Civil Society Redux

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Rural Catholicism and State-Society Relations in Postsocialist China
Why talk about civil society (again!)?

- Maturation of postsocialist transformations
- Globalization – transnational sources of authority and legitimacy
- Because people in China (and the US) are talking about it as well!

Church Opening Ceremony, 1996
Meizhou Prefecture, Guangdong
Why Religious Organizations and Civil Society?

- Transcendent power as source of authority, charisma
- Key means of mobilization and structuring of local landscape
- Ways of connecting to non-local sources of capital (political, social, economic)
- Source of empowerment for those marginalized in Chinese society

Group picture during visit by Maryknoll Superior General, Summer 1996
Old Problem in the study of China

- Problem of relationship with the state: autonomous, corporatist, or amphibious?
- Problem of defining “civil society organization”: businesses? Internet chat groups?
- Problem of defining the state: [the state is] phenomenological reality … produced through discourses and practices of power, produced in local encounters at the everyday level, and produced through the discourses of public culture… an open field with multiple boundaries and no institutional or geographical fixity (Aretxaga 2003)
- Problem of civility
Starting definition

• a set of diverse social organizations that publicly interact with the government at different levels to help arbitrate a diverse array of particularistic interests. These social organizations horizontally connect people together and provide them with a forum for expressing ideas, managing present activities, and envisioning the future.
• Based on Gellner (1995) definition
• Disregards issue of relationship to the state
• Emphasizes the space where people practice civil society
• Inclusive of all “social organizations”
Little Rome: A Catholic village in south China
Throughout the Church’s turbulent history in China, the persistent faith of such villagers has enabled the Catholic Church to survive many movements of persecution, including the latest during the Cultural Revolution. In good times, the Chinese Catholic Church flourishes politically and intellectually in the cities; but in bad times, which have been frequent since the Nestorian Christians first showed up in the Tang courts, the Church survived through its rural strongholds.

1919: After World War I, the French missionaries cede the mission to the newly-formed American Maryknoll missionaries; China is their first mission.
Little Rome, May 1926

“If you want a good penance, try to kneel as they are for two hours. The little bamboo chair is a concession to old age. The men worship inside nearer the altar. All our chapels and houses here are Chinese style. The chapel badly needs repairs.”

Fr. Thomas Malone, MM
1932: First Hakka priest under Maryknoll, from Little Rome, is ordained.
Prior to 1949, the local Church maintained a strong alliance with the Nationalist Party.

1950: Bishop Francis Ford is arrested for espionage and dies in a Canton prison one year later. “Bishop” Lan is entrusted with the diocese, but along with other Chinese priests and sisters, is imprisoned.

1955: Major crackdown in Shanghai and arrest of Chinese Catholic leaders.

1957: The CCP establishes the Catholic Patriotic Association as the institutional framework for the Catholic Church.

1966: With the Cultural Revolution, even state-sanctioned religious activities cease in the public arena.

1980: Establishment of the Chinese Catholic Bishop’s Conference and the Catholic Administrative Council in Beijing (organizations parallel to Patriotic Association); “Bishop” Lan returns from Beijing and revives public Catholic activity.

1983: The Meizhou Diocese established and churches with living clergy resurfaced, incorporated into the state institutional framework for religion.

1988: A local Patriotic Association established in Little Rome

1992: the Bishop’s Conference is marked as the highest Catholic organization in China.
1991: The first priest from the diocese is ordained, later to be assigned to Little Rome; the first sister took her final vows in 1996.

1997 Baptism by Fr. Liang
Little Rome

1952: Sr. Wang, who took her final vows with Maryknoll before they were expelled.

1997: Sr. Wang, with two of her students, during the church opening ceremony.
Little Rome

Lay leader, sprinkling holy water on the deceased.

Prayer group leaving the deceased.

Descendants cleaning the bones.

“Sweeping the graves,” Catholic-style.
Little Rome

Adult Baptism Class, 1997

Watching a catechism tape from Taiwan, 1997

Elementary School Fundraising, 1997

Children’s summer catechism school, 1995
Building a New Church

Original Church built by French MEP, 1872

New Church built by “Little Romans,” 1997
Building a New Church

- Most funding came from overseas, while most participants were mainlanders.
- Four key overseas activists brought in 71% of donations.
- 1994 State Council Documents 144 and 145 tightly control flow of money, with emphasis on sovereignty and bureaucratic oversight.
- Committees established by Little Rome parish, with support of local zhengxie, was an exercise in local civil society.
Practicing Civility

As a young man, 1935

As a grandfather, 1997
Practicing Civility

Singing Performance, New Year’s 1997

Neighbors building a road, 1997

Getting Married, 1996

Catechism Class, 1997
A Church of Their Own?

• Fr. Liao: first of seminarians of post-Mao period to get ordained in 1991; first served in Meizhou, then assigned to Little Rome in 1994

• Serving as the young legs for the older generation of priests in the 7 counties of Meizhou

• 2001 – Bishop Zhong passes away

• 2003 – episcopal ordination for Bishop Liao; not allowed to read papal bull of appointment, but confirmed appointment by Pope and allegiance to universal Catholic Church
Thinking about Civil Society

- Importance of transnational processes in civil society; alternative sources of authority, resources, organization
- Importance of global social networks – personal connections
- Connection of civil society organizations to other aspects of community
- Importance of institutions, administration, and rules – practicing civility