
Book Review: Working Around the Machine in China and Vietnam

Contributed by David Brown
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Civil Society Networks in China and Vietnam: Informal Pathbreakers in Health and the Environment. By Andrew Wells-Dang. Palgrave Macmillan. Hardback, 248 pp. £57.50.

Where an authoritarian regime monopolizes decision-making, influencing decisions and even turning them around may seem like a tall order for ordinary citizens. Intrinsicly suspect of serving a foreign agenda, Vietnam's Western-style civil society organizations hardly even try.

That's not the whole picture, argues Dr. Andrew Wells-Dang in an important new book. Drawing on trail-blazing research in both Vietnam and China, Wells-Dang demonstrates that the ordinary citizens of these two nations can indeed mobilize in support of a cause, stepping in to advocate successfully where government has either abdicated or failed to respond. The difference is that these advocacy groups aren't adopting Western 'civil society' models, but instead relying on forms of organization and tactics appropriate to their own societies.

Events like the Eastern European "color revolutions" some two decades ago, the Arab Spring and the red shirt demonstrations in 2010 in Bangkok bring Vietnam's registered non-governmental organizations (NGOs) no joy. Unlike private businessmen, these exemplars of civil society in Vietnam are on a tight leash. Dependent on grants and contracts from foreign embassies or foundations, suspected of ulterior purposes, they work under the skeptical eye of the nation's internal security agencies.

A few weeks ago, Nhan Dan, the organ of Vietnam's brook-no-rivals ruling party, printed an op-ed that sent a tremor through the local NGO community. Its author, Police Colonel Duong Van Cu, maintained that calls for expanding the civil society sphere in Vietnam are a stalking horse for foreign-funded political upheaval.

Though little noted by the public at large or even by the Communist Party members who read Nhan Dan for clues as to which way the political winds are blowing, Cu's article hit a raw nerve for the several thousand Vietnamese who staff local NGOs established on the Western model.

Typically but not always foreign funded, Vietnam's Western-style NGOs aim mainly to uplift poor and marginalized social groups or limit environmental depredations. They operate under permits granted by the central government and stay scrupulously clear of opposition politics. In marked contrast to civil society organizations in the Philippines, Thailand or even Cambodia, Vietnam's NGOs aren't found marching for any cause edgier than, say, traffic safety or gay and lesbian rights.

Vietnam's voluntary organizations operate in a legal limbo, the consequence of the government's decision in 2008 to suspend efforts to reach consensus on a Law on Associations. It proved impossible to bridge the gap between Western experts and their local proteges, who insisted on guarantees of the right to organize and associate freely, and conservative elements within the Vietnamese regime. The latter saw no need to tinker with the established system of mass organizations which, though they in theory represent the interests of peasants, women, youth, workers, etc., in fact have functioned as organs of state supervision.

Does that mean that the growth of Vietnam's civil society sector is intrinsically stunted, characterized by dependence on foreign models and patrons and practically constrained from efforts to mobilize like-minded citizens in support of local or national causes? Unhappily for NGOs formed on the Western model, that's probably so.

Analysis of a huge volume of internet censorship in China -- the only other Leninist state espousing 'market socialism' -- has shown that Beijing's internal security agencies are relatively relaxed when bloggers criticize the state or its leaders. They react sharply and swiftly, however, to "any comments that represent, reinforce, or spur social mobilization, regardless of content. Censorship is oriented toward attempting to forestall collective activities that are occurring now or may occur in the future."

What goes for China goes for Vietnam, too. Notwithstanding festering bilateral disputes over ownership of adjacent seas, Vietnam's party and police organizations maintain robust collaboration with counterparts in the colossus to the north. They find plenty of common ground when they contemplate the possibility that political movements may spring up outside regime control.

Andrew Wells-Dang, however, describes a successful networking approach that bears scant resemblance to the forms of public advocacy-oriented political activism dominant in the West. He is both a practitioner and a scholar, and the rare analyst who's done his field research in both countries.

Civil Society Networks in China and Vietnam, explores how citizens can come together around a shared objective and then "work the system" to build support for their goal. The cases that Wells-Dang studied concern quality of life issues: mobilization to forestall the condemnation of a beloved Hanoi park to make room for a five-star hotel complex, advocacy by and behalf of people with physical disabilities, peer support groups for women with AIDS, and a campaign against dam-building on China's "last wild river."

