The Shifting Definition of Rural Civic Organizational Studies amidst the Interference of “Civil Society”:

The Example of Guanxi and Trust: Empirical Studies of China’s Rural Civic Organizations

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Guanxi and Trust: Empirical Studies of China’s Rural Civic Organizations is a book of academic depth in the field of rural civic organization studies. The work borrows on a wealth of theoretical work from the field. While the writer’s grasp of contemporary theorists freed her from directly presenting empirical results, the sheer number and variety of theories requires of the writer a certain degree of reflection.

This piece attempts to analyze the book’s considerations with regard to applied theory, to reveal the interference of “civil society” terminology, to explain how a field striving to localize is unable to unfetter itself from popular terminology and is stuck undulating between actively merging and originally creating, and to consider what estimation we should make of the definition of the field as the work characterizes it. In this, the piece comes to one of the challenges of China’s rural civic organization studies: the shifting definition of the study.

Because the study of China’s rural civic organizations is just unfolding and the quantity of study results is rapidly increasing, at this time, we especially need to invigorate our discussion of the current studies and engender clear communication about the direction of the field.

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We cannot criticize the rigor of the empirical analysis in this book. Over the course of 18 months of surveying in Hunan’s Shaoyang County, the writer

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1 This piece was originally written in 2004 and has been revised in some places.
surveyed the extant civic organizations, surveyed local periodicals for historical records of organizations and collected recollections; it could be called an exhaustive effort. The materials’ depth and breadth are unparalleled by other researchers.

Subsequent to achieving this depth in the empirical study, the writer recognized that: “the state of China’s rural civic organizations is not as we researchers imagine it to be. Analysis cannot simply imitate the Western NGO framework, and it is different from the so-called “third sector” and “civil society” frameworks as well. From the soil that produced them and their development model, to their operational conventions, rural civic organizations are emblazoned with a uniquely Chinese imprint. Praying and worship in villages is directly coupled with Western civilization. Therefore, in our choice of theoretical models, we cannot simply use wholesale Western models for analysis. As such, the writer is attempting to choose a kind of localized model for use in her analysis. The research direction is firmly “complementary” in nature: “After reflecting on the predominant NGO theory literature, I finally chose the theory of social capital, within the framework of social network analysis, based on an analysis of traditional Confucian culture, and integrating the results of previous studies of guanxi in Chinese village society for my analysis of China’s rural civic organizations.” Regretfully, even in this relatively original research attempt, the writer was still unable to depart from the relatively determined “civil society” theory, and the complementary character of the theories employed finally resulted in an undefined drift between the different kinds of theoretical resources.

In Chapter One, the writer reviewed various theories related to rural civic organizations studies and comments on several theories related to NGOs. These theories are largely introduced from the West, and, as the writer boldly puts it: “Current Chinese research on NGOs primarily borrows from results of Western scholars studying NPOs, describes the use and function of the development of NPOs in Western societies, explains measures taken to stimulate NPOs’ development in Western countries, and presents trial evaluative research on cases of NPOs in China. Generally, based on the weakness of local theoretical research, there is a dearth of breakthrough contributions.2 But generally speaking, in the application of theoretical resources, most scholars’ emphases are placed on using Western theory for analysis, and most pay little attention to local theoretical resources. 3 These viewpoints may be limited by the appropriateness of her reading selections.

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2 The work under discussion. Pg. 10
3 Pg. 24