
UNDERSTANDING THE REVIVAL AND SURVIVAL OF GRASS-ROOTS ASSOCIATIONS IN CHINA: THE PERSPECTIVE OF FOUR CATEGORIES OF LEGITIMACY*

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Abstract: *Chinese grass-roots social groups have had a complicated relation with the social order during the past thirty years. This paper aims at using a series of practical concepts about legitimacy, from Weber and Habermas, to analyze the revival and present functioning of these groups, especially associations based on folk religion. As I see it, the fact that social groups are able to exist “normally” and to operate, even though they are not in conformity with the law, should be understood with the help of three categories: political legitimacy, administrative legitimacy and social legitimacy. At the end of the paper, I discuss the promulgation of the “Regulations for the Administration of Social Associations” which sets legal legitimacy as a core process integrating the three other kinds of legitimacy, and I examine the effort of government to require all social groups to possess full legitimacy.*

Keywords: *Chinese society, folk religion, grass-roots associations, legitimacy.*

Resumo: *Os grupos de base chineses têm tido uma relação complicada com a ordem social durante os últimos 30 anos. Este artigo tem como objetivo, usando uma série de conceitos práticos sobre legitimidade, de Weber a Habermas, analisar o reavivamento e o funcionamento presente desses grupos, especialmente as associações de base sobre religião e folclore. Como vejo isso, o fato de que esses grupos sociais são capazes de existir normalmente e de agir, mesmo que não estejam em conformidade com a lei, poderia ser entendido com a ajuda de três categorias: legitimidade política, legitimidade administrativa e legitimidade social. Ao final do artigo, discuto a*

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promulgação das “Regras para a Administração de Associações Sociais” que estabelecem a legitimidade legal como um processo central integrador dos três tipos de legitimidade, e examino o esforço governamental para requerer total legitimidade de todos os grupos sociais.

Palavras-chave: *associações de base, folclore religioso, legitimidade, sociedade chinesa.*

From the 1950s to the 1970s, due to a high level of vertical integration of society by the state, the Chinese people generally took part in social processes through their units or commune/production-teams, which served as grass-root organizations of the “vertical society”. Their social activities were generally within or under the name of the unit (in the case of urban residents) or the commune/production-team (in the case of commune-members) to which they belonged. As the result of reforms during the past decades, city-dwellers are no longer completely attached to their units,¹ and rural dwellers have turned from commune-members into villagers.² In these circumstances, individuals feel the need and encounter opportunities to organize horizontally in associations and participate in new sorts of social processes.

In a short period of under 30 years, associations have undergone considerable development, demonstrating complex relations with various legal, political, and administrative orders and engendering new social practices. According to certain analysts, from a legal perspective, existing associations may be classified in four types: 1) legally registered associations; 2) secondary associations without corporation status (i.e., those nominally affiliated to legally registered associations but that are in fact independent); 3) business corporations registered with the industrial-commercial administrative authorities; and 4) “illegal” associations that are not registered at all, such as associations operating under the names of “saloons”, “tribunes”, or “clubs” etc (Kang Xiaoguang, 1997, p. 630).

Adjusting this scheme to our needs, we divided associations into three categories: registered, nominally affiliated (including those nominally affiliated

¹ Some have been separated from the unit system. Those that remain within the system see considerable changes in their relation with the unit, i.e., the unit no longer holds all-round responsibility for the individual, and the individual owes only limited obligation to the unit.

² Commune members are attached through the commune to the state, while villagers are autonomous and have to arrange independently their own productive labor and cultural life.

to business enterprises) and “illegal” associations.³ The second category includes those nominally affiliated to legally registered associations and those nominally affiliated to and operating within various kinds of enterprises and institutions. Prior to its registration, an association must be nominally affiliated to a certain unit. It becomes a registered association only after official registration. Some registered associations failing to go through the annual check-up may once again become nominally affiliated associations. “Illegal” associations include, in addition to those active in metropolitan areas and named by Kang Xiaoguang, the many traditional folk groups that exist throughout urban and rural areas, e.g., folk-arts organizations in Beijing, worship groups and temple fair organizations in the countryside.

