

The Development of Guilds (Associations) in Wenzhou:

A Trend of Relationship between Civil Society Organizations and State

Abstract: Merchant guilds (associations) in the city Wen Zhou, Zhe Jiang Province have been well developed for the over past decade. As an intermediary force and the reframing of economic organizations, they not only represent the interests of the business, but also have come to become the autonomous force independent from the government. To a large extent, they pushed the government to reform itself. Though still a unique phenomenon, the trend of the relationship between civil society organizations and state carries optimistic implications on the growth of civil society in China.

Key Word: Merchant Guilds Government Civil Society

Since the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project did the research on 22 countries in Europe, Asia and Latin American, its further application of social origins theory to explain the relations between state and the third sector and the four models of third sector regime have been widely taken and employed by other scholars (Lester M. Salamon etc) . Headed by Lester M. Salamon, the project team collected the data from 22 countries and differentiated four regimes according to two key indexes. One is government social welfare spending, and the other is the scale of the third sector. Statist regime describes the status of low government social welfare spending and small nonprofit scale, with the corporatist regime at the other extreme, in which high government social welfare spending coexists with a large scale nonprofit sector. Social democratic regime depicts the situation of high government social welfare spending and small third sector, and the liberal type, a classic case of which is the United States, shows a large scale nonprofit sector even without big financial resource from government.

Though Salamon et al. recognized that the four regime types could only picture a basic contour of the situations in the third sector and it varies country by country in terms of different political, economic and social histories, its research seems to have

focused on a static description rather than a dynamic procedure. Especially to those countries with big political, economic and social transformations, it is difficult to cover the ongoing shifts in just one or two regime. Secondly, different associations constituting the third sector might enjoy different degrees of autonomy and freedom due to political constraints or authority's preference choices and thus face different situation in development. In China's context, the political and economic reform since late 1970s has opened up limited autonomy to the society with the upsurge of associations or civil organizations in different genres comparing to the control penetrating to every corner of the society before reform. As the Chinese Communist Party set up its economic reform goal preceding a political one, it is evident that the withdrawal of domination from economic sphere is proceeding much faster than that in political and societal sphere. With the regime changing from a totalitarian to an authoritarian one, some scholars argue the arrangements between the third sector and state has turned to a 'corporatism' type (Unger and Chan, 1993). The classic definition of corporatism was given by Philippe Schmitter. According to Schmitter, corporatism is "a system of interest representation in which the constituent units are organized into limited number of singular, compulsory, noncompetitive, hierarchically ordered and functionally differentiated categories, recognized or licensed (if not created) by the state and granted a deliberate representational monopoly within their respective categories in exchange for observing certain controls on their selection of leader and articulation of demands and supports".(Schmitter 1974: 93-4) As the sub-types of corporatism, the regime of societal corporatism is often a phenomena found in democratic countries while state corporatism is the peer in authoritarian regimes. Analysis of the features of the association functions, their role in representative of members, and their interaction mode with state shows that the state-corporatism regime fits into China's context. At the same time, Jean Oi explored how the administrative power of local officials positively influenced the rapid economic development including the private economic sector. Local state corporatism is her answer to the phenomena. (Oi 1999: 11). Oi compared it with the general uses of the term 'corporatism'. She cast more emphasis on the role of local state rather than the

central state. The corporatism is “constituted and coordinated by the local government- specifically counties, townships, and villages- not central authorities”. (Oi 1999:12) In the sense of “corporate”, local government resembles the characteristics of business corporations to certain extent, and local authority act like an executive member in a board of a company. Whereas, the local authority also attempts to keep the emerging private sector from growing an independent class, which adds the meaning of ‘corporatist’ to the term corporatism and regard China’s case as a sub-type of state corporatism. In later part of this paper, this framework is to be discussed on its accuracy to capture the features of the relationships between local state and merchant guilds as well as its transition.

