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The Western Concept of Civil Society in the Context of Chinese History (Hoover Essays)

Thomas A. Metzger

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There is a complicated relation, however, between these discussions and the meanings of this term in its original Western context. By analyzing this confusing semantic situation, this essay makes clear not only that China throughout its history has only exceptionally developed a civil society but also that current Chinese writing using this term has typically conflated it with indigenous assumptions out of accord with the Western civil society tradition.

This essay also argues that, in this Western tradition, "civil society" refers to an un-utopian political order in which morally and intellectually fallible citizens organize themselves to monitor an incorrigible state, seeking either to minimize state intervention in their lives or to use some state intervention to check allegedly oppressive elites outside the state. In Chinese writing, however, this un-utopian, "bottom-up" definition of "civil society" has been filtered out and replaced by a tradition-rooted, utopian, "top-down" view according to which moral-intellectual virtuosi—whether a political party free of selfishness or "true intellectuals"—take charge of a corrigible state or at least are allowed by the latter to guide society. This divergence in political reasoning threatens to complicate international relations.

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