



Localism and cosmopolitanism in Shanghai's civil society

International Sociology Reviews

2025, Vol. 40(2) 222–246

© The Author(s) 2025

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/02685809251325006

journals.sagepub.com/home/iss



Xi Lin

Institute for Advanced Study in Social Science, Fudan University, China

Yihan Xiong

Fudan University, China

Abstract

This essay explores the complex interplay between localism and cosmopolitanism—those seemingly opposing forces within civil society, examining both the tensions and the potential for synergy. Localism and cosmopolitanism are not necessarily opposing forces but rather two sides of the same coin. Local communities can be incubators for cosmopolitan values. Our case study of the shadow civil society in Shanghai, for example, shows how community efforts can not only foster local belonging but also promote mutual translation of local best practices and cosmopolitan ideals. Similarly, local social justice movements can connect with global networks promoting good governance, accountability, transparency, and the rule of law. This synergy allows local concerns to find a voice on the global stage and global ideas to be adapted and implemented in a way that respects local contexts.

Keywords

Civil society in Shanghai, cosmopolitanism, localism, multi-nodal approach

Introduction

Cosmopolitanism, as a universal ideal or a product of global forces, can be better understood as a local phenomenon, shaped by the historical, cultural, and political contexts of specific communities. Every cosmopolitan vision represents a particular community's image of a larger world it belongs to. This image is always partial and shaped by local interpretations. Cosmopolitanism, so to speak, is better dubbed as 'whole in the part'

Corresponding author:

Yihan Xiong, SIRPA, Fudan University, Shanghai 200433, China.

Email: xiongyihan@fudan.edu.cn

(Van Assche and Teampäü, 2015: 3–6). Moreover, legal and political ideals, as well as everyday practices considered cosmopolitan, are created and recreated within specific communities. These narratives serve various purposes depending on local aspirations and historical memories (Yeoh, 2013: 110). This, however, is not to suggest that localism and cosmopolitanism run in parallel and separately from each other. On the contrary, there is a co-evolution between the two. Cosmopolitan ideas are not static but constantly evolve in response to both local and global changes. Local narratives can be a response to global shifts or local competition within a globalised structure (Webb, 2015: 430–435). There is also an important role of local actors and historical contingencies in shaping cosmopolitan narratives. It avoids a deterministic view where global forces or economic factors dictate local forms of cosmopolitanism (Yeoh, 2004). This article focuses on civil society as a bearer of such intertwined relations between cosmopolitanism and localism. It brings local discursive constructions into sharper focus, revealing the ‘semi-autonomous character’ of how communities narrate their identities and relationships with the larger world. Civil society allows us to take a glimpse at how the narratives of cosmopolitanism are shaped within governance arenas, where actors and institutions negotiate power, knowledge, and decision-making processes (cf. Matoba, 2023; Moosa et al., 2021). Overall, it will allow for a more nuanced understanding of cosmopolitanism, one that acknowledges the agency of local communities and the complex interplay between local and global forces.

Shanghai, with its rich history of cultural exchange and cosmopolitanism, offers a compelling case study for examining the manifestations of this concept within the Chinese context. Scholars, for instance, through an analysis of the art scene in early twentieth-century Shanghai, have highlighted the city’s unique blend of cultural diversity, global influences, and urban activism (Zheng et al., 2024). This cosmopolitanism, however, was not merely an abstract ideal but was deeply embedded within the material realities of everyday life. The cosmopolitanism of Shanghai manifested itself in various dimensions of urban life, from public health initiatives and security measures to the proliferation of entertainment facilities. This tangible manifestation of cosmopolitanism created a new perceptual experience, extending beyond the purely intellectual to encompass a spatial and visual dimension (Liang, 2010: 1–5). The city’s cosmopolitan ethos fostered a new consciousness, one that transcended geographically delimited localities, embracing a more expansive vision of a global imaginary. This cosmopolitan perspective, rooted in the material realities of urban life, challenged traditional notions of cultural boundaries and national identity. Shanghai’s cosmopolitanism offered a glimpse into a future where individuals could navigate multiple cultural identities and participate in a globalised world without sacrificing their local roots (Liang, 2008). Therefore, how will it be possible for us to envision the intertwined relations between localism and cosmopolitanism in today’s world, and in Shanghai in particular? This will be the central question this paper aims to address. To do this, this article will start from a theoretical discussion of localism and cosmopolitanism in the first part, to be followed by a discussion of civil society in Shanghai. We coin the term ‘shadow civil society’ to remind our readers of some local characteristics of the civil society in Shanghai without sacrificing its cosmopolitan outlook.

Localised civil society as an embodiment of cosmopolitanism

In a globalised world of increasing interconnectedness and compression, the social and ethical sphere has undergone profound transformations, where there emerges a space for ‘world citizens’ to discuss the impacts of globalisation and advocate for a more just and peaceful world order (e.g. international NGOs and social movements). In the midst of this, cosmopolitanism is seen as a more philosophical concept reflecting a critical and reflexive engagement with globalisation, with its emphasis on ‘world openness’ and the fostering of an understanding of and respect for diverse ways of life (Delanty, 2006). The drawbacks of such a celebratory account of either globalisation or cosmopolitanism lie in their lack of specific solutions to complex problems, global or local (Hensby and O’Byrne, 2012: 387–390). In applying cosmopolitan ideals to real-world political issues like COVID-19 lockdown, we can see that there is no single, universally accepted ‘cosmopolitan’ answer to complex political questions (Mansourian, 2021).

Civil society is commonly defined as the social sphere between the private and public realms, centring on social interaction and ethical dimensions (Mann et al., 2021: 8–10). It fosters social capital and aims to check the power of the state and market. Historically this concept stems from Hegel’s view of civil society mediating between private and public (Pelczynski, 1984: 1–5) to Gramsci’s focus on its cultural and ethical content (Chambers, 2002: 91; Fonseca, 2016: 24). It is in general presumed that civil society situates itself between the state and the market, where operating via different mediums, these realms follow their own distinctive trajectory of development. In the case of civil society, it valorises ethics and social values.

Civil society, the realm of social interaction and collective action between individuals, families, and the state, has always grappled with the tension between the local and the global (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2013: 49–60). In recent decades, this tension has been articulated through the concepts of cosmopolitanism and localism. Cosmopolitanism emphasises a sense of global citizenship, valuing openness to diverse cultures and perspectives. Localism, on the other hand, prioritises the importance of place, community, and local traditions. Civil society, historically, has played a key role in both local and global movements. From village associations to trade unions, it has provided a space for individuals to come together, defend their interests, and shape their communities (Mann et al., 2021: 44–70). However, the rise in globalisation and the increasing interconnectedness of the world have forced civil society to confront the limitations of purely local approaches. Environmental challenges like climate change, for instance, require collective action that transcends national borders (Diez and von Lucke, 2023). Similarly, issues like human rights violations or economic exploitation increasingly demand a global response. The rise of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has further blurred the lines between local and global within civil society (Palazzo, 2005). Social media platforms connect local communities to global trends and movements. Environmental activism, for instance, utilises social media to share information, mobilise supporters around the world, and hold corporations accountable for environmental degradation (Carneiro et al., 2023; Goodbody, 2024; Zhang, 2023). However, social media can also create echo chambers that limit exposure to diverse perspectives, potentially hindering the cross-cultural dialogue central to cosmopolitanism (Coatney, 2021: 62–78).

From a cosmopolitan point of view, there is a rise in global civil society, especially as a result of the anti-Cold War movements and the increasing interconnectedness of the world (Castells, 2008). It is seen as an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1991) united by a belief in inclusivity and openness, providing an alternative to other models of global governance, such as the global marketplace model, the nation-state model, and the world federal model. Such a cosmopolitan view of civil society does not necessarily entail the presumption of or commitment to world government ideals, as if cosmopolitanism will of necessity lead to a single, unified global political structure. At its weaker dimension, cosmopolitan civil society draws on the communitarian aspect of citizenship, with stress on the sense of belonging to a global community with shared ethical values, albeit without a world government (Van Assche and Teampau, 2015: 15–20).

For cosmopolitan civil society, it stems from a consciousness to link with the international, the global, and the cosmopolitan in formulating its visions and programs for social change or activism. Beneath this global consciousness lies a ‘cosmopolitan empathy’ that could link communities across national boundaries (Vicentino et al., 2022: 1–10). Through interconnectivity by either social networks or social media, civil society activists can raise a cross-national awareness of certain issues, magnifying the voices of the marginalised, the impaired, the victimised, or the injured (e.g. poverty, inequality, injustice or unfairness). These can help to mobilise support across national boundaries for a more just order. Cosmopolitan civil society has a ‘deep global media literacy’, where social movements can leverage the media to raise awareness, influence public opinion, and create ‘global events’ that shift paradigms (Kamada, 2021).

