Article

Designing Contentious Politics in Post-1989 China

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Abstract

This article proposes a new approach to studying China's contentious politics in the post-1989 era. This approach treats China's central government as an institutional designer whose policies on social conflicts shape popular contention. This approach offers four insights. First, protests can provide useful information to the state about citizen grievances, but only if they are costly enough to ensure that only serious claimants engage in them. Second, protesters routinely forego strategies that would give them a stronger bargaining position because the state benefits from maintaining a consistent policy of rewarding only protests that pursue weaker strategies. Third, the contradictory "safety valve" and "single spark" metaphors for protest can be reconciled by distinguishing between the vertical flow of information from citizens to state and the horizontal flow of information from citizen to citizen. Finally, the article suggests why protests have been tolerated when apparently safer information-gathering institutions exist.

The study of contentious politics in China has been an extraordinarily vibrant area, yet it has historically had an important shortcoming. Researchers working

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in this area have tended to take the point of view of protesters, asking what strategies of contention appear to be most effective and under what circumstances. By contrast, the perspective of the party-state, especially its higher levels, has often been neglected. Rather than being treated as a strategic actor, it has been implicitly viewed as something of a fixed entity, an exogenous "political opportunity structure" that protesters can poke and prod as they try to determine how best to achieve their goals within it.

This has two likely causes. The first is the intellectual roots of this research in the broader literature on social movements, which aims to explain how social movements develop and what factors lead them to succeed and fail once they have started. The second is the rich empiricism on which most of this research is founded. The major scholars working on this topic have each conducted extensive fieldwork, often but not always limited to one or a few areas where contacts can give them access to protesters and (in some cases) to the low-level officials who interact with them.[1] Lacking similarly open interactions with higher-level officials, they may be reluctant to discuss their intentions. In some respects, this is an admirable empirical discipline against what could easily become ungrounded Pekingological speculation. However, this approach can lead us away from thinking seriously about how and why the state creates the environment in which these movements operate.

Recently, some researchers have begun to move beyond a narrow focus on protesters to look more closely at government strategies for dealing with protests. However, these tend to focus on how protests are handled once they have broken out, and still primarily at the local level (Cai, 2008; Cai, 2010; Deng and O'Brien, 2013; O'Brien and Deng, 2015; Xi Chen, forthcoming). Moreover, they do not address how previous government responses have affected the decision to protest. The approach I discuss in this article goes further, building on Elizabeth Perry's important insight (2008, 2010) that the most important determinant of protesters' behavior may be their evolving understanding of the rules set by the state.[2] The central question then becomes what rules the state will set and why. While we rarely have access to the rule-makers, and there is no reason why they would honestly discuss their strategies in such a sensitive area if we did, we can nonetheless develop and evaluate hypotheses based on their actions and their public communications (Stern and O'Brien, 2012; Steinhardt, 2016; Steinhardt, forthcoming).

This article further develops this line of inquiry by taking a top-down approach, starting by considering the state's likely objectives in dealing with both ongoing and potential protest and analyzing how its policies might serve these objectives. Flows of information are central to this analysis. It is of course commonly observed that authoritarian governments face major problems in gathering accurate information (Wallace, 2015). Democratic leaders

get constant feedback from journalists, activists, opponents, and voters. By contrast, in the classic authoritarian state complaints and criticisms are treated as attacks and squelched. The Great Leap Forward is the most extreme example of the harm that can arise when authoritarian leaders are unable (and perhaps unwilling) to get accurate information about the situation on the ground (Bernstein, 1984; Dikötter, 2010). China did not leave informational problems behind when it abandoned Maoist extremism. In fact, the shift from a planned economy toward a market economy in some respects reduced the quality of the information available to the state. Fewer people depended on state-controlled institutions for their income, and they could more easily move from place to place, making it harder to identify who was flourishing in the new system and who was struggling (Solinger, 2001). Even basic economic data are questionable (Cai, 2000: 783; Wallace, 2016). Economic reform and decentralization also opened up new opportunities for corruption that the government has found difficult to monitor and stop (Manion, 2004; Wedeman, 2012). Local officials systematically distort the information they pass upward to higher levels, suppressing anything that could make them look bad (Chen and Pan, 2016). Despite a more open political environment, ordinary people still shape what they will say to fit with the prevailing political trends (Jiang and Yang, 2016).

Andrew Nathan influentially argued that the party-state had been made "resilient" by a variety of "input institutions." However, he emphasized their legitimizing function rather than their informative function, saying that they "allow Chinese to believe that they have some influence on policy decisions and personnel choices at the local level" (2003: 14). Since then, the focus of research has turned from democratic concepts of input, representation, or participation toward explicit analysis of information flow. Melanie Manion, writing on local people's congresses, argues that these formal institutions function "not as policy representation but as an institutionalized flow of local knowledge" (2016: 2). More specific to contentious politics, Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li have argued that the Chinese government condones protests because they provide useful information about local malfeasance and policy implementation, serving as a kind of "fire alarm" (2005), and Rachel Stern and Kevin O'Brien suggest that the mixed signals the state sends to activists can induce these boundary-pushers to reveal important information about emerging social tensions (2012).

While recognizing that a political phenomenon or institution may provide information to the government is an important step, it is only a first step. Extracting useful and accurate information from people who are naturally looking out for their own interests is inherently difficult. Second, while the center may want to maximize the amount of information it receives, protest,

like many of the other policy tools it has at its disposal, not only has the desired effect of transmitting information vertically up to the center but also has the potentially dangerous side effect of permitting information to flow horizontally, from citizen to citizen. Such horizontal information flows may endanger the government if they lead discontented individual citizens to conclude that the discontent they feel is widespread.[3]

In this article, I approach the information problems of authoritarian governance in China using insights from game theory and in particular the branch known as mechanism design. This approach analyzes how incentives can be structured in order to induce participants in an institution to behave in a desired way. Crucially, the "mechanism designer" faces the very important constraint that participants can do things the designer cannot observe (hidden action), or may possess information unavailable to the designer (hidden information). In economics, this set of analytical tools has been applied to employment contracts, auctions, taxation systems, financial markets, school assignments, and even organ donation (Prize Committee, 2007). In political science, it has been used to study the relationship of voters to elected officials and modes of delegation to bureaucrats, among other topics (McCarty and Meirowitz, 2007: 220–68; Gailmard and Patty, 2012). I will apply it to China's contentious politics through the thought experiment of treating the party's top leadership as the mechanism designer: given their objectives, how should they structure their formal and informal rules, policies, and responses?

