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Organizing under Duress

I first observed mobilizing without the masses while studying labor organizations in China. While a few of these organizations have gained official status, the majority operated under the radar. Keenly aware of this precarious status, leaders were quick to assure me that their organizations harbored no anti-state agenda, and that they were not independent labor unions. On the contrary, they insisted that these were grassroots non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that assisted the country's 270 million migrant workers in attaining their legally guaranteed rights. As such, these organizations acted to preserve social stability and harmony, goals which aligned with the Chinese state's interests.

It was true that these organizations bore little resemblance to independent unions such as Poland's "Solidarity" trade union. They were small, poorly resourced, and did not involve themselves in popular protests. Activists also complained about the lack of solidarity among workers and described the organizing process as "grabbing a fistful of sand that slipped through one's fingers." Moreover, the state security apparatus' vigilance and harassment of grassroots labor organizations kept activists on edge. Organizations were disbanded from time to time, and the ones that moved and resurrected themselves in other jurisdictions learned to self-censor. Whether operating in Beijing, the Pearl River Delta, or the Yangtze River Delta, few of the groups I studied involved themselves in worker strikes or protests because doing so would be seen as a flagrant defiance of the state. Under such conditions, mobilization seemed unlikely.

Had I unquestioningly recorded these observations and activists' initial claims, I would not be writing this book. As it happened, however, my subsequent eighteen months of participant observation inside these organizations across China revealed a wholly unexpected political process. In fact, these organizations *were* mobilizing participants in remarkable, if unconventional,

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ways. Instead of organizing migrant workers to engage in collective strike action, activists coached them to confront the state as individuals or in small groups in a dynamic that I term "mobilizing without the masses." In doing so, organizations strategically hid behind the audacious contender.

To illustrate this dynamic in action, take the example of a female worker from Sichuan who was in desperate straits because her employer refused to pay her work injury compensation as stipulated by the labor law. While working without protective gear at a small car manufacturer, she had caught her upper arm in a machine, causing severe injuries. Factory management sent her to the hospital but refused to pay for subsequent treatment. Without surgery, she might have become disabled for life. When informal mediation with factory management failed, she sought assistance from the township labor bureau. After being turned away repeatedly by officials who told her that she would have to wait for arbitration, she visited the local state-run union as well as the Women's Federation, but to no avail; officials "passed the ball" from one unresponsive bureau to another. Despairing, she visited the local labor bureau again. This time, she threatened the labor bureau official: "If you don't solve my problem, I'm going to take *extreme measures*!"

To a casual observer, this lone challenger at the labor bureau may have been indistinguishable from the masses of aggrieved workers who had reached their tipping points. But to the participant observer, this individual challenger's actions represented the outcome of an organized process. In fact, a labor activist in a grassroots labor organization was coaching her via text messaging, telling her when, where, and how to make these threats against her employer.

Through embedding myself in these organizations, I observed this hidden coaching process, which was integral to the work of these groups. In the semi-private sphere of the organization, activists – many of whom were themselves migrant workers – facilitated discussions of labor exploitation, growing socio-economic disparity, and the failures of China's political and legal institutions in protecting workers' rights. Such discussions inculcated in their participants a sense of belonging to a much larger community of migrant workers who also faced the same unresponsive local states and inefficient legal systems. Thus, even without rallying participants to take part in collective strike action, activists provided workers with the moral support and strategic resources for contention.

This behind-the-scenes mobilizing was not one that activists articulated to me in interviews or recorded in handbooks distributed to workers. It was the unspoken modus operandi of grassroots activists working in a repressive authoritarian setting who were forced to experiment with innovative tactics. This kind of innovative organizing emerged as a political compromise with local authorities that were themselves caught in a bind: if they repressed such organizations stridently, they risked driving activists further underground. If they openly tolerated such groups, they would be held responsible for the multiplication of organizations that threatened a key pillar of the ruling Chinese

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Communist Party's legitimacy – social stability. Seizing upon such opportunities, activists devised a range of tactical innovations that allowed them to operate in a repressive political environment.