The local dimension of civil society can be seen in such constitutive elements as organisations like churches, social movements, and clubs, occupying a space between individuals, families, and the state, and encompassing both descriptive (identifying types of action and social spaces) and normative horizons (representing an ideal for social progress and evaluation) (Chambers, 2002: 90–100). In this vision, actors and processes are crucial to the mobilisation of local communities, as civil society manifests itself through actions and interactions of individuals and groups over time within specific contexts (Meyer and Hyde, 2004). This process-oriented approach emphasises negotiation, argument, and collaboration (or resistance) towards shared goals or against power structures – actions and processes that are contextualised in local, specific environs, thus challenging assumptions that civil society is only relevant at national or global scales (Kaldor, 2003: 585). Local engagements are thus of indispensable significance for building civil society and fostering connections with broader movements, where local organisations, not always focused on large-scale change, contribute to social cohesion and provide spaces for dialogue and sociability (Mann et al., 2021: 9).

Where actors exercise their autonomy, initiatives, and agency in collective actions, civil society is not independent of surrounding economic and political structures, which constrain or facilitate the space for action. Historically, the rise in civil society was closely bound up with the emergence and growth of the urban sphere, which stood in sharp contrast with rural ‘local communities’ that were constructed around place-specific ties (Madsen, 2002: 190). Previously it might have a state-centric orientation; nevertheless, in its successive development, civil society has evolved into a space distinct from both state and market (Amenta, 2005: 96–100).

The shadow civil society in Shanghai

To fully understand the characteristics of Shanghai's civil society, it is necessary to compare Shanghai with other regions (Zhang and Yao, 2016). Beijing has a civil society led by intellectuals, aiming at dissemination of ideas and policy advocacy as its main goals, for which reason intellectuals in Beijing enjoy a far higher level of political influence than elsewhere¹; by way of comparison, in Zhejiang Province, the civil society is mainly made up of entrepreneurs², who are keen to improve the business environment, set industry standards, and influence industrial policies, with a weaker political dimension and a strongest relationship with the government (Chen et al., 2023; Ma, 2021). Guangdong Province has a civil society of market-oriented media and social organisations, of which many are concerned with labour and environmental issues, with a strong collective action capacity (Tomba, 2010; Tsang, 2014: 5–9). Among this constellation of various types of civil society, Shanghai is seemingly less outstanding, as its civil society is mainly consisted of ordinary local citizens, with a far weaker capacity for collective action and political influence. The city in and of itself, nevertheless, is a most cosmopolitan place with an international outlook and a growing middle class (Zheng et al., 2024), where public opinions may exert pressure on the local and central government alike (Xiong, 2019). The middle class, by definition, can be approached statistically, using indicators of middle-income groups and occupational categories to classify the corresponding middle-class 'strata' (Xiong, 2020a). The traditional Marxist view is to place the middle class in the context of the production relations of society as a whole, based on a class analysis, particularly the ideological reproduction function that this class carries out. Zhu and Fan (2019) contrast these two approaches, emphasising the inherent cultural attributes of the middle class, arguing that a cultural self-perception and lifestyle are the two telling signs of the middle class.

Starting from the Western concept of civil society and stressing the organisational independence of civil society, one would think that Chinese civil society is very weak, or even that there is no civil society in China (Chen, 2013: 117). Nevertheless, from a more dynamic point of view, if civil society in North America and Western Europe has taken a consolidated shape, arguably its Chinese counterpart is in a more fluid form, malleable and context-specific. Take the civil society in Shanghai as an example. It may not be so organised in terms of organisational structure as its Western counterpart. Nevertheless, this does not discount its degree of autonomy from both state and market. The line between private rights and political participation may be blurred to a certain extent. Moreover, the state-society relation is not necessarily adversarial by presumption, in which case, there has for long been a cultural tradition of state-society collaboration or officer-citizen bond as enshrined by Confucianism (Bell and Wang, 2020: 6).

This consideration compels us to re-examine the concept of civil society in China through the lens of consent and the negotiation of authority. While existing frameworks often draw comparisons to Western notions of association (de Tocqueville, 2010: 302–310) or the 'weapons of the weak' employed in the Third World (Scott, 1985), these comparisons offer an incomplete picture. The reason we may call the civil society in Shanghai a 'shadow' one lies not in formal associations or acts of outright resistance, but rather in the realm of consent. This emphasis on consent is a crucial departure from

existing frameworks. It transcends the limitations of formal association, which might overlook the agency of individuals who choose not to outwardly organise. It also avoids romanticising resistance, acknowledging that even subtle acts of non-cooperation or the withholding of consent can be powerful tools for shaping policy and influencing the state. The concept of shadow civil society emerges from the ongoing collision and exchange between Chinese and Western cultural influences. Contemporary Chinese citizens hold nuanced conceptions of the state and political participation, distinct from both traditional Chinese models and modern Western ideals. Their values reflect a unique blend of pre-modern, modern, and postmodern influences, shaping their approach to engaging with the state. The concept of civil society, as a vital component of a modern state, has traditionally been associated with the cultivation of civic virtues and the active engagement of citizens in public life (Chandhoke, 1995: 10–12; Guo, 2023). Scholars have for long emphasised the role of education in fostering these virtues, nurturing a citizenry capable of informed and responsible participation in the political process (Barber, 2003: 233–237). Moreover, the study of civil society often focuses on the contributions of citizen-based groups and organisations to social governance, highlighting their role in shaping public policy and promoting civic engagement (Putnam et al., 1993, ch.6; cf. Agustín and Jorgensen, 2019; Berry and Gabay, 2009; Baker, 2009; Beck, 2008; Beck and Levy, 2013; Brincat, 2017).

While the preceding analysis highlights the vital role of civil society in shaping public discourse and fostering civic engagement, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this perspective. A more nuanced understanding must account for the realities of everyday political participation. While the ideal citizen may actively engage in public affairs, the reality is often more complex. The demands of work, family, and other personal commitments can limit the extent to which individuals can participate in political activities on a sustained basis. Moreover, the concept of ‘ocular politics’, as articulated by Jeffrey Green (2010), underscores the passive nature of much political engagement in contemporary societies. Citizens, both voters and non-voters, often observe and evaluate political discourse from a distance, rarely participating directly in decision-making processes. This highlights the disconnect between the idealised model of active citizenship and the realities of political participation in the modern world. While civil society organisations play a crucial role in mobilising citizens for specific campaigns or issues, it is important to recognise that sustained, universal participation remains an elusive goal (cf. Baumgartner and Leech, 1998; Green, 2016). Civil society often remains dormant, activated only in response to specific crises or events. This phenomenon underscores the challenges inherent in fostering a culture of active citizenship and the need for innovative strategies to encourage broader and more sustained engagement in public affairs (Chandler, 2009; Cheah, 2006). Therefore, when we use this term ‘shadow civil society’, it points to the realities of everyday political participation that are often more complex and nuanced than idealised models suggest. Understanding the limitations of civic engagement and the challenges of fostering active citizenship is essential for developing effective strategies to promote a more participatory and just democracy. By the same token, when focusing on the ‘power of consent’ (Locke, 1980: 14), we are capable of investigating the dynamic nature of the relationship between the state and shadow civil society in China. It is not a static power struggle, but rather a continuous negotiation,

where the boundaries of acceptable behaviour and the terms of the ‘psychological contract’ (Guest and Conway, 2001) are constantly evolving. By reframing the analysis through the lens of consent, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between state authority, cultural influences, and citizen agency in contemporary China.

The middle class in Shanghai. In assessing the relationship between the middle class and civil society in China, Hsiao (2010: 259–262) claims that ‘there is a disconnect rather than a link between the emerging middle class and the growth of civil society’. His assessment is based on a few diagnostic observations of the middle class in China, where there lack ‘progressive elements within the middle strata as measured by economic and income indicators or occupational criteria’, and no signs are available to suggest that ‘a true sector of nongovernmental civic organizations has developed into a viable social force’. His pessimistic evaluation may need further interrogation. The so-called ‘progressive elements’ are not entirely absent within Chinese society. Individuals striving for upwards mobility, even within a hierarchical system, may harbour aspirations for a more just and equitable social order. These aspirations, grounded in a Rawlsian sense of fairness (Rawls, 1971), could potentially translate into a demand for greater social participation and a more accountable political system. The characterisation of China’s non-governmental civic organisation (NGO) sector as underdeveloped requires further exploration. While NGOs might face significant restrictions, alternative forms of civic engagement may be emerging. Grassroots organisations focused on environmental protection, community development, or educational reform could be flourishing beneath the surface. These organisations, operating within the boundaries of the existing political system, might nonetheless contribute to a more vibrant civil society by fostering social capital, promoting public discourse, and advocating for incremental change. Furthermore, the assertion of a complete disconnect between the middle class and civil society growth in China warrants a more critical examination. Even within a context of limited political space, the middle class might exert a subtle yet influential force. Their economic clout could empower them to advocate for consumer rights, ethical labour practices, or environmental sustainability. In addition, their growing access to information and communication technologies could facilitate the formation of online communities and the dissemination of alternative narratives, fostering a more critical citizenry. We shall illustrate this by exploring the case of Shanghai, where the emergence of middle class has contributed in no small way to a robust civil society, especially during the 2022 lockdown period.