It is fair to say that registered associations have a foot-hold within the law, and “illegal” associations stand completely outside the law. Generally speaking, nominally affiliated associations are those having one foot inside and another foot outside the law. Here, the term “outside the law” includes different behaviors. In some cases, an independently operating association has a unit for nominal affiliation, but doesn’t go through the registration procedure. Others may operate under the name of an enterprise. This is the mode in which, for example, most *qi gong*⁴ organizations have been carrying out their *gong-passing* and *gong-practicing* activities. Still other associations that have their orientation within their units, and hence are exempt from registration, are in fact operating in the society at large. No matter what their status in relation to the law, associations of the above three categories all go about their business and are faring well. This doubtlessly shows that their existence and operation tallies with a certain kind of order, although this order lies beyond the realm of law. It is especially the case of grass-roots associations of folk religion in China which supply many typical examples and the main concern for this essay.⁵ In the following discussion,

³ “Illegal” doesn’t necessarily mean criminal. It just means that such associations have not gone through legal procedures.

⁴ Qi gong, or qigong, is a Chinese traditional energy acculturation, e.g., a Chinese system of prescribed physical exercises or movements performed in a meditative state.

⁵ We should bear in mind that grassroots associations of folk religion in China, although they can barely register and attain legal status as worship groups, have survived tough political circumstances, enjoying increased popularity during the past decades. The different forms they take on will be discussed below, including folk-arts organization and temple fair organizations. Though the religious function has never been abandoned, these associations wisely resort to traditional, cultural and administrative tactics to sediment their legitimacy.

we attempt to show that to understand the *de facto* status of associations, “legitimacy” is a better category than “legality”.

Four categories of legitimacy

“Legitimacy” is a concept with complex semantic extensions. According to dictionaries, its adjectival form, “legitimate”, means any of the following: 1) according to law, lawful; 2) in accordance with established rules, principles, or standards; 3) born of legally married parents; 4) in accordance with the laws of reasoning, valid, logical; 5) resting on or ruling by the principle of hereditary right; 6) justified, genuine; 7) of the normal or regular type or kind. The concept of “legitimacy” is used to denote possession of these properties. In short, “legitimacy” denotes something having a basis for being recognized, approved, or accepted. As to what particular basis it is, (e.g., certain provisions of law, rules, standards or logic), is to be determined by the actual circumstances.

The concept of “legitimacy” is used in social science (sociology, political science, etc.) in both its broad and narrow senses. The concept in its broad sense is used in discussions of social order and norms (Rhoads, 1991, p. 167; Weber, 1954, p. 5-10), or norm systems (Habermas, 1979, p. 204). The concept in its narrow sense is used in describing a sort of state rule (Weber, 1968, p. 212-216), or political order (Habermas, 1979, p. 179).

The concept of legitimacy in its broad sense involves extensive fields of society, more extensive than law or politics, and has great potential social usability. Weber’s idea of a legitimate order consists of morality, religion, custom, convention, and law (Rheinstein, 1954, p. lix). As Rhoads put it, “in sum, a legitimate order in Weber’s sense consists of empirically valid rules differentiated by their modes of enforcement into either conventions or laws” (Rhoads, 1991, p. 168). The rules enforced by special persons and institutions to ensure people’s conformity are laws, while the rules naturally observed by the society are conventions. Legitimacy means consistency with certain rules; among them, laws are only a rather special group. Other than laws there are rules such as regulations, standards, principles, norms, values and logic. Therefore, the basis of legitimacy might be found in the legal order, but it might be found in certain social values or practices inherited by the community as well.

In their discussions of the legitimacy of rule, Weber and Habermas used the concept of legitimacy in its narrow sense. Legitimate ruling is one of various

forms of legitimate order. It includes acceptance by the ruled. According to Habermas, legitimacy means recognized value and *de facto* recognition of a certain political order (Habermas, 1979, p. 179). A ruling can enjoy the collaboration of the ruled, because the rules or the basis on which the ruling is established are acceptable or even approved by the ruled. Theoretically speaking, the ruling is recognized due to its legitimacy. However, from a sociological point of view, a ruling is legitimate because it is recognized. This sociological approach, using recognition as an indicator, is a useful methodological reference for our study of the legitimacy of currently existing associations in China.

Legitimacy of ruling as discussed by Weber and Habermas is shown as recognition of those “above” by those “below”. However, discussions in recent years about cultural pluralism have extended recognition to relations between communities (horizontal recognition) and relations between those in authority and those being ruled (recognition of those “below” by those “above”). This sort of relationship forms the “politics of recognition” between different cultural groups within a community, and through this process particular cultures or groups with particular cultures acquire their legitimacy⁶ (Taylor, 1994). Therefore, when we analyze the legitimacy of an association according to the recognition it receives, we define the recognition-giving subject as the state, the government departments or their representatives, the various units or social associations, as well as individuals in the society. Recognition by the state or government departments involves giving authorization for the association to operate. Recognition by units or other associations involves cooperation or the provision of resources. Recognition by individuals involves the participation of particular individuals. An association’s activities are the public activities of a group or organization, and the legitimacy endowed by these three sorts of subjects is the basis for its public activities.⁷

Another concept that goes with legitimacy is “legitimation”, which means, according to the dictionary, 1) to make or to declare lawful; 2) to admit (a child born out of wedlock) as genuine; 3) to display, prove or declare lawful, proper or justified, so as to win recognition or authorization. “Legitimacy” denotes the

⁶ For examples using the concept of legitimacy in these ways (i.e., horizontal recognition and recognition from above), see Gutmann (1994, p. 5).

