

Mechanisms Behind Diffusion of Democracy in the Pearl River Delta Region

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GUSTAV SUNDQVIST, APR 7 2019

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Since the early 2000s, scholars of democratisation have been increasingly interested in how democracy spreads from one political unit to the next in a process often called diffusion of democracy (Brinks and Coppedge 2006, 464; Gleditsch and Ward 2006, 917; Wejnert 2005, 55). Many have noted that the PRC government threatens democracy in Greater China by weakening Hong Kong's democratic institutions (Pepper 2008, 300; Sing 2004, 221; Wu 2015, 290) and threatening to annex Taiwan (Jacques 2009, 304; Schubert 2012, 66). Less attention has been paid to how Hong Kong and Taiwan contribute to democratic development in the mainland. Despite their limited resources, promoters of democracy in Hong Kong and Taiwan may still have a democratising impact on some sections of Mainland China's society. This chapter addresses this issue by studying the relationship between labour non-governmental organisations (LNGOs) in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region of Southern China. The research question is 'How do LNGOs in Hong Kong contribute to democratic diffusion in the PRD?'

Democracy, Civil Society, and Diffusion

More maximalist definitions of democracy include not only free elections but also the rule of law (Weale 2007, 203), the protection of political and civil freedoms (Dahl 1998, 86), and the presence of intermediaries through whom citizens can influence politics between elections (Schmitter and Karl 1991, 78). These components of democracy are often channelled through the social sphere not belonging to the state or the market, termed civil society (Diamond 1999, 222). The main object of this study, labour-oriented civil society, is viewed here as a potentially democratising force. The study is restricted to LNGOs, because labour groups have historically played a prominent role in democratisation, especially in communist states.[1] Labour movements in authoritarian societies tend to focus on democracy-related issues such as institutions for class representation, freedom of association, and fair application of labour legislation (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986, 53). Labour groups can have a strong influence on national politics since they can often mobilise protesters and disrupt the economy through strikes (Valenzuela 1989, 447). Because of their officially pro-worker ideology, the legitimacy of communist regimes is particularly sensitive to criticism from organised labour (Beetham 1991, 183; Shambaugh 2009, 50). Labour movements thus played a decisive role in the transition from communist dictatorships in Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland, where the trade union Solidarity was especially important (Grugel 2002, 105). LNGOs were also prominent actors in Asian democracy movements, such as the anti-Guomindang movement in Taiwan during the 1980s (Chan and Chiu 2015, 168). Based on historical experiences, there is reason to believe that organised labour may play a major role in any potential liberalisation of politics in China.

Although civil society and labour movements have historically been prominent actors in transitions from authoritarianism, it must be noted that not all civil society groups have a democratising impact. Although the number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the PRC has increased dramatically, from 5,000 in 1990 to 500,000 in 2014 (Teets 2014, 11), most of these groups have a relatively non-political agenda and they generally do not aim to challenge the government (Foster 2001, 102; He and Huang 2015, 12; Hsu and Hasmath 2014, 533). Diamond

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(1999, 228) provides a proper analytical tool, based on five features, for measuring the democratising potential of civil society groups.[2] In this study, I developed an analytical tool inspired by Diamond, adjusted to more efficiently assess the democratising capacity of the small and pressured civil society groups in the PRC. The features employed are *self-government*, *goals*, *methods*, *institutionalisation*, and *density*. The first feature addresses the extent to which civil society groups practice internal democracy; the second and third, the goals and methods of civil society groups in relation to democracy; the fourth, whether the internal management of civil society groups is efficient and institutionalised; and the fifth, whether civil society groups are able to survive and grow.

