The Chinese Corporatist State: Adaptation, Survival and Resistance

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## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of illustrations</th>
<th>xiii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Notes on contributors</td>
<td>xiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>xvi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviations</td>
<td>xviii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. **The changing faces of state corporatism**  
   JENNIFER Y. J. HSU AND REZA HASMATH  
   1

2. **Joining forces to save the nation: Corporate educational governance in Republican China**  
   BARBARA SCHULTE  
   10

3. **A self-defeating secret weapon? The institutional limitations of corporatism on United Front work**  
   GERRY GROOT  
   29

4. **Collective wage bargaining and state-corporatism in contemporary China**  
   XIAN HUANG  
   50

5. **Keep business for business: Associations of private enterprises in China**  
   KEMING YANG  
   66

6. **Local state entrepreneurialism in China: Its urban representations, institutional foundations, and policy implications**  
   LEI WANG  
   83

7. **The state–religion relationship in contemporary China: Corporatism with hegemony**  
   CARSTEN T. VALA  
   102
Illustrations

Figures
2.1 Clusters of occupations that were pursued by identical individuals 18
5.1 Percentage of private enterprises with a CCP committee 74
6.1 Central-to-local transfers in China, 2003–2004 89
6.3 Average land prices in 35 major Chinese cities, 2000–2007 97

Tables
5.1 Percentages of members of political parties and business associations among private business owners in China, 1993–2006 72
6.2 The growth of budgetary expenditures on major local account items, 2000–2005 86
6.3 National, central budgetary revenues and local extra-budgetary funds, since 1993 88
6.4 Financing urban construction, 2001–2004 91
6.5 The floor space of sold and started buildings, 2000–2006 93
6.6 The gross premium and net premium of land granting, 1999–2005 96
8.1 Primary level of state interactions and registration status of Beijing NGOs 125
8.2 Primary level of state interactions and registration status of Shanghai NGOs 126
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Contributors

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Understanding China from a comparative and social science perspective has always been a challenge. Once it became possible to talk about comparative Communism, it also became necessary to highlight the very different models of the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. When asked about the methodology of contemporary China Studies, I have often answered that there are two approaches to avoid. The first is the view that everything in China is so completely *sui generis* that comparison is meaningless or, more extremely, that the language, concepts and methods developed elsewhere can have no purchase in China. The second is the view that everything that has happened (and presumably ever will happen) in China has occurred before somewhere else: that China is a fungible country. Both approaches are less than academically rigorous, for it is the grey area in between the two that are worth the discussion and the attempt to understand the structures and dynamics of change.

The attempt to explain state–society relations in China through a state corporatist lens addresses the challenge in precisely that context. Neither editors nor authors are stating categorically that China is, or has been, state corporatist; rather, they show it as a contested concept which, when applied to China, can highlight certain aspects of state–society relations, and challenge two current views of China quite dramatically in the process. The first is that the Communist Party-state model of interest domination – with the establishment and development of the People’s Republic – represents a departure in the history of China. On the contrary, similar structures and dynamics attend Republican China, too. The second and almost counter-intuitive view (at least to many) is that state corporatism only exists because the Party-state sees this as an agenda for the control and management of social and economic interest. The Party-state certainly has that agenda, but there is at the same time strong evidence that social and economic interests are equally desirous of a state corporatism that accommodates their presence in politics. Remarkably, interested stakeholders include the equivalent of NGOs and social associations, as well as the new entrepreneurial class. Although there has been much research done elsewhere in the last ten years that has highlighted the emergence of “crony capitalism” and a “red bourgeoisie,” the phenomenon is not presented as state corporatism as emphatically as may be suitable.
At the end of the day, there may well be commenters, the editors of this book included, who will say that a ruling Communist Party-state is structurally so different from other versions of state corporatism resulting from more open political systems as to render the equation meaningless. After all, Communist Party-states deal in the management of certainty, not the open political system’s uncertainty principle. Nonetheless, as the chapters in this book bear considerable witness, asking the question and attempting the comparison is important and often results in unexpected and interesting answers.