⁷ Kang Xiaoguang (1997, p. 636) mentions that associations in China have to simultaneously gain two kinds of legitimacy: official legitimacy and social legitimacy.

property of being consistent with a particular norm, which seems to be something objective, while “legitimation” denotes a process of actively establishing a relation with a particular norm, which obviously has its emphasis on something subjective – an effort with definite intention. “Legitimation” can be understood as defending legitimacy at a time when legitimacy might be denied (Habermas, 1979, p. 179, 181). In other words, legitimation denotes an effort to reach a certain consensus about legitimacy at a time when the objective basis of legitimacy is being questioned.

The concept of legitimation is a powerful tool in analyzing relations between newly emerging things and norms or orders in an increasingly fragmented society. Legitimation is necessary only when legitimacy is not automatic, and legitimation is to show that our behaviour is consistent with certain norms, even though the case may seem (or actually is) just the opposite. The mechanism of legitimation relies on the fact that, firstly, due to the fragmentation of social values, there no longer exist uniform and generally accepted norms, and therefore all concerned can only seek common grounds in their differences; secondly, the social process is a process of dialogue, aimed at arriving at a certain consensus over complex behaviour; and thirdly, any creative action is in fact a breakthrough and something that should be approved by the existing order. Therefore, legitimation is a process of extending and restructuring order.

To sum up, legitimacy involves relations not only with the law, but also with the social order. Legitimacy is not a problem of being pursued by law, but of being recognized by the society. Legitimation is then a process of actively proving a positive relation with the order, not just passively “not running in the contrary direction”.

The theory on legitimate order that we have outlined above should be helpful in understanding how associations are faring and operating currently in China. We intend to show, through the analysis of various aspects of present-day associations, that current legitimate order in China is compounded, diversified and pluralized.

Looking at the temporal dimension, we observe the coexistence of new norms with those that have enjoyed a long continuity, as well as those long past. New norms, e.g., newly promulgated laws and rules regarding associations’ activities, are constantly produced or enacted while, at the same time, among those norms to be reformed, some are rescinded and some continue to be effective. To make things more complicated, some completely discarded norms of the past have been revived and are effective in certain areas. The staging of

a folk show at religious festivals serves as apt example. If the organizers hold the ceremony in accordance with old conventions, the event will readily be recognized by authorities according to present-day standards. This overlap in the time domain is a significant characteristic of a society in its transitional period.

In spatial terms, activities in rural areas follow a set of norms different from those in urban areas, and those associations rooted in units have norms different from those with using neighbourhoods as their base, even though both sorts of associations are active in urban areas.

Looking at the social aspects of this context, we see that China has gone from being highly integrated politically, economically, legally, administratively and culturally to being relatively scattered – a process resulting in a lot of what Bourdieu has called “fields” with independent logics and rules of their own (Bourdieu; Wacquant, 1992, p. 94-98). Legitimacy in one area does not necessarily mean consistency with norms of another area. Temple fairs and worship groups recognized by villagers in accordance with traditional customs do not necessarily enjoy recognition by local governments. Even those folk worship-groups recognized by local government may not have gone through proper legal procedures. It is precisely because the current legitimate order (or the legitimacy of order) is dependent on fields that the basis of legitimacy of associations’ existence is complicated.

Sources of legitimacy for current Chinese associations are chiefly political, administrative, as well as including social and cultural traditions, in addition to the law. An association may acquire legitimacy in one of these four domains, but it may also acquire legitimacy in all four domains. That is to say, some associations acquire relatively complete legitimacy, while other associations may acquire only local or partial legitimacy. The requirements posed for an association’s legitimacy by these different domains have changed over the past thirty years, just as the degree of an association’s need for legitimacy in these domains has changed. Legal legitimacy became an explicit requirement for associations only after the promulgation of “Provisional Regulations for the Administration of Social Associations”, finally becoming a rigid requirement after the “straightening out” of associations in 1997 and the promulgation of the “Regulations for the Administration of Social Associations” in 1998. While legal legitimacy has gradually developed into a compulsory requirement, though with considerable latitude, associations still must seek the social order’s acceptance through satisfying political, administrative and socio-cultural legitimacy requirements. In the following paragraphs, we propose to discuss the wisdom

of a certain group's organizers who founded their association through local legitimacy and strived to develop it, working for full legitimacy on three different fronts, viz., through political legitimacy, administrative legitimacy, and social legitimacy (or social and cultural legitimacy as manifested by folk norms based on cultural traditions, social customs, etc.). We will conclude our discussion showing how legal legitimacy is programmed by the Chinese government as a core process to integrate the other three kinds of legitimacy.