In order to apply these tools, I will make four simplifying assumptions. First, a key feature of this approach is that rather than treating each interaction (such as a protest) in isolation, it pushes us to examine what rules the mechanism designer would want to establish at the outset. That is, rather than waiting until a situation arises and responding ad hoc, the mechanism designer lets it be known, either through policy statements or through precedent, how it will respond to particular behaviors. It then sticks to this policy not because it is most convenient in a given interaction, but because doing so sets up the right incentives for the participants in the mechanism. Second, mechanism design examines the optimal behavior of a single actor with a clear set of objectives, even though in reality the Chinese central government is made up of many different individuals, each with different objectives as well as different views about what policies would be best for the government as a whole. Third, I will generally assume that protesting groups have also managed to overcome the well-known barriers to collective action and can act in favor of their collective interest. And fourth, I will assume that both the government and the citizens act rationally in pursuit of their interests, even though protests, in particular, can be an emotionally charged context in which decisions must be made quickly. Both the government and the citizens are treated as

canny strategic actors, not as passive objects of the other's manipulation. In particular, the mechanism designer (the state) must anticipate and take into account how mechanism participants (society) will respond to or try to subvert the incentives it puts in place.

Each of these assumptions will be violated to some degree in almost any actual interaction between citizens and the state. Nonetheless, there are insights to be had from conducting this kind of thought experiment. Specifically, the mechanism design perspective helps us explain four puzzling facts about China's protests. The first puzzle is why the government neither fully suppresses nor fully welcomes protests. If protest is threatening, why tolerate it? But if it is usefully informative, why is the government often happy to ignore protesters, or even to look away as they are beaten or arrested by local authorities? The economic theories of signaling and screening suggest an answer. In order for people to protest at all, they must hope to receive some concessions. But in order for protests to be informative, the act of protesting must also be costly or even dangerous to the participants, as this ensures that only the seriously aggrieved will choose this outlet.

The second puzzle is why protesters do not take more actions that would strengthen their bargaining power against the state. From the perspective either of rationalist bargaining theory or of social movement theory, one would expect that they should try to get the most leverage they can by organizing, framing their grievances in a broad-based way, and building links to other discontented social groups. Yet they do not. Taking the state's perspective, however, we can see that it must firmly suppress groups that try to enhance their bargaining power in this way in order to avoid setting a precedent that would lead all future protesters to do the same. Indeed, the ability to commit to such a stance makes it easier to permit protests that remain safely narrow.

The third puzzle is related to the first. Conventional wisdom, experience, and many theories suggest that even small protests may be dangerous for authoritarians. Such protests can rapidly spiral out of control, echoing Mao's observation that "a single spark can start a prairie fire." On the other hand, we have the argument that China's protests actually stabilize the government, conveying useful information or perhaps somehow acting as a safety valve. How do we reconcile these views? What makes protests stabilizing and what makes them destabilizing? Is this determined by exogenous conditions, or do the actions of the state affect whether protests act as a safety valve or a "single spark?" The key here is to understand that protests are useful when they convey information vertically, from society to the state, but dangerous to the extent that they disseminate information horizontally, among members of society. The balance between these two factors determines whether using protests as a screening device is a feasible strategy.

Finally, even if we concede that protests may provide information to the government, are there not less dangerous ways to achieve the same objective? What is special about protests in comparison to the petition system, legal reform, the media, or local elections, and other elements of China's political system that have also been argued to provide useful information? As I will show, each of these institutions or practices has strengths and weaknesses in terms of the information they gather and disseminate, making them imperfect substitutes.

The First Puzzle: Why the Inconsistent Response to Protests?

Conventionally, one might expect an authoritarian state to suppress protests, viewing them as inherently challenging and insubordinate. Yet the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) response to protests in recent years has been quite different. Protesters frequently receive concessions, whether in the form of cash or other government intervention on their behalf (Cai, 2010; O'Brien and Li, 2006; Su and He, 2010; Lee and Zhang, 2013). Moreover, top leaders, including Zhu Rongji, Jiang Zemin, Wen Jiabao, and Hu Jintao, as well as ministers of public security Zhou Yongkang and Meng Jianzhu have made public statements placing the blame for protests on local cadre behavior and urging restraint in police handling of these protests (Steinhardt, 2016; Steinhardt, forthcoming). These statements both embolden potential protesters and suggest that China's leaders find some value in tolerating public protest.[4]

On the other hand, protest leaders are often arrested (Lee and Zhang, 2013; O'Brien and Li, 2008), and stories of violent repression by police or plainclothes thugs frequently feature in media reports of major protest incidents (Cody, 2005; Moore, 2012; Denyer, 2015). In many other cases, protesters are simply ignored if local and central authorities view them as sufficiently innocuous (Hoffman and Sullivan, 2015). Between these extremes there are many intermediate approaches, such as mobilizing (and threatening) the friends and relatives of protest participants to put social pressure on them in a "relational repression" strategy (Deng and O'Brien, 2013).

The most obvious explanation for this inconsistency, and certainly an important part of the story, is the diversity of interests and opinions within the sprawling Chinese party-state (Lieberthal and Oksenberg, 1988; Mertha, 2009; Stern and O'Brien, 2012). With regard to protests in particular, local officials are more likely to prioritize the short-run appearance of stability, doing whatever they can to keep higher levels from learning about their problems (Lee and Zhang, 2013; Li and O'Brien, 2008).

One might also argue that the government has little reason to stand in the way of protesters in many circumstances. Labor protests in particular could be viewed as purely a conflict between firms and workers. When protesters extract concessions from firms this imposes no costs on the state, so it should be happy not to get involved. This interpretation is particularly tempting when one considers protests against foreign-invested firms. However, this explanation understates the inextricable link between politics and economic matters in China. First, local economic development is a central priority of most local officials, and this leads them to support and protect firms located in their area regardless of ownership (Bai, Hsieh, and Song 2014; Lorentzen, Landry, and Yasuda, 2014). It may well be that higher levels of the state place greater priority on the welfare of laborers, but in practice either the willingness or desire of the state to strictly enforce labor regulations falls short (Gallagher, 2014). Second, even labor protests targeting private or foreign firms are disruptive and potentially pose the risk of linking up to form a larger movement.