What Unger and Chan discovered in the 1990s was the corporatist representation of trade unions or associations that mainly included the state-owned enterprises, meanwhile positive signs were mentioned on the implications of local Chamber of Commerce under the umbrella of All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce. More than ten years passed and the phenomenon of merchant guilds established by Wenzhou businessmen probably has provided new perspective in observing the regional corporatist regime. On the approach of the resurgence of merchant guilds and its influence from bottom-up on the reform within the local government, this form of civil organizations in Wen Zhou reflects the autonomy and vigor from the society. Though it is limited so far in economic sector where government has been relinquishing the power back to society most, this uniqueness has attracted a lot of interests.

The existence of merchant guilds in China has been a long history. Merchants in Shan Xi and An Hui Province were once very powerful in influencing the economy locally or even nationally. Guilds were set up to expand their networks with government and business as well. The earliest merchant guild in Wen Zhou dates back to the late Qing Dynasty, and it boomed again after the economic boost in Zhe Jiang Province. As an exit port for trade with foreigners after the gate was forced to open to the West. Merchant guilds were permitted to set up under the authorization of the Qin Government. They stretched out their force and gained their influence from their

clients and public by steadying the foods price and coordinating with the government on people's livelihood. Nonetheless, the coming turmoil from the collapse of Qin Dynasty until late 1970s did not create a stable surrounding for the normal maintenance of these organizations. The communist system actually stifled the economy. The merchant guilds had no environment to live on. Not until from 1980s when the private economy sector started to revive when the reform stimulated the economy and the small commodities business came back to life, many manufacture industries expanded their business. Wen Zhou has been known for its production of small commodities. Manufactures of shoes, clothes, cigarette lighter, glasses etc. have been mainstay industries in Wen Zhou. The competition within the city and from outside prompted the businesspeople to find a way to regulate themselves and enhance the competitiveness. Yet, the determination to clear out the infamous reputation of producing fake and low-quality products during the 1980s is also an opportunity for local merchant guilds to display their force. Wen Zhou mould is famous for its small commodity economy. Yet in 1980s, its fame was also contaminated by fake and low-quality products. Small workshops producing similar products often reduced market prices and formed a vicious competitive circle. The unhealthy market order and crisis of trust did not just exist in Wen zhou, actually it was a common feature in many provinces where market economy was under construction at beginning. What makes Wen zhou different from other places in the adjustment is the role played by merchant guilds and associations. Instead of solely being regulated by government, the merchants in different industries set out to form their own guilds (also called associations) to clean the market. The enterprises in different industries benefited from the associations or guilds a lot in upgrading and regulating their own business while the latter also tightened the ties with their members and government in establishing a more developed and matured market. For a long time, the scholars or observers have done research from economic perspective and discovered how it have been contributing to local economy and its adaptability and influence on other regions. However, not until in recent years, did scholars start to explore it in a political science paradigm and observe its implication to the growth of

the third sector¹ (Yu 2004& 2007, Chen& Ma, 2006). They did lots of surveys on the organizations, personnel, systems, financial situation, and the networks with government to assess the autonomy and the performance of the merchant guilds. Although they discuss about the relations and interactions between merchant guilds and government, they do not intend to discuss the relations in a theoretical framework. This report attempts to employ the social origin theory to analyze the regime type between the merchant guilds and government².

When scholars try to fit China's case into certain regime type, they sometimes ignore the unbalanced development in respective sphere. A simple prototype of regime is insufficient to capture the relations between authority and the third sector. The development of merchant guilds in Wen zhou has shown some features beyond the strictly defined state-corporatism regime. The bottom-up approach the merchant guilds and industrial associations have taken reflects a new way to seize more self-governing freedom from the state. Secondly, at a regional level, positive signs indicate a transformation from a state-corporatism to a societal-corporatism in terms of relatively great organizational, decision-making and financial autonomy the guilds (associations) have. Thirdly, the government's role in Wen zhou is also a reason that contributes to the changing regime.

I Bottom-up Approach in the formation of merchant guilds (associations)

In a state-corporatism regime, the state recognizes only one organization as the legitimate representative of the interests in respective sectors. In order to secure the order, the state cautiously makes the arrangements from top-down and holds the decision-making power tightly in hand. If the sole representative organization in

¹ Yu has been doing research on guilds in Wenzhou since 2002, and has conducted quite large-scale surveys in 2003, 2005 and 2007 on the internal organizations of the guilds and their performance assessment. His research group tries to evaluate the autonomy and functional situation of guilds in Wenzhou.