Social legitimacy

Social legitimacy, as we stated above, is manifested as recognition or even participation by certain people or community accompanied by concrete forms of social justification. Social justifications may have three kinds of basis: one is local heritage, another is local common benefit, and the third is consensus regarding rules or arguments. To have its foothold somewhere, an association must have at least one of these as its basis. For folk groups, tradition enjoys irrefutable justification. The organizer of a lion-dance association once expressed this fact in a most convincing way – “This is not my invention but inherited from our ancestors. Having been passed on from generation to generation, how could it be disrupted in our hands?” (Gao Bingzhong, 1998, p. 3).

Folk groups that exist nowadays often formulate justifications on all possible bases. We can cite as example the “Dragon Tablet Association” we investigated in a rural area of northern China. It was organized by the dwellers of Fan village, and was said to have a long history but was banned when people were organized into People's Communes at the end of the 1950s. At first, people continued to burn joss sticks stealthily at night, but then all such activities stopped when the Cultural Revolution began. It was probably in the year 1979 that villagers resumed enshrining the dragon tablet. And dragon tablet fairs were resumed in 1987.

The “Dragon tablet” is a tablet with engravings saying: “Tablet of the Dragon – True Dominator of heaven and earth, the three worlds, and all the ten directions”. There are nineteen leaders of the association, who take turns keeping the tablet for one year. On and around the second day of the second month of the lunar year, the tablet is moved to a temporary shelter for worshipping by more than hundred thousand people from the neighbourhood, during which time a temple fair is organized that normally lasts four days. Donations to provide

joss sticks and lanterns and directly as votive offerings to the god amounted to ¥ 80,000 (US\$10,000) a year in the beginning of the 1990's and more than ¥ 40,000 (US\$5,000) in recent years. The leaders claim to "have kept themselves "clean and honest" through their faith in the "dragon tablet". The council in charge of the temple fair declares that "everything taken from the people will be used for the people", and the money is used primarily for receiving troupes that come to give performances, for entertaining guests, for assisting families with financial difficulties, and for improving conditions of local schools.

The "Dragon Tablet Association", it may be observed, is part of local tradition, and from the beginning of its resumption it has enjoyed what Weber called "Traditional Legitimacy" (Weber, 1968, p. 36). It has also inspired a yearly fair which facilitates economic intercourse among people of the area. Therefore, it also has a basis in public welfare. Moreover, its income and expense conforms to the generally accepted rules of the neighbourhood and, in this sense, operate in an acceptable way. The Dragon Tablet Association, with ample justifications, has thus won the recognition and merited the participation of the local people, demonstrating its social legitimacy.

Most folk groups at their inception do not go through the legal process. They can exist without legal legitimacy because, like the Dragon Tablet Association, they have acquired social legitimacy through traditional ceremonies. There are now nearly a hundred such traditional folk-arts organizations in Beijing. Each one of them has gone through the traditional ceremony of celebration at their inception. For revival of an old organization, experienced organizers must first have various kinds of stage props, such as "lions" or drums, and a team of performers who are adept at using these props with sophisticated skill. When everything is ready, the leaders, instead of going to register at the civil administration department, will select an auspicious day for the celebration ceremony, and invite several older, still-living leaders as well as leaders of other friendly or related organizations. Traditional folk- arts organizations cannot be founded independently, but have to be shown approval by the presence of these leaders, people of the same occupation. In the past, the celebration ceremony alone could endow a folk-arts organization with ample legitimacy, but today it serves only to convey social legitimacy.

