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## Harmonious Society

KIN-MAN CHAN

The Chinese University of Hong Kong,  
Hong Kong, China

### Introduction

“Harmonious society” (“*hexie shehui*”) is a concept that was introduced by President Hu Jintao of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as a vision or objective for the country’s future socioeconomic development. After his succession to power in 2002, Hu presented this concept and a related idea, the “scientific development concept” (“*kexue fazhan guan*”), as the unifying concepts of his administration. Researchers point out that these two concepts distinguish Hu from his predecessor, Jiang Zemin (Lam, 2005; Delury, 2008). Both concepts were incorporated into the Chinese government’s 11th five-year plan (2006–2010) and the constitution of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2005 and 2007, respectively, and have generated much discussion. This article introduces the meaning of a harmonious society and discusses the relationship between a harmonious society and civil society. It also investigates the obstacles to attaining this harmonious society.

### Definition

Harmony is a central concept in traditional Chinese philosophy, especially in Confucianism (Delury, 2008). It is a social ideal that governs not only family and interpersonal relations but also those of the rulers and the ruled. In the Confucian classic, the pursuit of social harmony does not mean absence of conflicts and disagreements and there is even room for loyal opposition (Delury, 2008). Later interpretations, however, tend to put emphasis on order and stability, which might inevitably minimize and ignore social disparities and conflicts (Cheung, 1989). Similarly, Hu’s administration did call for harmonious society with an aim to achieve social stability, but they, as demonstrated below, were not blind to present social

inequalities and problems. Rather, it is these conflicts and problems that lead them to set such a policy orientation.

According to President Hu (2005:3), a harmonious society is a society that is “democratic and ruled by law, fair and just, trustworthy and fraternal, full of vitality, stable and orderly, and maintains harmony between man and nature.” These social values cover not only political and economic institutions but also cultural and environmental dimensions, which is demonstrated by the exhaustive list of suggestions made in the resolution of the Central Committee of the CCP in 2005 concerning the building of a harmonious socialist society. The suggestions cover a broad range of topics, including policy orientation regarding rural development, regional development, employment, education, medicine, and public health, environmental protection, the legal system, taxation, and fiscal policies, the social security system, community management, party leadership, and cultural enterprises (Chinese Communist Party, 2006).

Although numerous policies fall under the rubric “harmonious society,” the concept is not unfocused. It was introduced against a background of the social disparities and conflicts that were induced by rapid economic development in China. In other words, this inclusive vision was invoked as Party leaders had already acknowledged a number of inequalities and externalities that had been generated by economic development, and building a harmonious socialist society represented the determination of Hu’s administration to solve these problems (Delury, 2008). How then can these social disparities and conflicts be solved? What are the guiding principles behind the exhaustive policies and programs? These questions are also related to the scientific development concept, which is discussed together with the concept of a harmonious society in several CCP documents and speeches by CCP members.

If a harmonious society is the vision of Hu’s administration, then the scientific development concept is the means by which the harmonious society is to be built – they are two sides of the same coin (Fan, 2006). According to President Hu (2004), the main themes of scientific development concept are “putting people first, comprehensive, coordinated, and sustainable.” The scientific development concept emphasizes a more balanced approach to China’s development. Hu named five areas of development, or “five pairs of coordination” (“*wuge tongchou*”) to be coordinated or balanced to address the social disparities found in present day China: rural versus urban, coastal versus central and western, economic versus social, human versus nature, and domestic development versus openness to the world. While Hu’s administration aims for a “well-off society” (“*xiaokang shehui*”) and economic

development is still the top priority, it seeks a more balanced and comprehensive development strategy. This latter objective is revealed in the 11th five-year plan, which takes seriously the issues of distribution and sustainability (Fan, 2006). Naughton (2005:1) comments that the 11th five-year plan “presents a program of government action designed to ensure that rapid growth will be more sustainable over the long term, and that fruits of growth will be more equitably shared.” It is through such a program that Hu’s administration seeks to attain and maintain social harmony in China.

