

## **Nurture Civic Consciousness, Promote a Transformation of Governance<sup>1</sup>**

Young Chinese citizen Yao Ming, returning from the NBA competition, published a personal letter calling on the public to pool their efforts to combat SARS. He then headed the bill at a fundraising event, raising quite bit in donations to be handed over to doctors in the front line. He is a star [basketball player; centre with the Houston Rockets], which gives him a lot of appeal; and he has civic consciousness, which wins him respect in the world. That some regard this as grandstanding is probably due to the fact that we are still unaccustomed to a son showing gratitude to his mother. What a pity that such philanthropy, like sincere advice which grates on the ears, is all the more unwelcome and arouses hostility. As they say, “those who know me think I’m sore at heart, those who do not think I have ulterior motives.” Also regrettable is that in the entire national battle line arrayed against SARS, we still see precious little in the way of the range of social organizations which are making such a great contribution to the effort in Hong Kong.

We should be delighted to see the coming of age of youngsters like Yao Ming, who have experienced life in Europe and the US; delighted also to see their awakening of civic consciousness; delighted to see people taking on their responsibilities as citizens. When a nation is in such dire straits this indeed counts as a stroke of fortune, which it can take to its heart without qualms. One might well imagine that if among more regions and more groups there were more such awakenings, such a participation by society in a such a critical time as the fight against SARS, a great load would taken off the nation. The government would then not have to see to everything itself, directly and totally involving itself in society’s affairs, and taking on burdens far too heavy for it. In fact, in a society where markets are developing swiftly, civic consciousness and the formation of a mature society is not only necessary, but inevitable. What the difficulty with safeguarding the countryside which the fight against SARS has run into shows is that, given the contradictions of the urban-rural dichotomy and deficiencies in village governance, the growth of civic social consciousness and maturity of society play an indispensable role.

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<sup>1</sup> Editorial, *21 Century Economic Herald*, 15 May 2003, p. 1. (培育公民意识 推动治理转型 *21 世纪经济报道*)

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In rural regions, after the reforms in division of financial functions, the profit motive was strengthened at every level of government, quite a few regions had a situation in which state functions were devolved downward, while the ownership of assets was transferred up. This led to serious shortfalls in local government's public funding allocations (particularly for education, and public health). This was another reason for the Centre to promote village self government. Meanwhile in the cities, due the existence of a large surplus labour force, cheap migrant labour became the engine of economic growth of the developed regions, though improvements in their level of social security were relatively slow. The tension between the advantages of cheap labour and safeguarding the rights of the migrant workers became daily more obvious with swiftly rising economic standards. Without safeguards, stability is problematic; bottlenecks in the household registration system and social security create problems in the administration of a highly mobile group of migrant workers. The latter are "suspended in mid-air," unable to settle securely in the cities, moving between village and town year after year, not seasonally, but year-round. A body suspended in mid-air is not stable: this is a law applicable not only in physics but in human society as well. When a society of over 1 billion people is unstable, their social behaviour may have a direct impact on the stability of the society as a whole. During the SARS episode, the danger this group brings to rural society when it returns home is only the beginning. In fact, anything which impinges on the livelihood of this group, even if its onset is less sudden, even if their actions are quite unorganised, will nonetheless not only trigger unrest within this group, but also bring about wider social instability.

The previous model of social governance by an omnicompetent government is already hard put to cover a society which is flowing at high speed; there is a steep rise in the difficulty of relying simply on the government's strength to penetrate every cell and capillary of society. Apart from the heavy financial burden that massive expenditures on governance may bring about, it is moreover hard to avoid having recourse to ever more brute force to control a mobile society, leading to incidents of the law enforcers violating the law. And if the government does not intervene or its governance is feeble, given that there is no self-organized involvement of society in governance, then a space is left for a criminal underworld to grow.

Faced with the SARS crisis, this difficulty of governance is made more obvious. A rather large number of migrant workers who have low incomes and no urban residence permits have a strong need to return home because of the needs of the busy season in farming and also because they have no feeling of security in the cities (they are seen as an especially risky group because of their inferior living conditions). If the cities put them under local management, how can they solve their families' production problems? And if treating the disease becomes a protracted battle and the migrant workers are put under local jurisdiction, this will lead to even more problems. Thus the government is forced

either to utilize force which is somewhere between what is appropriate and what is legal to bring order, or else to endure the pains of letting each society go its own way and a social segregation in which peasants reject the urbanites and city people dread the peasants.

To resolve this problem in governance, the most basic approach is to re-order relations between the *Centre* and the regions, promote a transformation of regional governance, and change the urban-rural dichotomy by such means as reforming the household registration system. But neither of these are feasible without the rise of a mature society, the best basis for a transformation of governance. In the current fight against SARS, an effective approach to avoiding a crisis of social fragility would be to allow a mature, autonomous society to support an effective government. Encouraging civic participation and consciousness, encouraging the development of social self-organization and participation; the support of such a social force in the struggle against SARS can take over some of the government's load of concerns.

In the countryside, it is necessary to give full play to all legitimate cooperative organizations, so as to fill up the space left when the original power structure retreated, and solve the anxieties about their homes felt by those migrant workers who are unable to return to them. In the city is necessary to encourage and give full play to various migrant workers organizations, provide information for the government which is hard to obtain through administrative intervention regarding the management of the floating groups. And in protecting the interests of the migrant workers and raising their standards of public health, at the same time as the government is restraining the enterprises by administrative decrees, they can encourage the migrant workers organizations to protect their own interests. And non-government organizations which are major actors in the markets like associations, learned societies, research associations, foundations, etc, as intermediate strata between the state and the citizens, can completely play their roles.

During the crisis, a maturing civic consciousness and increasing role played by society can take over some of the government's worries. The State should open its heart, and just as it accepts the contribution of each and every citizen, it should accept that of a mature civil society. One of the lessons of dealing with this crisis is that the government, while putting relations between Centre and regions and between town and country in good order, must at the same time provide an elastic space for the growth of a pluralistic civil society which adapts to the economic base. As the market economy develops, society and citizen individuals have come of age, and within legal restraints, the government could encourage them to manage their own affairs.

In this sense, how this crisis helps promote the social maturing of civic consciousness and the growth of a mature society will be an important indicator in seeing whether China makes any progress after undergoing it. In the entire

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nation's war against SARS, we can in that case expect to see the participation of still more social organizations and volunteer workers.

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