² Many scholars have showed interests on the special phenomenon of booming guilds in Wenzhou from the perspective of economy, like transaction cost angle. Not until from 2004, Chinese scholars began to explore the phenomenon in the respect of political science or civil society, such as *civil guilds and local government----based on the research in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province* (Yu, Wang, Huang 2006), *Between Government and Enterprises: Research of Guilds in Wenzhou* (Yu, Huang, Fang 2004), *Chinese Social Organization Research In Controversy: The Angle of State-Society* (Wang, 2006). Outside China, Margaret M. Pearson has asserted a social corporatism regime in business associations in foreign enterprises in China. Jonathan Unger discussed the rise of guilds as bridge connecting private business and Chinese government. So far, no one has explicitly analyzed the regime and its potential trend in terms of the merchant guilds sphere.

certain sector doesn't oversee its constituencies according to state's will, it might be punished by removal of its leaders or in other form. Meanwhile, the peak organization in a societal-corporatism regime has more choices in choosing its own members and bargain with them. In Wen zhou, the merchant guilds and industry associations have enjoyed much freedom in joining the group of its agent, the Industrial and Commercial unions or Economic and Trade committee, the latter of which is in charge of economic affair in the government. At the same time, the autonomy of setting up merchant guilds and industry associations in all industries are uniquely high in Wen zhou that some scholars call it 'real civil merchant guilds '(Wu, 2003) or 'democracy forced from bottom-up '(Zhao, 1999). The autonomy comes mainly from the impetus of private enterprises that have contributed dominantly to the economy since 1980s. By 2006, the private economy accounts for over 80% of the production output. It also benefits from a weak linkage between economy and government. In this sense, it opens up a gap and creates space for breeding the third force.

After the reform and open-up policy were carried out, the first constellation of merchant guilds were established in late 1988. The Wen zhou Sodality of Joint Venture Enterprises was established on October 15th, followed by the Grocery Association and Association of Knitting and Textile Industry on November 28th the same year. All these three associations were formed spontaneously. Later, merchant guilds and associations were established in other fields that covered most of pillar industries in the city. Shoemaking, glasses-making lighter, leather and many other industries started to realize the significance and register under the General Chamber of Commerce in form of their own guilds. Two points need to be emphasized here. First, unlike associations or guilds in many other places or at a national level in China which have taken off the government's jacket and evolved from a department in the government, guilds in Wen zhou tell a very different story. They are the outcomes of bargain and voluntary unification among enterprises. As many scholars have noticed, most of the industry associations at national level have been prompted by government in that the state could design the layout of the associations in respective sectors according to its own preference and maintain influence in associations' agenda setting

and task implementation. That is what happened to the abolishment of seven of China's industrial ministries and transformed them into associations in 1990s and in other similar cases. Yet, in Wen zhou, we see the associations booming in an opposite direction. Most of the guilds or associations bonded themselves spontaneously without the direct instructions from upper pressure. The self-impetus from the grass-root level distinguishes bottom-up model from the other top-down one. By the end of the April, 2007, there are more than 131 guilds (associations) registered in Wen zhou. The number is quite big considering the size of the city. According to a survey, most of the guilds (associations) asserted that the initiatives were in their own hands and they were organized in the need of market and industry requirement.

The second point to be illustrated is the issue of corporatist representative. We could assess the limited influence of government from the three different ways in forming guilds (association). The first kind was directly established by the government. Request from the government to set up guilds (associations) just existed for a very short period and at the very beginning in late 1980s in Wen zhou and soon faded away. The associations authorized by government constitute only a tiny portion of the whole amount. The second kind is the transformation one that were used to be certain ministries or bureaus in the government, as has often been the case at national level or in other cities which is a historical trail. They been changed into the form of guilds (associations) but still employ some of the functions inheriting from its original position. Packing Technology Association is one of them. This kind of guilds (associations) also just comprises of a small part. The main force lies on those organized by the rule of autonomy and voluntary. According to Regulations on the Registration and Administration of Social Organizations, they need to register in the Civil Affair Bureau and choose a relative governing body, which would be General Chamber of Commerce or Economy and Trade Committee. Normally, the organizations governed by General Chamber of Commerce are called merchant guilds, and those choosing Economy and Trade Committee as their governing body are called industry associations. Yet, the organizations on either side are treated equally by local government and enjoy the same rights. Therefore, guilds and industry associations are