The public health emergency in Shanghai in 2022 exposed a fascinating dynamic concerning the boundaries between the government and the people as well as the state and civil society. Unlike contexts where a culture of ‘government power worship’ prevails, Shanghai’s market-driven economy fosters a citizenry more attuned to the demarcation between public power and the private sphere. This heightened sensitivity is likely attributable, in part, to the city’s well-developed market structures and resourceful government. The middle class, in particular, benefits from a mature market infrastructure, providing them with a degree of economic autonomy and access to resources. The central insight of the Marxian theory of class analysis is to examine the nature and political tendencies of social classes by placing them within the context of productive relations.

Our understanding the middle-class culture will be premised on the tracing of the conditions of (re)producing the middle class. By examining the middle class in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, scholars have reported that those with higher marketability (education and professional skills) and those employed in state-owned enterprises are more likely to be among the middle class³. This, in turn, emboldens them to express dissenting views on public matters. Furthermore, the presence of a vibrant market often cultivates a network of private contacts, encompassing not only middle and high-level officials but also mainstream media outlets and opinion leaders. This access to alternative channels of communication empowers the middle class to voice their concerns and participate, albeit indirectly, in shaping public discourse.

It is important to acknowledge that this negotiation of boundaries does not necessarily translate into overt confrontation. While the middle class demonstrates a willingness to challenge perceived overreach by the state, the emphasis remains on maintaining a degree of social stability and economic functionality. This suggests a pragmatic approach, one that seeks to influence public policy through reasoned discourse and engagement with established institutions, rather than resorting to disruptive forms of protest. The Shanghai case thus presents a nuanced example of civil society operating within a specific socio-economic context. It highlights the potential for a middle class, empowered by a market economy, to engage constructively with the state, even as they remain vigilant in protecting the boundaries between public and private spheres. The Shanghai experience offers valuable insights into the evolving relationship between civil society and public authority in a globalised world.

Urban grassroots governance in the 'State-market-society' triad. The 'state-market-society' triad is a classic analytical framework for understanding local governance (Pelczynski, 1984: 10–11). At the community level, public officials at the town government may be regarded as representative of the state. The property company is the market, while local residents and apartment owners are the citizens, constituting the society distinct from state and market. In the Chinese bureaucratic hierarchy, the neighbourhood committee (jiedao weiyuanhui) may be regarded as an oddity, a bridge, or an in-between. It is situated between the state and the society, acquiring certain features from both. By law it is a self-governing, autonomous body for the local community, mainly made up of local residents and responsible for public matters within a designated area. It is, in this sense, 'societal', as its members are mostly ordinary, local citizens. On the other hand, in its actual operation, it is more often than not been absorbed into local government, becoming an extension of the latter in providing public services and goods to local residents. It is the convergence point for society and state. This was particularly the case during the lockdown period in Shanghai in 2022, where understaffed local government bureaus had to rely upon neighbourhood committees all over the city in the providing of public goods. It brings politics closer to citizens' everyday life by enabling and empowering them in the process of political participation (Boyte, 2005).

In unpacking the public administration during the lockdown period, we can use this 'state-market-society' triad as an approach to dissect three different mechanisms at work. For the state, it is in principle a mode of governance that sets public interests as its priority, with a constellation of coercive apparatuses at its disposal should there occur failure

to observe its directives, policies, and regulations. The market emphasises free will and the spirit of contractarianism, with its focus on private interests. The community, as a middle ground between the state and the market, is the ground where the private and the public meet, negotiate, and converge. During the lockdown period, the community was an important player in filling the vacuum left by the state and the market, as far as preventing the spread of the COVID-19 virus was concerned.

Through this triad framework, first and foremost, Shanghai presents a ‘strong state’ model (Ye, 2022b). The local government in Shanghai functions with a high level of efficiency, rich public resources at its disposal, a stronger capacity to provide public services, and a far-reaching penetration into the market economy and grassroots society. In terms of the rule-of-law index, Shanghai has been ranked way higher than other municipalities, provinces and regions in China, with a track record of pro-market policies in the form of the rule of law, transparency, the attracting of direct investment, and the improvement of business environments, to name just a few. Grassroots organisations in Shanghai rely on the ‘strong market’ for financial and human support on the one hand, and on the ‘strong state’ for public resources and service opportunities on the other, creating a community self-governance mechanism that is dependent on both the strong market and the strong state to function.

Alongside this ‘strong state’, the market in Shanghai is also quite strong. Shanghai has a very market-driven economy since the development of the Pudong area in the twentieth century. According to the China Marketisation Index Report, Shanghai’s marketisation level had been among the highest in China from 2008 to 2018. According to its measurements, Shanghai’s marketisation index had been continuously growing in four 2-year intervals, except for 2012, when it declined compared to 2010 and dropped to the fifth place in the rankings. Other than that, Shanghai was ranked the top in the country in all three measurements in 2008, 2010, and 2014, and was narrowly overtaken by Zhejiang in 2016, still maintaining the second place in the country (Wang et al., 2018). In areas related to social governance, Shanghai also has introduced market mechanisms into its provision of public services, where the government will resort to private corporation for the procurement of public goods or human resources. Because of this, Shanghai is able to maintain its public service supply capacity at the second highest in the country while controlling the size of the government (He and Zheng, 2014).

In this triad, Shanghai’s civil society organisations are not as strong as the market and the state. Shanghai has adopted the strategy of ‘replacing NGOs with social workers’ in grassroots governance, whereby the government purchases services from social work organisations and incorporates them into the grassroots governance system. As has been pointed out, in local communities, neighbourhood committees, supposedly the self-governing bodies for local residents, have now become another administrative ‘arm’ of the government. Originally there co-exist two parallel organisations, namely the government administrative system and the residents’ self-governing bodies, whereas by now they have gradually coalesced into one single system. As a result of such assimilation or coalescence, the community has never been able to develop its own strong sense of autonomy, where an individualistic consideration of one’s own private interests irrespective of public goods may give rise to serious conflicts (Hong and Lin, 2014).

Localism and cosmopolitanism of Shanghai Civil Society during the 2022 COVID-19 lockdown

The public health emergency in Shanghai in the beginning of 2022 presented a unique challenge for urban governance, demonstrably distinct from the previously encountered exigencies of localised disaster relief, such as typhoon or flood control. Unlike these discrete events, which necessitated a focused and resource-intensive response concentrated within a specific geographical area, the epidemic management of COVID-19 demanded a more overarching approach. It necessitated the mobilisation of not just state resources but also the concerted efforts of the market and civil society at large. The traditional approach to disaster relief, often characterised by an ‘abundance’ of readily deployable municipal resources, was not readily applicable. The strategy of ‘concentrating all resources on one area’, effective in addressing location-specific natural catastrophes, could not be readily translated to the management of a city-wide epidemic like the COVID-19. Public resources, typically plentiful in the face of isolated emergencies, became relatively scarce when confronting a pervasive and multifaceted threat like the COVID-19 pandemic. In the meanwhile, the market, accustomed to the smooth flow of goods and services, entered a state of ‘standstill’ during the epidemic. The disruption of supply chains, the limitations on mobility, and the fear of contagion significantly impeded normal market operations. This would very much depend on the ‘state-market-society’ triad to come up with innovative solutions to maintain the flow of essential goods and services while mitigating the spread of the virus.

Civil society at the grassroots level, encompassing individual citizens and community organisations, played an equally, if not more, important role in the epidemic management. In contrast to location-specific disasters, where the state may take the lead, an overarching public health emergency engendered a heightened level of citizen engagement and self-governance at the local level. Civil society activism manifested itself in various ways, including the debate on public health directives, community-based support networks, and the dissemination of COVID-19-related information. Overall, it was quite a challenge for urban governance, centring on a holistic approach that transcended traditional disaster relief models and depending on the coordinated efforts of the state, the market, and civil society at large. Through an analysis of the state response, the potential ‘standstill’ of the market, and the crucial role of grassroots-level collective actions, we can develop a more nuanced framework for understanding and effectively responding to such public health emergencies in cosmopolitan cities.

Cosmopolitanism in Shanghai civil society. The burgeoning civil society in Shanghai presents a compelling case study for exploring the potential embodiment of cosmopolitan ideals within a specific socioeconomic context⁴. During the social mobilisation in the lockdown period, we can examine how Shanghai’s civil society grapples with the core tenets of cosmopolitanism. Kantian cosmopolitanism posits a universal moral community, encompassing all rational beings. These individuals, analogous to citizens in a republic, share fundamental characteristics: freedom, equality, and independence. They are bound not by codified laws but by the universal principles of morality, derived through reason. In the context of Shanghai’s civil society, this translates to a recognition

of the inherent moral worth of all individuals, regardless of nationality or origin. Efforts to promote cross-cultural understanding and collaboration within the city can be viewed as expressions of this Kantian ideal. In addition to Kant, early utilitarian cosmopolitans, such as Jeremy Bentham, grounded their cosmopolitanism in the principle of ‘common and equal utility’. This approach emphasises the maximisation of well-being for all, transcending national boundaries. Shanghai’s civil society, through its engagement with global networks and advocacy for issues like human rights and transparency, reflects this utilitarian strand of cosmopolitanism. By advocating for policies that enhance the well-being of all people, regardless of location, Shanghai’s civil society demonstrates a commitment to this broader conception of human flourishing. The question of grounding moral cosmopolitanism remains a central debate. While Kant emphasises reason, other potential foundations include universally shared human characteristics such as the capacity for suffering, a moral sense, or an aesthetic imagination (Kant, 2006), the specific basis for cosmopolitan principles within Shanghai’s civil society is likely a complex interplay of these various factors.

