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Protest and Policy Outcomes under Authoritarianism

The bloody suppression of the student movement at Tiananmen Square in 1989 gave the Chinese government a well-deserved reputation for repression. Going into the 1990s, protests against state policies – such as compensation in housing demolitions – rarely succeeded and could result in harsh repression. As one evictee whose shop was being demolished told a reporter in 1997, "I am not protesting although I am unhappy ... it is useless to protest – if you do, you go to jail and the others get the best apartments."[1] By the early 2000s, protests were on the rise, but the popular perception of China remained one of a highly repressive state. The *New York Times* artfully captured this popular image in a 2005 article entitled, "Land of 74,000 Protests (But Little Is Ever Fixed)."[2] This lack of responsiveness would hardly surprise scholars of authoritarian politics. China, after all, lacks institutions that commonly promote responsiveness in other authoritarian states, such as national elections and powerful opposition parties.

THE PUZZLE

This popular understanding misses an important change that has taken place in China over the past decade. Authoritarianism in China has become much more responsive. By the early 2000s, local governments frequently bought off protesters with cash in order to quiet them down.

[1] "Capitalist Roaders a Moving Tribute to Central Planning," *South China Morning Post*, December 22, 1997.
[2] "Land of 74,000 Protests (But Little Is Ever Fixed)," *New York Times*, August 24, 2005.

Repression did not disappear, but concessions became a much more prominent response than they had been previously. The central government introduced a raft of populist policies that addressed protesters' grievances. In the countryside, the central government greatly increased the compensation given to farmers who were dispossessed of their land in government-led land expropriations and called on provincial governments to establish a social security system for landless farmers. Some provinces quickly followed suit, although others dragged their feet for years. In urban areas, the central government abolished administratively set compensation for home owners whose houses were demolished, mandating instead that home owners be given market compensation. Similarly populist policies emerged in a variety of other areas, including taxation, pensions, and labor relations. State responsiveness to protests was not uniform, however. In other areas, such as policies toward benefits for community and substitute teachers, no populist policies have emerged.

In sum, the Chinese government has been responsive to protests at the local, provincial, and national levels. This responsiveness raises a series of puzzles. Under what conditions can citizens in authoritarian regimes influence policy making through protest? Why have local governments been much more responsive to the demands of protesters in recent years? Why have some provinces aggressively promoted populist policies in response to protests, while others have stalled? Why has the central government responded with extensive policy changes in response to protests from some social groups and with only moderate or no policy changes to protests from others?

PROTEST AND POLICY MAKING IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES: AVAILABLE EXPLANATIONS

Does protest influence policy making in authoritarian regimes? There are good reasons to believe that influence is unlikely. Recent studies suggest that even social movements in advanced industrial democracies achieve only some level of influence 50 to 70 percent of the time.[3] Closed authoritarian regimes, moreover, often try to ban or prevent virtually all forms of

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[3] Edwin Amenta, Neal Caren, et al., "The Political Consequences of Social Movements," *Annual Review of Sociology* 36 (2010): 287–307; Paul Burstein and April Linton, "The Impact of Political Parties, Interest Groups, and Social Movement Organizations on Public Policy: Some Recent Evidence and Theoretical Concerns," *Social Forces* 81(2) (2002): 380–408.

popular protest.[4] When protests do arise, "the quintessential governance strategy in closed autocracies is to reward loyalists and repress independent citizens and movements."[5]

A small but growing body of literature, however, suggests that China is much more responsive to protests than most closed authoritarian regimes.[6] In this book, I argue that China represents a case of *responsive authoritarianism*.[7] I adopt a definition of *responsiveness* drawn from studies of accountability in democracies. As Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes note, "a government is 'responsive' if it adopts policies that are signaled as preferred by citizens. These signals may include public opinion polls; various forms of direct political action, including demonstrations, letter campaigns, and ... elections."[8] By responsive authoritarianism, I refer to a regime that proactively monitors citizen opposition to state policies and selectively responds with policy changes when it gauges opposition to be particularly widespread. Responsiveness, moreover, is intended to strengthen the state and avoid the development of a revolutionary opposition rather than being a sign of state weakness.