Diffusion can be defined as 'the spread of a practice within a social system, where the spread denotes flow or movement from a source to an adopter typically via communication, role modelling, and/or coercion' (Wejnert 2014, 35). Diffusion generally involves at least two actors, a source and a potential adopter, a communication channel linking them together, and an innovation (Rogers 1995, 18). In the case of China studied here, the innovation is democracy. Although previous studies quite convincingly show that some kind of democratic diffusion effect exists, most of this work is based on large-N analyses of cross-state data (Brinks and Coppedge 2006, 464; Doorenspleet 2004, 322; Gleditsch and Ward 2006, 921; Kopstein and Reilly 2000, 17; Starr and Lindborg 2003, 495). Some theories on the diffusion mechanisms have been elaborated, but understanding of how democratic diffusion actually works is still relatively underdeveloped (Yilmaz 2009, 95). According to existing theories, democracy can be diffused through two different mechanisms: imposition or emulation (Teorell 2010, 86). Imposition is described as an attempt to influence others towards democracy through either coercive or cooperative means (Levitsky and Way 2005, 21). Powerful and high-status actors are generally more able to influence weak and low-status actors than vice-versa (Fordham and Asal 2007, 32). Emulation occurs when one actor, due to changing external conditions or new information, decides to adopt a more democratic stance (Brinks and Coppedge 2006, 466; Elkins and Simmons, 2005, 39). In the latter case, an adopter of democracy such as a democratic polity or a democracy-promoting organisation provides information (intentionally or not) on conditions associated with moving towards democracy (Elkins and Simmons 2005, 42). Democracies on the borders and movements towards democracy elsewhere can remind people in authoritarian societies that democracy is achievable (Ambrosio 2007, 235; Huntington 1991, 100).

A problem of previous theories on the mechanisms of democratic diffusion is reliance on overly broad concepts. More detailed theories are thus needed to better understand how democracy is diffused at the grassroots level in different social and geographical contexts. This chapter aims to contribute to filling this gap in the research.

Method and Material

From a democratic diffusion perspective, the PRD can be seen as a critical case. The region includes two important political units: the semi-democratic former British colony of Hong Kong and the southern parts of the much more authoritarian Guangdong province, both under the supreme authority of the central PRC government and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Because of more freedom of speech and assembly in Hong Kong, civil society in sensitive fields such as labour and democracy promotion has much more political space there than in Guangdong (Collins and Cottey 2012, 59; Lo 2013, 943). In this study Hong Kong LNGOs (H-LNGOs) are treated as the main sources of diffusing democracy and Guangdong LNGOs (G-LNGOs) as the main potential adopters. Although some studies have discussed how H-LNGOs influence G-LNGOs (Chan 2013, 9; He and Huang 2015, 15; Xu 2013, 246) the democratising aspect of this relationship has so far received little attention.

The primary material in this study is 18 interviews with 20 respondents and some fieldwork notes. All interviews were conducted during three fieldwork trips in the PRD in 2015, 2016, and 2017. All but one of the interviews with respondents from H-LNGOs was conducted in English and all interviews with G-LNGO respondents were conducted in Mandarin. I transcribed the English material myself and had the Chinese material transcribed by a trusted Chinese research assistant. Responses have been further edited for clarity, but the original transcripts are available by request. The interviews were semi-structured, and respondents were asked relatively broad questions about their organisations' activities and cooperation networks. Eight H-LNGOs and five G-LNGOs were covered. According to respondents from four of the Hong Kong groups, 12 H-LNGOs focused on mainland issues in 2017. The material thus involves a large sample of the H-LNGOs and may be generalisable to the whole community of these groups. Due to the state's suppression of mainland labour groups, there is no certain knowledge of the exact number of G-

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LNGOs, but estimates vary between 30 and 50 (Franceschini 2014, 480; Fu 2017, 448; Xu 2013, 246). The sample of these groups is thus hardly generalisable. Still, the information provided by G-LNGOs can be compared with that from H-LNGOs to deepen our understanding of how strategies to influence actors in the mainland are received. Following Xu (2013, 246), the organisations are identified by codes to protect their confidentiality (H1, H2, H3, G1, G2, G3, etc.). Information on the coding of the LNGOs are provided on my webpage under the 'research' tab[3]. A confidential version of the transcribed interviews can be provided on demand to readers qualified not to misuse the information.

