

# State and society: reconstructing the model of state-society relations in a power&ability perspective

Huang Hongkai\*, Lu yuan

*School of Politics and Public Administration, SWUPL, Chongqing, China*

**Abstract:** *The traditional perspective of analyzing the state-society relationship based on the strength and weakness of power is lagging behind the real political needs in the era of technological transformation, so it is urgent to find a new analytical path to rediscover and construct a new model of state-society relationship in order to improve the level of state governance and realize the smooth operation of social order. From the perspective of the dichotomy of power and ability between the state and society, this paper analyzes the differences in the power and ability of the state and society in different political systems and constructs a model of service absorption administration with strong empowerment as a characteristic, which provides a new analytical framework for understanding the relationship between the state and society in modern state governance.*

**Keywords:** *State-society relations; Service-absorbing administration; Grassroots governance; Power dichotomy*

## 1. Introduction

The Fourth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee made systematic institutional arrangements to promote the modernization of the national governance system and governance ability and put forward the goal of building a "community of social governance", however, the national government is not simply a transactional task but must be implemented sequentially from the top-down, with an emphasis on strategic top-level design. Since the reform and opening up of China, along with the reform of China's market economy system, the decreasing control of the state in the public administration sphere and the differentiation of social subjects have stimulated the demand for pluralism in the social sphere, thus giving rise to several self-organized social groups. However, since the founding of the state, China's planned system has been at the heart of its reforms, which are inseparable from the support of the state, and are all-around reforms dominated by state power. Therefore, the reforms have not fundamentally changed the relationship between the state and society in terms of the distribution of power, with the state occupying a dominant central position by its absolute superiority, while society is in a dependent and subordinate position. The dominance of the state can lead to an excessive infiltration of administrative power into social organizations, on the one hand suppressing their autonomy and limiting their development and growth, making it difficult for them to fulfill their functions consciously and efficiently, but at the same time, the people's desire for a better life has increased the public's diverse demand for public goods and services, and social organizations are increasingly needed by the state, making it an important issue to shape the relationship between the state and society.

## 2. Dichotomy of power and ability: a new perspective on the relationship between state and society

As a traditional perspective of power in analyzing state-society relations, the access to administrative, discretionary, and fiscal power is of great significance. However, the pure power perspective analysis can hardly explain the contemporary practical forms of state-society relations, and the partial situation of professional social organizations dominating in the state of state inner construction that exists sporadically in grassroots local governance highlights the obvious boundary between power and ability, presenting different governance models and characteristics from the analysis of state-society relations in "the unity of power and ability" perspective.

### 2.1. The Dual Dimension of the relationship between power and competence

On the relationship between power and ability. Based on the power-ability relationship, there are two

perspectives on the relationship between state and society: First, the holistic view of power and ability from a static perspective. This perspective is the normative view of the relationship between the state and society, in which power and ability are directly or indirectly regarded as a seamless organic whole, and the two are considered to be complementary and always change in a positive relationship, i.e., a high concentration of power will naturally produce an efficient increase in ability. Power is seen as an independent variable and an important indicator of the relationship between the state and society, and it is believed that ability will be spontaneously increased by the increase of power when ability appears more as value rationality and is embedded in the instrumental path of power. In the long run, the effectiveness of power will be insufficient to provide institutional space for the improvement of ability, and the reverse change of power and ability will occur, resulting in governance conflicts. Therefore, a new perspective is urgently needed to construct a model of the relationship between the state and society.

Second, is the dichotomous view of inner construction from a dynamic perspective. Analyzing the relationship between state and society from the perspective of the dichotomy of power and ability, power and ability are regarded as interactive but independent concepts with their own space of operation. They have equal importance in the relationship between state and society without the relationship of in or out. The dichotomous analysis does not mean that the relationship between power and ability is severed, but the two are inseparable in relative terms, i.e., ability without power is only a metaphysical utopia, not realistic; to talk about power without ability is only the increasing cost of governance, the excessive waste of administrative resources, and the modernization of governance will become nominal.

## ***2.2. Shift from the unity of power and capability to the dichotomy of power and capability***

The traditional perspective of analyzing the state-society relationship based on the strength of power has many shortcomings because it lags behind the realpolitik needs in the era of technological transformation, so there is an urgent need to find a new analytical path to rediscover and construct a new model of state-society relationship to improve the level of state governance and achieve the smooth operation of social order.

