

**Civic Discourse, Civil Society, and Chinese Communities.** Edited by Randy Kluver & John Powers. Stamford, CT: Ablex Pub. Corp., 1999. 296 pp. ISBN 1567504434 (paper).

*Civic Discourse, Civil Society, and Chinese Communities* is undoubtedly another earnest attempt to recapture the development of civic communication in China. However, as always happens, China itself seems to defy any efforts of conceptualization. It is evident that an unprecedented number of Chinese, both in China and around the globe, are engaged in discursive discussions in regard to Chinese identity and ethos at an unprecedented lightning speed thanks to the Internet. These emerging discourses, however, may not necessarily lead to the conviction that a civil society characterized by Western experience and criteria is taking root in China.

Kluver & Powers equate civil society in its contemporary sense with the rise of Western democratic concepts and institutions. Such society sets clear boundaries between the power of the state and the rights of people who voluntarily form autonomous groups to seek their own social interests within the collective structure of the nation-state. They believe that society is formed discursively and thus the development of China's civil society in the post-Mao reform era could be elucidated by identifying and examining discursive practices of various groups of people within Chinese society and Chinese communities worldwide.

Civic communication is investigated in this book as it occurs in five aspects:

- within autonomously formed citizens' groups;
- between a populace and its government (both from the top down and from the bottom up);
- within the government among its various branches or competing factions;
- between the Chinese central government and the external discourse communities, such as other governments and nongovernmental groups such as the United Nations;
- among multiple Chinese diaspora communities that are creating distinctive civil discourses with Chinese characteristics scattered around the world.

The contributors to the book each define civic discourse in their own terms, and the differences in establishing the locus of Chinese civic discourse lead to various, and even conflicting, conclusions. For example, Kluver claims that China's educated elite will play an essential role in the formation of a truly civic discourse (p. 12), while Powers, as based on memoirs of foreign correspondents in China, argues that the influence of the political elite is quite limited in shaping the life and mind of common people (pp. 23-24). George Xu's essay emphasizes the ubiquitous role of traditional Chinese rhetorical topics in providing stability and continuity to the public discourse that constructs social the fabric (p. 42). Other contributors, however, are more positive in detecting the emergence of civil discourse in the context of the freedom to worship and rights of grassroots political groups.

The confusion in the central conception of civic communication also contributes to one of the obvious weaknesses of the book. The text fails to address societal differences between civic communication within personal channels and that in the public domain. The formation and expression of society could be understood and examined discursively. However, civic discourse embodies and enacts different concerns and significance whether it is represented in argumentative conversations among individual citizens; public discussions in movies, television, and radio; or political dialogues between and among various government factions, constituencies of diasporic Chinese communities, and the outside world. It is rather difficult to fathom the significance that the genre of private conversation *kan dashan* (informal chatting) attains in relation to public discourse and civil society, as one of the authors (Shuming Lu) contends (pp. 181-194).

Certainly, the major weakness of the book is that the information provided is considerably out of date and fails to grasp the dynamic of changes that have been taking place in civic communication in Chinese society since the mid-1990s. Several examples cited as emergent discursive cases, such as the youth model Zhang Haidi and the TV documentary *River Elegy*, are social phenomena from the 1980s now considered to be discursively obsolete in public discussions. Meanwhile, millions of Chinese have been attracted to the Internet and have formed numerous discursive communities in the virtual world from the mid-'90s to the present.

Of course, I realize that the boom of the Internet-assisted discursive discussions in Chinese society occurred in 1999-2000, and it is unreasonable to expect a 1999 book to be able to cover it. However, some new and important patterns of civic discussions started emerging from the early 1990s to 1998 with the initial evolution of the Internet in Chinese-diaspora communities and later in China and Chinese-speaking countries. The book, although containing some initial discussions of the subject, fails in general to gauge the significance of this emergent trend in global Chinese communication.

Civic communication among the Chinese population in a transnational environment has never been carried out so easily and instantly as it is being done presently in the age of the Internet and the World Wide Web. The book offers one of the first attempts to investigate the evolution of civil society in China in the context of global Chinese communities including Hong Kong, Taiwan, and those in North America. This transnational feature of civil discourse has become very prominent, as Chinese is now the second largest language group on the Internet after English. As of March 2001, the total Chinese-language Internet population was estimated to be 40.7 million (Global Internet Statistics, 2001). Among them, 22.5 million were in China (*Statistical Report on Development of China's Internet*, 2001), 10 million are in Taiwan, 3.6 million in Hong Kong, and the rest are in Singapore and other global Chinese communities in North America and around the world (Nielsen//NetRatings, 2001).

The book includes an interesting study of the Chinese virtual community in North America by Dujun Liu (pp. 195-206). It is worth noting that the Chinese diaspora was one of the first groups in North America to use the Internet to distribute information and promote community interests. The first Chinese Ethnic Internet (CEI) was established in the United States by a group of Chinese students and scholars during the spring of 1989 when student demonstrators marched in Beijing. The network later distributed two weekly Internet magazines—*China News Digest* (in English) and *Huaxia Wenzhai* (in Chinese)—and claimed about 150,000 subscribers in 1998. Its homepage reported 457,036 hits per day in the same year (pp. 196-197).

However, the book stops short of elaborating on the influence of the North America originated virtual community on the emergent trend of transnational civic communication among Chinese individuals on the Chinese mainland and in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, the United States, Canada, and other countries, which is made possible only by the Internet. Chinese netizens are communicating daily beyond national borders on numerous issues concerning China's politics, Taiwan's future, China's relationship with the United States, and the prospect of Chinese civilization. It is against this backdrop of civic communication that the investigation of emerging discourse and civil society in China could be meaningful and carry some weight.

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