Compared to other aspects of protest in China, the influence of protest on policy making has received comparatively little attention. Indeed, as

4 Graeme Robertson, *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes: Managing Dissent in Post-Communist Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 20.
5 Guillermo Trejo, *Popular Movements in Autocracies: Religion, Repression and Indigenous Collective Action in Mexico* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 31.
6 Yongshun Cai, *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); Xi Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2012); Martin Dimitrov, "Vertical Accountability in Communist Regimes," in M. Dimitrov (ed.), *Why Communism Did Not Collapse: Understanding Authoritarian Regime Resilience in Asia and Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 276–302; Andrew Mertha, "'Fragmented Authoritarianism 2.0': Political Pluralization in the Chinese Policy Process," *China Quarterly* 200 (2009): 995–1012; Elizabeth Perry, "'Sixty Is the New Forty' (Or Is It?): Reflections on the Health of the Chinese Body Politic," in W. C. Kirby (ed.), *The People's Republic of China at 60: An International Assessment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); James Reilly, *Strong Society, Smart State: The Rise of Public Opinion in China's Japan Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
7 The term *responsive authoritarianism* has been used by Reilly, Stockmann, and Weller. See Reilly, *Strong Society, Smart State, Daniela Stockmann, Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China* (Cambridge University Press, 2012); Robert Weller, "Responsive Authoritarianism and Blind-Eye Governance in China," in N. Bandelj and D. Solinger (eds.), *Socialism Vanquished, Socialism Challenged* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
8 Bernard Manin, Adam Przeworski, et al., "Introduction," in A. Przeworski, S. C. Stokes, and B. Manin (eds.), *Democracy, Accountability and Representation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 9.

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Tarrow recently noted, "scholars of Chinese politics have not yet system-
atically examined relations between protest and policy response."[9]
In order to identify the gaps in our understanding of the relationship
between protest and outcomes in China, it is helpful to approach the
question from the perspective of the policy-making process. The policy-
making process can be broadly conceived of as occurring in three stages:
agenda setting, policy formulation and adoption, and policy implementa-
tion. Because this book explores only the agenda-setting and policy for-
mulation and adoption stages, I will limit my discussion to these two.[10]
In so doing, I show that while scholars have explored the agenda-setting
stage to a certain extent, the policy formulation and adoption stage has
been largely neglected.

The Agenda-Setting Stage

Unsurprisingly for an authoritarian regime, scholars have suggested that it
is difficult for petitions and protests to influence high-level politics.[11]
Chen, for example, argues that while it is possible for petitions to lead
to policy changes, the petitioning system is "deeply flawed and severely
inefficient in channeling interest articulation."[12] Instead, Chen and Xu
found that the support of a mass organization led by an official with close
ties to the top Party leaders was necessary to place protesters' demands on
the agenda.[13] Mertha, in his study of mobilization surrounding hydro-
power policy in China, found that protest was actually *counterproductive*.
Through his compelling case study of the Pubugou dam, where tens of
thousands of landless farmers protested against low compensation,
Mertha argues that "protests had absolutely no effect on the dam
project."[14] Instead, Mertha found that lobbying by nongovernmental
organizations (NGOs) and critical reporting by activist journalists were
much more effective at influencing the agenda. In particular, NGO and

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[9] Sidney Tarrow, "Prologue: The New Contentious Politics in China," in Kevin O'Brien
(ed.), *Popular Protest in China*, p. 7.

[10] On the influence of protest on policy implementation, see Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li,
Rightful Resistance (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[11] As will be discussed later, scholars are more optimistic about the utility of contention in
fostering improved policy implementation. See *ibid.*, p. 99.

[12] Xi Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China*, p. 204.

[13] Xi Chen and Ping Xu, "From Resistance to Advocacy: Political Representation for
Disabled People in China," *China Quarterly* 207 (2011): 649–67.

[14] Andrew Mertha, *China's Water Warriors* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008),
p. 65.

media activists were able to effectively change the "issue frame" away from economic development and toward environmental protection and cultural preservation.

