CHAPTER SIX

THE EMERGENCE OF CHINA'S CIVIL SOCIETY AND 
ITS SIGNIFICANCE TO GOVERNANCE

Introduction: Civil Society and Good Governance

“Civil society” is a term open to interpretation. By and large, definitions fall into two categories, namely those championed by political science, and others used in sociology. Both categories define civil society as a public sphere, mainly consisting of civic organizations. The emphasis, however, is different. Political scientists emphasize society’s “civil” nature, i.e., of the influence of civic organizations protecting citizens’ rights and enhancing political participation and civic engagement. Sociology emphasizes the “intermediate” nature of civil society, as an intermediary between state and commerce. Civil society is thus interpreted as all civic organizations and other civil relations not determined by state or political authority. It is comprised of various non-state or other civic organizations not linked to a governing political force, including NGOs, voluntary civil and civic organizations, residential community organizations, as well as spontaneously organized interest groups and civic movements. Such organizations are also referred to as “the third sector” between government and commerce.

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2 The English term “civil society” can be translated as “shimin shehui,” “minjian shehui” and “gongmin shehui” in Chinese. In fact, the three Chinese terms differ in meaning, however fine the nuances. “Shimin shehui” is the most commonly used term and the classical translation of “civil society,” derived from Chinese translations of the Marxist classics. Within the latter, however, the term actually has predominantly negative connotations, referring to bourgeois society. “Minjian shehui” is the translation used in Taiwan, and preferred by Chinese historians. This term is also widely used in research on China’s contemporary civic organizations. Neutral in tone, some scholars and a majority of government officials treat the term with caution. “Gongmin shehui” is a recent translation, dating back to the beginning of the reform period. Used in a commendatory sense, the term emphasises the political dimension, namely citizens’ political participation and checks on state power. En vogue with younger academics, most terms are actually used interchangeably.
The civil society organizations (CSOs) mentioned in this article have the following four features. First, they are non-oficial, i.e., “civil,” and they do not represent the position of any government or state. Secondly, they are charities, not founded for the sake of making profit, but for the provision of public welfare and services. Thirdly, they are relatively independent, meaning that they have their own organizational and management mechanisms as well as independent sources of funding, and that they are thus independent from the government to some extent in terms of politics, administration and finance. Finally, they are voluntary in nature, implying that members are not compelled to join CSOs, but rather do so out of their own free will. Therefore, these organizations are also called civil voluntary organizations. As CSOs develop, they play an increasingly important role in social management. The process of social management exercised by CSOs independently or in cooperation with the government no longer belongs under the term “government,” but “governance.”

The basic meaning of governance refers to a governing authority’s efforts to maintain order and to enhance public welfare. The objective of governance is to utilize power in order to guide, control and institutionalize citizens’ activities and to maximize the public good in its various institutional expressions. From the perspective of political science, governance relates to the process of public administration. Governance provides the basis for the institutionalization of political authority, for the handling of public affairs and the management of public resources. It highlights the role of political authority and the exercising of administrative power needed to maintain social order. At a first glance, “governance” and “government” appear to be very similar, but the deeper implications are quite different. In order to distinguish between the two terms, we need to examine similarities and divergencies. Both terms express the need for authority and power, for the purpose of maintaining social order. However, there are two basic differences between the concepts.

One key difference is that governance requires authority. This authority not only rests with government departments but also to NGOs. Government always determines society through public institutions, whereas governance can act through public or private institutions, as well as through private-public partnerships. Governance requires cooperation between state and civil society, between government and extra-governmental bodies, public and private institutions and between compulsory and voluntary service. Therefore, governance is a more