The question of social legitimacy in the modern nation-state has posed new requirements to folk-arts organizations. These organizations are active at the grass-root level. They are founded and kept operative only because they have a certain social legitimacy. However, the monopoly of violence and symbols

by the modern nation-state has left society with no more than relative autonomy. The present relation between state and society has reduced the social legitimacy of folk-arts organizations to a limited legitimacy to operate in a limited sphere of social life, in limited ways. The organizations now face pressure to meet the requirements for legitimacy in other respects as well. When a folk-arts organization, worship group, or temple fair has developed to a certain stage or level, it eventually will have to deal with legitimation problems in other respects. If it operates only in a village or in a neighborhood, social legitimacy alone might be sufficient to guarantee its smooth operation. But if it is to operate or has influence over a larger area, it will have to acquire legitimacy in other respects, or it will encounter unbearably repressive administrative, legal and political forces.

Social legitimacy is extremely important not only for these folk groups, but also for many other associations. Project Hope of China Youth Development Foundation has enjoyed great success only because the idea of education held by the CYDF has won extensive recognition by the society. Now that the government is no longer providing funds, if an association is unable to gain a certain level of social recognition, it will not have the necessary resources for operation, not even the basic fund for registration.

Administrative legitimacy

Administrative legitimacy is a formal legitimacy based on procedures and practices of the bureaucratic system. Administrative legitimacy of an association depends on recognition by the head of a certain unit.⁸ His recognition usually extends naturally into participation, which in turn shows his recognition as a matter of course. The form of his participation is quite flexible. It might be either practical or symbolic, such as holding the position of an “honorary chairman”. If the organizers of an association ask for permission and report in accordance with administrative procedure, duly notifying the authorities of all relevant activities, acting always with the approval of all unit or department heads concerned, then they can operate within the space formed by the unit

⁸ Business enterprises and institutions are not themselves public administrative departments, but their leaders also belong to the ranks of public personnel, and perform administrative functions. They too are therefore sources of administrative legitimacy.

itself and its effective sphere of influence, even though the association does not enjoy legal legitimacy. If the organizers of the association are themselves administrative officials of certain rank, the association will naturally enjoy administrative legitimacy.

Administrative legitimacy has extraordinary significance for Chinese associations and their operations. In a certain sense, the administration of associations in China is an extension of the administrative system with the unit as its foundation. As mentioned above, China's associations can be classified, with respect to legal status, in three categories: registered associations, nominally affiliated associations, and illegal associations. We can also differentiate existing associations in terms of social structure into three types: corporation associations (those that have acquired corporate status through registration), unit associations (those whose activities are limited to within a unit), and folk associations (those that are not registered nor nominally affiliated to any unit). Administrative legitimacy is particularly vital to the corporation associations and unit associations.

Administrative legitimacy is a prerequisite for corporation associations. According to the provisions of the "Regulations for Social Associations," no association can qualify as a corporation unless it finds a responsible unit. That is, a responsible administrative or quasi-administrative unit is a fundamental condition or prerequisite for an association to consolidate its legal standing. If an incipient association is unable to find a unit that will agree to grant it administrative legitimacy, it will not be able to request, much less be granted legal legitimacy.

Administrative legitimacy is even more vital to unit associations, since the unit is legally entrusted with full power in management of all associations within the unit. These associations are exempt from registration. To these associations, the unit is actually a legal and administrative system all in one. For instance, there are usually many associations in universities, even tens of them in larger universities. In order to enforce better administration, some universities have issued regulations for the administration of associations within the university. These regulations show that the unit is exerting administrative control over association activities. For example, Provision 13 of the "Regulations for the Administration of Student Associations" of a well-known university stipulates that "any association, prior to conducting any activities, should send in an application to the university Youth League Committee, and, after being granted consent following preliminary review, hand in a budget report of its activities.

No activity should be organized until the entire program of activities is approved. Those responsible for the association should give the university Youth League Committee an oral or written report after completion of said activities.” Provision 15 stipulates that “any association to conduct joint activities with other units within or without the university should seek prior consent of the university Youth League and send in certification by cooperating units along with the program of activities. No activities should be conducted until these are reported by the university Youth League Committee to higher level authorities or relevant units and approved thereby.” In other words, the operation of these associations is entirely regulated by administrative procedures. Their proposals and programs can be implemented only after acquisition of legitimacy through administrative mechanisms. Compared with corporate associations, unit associations have less autonomy and greater dependence on administrative legitimacy.