Even among scholars who argue that protests *have* influenced policy making, much of the emphasis has been on the role of public opinion and the media in mediating the impact of protests. Reilly has argued that nationalist protests provide information to the regime about public opinion on foreign policy. Although this information about public opinion is heavily skewed toward the views of a negative and engaged segment of the public, it is precisely this highly mobilized minority that authoritarian leaders fear. Reilly examines the role of several state institutions in monitoring public opinion, particularly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Statistical Bureau, the Public Security Bureau, and the Propaganda Ministry.[15] Cai has argued that larger and more frequent protests strain the legitimacy of the state by turning the private grievances of the protesters into public knowledge. The media, in turn, sometimes support protesters by publicizing their plight. Once the public is aware of protesters' grievances, the state can no longer claim ignorance and must adjust policies or risk losing legitimacy.[16] Scholars have also noted that petitions provide a source of information to the central government.[17] In particular, petitions can provide information to the government on where policies have been implemented poorly.[18]

The Policy Formulation and Adoption Stage

Scholars have adopted three approaches to the policy formulation and adoption stage: fragmented authoritarianism, advocacy by mass organizations, and cost-benefit analysis. Each approach offers a different explanation for why officials might support policy changes. The key insight of the fragmented authoritarianism model is that by integrating the interests of implementation agencies into policy making itself, the policies that emerged out of bureaucratic bargaining were often significantly different from the initial goals of policy makers at the top.[19] Early research by

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[15] James Reilly, *Strong Society, Smart State*, pp. 35–7.
[16] Cai, *Collective Resistance in China*, p. 15.
[17] Huang, "Administrative Monitoring in China," *China Quarterly* 143 (1995): 828–43.
[18] O'Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*; Dimitrov, "Internal Government Assessments of the Quality of Governance in China," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 50(1)(2014): 50–72.
[19] For an up-to-date synthesis of the literature, see Mertha, *China's Water Warriors*.

O'Brien and Li uncovered a "structural opening" between central and local governments whose interests diverge that allows protests to influence policy implementation.[20] Mertha builds on the notion of a structural opening, arguing that official organizational mandates can create "disgruntled officials" who oppose a particular policy. In order to defend their organizational interests, disgruntled officials form coalitions of broad-based support. For example, environmental and cultural protection agencies banded together with NGOs and media outlets to oppose large hydropower projects.[21]

Chen and Xu have shown that mass organizations also advocate policy changes on behalf of protesters. Designed as "two-way transmission belts," mass organizations in theory both channel the demands of the masses to Party leaders and assist the state in policy implementation. In practice, mass organizations tend to neglect the former role in favor of the latter. The Chinese Disabled Persons Federation (CDPF), however, took up the cause of disabled taxi drivers because the protests of these drivers brought the CDPF's representation role into conflict with its policy implementation role. As protests strained its legitimacy, the CPDF was compelled to argue on behalf of its constituents.[22] The All China Federation of Trade Unions, another mass organization, has similarly advocated policy changes in response to worker protests.[23] Chen and Xu thereby highlight an additional reason why officials might support demands mobilized by citizens: because they have an institutionalized representation role.

Cai, by contrast, adopts a cost-benefit approach to protest and policy making, conceptualizing the cessation of protest as a benefit that preserves regime legitimacy. Cai argues that the central government cares more about protecting the legitimacy of the state than local governments, making the central government more inclined toward policy changes.[24] Policy changes are costly if they require government expenditures or if they result in a loss of revenue.[25] As a result, "the cost determines the pace and degree of policy adjustment."[26]

[20] Although their focus is on the policy implementation stage, the implications for the policy formulation and adoption stage are clear. O'Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*.
[21] Mertha, *China's Water Warriors*, pp. 8–9, 16–17.
[22] Chen and Xu, "From Resistance to Advocacy."
[23] Eli Friedman, *The Insurgency Trap* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).
[24] Cai, *Collective Resistance in China*, p. 5.
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 179.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 156.

Gaps in the Existing Literature and the Puzzle of Responsiveness in Land Takings and Demolitions

As the sections that follow will show, this book builds on insights from the existing literature and particularly the fragmented authoritarianism approach. Nonetheless, there are significant gaps in the existing literature. First, while scholars have long noted that petitions and protests convey information to the regime, the link between petitions signaling information and change in formal policies has largely been inferred rather than demonstrated through policy studies that follow the policy-making process from start to finish.[27] In particular, we know little about how the petitioning system *processes* information transmitted by protests and petitions and how this influences the agenda. Does the state respond equally to all information transmitted by protests and petitions? If not, what influences decisions about how the petitioning system allocates attention?

