Civil Society, Active Citizens and Community Governance

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This article tries to explain the significance of civil society for cultivating and promoting active citizens, and the importance of sound civil society and active citizens for advancing community governance.

This article is based on three cases concerning the relationship between civil society, active citizens and community governance, which have conducted in the three communities in Shanghai. From these empirical studies, we put forward two arguments: first, civil society is a field of socio-cultural practice. If people have continuously been living in such a field, they will have formed a habitus of active citizens. We argue that the change and enhancement of citizen’s quality are the long-term effects of socio-cultural practice, but not the work of a single-day. If we want to change and enhance citizen’s quality, there must be an institutionalized socio-cultural space, that is, a civil society. More concretely, civil society means that there is a public sphere, there are various opportunities and mechanisms of civic participation, there are various kinds of public-benefit organizations, non-profit organizations and voluntary groups, and finally there are a core value of citizen’s virtues.

Second, only if there is a sound civil society, active citizens, and positive cooperation of multi-sectors (i.e. government, market and civil society) or plural agents, community governance (or good governance) can be realized.

The reasons are as follows: (1) Civil society can cultivate active citizens. Active citizens are not atomic self-interested individuals, but citizens with thought, belief, love, responsibility and sense of community. (2) Civil society can lead us towards the good governance. Community governance is a process of interaction between three sectors (government, market and civil society), and it works through the machanisms of cooperation, coordination and partnership. The essence of good governance is a kind of associative governance of public life by the government and citizens, which is a new relationship between state and civil society and an optimal state of cooperation between two agents. (3) Civil society can promote the performance of government. The quality of public service is a component element of good governance. By the cooperation with government, public-benefit organizations can improve the quality and effectiveness of public service or community service.

However, the emergence of civil society in China needs not only innovation of institutions in macro and meso levels, needs to transform from the pattern of singular government to multiple one of networked governance, needs to create and improve the interaction and cooperation mechanisms for effective for democratic community governance, but also needs to play the roles of citizen’s autonomy, initiative and creativity, and thus forms the micro basis for the development of civil society.

References