The common thread is what did not happen: in each case, a handful of volunteer activists managed to achieve public policy goals without triggering a reflexive, negative response by conservatives in the party/state structure. These activists were loosely organized; in no case did they seek official recognition. Nor were these cases us-against-them situations; the activists built on childhood and school friendships with each other, with people within the state and party structure and with reporters and editors. Many of the people Wells-Dang interviewed were simultaneously members of the establishment (officials, state scientists, registered journalists) and activists.

Unlike many analysts, Wells-Dang sees "civil society" as broader than formal organizations alone: it includes individual analysts, bloggers, religious groups and so on. These informal groups are not "tamed," he says; they can and do engage in policy advocacy within (or in spite of) the limits set by the Party/State. Nor, he emphasizes, is civil society necessarily oppositional.

Wells-Dang found that in a restrictive environment like contemporary China or Vietnam, informal, decentralized, independent, ad hoc networks are more effective than "hard" and foreign-funded organizations" like NGOs. The conclusion might be different if NGOs were able to raise ample operating funds from domestic sources, but that's almost

unheard of in either nation. "Network effectiveness," Wells-Dang concludes, is "based on the presence of influential allies, a balance between inside and outside ties, support from public opinion, and leadership from . . . a committed core group" and, he adds a bit later, limited goals and not being perceived as a "troublemaker."

Achieving public goals in a practical way, according to Wells-Dang's research, doesn't seem to be a process that's much different in Hanoi or Beijing than in Fresno or Wagga Wagga or Newcastle. Get together. Work out a plan. Push the plan with officials who are also friends. Talk to reporters and editors. Enlist the help of people who know decision-makers. Don't give up, stick to the script, build consensus and avoid getting entangled with larger and essentially extraneous causes -- the sort that set off alarm bells at the Ministry of Security.

Wells-Dang's research is important not least because it recalibrates our expectations of how policy change can come about in authoritarian states like Vietnam or China. By emphasizing informal networking that's focused squarely on a problem that the authorities can't or won't manage, he provides a powerful lens for analysis of citizen activism.

Take, for example, a controversy that's not discussed in Wells-Dang's book but validates his approach, the Vedan affair. It erupted in September 2008 when Vietnamese environmental police discovered that a Taiwanese maker of MSG was discharging huge quantities of industrial waste into a river near Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). Follow-up investigation revealed that the discharges had been going on for a dozen years, unnoticed by local authorities. After confirming breaches of anti-pollution law, government agencies proposed to let the Vedan Corporation off with token fines. Vedan was, after all, a big employer with close ties to provincial leaders.

Atypically, things didn't end there. Several HCMC newspapers took up the cause of the several thousand fish farmer families whose livelihoods had been systematically destroyed. Lawyers stepped in to organize a massive claims-filing campaign. Bucked up by the show of public support, Environment Ministry officials arranged for a research institute to calculate total damages. Consumer advocates organized a boycott of Vedan products that spread to supermarket chains throughout Vietnam's southern region. The Prime Minister let slip that he expected an appropriate outcome. At last in August 2010, facing defeat in court and hammered by bad publicity, Vedan capitulated and compensated farmers at hitherto unimagined levels.

A Wells-Dangian analysis can also be applied to the controversy that erupted in 2009 over plans to allow Chinese firms to mine bauxite in Vietnam's central highlands. Again, an ad hoc coalition formed on a foundation of long-established friendships and professional ties and skilful management of a new propaganda medium, on-line blogging. It engaged environmentalists, soldiers and, ultimately, anti-regime dissidents who sought to exploit the fracas to erode trust in the regime. The movement failed to stop the bauxite project because of the conspicuous entry of the dissidents, which gave security agencies an excuse to crack down.

In neither the Vedan nor the bauxite affairs, nor in any of Wells-Dang's four case studies (two in Vietnam and two in China), did Western model NGOs play a significant role. In all cases, there was space for a civil society coalition to form and find common ground with some elements of the regime. In all cases, a handful of individuals stepped up to the problem and provided consistent, responsible leadership.

It's an effective model of civil society activism that's likely to be seen more and more in both countries.