The second issue is the level of aggregation of the state. While O'Brien called for future research to more fully "unpack the state" a decade ago, our progress since has been somewhat limited.[28] This book represents an effort to move beyond the *central–local* dichotomy of previous studies by showing that provincial governments have varied dramatically in their support for policy changes in land takings. Some provinces adopted policy changes even before the central government mandated that they do so, while other provinces delayed adoption of such policies for a decade or more. Moreover, this book also unpacks the central government, showing that central ministries have not been completely united in their support for policy changes. While the Ministry of Land Resources has supported policy changes in land takings, for example, the Ministry of Railroads has opposed them. This suggests that both the central and the local state must be further disaggregated to advance our understanding of protest and policy response.

[27] Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China*, p. 92; Dimitrov, "Vertical Accountability in Communist Regimes"; Huang, "Administrative Monitoring in China"; Elizabeth Perry, "Sixty Is the New Forty (Or Is It?)," in William Kirby (ed.), *The People's Republic of China at 60* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 136–7. For an exception, see Jing Chen, "Petitioning as Policymaking: Chinese Rural Tax Reform," in Kate Zhou, Lynn White, and Shelley Rigger (eds.), *Democratization in China, Korea and Southeast Asia?* (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 156–72.

[28] Kevin O'Brien, "Neither Transgressive Nor Contained: Boundary-Spanning Contention in China," *Mobilization* 8(1)(2003): 51–64. Mertha's work on hydropower policy is a prominent exception. See Mertha, *China's Water Warriors*.

The third issue is why state officials advocate for or oppose policy changes. As this book will show, the Ministry of Land Resources and the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development were the strongest advocates for policy changes in land takings and demolitions, respectively. Yet, far from being harmed by the existing policies, these ministries benefited considerably from them because land takings and demolitions brought considerable funds and authority to these two ministries.[29] Unlike mass organizations, moreover, these ministries lacked an institutionalized representation function. Likewise, local governments often benefit even more from land takings and demolitions, yet some provincial governments have advocated for policy changes. In many cases, moreover, the provinces that adopted social security for landless farmers were among the provinces where the population of landless farmers was the greatest and the costs of the programs therefore the highest. This suggests that the effect of fiscal costs on policy responsiveness may be more complex than previously thought.

Finally and most important, there is the issue of the policy formulation and adoption stage itself and how institutional arrangements influence responsiveness. Mertha's excellent study of the policy-making process in dam building has highlighted the continuing relevance of the fragmented authoritarianism model, but he does not examine formal legislative policy making of regulations and laws. While Cai's study highlights the importance of costs as a constraint, the role of formal policy-making institutions – such as the State Council and the National People's Congress – in mediating the impact of protest has remained unexplored.

PROTEST SIGNALS AND AGENDA SETTING

Protests signal information to policy makers. Scholars of democracies disagree about whether the information environment is rich or poor for policy makers.[30] The overwhelming consensus in authoritarian politics, however,

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[29] The Ministry of Land Resources (MLR) is a partial exception in this case because the MLR was also concerned with arable land loss. On this *issue linkage* as an important factor, see Cai, *Collective Resistance in China*. The same cannot be said, however, for the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development.

[30] On an information-poor environment, see Susanne Lohmann, "A Signaling Model of Informative and Manipulative Political Action," *American Political Science Review* 87(2) (1993): 319–33. On an information-rich environment, see Bryan D. Jones and Frank R. Baumgartner, *The Politics of Attention: How Government Prioritizes Problems* (University of Chicago Press, 2005).

is that dictators are starved for information. As Policzer put it, "[D]ictators may be powerful, but they are often also information-poor."[31] This is particularly the case for politically closed communist regimes, which "are not well equipped to respond to the changing demands and needs of society – precisely because they are intrinsically top-down 'mobilization' regimes rather than regimes that possess the feedback mechanisms to hear and respond to aggregated social needs and demands."[32]

The multiple levels of officials between rulers and the citizenry in China exacerbate monitoring problems.[33] Marketization and decentralization during the reform period, moreover, have only caused monitoring problems to become more acute.[34] Making matters worse, local officials frequently manipulate information.[35] Wallace, for example, has shown that provincial officials are more likely to "juke the stats" by inflating gross domestic product (GDP) growth figures during times of leadership turnover when there are possibilities for promotion.[36] As one top Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader lamented, "[T]he most difficult thing for a leadership unit to do is to collect accurate information at the basic level."[37] Consequently, studies have found that "lower-level officials in Leninist systems have a strong incentive to lie to their superiors … the quality of information available to leaders in such systems is generally poor."[38]

Protests and petitions are important for precisely this reason.[39] Studies of social movements in the United States have argued that citizens can use

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[31] Pablo Policzer, *The Rise and Fall of Repression in Chile* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), p. 18.