Moreover, even if we hold these factors constant, there remains an indeterminacy about state policy toward protest that requires explanation. O'Brien and Li argue that these conflicting cues result from the ambivalence of higher-level leaders toward protest (O'Brien and Li, 2006). Similarly, Xi Chen argues that this ambivalence is inherent in state ideologies and institutions (Xi Chen, 2012). But why do these leaders continue to advocate an ambivalent ideology and maintain ambivalent institutions?

It has also been argued that maintaining uncertainty about the state's response helps keep people in line more than certainty would (Hassid, 2008; Stern and Hassid, 2012; Stern and O'Brien, 2012). Yet the logic of this is unclear. Certainly, people are reluctant to engage in activities that might be punished, but why should the certainty of punishment make them more willing to do so? In practice, it seems that ambiguity encourages boundary-spanning activity as much as it leads to greater caution (O'Brien, 2002). In particular cases, officials may take a lighter hand because they worry about repression backfiring by creating more support for the protesters (O'Brien and Deng, 2015), but to do so consistently runs the risk of normalizing protest even more. By contrast, the harsh, consistent, and unapologetic repression of the Falun Gong movement sent a clear message that deterred all but the most fervent from continued protest (Tong, 2009). The total lack of ambiguity on this issue deters protest from all but the most passionate movement adherents.

The mechanism design perspective helps explain why this apparent inconsistency would be in the government's interest even without internal discord or indecisiveness, and not because it does a better job of keeping people in line. The key is to think about the informational function of protests. What

makes a protest informative? The economic theory of costly signaling provides an answer, while also pushing us to ask some more specific questions. Costly signaling theory applies when the information to be transmitted is some characteristic of the "sender" that is otherwise unobservable to the "receiver." Even more important, the costliness of the signaling activity must be systematically related to the unobserved characteristic. In particular, the cost must be high enough that the potential benefit from signaling outweighs the cost for some but not all potential signalers. Otherwise, either everyone or no one would signal (protest), yielding no information in either case.

For example, in the original exposition of economic signaling theory, Michael Spence illustrated this point by supposing that some individuals find school easier than others (e.g., they are more diligent by nature), and that those who find it easier are also more productive in their jobs than those who find it challenging (1973). Given this, attending school could lead to higher wages even if the actual experience of schooling in no way improves their ability to do their jobs. It would do this because only the diligent would find it worthwhile to attend school and employers would pay them more, knowing that they were diligent.

While O'Brien and Li point to the value of protest as a way for the government to identify corrupt or abusive officials (O'Brien and Li, 2006), a letter or petition could do this more directly and with less disruption. What a protest conveys is information about the intensity of the grievance felt by the protesters, whether this results from local malfeasance or central policies. Signaling theory tells us that even a costly activity like protesting can only convey additional information if the costliness of the act depends on the unobservable characteristics of the group (the protesters). The costs of protesting are primarily costs of time and of risk. Time spent protesting is time not spent working the land, looking for a job, or running a small business. If there is some possibility of a protest being broken up violently, or of individuals being arrested and serving jail time, this risk will also make protest less attractive. Crucially, these costs are more significant for individuals with milder grievances, for whom the status quo is not so onerous. Someone with a good job or the likelihood of getting one loses more by spending time protesting on the street, locked in jail, or recovering from a beating—prospects that are less frightening to someone with less to lose, or whose grievances already make life under the status quo less valuable.

Why should this information be valuable to the government? One obvious value is in helping it identify individuals or groups whose grievances are particularly severe, the ones who might take other actions that would cause harm to the state if the grievance remains unaddressed. This harm might result from instigating or participating in spontaneous "anger-venting" riots

such as broke out in Weng'an in 2008 (Yu, 2008), joining illegal political or religious movements like the Falun Gong, or even, should the opportunity arise, directly challenging the state in ways that occurred during the Jasmine Revolutions of the Arab Spring or in China itself in 1989. Knowing which individuals and groups might be predisposed to such behavior, the state can take some action, whether repression or concessions, to ensure that the protesting group no longer poses a threat.

If a protest were an isolated incident, or if it were so massive and widespread that it threatened to overturn the government, the government's only concern would be the short-run one of identifying the mix of repressive tactics and concessions that would bring it to a halt most rapidly and at the least cost. What makes this a mechanism design problem from the perspective of higher levels of the central government is the fact that there are so many actual and potential protests in China at any given time. China's size is often raised as a unique governance challenge, but in this one respect it also confers an advantage. The government's response to one protesting group will set expectations for all other groups that might mobilize on behalf of a grievance. The potential costs and benefits they see will in turn influence how informative their own protest will be as a signal.

Given this, strict repression would be counterproductive. If every expression of grievances were to be met with an iron fist, this would drive discontent underground. This would of course create the surface appearance of an acquiescent or even contented populace, but the government would lose this source of information about what groups were facing the most severe problems, risking a more widespread uprising at some unpredictable future point. On the other hand, protest would be equally uninformative if the government responded promptly and sympathetically to every group that could gather a dozen people together at the city government offices, because most of the groups that came forward would not be sufficiently aggrieved. Instead, the balance of costs and benefits protesters receive must be enough to entice the truly discontented to protest while dissuading those with lesser grievances.