In a nutshell, this book theorizes this type of unorthodox mobilization and the political conditions that gave rise to it. In doing so, it revises our understanding of the role that organizations can play in encouraging and directing popular contention. It suggests that despite high risks, it is nevertheless possible for weak civil society organizations to facilitate popular contention under certain conditions. Contrary to assumptions, civil society's hands are not entirely tied; organizations can provide critical strategic, cognitive, and moral resources to popular contenders, thereby shaping the very grammar of popular contention.

ORGANIZING UNDER DURESS IN CHINA

How do organizations mobilize popular contention under repressive political conditions in an authoritarian state? While much has been written about civil society's role in challenging authoritarian incumbents (Bunce and Wolchik 2011; Beissinger 2007; Almeida 2003; Diamond 1994; Weigle and Butterfield 1992; Gold 1990), the micro-politics of organizing contention on an everyday basis in authoritarian political settings remain relatively obscure. This book casts a spotlight on one seemingly counterintuitive dynamic of organizing contention: *mobilizing without the masses*. In this dynamic, civil society organizations[1] refrain from mobilizing aggrieved citizens to take up large-scale collective contention. Instead, they coach participants to contend as individuals or as small groups. The process of coaching contention is a collective endeavor that takes place in the private harbors of organizational headquarters. In these relatively safe spaces, activists construct and disseminate pedagogies of contention that foster collective identity and consciousness. In conventional forms of mobilization, the fostering of collective identity and oppositional consciousness facilitates collective action (Snow 2013; Gamson 1992; Melucci 1989). Yet in mobilizing without the masses, only a single individual or a small band of the aggrieved engages in overt contention. While the organizational process is a collective one, it remains concealed behind a repertoire of small-scale or individualized contention.

[1] The term "civil society" is conceptually slippery and has been the subject of much scholarly debate (Evans and Heller 2015: 691–713; Foley and Edwards 1996; Diamond 1994). In the Chinese context, debates have centered around the level and type of autonomy civil society has gained vis-à-vis the state (Lu 2009; Howell 2003; Foster 2001; Saich 2000; White, Howell, and Shang 1996; Gold 1990). This book follows recent studies (Teets 2014: 14; Simon 2013) that define civil society broadly as composed of a diverse array of organizations with voluntary membership and some degree of operational autonomy from the state, defined as the ability to set a self-determined agenda (Wang 2006).

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This dynamic of contention allows organizations to facilitate popular contention while reducing potential political risks to the organization itself. Through channeling discontent into individual forms of contention, organizations strike a middle ground between being obedient to the authoritarian state and becoming rebellious social movement vehicles. On the one hand, organizations are not entirely obedient; they coach citizens to disrupt social order in an effort to demand redress from the local government. On the other hand, they also refrain from inciting large-scale protests and strikes, which are risky endeavors in authoritarian settings, particularly when they are coordinated by civil society organizations. The small-scale contentious performances that activists coach participants to deploy do not constitute a serious collective challenge to the state. Instead, by disguising the collective coordinating behind a façade of individual contention, activists signal to the state that they understand the boundaries of organized contention. In such a manner, even weak organizations can serve as mobilizing vehicles for limited contentious political activity, despite the threat of state harassment and periodic organizational closures. In doing so, they deliver tangible benefits to participants seeking to claim rights from an otherwise unaccountable authoritarian state.