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1 The changing faces of state corporatism

Jennifer Y.J. Hsu and Reza Hasmath

The modern Chinese state has traditionally affected every major aspect of the domestic society. With the growing liberalization of the economy, coupled with an increasing complexity of social issues, there emerges a belief that the state is retreating from an array of social problems from health (Duckett 2010) to the environment (Wu 2011). Yet, as we survey China’s political landscape today, we see that not only is the central state playing an active role in managing social problems, but new state actors at the local level are increasingly seeking to partner with various non-governmental organizations or social associations to ensure the continuing presence, legitimacy and viability of the state. In this context, this book brings together a series of inter-connected chapters that examine how a corporatist understanding of state–society relations may be reconstituted in light of new social stakeholders emerging to the forefront, and thereafter play a greater role in managing contemporary social issues.

Understanding state–society relations through a state corporatist lens enables the observer to engage with the nuances of the state. This directs our attention to the changes that have occurred within the Chinese state structures, vis-à-vis society, as a result of economic reforms. As Unger and Chan (1995: 37) note with great clarity, “corporatist arrangements, regardless of whether they are of the authoritarian or society variety, do not define any political system anywhere; they are instead institutional mechanisms in the service of government and particular sectoral constituencies.” Theories of state corporatism and its importance for economic development in post-war Europe have dominated the corporatist literature. Philippe Schmitter’s 1974 seminal essay “Still the Century of Corporatism?” sought to set out an operational definition of the term. Schmitter (1974: 92) saw that corporatist theory could explain patterns of organized interest, which would be compatible across the different political regimes that existed at the time, from the liberal democracies of Europe to the authoritarian regimes of Portugal and Brazil. His essay aimed to delve deeper into the institutional structures rather than see it simply as a policy tool. Schmitter’s oft-quoted definition of corporatism endeavored to highlight the institutional structure and applicability across various regimes:

Corporatism can be defined as a system of interest representation in which the constituent units are organized into a limited number of singular, compulsory,
noncompetitive, hierarchically ordered and functionally differentiated categories, recognized or licensed (if not created) by the state and granted a deliberate representational monopoly within their respective categories in exchange for observing certain controls on their selection of leaders and articulation of demands and supports.

(1974: 93–94)

Schmitter believed that such a model and its institution (as described above) could either be enforced by the state or emerge voluntarily. Consequently, he distinguished between state corporatism and societal corporatism. He explained societal corporatism as the “imperative necessity for a stable, bourgeois-dominant regime, due to processes of concentration of ownership, competition between national economies, expansion of the role of public policy and rationalization of decision-making within the state to associate or incorporate subordinate classes and status groups more closely within the political process” (1974: 107–108). However, Schmitter’s argument for societal corporatism was criticized as “general, not to mention speculative, and did not offer much on the specific operation of, and power structures associated with societal corporatism” (Williamson 1989: 12).

Beyond the development of an operational model of corporatism, Schmitter’s essay was also a response to interest politics—namely pluralism—that pervaded the political science discipline in North America. Accordingly, the essay ventured into conceiving the representation of interests. As Williamson (1989: 11) so aptly wrote: “If pluralism was the competitive market system of pressure group activity, then corporatism was the state-licensed monopoly.” Nonetheless, Schmitter’s work sparked great interest within academia from the 1980s to find more empirical evidence to support corporatist theory. Moreover, such interests led to academic enquiries into the relationship between corporatist institutional structures and related policy systems, as well as its difference to the pluralist system. In addition, there were attempts to establish links between corporatism and macroeconomic development throughout the 1980s. As corporatism studies gained ground, authors such as Wassenberg (1982) and Cawson (1986) sought to rethink corporatism at the meso-level, as they believed the existing framework focused too much at the national level.