[32] David Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center University Press, 2008), p. 7.

[33] Andrew Wedeman, "Incompetence, Noise, and Fear in Central–Local Relations in China," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 35(4)(2001): 59–83. See also O'Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*, p. 28.

[34] Peter Lorentzen, "Regularizing Rioting: Permitting Public Protest in an Authoritarian Regime," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 8 (2013): 127–58.

[35] Lily Tsai, "Understanding the Falsification of Village Income Statistics," *China Quarterly* 196 (2008): 805–26.

[36] Jeremy Wallace, "Juking the Stats?" *British Journal of Political Science* (forthcoming).

[37] This comment was made by Yao Yilin, as quoted in Huang, "Administrative Monitoring in China," p. 832.

[38] Richard Baum and Alexei Shevchenko, "The 'State of the State'," in M. Goldman and R. MacFarquhar (eds.), *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 337. For similar sentiments on the paucity of information in the China, see Minxin Pei, *China's Trapped Transition: The Limits of Developmental Autocracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

[39] Dimitrov Martin makes a similar point. See Dimitrov, "Internal Government Assessments of the Quality of Governance in China."

protests to signal information on their policy preferences to politicians.[40] Arguments about the influence of protest on policy making are almost always grounded (at the very least implicitly) in the theory of democratic representation.[41] The theory holds that legislators seek first and foremost to win reelection. As a result, they will support or oppose policies on the basis of "the number of votes that they think their actions will win or lose them at election time."[42] Consequently, the number and size of protests provide information on the extent of support for policy changes among the electorate. Applying this approach to a closed authoritarian regime (which, by definition, lacks elections) presents obvious difficulties. I will return to this issue shortly.

Scholars have only very recently begun to apply the signaling approach to the study of protest in China.[43] Much of the research has focused on signals emanating *from* the state. Weiss has shown that the state selectively facilitates or represses nationalist protests in order to signal information to foreign governments about the Chinese state's resolve, hawkish commitment, or credible reassurance.[44] Stern and O'Brien note that the state signals information to citizens through two main channels: direct experiences with state agents and indirect communication of official preferences.[45] Repression is the most direct experience with state officials and a powerful signal. Hurst has shown that by repressing protesting state-owned enterprise (SOE) workers, cash-strapped local governments in the North-Central and Upper Changjiang regions were able to deter future mobilization by signaling

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[40] Susanne Lohmann, "A Signaling Model of Informative and Manipulative Political Action"; Paul Burstein, "Social Movements and Public Policy," in M. G. Giugni and D. McAdam (eds.), *How Social Movements Matter* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 3–21; Doug McAdam and Yang Su, "The War at Home: Anti-War Protests and Congressional Voting, 1965–73," *American Sociological Review* 67(5)(2002): 696–721; Bradyen G. King, Keith G. Bentele, et al., "Protest and Policymaking: Explaining Fluctuation in Congressional Attention to Rights Issues, 1960–1986," *Social Forces* 86(1)(2007): 137–63, Daniel Q. Gillion, *The Political Power of Protest: Minority Activism and Shifts in Public Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[41] Lohmann, "A Signaling Model of Informative and Manipulative Political Action"; Burstein, "Social Movements and Public Policy"; Piven, *Challenging Authority: How Ordinary People Change America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008). Gillion, *The Political Power of Protest*.

[42] Paul Burstein, "Social Movements and Public Policy," p. 5.

[43] Rachael Stern and Kevin O'Brien, "Politics at the Boundary: Mixed Signals and the Chinese State," *Modern China* 38(2)(2003): 174–98.

[44] Jessica Chen Weiss, *Powerful Patriots* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[45] Rachael Stern and Kevin O'Brien, "Politics at the Boundary: Mixed Signals and the Chinese State," *Modern China* 38(2)(2003): 174–98.