Analysis

In this section, I argue that H-LNGOs mainly use four different strategies: (1) consulting, (2) financing, (3) providing free space, and (4) providing international networks to diffuse democracy in the PRD. The four categories were developed inductively during the analysis of the material. In the final discussion, I elaborate on the extent to which these strategies can also be perceived as mechanisms through which democracy can be spread. The appendix summarises how respondents from H-LNGOs described their groups' most salient strategies and how respondents from G-LNGOs described their groups' responses to these strategies.

Consultation

Consultation seems to be an important strategy of H-LNGOs to promote democratic diffusion in the PRD. Respondents from seven of the H-LNGOs told me that their groups participated in training sessions and workshops in Guangdong, and all the Hong Kong groups provided online, telephone, or face-to-face consultation to their mainland partners. Regarding the content of this consultancy, respondents from all but one of the H-LNGOs stated that they aimed to influence their cooperation partners to involve themselves in methods and activities more related to democracy such as elections, collective action and advocacy. One respondent from H2 told me the organisation used workshops to encourage G-LNGOs to become involved in trade union activities, which is sensitive in Mainland China, where all unions are supposed to be controlled by the state:

one content was to let them decide a goal and see what they could do between the time span of one year in order to improve working conditions. They decided that their goal was to elect a trade union. When I returned in May, perhaps May 20, in the middle of May 2014, they started to take action, and declared they would elect a trade union.

Representatives from seven of the H-LNGOs also said that they consulted with their Guangdong partners to encourage their *institutionalisation*. As one respondent from H8 said, one aim was to raise the level of organisation among often scattered activists:

we do believe in organisations, we do believe in organising, so we stress that organising is possibly the most important aspect for the sustainability of a labour movement, so we try to bring up this kind of messages, but, you know, whether other buy this kind of messages or not, it is up to them.

Except respondents from G3, the Guangdong activists generally played down the impact H-LNGOs had on the *methods* and *institutionalisation* of Guangdong groups. However, most Guangdong respondents were in frequent contact with H-LNGOs and some noted that their Hong Kong partners provided some good advice in these fields. Respondents from five of the H-LNGOs also told me that they used consultation to influence the *goals* of Guangdong partners in a more democratic direction. As one representative of H5 reported, their organisation promoted concepts related to democracy such as freedom of speech and freedom of association:

of course we would like to see democratic development in China, yes. So, at the moment of course we would not say that we are going to pull down the CCP openly, it would be political suicide, yes. And, and, also we understand it is kind of hard to call for just democracy with workers because they don't necessarily understand, firstly and secondly they won't be able to relate their own lives to that, their own well-being with that, so we actually frame it in another way... We actually started to talk about that from the three basic labour rights, the right to strike, the right to organise and the right to collective bargaining, so it is more connected to workers' consciousness, at the same time promoting

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some values of free society, like for example freedom of association, freedom of speech and the important value of deciding on your own life.

Respondents from three of the five G-LNGOs told me that interaction with actors overseas, especially organisations from Hong Kong and Taiwan, changed the Guangdong activists' views on politics in a democratic direction. However, the Guangdong activists usually emphasised that although they received ideological inspiration from abroad, they still had to develop indigenous strategies to achieve democracy, as demonstrated in the following conversation with one respondent from G2:

Interviewer: 'You still think that communication with people in Taiwan and Hong Kong was meaningful?'

Respondent: 'Yes... it opened our horizons... now, the whole background is clear for us.'

Interviewer: 'Did they also talk about like human rights and democracy?... Do you think this is meaningful?'

Respondent: 'Yes, certainly... the work we do will eventually end there.'

Interviewer: '... so foreign actors influence you a bit but not very much and this influence is mostly in the ideological field?'

Respondent: 'Yes, because usually I still believe that we must rely on ourselves and explore our own road. Only then will we know how to realise democracy here.'

There seems to have been great variety in how much Hong Kong groups have influenced the ideology of particular mainland activists. One respondent from G3 noted that some mainland activists were especially influenced by ideas from Hong Kong:

Interviewer: 'Your colleague told me that you talk about how to practice democracy.'