By the 1990s, the ascendancy of neoliberalism led to the speculation of the decline and demise of corporatism. Advancements in technology and the weakening of labor unions resulted in a gradual dis-embedding of state institutions from society. Molina and Rhodes (2002) argued that the proclamation of corporatism’s demise was premature given that the traditional corporatist European states such as Italy, Portugal and Spain had reinterpreted institutions and relationships to adjust to the new economic challenges of becoming integrated into the European monetary system. In order to meet such challenges, traditional European corporatist states had all “implemented new social pacts, based on peak level concentration” (Molina and Rhodes 2002: 311). Here we saw state corporatist structures were in fact adaptable to the national social and economic conditions,
The changing faces of state corporatism

which would be particularly relevant in our aims to understand China within such frameworks.

The development and economic success of East Asia can be viewed through the corporatist lens. However, corporatism within the East Asian context has moved into conceptions of a developmental state, where the state has dominated industrialization and, subsequently, the majority of social actors have been co-opted to focus on this national goal. Societal corporatism occurs where social groups are brought closer to the political process by the state (Schmitter 1974). However, what is observable in China is that certain conditions give rise to the situation where social organizations seek to be closer to the state. Thus the theoretical constructs and empirical evidence of corporatism are clearly not “dead” when one considers China (and East Asia), but it can be further developed if the focus is shifted to understanding the societal, economic and political conditions. The industrialization process of East Asia and China is inextricably tied to the state’s agenda and has led to new dynamics in state–society relations.

Corporatism within the Chinese context

The last three decades have seen the Chinese state reshape and transform itself as a result of economic reforms. Although the state has loosened its grip on most sectors of society, there is evidence to suggest that the state is by no means retreating from society. The state’s relationship with newly emerging social organizations, from environmental to women’s groups, illustrate that it is attempting to interpret and manage social change, and thereby reassert its dominance in a contemporary setting (Howell 1994: 206–207). Increasing concern over the state’s legitimacy has also led to the need to adapt, albeit with reluctance. Howell concludes that instead of new elites, such as entrepreneurs being proactive and influencing public affairs, the state is actually looking for new mechanisms to control the economy and society (Howell 1994: 211). Similarly, Dickson (2000) argues that, since the implementation of liberalization policies in the late 1970s, the state has relied less on coercive tools and propaganda in managing society, and has instead developed linkages with social organizations, such as professional associations, to enable the state to streamline the interests of society along the lines of reform. With the state regulating social change through its control of social organizations from non-governmental organizations to entrepreneurial associations, we see the manifestation of corporatism in practice.

In sum, it is useful to employ the corporatist framework to understand the Chinese state’s transformation and its relationship with society since it highlights the factors that have shaped the state. Nonetheless, the usefulness of the concept must be coupled with an awareness that the framework does not encompass all that is happening in China today, and the shortcomings of the framework are clearly highlighted by each of the contributors in this book. In a typical corporatist system, only one national organization per sector is recognized by the state. The state deems which organizations are legitimate and, as such, this relationship is unequal in suggesting that associational life is to a degree state-directed.¹ An
interventionist state often assists to organize and establish sectoral association and mediate the relationship between associations. However, within this mode of operation, some autonomy is allowed for the association. The state-corporatist structure focuses on the emergence of associations, as do other frameworks, but it does not erode the power of the state; rather, it is seen as moving from state control to indirect state coordination (Gallagher 2004: 420). The coordination that Gallagher describes can also be interpreted as a state monopoly of social interests (Williamson 1989). The reinforcement of the state’s power or coordination is in part related to what Dickson (2000) calls the “non-critical realm of civil society”—that is, entrepreneurs and technocrats who have greater interest in maintaining the status quo to ensure their own survival. The “critical realm,” such as intellectuals who have potential to influence state–society relations, are excluded by the state, and thus “corporatist structures are consequently emerging in China as a substitute for coercion, propaganda, and central planning to maintain hegemony” (Dickson 2000: 532). Despite the liberalization policies and decentralization of state power, the state nonetheless retains its overall control by maintaining a bargaining position with the local state (Krug and Hendrischke 2008).