First, there is a strong sense of private rights and rules formed on the basis of individualism. As a cosmopolitan metropolis, the citizens in Shanghai have, on an average level, a better record of educational achievement, with access to diversified sources of information and greater sensitivity to domestic and international affairs. There is a greater attention to the protection of individual rights and a use of legal procedures afforded by the rule of law. During the lockdown period, many members of the public questioned the legality of those lockdown measures. Whether these appeals and reflections from the social level can be fully justified in terms of laws and legal theories notwithstanding, the circulation of such opinions within the society at large bespoke the sensitivity of local communities to legal compliance, political legitimacy, and moral justifiability of public policy measures. The residents of Hui Xian Ju, a neighbourhood in the Xuhui District, challenged the lockdown policy issued by their local neighbourhood committee, accusing them of implementing an unreasoning, draconian code of lockdown that was without authorization and thus illegitimate. They, on this basis, announced that they would lift the ban on outdoors activities on their own, which was a typical case of such public opinion being turned into collective action (Chake, 2022).

Second, there is a preference for a market-based approach to resource allocation. Shanghai is one of the most market-oriented municipalities in China, where the market plays a decisive role in resource allocation, and the public prefers to obtain resources through market-based methods. At usual times, Shanghai has abundant public and market resources at its disposal, with surplus for public transfer to other provinces or regions in China. However, during the lockdown period, the so-called ‘static management’ (*jingtai guanli*) of the whole city led to a sharp decline in the mobility of local residents, and the market almost ceased to operate due to the ‘frozen’ mobility of the people. It was difficult for the government to find temporary measures to fill the huge gap in supply brought about by the market shutdown, resulting in a shortage of supply in almost every public good and service. Confronted by the dilemma of the double scarcity of public and market resources, Shanghai citizens quickly responded to the ‘temporary scarcity’ through group purchases (*tuangou*). Group purchasing was essentially a market-based resource allocation method, whereby buyers, in aggregating their purchase demands,

increased the supply of goods by raising prices and buying in bulk, which was close to the act of auction to a certain extent. Typically, the larger the neighbourhood and the higher the price accepted by the residents, the more likely the group purchase was to land in a deal. In the early days of the lockdown period, group buying played a crucial role in alleviating residents' supply shortages. Indeed, it should be acknowledged that the low-income and the elderly were often excluded from group buying (Qu, 2022).

Third, there is a greater attention to professionalism. The civil society in Shanghai has on average a better record of educational achievement, of whom many are professional technicians, engineers and managers, to name just a few. The civil society led by the middle class in Shanghai has been known for its culture of professionalism, where expert knowledge can play a crucial role in the making of collective decisions and public policies. The middle class in Shanghai has many members who are experts in multiple areas and disciplines including but not limited to college professors, doctors, engineers, and technicians. It also has a leading research infrastructure in terms of natural sciences and medicine. The great influence and prestige enjoyed by Zhang Wenhong, an expert in epidemiology in Shanghai, was a telling example of this public respect to professionalism (Guan, 2022).

Fourth, members of the civil society in Shanghai can be good at using the Internet and social media for communicating of their views, opinions and perspectives. Strictly speaking, this is not a feature unique to Shanghai; on the contrary, it is a shared trait we may identify among cosmopolitan places (e.g. London, New York, Paris, and Tokyo, among many other cities), namely a higher level of media literacy (Hull and Stornaiuolo, 2014). When the lockdown measure was announced in Shanghai, it immediately caught the attention of media both in and outside China. Shanghai, with its cutting-edge ICT infrastructure and digital capabilities, has a middle school that is well versed in the use of these infrastructure and capabilities to communicate their voices with the outside world. A handful of social media platforms are at the disposal of local residents in the disseminating of their voices, experiences and dissenting views of the lockdown measures (Ye, 2022a).

As can be seen, Shanghai's civil society maintains a cooperative attitude towards institutionalised power, while, at the same time, it advocates professionalism, demands the rule of law, procedures and institutionalisation, and remains clear-headed and vigilant towards public power, in search of a governance model based on the transparency of information and the rationality of rules. Attention has been paid to the rationalisation of public policy measures and the rule of law (Shi, 2019). Those emergency lockdown measures, where they failed to align with the civil society's subscription to professionalism and its understanding of the rule of law, were without a doubt put under a questionmark.

Localism in Shanghai civil society. Since the March 2022 outbreak, Shanghai's neighbourhood committees were mobilised to tackle with the public health emergency situation. There was an article, titled 'Reading Shanghai's Neighbourhood Committees: How difficult is it to govern the city's "endpoints" under the epidemic', which, becoming viral on social media, examined in detail the tasks undertaken by local committees to prevent and control the epidemic during the COVID-19 outbreak. There was a huge gap between the

number of staff working at a typical neighbourhood committee (normally six to nine persons on average) and the committee's jurisdiction of target population (an average of 3,940 residents). In its daily operation, there were 119 daily affairs for a local neighbourhood committee on its worklist in Shanghai's Pudong Area in 2018. Of these 119 items, 82, at 68.9%, were in support of party committees, government agencies, local courts, and the issuance of various certificates for local residents. From this it can be seen that although neighbourhood committees were supposedly and legally self-governing bodies, they were in fact a hub of local governance between the government and local residents (Bian et al., 2022). Articles 20 and 21 of the current Regulations on Shanghai Municipal Neighbourhood Committees stipulate that the neighbourhood committees should supervise the operation of property owners' committees within local residential areas⁵.

The COVID-19 outbreak cast a harsh light upon the performance and operational capacity of neighbourhood committees, revealing a complex interplay between citizen demands, information dissemination, and the exercise of discretionary power. On the one hand, residents placed a premium on the timely and transparent conveyance of authoritative information by these committees. They expected a decisive and prompt approach to decision-making, particularly in a context where mobility restrictions were in place. The discretionary power wielded by neighbourhood committees in issuing various certificates had taken on unforeseen significance. From the release of essential goods to facilitating emergency medical care and medication access, these certificates profoundly impacted the safety and security of residents' lives and property. This expanded role positioned neighbourhood committees within the public consciousness as a vital arm of the 'grassroots government'. However, this newfound centrality was not without its challenges. The middle-class residents, often characterised by a higher level of information access and relative resourcefulness, were more likely to scrutinise and critique the execution of decisions and the legitimacy of the committee's authority. This dynamic underscored the inherent tension between the need for decisive action during a public health crisis and the expectation of transparent, accountable governance, even at the local level (Cai, 2022).

The ability of neighbourhood committees to navigate these competing demands would be a crucial determinant of their effectiveness in this extraordinary circumstance. Their capacity to earn and maintain the trust of residents hinged on their ability to provide reliable information, act with sound judgement, and ensure fairness and impartiality in the exercise of their newfound power. The COVID-19 lockdown thus presented a unique opportunity to evaluate the legitimacy and effectiveness of neighbourhood committees as a vital tier of urban governance, particularly in the context of crisis response.

On the other hand, the demands of the middle class extended beyond the realm of information dissemination and decisive action. They envisioned the neighbourhood committee functioning not only as an arm of the 'grassroots government' but also as a facilitator for continued market engagement, reflecting their inherent preference for market mechanisms (Li and Shen, 2023). This manifested in their expectation that the committee would actively cooperate with property owners and landlords. From their perspective, the committee ought to facilitate the procurement of essential materials, maintenance services, and public health services within the neighbourhood. This reflected a fundamental tenet of middle-class preference – a belief in the efficacy and

efficiency of a market-driven approach to securing vital goods and services. However, one must acknowledge the potential tension inherent in this demand. While the middle class desired a decisive and informationally transparent committee acting as a quasi-governmental entity, they simultaneously expected it to effectuate market solutions. This presented a potential conundrum. Could the committee effectively fulfil both roles – that of a decisive, information-driven arm of the state and that of a facilitator for market transactions – especially in a context of public health crisis and resource scarcity? This question highlighted the need for a nuanced approach, one that acknowledged the legitimacy of both sets of demands while recognising the inherent challenges in reconciling them. The neighbourhood committee might need to prioritise the allocation of resources based on public health needs while finding creative ways to connect residents with essential services, potentially through partnerships with local businesses or the establishment of alternative market mechanisms within the constraints of the lockdown (Chen, 2023).