interchangeable concepts in this context. As is indicated above in a survey, most of the enterprises believed they formed or joined the guilds (associations) by their own will and were not interfered or obliged by government. General Chamber of Commerce and Economy and Trade Committee offered enough freedom and show great flexibility to welcome their constituencies.

II self-governing in operation

One reason that the guilds (associations) develop quickly is the autonomy in the management and agenda-setting. The first of all is the independence of money. Unlike other organizations in the third sector which probably rely much on the financial support from outside or from government in China, most of the guilds (associations) in Wen zhou have realized the financial independence. The biggest proportion of the income comes from the membership fees and special sponsorship or donation by enterprises. The financial autonomy from government helps enlarge the independence of the guilds (associations) in daily running. In 2005, the government issued an official regulation that ‘industry associations’ should be financially independent from party and government organizations suggesting a supportive gesture of guilds (associations) autonomy from government.

The elections of council chairman and members are held independently as well. In recent years, some guilds (associations) have adopted competitive methods to elect their leaders and main council bodies. At the same time, they have full rights to follow their own agenda-setting and strive for their members’ interests as well as supervise the members’ behavior in the respective industry. When governments are still suffering headache about busy regulating industry self-discipline or market order, the guilds (associations) have freed government from facing such pressure. “Unlike what happens in many other cities, copyright protection and quality-check have been missions spontaneously taken by guilds instead of being pushed forward by government”, as a head from one guild put it. A very classic case is the lawsuit of anti-dumping cigarette lighter against European Union’s new bill that occurred in 2002. As in such anti-dumping lawsuits, government is not allowed to be involved

directly, the final victory for the Wen zhou Smoking Set Guild displayed more than economic gains in international market. Civil merchant guilds have learned to set their own action agenda and implement it beyond government scope.

Lots of guilds (associations) have complete regulations and rules to constrain their members as well as protect their interests by the force of collective action. In this sense, guilds create social capital of trust and networks and increase their leverage in the bargain with government. Fukuyama argued (2000) that in the absence of civil society, state power could often find its chance to maneuver individuals and intrude the personal space. Only through constrain of excessive individualism, could individuals seek energy to stop state's infinite intrusion. The judgment could apply to the guilds. As members join in a group and comply with the same game rules under their own constitution, guilds squeeze out autonomy space from government. The large sector of guilds and its high autonomy to make and follow its own agenda away from government directions suggest an expanding civil space. Under a state-corporatism regime, associations may have limited freedom in steering the development direction since state power has made the arrangement for them. In Wen zhou, guilds (associations) are responsible to their members rather than to government and government is retreating from its original position.

III Role of Government

The role and motivation of local government in the boost of economy in Wen zhou as well as in many other places has been explored a lot by scholars. In Wen Zhou, the local government adjusted its role in dealing with economic affairs and it has attempted to reform within the government. The authority transformed its role of 'doing nothing' at the outset to that of 'amount to something' (Zhang 1994). In the beginning, local government was passive in the management of economy. It did not help cultivate the economy as ambitiously as other local authorities at the start. Instead, it was the success of private economy that spurred government to take a more positive role. As Kang argued, since late 1970s as the reform is deepening, the legitimacy of the regime relies mainly on the performance of economic development.