In the liberalization of the economy, the corporatist framework shows that mechanisms are needed to fill the gaps where the government has freed up. This is evident in Howell’s (1994) work on Xiaoshan’s intermediary associations, as mentioned previously. The bridging effects of these associations between state and society are regarded as substitute control mechanisms for the state. According to Unger and Chan (1995: 39), the devolution of state power creates space, but not space for independent organizations. This is evident in the emergence of intermediary associations. The corporatist framework explains the dependent relationship between the Chinese state and associations, but also highlights a level of state co-optation of society. As Gallagher (2004: 421) writes, it is a relationship of “mutual penetration, converging interests, and cooptation.” Yet, where Chung (2007) and Yang (2006) see corporatism as a reaffirmation of the state’s control, Unger and Chan argue that corporatism helps the state to loosen its grip; that is, corporatist associations are shouldered with the traditional responsibilities of the state—as is the case in relation to migrant workers. Mass organizations such as the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) are now responsible for delivering a substantial amount of social services to migrant workers in urban areas. Regardless of whether the state is releasing or tightening control, it is perhaps wiser to understand this reality, as Gallagher does, by seeing it as a shift from state management to state coordination of social affairs.

The local state has proven to be a notable factor in the (re-)negotiation of the state–society relationships. The Chinese state is indeed shaped by local forces and, with the decentralization of state power, local authorities now have the opportunity to interpret state–society relations within their own contexts. The importance of the local level is reflected in the trends of the corporatism literature where meso-level studies have become increasingly important. The initial decentralization of the state’s power, largely within the economic arena, has given local authorities the opportunity to exert their own influence over social organizations,
associations and other groups within their jurisdictions. While the literature mainly focuses on the role of local authorities in local business associations, it is nonetheless helpful to look briefly into the literature. Jonathan Unger’s (1996) study of the Self-Employed Labourers’ Association (SELA) of the Chaoyang District branch in Beijing identifies the discrepancies between the central and local level. SELA is meant to represent and assist those operating their own small businesses and give guidance on the administrative procedures of having one’s own business, taxation and other services. However, as Unger has observed, association officials have treated its members with disdain. He has documented that local officials have their own agendas aside from the association’s national goal, and that it is the pursuit of personal interests that dictates their work in the association. Christopher Nevitt’s study (1996) of the same organization in Tianjin offers a similar assessment. He writes that the members of SELA have held the organization in “low regard” and that its controlling nature of small entrepreneurs has made it unlikely for its members to turn to SELA for assistance if faced with a business problem (Nevitt 1996: 30–31). Unger argues that while associations such as SELA may seem corporatist on paper, in the sense that the local state seems to be in tight control of the small private businesses within its area of jurisdiction, in actuality many of the members interviewed are unfamiliar with SELA—the association precisely created to represent them. In addition, the self-interest of association officials has created a rift between the central and local. This sentiment is echoed by White, Howell and Shang’s (1996) study which observes that weak linkages between national and local branches of “semi-official” organizations, such as Chinese Wildlife Conservation Association, render such associations unlikely to be truly representative of its constituents or goals.