Respondent: 'Yes, we have studied this topic recently, but we still do not have any strong political ideas... but if you compare, there are some colleagues who go abroad and think that everything there is good... their political consciousness has been enlightened.'

Representatives from four H-LNGOs also said that their groups used consultation to promote democratic *self-government* among G-LNGOs, as demonstrated by this respondent from H2:

during our trainings we may mention that they should elect their workers' representatives. During the bargaining process, they should elect workers' representatives or workers' representatives should take in all the demands from the workers and see what they need. Then they should present their demands to the management. This is perhaps a performance of democracy.

One respondent from G3 also noted that interactions with H-LNGOs influenced their organisation's internal governance in a democratic direction:

we think that several Hong Kong groups have a relatively thick cultural atmosphere. They always say that things should be done together, discussed together, and they talk relatively democratically. I think that their atmosphere is a bit better than it is here in the mainland. It is worth studying this, and referring to this... so, now when we do things, when we do things together, then all of us first talk about it, we walk into the final results together. If it is a huge decision, you cannot decide about it by yourself.

Financing

Financing also seems to be a prime strategy of H-LNGOs to diffuse democracy in the PRD. Many respondents said

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that financing and consultation were especially important in the past, as many G-LNGOs were originally established by Hong Kong activists. According to one respondent, who is also a prominent scholar on Chinese labour groups, at least ten of the 30 to 50 G-LNGOs were established by Hong Kong groups, most of them around the turn of the millennium. Respondents from three of the Hong Kong groups told me their organisations had founded labour groups in Guangdong, and one respondent from G3 stated that her organisation was originally established by H4: 'one of their methods was to establish libraries. They established libraries in industrial areas and used this method to give workers service and to organise work, so at that time our colleagues from H4 went to the mainland to search, for instance, for workers to train, and they also contacted some social worker students and social worker professionals. So, they found perhaps four people, workers and social worker students, and they established G3, just like that.'

All five G-LNGOs seem to have received funding from Hong Kong partners, either recently or further in the past. The Guangdong activists said that they had no other choice but to rely upon funding from Hong Kong or foreign countries to finance projects more related to democracy, since mainland foundations usually only support charity projects. Respondents from two of the H-LNGOs said they conditioned financing to steer their mainland partners towards activities such as advocacy, collective action, and collective bargaining. As one employee from H2 said: 'it sounds strange but the foundation of our organisation is that we believe that collective bargaining is the way. So then if they want to work with migrant kids, they are free but not with our funding.' By providing funding, H-LNGOs seem to aim at influencing the methods of Guangdong partners working towards democracy and increasing the density of G-LNGOs.

Due to tightening political control of foreign funding of NGOs, Guangdong groups involved in sensitive activities face increasing hardship. The Foreign NGO Management Law, which came into effect in 2017, requires the Public Security Bureau to exert stricter control over the flow of financing between Hong Kong and mainland NGOs. As a result, respondents from G2, G3, and G5 told me it was increasingly hard to receive legal founding for sensitive activities. The director of G5 stated that he was prepared to lay off all his employees and continue his activism on his own: 'at least I can use my pencil to carry out my work... and who would employ me anyway? Who would employ a man who would just start a strike?' One Hong Kong activist told me that the director of G1 also planned large staff cuts as a consequence of the deteriorating political climate.

Provision of Free Space

The literature on social movements in authoritarian societies uses 'free space' to refer to spatial or organisational loopholes that allow some administrative freedom (Bedford 2009, 30; Johnston 2005, 111). Having more civil freedoms than Mainland China, Hong Kong can be perceived as a relatively free space in the PRC. It should, however, be noted that civil freedoms in Hong Kong have deteriorated in recent years. According to the Freedom House Index (2017), civil liberties in Hong Kong have slowly decreased every year since 2014. The Hong Kong activists I interviewed admitted that they were worried about the city's political trajectory. Nevertheless, as one activist from H1 said, they usually still perceive the political climate in Hong Kong to be much freer than that in the mainland: 'even though the so-called freedom of expression is deteriorating in Hong Kong, compared to the environment in the mainland, we still have a relatively safe and open space to talk about things like this.'

