not, board interlock may shift from an opportunity to a threat: organizations may not only reap the benefits of coordination, but now do so by coordinating around an independent agent.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2017.10.001>

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Board interlock is crucial to understanding “infrastructural” forms of state power (Mann, 1984). Infrastructural power refers to the capacity of the state to act through civil society, by penetrating, and thereby influencing, its institutions. Infrastructural power is often contrasted with despotic power: the ability of state elites to act without formal negotiations with civil society, through top-down, unilateral action. The coordination enabled by board interlock provides an important means by which a state might amplify infrastructural power—or, conversely, a means by which non-governmental actors may reduce it.

The world of non-profit foundations in the People’s Republic of China provides a key test case for how a central authority confronts the challenges of an emergent network of non-governmental organizations. In short: how does an authoritarian regime deal with the counter-power that may develop when agents of a putative civil society connect together?

1.2. How much autonomy? A brief introduction to civil society and the Chinese nonprofit sector

While charities and “social organizations” appear early in China’s history, the majority were closed down during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s (Ye, 2003). The nonprofit sector only re-emerged during the reform era of the 1980s, as part of the government’s push to decentralize and devolve power away from direct state control (Ma, 2002; Teets, 2013). In the following decades, the sector has expanded so rapidly that scholars today ask whether or not it represents the rise of a Chinese civil society: a dense network of groups that bring together citizens to accomplish activities outside of government control.

That concept, civil society, has its origin in the 19th Century, when Alexis de Tocqueville connected the early stages of American democracy to the growth of voluntary associations of ordinary citizens for everything from the promotion of temperance to the founding of schools (de Tocqueville, 2000). Ever since, political theorists and sociologists have tried to understand the role that these associations might play in the liberalization of authoritarian regimes and the early stages of democratic rule (Walzer, 1992). The concept of civil society has continued to evolve; in a recent study of the “illegal” NGO sector within China, Spires (2011) p. 4 quotes Foley and Edwards (1996) p. 46 to describe a neo-Tocquevillian concept of civil society as “an autonomous sphere of social power within which citizens can pressure authoritarians for change, protect themselves from tyranny, and democratize from below”. For these reasons, hard-line members of the Chinese government are liable to view the very concept of civil society as a “trap” (Keith Zhai, 2017). A central theme of research on the Chinese nonprofit world is thus how autonomous organizations can be in presence of state control (Ma, 2002; Hsu, 2010).

Yet the existence of non-governmental associations does not necessarily imply a civil society in the Tocquevillian mode or even a threat to authoritarian rule. While countries in the West have accepted nonprofits that operate independent of government control, foundations in China must contend with a one-party system potentially intolerant of organizations that might hold it accountable or draw attention to its deficiencies, and that therefore strives to control and monitor it. Concerns about the lack of autonomy in the nonprofit sector have led many observers to talk in terms of *state-corporatism* (Whiting, 1991; Ma, 2002), where the nonprofit sector is an auxiliary and dependent system of the state. In the classic definition of Schmitter (1974) pp. 99–100, the relevant organizations in state-corporatism parallel those of government agencies, being “singular, noncompetitive, hierarchically ordered, sectorally compartmentalized, interest associations exercising representational monopolies”.

In general, civil society can be understood through a paradigm focused either on conflict, or on contingent cooperation. Theories that focus on conflict assume that the state and non-state organizations have goals that are in fundamental tension. These theories leave little room for extensive cooperation between the two sectors. The neo-Tocquevillian conception of civil society is the most explicit form of this conception, while, in the particular case of Chinese non-profits, the idea of civil society as a challenge to state power can be found in Kang and Han (2008) which describes a “system of graduated control” where the state exerts different control strategies over different types of nonprofits, depending on the level of threat these extra-government organizations are seen to pose.

By contrast, the contingent cooperation paradigm sees nonprofits as potential service arms of the state, at times able to implement the state’s goals in a more efficient and effective fashion. Spires’ 2011 paper (Spires, 2011) popularized an account of this form, based around the idea of a “contingent symbiosis” between government and civil society, in which illegal NGOs are allowed to operate as long as they relieve the state’s responsibilities for social welfare. Another example is provided by Teets (2013) p. 36, which describes a “consultative authoritarianism” that promotes at one and the same time an “operationally autonomous civil society” and a “sophisticated authoritarianism that uses more indirect tools of social control”.

1.3. Networked civil society

Because of the power of the Chinese state, research into its nonprofit world tends to focus on how much autonomy can exist in the presence of state control (Ma, 2002; Kang and Han, 2008; Hsu, 2010; Hsu et al., 2017). Previous studies have documented the strategies and tactics of individual nonprofits, either through case studies or the identification of qualitative patterns of behavior across multiple cases (Estes R.J., 2017; Saich, 2000; Lu 2007; Teets, 2013).

Civil society, however, is more than just the existence, and even the autonomy, of non-governmental organizations. It is how these organizations connect together, in a horizontal fashion, to form something more than a catalog of distinct endeavors (Salmenkari, 2013): organized “multiple overlapping and intersecting sociospatial networks of power” (Mann, 1986 p.1).

To understand civil society in China, in other words, we must study not only how the state acts on individual foundations, but also how it interacts with the networks through which these foundations share personnel, information, and resources. The infrastructural power the state exercises may be both enhanced, and dissipated, by the horizontal connections between the organizations it penetrates. Board interlock is one of the primary mechanisms for this self-organization to take place, and yet we know next to nothing about how this process has unfolded, and the implications of this evolution for civil society in twenty-first century China.

We will study the Chinese state–society relationship by looking at the evolution of the non-profit board interlock network. To do this, we draw on a large dataset of officially-registered nonprofit foundations. This dataset records not only important information about each foundation, but also the list of board members, enabling us to construct the board interlock network. Our analysis can then operate at two levels simultaneously: (1) at the level of the individual foundation, and (2) at the level of the network, where edges between foundations are defined by the sharing of board members.

At the level of individual foundations, our data show the high level of presence of government officials on foundation boards. Examination of how the number of government officials varies by working areas and foundation type shows how the presence of gov-

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