It is also important to note that the government's ideal strategy would not be to set up the same mechanism (the same array of costs, rewards, and punishments) for every potential protesting group. Instead, it should adapt the mechanism to what it knows about each distinguishable group, such as the likelihood that the group is discontented, and the combination of costs and concessions necessary to induce this group to protest if but only if it is a real danger. Isolated and impoverished farmers might be in extraordinary distress, but their ability to launch a credible challenge to the government is minimal. Consequently, it might take a relatively small payment to buy their loyalty. By contrast, urban workers in major cities would be an essential part of any

challenge to the government, especially those with strong existing social networks left over from the days of planned economy work units. Thus, even if their circumstances might be objectively better than those faced by rural people or by the migrant workers in their midst, the potential threat they pose means that they might need much greater concessions.[5]

Finally, if the government knows with certainty that any particular group is a threat, preemptive concessions to all members of that group would be a better strategy, obviating the need to protest. We see an example of this last option in the 2006 ending of agricultural taxes, after it became apparent that discontent over rural taxes and fees was near-universal. Similarly, the coverage of a minimum-livelihood guarantee (*dibao*) program was expanded significantly in the 2000s when protests by the urban unemployed became commonplace, and then was scaled back as it became clear that this source of discontent was no longer as widespread (Solinger, 2015). Local and national pension programs were also expanded and made more generous in response to protests by retired state-owned enterprise (SOE) workers (Frazier, 2010). Rules surrounding urban demolitions and rural land-takings were also tightened after they became a common reason for protests (Heurlin, 2014). In each of these policy areas, as problems became sufficiently widespread, the state chose to make broad concessions to an entire class of citizens even if some might not have posed a threat, rather than waiting for them to demonstrate their seriousness by protesting.

Consequently, understanding protests as a signaling device, one used not in the context of a one-off interaction but as part of a broader mechanism, helps to resolve the apparent contradiction in the government's inconsistent reactions. In order for the act of protesting to convey useful information, the government must ensure that protesters face costs and risks as well as holding out at least the hope that protesting will yield some benefits. Moreover, these should vary depending on the observable characteristics of any group of potential protesters.

To be sure, this is not the only reason why the government might be inconsistent about either rewarding or punishing protesters. The government is not a unitary actor but comprises many different decision makers with different objectives and different opinions about how to respond to a particular protest. Protests are inherently volatile interactions that can take an unpredictable course even if one side approaches them with a clear plan. Nevertheless, this logic highlights forces that could lead even a rational unitary actor to have an apparently inconsistent pattern of response, even without taking into consideration the many ad hoc and contingent factors that also shape the development of any particular protest event.

The Second Puzzle: Why Do Protesters Forego Opportunities to Increase Their Bargaining Power?

The second puzzle that the mechanism design perspective helps to explain is the failure of Chinese protesters to take actions that would strengthen their bargaining position. As I will discuss below in more detail, analysts have long recognized that protests in the post-Tiananmen era have typically been very narrow in their orientation, targeting local authorities and focusing on localized economic grievances instead of launching broader challenges to the regime. This is a puzzle in light of two major bodies of theory: both that based in the rational choice theory of bargaining and that based in the social movements literature.

In basic bargaining theory, one of the most important determinants of the outcome is the "outside option" of either side (Sutton, 1986), what is also sometimes called the BATNA, or "best alternative to negotiated agreement" (Fisher and Ury, 1981). This outside option is the expected utility that a side will achieve if it walks away from the metaphorical bargaining table. For instance, in salary negotiations, an employee's outside option is the next best job he might get if he quit, while the employer's outside option would be to search for and pay someone else to do the same job. The better one side's outside option is, the greater the leverage that side will have in the bargaining.

In the context of contentious politics, protesters have two outside options to choose from if their initial protest fails to elicit a satisfactory response. One is to back down, accepting the status quo ante. The other option is to escalate and broaden the protest, perhaps even shifting from a contained protest over narrow grievances to a broader challenge to the government. This second possibility is particularly important if we believe that the government wants to encourage protests as a means to identify people whose discontent is severe enough that they might be tempted to start or join a revolt. Thus, the values of the outside options of both the government and the protesters depend on what they expect to happen if the protesters escalate.

This basic bargaining framework suggests we should expect protesters to take steps that would put them in a better position and the government in a worse position should the government not provide a satisfactory resolution of their concerns. In particular, we should expect them to mobilize the broadest possible base of support for their cause. Yongshun Cai argues along these lines that "forceful collective action requires as many participants as possible" (2010: 37). Taken seriously, this implies that they should make alliances with discontented groups from other segments of society or other geographical locations. Such alliances would be facilitated by portraying their grievances as generally as possible, going beyond their own economic concerns to

address the structural factors underlying not only their own grievances but those of many other social groups as well.

Social movement theory not only comes at this question from a different perspective, but also implies that protesters would be more likely to succeed if they moved away from narrow strategies. Two of the most important factors this body of theory identifies as crucial to the success of social movements are organization and framing. Movements may emerge from personal networks or informal organizations, but "without some degree of formal organization," they tend to "fade away and dissipate their energies" (Tarrow, 2011: 124). Consequently, protesters hoping to have real influence should be expected to take steps to organize in order to gather supporters, money, and material (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 1996). Framing refers to the creation of a common understanding about the need for collective action, the formation of a collective identity, and the shaping of emotions to motivate mobilization. Successful movements frame their causes in ways that resonate with wider groups of supporters and sympathizers in the broader society (Benford and Snow, 2000). In order to succeed, these frames must become more popular and accepted than competing frames created by state actors (Tarrow, 2011).

Yet this is not what we see in China. Instead, we see narrow mobilization around narrow issues. In the late nineties and early 2000s, urban workers protested in large numbers as a consequence of the restructuring of SOEs. Yet the objects of their protests were plant closures, layoffs, or default on unemployment or pension benefits. They demanded compensation or support without fundamentally challenging the direction of economic reform (Feng Chen, 2000; Blecher, 2002; Hurst and O'Brien, 2002; Hurst, 2009; Cai, 2006). These fairly narrow demands were framed in terms that also posed little challenge to the government. Most often a traditional right to subsistence was central, with slogans like "We want to eat" (Hurst, 2009: 112). In other cases, workers made reference to the government's Mao-era commitments and ideology, hearkening back to the era when their privileges were unassailable (Feng Chen, 2000: 63; Chen and Tang, 2013). These constituted somewhat more of a challenge to the government's market reform policies, but even this was indirect considering that the government itself continued to profess socialist ideals. Moreover, this framing served as a justification for the straightforward material claims of the protesters rather than as a political call to arms. Organizationally, workers also kept protests to a limited scope. With only rare exceptions, employees of each SOE protested on their own behalf (Hurst, 2009), targeting "leaders of a particular factory or firm" (Zhao, 2001: 439), or low-level officials (Blecher, 2002). Overall, the outcome was a "decentralized, 'cellular activism' [that] seldom evolve[d] into lateral, cross-locality rebellion" (Lee, 2007: 9).