The traditional view of a single power perspective is that the default relationship between ability and power is the same, that strong power naturally enhances ability, that the two are inseparable, and that the core ability lies in the strength or weakness of the power holds rather than the other. This analytical path does not regard capability as a single dimension and gives it room to operate independently, thus analyzing the possible deviation of power and capability in the real state governance practice. Therefore, the analysis of the state-society relationship in this paper will shift from the unity of "power-ability" to the dichotomy of "power-ability" and re-examine the relationship between state and society from the perspective of the power-ability dichotomy.

Power and ability in the dichotomy of power and ability are not inseparable and always change in the same direction. From the perspective of the state, through the accumulation of institutionalized power, society will be gradually crowded out and swallowed up by administrative forces while consolidating resources to enhance policy implementation ability. The increase of formal power of the state implies the real possibility of rapidly concentrating and integrating resources to respond to crises in the face of sudden social public events, but it also implies the fact that social forces are squeezed or even ignored by strong public power. However, the extent of the impact of such events is predetermined by their episodic nature. If the state keeps increasing its power, its ability will inevitably show a marginal decrease in ability after a certain optimal fit point, i.e., the multiplication of state power and the low growth of ability will produce a huge gap.

When the administrative rule of the state is confronted with professional social problems and it is difficult to respond to public demands in a timely and effective manner, the state's ability will show a decline in the speed of super-power gathering, and then the governance dilemma of strong power and weak ability will arise. From the perspective of the social field, the emergence of social self-organized groups is mostly based on the similarity of fields or the unity of goals, and thus has endogenous professionalism, which means that the strengthening of the state's institutionalized power leads to the survival crisis of social power does not absolutely diminish its degree of professionalism, i.e., the strength of the informal power influence of social organizations and their ability to dissolve professionalism and solve the problems of grassroots social governance do not always show a positive relationship. The relationship is not always positive.

Thus, it can be seen that the analysis of the relationship between the state and society from the perspective of "the unity of power and ability" is not effective in explaining all the problems due to the

tension with the real practice due to the progress of the times, and the shift to the dichotomous perspective of "power-ability" is in line with the needs of the new era of realpolitik and has greater interpretative power and inclusiveness in line with the concept of public politics.

### **3. The Changing Relationship between State and Society in the Dichotomy of Power and Ability Perspective**

#### ***3.1. The shift from reducing ability and decentralizing to enhancing ability and centralizing***

Once the maintenance of social order and stability and the promotion of economic development have evolved as the core reference point for state officials' decisions, the public demands and social issues they face will be weighed under this framework design. In the concrete administrative practice, the state will classify the demands and expectations of the public and make political decisions according to the state's governance ability. When faced with high public demands and expectations and the state is unable to respond to the public by effectively resolving the problem with its realistic ability, the state has to solve the problem of grassroots social governance by transferring part of its power to the society and using the pluralistic path of non-institutionalized power of third-party social organizations instead of the model policy path of rigid administrative means, to avoid the failure of the state caused by the improper response, the public's distrust of the state. This means that the state will "reduce its ability and decentralize" and choose not to interfere or interfere in the conscious behavior of social organizations to a limited extent, and social organizations will take over the power transferred from the top-down by the state while showing greater autonomy and independence than before, thus presenting an institutional environment of state-society relations with the characteristics of a weak state and a strong society, a weak state and a strong society. The institutional environment of state-society relations.

In a powerful social environment, when social organizations do not implement or cooperate with state policy decisions based on their increased power and independence, or even evade administrative supervision and realistic punishment, the state will be "captured" and hollowed out by society, which will lead to disorder and conflict in society, and to restore the original order, the state must restore the original order, the state must be "empowered and centralized" instead of relying on the autonomy of the system. On the one hand, the state needs to reform its administrative system, rationalize, improve, and strengthen its responsibilities, enhance the effectiveness of state governance, thus reshape the image of the state, and improve the power and credibility of the state; on the other hand, to avoid the resistance of the original self-organized social forces to the state's public power, the state needs to take back most of the power ceded through administrative coercion, and at the same time, control the self-generated social organizations. Based on the principle of loss avoidance to maintain the effective provision of public goods and services, the state also devolves as much power as possible to social organizations in non-construction core social areas, allowing social organizations to autonomously resolve conflicts and demands that the state is unable to do so or cannot resolve well in a specific time frame, but not "giving way" to society, the state has never been absent. Rather, the state has never been absent from its position, but while adopting a moderate degree of decentralization, it has strengthened its all-round monitoring of the power of social organizations and made some non-interventionist acts to reduce the possible demands of social forces on the government, thus hiding the essence of its control. The institutional environment of a strong state and a weak society, and a strong and weak state and a weak society, is characterized by "empowered and centralized".