The criterion to assess and promote officials is economic-oriented, driving local officials to care about the local economy. (Kang 2002). Combining political with economic considerations, we could better understand the behavior of local officials. Parris (1993) argued that the 'Wen Zhou Model' has been the result of conflict, compromise and long-term bargain among the public, local government and central government. New boundary between state and society has been emerging and a new relationship seems under construction in Wen Zhou. She also noticed the role of agents in channeling the enterprises with government. However, the role that local government plays on how to cope with the guilds changes over time. The way and the extent it influences on society take the form opposite to that in other regions. Since the economic and political transition commenced, the public power in China has retracted itself gradually from society. The Wen Zhou government, on the contrary, reacted in an opposite direction (Yu 2004). It was inactive by neither supporting nor opposing the status of guilds (associations) when the first round of formation gained its strength. It was not until 1999 that Wen Zhou government issued the regulations of management of industrial associations in Wen Zhou. In 2005, the government published regulations to further promote the standard development of industrial guilds (associations) as complementary rules. When the political identity and legitimacy of guilds (associations) were still vague, the local power acquiesced in the new sector's growth.

As local government comes to realize the role the guilds (associations) have played in an efficient effort of building a clean market that has improved the image of Wen Zhou products, it becomes more involved in interacting with guilds (association) affair. Alongside with the regulations and rules issued to support the guilds (associations), the two direct governing units responsible for guilds (associations) affair are also seen being more active in it. The Economy & Trade Committee in Wen Zhou has allocated ¥750,000 RMB per year to sponsor the guilds (associations) with good performance and feedback. The General Chamber of Commerce, as the other one, takes the advantage of its privilege to nominate candidates to local People's Congress and People's Political Consultative Conference to attract their constituencies. In 2003, it

recommended 141 entrepreneurs or leaders of the guilds (associations) to the two bodies. Besides that all the chairmen in the town-level guilds (associations) and branches outside Wen zhou city have been elected inside the groups, the chairmen of the General Chamber of Commerce are also elected from the enterprises. The government officials have quitted serving in the Chamber as an eye for government. Actually, the government has tried to introduce a new mode to administer the guilds (associations) which is called “governed by Chamber”. It attempts to turn the administering body into a non-government one, which might contradict the rules made by Civil Affair Bureau.

With the remarkable growth of the private economy and merchant guilds as its consequence, the government adapted itself not only by issuing regulations to normalize the supervision, but also by reforming the bureaucratic institutions and improving public service quality and efficiency. Since 2001, Wen Zhou Government launched its reform plan. It not only included the mission demanded from the Central Government, but was also comprised of the Municipal Administration’s own portfolio package. The government promised to withdraw the power inappropriately intervened in the market, simplify the administrative approval procedure for business, and leave auxiliary and technical services to the societal intermediary organizations, thus releasing more space room for the development of merchant guilds. In regard to the streamline of administrative approval procedure, the government not only shortened the time but also cancelled some steps in the procedure. Furthermore, the administration guaranteed the public service would be more transparent to the public.

The intensity and depth of the reform plan in Wen Zhou was regarded going farther than as required by the Central State. Apparently, the local authority has realized that the administration’s role needed to be adjusted for the sake market and society. Where did the motives within the government come from? As scholars asserted that the legitimacy of the regime now counted largely on the economic performance to obtain support from people, governments’ dependence on entrepreneurs increased.

IV Relations between Local State and Merchant Guilds

As the reframing of the economic organizations, the merchant guilds are established to represent the interests of their respective industries. Besides their function to regulate the members' behavior in the market, provide with necessary service and resource, share information and reduce the cost within the industries, the other big part of role is to influence government in policy making procedure, guard the industry from being intervened too much by the government, and strive for the autonomy from the public power. In China's context, the state attempts to keep the business under the order set by the regime while at the same time, granting them relative autonomy to deal with their own affairs. Currently, merchant guilds advocate their advice through four official channels: the first is to formulate proposals to People's Congress or People's Consultative Committee and prompt them to pass bills. The second means is to bring forward suggestions or negotiate with the agencies or departments in the government. Very often, the elitists in the organizations would utilize their private ties and influence to bargain with the government to carry out laws or policies that are of the merchant guilds' interests. This is regarded as an unofficial way but effective in many situations. A fourth one is to draw up regulations by the merchant guilds and enforce them on their own industries with the support or acquiesce of government. The first two approaches are more open and official while the other two rely more on the leaders or elitists' personal connection with governmental officials. They might be more effective for a short term but jeopardize the organizations or the public interests in the long run by counting on individuals instead of cultivating the force of the organizations. All in all, however, the merchant guilds have developed a ripe mode to deal with governments.

