

The Yearning for “Civil Society” and Pushing for Democracy in Taiwan

Proposed Paper for the 2nd WCTS, London, 2015

Mau-kuei Chang

Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica, TAIWAN

Abstract

As Tocqueville has argued, in the context of the U.S. in late 19th century, civil society and civil organizations are organic parts of democratic system, important for the quality for representative democracy. The argument serves as an important source for the strength and quality of democratic regimes since. This paper suggests that civil society is not only an objective social phenomenon premised on the existences of different kinds of social organizations, collectivities, or networks. It serves other important functions for transforming authoritarianism. This is because it constitutes important discourses for the struggles for justice originated from the grass-rooted. It helps to clarify the supposedly functioning and meanings of formal politics, justify collective actions in resisting in facing the overwhelming power of the state, mostly, and the market forces, sometimes. To discuss how people in Taiwan have evolved in defining, imagining, and engaging in their discussions of civil society, and using the concept not just for describing existing social network among groups, but to become actively involved in public issues is especially interesting for several reasons. First, it is after all a “new” and “imported” idea from the West. It did not exist in public discourses before late 1980’s. And yet it has become occupying a key position in justifying collective actions in political reforms or in whistle blowing of government’s wrong-doings, and of failures of the market. How did this come about and when did it happen? What was the relation of civil society to the early years of political movement for democratization? And the relation to building of democratic regime? Secondly, since it was an “imported” idea, the changing of its translations really signifies important shifting of Taiwan’s democracy and development. What can we learn from the changes of Taiwan’s legal political system through the changing translation of this term? This paper suggests that different translations really mean different strategy of the grass-rooted in negotiating and dealing with the political system. In sum, this paper will explore how people in Taiwan engaged in self-organizing, self-learning, and self-governing in name of striving for strong and autonomous civil society, and this is in general reflects the tendency to shape and to reconfigure Taiwan’s democracy in past several decades