For folk associations that generally lack legal legitimacy, administrative legitimacy also has a practical significance. Folk associations enjoy social legitimacy limited to the grass-roots level and can operate only within a very limited space. However, in the course of their activities, they end up involving administrative departments of all levels – an involvement which helps these associations go beyond the limitations of a grass-roots society. Dancing and singing troupes of folk-arts organizations, worship groups or temple fairs usually operate within the neighborhood or village, but certain activities organized by the administrative units allow them to conquer a wider audience. For example, in Zhao County of Hebei Province, the Bureau of Cultural Affairs organized an annual competition of folk-arts organizations and awarded certificates of merit to the winners, who then proudly displayed these certificates during their participation in temple fair ceremonies. In Beijing during the Spring Festival, the Chongwen District government sponsors the Longtan Lake temple fair, the East Metropolitan District government sponsors the Temple of the Earth fair, and the Chaoyang District government sponsors the temple fair held at the Temple of Dongyue. During the fourth month of the Lunar Year, the Mentougou District government sponsors the Miaofeng Hill Golden Top pilgrimage temple fair. The fairs unite within their framework those folk-arts organizations usually scattered in the neighborhoods, and these organizations in turn transform their certificate of participation in these activities into a vague administrative legitimacy (or an impression of administrative legitimacy) and use it as a basis for justifying their public operation. Some organizers apparently consider that their associations

acquire a certain legitimacy through participation in these administratively authorized activities.

To distinguish the administrative legitimacy of the association from that of its other aspects may further help us understand the importance of administrative legitimacy. The administrative legitimacy of an association may be obtained once and for all from a certain unit (e.g., when a corporate association becomes affiliated, or when the unit association obtains approval to be founded), but administrative legitimacy may also have to be obtained step by step, because the space for association activities may vary among different units and some activities may even go beyond a single unit. Therefore, whether a corporate association or a unit association, if it is to get on with its activities, it will have to get in touch with various units and seek approval or support from the authorities concerned.

The administrative system gives an association a certain degree of legitimacy based on its usefulness. Units and departments consider associations as elements of their activities or as part of their social resources. On a small scale, many local governments invite folk-arts organizations to perform, warming up the atmosphere at ceremonies in memory of martyrs during the Spring Festival or in honor of military men's families on Army Day. On a larger scale, local governments may use temple fairs to stimulate markets and promote the economy. For instance, "Jingxi Tour Agency" (in Beijing) is a corporation controlled by the Mentougou District government, Beijing. One of its economic mainstays is the income from tourism to Miaofeng Hill, the main attraction of which is the temple fair together with the pilgrimage to "Bixia Yuanjun" (Goddess with Azure Glow). And the Miaofeng Hill temple fair that resuscitated in the 1990s is formed with the participation of folk-arts organizations from various districts and counties under the sponsorship of the Mentougou District government.

Political legitimacy

Political legitimacy involves intrinsic qualities of the association such as its purpose and the intention and meaning of its activities. Political legitimacy denotes that the association or its activities conform to certain political norms, that it is "politically correct" and hence acceptable. An association chooses its own purpose and shows the meaning of its activities in the course of its operation. If

these are accepted, especially by the Party system,⁹ the association has thus obtained a certain legitimacy.

Political legitimacy is vital to the existence and development of associations. It is a problem to be solved first of all in order to have any existence in China's public space. China's administration of associations emphasizes the administrative mode of control. It takes associations as an extension of the state unit system, and administrative control of any unit sees maintenance of political order as its primary obligation. Therefore, to get a unit for affiliation an association must satisfy the requirements of the political norms. Passively speaking, it should not "run contrary to the norms".¹⁰ Positively speaking, the association is best served by making contributions to the existing political order. Only under such conditions will the unit leaders allow the association to use their administrative resources and to operate within their administrative space. Only then will the association have any possibility of success in becoming a corporation. Even after an association has turned into a corporation, the leaders of the unit, with resources in their hands, will still continue to evaluate its activities in terms of political legitimacy and react accordingly. Associations with neither legal nor administrative legitimacy will use social and cultural legitimacy to make their appeal while using political legitimacy to respond to pressure from the administrative and law enforcing departments. For example, they might say, "Yes, we do not have your permission, nor have we registered, but what we have done is right in nature." Usually they would thus be exonerated.

Because of its importance, political legitimacy is a *must* for associations. Associations are technically autonomous organizations of the masses, but they are generally quite conscious of their double function as a kind of state political unit and will take on certain political responsibilities to reinforce their political legitimacy. To be "politically correct", as defined in state-promulgated regulations for the administration of associations, is a passive requirement, meaning "no

⁹ One of the characteristics of the Chinese system is the existence of a professional political system in addition to the administration system, which consists chiefly of the Party and Youth League system. They examine associations, looking for political standards consistent with the political order and grant or deny the association political legitimacy accordingly.

