Historical and Geographic Context, Development Space, and Asian NGOs: Review of The State and NGOs – Perspective from Asia

Lu Fang
NGO Research Center, Tsinghua University

Asian NGOs emerged in large numbers in the 1980s, forming a revolutionary social wave. Academics observed this phenomenon closely and a great deal of research was conducted on this topic, but most of it utilized conceptual definitions based on Western traditional civil society theory. In recent years, studying the West has become prolific in many Asian countries and using Western theory to assess the realities of scholars’ own countries has now been common among Asian scholars for some time.

However, one should keep in mind that Western theory is a product of its own context. The substantially advanced state of Western theory has led many Asian scholars to mistakenly believe that all aspects of Western theory are advanced. However, upon closer examination, it is clear that Western theory is unavoidably a product of its own, localized context. Therefore, the appropriateness of using the same analytical device to solve all problems is highly questionable. That said, there is a group of Japanese scholars led by Shinichi Shigetomi that does not blindly apply Western theory to Asian contexts. This group’s mission is to try to break free of civil society theory in the study of the development of NGOs in Asia and create a theory that differs from that in the West. Through empirical comparison and analysis of fifteen Asian countries and regions, they introduce a new perspective for understanding NGOs. Abandoning conventional theory, they attempt to address, in the context of Asian countries that have utterly different politics, economies, societies, cultures, and traditions: “What is an NGO?” Other important related questions include: What are the differences between Asian and Western NGOs? What are the development trajectories of these unique NGOs? How large is the political and economic space they occupy in a special region like Asia? What is the nature of relationships between NGOs, governments, and local populations? In addition, what kind of trends and developments are on the horizon?
That the authors of this edited volume are able to attempt to introduce a new perspective connected to their research methods and backgrounds. Shigetomi, the main editor, is the chief of the Southeast Asia working group of the Asian economics department of Japan’s Asia Trade Promotion Organization. He has researched Southeast Asian, especially Thai, village development and economic development for almost twenty years and authored *Development and Community Based Organizations in Thai Villages* (1996). The remaining fourteen scholars have all been engaged in research on regional economies and societies in nations across Asia and have accumulated rich empirical research experience. Their close and personal contact with Asia has led them to gradually shift their research perspectives from Western to Asian theory to analyze the localized evolution and development of NGOs. This has subsequently produced scholarship that is positioned within the Asian historical and geographic context.

This volume draws upon numerous empirical surveys, deliberations, and reflections; its research scope covers broad, cross-cultural content regarding the different areas. Despite major disparities in national and regional contexts, the different authors use a similar theoretical framework. They not only provide thought-provoking new examples, they, more importantly, also introduce the concept of “development space,” whereby they argue against conventional political theories of nations, including that of civil society theory.

The book is structured as follows. It begins with an introduction of the history and definition of Asian NGOs, as well as describing their research perspective and analytic framework. The essays that follow introduce the origins, state, and characteristics of NGOs from the fifteen nations/regions. Each NGO case study is presented in the context of its unique political and economic development background. Through tracing back to social traditions, these essays examine the historical necessity of the growth of NGOs in various places. They also analyze the relationships between NGOs, governments and nations, highlighting the initiative NGOs have demonstrated as they conform to historical periods and interact with national economies while focusing on the real political space in which NGOs are positioned.

In Western countries, NGOs serve as supplements to governments and markets, as social pillars that are capable of pushing back against both. They are also seen as an expression of civil society. The social force embodied by NGOs is capable of organizing citizens to participate in social and public affairs and to influence policy, simultaneously creating great economic value. Nevertheless, NGOs are embedded in systems of limited government and well-formed economies and, as such, are inseparable from the West’s liberal democratic political tradition. Consequently, international research on NGOs