One strategy used by H-LNGOs to facilitate democratic diffusion in the PRD seems to be sharing Hong Kong's free space with Guangdong partners by inviting mainland activists to participate in workshops on sensitive issues organised in the city. Respondents from seven of the H-LNGOs told me they regularly invited mainland partners to participate in activities held in Hong Kong and five Guangdong respondents from three of the G-LNGOs said they had participated in such events. Permanent residents in Guangdong usually only must meet some minor formalities and pay a small fee to be permitted to go to Hong Kong. Five of the respondents raised the advantages of arranging activities in the city. As the director of H7 told me: they are coming up more [laughs] because we cannot organise meetings in [mainland] China anymore... although some harassment also happens in Hong Kong, it is still good. For them it is easier to come to Hong Kong, but if we organise some meetings outside China [PRC], there would be more difficult, then they have to get a visa.'[4]

As stated by a respondent from G3, workshops in Hong Kong were also appreciated by G-LNGOs: 'we often

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participate in their trainings and activities. In addition, we often use their groups to contact Hong Kong workers and understand more about Hong Kong workers. We communicate with Hong Kong workers and learn from them. We get some inspiration from them, we learn and then we use it in the mainland.' The director of H7 told me that their group had even invited mainland workers involved in a legal conflict with a large multinational company to come to Hong Kong and protest in front of the company's office building. I also sometimes experienced Hong Kong as a free space for mainland activists participating in protest activities. During the rally in Hong Kong on 1 May 2017, I met the director of G5, who I had interviewed a year earlier in the Guangdong city of Dongguan.

It should be mentioned that two respondents from Hong Kong and two from Guangdong also mentioned disadvantages to organising activities for mainland partners in Hong Kong. As reported by one employee at H8, mainland activists entering Hong Kong face political risks: 'after leaving the country they are always interrogated by the police, before and afterwards. Instead of bringing them trouble, we prefer to go inside and meet them.'

International Networks

Finally, H-LNGOs seem to use their international networks to promote democratic diffusion in the PRD. Because of the relatively free political space in Hong Kong and the good English language skills of Hong Kong activists, H-LNGOs have many cooperative ties with international actors. This probably explains why H-LNGOs are better funded than G-LNGOs. Respondents from six of the H-LNGOs told me that their groups receive foreign funding, mostly from labour unions, churches, and democracy-promoting agencies in Europe and the USA. The funding H-LNGOs provide for groups in the mainland thus generally has its origin in the West.

Respondents from seven of the H-LNGOs also used their international networks to help their mainland partners put pressure on multinational companies involved in labour conflicts and legal disputes. One respondent from H3 stated that they often used their contacts with Taiwan LNGOs to pressure Taiwanese companies: 'we have connections with the Taiwan groups, and then sometimes if there are any cases or some workers' struggles related to Taiwanese-owned factories, then we contact them, to see if they can give any support to the workers.' This respondent also told me that the Taiwanese groups usually respond by organising protests and by spreading information about these cases through social media. The director of G1 also said it was helpful to contact foreign media to put pressure on companies: 'we advise workers to first find media, of course, not domestic media but foreign media. Because after foreign media enters, some local governments will put pressure on companies.'

Finally, international networks are also used to pressure authorities in Mainland China to respect civil rights. The most prominent cases have been when Chinese authorities have detained labour activists such as Wu Guijun (detained in May 2013, then released in May 2014), Zeng Feiyang (detained in December 2015, then given a four-year suspended sentence), and Meng Han (detained in December 2015, then sentenced to 21 months in prison). Respondents from two of the H-LNGOs told me they were actively involved in these campaigns, and seven of the eight Hong Kong groups also signed online petitions protesting these cases. One respondent from H8 was particularly involved in the campaigns to free Zeng Feiyang and Meng Han: 'we have written to international unions as well as NGOs, international NGO platforms such as the Clean Clothes Campaign, etcetera, etcetera, in you know, different campaigns that we all work on together in a coordinating kind of fashion in bringing this campaign possible.' The respondent from H8 argued that foreign labour unions had some leverage on the Chinese government because the ACFTU depends upon the goodwill of foreign unions to strengthen its role in international labour organisations.