While it is true that Shanghai's civil society might lack a highly organised structure, and the middle class historically exhibited a low level of participation in public affairs, a crucial shift emerged in the face of the COVID-19 lockdown. This period of crisis revealed an untapped potential within this demographic segment. Although lacking systematic experience in self-governance, the middle class possessed a significant advantage – a high level of human capital. Many residents held managerial positions within public institutions or the private sector, equipping them with valuable skills applicable to community governance. This crisis, with its attendant threats to the tangible interests of families, acted as a powerful catalyst for middle-class participation. Static, top-down lockdown measures proved insufficient. The middle class, driven by the need for material security and orderly boundary demarcation within their communities, stepped forward to safeguard their collective well-being (He et al., 2023). Their marketability and awareness of rules manifested in two key ways.

First, residents leveraged their understanding of market dynamics. They utilised office and project management software to facilitate 'refined group purchasing', a testament to their resourcefulness in connecting with the market and maintaining essential supplies during a period of disruption. Second, their familiarity with regulations and online communication platforms like WeChat proved invaluable. Residents rapidly adopted these tools for bartering, neighbourhood messaging, and information sharing. This online space created a platform for applying established rules and regulations more effectively. Furthermore, WeChat groups fostered a sense of community and facilitated communication between residents⁶. This technological literacy, as it were, laid the groundwork for collaboration. Industry committees emerged as platforms for deliberation alongside neighbourhood committees and property owners. Residents engaged in discussions aimed at programme development and the reconstruction of governance norms tailored to the specific needs of the community.

However, the success of these resident-led initiatives, particularly group purchasing efforts, remained contingent upon several factors. The effectiveness of the 'head of group purchase' (tuanzhang), responsible for coordinating material procurement, played a crucial role. In addition, the neighbourhood committee retained an essential responsibility, providing leadership and oversight. Property owners contributed through planning expertise, and industry committees served as platforms for collective discourse. This

lockdown period thus highlighted the critical importance of good governance norms at the community level, requiring collaboration between various stakeholders, including the middle class, to navigate unforeseen challenges (Qu, 2022).

Block Z in Pudong New Area is a typical middle-class neighbourhood with an average price of more than RMB 100,000 per square metre and more than 700 households. During the period of lockdown, the management committee and neighbourhood committee of Block Z took the lead, with the participation of the property owners, and compiled in mid-April, 2022, when the outbreak was at its peak, a *Manual of Guidelines for the Management of COVID-19 Lockdown Period*, which was published on the public website of the management committee. In the management structure of Block Z, the neighbourhood committee played a more important role in communicating with the government, while the property owners' committee actively participated in self-governance through mobilisation and publicity, and the property owners provided support for community access, distribution of materials, and garbage disposal.

In response to the exigencies of the public health emergency, a novel governance structure emerged at the community level in Shanghai. This framework, built upon the principle of 'joint governance', facilitated a collaborative approach between various stakeholder groups. Notably, the neighbourhood committee, the owners' committee representing residents, and individual property owners jointly established a 'command group' for the epidemic prevention work. This central body ensured a finely divided distribution of responsibilities, with six specialised working groups established within its purview. These groups addressed critical needs, focusing on the organisation of nucleic acid testing, the safeguarding of medical requirements, the guarantee of food and beverage supplies for property owners, the provision of care for vulnerable groups, the procurement of essential emergency supplies, and effective public communication strategies. The vanguard role assumed by party members within the command group deserved particular attention. They played a crucial role in establishing 'vanguard teams' (xianfeng-dui), tasked with essential community mobilisation efforts. These teams undertook the recruitment, training, and management of volunteers, ensuring a robust system of citizen participation in the community response. Furthermore, the party members functioned as disseminators of party guidelines and policies, ensuring clear communication and adherence to official directives. To enhance the effectiveness of the command group and ensure its responsiveness to evolving needs, a mechanism for democratic deliberation and oversight was incorporated. Specialised delegations, representing each block of flats within the community, were integrated into the group's structure. This facilitated the timely identification of residents' specific requirements and allowed for adjustments to be made to the group's work in a dynamic and responsive manner, informed by a constant flow of daily information. This inclusion of resident representatives within the command group structure suggested a nascent recognition of the importance of bottom-up approaches in achieving effective crisis management within the context of a well-ordered society.

The anti-epidemic management model implemented in Block Z presented a compelling case study in collaborative governance during a public health crisis. This model was characterised by three key features, each contributing to its effectiveness. First, the model leveraged the inherent flexibility afforded by owner autonomy. Residents, through their

ownership committees, actively participated in delineating the boundaries of responsibility between the neighbourhood committee, property owners' committees, and individual property owners. This participatory approach established a clear foundation for cooperation among these various stakeholders. Second, the model emphasised centralised and unified command in coordinating anti-epidemic efforts. This centralised structure served as a crucial complement to the division of responsibilities. By avoiding an overly granular division of labour, the model safeguarded against potential paralysis within the governance system, which could occur if any single party were to encounter difficulties fulfilling its designated tasks. Third, the model incorporated a unique element within its command group structure. In addition to the division of labour for specialised tasks, the group also integrated party organisations and representatives. This inclusion reflected a commitment to grassroots self-governance, albeit under the leadership of party organisations. This tripartite structure, encompassing centralised elements alongside decentralised decision-making, embodied the principles of interactive governance. It facilitated a division of labour not only between government and market actors, but also incorporated civil society through resident participation. This multi-actor approach effectively mobilised the collective enthusiasm and expertise of various stakeholders, ultimately contributing to the success of the anti-epidemic efforts within Block Z.

The Block Z model, with its emphasis on owner autonomy, centralised coordination, and inclusive participation, offered valuable insights into the potential benefits of a multi-actor approach to crisis management. Although the generalisability of this model across diverse social and economic contexts would await further research, the Block Z case undeniably provided a compelling example of how collaborative governance could be harnessed to effectively address complex public health challenges (Xiong, 2020b).

Intertwined cosmopolitanism and localism in Shanghai's civil society. The public health emergency in Shanghai underscored the crucial triad of 'state-market-society', not only as a source of information but also as a resource pool for problem-solving. Through the proliferation of WeChat groups and self-organised initiatives, a complex web of relationships emerged. This network, comprised of numerous enthusiastic citizens and entities with access to resources, formed a resilient self-operative mechanism that significantly aided the official response to the crisis in the midst of market failures. This case study compels us to consider the potential benefits of a 'multi-nodal' interconnectedness between localism and cosmopolitanism, insofar as information dissemination and crisis management are concerned. While official government channels remained essential, they could be effectively complemented by establishing additional information hubs alongside data processing and problem-solving nodes. This multi-nodal structure fostered a more robust and responsive system that could tap into resources at both local and cosmopolitan levels.

We may consider a hypothetical scenario here, where a mother with a young child is tested positive for the virus. Her immediate needs are likely multifaceted, encompassing medical care, childcare arrangements for her children, elder care for dependents at home, and potentially, psychological support. A singular, hierarchical response structure might struggle to address this complex set of needs effectively. National or

cosmopolitan guidelines would not be able to respond in a timely manner to such needs. By way of comparison, a multi-threaded, diversified network, operating both horizontally and vertically, could facilitate a more comprehensive and coordinated response, where the cosmopolitan would need to be activated through a local understanding and interpretation of needs of this mother.

In this hypothetical scenario, if we adopt a multi-nodal perspective and regard each entity as a node, then every such 'node' within the network, specialising in a specific area, could be activated simultaneously, ensuring that the diverse needs of the individual are met promptly and efficiently. By definition, a node is a 'junction of information channels', where governments are regarded as 'nodal' to the extent that they are 'seeing many different cases and thus building up a store of information' (Hood, 1983: 4). Here we would argue that it is not just governments, but also other organisations, individuals or entities that can be equally 'nodal' in nature. These 'nodal' entities *en semble* create an assembly of 'nodes' that constitute a multi-nodal network⁷. Furthermore, the Shanghai experience highlighted the limitations of traditional hierarchical structures in fostering innovation during a pandemic crisis like the COVID-19. While government departments and agencies, such as the Civil Affairs Department (*minzhengju*), might recognise the need to incentivise social workers, their ability to implement such incentives could be hampered by bureaucratic processes. Street-level actors were often the ones tasked with the procurement of services and the execution of incentive programmes. This disconnect between policy design and implementation posed a significant hurdle to rapid adaptation and innovation. However, by fostering a synergy between the private and public sectors, a more dynamic and adaptable system could emerge. Dialogue and communication mechanisms between government and civil society could facilitate a process of 'trial-and-error' and exploration by the private sector. These local, 'on-the-ground' experiences could then be translated into valuable lessons and best practices that could be adopted, generalised and put to potential cosmopolitan use by the official sector. For example, if a grassroots governance unit launches a programme to support frontline social workers, the challenges encountered, the feedback provided by the social workers themselves, and the programme's overall effectiveness all constitute valuable firsthand information. Seemingly local as this data may look, the Civil Affairs Department can leverage it to refine and improve their own initiatives, fostering a continuous learning cycle between the local and the national or cosmopolitan. This process resonates with the making explicit and sharing of 'tacit knowledge' within an organisation (Huizenga, 2015: 55–56), transforming practical experience into a shared understanding and cultural competency via the triadic apparatus of 'state-market-society'.