### Historical Background

The harmonious society and scientific development concepts were introduced as Hu and other party leaders perceived that China has progressed to a different phase in development. In a speech delivered to provincial cadres, President Hu (2005), citing other countries and regions as examples, argued that when a country’s annual gross domestic product (GDP) per capita exceeds US\$1,000, its socioeconomic development enters into a critical stage. In this stage, the country experiences either rapid economic growth and social stability or economic stagnation and social unrest, depending on whether or not its government makes the proper policies and decisions. Given that China’s GDP per capita has exceeded US\$1,000 every year since 2003 (People’s Daily Online, 2004), Hu was implying that the country had already moved into this new phase of development. In his speech, Hu identified a number of areas of social discord and problems that required a long-term strategy: rural-urban inequalities, regional disparities, uneven income distribution, energy supply shortages, environmental degradation, diversity in moral values and social interests, corruption, and crime. The present challenge facing the party, Hu pointed out, was how to steer the development process in tackling all these problems and conflicts. The Party developed a resolution (Chinese Communist Party, 2006) that describes the building of a harmonious socialist society as a continuous process to solve the social problems and conflicts generated by rapid development.

As an idea that was corresponding to a new phase of growth, Hu’s vision of a harmonious society and its correlate, the scientific development concept, represents a break from the development paradigm of the previous leadership. In the initial stage of economic reforms in the 1980s, party leaders including Deng Xiaoping adopted a slanted policy that favored certain sectors (such as the upper and middle classes) or regions (such as coastal provinces and cities), the so-called theory of “letting some people get rich first” (“*xianfu lun*”). Although China’s

economy grew rapidly, gaps between different regions and social strata widened tremendously (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Research Team, 2005; Hu, 2007). Certain disadvantaged groups such as rural peasants and laid-off workers were barred from sharing the benefits of China’s economic development and became potential sources of social unrest. In contrast to previous administrations, Hu’s administration, while maintaining the goal of building a well-off society, emphasizes “common prosperity” (“*gongtong fuyu*”). Rather than seeking only to create wealth and attain rapid economic growth, Hu’s administration has striven to reduce the widening social inequalities by prioritizing the welfare of disadvantaged social groups and underdeveloped regions (Naughton, 2005; A. Hu, 2005; Fan, 2006). This shift in orientation is outlined in the “five pairs of co-ordination” of the scientific development concept.

Along with the goal of common prosperity, that is, the even distribution of the benefits generated by economic growth, the notion of a harmonious society has broadened the previous development paradigm. Angang Hu (2007) comments that the principle of putting people first, which is enshrined in the scientific development concept, has changed the concept of development from one that narrowly focuses on economic development and growth in GDP to one that takes human and other aspects of development into account. The 11th five-year plan articulates goals that are related to issues including sustainability, energy consumption, and environmental conservation. This blueprint for development also addresses issues such as employment, social security, poverty eradication, education, medical care, and community organization. Comprehensiveness is, in fact, one of the key elements of the scientific development concept.

### Key Issues

Discussion of a harmonious society has provided unprecedented opportunities for scholars and activists in China to construct a new discourse of civil society. Chan (2006) and Angang Hu (2007) in different occasions similarly argued that in modern society, social conflicts are unavoidable and people should not expect harmonious relationships based on homogeneity as was the case in a traditional agricultural society. A more dynamic conception of harmony should be promoted along with due recognition of diversity in society. Both Chan (2006) and Angang Hu (2007) suggest three measures for the attainment of a harmonious society in today’s China. First, the Chinese government should take steps to reduce inequalities by implementing a more balanced development strategy (particularly, to induce investments in inland

regions) and ensuring more progressive redistribution of income through social welfare and services. Second, the Chinese state should develop a fair and strong system, that is, democracy and rule of law, to resolve social conflicts. Because it is difficult to promote absolute values or reach consensus in modern society, it is important to maintain procedural rationality in conflict resolution. Democracy as majority rule and legal procedures such as admission of evidence, defense, and jury decision making provide a relatively level playing field for people to resolve their conflicts. Third, it is important to promote the idea of tolerance when addressing diversity in modern society. People should learn to respect differences, not just in religious beliefs and lifestyle, but also in the political dimension. Given the long and traumatic history of political struggles in China, it is important for people to learn how to deal with political opponents in such a civilized manner that political violence is avoided.

