

Civil Society Regulation and Organizational Culture: Reflections on Theory and Practice in China

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China's passage of a national Charity Law and an INGO Law in 2016 represents a unique opportunity to consider the implications of civil society regulation for organizational culture and democratic practice in authoritarian states. Based on study of both laws and over a decade's research into the organizational cultures of Chinese civil society groups, in this talk I explore some of the ways in which official regulation can shape the possibilities for democratic practice within civil society, including both professionalized NGOs and ideal-typical voluntary associations. While state regulators typically seek to encourage 'governable' groups, ground-level practices are a result of legally mandated and customary organizational structures and their interactions with mainstream and counter-hegemonic cultural norms. Within this dynamic process, the emergence of some forms of democratic expression is precluded, while others can be opened up and made available for experimentation. These processes and interactions are rife with contestation, and their ultimate implications often unclear. By putting theoretical predictions and empirical observations in dialog, however, we can begin to see the outlines of probable futures for civil society actors embedded in authoritarian political settings and also consider lessons for democratic countries with long-standing civil society traditions.