The Shanghai case study offers valuable insights into the potential of civil society and a multi-nodal approach to strengthen epidemic management. The local and cosmopolitan knowledge can join hands in such a multi-nodal network to provide innovative solutions to seemingly local, but *de facto* cosmopolitan issues. By acknowledging the limitations of traditional hierarchical structures and encouraging collaboration between and among such entities as government, market, and civil society, a more responsive and adaptable approach to public health emergencies can be cultivated.

Conclusion

Using the shadow civil society in Shanghai as an example, this essay delves into the intricate relationship between localism and cosmopolitanism within civil society, acknowledging both the inherent tensions and the potential for a mutually reinforcing dynamic. Far from being inherently oppositional forces, these concepts can be more productively understood as two sides of the same coin. Local communities, far from being insular entities, can serve as fertile ground for the cultivation of cosmopolitan values. Engagement with local neighbourhood committees, for instance, has been shown to foster not only a sense of local belonging but also opportunities for intercultural exchange. These shared spaces can transcend cultural boundaries, fostering dialogue and understanding between diverse community members. The governance practices of these local neighbourhood committees, with their emphasis on transparency, accountability, and the rule of law, can connect with global networks of like-minded individuals and organisations. This cross-pollination allows for the exchange of best practices and the dissemination of knowledge on a global scale. This synergistic relationship empowers local concerns to find a voice on the international stage. Local communities, by engaging with global networks, can amplify their demands for good governance, social justice, or accountable public administration (Mann et al., 2021: 9–13). Conversely, the global flow of ideas and resources can be channelled and adapted to resonate with specific local contexts. Global principles, such as those promoting transparency, due process of law and legality, can be effectively translated into locally-driven initiatives, ensuring their long-term viability and effectiveness.

The emergence of a ‘shadow civil society’ during the stringent lockdown measures imposed in Shanghai in response to the COVID-19 pandemic presents a compelling case study for examining the intricate interplay between localism and cosmopolitanism within the broader context of civil society’s role in crisis management. This phenomenon, characterised by the spontaneous and organic mobilisation of citizens outside of formally established institutions, served not merely as a supplement to governmental initiatives but also as a crucial counterbalance, highlighting the potential for a dynamic and nuanced relationship between state and non-state actors in addressing complex challenges. While local governmental bodies, acknowledging the pragmatic value of civic engagement, actively sought to foster collaboration with community-based organisations (as documented in Cai et al., 2021: 107–120), the emergence of this ‘shadow’ sphere reveals a deeper tension. These partnerships, while facilitating essential anti-pandemic tasks such as the recruitment of volunteers, the collection of donations, the dissemination of vital information, and the distribution of medical equipment (as noted by Cheng et al., 2020), simultaneously underscore the limitations of a purely localised response. The ‘shadow’ element arises precisely because the needs of the community, particularly the most vulnerable within it, exceeded the capacity or willingness of official channels to address them. This necessitates a broader, more cosmopolitan perspective, one that recognises the inherent interconnectedness of communities and the universality of certain human needs and rights.

Indeed, the actions of these ‘shadow’ organisations, in providing essential services and support to those neglected by official agencies (An and Tang, 2020), resonate with a

cosmopolitan ethos of solidarity and shared responsibility. They demonstrate that the concern for the marginalised, the pursuit of an equilibrium between efficiency and equity – themes identified by Evans and Boyte (1992: 7, 81, 95) – transcend national boundaries and emerge as ‘universal concerns, even within a seemingly localised crisis. Thus, the Shanghai case illuminates a complex dialectic. On the one hand, it underscores the vital importance of local knowledge, embeddedness, and responsiveness in times of crisis. On the other hand, it reveals the limitations of a purely localist perspective, particularly when confronted with challenges that expose systemic inequalities or require a coordinated response that transcends geographical boundaries. The ‘shadow civil society’, therefore, can be seen as a manifestation of both localism and cosmopolitanism – local in its origins and immediate impact, yet cosmopolitan in its underlying motivations and implications for our understanding of global citizenship and shared responsibility.

This analysis necessitates a re-evaluation of traditional conceptions of civil society, moving beyond a binary opposition between state and non-state actors. Instead, we must consider a more fluid and dynamic model, one that acknowledges the potential for both collaboration and contestation, for both local specificity and universal principles. The ‘shadow’ reveals not simply a gap in service provision, but a space where the local and the global intersect, where individual agency and collective action converge to challenge existing structures and promote a more just and equitable society. All in all, the analysis offered in this essay challenges the traditional binary framing of localism and cosmopolitanism. By recognising the potential for synergy between these forces, we gain a richer understanding of civil society’s role in fostering a more just and equitable global order. Local communities, far from being impediments to global progress, can serve as crucial incubators for cosmopolitan values and agents for positive social change on a global scale (Holbig and Lang, 2022). This reframing of the relationship between local and global offers a valuable lens for examining the complex dynamics within civil society and its contributions to a more interconnected world. In particular, the analysis of shadow civil society in Shanghai, as a manifestation of localism and cosmopolitanism, can be further enriched by examining its global dimensions. The dispatch of Chinese civil society organisations abroad to assist in the combat of the coronavirus pandemic offers a compelling example of the international reach and impact of these organisations (Spires, 2024: 45–80). The engagement of Chinese civil society at the global level is particularly significant given the Chinese government’s active promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Esteban and Qiao -Franco, 2024: 3–7). This initiative, aimed at fostering economic cooperation and connectivity across Asia, Europe, and Africa, presents opportunities for Chinese civil society organisations to contribute to development efforts and promote cultural exchange (Arase, 2023). By participating in BRI projects, these organisations can extend their reach beyond domestic boundaries, fostering international solidarity and contributing to global governance (Esteban and Oliví, 2024). This global dimension of shadow civil society underscores the interconnectedness of local and global issues. The experiences and lessons learned from the engagement of Chinese civil society organisations in international development efforts can inform domestic practices, fostering a more cosmopolitan and outward-oriented approach to civil society engagement within China.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This article was sponsored by the Key Project of National Social Science Foundation (grant no. 22AZD085).

Notes

1. See, for instance, a study of cultural parks public venues of intellectual exchange in Beijing, Ren (2013: 62–65). For the political influence of the middle-class in China in general, see (Li, 2010: 73–79).
2. For the relations between entrepreneurs and the rise of the middle class in China, see Goodman (2010).
3. See Zhang and Yao (2016). It should be noted that the main conclusion of this study is that the level of marketisation has a significant impact on the social production of the middle class. However, the study also points out that the level of marketisation, when placed in a binary logistic Steele regression model that takes into account the two indicators of market capacity and monopoly industries, does not have as great an impact as the latter two. The marketisation indicators used in the study were taken from an earlier version (2014 edition) of the Wang et al. (2018), in which the difference between the marketisation levels of Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou was significant (9.87, 10.96, 10.42), whereas the data for the same period in 2018 (9.14, 9.93, 9.86) narrowed the gap. It is believed that differences due to market power and industry monopolies are more robust than the level of marketisation itself.
4. For a discussion of cosmopolitan ideals, see Gabriel and Veronis, 2023.
5. For the role-played by neighbourhood committees during the lockdown period, see an interview of Miao Jia ([https://shanghai.nyu.edu/is/how-are-neighbourhood-organisations-helping-residents-during-shanghai-lockdown#:~:text=Neighbourhood%20committees%20\(or%20juweihui\)%2C,test%20positive%20to%20hospitals%20and](https://shanghai.nyu.edu/is/how-are-neighbourhood-organisations-helping-residents-during-shanghai-lockdown#:~:text=Neighbourhood%20committees%20(or%20juweihui)%2C,test%20positive%20to%20hospitals%20and)), a sociology professor at New York University Shanghai, and also her research on a similar occasion of neighbourhood committees during the Wuhan Lockdown in 2020, see Miao et al. (2021).
6. During the lockdown period, WeChat or other Internet platforms had served as important infrastructure to enable the channelling of voices and opinions, see Li (2024).
7. Such an idea of ‘a network of multiple nodes’ can be seen more in computer science, especially in chip design. We have borrowed this concept from computer science research. See, for instance, Verma et al. (2023).

References

- Agustín OG and Jorgensen MB (2019) Solidarity cities and cosmopolitanism from below: Barcelona as a Refugee City. *Social Inclusion* 7(2): 198–207.
- Amenta E (2005) Institutional and state-centric theories of political sociology. In: Janoski T, Alford RR, Hicks AM, et al. (eds) *The Handbook of Political Sociology: States, Civil Societies, and Globalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.96–114.
- An BY and Tang S-Y (2020) Lessons from COVID-19 responses in East Asia: Institutional infrastructure and enduring policy instruments. *American Review of Public Administration* 50(6-7): 790–800.