By the early 2000s, SOE worker protests became less common but other issues took their place. Outside the world of SOEs, labor activism has continued and perhaps grown. But again, we see in these cases a very narrow orientation. Workers almost always focus on their rights under existing (if not necessarily enforced) labor law or on improving pay and work conditions (Chen and Tang, 2013). They often attempt to get the state on their side against their employers, especially if they are foreign or privately owned. Coordinated strikes across firms are almost unheard of, and even attempts to organize independent unions within a single firm are rare and generally unsuccessful. Scholars have discussed the distinction between the more traditional moral economy claims of the northeastern SOE workers and the more legalistic or rights-based claims of workers at newer coastal firms (Lee, 2007; Hurst, 2009; Chen and Tang, 2013), but both types of moral claims are based in the government's own espoused principles and values and as such remain within the narrow rhetorical scope Kevin O'Brien characterized as "rightful resistance" (1996). As Su and He put it, "protesters, occasional violations of law notwithstanding, do not so much confront as appeal to the government" (2010: 180). By doing so, they reduce the threat they could pose and thereby abandon bargaining leverage.

The countryside, too, has seen many protests. In the late 1990s, these centered on taxes and fees. Despite laws restricting taxes and fees to 5% of peasant income, local officials frequently exceeded these limits or redefined their impositions in order to give the appearance of legal compliance even though the overall "peasant burden" of extraction was beyond what the farmers could bear (Bernstein and Lü, 2003). While local officials were often violating the spirit or letter of the law and in some cases may have misused the funds extracted, their actions mainly resulted from the stark mismatch between the services and infrastructure they were expected to provide and the revenues they had available (Takeuchi, 2014). The language with which rural people framed their claims departed in important ways both from Maoist rhetoric and from traditional values, taking a "rights conscious" form that justified protests in terms of rights at least nominally granted by the government (O'Brien and Li, 2006). Yet they appeared almost willfully blind to the complicity of higher levels of government in their plight, blaming local officials and beseeching their superiors for assistance (Bernstein and Lü, 2003; O'Brien and Li, 2006). With rare exceptions, protests stayed confined in scope to one or a few villages. Demands were for localized relief and removal of officials, not for changes to national agricultural or tax policy (Bernstein and Lü, 2003: 241–42).

The 2006 abolition of agricultural taxes and generally tighter controls of fee collection largely ended this source of protests. But, just as in the cities,

protests continued even as the grievances changed. Land expropriation became particularly prominent (Guo, 2001; Cai, 2010: 52–68). With China's rapid development and urbanization, the rights to agricultural land became very valuable if the land could be converted to commercial use. China's farmers nominally hold long-term leases to their land, with ownership and real-location rights vested in the village as a collective. However, the government can legally take control of the land under some circumstances (Guo, 2001), and often does so illegally (Mattingly, 2016).

If we think in terms of social movement or bargaining theory, it might seem that farmers would be able to extract more significant concessions if they framed the issue as a broad movement for agricultural or property rights reform and attempted to ally with others around the country facing the same abusive treatment. Yet they do not. Instead, the protesters fight for better compensation or the return of the land. They base their demands on existing laws or broader moral claims and target their complaints at lower levels of government while insisting that higher levels have their interests at heart (Guo, 2001). Notably, protests have rarely erupted when the land has been requisitioned by higher levels of government for large-scale infrastructure projects, even though the disruption to rural people's lives could be much more severe (Tong and Lei, 2013: 45).

Finally, environmental protests have become more and more prominent in recent years (Deng and Yang, 2013). While some urban protests have mobilized city-wide participation that goes beyond the small and more cohesive worker or peasant communities involved in earlier protests and occasionally has elements of broader policy advocacy, they have generally maintained a narrow NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) character, opposing particular industrial projects rather than advocating a new relationship between citizens and the state (Steinhardt and Wu, 2016).

To be sure, within these limits, there is a consensus that the popular saying has it right—"a big disturbance gets a big resolution, a small disturbance gets a small resolution, and no disturbance gets no resolution" 大闹大解决, 小闹小解决, 不闹不解 (Rosenthal, 2003; Cai, 2004: 442; Michelson, 2008). Xi Chen finds that petitioners engaging in disruptive action or those who take steps to attract media attention are much more likely to get a "substantial" response (2012), and Yongshun Cai also finds that mobilizing sufficient numbers and engaging in disruptive activity help protesters get a favorable outcome (Cai, 2010). What is crucial, however, are the protest strategies that do not appear in their samples at all because they are almost never used—attempts to organize independent unions, form independent media outlets, organize nationwide protests or general strikes, and other strategies typical of social movements in other countries.

Why is this? One reason might be naivety or failure to recognize common interests. Walder and Gong influentially argued that a central reason for the failure of the 1989 Tiananmen protests was the unwillingness of students to make common cause with workers, concluding that "future democratic movements will be crippled unless this obvious barrier between students and intellectuals on the one hand, and ordinary working people on the other, is broken down" (1993: 28). Relatedly, it might be that aggrieved citizens honestly fail to realize that their grievances could be attributed to the existing political and economic system. Blecher argued that workers were not "mounting a co-ordinated challenge" against centrally mandated policies that harmed their interests because social forces and explicit government strategy had led them to accept the rightness of these policies (2002: 286). Lianjiang Li (2004) finds that Chinese villagers tend to trust higher levels of the state more than the local officials with whom they have more frequent direct interactions, which could also be taken to support the idea that ordinary Chinese are naïve or misled about the origins of their problems.

One might also argue that there is no puzzle—we already know the answer. Throughout the People's Republic of China's history, Chinese protesters have been well aware of which claims and strategies will be tolerated by the government and which will not, exhibiting a highly refined "rules consciousness" (Perry, 2010). Even the 1989 student protesters, whose nationwide movement in most respects went far beyond these narrow bounds, knew that if they allied with the workers this further escalation would elicit a harsh crackdown from the government (Wright, 2001: 22). Departing from the choreography of narrow protests threatens the government and only invites trouble.