#### ***3.2. The inner logic of the transformation of the social model of administrative exclusion under powerful and imbecilic***

When the administrative bureaucratic state infiltrates and controls every aspect of social life using either institutionalized power or normative law. "When society shrinks in the process and ceases to be a source of creation for law and religion, then the catastrophe will come".<sup>1</sup> The state is a powerful and capable state environment that has the quality of increasing power because it enjoys absolute advantages in resources, policies, and violent machines, and the rate of concentration of state power tends to multiply and creates a huge gap with the rate of increasing state ability, and the gap becomes more and more prominent as time goes on, resulting in the phenomenon of "powerful and inefficient" state. Under the theoretical framework of "political cognitive power, institutional absorption power, institutional integration power, and policy implementation power",<sup>2</sup> which are important indicators of the state's governance ability, the institutional environment of a strong and powerful state will lead to a weak state ability, coupled with the state's excessive infiltration and control of social forces, so that the power that

belongs to the society is constantly eroded by the state and forced to attach to the state and become its subsidiary organization, and it is difficult to "grow up" while "taking advantage of the cool". To avoid possible punishment of social organizations by the state, when the public is faced with conflicts and demands, the state is unable to respond effectively and entrusts social forces to resolve the conflicts, even if the society is capable of resolving them efficiently, but to prevent the state from "taking away power afterward" to bring huge costs to social organizations, effective resolution of conflicts may mean the loss of more autonomy rather than an increase, and failure to effectively resolve conflicts may be held accountable by the state and put social organizations in a crisis of survival, so the reality is that social organizations are often weak to the state or carry out activities under the domination of state administrative forces to avoid losses to the maximum extent.

It can be seen that the institutional environment of "powerful and capable state, powerless and ineffective society" can also lead to ineffective responses to public demands, and even cause social forces to rebel and bring society into a state of disorder and stagnation, so it is necessary to explore a new relationship model to respond to the needs of the times.

