According to the official registration records of the state Ministry of Civil Affairs, few community organizations exist in China below the county level. It would appear that China’s civil society, having primarily developed above the county level, has not yet emerged at the grassroots level. However, this is not, in actuality, the case. In local communities and rural villages, the quantity and types of folk organizations, as well as the number of participants in the activities of these organizations, greatly exceed those at and above the county level, though this is not reflected in official statistics. The depiction of the circumstances and evolution of these grassroots organizations is of great significance to an accurate understanding of contemporary Chinese civil society.

Voluntary organizations are not modern constructs of social interaction. China was traditionally an expansive empire, in which huge spaces existed between the state and the individual, and numerous intermediary organizations were relied upon to maintain social cohesion. Voluntary organizations functioned as the most basic form of social connection as well as the foundation upon which all of society operated. Included among these traditional folk organizations were blood relation-based families and clans geographically-defined associations and assemblies (e.g. the Spring and Autumn Assemblies which offered sacrifices to the earth, the economically-oriented Green Sprouts Assembly, and the comprehensive temple fairs and township associations); professional guilds; and associations based on personal interests, including poetry societies, money societies, incense societies, seniors associations, and fraternities. These folk organizations embodied the cultural models and values that traditionally defined Chinese interpersonal relationships and represented the customary means by
which social capital was cultivated in Chinese society. During China’s process of becoming a modern nation, especially at the peak of the various socialist movements, most of these organizations were either banned or replaced. The few that survived were forced to operate covertly, or in a reduced and informal capacity.

However, thirty years of “Reform and Opening” has impelled the voluntary development of Chinese society beyond the official administrative system. The ideological bases and institutional forms of this development have derived from two major sources: the modern, civil societies of foreign (most frequently Western) nations, and traditional Chinese folk society. The former have provided the ideological and institutional framework for the regeneration of Chinese society, as well as models and institutional structures for this development. Employees of state-owned enterprises and administrative work units have frequently drawn upon the experiences of developed countries in establishing professional organizations, academic associations, and national charity and public welfare enterprises in China. The latter, conversely, has provided the organizational structures, shared values, and rules for interpersonal exchanges for China’s rapidly-reactivated voluntary grassroots organizations. Through this process of development, we have not only witnessed the reemergence of organizational structures such as family and clan organizations, temple fairs, money societies, township associations, wedding and funeral councils, etc., but also the return of concepts such as “happiness,” “auspiciousness,” “harmony,” “safety,” “filial piety,” “righteousness,” “accumulation of virtue,” and “benevolence,” which serve as organizational resources as well as guiding values.

It is a verifiable fact that a wide variety of folk organizations have emerged in China during the past thirty years and that a number of these have adopted the title or organizational structure of traditional voluntary organizations. Yet academic studies of the adoption of traditional resources by folk organizations are replete with disparities and even contradictions. For instance, in discussing the revival of family organizations, certain scholars have used the example of disputes between families over burial grounds in denouncing the resurgence of the clan as “the rekindling of the cold ashes of feudalism.” Meanwhile, others have pointed to the active role of family connections in the growth of rural enterprises as a manifestation of the vitality of Confucian traditions in modern industry and commerce. In examining the reinstatement of temple fairs (庙会), some scholars view the involve-