Authors such as Marc Blecher and Vivienne Shue (2001) have outlined the corporatist strategies of the officials in the municipality of Xinji of Hebei province in their attempts to establish the fur and leather trade. The success of the Xinji case is a result of the local state leaders’ move to “pick a winner” by providing them “the full panoply of developmental state levers to push that sector to prominence, dedicating themselves particularly to the planning and development of an enormous industrial and commercial park for fur and leather goods producers and traders” (Blecher and Shue 2001: 370). While the local officials remain hands-off to entrepreneurship through indirect controls such as licensing, financing, quality control and other measures, they are able to exert control over the private sector. Such strategies clearly suggest a local corporatist state in operation. The Xinji case indicates that, in picking a winner, there will ultimately be a loser—that industries without the backing or favor of local officials will lose out. Additionally, strong support from the local state will surely create fierce competition at the inter-provincial level, where similar industries are also supported by other local governments. This competition prevents a truly corporatist state to operate, as the local level is more concerned in meeting their goals, at the expense of the national. Similarly Jean Oi’s (1995) study of rural township village enterprises (TVEs), conveys this sense of localism. TVEs are seen as within the realm of the local
officials’ administrative responsibility and are subsequently treated as only a segment of the whole. Oi regards the economic growth of local regions as a result of local state coordination, not the central. As such, the local corporatist structure weaves a web of intimate relationship between banks, finance and tax offices, township and village authorities, where mutual cooperation would ensure each maximizing their revenues.

There is indeed evidence as noted in the above mentioned literature and in the chapters ahead, that local officials have been able to increase their power and control over resources and distribute it according to their preferences. What is evident here is a fragmentation of the central state and a redefinition of relationships between local groups—whether it be associations or businesses—and the local state, as a result of economic coordination at the local level. The developments at the local level indicate that we should seek for concrete changes in state—society relations. The transformations that we are seeing in Chinese society, whether it be the re-emergence of religious groups or the increasing number of NGOs, reveal that state–society interactions have become far more complex. As Tony Saich (2004: 179) writes: “Much experimentation is taking place with basic level organizations and institutions, which all makes for a very messy kind of China, and one that defies simple categorization.” The state corporatist lens provides the opportunity to assess the changes at the central and local levels of the state while maintaining a grasp on how social stakeholders are framed within these alterations. However, while the corporatist framework is appropriate for studying how state–society relations have evolved, the weaknesses of such a framework include an over-emphasis on the state. Each chapter in this book sheds light on the process of interaction between state and the relevant social stakeholders. This is, however, paired with an acute awareness that social, political and economic conditions can alter the corporatist arrangements, ultimately suggesting that the corporatist framework ought not to be considered in a static manner.

State and society interactions: The changing face of state corporatism

The corporatist nature of the Chinese state is not a new concept, as we see in Chapters 2 and 3 by Barbara Schulte and Gerry Groot, respectively. Schulte’s chapter notes with great clarity that, despite the fragmentation of Chinese society during the Warlord period (1911–1927), educational associations of the time were nonetheless able to operate under the conditions of corporatism as part of greater quest to seek national unity and modernity through education. As Schulte observes, the protagonists of these educational associations were willing to take on state-building and modernization tasks not on behalf of the state, but in lieu of the state, as such responsibilities were only temporary until a capable government emerged. Thus, while the incorporation of educational associations into the Nationalist government did not occur seamlessly, it was seen as necessary to the establishment of a strong state that could defend against the Communist threat and promote the goal of nation building.
Whereas Schulte has noted the weakness of corporatism in accounting for the ideological underpinnings of nation building, Groot has delineated the shortcomings of modern corporatist structure in accounting for and managing recent religious and ethnic tensions. Groot examines the Chinese Communist Party’s United Front work from the 1930s to the present day. More specifically, he traces the apparent failures of the United Front Work Department of the Party in the area of religion and ethnic minorities. According to Groot, the selectivity of its membership has resulted in a growing gap between any religious or minority representative and their constituencies, thereby exacerbating ethnic and religious unrests. Despite the dysfunctions of the corporatist structure, it has provided the Chinese state with enough strength to contain the recent disturbances.

Xian Huang illustrates a classic case of corporatism in the area of contemporary collective bargaining in Chapter 4. She highlights the leading role the state plays in the process of collective bargaining at both the government and enterprise level. The chapter argues that the initiation of collective bargaining in Chinese enterprises has been contingent on the interest convergence among the state, management and workers in the economic boom of 2001 to 2006. Collective bargaining is considered a method to alleviate fears of the economy overheating, growing social inequality and friction with trading partners.