### 3.3. Enhanced ability and empowerment in a strong state and strong social system environment

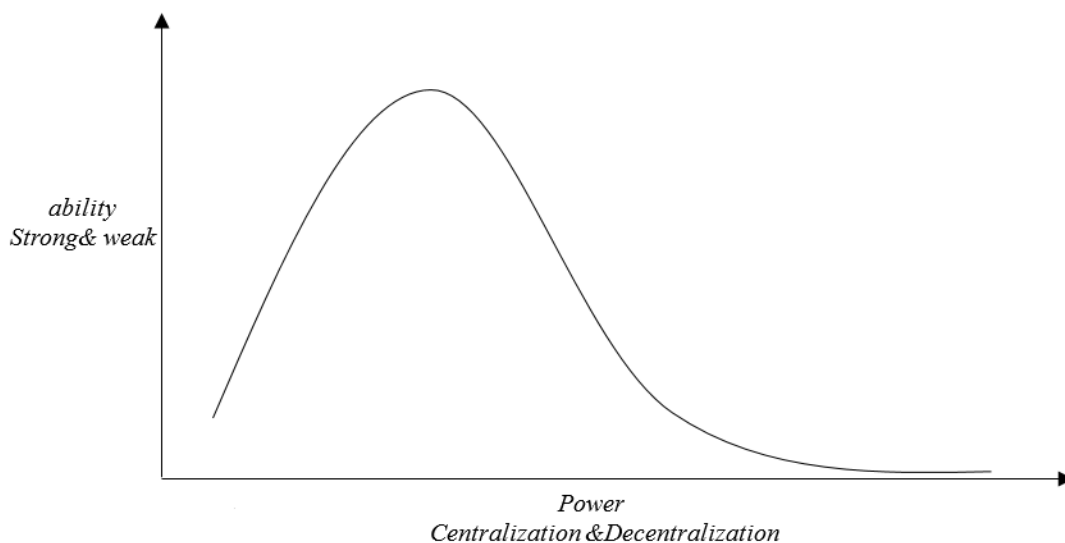


Figure 1: The relationship curve between the power and ability of the state

The institutional environment of "strong power and powerful state, weak power and weak power society", which continues to be characterized by "power-enhancing centralization", has led to the development of the state in the form of "strong power and low power", which means that strong power is not equal to strong power. The relationship between the strength of power and the ability of the state is not always positive but shows a trend of diminishing marginal power, which is when the positive relationship reaches a certain peak and an optimal saturation point. That is to say when the positive relationship between each other reaches a certain peak and an optimal saturation point, along with the continuous strengthening of power, there will be a trend of diminishing state ability, and it is urgent to weaken the state power and give up the power that should belong to the society, so as to build a "weak power and weak power state, weak power and weak power society" with the characteristic of "making up for power". The institutional environment of the relationship between the state and the society is "to give up power". "In contrast to the "weak state and strong society" model, the "weak state and weak society" model is not about the decentralization and weakening of power. In contrast to the extensive decentralization of the state under the "weak and weak state and strong society" model, "devolution" is a planned and purposeful limited transfer of power to provide efficient public goods and services and to better achieve the goals of social governance. Here, the "weak state" uses limited devolution of power as a means to achieve functional complementarity with society. The weakness of the "weak power and weak ability society" at this time is more about the state's absolute possession of core resources and the final decision of top-level design than about the state's absolute possession of core resources and the final decision of top-level design, even though the society has obtained the state's concession of power to improve its governance ability and credibility. Therefore, the institutional environment of the "weak power and weak ability state and weak power and weak ability society" has not substantially escaped

from the "strong power and strong ability state and weak power and weak ability society". Therefore, the institutional environment of the "weak and powerful state and weak and powerful society" is not substantially free from the phenomenon that social organizations are still dependent on the state for self-preservation and minimizing the cost of survival due to the excessive administrative power of the state in the environment of the "strong and powerful state and weak and powerful society".

With the high administrative cost and the lack of innovation and vitality of social forces, it is impossible to "get rid of the state and let the government go away"<sup>3</sup> as socialism with Chinese characteristics enters a new era and faces fundamental changes in the main contradictions of society, and it is also difficult to leave the society and thus deflate social forces. The new social governance problems will definitely force the transformation of state-society relationship, to avoid potential social risks, resolve social conflicts and achieve social stability and long-term stability. Under this model, the state and society are no longer two opposing parties in the traditional sense but have equal status with each other, and through a two-way interaction of consultation and cooperation, mutual support and cooperation, the two sides interact and communicate with each other to break the dilemma of one-way operation. Through mutual consultation and cooperation to enhance the governance ability of both sides, in the cooperation and support of the state empowerment and social organizations, to build a benign two-way interactive relationship model, to promote the modernization of the state governance system and governance ability at the same time towards good governance and good governance in practice is expressed as a new model of state-society relations of service (society) absorbing administration (state).

#### **4. Service and Administrative Inner construction: A New Interpretation of the Theory of State-Society Inner construction from a Power Perspective**

The relationship between the state and society is an important issue of concern for state governance and has been widely discussed in academic circles. Under the traditional analysis path of administrative power, not only political power is concentrated in the hands of the state, but also economic power and resource power are gradually clustered, and local governance is conducted in the form of social assistance to the state. However, the concentration of administrative power does not mean the complete loss of social autonomy. When the level of governance and professionalism of local grassroots are divided by the gap of financial and intellectual ability, and the contradiction of "integration of decision making and diversity of implementation"<sup>4</sup> emerges, it is difficult to effectively respond to the public demands to solve the contradiction, it is urgent to adopt a democratic approach. To resolve the contradictions and improve the acceptance of policies, we need to mobilize social forces through the form of service absorption administration and embed them in the process of social governance or policy implementation.

The interactive co-evolution of the relationship between the state and society, the relationship model of service absorption and administration characterized by strong empowerment, is an innovative theoretical perspective to interpret the modern state social governance model, in which the state, through the profound experience of long-term governance practice, recognizes the difficulty of effectively responding to the public and resolving social conflicts under the coexistence of complexity and uncertainty due to the lack of professionalization. After re-examining the social forces, the state found that social organizations established from the bottom up by specific individuals or groups based on a common vision and similar professional background and with emotional ties could effectively professionally resolve conflicts and gain public recognition while accurately understanding the root causes of social problems. To this end, the state has begun to promote the independence of social organizations through "economic decentralization, political empowerment, and social empowerment,"<sup>5</sup> giving impetus to the transformation of social forces from complete dependence on the state to independence in dealing with the challenges of grassroots social governance by virtue of their power. While identifying and seizing the opportunities, social organizations learn from past experiences and continuously improve their professionalism to gain the attention of the state so that they can give full play to their advantages and realize the effective taking over of the power given by the state, i.e., social power fills the position in time to achieve its leapfrog development while giving the state more than expected political legitimacy, social stability and economic growth in return, so that the society not only This has resulted in a positive interaction with the state, shaping a symbiotic path of positive feedback and two-way interaction between the state's continuous empowerment and society's incremental contribution.