- Anderson B (1991) *Imagined Communities (Revised Edition)*. London: Verso Books.
- Arase DM (2023) Making sense of the belt and road initiative. In: Arase DM and de Medeiros Carvalho PMAR (eds) *The Belt and Road Initiative in Asia, Africa, and Europe*. London; New York: Routledge, pp.3–29.
- Baker G (2009) Cosmopolitanism as hospitality: Revisiting identity and difference in cosmopolitanism. *Alternatives* 34(2): 107–128.
- Barber BR (2003) *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age (Twentieth Anniversary Edition)*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Baumgartner F and Leech BL (1998) *Basic Interests: The Importance of Groups in Politics and in Political Science*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Beck U (2008) Reframing power in the globalized world. *Organization Studies* 29(5): 793–804.
- Beck U and Levy D (2013) Cosmopolitanized nations: Re-imagining collectivity in world risk society. *Theory Culture & Society* 30(2): 3–31.
- Bell DA and Wang P (2020) *Just Hierarchy: Why Social Hierarchies Matter in China and the Rest of the World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Berry C and Gabay C (2009) Transnational political action and ‘global civil society’ in practice: The case of Oxfam. *Global Networks—a Journal of Transnational Affairs* 9(3): 339–358.
- Bian J, Chen Y, Gao W, et al. (2022) Shudu shanghai juweihui: yiqing xia chengshi de ‘moshao’ zhili nan zai na (A digital reading of Shanghai’s neighbourhood committees: What is the difficulty in managing the ‘periphery’ of the city during the pandemic?), 2 June. Available at: <https://www.jfdaily.com/statics/res/html/web/newsDetail.html?id=493596&v=1.3&sid=67>
- Boyte HC (2005) Reframing democracy: Governance, civic agency, and politics. *Public Administration Review* 65(5): 536–546.
- Brincat S (2017) Cosmopolitan recognition: Three vignettes. *International Theory* 9(1): 1–32.
- Cai Q, Okada A, Jeong BG, et al. (2021) Civil society responses to the COVID-19 pandemic: A comparative study of China, Japan, and South Korea. *The China Review* 21(1): 107–137.
- Cai Y (2022) How the lockdown is remaking Shanghai neighborhoods. *The Sixth Tone*, 20 April. Available at: <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1010174>
- Carneiro R, Brasil FDD, Magalhaes BD, et al. (2023) Struggling over Serra do Curral: ?New Extractivism? Conflicts and Civil Society. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies—an Interdisciplinary Journal* 15(1): 33–52.
- Castells M (2008) The new public sphere: Global civil society, communication networks, and global governance. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616(1): 78–93.
- Chake (2022) Xiawucha: Shanghai huixianju daxiang ‘zixing jiefeng’ diyiqiang (Shanghai Huixianju fires first shot at ‘self-unlocking’). *Lianhe Zaobao*, 24 May. Available at: <https://www.zaobao.com.sg/realtime/china/story20220524-1276031>
- Chambers S (2002) A critical theory of civil society. In: Chambers S and Kymlicka W (eds) *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp.90–110.
- Chandhoke N (1995) *State and Civil Society: Explorations in Political Theory*. London: Sage.
- Chandler D (2009) Critiquing liberal cosmopolitanism? The limits of the biopolitical approach. *International Political Sociology* 3(1): 53–70.
- Cheah P (2006) Cosmopolitanism. *Theory Culture & Society* 23(2-3): 486–496.
- Chen D (2023) *Zhongda gonggong weisheng weiji zhong shanghaishi shequ zhili xietong kunjing yu youhua – yi j jiedao weili* (Dilemma and Optimisation of Community Governance Collaboration in Major Public Health Crisis in Shanghai: The Case of J Neighbourhood) (Master’s Thesis), East China Normal University, Shanghai.
- Chen J (2013) *A Middle Class without Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Chen P, Zhang M and Wang Y (2023) The Chinese new middle class and their production of an 'authentic' rural landscape in China's gentrified villages. *Geoforum* 144(August): 1–10.
- Cheng Y, Yu J, Shen Y, et al. (2020) Coproducing responses to COVID-19 with community-based organizations: Lessons from Zhejiang Province, China. *Public Administration Review* 80(5): 866–873.
- Coatney C (2021) Don't feed the trolls? Emerging journalism practices for fighting anti-semitism. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies-an Interdisciplinary Journal* 13(1): 62–78.
- de Tocqueville A (2010) *Democracy in America: Historical-critical Edition of De La Democratie En Amerique*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Delanty G (2006) The cosmopolitan imagination: Critical cosmopolitanism and social theory. *British Journal of Sociology* 57(1): 25–47.
- Diez T and von Lucke F (2023) Global justice and EU climate policy in a contested liberal international order. *International Affairs* 99(6): 2221–2239.
- Esteban M and Olivie I (2024) China and aid norms: A case study on Ethiopia, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. In: Esteban M and Lin Y (eds) *China and International Norms: Evidence from the Belt and Road Initiative*. London; New York: Routledge, pp.22–46.
- Esteban M and Qiao-Franco G (2024) China's stances toward international norms viewed through the belt and road initiative. In: Esteban M and Lin Y (eds) *China and International Norms: Evidence from the Belt and Road Initiative*. London; New York: Routledge, pp.1–21.
- Evans SM and Boyte HC (1992) *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America*. Chicago, IL; London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Fonseca M (2016) *Gramsci's Critique of Civil Society: Towards a New Concept of Hegemony*. London: Routledge.
- Gabriel C and Veronis L (2023) Cosmopolitan paradox? The labour market experiences of newcomer skilled workers. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies-an Interdisciplinary Journal* 15(3): 73–90.
- Goodbody F (2024) Global citizenship, global access, and world-class education: Constructing institutional narratives at the Sino-British universities. *Social Transformations in Chinese Societies* 20(2): 73–87.
- Goodman DSG (2010) The new rich in China: Why there is no new middle class. *Arts: The Journal of the Sydney University Arts Association* 32: 13–36.
- Green JE (2010) *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Green JE (2016) *The Shadow of Unfairness: A Plebeian Theory of Liberal Democracy*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Guan J (2022) *Xinguan yiqing qijian yixue zhuanjia de huayu shijian – jiyu zhang wenhong yisheng de huayu Fenxi* (The Discourse Practices of Medical Experts during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Discourse Analysis on Dr. Zhang Wenhong) (Master's Thesis). East China Normal University, Shanghai.
- Guest DE and Conway N (2001) *Public and Private Sector Perspectives on the Psychological Contract*. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.
- Guo Z (2023) From ethnic segregation to equal political status: The making of the concept of citizenship in early modern China. *Citizenship Studies* 27(6): 637–653.
- He J, Zhang Y and Yi Z (2023) Towards resilient neighbourhood governance: Social tensions in Shanghai's gated communities before and during the pandemic. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 10: 568.
- He Y and Zheng W (2014) 'Huiying shimin xuqiu': chengshi zhengfu nengli pinggu de hexin (Responding to citizens' needs: The core of city government competence assessment). *Tongjidaixue Xuebao Shehui Kexue Ban (Journal of Tongji University Social Science Edition)* 25(6): 56–65.

- Hensby A and O'Byrne DJ (2012) Global civil society and the cosmopolitan ideal. In: Delanty G (ed.) *Routledge Handbook of Cosmopolitanism Studies*. London: Routledge, pp.387–399.
- Holbig H and Lang B (2022) China's overseas NGO law and the future of international civil society. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 52(4): 574–601.
- Hong J and Lin S (2014) Shanghai jiceng zhili youxiao ma? (Is Shanghai's grassroots governance effective?). *Shangguan Xinwen (Shangguan News)*, 24 September.
- Hood CC (1983) *The Tools of Government*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Hsiao H-HM (2010) Placing China's middle class in the Asia-pacific context. In: Li C (ed.) *China's Emerging Middle Class: Beyond Economic Transformation*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, pp.245–263.
- Huizenga E (2015) *The Knowledge Enterprise: Innovation Lessons from Industry Leaders (2Nd Edition)*. London: Imperial College Press.
- Hull GA and Stornaiuolo A (2014) Cosmopolitan literacies, social networks, and 'Proper distance': Striving to understand in a global world. *Curriculum Inquiry* 44(1): 15–44.
- Kaldor M (2003) The idea of global civil society. *International Affairs* 79(3): 583–593.
- Kamada H (2021) When accurate information harms people: Information on COVID-19 infection clusters in Japan. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies-an Interdisciplinary Journal* 13(2): 60–72.
- Kant I (2006) *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Li C (2010) Chinese scholarship on the middle class: From social stratification to political potential. In: Li C (ed.) *China's Emerging Middle Class: Beyond Economic Transformation*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, pp.55–83.
- Li W and Shen D (2023) Zhiquan xiachen: chengshi jiedao zhifa tizhi gaige de duocheng bijiao (Levelling down governance: A multi-city comparison of the reform of the urban street law enforcement system). *Shanghai Xingzheng Xueyuan Xuebao (Journal of Shanghai Administrative College)* 24(5): 69–77.
- Li Z (2024) Xinxing zhuliu meiti gongzhong fuwu pingtai de goujian yu yunxing-yi shanghai yiqing qijian pengpai 'zhanyi fuwu pingtai' de shijian weili (The construction and operation of a new mainstream media public service platform: An example of the practice of the paper's 'epidemic battle service platform' during the Shanghai epidemic outbreak). *Chuanmei (Media)* 2024(4): 68–70.
- Liang SY (2008) Where the courtyard meets the street: Spatial culture of the Li neighborhoods, Shanghai, 1870–1900. *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 67(4): 482–503.
- Liang SY (2010) *Mapping Modernity in Shanghai: Space, Gender, and Visual Culture in the Sojourners' City, 1853–98*. London: Routledge.
- Locke J (1980) *Second Treatise of Government*. Indianapolis, IN; Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.
- Ma Z (2021) Zhejiang details pilot zone for common prosperity. *China Daily*, 22 July. Available at: http://subsites.chinadaily.com.cn/Qiushi/2021-07/22/c_644747.htm
- Madsen R (2002) Confucian conceptions of civil society. In: Chambers S and Kymlicka W (eds) *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp.190–206.
- Mann R, Dallimore D, Davis H, et al. (2021) *Local Civil Society: Place, Time and Boundaries*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Mansourian Y (2021) Bonsai in the time of COVID: The miniature, the social and the solitary. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies-an Interdisciplinary Journal* 13(2): 12–27.
- Matoba K (2023) Cosmopolitan Society and its Enemies: Historical Amnesia Narratives. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies-an Interdisciplinary Journal* 15(3): 1–19.