Theoretically, mobilizing without the masses suggests an alternative pathway through which civil society organizations in repressive political environments can facilitate contention. As such, this dynamic is situated between individual contention (Bayat 2013; Scott 1987) and collective contention (Tarrow 2011; McAdam et al. 2001). It bears some resemblance to "everyday resistance" in that aggrieved citizens take matters into their own hands to contest the status quo without resorting to collective defiance. To the casual observer, the participants in mobilizing without the masses resemble any number of self-inspired, atomized protestors seeking redress from the state. Yet beneath the surface, there exists an organization that is instrumental in inspiring such individual contention. This organizational element is similar to the dynamic of collective contention in that mobilizing vehicles play a key role in coaching contention. During the pedagogical process of mobilizing without the masses, activists construct diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames (Snow and Benford 1988) that encourage participants to identify themselves with a broader group of disadvantaged citizens. However, activists are careful to ensure that these collective frames ultimately do not translate into large-scale collective action. Instead, they coach participants to contain the scale of contention in the interest of minimizing political risk to the organization.

Empirically, mobilizing without the masses emerged from a close study of state repression and civil society contention in China. Contemporary China is an instructive case for examining the dynamics of organizing under duress because while the Party-led state has permitted the growth of civil society, it continues to repress organizational activism. For the most part, civil society organizations in China do not openly oppose the party-state or disrupt social stability on a large scale. For example, environmental NGOs have spearheaded an emergent "green

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civil society" movement with transnational ties and have successfully pushed for changes to China's environmental policies, but it is risky for them to openly challenge the state's policies on energy or the environment (Mertha 2008; Sun and Zhao 2008; Ho 2001). Likewise, citizen rights advocacy organizations and religious organizations also face periodic repression even when they do not explicitly mobilize participants to oppose the state's agenda. For example, authorities disbanded the Open Constitution Initiative in 2009, presumably because of its involvement in high-profile civil rights cases.[2] The ensuing "new citizens' movement" that was initiated by leaders of the disbanded Open Constitution Initiative was also subject to intense state harassment.[3] Similarly, the Beijing Women's Legal Aid and Research Center was disbanded in 2016 despite its leadership's decision to refrain from handling politically sensitive cases.[4] Likewise, underground Protestant churches that have largely restricted their activities to private home meetings also experience state harassment. The state continues to limit the organizational activity by pressuring landlords not to lease to religious organizations and by putting church leaders and members under house arrest (Vala 2012).

In this operating environment, aggrieved citizens have typically mobilized without the aid of formal organizations. This is reflected in a range of popular contention that has erupted in rural and urban areas alike, from peasants protesting land grabs (Heurlin 2016) to workers striking for higher pay to the middle-class advocating for environmental protection and food safety (Yasuda 2017: 15–16; Stern 2013: 8–9; Mertha 2008; Sun and Zhao 2008). Although these "mass incidents" have not yet forced the party-state into a crisis point (Slater and Wong 2013: 729–30), they have contributed to a level of social instability that is unnerving to the regime. More importantly, this surge of popular contention is characterized by a lack of organizational bases (Reny and Hurst 2013; Chen 2012: 9; Lee 2007b; Zhou 1993: 55). For example, "rightful resisters" cleverly use the language of the law to press for their legal rights as citizens, but they do so without the help of formal organizations (O'Brien and Li 2006). Under certain conditions, these "temporary communities" (Cai 2010: 16) of protestors have successfully won compensation from the state, in part due to their avoidance of formal mobilizing structures. In fact, having visible leaders in protests can increase the likelihood of repression, as the state knows which individuals to round up in order to demobilize contention.

Meanwhile, most civil society organizations stay in the relatively secure space of social services provision through partnering with local states (Howell 2015; Hsu and Hasmath 2014; Teets 2014; Hildebrandt 2013; Simon 2013; Lu 2009; Shieh 2009). Some NGOs even "beg to be co-opted" by the state

[2] *Economist*, Open Constitution Closed. July 25, 2009.

[3] A. Jacobs and C. Buckley, Chinese Activists Test New Leader and Are Crushed, January 15, 2014, *New York Times*.

[4] K. D. Tatlow, China Is Said to Force Closing of Women's Legal Aid Center, January 29, 2016, *New York Times*.