In Chapter 5 Keming Yang surveys the state of business associations in China. By confirming that their numbers have increased, Yang argues that business associations are continuing to play the role of “the bridge” between the state and the business. The corporatist relationship is maintained since business associations follow the principle of keeping business to business by refraining from mixing business with politics. However, there are situations in which the current arrangements have proved ineffective for business associations where their demands of state support are incompatible with state policies. Consequently, Yang surmises that the survival of the corporatist structure is contingent on how the state manages these internal tensions.

China’s urbanization and changing land-use strategies, argues Lei Wang in Chapter 6, have largely been driven by land-use manipulations of municipalities. The involvement of Chinese local states in the urban land market is rooted in the re-centralized fiscal and centralized political institutions. According to Wang, local states have every incentive to be involved in order to maximize their revenues through the competition of inward investments. Nonetheless, such corporatist arrangements between the local states and land developers are seen as unsustainable, particularly as they overheat the housing market.

Although the corporatist framework has served the understanding of land markets and business associations well, Carsten Vala argues in Chapter 7 that the relationship between state and religious groups is dynamic. Vala believes that a blanket perspective of emphasizing Party-state control of official religions undercuts the agency of grassroots religious actors to expand their activities within official boundaries. Vala shows that while practitioners of popular religion may resist the encroachment of the state, they are more likely to seek to engage local state officials and maintain a mutual relationship in which popular religious actors
offer material benefits in return for official legitimation. This dynamic of seeking a mutually beneficial relationship between state and social organization is brought to the fore in the subsequent chapter.

Jennifer Hsu and Reza Hasmath’s chapter on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) illustrate that NGOs, like the religious groups of the previous chapters, seek a closer relationship with the state. Hsu and Hasmath argue that it is the local state that is of the greatest importance to NGOs, as it is the local authorities who determine the practical boundaries of what is acceptable or not for NGOs. The strategies in which the local state and NGOs interact are based on the notion of tacit and overt sanctioning, as these indicators provide NGOs the ability to discern how and when to engage with the local state.

The final chapter by Hsu and Hasmath discusses lessons learned from the Chinese experience with corporatism. The authors argue that, while there are shortcomings in the corporatist framework, corporatist arrangements in other nations have evolved into a social partnership between state and society akin to the Chinese experience in many regards. These lessons and experiences indicate the dynamic and flexible nature of the framework.

Ultimately, viewing Chinese state–society relations with a corporatist lens allows the observer to investigate the opening up of social space while acknowledging the continued control of the state of various realms. While the following chapters recognize the various weaknesses of this perspective, there is simultaneously a strong belief in its fluid nature. This flexibility is particularly visible when we investigate the relationship between local states and social stakeholders, thereby suggesting that the corporatist framework may be more apt at explaining local state and society relations in China today.

Notes

1 According to Macedo et al. (2005: 117), associational life can include “civic associations, community groups, sports teams, religious organizations, workplace associations, political movements, issue-oriented advocacy groups, and more.”

2 Decentralization often refers to three types: administrative, political and fiscal. Administrative decentralization can be seen as the delegation of responsibilities to lower levels of government with the ability to make certain policy decisions. Political decentralization encompasses the fact that local levels of government are able to make and implement various policies without being vetoed by the state. In addition, it also involves the selection of local officials by the people rather than appointment by the state. Fiscal decentralization at a minimum requires local or regional governments to generate and distribute state revenues. In the context of China, decentralization is seen within a fiscal perspective, thus leading to ponderings about the creation of a federalist state (See Montinola et al. 1995 and Yang 2006).

3 The term “semi-official” refers to associations that are still part of the state but are designed to bridge the gap between state and society.

References


