中國公民權利、公民社會與媒體呈現，1978 – 2012

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by

Liu Na
劉娜

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Abstract

The tremendous rise of the Internet in the past decade has witnessed a wide range of significant social changes in contemporary Chinese society. Among these, citizens’ rights pursuits and the growth of civil society have become unprecedentedly striking and noticeable. In the meanwhile, the state’s control over citizens’ rights appeals is also highly visible and constricted. The conflicts between the state and citizens have thus emerged and focused on the issue of citizenship rights. This study employs citizenship rights as an analytical locus to investigate the contentious relationship between the state and the civil society in China.

The theoretical framework articulates the conceptual relationship between civil society and citizenship rights, and borrows the theory of social constructionism to explicate the critical roles that media play in constructing social understandings of citizenship rights and negotiating between the state and the civil society in dynamic ways. Particularly in China, the media has dual roles of maintaining political loyalty while meeting the market’s need. Therefore, it is expected to see both competition and compromise between the state power and the civil society through media representation of citizenship rights. Based on the theoretical perspectives, this study argues that there is a dynamic coexistence that comes in conflict and/or dialogue between the expansion of civil society and the reinforcement of the party’s legitimacy in China. In other words, the state and the civil society are interdependent and mutually reinforced in dynamic ways.

Methodologically, this study uses both quantitative and qualitative research methods to examine the contexts and conditions of the mutual reinforcement relationship of the state-civil society. First, the longitudinal content analysis of the flagship party newspaper People’s Daily and its coverage of citizenship rights from 1978 to 2012 offers the official construction and interpretation of citizenship rights. The results show that the focus and goal of coverage shifted significantly three times: (1) establishing a socialist legal system after the Cultural
Revolution, (2) transmitting legal knowledge after the Tiananmen crackdown, and (3) socializing legal tools to resolve socioeconomic disputes in the Internet era. The major themes of the People’s Daily coverage correspond to the key political tasks of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in different historical periods. These are to bond socialism with the legal system to legitimize political rule, to cultivate social understandings of the legal system, and to use legal tools to enhance the performance legitimacy. It suggests that the Western idea of citizenship rights is instrumentally used by the party to serve its political legitimacy. The party media, therefore, play a supporting role in advancing the state power and should not be included in the sphere of the civil society in China.

Second, the comparative content analysis of the People’s Daily and the Southern Metropolis Daily between 2000 and 2012 reveals that the Chinese media have dual roles in helping to advance the state power and the civil society respectively. The party newspaper follows the socialist ideology and changes the salience of the topic according to the significant political and legal activities, while the market newspaper includes elements of civil society and employs the logic of journalistic professionalism when covering citizenship rights. The results reveal two different discourses that support the state and the civil society respectively. However, the similar emphases in covering citizenship rights between the two types of newspapers imply the dialogical coexistence between the expanding civil society and the strengthening party’s legitimacy in China.

Third, the comparative content analysis of three influential cases related to the quest for rights reveals three types of critical junctures for the legal system: replacing old law/regulation, enacting new laws, and incorporating new content into existing legal codes. The mechanism to put forward individual cases to become critical junctures is the joint force of online public opinion, market media, and defense of individual citizens’ rights. The joint social force pushes the boundary of legal reforms and changes social understanding of rights.
defense. It further competes with and challenges the political status quo. However, the resolutions of these cases and the successful changes of legal codes suggest that the party-state is highly responsive to public appeals in critical contentious events. The praise of good governance helps regain mass loyalty towards the party and further strengthens its political legitimacy. The dual roles that the contentious cases play indicate that there is a conflicting coexistence between the expanding civil society and the strengthening state’s power.

The last part of the analysis examines the correlations between newspaper coverage of citizenship rights and the four types of structural factors: the development of the Internet, economic development, social conflicts, and the growth of civil society organizations. The results indicate that they contextually correlate with each other. Specifically, the party newspapers correlated strongly with economic development and status of social conflicts, which are the key indicators of the party’s performance legitimacy. The market newspaper, however, correlates strongly with the development of the Internet and the growth of civil society organizations, which are the critical factors advancing the civil society. The analysis suggests a contextual coexistence of the expanding civil society and the increasing state power, and the Internet and market media are the key social forces to advance the growth of civil society.

This study concludes that the expanding civil society dynamically coexists with the strengthening party legitimacy. However, the growth of civil society is largely influenced by the competing and shifting balance of the political and social forces. The competition is particularly visible during contingencies or critical events, when the state’s control capacity is heavily tested and the official surveillance system highly mobilized. In addition, the critical obstacle to developing civil society in China is the one-party authoritarian rule. Attempts to cross over this boundary would be severely suppressed by the party. In this sense, the growth of civil society in China may not be advanced at the expense of the state power. Instead,
mutual reinforcement and dynamic coexistence between the two seems a more realistic prospect.