In light of the discussion above, it is proposed that the development of civil society can contribute to three aspects of conflict resolution in China. First, many civic groups, particularly those dedicated to poverty eradication and issues relating to women, the environment, and education, play a crucial role in providing services to underprivileged groups. It is rather obvious that the “remedial function” of civil society can help reduce social inequality, which is the root cause of many social conflicts. Chinese people, however, appear to find it difficult to understand how the advocacy functions of civil society may also contribute to a harmonious society.

In fact, advocacy groups such as labor and environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) play a significant role in raising public awareness of social problems and provide alternative sources of information outside governments. Only when the voices of the underprivileged, such as peasants and laid-off workers, or spokespeople for the natural environment are heard in the public domain can balanced public policies be formulated and social inequality alleviated.

Civic groups also enhance the development of democracy and rule of law. By constantly aggregating and expressing the interests of the people, civil society deepens the meaning of democracy beyond electoral politics. Frentzel-Zagorska (1990) schematically depicts the functions of civil society on four levels: first, elaboration of those normative structures through which group identities and interests are defined; second, elaboration and expression of the encompassing collective identity of the given society, including the definition of its traditions, its hierarchy of values, and norms of social behavior; third, control over state policies from the viewpoint of their consistency with the socially constitutive value system;

and fourth, self-defense of the society in cases in which this consistency is violated. In a nutshell, when state policies are made in accord with social values, it expresses the most important principle of democracy.

Civil society is also pertinent to the establishment of the rule of law in a society. A legal culture with strong roots in civil society in terms of respecting individual rights and honoring contracts provides ongoing normative support to legal institutions. Civic groups that provide legal assistance to underprivileged groups also contribute to making the legal system a more equitable mechanism for conflict resolution.

Finally, the civility embedded in associational life is crucial in nurturing tolerance in modern societies. To accommodate the great diversity of interests and beliefs in civil society, civic groups should learn to coexist and cooperate with other groups. Through overlapping membership and cross-pressure, people are more likely to move away from parochialism and extreme ideology. Shils (1991) defines civility as a feature of civil society that considers others as fellow citizens of equal dignity in their rights and obligations as members of civil society. Civility can be expressed as polished manner such as courtesy, self-restraint, and well-spokenness that facilitates communication and cooperation in public life. More importantly, civility is expressed as respect and tolerance, and includes concern for the good of adversaries as well as for the good of allies. Shils (1991) regards civility as the virtue of civil society.

In sum, civil society can help reduce social inequality through the provision of social services to and advocacy for underprivileged groups. It enhances democracy and legal-rational procedures for resolving social conflicts. Civil society also promotes tolerance and respect for others, which may reduce conflicts arising from divergent interests, beliefs, and lifestyles. Thus, it is argued (Chan, 2006; Hu, 2007) that civil society can contribute to the attainment of a harmonious society in China, a society that President Hu characterizes as “democratic and ruled by law, fair and just, trustworthy and fraternal, full of vitality, stable and orderly, and [that] maintains harmony between man and nature” (Hu, 2005: 3).

## Future Directions

Although in theory civil society can contribute to the attainment of a harmonious society, and the latter does provide a legitimate discourse for promoting civil society in China, a number of obstacles exist for Chinese civil society to contribute to this end. On the one hand, the Chinese government realizes that NGOs in China supplement the state as a “third sector” by providing services to

those who are poor and in need. On the other hand, the Chinese Communist Party is also worried that these groups may turn into an independent social force that challenges the regime. As a result, civil society in China faces tremendous constraints in several fronts.

First, most NGOs are unable to attain legal status because stringent laws prohibit them from registering with Chinese authorities. All associations and nonprofit organizations (NPOs) are required to find a government unit as their sponsor before they can register with the civil affairs authorities. As sponsors need to shoulder political risks, few government units are willing to become sponsors except in the case of personal relationships or material consideration. Most NGOs are also short of resources, as the Chinese government is dilatory in providing funding; in addition, the Government does not encourage donations from groups that are not state-sponsored charity groups. As a result, many NGOs have to rely on overseas funding sources such as foundations or international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) in Hong Kong and Western countries. Since the “Colored Revolution” in Central Europe, NGOs with foreign connections have inevitably been under close scrutiny by the Chinese state. Also, overseas foundations and INGOs cannot find a way to acquire legal status in China, although a registration law for foreign foundations is already in place (Chan, 2005). Given these constraints, it is doubtful whether civil society in China can contribute to the attainment of a harmonious society as hoped. Only a small number of NPOs are able to provide quality services to the public. Advocacy groups are few and have only a limited range of strategies. Public discussion of democracy is still a sensitive issue in China, and the Chinese government has cracked down on NGOs that monitor government corruption. Solid evidence is still required to prove that Chinese associations are embedded in a culture of tolerance, particularly in the case of community-based organizations and indigenous religious groups.