¹⁰ All of the government regulations on associations list certain fundamental political norms that must not be violated, e.g., no contradictions with the four cardinal principles, no harm to national reunification or to the unity of the Chinese nationalities, etc. Thus the regulations are formal as well as substantial.

violations”. However, most associations explicitly state their intention to show a positive political attitude. For example, the alumni association of Peking University (founded in 1984) stipulated its purpose as “to strengthen relations between alumni, to carry forward the good tradition of Peking University, and to make contributions to the development of our alma-mater, to the socialist modernization construction and the reunification of our motherland, and to the rejuvenation of China.” The charter adopted by China Folklore Society (founded in 1983) stated its aim as “to uphold the four cardinal principles, carry on the policy of ‘letting the hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend’, unite those working on the folklore of our country to investigate, collect, process and research on the folklore of our country’s different nationalities, and make contributions to establishing Marxist-Leninist new folklore with Chinese characteristics, to transforming social traditions, to enhancing socialist material and moral civilization, to promoting overseas cultural intercourse and to enriching the cultural treasures of the world.” Apparently the political aspirations of these associations go much higher than the bottom-line of the state. This underlines how associations are in dire need of political legitimacy to survive.

To maintain its political legitimacy in an ever-splintering society, an association needs to make skillful maneuvers. “Politically correct” is a subjective judgment. It forms the basis of legitimacy only when this judgment becomes the consensus of all concerned, and the easiest way to reach this consensus is to affirm it in the association’s explicit purposes, as in the above examples. However, to pass judgment on the activities of an association is a much more complex problem. In a country where social strata and cultural values are undergoing sharp changes and divides, it is the general rather than the exceptional case that people would have different interpretations regarding the political significance of the same action. As a matter of fact, an association and its activities may, in its main or direct aspects, be quite different from the current political norms, and the above-mentioned consensus might not be reached naturally (or spontaneously). In such circumstances, the association will have to produce (or form) this consensus through its own efforts. This is called legitimation, in the course of which some activities that started out as vague, contradictory or negative may turn out to have positive value.

Associations have produced “politically-correct” consensus by using various tactics. For instance, the China Youth Development Foundation initiated “Project Hope” to seek donations for poverty-stricken students to complete their primary education. This is a project to make amendments for deficiencies in the

government's education policy. To be implemented, it had to arouse sympathy and get donations from people. Hence it revealed the misery of children deprived of education, a revelation that implied political criticism of social injustice. However, its overwhelming success relied precisely on its utilization of politically legitimate administrative resources. Its organizers did not openly criticize government mistakes, but instead made every effort to publicize the concern leaders of the party and state¹¹ expressed for this project, as well as other sorts of positive political values they extracted out of Project Hope to the state.¹² As a result, what people generally perceived was the project's positive political meaning, a perception that guaranteed ample political legitimacy from the Party and government. "Project Hope" owes its great success to the great political wisdom and skill of its organizers.

A folk group's effort in seeking political legitimacy presents another example of this complicated maneuvering. The dragon tablet enshrined by the "Dragon-Tablet Association" of Fan Village was originally a tablet representing the God of the Land¹³ or a group of gods.¹⁴ But around the year 1990, as the dragon-tablet fair grew in scale, intellectuals of the Dragon Tablet Association (native villagers and non-natives) gradually reached unanimity in stating that the dragon tablet represented the "Gou" Dragon – Successor of the Dragon. The organizers had this verdict printed on pamphlets and included in the history of the "Dragon Tablet Association". Giant horizontal scrolls were unfurled at gathering places, saying "All descendents of Yan Di and Huang Di are successors of the Dragon". Results of questionnaires applied to villagers of Fan Village as well as to visitors, in 1998 and 1999 respectively, showed that 72% of the villagers from the Fan Village and 50% of the visitors thought that the god of the dragon tablet was the ancestor of the Chinese people. "Successors of the Dragon" is a slogan to

¹¹ For a comprehensive report on the participation of important leaders, see the section on "Waves of love from Zhongnanhai" in "For the Future of Our Motherland – A report on the seven years of operation of Project Hope" (*Journal of the China Youth Development Foundation*, 1 November 1996).

¹² For example, "Project Hope" is a new growth point in the construction of socialist moral civilization. (*Journal of the China Youth Development Foundation*, 1 August 1996).

¹³ The God of the Land is also known as "Dragon Fude"

¹⁴ Perhaps they are called "Dragon Tablets" because they incorporate engravings of dragons. I have discussed this conclusion with Professors Ye Tao and Liu Tieliang using the results of their investigations.

enhance cohesion of the Chinese people, and has been endowed with the profound political significance of patriotism.

