

In Search of Civil Society: Market Reform and Social Change in Contemporary China

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Abstract

Since 1978, China has pursued sweeping economic changes in an officially sponsored transition from a Stalinist centrally planned economy to a socialist market economy. China's reformers have highlighted the need to curb the awesome power of the Leninist state and change the balance of power between state and economy, state and society. In practice, the economic reforms have set in train a process of potentially fundamental social and institutional change in China which is creating new socio-economic forces, shifting power in their direction, and raising the

possibility of political transformation. This book explores the extent to which this experience can be described and understood in terms of the idea of 'civil society', defined in sociological terms as the emergence of an autonomous sphere of voluntary associations capable of organizing the interests of emergent socio-economic groups and counterbalancing the hitherto unchallenged dominance of the Marxist-Leninist state. The authors lay out a clear operational definition of the concept of civil society to make it useful as a tool for empirical inquiry and avoid the cultural relativism of its origins in Western historical experience. Guided by this theoretical framework, the book brings together a vast amount of empirical data on emergent social organization and institutions in contemporary China, drawing on the authors' extensive fieldwork experience in East Asia. It is based on interviews, survey questionnaires, and copious documentary sources, buttressed by in-depth case studies of specific localities over a two-year period from 1991 to 1993. The research focused on the changes in the socio-economic realities of three major social groups - urban manual workers, women, and managers/entrepreneurs. The primary emphasis is on transformations in urban China, though detailed rural case studies of Xiaoshan and Nanhai are included to provide comparative context. The authors describe the new forms of state-society relations, as reflected in the complex links between the state and new associations. They show how the expansion of these associations is jeopardized by the lack of general democratization of China's political institutions.

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