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(Foster 2001) while others form a "contingent symbiosis" with the local state in which officials tolerate these organizations so long as they provide beneficial services and refrain from challenging social stability (Spires 2011). To the extent that organizations are engaged in advancing social change, they mainly do so through policy advocacy at local levels of government. Civil society's participation in policy debates in China has been analyzed through the lenses of "consultative authoritarianism" (Teets 2014), "authoritarian deliberation" (He and Warren 2011), and "policy entrepreneurship" (Mertha 2008). NGOs have forged alliances with local state agencies to push for environmental protection (Mertha 2008; Ho 2001), provide disaster relief (Teets 2012, 2009), defend the rights of sexual minorities (Hildebrandt 2013), and advocate for migrant workers (Spires 2011). This co-dependent relationship allows the government to reap the benefits of an active civil society while simultaneously allowing organizations to secure their survival and influence policy-making (Hildebrandt 2013; Spires 2011; Shieh 2009; Lu 2009). Whether providing social services or policy consultation, civil society organizations have proven themselves adept at working within the limits of China's authoritarian political system.

Yet, this study shows that Chinese civil society organizations can and do play a far more active role in shaping state–society relations than delivering social services and providing policy consultation. Under certain conditions, some grassroots organizations coach participants to make rights claims against the state. In turn, they are essentially engaged in a form of mobilization, defined as the process through which individuals are recruited and spurred to engage in contentious actions against the state. The next section examines the broader set of political conditions that make this form of mobilization possible.

China's Associational Revolution

Since the 1990s, China has experienced an associational revolution in which civil society organizations have blossomed under the vigilance of the party-state (Teets 2014; Hildebrandt 2013; Dillon 2011; Howell 2003; Ho 2001; Gold 1998; Brook and Frolic 1997; White et al. 1996). During this period, as many as eight million formal and informal organizations surfaced (Wang and He 2004: 524).[5] This revolution has resulted in a pluralization of civil society organizations in a variety of sectors such as labor, environment, HIV/AIDS, and disaster relief, among others. It also represented a shift in state control from a strict corporatist system of regulation that permitted only state-run mass organizations to one that relied on indirect and variegated forms of control over civil society (Teets 2014: 70).

[5] Eight million is a higher bound estimate. The Ministry of Civil Affairs reports that in 2009, there were 400,000 registered social organizations and an estimated additional 2–3 million informal organizations registered as commercial enterprises.

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This associational revolution stemmed from the party-state's goal of downsizing the government and pluralizing civil society, expressed in the official slogan "small government, big society" (*xiaozhengfu, dashehui*). It unfolded as China was transitioning out of a command economy into a partially liberalized economy. Marketization also demanded parallel adjustments to the structure of governance, as the party-state sought to downsize the government and to make it more efficient. As the central state placed pressures on local states to innovate new models of governance to address the problems created by rapid economic growth, the latter turned to civil society for assistance in providing public goods and services (Teets 2014: 47). Thus, the push to pluralize civil society in the early 1990s reflected the party-state's desire to shift responsibilities for social welfare, economic development, and disaster relief to the private sector (Ma 2006: ch. 2).

In response, a plethora of social organizations emerged. Together with existing social organizations, they can be located along a spectrum according to the degree of the threat they pose to the Chinese Communist party-state. The least threatening include state-run mass organizations such as the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) and the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), which remain tethered to the state. Further down the spectrum is the panoply of social organizations, non-profits, and philanthropic foundations that often partner with local governments to improve the quality of governance through the provision of social services. The most extreme are organizations that threaten social stability either due to political goals such as advocating for democratization or human rights or due to their mobilizing tactics, which may involve coaching participants to deploy illegal means to advocate for their rights. In reality, civil society organizations may shift on this spectrum of contention in both directions. Organizations that are contentious at one point in time may become co-opted by the state and change their tactics and goals to be more accommodating. Conversely, organizations that enjoy synergistic relationships with the state may also transgress into disruptive politics as they develop, thus developing a more antagonistic relationship with the state.