But why should the state be so implacably opposed to all but the narrowest of protests? There is significant scope to broaden protests while stopping short of revolution. If a bigger disruption gets a bigger payoff, why hold back? The key is that while the state may want to make use of protests as a tool to identify trouble spots, it seeks to do this at the least possible cost. Protesters who coordinate with other disgruntled groups and begin to frame their action as reflecting a broad challenge to the government will be able to demand greater concessions. By contrast, self-limiting strategies like "rightful resistance," which avoid challenging the government directly or going beyond largely localized and economic demands, undermine the natural increase in a group's ability to mobilize over time.

Since the government faces millions of potential and actual protesters, it is in its interest to act forcefully to ensure that protesters follow the "rules" of rightful resistance, even if this is very costly in a particular instance, thereby enabling it to use protest as an information-revealing mechanism at the

lowest cost. And, indeed, we see groups that fail to follow the rules are dealt with harshly. The Falun Gong demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to mobilize in 1999, attracting the harshest nationwide crackdown since 1989. The founders of the China Democratic Party and the Charter 08 signatories also crossed the line by framing their demands in a language that could not have been satisfied without systemic change, and therefore their attempts to organize were disrupted promptly and forcefully. Even what might seem to be more minor violations of these rules, like the 2015 attempt by feminist activists to organize a multi-city awareness campaign against sexual harassment, can earn prison time.

The exception that proves the rule was the strike wave of 2010. It began in May with a spontaneous work stoppage at a wholly Japanese-owned Honda plant in Guangdong, motivated by anger about wages that were lower than at many nearby plants. This sparked strikes at several other plants around the country that lasted through August. Although Manfred Elfstrom and Sarosh Kuruvilla suggest that these incidents show "increased coordination of strikes and protests, better organization, and a more strategic focus" (2014: 469), little effort was made to link these strikes into a broader movement or to articulate an ideology that would make them more than a series of comparatively small-scale conflicts with specific mostly foreign-owned factories. Most of the strikes received purely economic concessions in the form of increased wages, with only incremental change even to the party-dominated collective bargaining arrangements at the factories in question (Friedman, 2014; Chan and Hui, 2014).

Viewed in this light, keeping protests narrow in scope and using the rhetoric of rightful resistance no longer looks like a clever strategy used by China's people to eke out incremental gains from a divided government. Instead, it appears as the natural consequence of a well-chosen policy on the part of the government: to tolerate protests that stay within bounds while policing those boundaries strictly.

The Third Puzzle: Is Protest the Safety Value or the Single Spark?

If one accepts the premise that protests might be tolerated because they benefit the government, this raises a third puzzle. If tolerating protests is such a clever strategy, such a useful safety valve, why does every authoritarian government not do the same thing? Although it is commonly used, the safety valve metaphor, which dates back to the days of steam engines, is a poor one. When the pressure in a steam engine gets too high, releasing pressure with a safety valve lets off steam and reduces the risk of a dangerous explosion. This

analogy has also been used to explain how seemingly democratic institutions and practices ranging from village elections to online discussion can paradoxically preserve authoritarian rule (Oi, 2003; MacKinnon, 2008; Hassid, 2012; Dan Chen, forthcoming). However, the implicit theory of political behavior in this metaphor is rarely articulated.[6] The idea originated in a psychological theory that participating in protest is emotionally satisfying in its own right, a form of catharsis or self-expression (Bayley, 1962; Coser, 1956). The implicit assumption is that after participating in a protest, the individual no longer feels as strongly about the initial grievance, irrespective of whether any concessions have been granted or policies changed. Thus, as with a steam engine, the worst that can happen if the valve is opened for too long is that the pressure becomes too low to drive the engine.

Protests, however, are quite different. Pure anger-venting riots, in which people take to the streets to express a generalized sense of injustice rather than to defend their personal interest (Yu, 2008), are dramatic but relatively rare. Chinese protesters may take some pleasure in airing their grievances, but they seem to care just as much or more about whether their demands are met. The safety valve alerts the state to a problem, but the state must still attend to it. Indeed, as discussed earlier, the safety valve may never even open up (citizens will never protest) if citizens do not expect that the state is likely to take action by making concessions.

An even bigger problem with the safety valve metaphor is this: the act of protesting conveys information about a group's discontent not only vertically, upward to higher levels of government, but also horizontally, to other social groups. When one group sees another group protest, it learns about discontent that was previously hidden to it. This may embolden it to protest, either because it loses confidence in the state's competence, or gains confidence in the level of hidden support in society for dissent. This can in turn embolden other groups to protest, and so on, a single spark igniting a prairie fire that can topple the state (Kuran, 1991; Lohmann, 1994). Yet, the fact that protests have become so commonplace and accepted in China makes it clear that the "single spark" analogy also misses something important.

A better metaphor may be to think of the strategy of tolerating protest as a kind of *controlled burn*. In managing forests and other wild areas, fire is a constant threat. As plants naturally grow and die, more and more flammable material builds up. While foresters used to put out fires as soon as they arose, they have increasingly come to recognize that it can be safer to allow naturally occurring fires to take their own course, burning up the flammable material in a localized area, as long as they can be kept from spreading too widely. Because a fire will not spread through these previously burned areas, this ensures that even if (or when) an unexpected fire begins, its impact will be

limited (Bancroft et al., 1985). In the context of potential protesters, the state's hope is that once aggrieved groups have called attention to their problems and had them addressed, they will become less interested in participating in anger-venting riots or even broader challenges to the state if these should break out. The possibility of these other events reaching the critical mass or tipping point at which they could constitute a serious threat to the state thus becomes lessened. However, as with any use of fire, there is always the risk that a spark will leave the controlled environment, causing precisely the conflagration that the controlled burn was meant to avoid.