- Meyer M and Hyde C (2004) Too much of a 'good' thing? Insular neighbourhood associations, nonreciprocal civility, and the promotion of civic health. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 33(3 suppl.): 77–96.
- Miao J, Zeng D and Shi Z (2021) Can neighborhoods protect residents from mental distress during the COVID-19 pandemic? Evidence from Wuhan. *Chinese Sociological Review* 53(1): 27–54.
- Moosa S, Riyaz A, Raheem RA, et al. (2021) Social value orientations and public confidence in institutions: A young democracy under the imprint of COVID-19. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies-an Interdisciplinary Journal* 13(2): 28–43.
- Nicolacopoulos T and Vassilacopoulos G (2013) *The Disjunctive Logic of the World: Thinking Global Civil Society with Hegel*. Melbourne, VIC Australia: Re.Press.
- Palazzo G (2005) Postnational constellations of innovativeness: A cosmopolitan approach. *Technology Analysis & Strategic Management* 17(1): 55–72.
- Pelczynski ZA (1984) Introduction: The significance of Hegel's separation of the state and civil society. In: Pelczynski ZA (ed.) *The State and Civil Society: Studies in Hegel's Political Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.1–13.
- Putnam RD, Leonardi R and Nanetti RY (1993) *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Qu T (2022) Shanghai Covid lockdown: Residents resort to phone calls, group buying to source essentials as food orders, express package deliveries disrupted. *South China Morning Post*, 6 April. Available at: <https://www.scmp.com/tech/tech-trends/article/3173255/shanghai-covid-lockdown-residents-resort-phone-calls-group-buying>
- Rawls J (1971) *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press.
- Ren H (2013) *The Middle Class in Neoliberal China: Governing Risk, Life-building, and Themed Spaces*. London: Routledge.
- Scott JC (1985) *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Shi Y-q (2019) Yiba chizi ruhe 'liangdaodi': jiceng zhili zhong de zhili yinghua yi yige chengshi gengxin shidian xiangmu weili (How can a ruler 'Measure everything': Institutional hardening in grassroots governance, taking an urban renewal pilot project as an example). *Shehui (Society)* 39(2): 31–57.
- Spires AJ (2024) *Global Civil Society and China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tomba L (2010) The housing effect: The making of China's social distinctions. In: Li C (ed.) *China's Emerging Middle Class: Beyond Economic Transformation*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, pp.193–216.
- Tsang EY-H (2014) *The New Middle Class in China: Consumption, Politics and the Market Economy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Van Assche K and Teampău P (2015) *Local Cosmopolitanism: Imagining and (Re-)making Privileged Places*. Cham: Springer.
- Verma M, Chatterjee S, Garg G, et al. (2023) Scalable multi-node fast fourier transform on GPUs. *SN Computer Science* 4: 625.
- Vicentino L, Doroteo JZT, Garcia LAV, et al. (2022) 'Sana All': Netizens' perception of government responses to COVID-19. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies-an Interdisciplinary Journal* 14(1): 1–16.
- Wang X, Fan G and Hu L (2018) *Zhongguo fenshengfen shichanghua zhishu baogao 2018 (Report on China's Sub-provincial Marketisation Index 2018)*. Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe (Social Sciences Academic Press).
- Webb AK (2015) The rise of the cosmopolitan traditionalists: From the Arab Spring to a global countermovement? *International Political Science Review* 36(4): 425–440.

- Xiong Y (2019) Zhongguo zhongchan jiecheng de zhengzhi qingxiang jiqi dui yuqing de yingxiang (The political tendency of China's Middle class and its impact on public opinion). *Xiangtan Daxue Xuebao Shehui Kexue Ban (Journal of Xiangtan University Social Science Edition)* 43(5): 158–161.
- Xiong Y (2020a) Jingxi fenceng shehui yu zhongchan jiaolu zheng (Fine stratified society and middle class anxiety). *Wenhua Zongheng* 2020(5): 112–120.
- Xiong Y (2020b) Guojia zhutui yu shehui chengzhang: xiandai shuren shequ jiangou de anli yanjiu (State promotion and social growth: A case study of the construction of modern acquaintance communities). *Zhongguo Xingzheng Guanli (China Administration)* 2020(5): 99–105.
- Ye J (2022a) Shanghai residents turn to NFTs to record COVID lockdown. *Reuters*, 4 May. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/technology/shanghai-residents-turn-nfts-record-covid-lockdown-combat-censorship-2022-05-04/>
- Ye M (2022b) Yifushi hezuo: qiangguojia xia de chengshi shequ zizhi—yi shanghai NX jiedao de shequ zizhi jingyan weili (Dependent cooperation: Urban community autonomy under a strong state: The experience of community self-governance in Shanghai's NX street neighbourhood as an example). *Jiangsu Xingzheng Xueyuan Xuebao (Journal of Jiangsu Administration Institute)* 2022(1): 112–119.
- Yeoh BSA (2004) Cosmopolitanism and its exclusions in Singapore. *Urban Studies* 41(12): 2431–2445.
- Yeoh BSA (2013) 'Upwards' or 'Sideways' cosmopolitanism? Talent/labour/marriage migrations in the globalising city-state of Singapore. *Migration Studies* 1(1): 96–116.
- Zhang H and Yao Y (2016) Shichanghua yu shichang nengli: zhongguo zhongchan jiecheng de shengcheng jizhi—yi beijing, shanghai, guangzhou weili (Marketisation and market ability: The generation mechanism of China's middle class—Taking Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou as an Example). *Jilin Daxue Shehui Kexue Xuebao (Journal of Social Sciences of Jilin University)* 56(6): 105–115.
- Zhang S (2023) Constructing global citizenship identity through accumulating cultural capital: Chinese female international students' experiences at a British university. *Social Transformations in Chinese Societies* 19(2): 115–131.
- Zheng J, Zhang SPY, Fan Z, et al. (2024) Rediscovering Shanghai modern: Chinese cosmopolitanism and the urban art scene, 1912-1948. *Urban History* 51(1): 198–232.
- Zhu B and Fan X (2019) Zhongchan jiecheng huo zhongdeng shouru qunti dangqian zhongguo zhongjian jiecheng de zaishenshi (Middle class or middle-income group – a re-examination of the current middle class in China). *Jianghai Xuekan (Jianghai Journal)* 2019(1): 117–126.

Author biographies

Xi Lin is a professor of political philosophy and assistant dean of the Institute of Advanced Study in Social Sciences (IAS-Fudan), Fudan University, Shanghai, China. He was a former member of the Higher Education Academy (UK). His main research areas include theories of justice and the phenomenology of gender and equity. He is the author of *Panda in a China Shop* (2019), and the translator of *Rethinking Chinese Jurisprudence and Exploring Its Future* (2014) and *Towards the Rule of Law in China* (2022, Cambridge University Press). His research articles have appeared in *Global Policy*, *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, and *Acta Koreana*.

Yihan Xiong is a Changjiang Distinguished Professor in the School of International Relations and Public Affairs at Fudan University, Shanghai, China. He received his PhD (2009) in Political Science from Fudan University. His current research focuses on politics of migration, political participation, and social governance. His articles appear in *The China Quarterly*, *Security Studies*, *Citizenship Studies*, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, *Journal of Chinese Governance*, and *the Japanese Journal of Political Science*.