In the administrative absorption service model under the inner construction of state and society, the state embeds formal power in the non-institutionalized structure of society through its integration and distribution of institutionalized power and social resources, and when faced with social problems of a

more specialized nature, the state usually relies on administrative coercive means or institutional constraints to absorb and guide social organizations. At this time, based on the advantages of social organizations in solving professional problems, the state reshapes their legitimacy and ability to act utilizing formal power, institutions, orders, and regulations, and in response, social organizations take strategic actions according to their needs and are embedded in the limited space freed up by the state to support the state in exchange for more resources. It can be seen that the state-society relationship under the administrative absorption service model essentially still follows the logic of action dominated by the formal power of the state, and the power concessions taken by the state are half-hearted because the boundary between the state and society is not clearly delineated, and it often appears that the state spontaneously adjusts its embedding strength to change the level of relationship with society based on its own needs. As a social organization, it is forced to accept the adaptation of formal power to obtain institutional support and resource supply from the state to maintain the legitimacy of its existence. Therefore, under the operating mechanism of spontaneous adaptation of state institutionalized power that swallows social power, how to achieve a balance between the "embedded behavior of state power and the endogenous order of social organizations" "becomes the key to analyzing the relationship between state and society and improving the state's governance ability.

In a word, unlike the state-society relationship model constructed by the administrative power from the state perspective, the service absorption administrative model with the characteristic of empowerment is from the social perspective, and the state power is transformed from "absolute monism to relative monism",<sup>7</sup> from state-dominated control to macro coordination. This model provides a new analytical framework for understanding the relationship between the state and society in modern state governance by highlighting the indispensability of society in solving specialized social problems.

## 5. Conclusion and Outlook

To modernize governance ability, we need to start from the perspective of multiple complexes of that ability, with the Party's leadership as the core, and give full play to the mutual empowerment and communication of multiple actors, such as the state and society, to achieve the organic coordination of various capacities, achieve the goal of strong ability, build a governance community, and construct a "Party-led, government-accountable, democratic consultation, social coordination, public participation, rule of law-guaranteed, science, and technology-supported social governance system. The system of social governance is led by the party committee, responsible by the government, democratic consultation, social coordination, public participation, guaranteed by the rule of law, and supported by science and technology.

Social organizations in China can be roughly divided into two parts, one of which is the government-run organizations proposed, convened, organized, established, and managed by the state authorities from the top down. The government-run social organizations are mostly created after the reform of government institutions and the division of functions previously belonging to the government so that they can assume more government functions, which is like a kind of "quasi-governmental" organization. Secondly, social organizations are spontaneously established by specific individuals with a common vision and ties of emotions and hobbies from the bottom up, which are more autonomous than the government-run organizations themselves, but they also lack substantial help from the government and have difficulty in obtaining support and protection from the state difficult to achieve successfully.

## References

- [1] Harold J. Berman. (2012). *The interaction of law and religion*, The Commercial Press, 10.
- [2] Yang Guang Bing (2019). *Basic indicators of national governance ability*. *qianxian*(12), 45-48.
- [3] Zheng Hangsheng, Yang Min. (2010). *Mutual Construction of State-society Relationships in Modern China: A new perspective of social construction*. *Nanjing Journal of Social Sciences* (01), 62-67+96.
- [4] Zhou Xueguang. (2011). *Authoritative Institutions and Effective Governance: The Institutional Logic of State Governance in Contemporary China*. *Open Times* (10), 67-85.
- [5] Ni Xing, Zheng Chongming, Yuan Chao. (2020). *Shenzhen as an Exemplar of Chinese Governance: a Theoretical Framework of Vertical coevolution*, *CASS Journal of Political Science*(04), 15-26
- [6] Xu Yuanyuan, Zuo Daihua. (2019). *The Endogenous Order in Rural Governance: Evolvement Logic, Operation Mechanism and Institutional Embeddedness*, *Issues in Agricultural Economy* (08), 9-18.

[7] Ma Zhong, An Zhaoji. (2020), *Further Consideration on Constructing the Theory of National Governance with Chinese Characteristics from the Perspective of Indigenization*. *Journal of Xi'an Jiaotong University(Social Sciences)* (02),17-24.