This study recognizes the dynamic movement of civil society organizations along a continuum. However, for analytical purposes, it divides civil society organizations into two sectors: the aboveground and the underground sector. This approach captures the dynamic relationship between the state and the organization at a particular moment in time. The aboveground sector entails organizations that, at the time of analysis, do not directly threaten social stability in their stated objectives and mobilizing tactics. These organizations are typically registered with the Bureau of Civil Affairs or with the Bureau of Commerce and partner with local states to deliver critical social services such as disaster relief, education, health provision, and environmental protection (Hildebrandt 2013; Lu 2009; Shieh 2009). Some organizations in this sector also have opportunities to serve as policy consultants on diverse issues related to local governance (Teets 2014; He and Warren 2011; Mertha 2008).

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In contrast, the underground sector is composed of organizations that, at the moment of study, harbor goals beyond social services delivery and limited policy consultation. These include a wide range of organizations that threaten the party-state's legitimacy either because they engage in rights advocacy on behalf of marginalized populations or because they organize participants around principles or belief systems that challenge the party-state's ideologies. For example, organizations such as the New Citizens Group,[6] networks of human rights lawyers as well as certain legal aid and labor rights organizations, may be seen by the state to undermine social stability by encouraging vulnerable citizens to make rights claims. In addition, religious organizations such as informal Protestant churches and sects such as the Falun Gong may be seen to rally participants around belief systems that ultimately challenge the ideologies that the party-state propagates. Although these organizations largely refrain from directly mobilizing protests, their collective action potential is nevertheless problematic to the party-state.

Together, the emergence of these two sectors of civil society posed a dire governance dilemma for the party-state: how to foster civil society growth while simultaneously monitoring its potential to mobilize opposition? The party-state must walk a fine line between promoting organizations that can assist the state while keeping threatening organizations at bay (Howell 2012: 287). On the one hand, a vibrant civil society sector could assist the party-state in delivering social services to the population and allow the state to downsize the government.

On the other hand, an unbridled civil society could challenge state power, as the resurrection of civil society in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere has shown (Alagappa 2004: 16; Ekiert and Kubik 2001; Bernhard 1993; O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986: ch. 5).[7] For a brief period during the 1989 Tiananmen Democracy Movement, Chinese civil society organizations faced off with the ruling Communist Party to demand liberal reforms (Nathan 2001; Wright 2001; Zhao 2001; Gold 1990). Among the civil society groups was the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation, which, in the week leading up to June 4, mobilized 150 activists to Tiananmen Square and also issued calls for a general strike which went unanswered (Walder and Gong 1993). Although the scale of this independent workers' organization was miniscule compared to the Polish Solidarity Trade Union, it represented a "new species of political protest" in that it fit neither with the factional mobilization model in the 1970s nor with the traditional model of intellectual dissidents (Walter and Gong 1993: 3–4). The 1989 democracy movement alarmed the party-state because organizations implicitly

[6] The New Citizens Group was formerly known as the Open Constitution Initiative or *Gongmeng*.

[7] While this study examines the rise of social organizations in China, it does not argue that the rise of civil society is the only or necessarily the most important factor that contributes to political change in authoritarian regimes.

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challenged the state's monopoly on defining and solving social and political problems (Manion 1990). While the party-state successfully demobilized the Tiananmen protestors with infamous crackdown on June 4, 1989, it remained all too aware that it must carefully balance the need for civil society against the threat that it poses to illiberal state power.

Traditionally, the party-state has governed civil society through a state corporatist system of regulation, which limited the types of organizations that were legally permitted (Economy 2004; Pearson 1997; Unger and Chan 1995; Whiting 1991). Ironically, the Chinese state's embrace of state corporatism in the 1980s reflected a gradual "relaxing" of control from a party system that previously dominated society directly via state institutions (Unger and Chan 1995: 39). In what has been called a "state-led civil society," the Chinese state controlled society not through direct domination but through a disciplined and unequal partnership with civic organizations (Frolic 1997:58).