In the past five years, the concept of “intangible cultural heritage” has become very popular. The central and local governments now recognize many items of folklore and folk religion (which had been treated as symbols of backwardness and superstition for decades) as valuable culture. The concept of cultural heritage has become a category of political rectitude. The Dragon-Tablet Association’s organizers made new scrolls during the 2005 fair with saying such as “The Dragon Tablet Fair is an Intangible Cultural Heritage”. Through reproduction (reinterpretation and publicity) of its original meaning and identity, they have transformed their worship from something that might well be rejected by the outside world into something people cannot but admit is politically right.

Political legitimacy is a rigid requirement, but *which* political norm applies and how compatible it is with the nature of an association are flexible issues. Political legitimacy is a form of restriction, however it also provides political rhetoric for creating new interpretations. As a result, it provides a certain cover for social dynamics and vitality.

Investigation of various associations’ statements about their political purposes and significance suggests that they have three ways of demonstrating their consistency with the political order: 1) consistency with the ideology and values upheld by the state (e.g., socialist moral civilization); 2) consistency with the goals of the state, especially the central task (e.g., economic construction); and 3) consistency with policies of the state (e.g., united front and maintaining stability). The key to political legitimacy is not what is done but what is spoken. Political legitimacy depends particularly on the process of interaction.

Legal legitimacy as the core of integration

When they began, many associations had only one sort of legitimacy: political, administrative or social and cultural, hence their operation was based on one aspect. Legal legitimacy was the last and the least important requirement, proved over time to be a requirement that could be disregarded. However, the time when associations could exist with just one sort of legitimacy is finished. Since the promulgation of the “Regulations for the Administration of Social Associations”(“Regulations” in brief) in 1998, the government has imposed

comprehensive requirements of legitimacy on associations, which now must be politically up-to-par, administratively affiliated, compliant with legal procedures, and supported by the society. None of the above can be omitted. Among them, legal legitimacy is the only genuinely rigid requirement. According to regulations, social groups have to register with the Department of Civil Administration in order to become legal groups recognized in law, or they will be punished.

Apparently legal legitimacy is considered a core process, designed to integrate the other three kinds of legitimacy, and so the government expects all associations to possess full legitimacy. The Regulations require all social groups to hold political, administrative and social legitimacy as well as legal legitimacy. The 9th entry of the Regulations reads “before any initiator applies to the registration bureau to found a social group, he must have his application censored by the units in charge and acquire their permission.” The censorship and permission of concerned units means that the social group must pass the test of political and administrative legitimacy. Furthermore, the 10th entry states that any social group is expected to have certain resources and civil capacities [such as a certain number of members, fixed location, legal source of property and financing, operation outlay from ¥ 30,000 (\$3,750) to ¥ 100,000 (\$12,500),etc.]. Social legitimacy is the premise of all these conditions, because society is the only place where associations can find their members and supporters, property and financial resources. We can say that social legitimacy is the base on which associations can make room for themselves in society. Apparently these three kinds of legitimacy are prerequisites to legal legitimacy as well as channels for the state and society to exert their influences. The state, through the Party and administrative authorities, holds the power for endowment of political legitimacy and administrative legitimacy, while the general public, acting according to its own interests, decides whether or not to endow associations with social and cultural legitimacy.

With abundant resources, some associations, such as China Youth Development Foundation and China Tea Friends Association, can satisfy the new legal requirements. However, others have a hard time coping with them. Experienced secretaries are undone by the required registration fees. Even some academic associations which, up to now were doing well, find it is hard to adapt to the new requirements.

Other associations, such as folk groups, are finding it nearly impossible to gain legal legitimacy under the new Regulations. For the folk-arts organizations

in Beijing, the most difficult condition is that they must affiliate to units in charge. No government unit – neither the Propaganda Department, nor the Culture Bureau, nor the Tourism Bureau – is willing to take political and economic responsibility for them, even though the various temple fairs bring promise of economic prosperity. We can say the main problem of academic associations is an economic one, while the main problem of folk groups is that of administrative affiliation. While there are exceptions (the “Dragon Tablet Association” has successfully combined its dragon worship with national ideology, transforming a temporary shrine into a “Dragon Culture Museum”), most grass-roots associations in China have been hampered by the new law.

The “Regulations for the Administration of Social Associations” issued in 1998 brings home the message: an association either enjoys all four kinds of legitimacy, or it does not exist at all. Nonetheless, within the categories of folk groups and illegal associations, there will continue to be many associations for quite a long period. In a society where several contradictory orders coexist, there is bound to be a mechanism for acquiescence embodying compromise (Weber, 1954, p. 9). This will leave some room for the operation of different types of associations as well as a unique field for further study.

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