Of course, this is still just another metaphor. But it directs us to ask what leads one protest to ignite another and what it is about China that keeps this from happening, or at least has so far. I propose three factors. The first is the existence of the historical tradition of protest that Elizabeth Perry (2008) and Ho-Fung Hung (2011) have documented: since imperial times protesters have targeted local officials while deferring to higher levels of the political system, and have focused on economic and subsistence concerns rather than asking for new rights or other political changes. This tradition makes it easier for the CCP to tolerate and make use of narrow self-constrained protests because the CCP, the protesters, and other elements of society place the same meaning on these protests. This tradition is also served by and reinforces the common view that higher levels of the state can be trusted even though corruption is rife in the localities (Li, 2004, 2008), and facilitates blame-avoidance by central authorities (Cai, 2008). Indeed, protesters appear to trust the central state *more* than non-protesters (Tang, 2016: 114). Moreover, narrow protests by definition engage in less horizontal dissemination of information.

By contrast, in polities that lack this tradition society might interpret toleration of protests as a sign of a weak state. Even citizens who might want to engage in constrained protests could not do so if they lacked a clear means to distinguish their actions from a challenge to the state. Other citizens, too, might view any protest, regardless of its declared aims, as a covert challenge, leading them to join in. In China, having a common interpretation of protests by all sides makes it safer to implement this mechanism.

However, even narrow protests can be dangerous if they are sufficiently widespread. The second factor that has made it possible for the CCP to implement a controlled burn strategy is China's geographic dispersion and poor physical and communications infrastructure. Throughout history there have been substantial geographic barriers to any attempt to form a national movement in China. Unauthorized travel from one region to another has been challenging, as the heavy casualties of the Long March showed. In addition, even the largest population centers are each fairly small relative to the population.

Beijing's population of about 20 million is only 1.5% of the national population, and even Shanghai's population does not yet exceed 2%. Contrast that with a country like Hungary. In 1956, a fifth of its population lived in the capital city of Budapest. No mountains separate citizens of the capital from the rest of the country, and one radio station can broadcast to the entire country. As a result, when a protest movement began in 1956, it quickly spiraled to the point where only an external intervention by Soviet forces could reverse it (Ekiert, 1996).

The third factor is not as exogenous as the previous two, but it also plays an important role. The greater the state's ability to keep government-challenging protests contained, the more it can tolerate without these protests posing a threat. This may also help explain why the government seems to have taken steps to strengthen the internal security apparatus (Wang and Minzner, 2015) even as it has advocated that these forces treat protests as "contradictions within the people" to be handled gently when possible (Tanner 2004; Steinhardt, 2016; Steinhardt, forthcoming). Rather than reflecting contradictory impulses, the one facilitates the other.[7]

Considering the tradeoffs between the vertical and horizontal flow of information also sheds light on the sustainability of this mechanism. This helps go beyond simply noting that even if protests seem to help the state now they might not in the future.[8] It also hints at why the CCP under Xi Jinping may have become less tolerant of protests. China's physical transportation network has improved dramatically in the reform period, with new highways, high-speed railways, and airports appearing all around the country and will continue to do so, with continuing annual infrastructure investments adding up to more than those of Western Europe, North America, and South America combined (Chen, Matzinger, and Woetzel, 2013; Woetzel et al., 2016). Telecommunications have developed even more dramatically, with a reported 620 million people now having 24-hour mobile Internet access (Larson, 2016). This has made it much more difficult to allow even localized protests to proceed, since they can so easily gain national attention. Indeed, some research suggests that while a certain degree of critical commentary is allowed online, organizing collective action of any sort attracts strict censorship (King, Pan, and Roberts, 2013). Unlike offline protests, these online protests attempt to draw participants and support from around the country, making them far more dangerous and therefore less tolerable. As a result, it is quite possible that these factors which one might expect to lead to a more open society might compel the CCP to pursue harsher counterstrategies, with the net effect ultimately ambiguous.[9]

The Fourth Puzzle: Why Not Use Other Institutions to Gather Information?

The mechanism design approach offered answers to the three previous puzzles by helping to think about what the government might want to get from protests and how this should affect its responses to social unrest. But should we take this as given? Managed protest may be one way the government can acquire useful information; it is not the only way. The final question, then, is: what is it about permitting protests as an information-gathering tool that makes it worth the risks to the government?

Several other institutions have been identified in the literature as serving a similar function: hierarchical approaches like the petition (letters and visits) system and its recently developed online heirs, Western formal institutions like a rule-of-law based judicial system, or quasi-democratic institutions like village elections and people's congresses, as well as what in democracies would be characterized as parts of civil society, such as nongovernmental organizations and the media. Each has its own distinct strengths and weaknesses from the state's perspective. I will focus on three crucial dimensions of each: the nature and quality of the information conveyed, the extent to which they convey information vertically without also conveying it horizontally, and the opportunities for intermediate levels of the state to distort the information.

The discussion of the first puzzle above highlights the greatest value of protest toleration, the kind of information conveyed. Because of the significant costs and potential dangers of any protest to participants, protests are uniquely effective as a screening device. Only the more intensely aggrieved will protest. Moreover, because it is a collective act, protest demonstrates that the intense grievance is held by a cohesive and potentially dangerous group, not just one powerless individual.[10] The discussion of the third puzzle, by contrast, highlights the main problem with protests: because they are so public they convey information about grievances horizontally from citizen to citizen. This can endanger the state if what appear to be localized grievances get reframed as representative of systemic problems. Keeping protests consciously narrow, as I discussed in the context of the second puzzle, can mitigate this problem but does not eliminate it.

The last point, distortion of information by intermediate levels of the state, has not been a focus of the previous discussion but becomes important when making these institutional comparisons. Information about grievances generally makes the local authorities look bad, so they face a strong incentive to suppress it before it reaches higher levels of the state. The existence of such distortions is well known, but the relative susceptibility of different

institutions to distortion has not been. Because of their public nature, protests are harder (although by no means impossible) for local officials to hide from higher levels of the state.[11] By comparison, it is much easier to disrupt, distort, or close off the flow of information from these other institutions, if (as it so often does) it reflects badly on lower levels of government.