Discussion

From the analysis, it seems clear that H-LNGOs have at least some potent strategies for spreading aspects of democracy to their Guangdong partners. Since the total population of H-LNGOs are limited and respondents from the groups often mention the same strategies, it is plausible to see these methods as corner stones in the community's attempts to contribute to democratic diffusion in the PRD. In general, H-LNGOs seem to use consultation, financing, sharing of free space, and international networks as main strategies to influence their partners in a democratic direction. Whether these strategies may be described as mechanisms through which democracy spreads is more difficult to determine, not least because the study involved a relatively limited number of

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G-LNGOs. There seems to be plenty of evidence suggesting that financing from Hong Kong groups has been necessary for increasing and sustaining the density of G-LNGOs involved in democracy related activities. There are also interesting cases suggesting that consultation from Hong Kong activists has inspired G-LNGOs to orient themselves in a democratic direction, not least in the fields of goals and self-government. The free space of Hong Kong also appears to increase some G-LNGOs' opportunities to receive information, and to provide them inspiration on how to develop their activities and ideas in a more democratic direction. The international networks provided by H-LNGOs also seem to provide G-LNGOs with some leverage against their adversaries. Thus, these four strategies at least seem to work as mechanisms in some cases. However, more research is needed to gain a deeper understanding on the breadth and impact of these mechanisms.

In interview studies, interest should be directed not only to what is said, but also to what is left unsaid. One aspect of this study that deserves further attention is that none of the G-LNGOs' respondents expressed any ambition to influence H-LNGOs in any direction. There was also no evidence suggesting that Hong Kong activists perceived their organisations as under the influence of mainland groups. It thus seems that the H-LNGOs exert unilateral influence on G-LNGOs. One plausible explanation for the hierarchical structure of the LNGO network may be the disparity in resources, knowledge, and freedom between H-LNGOs and G-LNGOs.

In the bigger picture, this study may be a first step in developing a better understanding of how democratic diffusion works on a grassroots level. Financing, consultation, and international networks may be perceived as different dimensions of the imposition mechanism. Actors in a more democratic community can use these tools to strengthen civil society actors in authoritarian societies, to influence them to orient themselves in a more democratic direction, and to increase the costs for regimes that aim to suppress them. Consultation and free space can be perceived as dimensions of the emulation mechanism. By visiting democratic societies and receiving advice from democratic actors, members of civil society groups from authoritarian societies can gather information on the benefits and drawbacks of democracy and may also develop a better understanding of how democracy should and could be achieved.

Notes

[1] Note that LNGOs should be distinguished from member-based trade unions. In state-corporatist systems such as the PRC or pre-democracy Taiwan, representation of important social groups is monopolised by the state. In Mainland China, there is thus no legal trade union except the party-controlled All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). Any new workplace trade unions must be permitted by the higher levels of ACFTU. LNGOs often engage in activities traditionally performed by trade unions such as providing legal consultation. However, unlike ACFTU, most LNGOs' activities take place outside of the workplace and these groups are usually not allowed to visit factories. For a discussion on the difference between the official trade union and LNGOs see Chan and Chiu 2015, 157–165.

[2] Diamond uses five features to assess the democratising capacity of civil societies: (1) self-government, (2) goals and methods, (3) organisational institutionalisation, (4) pluralism, and (5) density.

[3] <http://www.gustavsundqvist.com>

[4] Note that the respondent, who spoke English during the interview, sometimes uses the term China when she only refers to Mainland China, but sometimes also includes Hong Kong in the concept.

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Appendix (available in the PDF version, see top of page for download)

Tables 1 and 2 show how respondents from H-LNGOs described their groups' most salient strategies and how respondents from G-LNGOs described their groups' responses to these strategies.

About the author:

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