Although the corporatist regulatory structures remained throughout the 2000s, there was also a high degree of informality as well as local variations in terms of governing civil society organizations. For example, the party-state actively encouraged local states to experiment with relaxing the registration requirements for certain types of social organizations (Simon 2013). In keeping with its tradition of "guerrilla policy-making" (Heilmann and Perry 2011), at least four municipalities or cities including Beijing, Changsha, Foshan, and Guangzhou have spearheaded reforms aimed at the "one-stop registration" of civil society organizations (Simon 2013: 316). In addition, local states often relied on informal and erratic practices of policing civil society organizations that crossed the line of political acceptability. Local bureaus of civil affairs periodically launched "rectification campaigns" to de-register certain organizations based on parochial political goals. In contrast to abiding by a rigid corporatist system, the party-state actively experimented with versatile approaches to controlling civil society.

FLEXIBLE REPRESSION OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Part I of this book argues that under the Hu Jintao administration (2003–13), the party-state adopted "flexible repression" to govern civil society, which provided the opportunities for mobilizing without the masses to emerge. This type of state control permitted civil society groups to operate with a degree of maneuverability so long as these same groups did not directly mobilize collective contention. Flexible repression was part of a broader adaptive governance style that characterized the Chinese political system. Since the end of the Mao era (1949–76), the party-state has embraced a style of governance that emphasizes adaptability and agility. Instead of abiding by formal regulations and policies, the party-state encouraged political actors of all ranks and especially in the localities to experiment with innovative ways of managing society (Heilmann and Perry 2011: 9).

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Three main features characterized flexible repression: decentralization, improvisation, and fragmentation. First, flexible repression entailed the decentralization of control. The central state gave considerable discretion to local states to experiment with policies governing civil society, so long as they aligned with the central state's broad mandate to maintain social stability. Decentralization was an enduring tradition of Chinese governance under the Chinese Communist Party (Landry 2008). While strategic decisions were reserved for the top leadership, the implementation and operationalization of these decisions were left to local leaders (Heilmann and Perry 2011: 13). In governing civil society, local authorities had a wide degree of latitude when deciding which organizations should be permitted to register, which should be tacitly tolerated, and which should be disbanded.

The second feature of flexible repression was improvisation. Local state actors did not necessarily follow a tightly scripted set of procedures in governing civil society groups. Instead, they adapted their repertoire of control to specific situations. In the absence of clear "rules of the game," local state agents combined a diverse range of hard and soft control tools to keep organizations in check. Furthermore, they relied not only on the security apparatus but also on other bureaucratic and societal actors including gangsters, landlords, and officials to pressure organizations into compliance (Deng and O'Brien 2013; Lee and Zhang 2013). Together, this heterogeneous network of actors devised the specific practices of control. This decentralization of control was in keeping with the central state's "guerrilla policy style," which encouraged "diverse and flexible responses" to domestic challenges (Heilmann and Perry 2011: 22–3).

Finally, flexible repression was characterized by fragmentation across different agencies within a single local state. Because the local state is composed of different agencies with competing agendas, inter-agency conflict arose over how to effectively control civil society organizations. These conflicts directly influenced how control was carried out. Working at cross-purposes, various agencies working within a single local state pursued contradictory strategies.

These three features of flexible repression were manifested in the specific practices of state control, which entailed constraining underground organizations' mobilization capacity while channeling aboveground organizations into social services delivery. Unlike their aboveground counterparts, underground organizations were much more difficult to govern through institutionalized channels. In practice, the state exercised fragmented control to govern groups that threatened social stability. "Fragmented control" highlights local states' horizontal fragmentation within a single administrative level into a myriad of agencies with different bureaucratic mandates (Chapter 3). Although every agency had an incentive to maintain social stability, local state agencies interpreted and operationalized this broad mandate differently. Driven by varying bureaucratic missions, agencies within the local state pursued divergent control

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