Whether local governments in China will interpret the meaning of a harmonious society as it is described by the President is another issue at stake. This concept can be interpreted as praise for absolute social order and used as a convenient tool for suppressing dissent. Unless the Chinese government formulates concrete policies to accompany its commitment to this direction of development, “harmonious society” will be just another slogan in China. Recently under discussion in China is the use of new indicators, including the Human Development Index and Green GDP, to reflect more comprehensively the level of China’s development; such measures are seen as a means to shape the behavior of local government officials.

If these indicators are adopted, then the performance of these officials will be assessed according to them, and the officials will have to value environmental protection, education, and other areas of social development to the same extent that they value industrial investments and outputs. Eventually, an environment that is more friendly to civil society will evolve, and that civil society will have a better chance of contributing to the development of a truly harmonious, and modern, Chinese society.

## Cross-References

- ▶ Advocacy
- ▶ Civil Society and Culture
- ▶ Civil Society and Democracy
- ▶ Civil Society and Social Capital in China
- ▶ Civil Society and Social Inequality
- ▶ Civil Society Theory: Shils
- ▶ Civility
- ▶ Good Governance
- ▶ Legitimacy
- ▶ Social Cohesion
- ▶ Sustainability

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## Havel, Václav

MIROSLAV POSPIŠIL

### Basic Biographical Information

Václav Havel was born in 1936 into a well-known and wealthy Prague family. He spent his early years under the two major twentieth-century varieties of totalitarianism – first Nazism, then Communism. As a “class enemy” he was barred by the Communists from formal education and so cobbled together an education by working as a chemical lab apprentice, attending night classes, and studying economics and, later, drama. He started writing poetry and plays in the late 1950s; in the 1960s he wrote a series of plays that won him international acclaim and he became actively involved in public life and politics. After the Warsaw Pact crushed the Prague Spring in 1968, the new regime banned Havel from all forms of theater and literary work. But he continued with both his writing and them Czechoslovakia and in the course of the 1970s and 1980s he became the unofficial leader and the most thought-provoking voice of anticommunist opposition in then Czechoslovakia. Most notably, he was one of the

architects and founding spokesmen of Charta 77, besides Solidarność the most important opposition initiative in Eastern Europe. Havel was repeatedly arrested, and he served several years in prison for his dissident activities (1977, 1978–1979, 1979–1983, 1989). During the Velvet Revolution (November 1989), which toppled the weakened communist regime, he emerged as the undisputed leader of the opposition, and as Czechoslovak (1989–1992) and Czech (1993–1998 and 1998–2003) president led his country to multiparty democracy, membership in NATO (1999) and the EU (2002). In his post-presidency Havel has focused on European affairs and the defense of human rights (Belarus, Burma, Cuba, Tibet) and has returned to writing.

### Major Accomplishments/Contributions

Besides securing a place in history as playwright, politician, and statesman, Václav Havel is also a political thinker who has contributed significantly to the development of civil society in Central and Eastern Europe. Using the idea of the *Lebenswelt* (“natural life”) from the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, he developed, in both his essays and his activities during the 1970s and 1980s, the concept of society’s self-organization and autonomy that greatly influenced the thinking and activities of Czechoslovak dissidents before 1989 and contributed to the rebirth of independent Czech civil society since 1989. In the 1990s he defended the vision of a strong civil society as an important and necessary pillar of stable democratic order against both nostalgia for paternalistic state socialism and ultraliberal concepts of society as a sum of individually-acting persons. Václav Havel and his first wife Olga as well as his second wife Dagmar have also led the way as civil society practitioners establishing several foundations and other NGOs of their own.

### Cross-References

- ▶ [Civil Society and Social Capital in Central and Eastern Europe](#)
- ▶ [Civil Society History VII: Late 20th and 21st Century](#)
- ▶ [Charta 77 Foundation](#)
- ▶ [Human Rights](#)
- ▶ [Self-organization](#)

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