Historically speaking, the societal organizations had a close ties with government in China. Many scholars attributed the feature to the culture of 'guanxi' which has been embedded in the society. This partly explains why some merchant guilds opt to establish closer but more private networks with government. Yet, as more organizations found out that transparent and open communications networks will eventually benefit them more in the long run, they anticipate having more official and

open relationship instead of knocking at the back door. As Douglas Guthrie argues that the significance of 'Guanxi' might be facing a decline in China. "There is a growing emphasis on the distinction between social relationships and the use of these social relationships in the gift economy and managers in the urban industrial economy are increasingly likely to distance themselves from the institution of guanxi practice in the economic transition. While managers often view social connections as important in business transactions, they tend to generally view the importance of guanxi in market relationships as secondary to the market imperatives of price and quality." (Guthrie 1998:29) Kennedy asserted that clientelism is the micro-level phenomena, and the model privileges viewing direct one-to-one contact between officials and businesspeople. (Kennedy 2005:175) From a macro perspective, the whole environment for the communication between government and merchant guilds has been undergoing in a legal and official framework. On many issues, the government's influence is still large and inevitable. As a nature inherited from traditional Chinese political culture and practical calculation, the guilds are working hard to build private networks with government. Yet, a legal procedure is undergoing to get guilds (associations) channeled to government.

V Implications

This paper observed the phenomenon of boom of merchant guilds in the city Wen Zhou of Zhe Jiang Province. The strength of this type of organizations, its effort to govern themselves with regulations, its impact on the local economy has been changing their status in dealing with government. More significantly, it has become an important reason pushing the government to reform from inside and adjusting their behavior mode to the market and the organizations. The paper examined the revitalization of the merchant guilds (associations) in Wen Zhou, the way that they govern and regulate themselves, and the role of being representative of the business. Then the changing role of the government was analyzed as well as their relations with the organizations. Their motivations were discussed. The bottom-up approach in the resurgence of guilds (associations), the free space the guilds (associations) have been

creating through self-governing, and the evolving role the government played outline the contour of the situation of guilds (associations) in Wen zhou. In this field, we have seen traits of a societal-corporatism arrangement.

Civil society has been an important research area in political science, as it has significant impact on the formulation of certain patterns of interaction between society and government. As a main force of civil society, NGOs (Non-Governmental-Organization) provide social services in spheres that government might ignore. However, research has been achieved in a Western context. It is true that the goals and functions of NGOs have basic similarities regardless of their circumstances, yet different political and social systems and constitutional frameworks have different interactions with civil society. Many western scholars have showed strong interest in China case, but they tend to start with the same basic assumption as for a developed country (Alagappa, 2004). This may lead to misunderstanding in the analysis. The actual role of NGOs and interaction with government are sometimes misread. The development of merchant guilds may have shown a different case and approach to observe the behavior of non-governmental actor in China's context. As some viewpoint has suggested (Ma 2002), Tracing back to China's history and political culture, China's societal organizations have always had closer relations with the state than do their Western counterparts. Today, many organizations established by the society from grass-root have requested for more independence and autonomy. Yet, the relationship with the state would never be as simple as those in the West. "Instead of measuring how much autonomy Chinese NGOs do not exercise, we should see, with a more positive attitude, how much progress they have made so far in becoming a dynamic force outside of the state system". Judging by this, merchant guilds (associations) have achieved quite a lot of progress. The role of local government in the whole scenario is also worthy of being paid attention. The local state did not follow the central government's rules all the time. At the same time, the local government has started a reform within the government to better adapt to interact with the guilds and the society. Concerning the comparatively free environment for economy, the growth of merchant guilds in Wen

Zhou might be regarded as an exception in a big picture of the prospects of civil society in China. Nonetheless, it has demonstrated a unique approach for the development of civil society organizations and thrown optimistic light on it.

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