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Rural Migrants: On the Fringe of the City, a Bridge to the Countryside

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### Jonathan Unger (ed.), *Associations and the Chinese State: Contested Spaces*

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- 1 **Jonathan Unger (ed.), *Associations and the Chinese State: Contested Spaces*, Armonk-London, ME Sharpe, 2008, ix +275 pp.**
- 2 The study of associational life in China has been squarely on the scholarly agenda since the early 1990s. The contributions to this new volume, edited by Jonathan Unger, reflect the increasing diversity in Chinese associational forms and in the conceptual lenses being utilised to analyse developments on the ground. The book perhaps best serves as an anthology for those scholars looking for an overview of the field. While some chapters are essentially reprints of previously published work, others are based on more substantial revision of prior articles, and still a few others offer original data or perspectives (most notably a chapter by Samantha Keech-Marx).

Andrew Watson opens the book in Chapter One by highlighting the variety of associational life in China and positing the existence of a diverse civil society. He identifies nine categories of associations that comprise the field, including mass organisations, government-organised NGOs and foundations, service-based non-profit groups, independent foundations, research or study associations, business associations, issue-based groups, rural associations, and grassroots groups. He locates these along a spectrum of autonomy, with mass organisations and GONGOs situated closest to the state and grassroots groups just outside of or on the fringe of state control.

Chapter Two, by Jonathan Unger and Anita Chan, offers a contrasting theoretical and empirical perspective to Watson's. As in prior works by the pair and individually, here they argue that the civil society perspective is not appropriate for a general analysis of Chinese

associational life. While they concede that some relatively autonomous (and innocuous) groups have sprung up at the margins, they hold that associations in China are still best understood through the lens of state corporatism. In their view, corporatist structures and practices dominate, and the Chinese government, rather than ceding ground to autonomous civil society organisations, has been quite successful at and insistent on incorporating, controlling, or overseeing any extra-Party, extra-government organisations that could pose a threat to the political status quo.

Chapters Three to Six stay mostly within the corporatist framework. Focusing on China's trade unions in chapter three, Chan offers an insightful comparative analysis that draws on communist theory and actual experiences during the communist period in Eastern Europe. She goes on to discuss the development of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) under Mao, through the economic reform era and up to the present. Although she identifies the "seed-germ" of societal corporatism in recent legal reforms, she ultimately finds that worker control of Chinese unions is still heavily constrained by the demands of capital and management.

The authors of chapters Four (Kenneth W. Foster), Five (Jonathan Unger), and Six (Scott Kennedy) take business and trade associations as their key area of interest. Drawing on extended fieldwork in the city of Yantai, Foster argues that China's business associations are essentially "appendages of government or Party organizations" that are used by the party or state to carry out mandates from above. Unlike the membership-based Chamber of Commerce familiar to readers in North America and other democratic societies, business associations in Yantai – and by extension other parts of China – are not organisations designed to represent the interests of businesses to the public or government.

Unger, in Chapter Five, draws on two periods of fieldwork with business associations in Beijing. After fieldwork in the early 1990s, although he viewed these groups as essentially corporatist creations designed to further the goals of their state overseers, he also saw signs that civil society-type associations could emerge as members became more assertive. During a return visit in 2004 and 2005, however, Unger found that any nascent autonomy had been quashed by the authorities. State corporatism had reasserted itself.

In Chapter Six, Kennedy provides a different perspective in his study of manufacturer associations and their efforts to create price-setting cartels. He found that the associations were unable to completely control their members and at times were actually influenced by the members. The associations' ultimately unsuccessful attempts to create cartels in the 1990s lead him to conclude that corporatism failed to live up to its potential in this case. He also contends, though, that a civil society framework does not hold great explanatory power either, as the members of these associations were unable to assert real and lasting autonomy. He sees a more complicated picture of rival interests

in the field, one that precludes applying one simple label to government-business relations in China.

While the published literature on associations in China has been unfortunately (although understandably) dominated by studies of government-controlled or government-initiated organisations, the three final chapters of this volume focus attention on grassroots organisations. In Chapter Seven, Samantha Keech-Marx takes a close look at three "popular women's organizations" in Beijing. These groups provide legal support for women in need and also engage in policy advocacy where possible on issues such as domestic violence. Eschewing the civil society framework for its seeming strict division between state and society, Keech-Marx draws on insights from social movement theory to show how these groups frame their concerns in ways that resonate with government rhetoric and official goals.

Chapter Eight, by Xin Zhang and Richard Baum, analyses the origins and operations of "Sanchuan Development Association (SDA)," an NGO in rural Qinghai that works on community development and poverty alleviation. Preferring to avoid the normative connotations of "civil society," they describe what they term a "people's NGO" that is "almost wholly autonomous and self-directed... [and] only loosely and intermittently linked to the state" (p. 203). They conclude by pointing to the need for further research on grassroots groups and offering questions that may well animate the field for years to come, including: "Do such NGOs weaken or strengthen local state capacity? What is the optimal division between the state, the market, the local NGO, and external donors?... Do autonomous associations like SDA help to 'empower' their own members and/or the wider rural populace?" (p. 215). To be sure, these are questions applicable to grassroots groups in China and elsewhere.

The final chapter by Benjamin Read looks at homeowners' associations that have sprung up in new private housing complexes. Close study reveals that many of the most active leaders of these associations have no qualms about working closely with the state that seeks to regulate them, but they also "evinced an enthusiasm for organizing in a democratic and self-initiated fashion" (p. 252). Read thus places them squarely within the realm of civil society.

While generally framed in terms of the debate between civil society and corporatist perspectives, the richness of the case studies presented here reveals the complexity of contemporary Chinese associational life and allows the authors to push a bit beyond these rather narrow ideal-type concepts. In particular, the final three chapters on grassroots organisations point the way towards future research agendas that should keep China scholars busy for some years to come.