To make this comparison more concrete, I will discuss some of these other institutions in more detail. First is the petition system. The role of this system in gathering information is widely recognized (Cai, 2004). Indeed, it might seem like the best information-gathering system of all. Anyone with a grievance can write a letter or make a phone call. Moreover, in doing so the aggrieved individual remains an individual and does not start to make connections or build an organization that might be more threatening, nor does the petition process spread information horizontally. Martin Dimitrov provides evidence that both China's leaders and the past leaders of the European Communist states have made extensive use of the complaint system to identify and head off social problems for precisely this reason (Dimitrov, 2015). The primary weakness of this mechanism, as I suggested above, is the near-zero cost of simple petitions. This low cost means that simple letters and visits do not provide reliable information with which to distinguish the dangerously aggrieved from the rest, with the result that the vast majority of petitions receive no response (Ling, 2014). Indeed, Xi Chen (2012) finds that "troublemaking" (essentially, public protest) is virtually the only way petitioners will get a response. Another problem is that local authorities are often the source of the trouble and prefer to cover it up. This led to the widespread practice of "skip-level" petitioning, which in turn resulted in a large number of frustrated petitioners gathering in Beijing and pursuing increasingly public, coordinated, and disruptive strategies. This ultimately forced central authorities to crack down on this practice (Li, Liu, and O'Brien, 2012).

Online systems intended to fulfill a similar function have faced some of the same problems. Several recent studies have evaluated official responsiveness to online information requests. One study found response rates roughly comparable to those found in studies of democracies (Distelhorst and Hou, 2014), although patterns of response exhibit ethnic bias (Distelhorst and Hou, forthcoming). Another, however, found that very similar information requests were mostly ignored. Only when these requests were accompanied by a veiled threat of collective action or an explicit threat to approach higher-level authorities did the response rate even approach 20% (Chen, Pan, and Xu, 2016).

The judicial system might also seem to be a better institution for resolving citizen grievances. By strengthening legal institutions and developing greater rule of law, the state could channel grievances out of the streets and into the

courtrooms, avoiding the disruptions and dangers of protests. The problem is that whether an aggrieved group has a good legal case may only be weakly correlated with its propensity to revolt. Thus, the legal system may grant concessions to aggrieved groups that lack the power to threaten the state, and reject the claims of groups that do pose a real danger. Thus, it is not surprising that judicial institutions frequently take into account public opinion, as expressed by petitions, protests, and media reporting—a populist legality with links to the CCP's revolutionary past (Liebman, 2011) but which also appears to result from the party's realization that even rule by law may not always serve its interests (Minzner, 2011; Liebman, 2014). This populist legality undermines attempts to move toward rule of law, but brings legal outcomes more closely in line with those achieved by the mechanism of screening by protest, ensuring that dangerously aggrieved groups get at least some of what they want.

Village elections were also introduced in part to provide information, compensating for the party's difficulties monitoring local officials (O'Brien and Li, 2000). When implemented fairly, village elections provide both information about discontent and potentially an immediate and automatic response in the form of the replacement of an unpopular village head. However, in a fair election a vote for one candidate over another is almost costless, making it a much less powerful signal of preferences than popular protest. Another limitation with this mechanism is that it does not do enough if the discontent cannot be resolved by a change in village head. The most fundamental problem, though, is that it remains restricted to the relatively powerless village level. One reason the party has resisted extension of competitive elections to higher levels of government may be that these would inherently involve substantial horizontal information dissemination and even active coordination among disparate groups, endangering the party's hold on power.[12]

Despite the lack of competitive elections, though, China's people's congresses, both local and national, have also been found to usefully convey information upward (O'Brien, 1990). Recent studies find that this role has become more important over time at both the local and national levels (Manion, 2016; Truex, 2016). Although they face limited electoral pressures, delegates strive to please higher levels of the party-state by gathering information about their constituents' needs and perspectives and conveying it upward. Because delegates are beholden to the party and their deliberations are not freely reported, the risks of horizontal information dissemination are minimized. However, they are also closely linked with lower levels of the party-state, making them unlikely to present information that puts their allies or subordinates in a bad light. Especially at the local level, their requests are typically for "pork," fiscal transfers to be spent on local public goods

(Manion, 2016). This provides useful information about what kinds of investments are needed, but because every delegate is incentivized to make the case for his or her constituency, their advocacy does not convey a strong signal of the intensity of needs or grievances in an area.

In addition to these formal institutions, other entities such as the media and civil society organizations have also been identified as playing an important role. Starting in the 1990s, traditional news media began taking on a much more active and independent watchdog role, reporting on local government malfeasance and other social problems (Zhou, 2000; Liebman, 2005). Commercial pressures to attract news consumers motivated much of this reporting, but the CCP's forbearance was crucial in allowing it to become widespread (Stockmann, 2013; Dan Chen, forthcoming). Allowing watchdog reporting as a tool of information gathering shares some important strengths and weaknesses with tolerating protests. Even more than protests, news reports inherently disseminate information horizontally to other members of society as well as vertically upward to higher state authorities. However, the impact of horizontal information dissemination is limited if the state retains the capacity to rein in reporting when it so desires, particularly when there is the risk that a multitude of apparently localized stories will coalesce into an unfavorable nationwide picture (Lorentzen, 2014). Since reporters are usually from other jurisdictions or from units associated with higher levels of the state, it is difficult (although by no means impossible) for local authorities to keep their findings from reaching higher levels (Bandurski and Hala, 2010). In terms of the quality of the information provided, since reporters conduct their own investigations, their reports are not subject to the kind of costly screening process inherent to protests, but it may be that this is made up for by the specific and relatively objective nature of the information contained in a media report. The incentive to overstate problems is also kept in check (at least partly) by the desire to maintain their own credibility and journalistic standards (Hassid, 2011).

The Internet has also increasingly become an important information source, with journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens uncovering policy problems or official misbehavior and posting evidence or allegations online (Hassid, 2012; Sullivan, 2014). The low barriers to participation (a complete lack of screening costs) mean that these postings include both high-quality evidence such as the crowdsourced set of incriminating photos that brought down "Big Brother Watch" Yang Dacai (Jiang, 2014), but also low-quality or near-contentless diatribes. This may explain the finding of King, Pan, and Roberts (2013, 2014) that uninformative anonymous posts can take a very critical tone without being removed as long as they do not relate to a topic that has attracted a dangerous spike of interest.

While some high-profile events attract the attention of top leaders, the sheer volume of content is probably the greatest problem with the Internet as an information source. Indeed, Chen and Pan (2016) find that local officials are tasked with filtering this information and passing it on to higher levels, resulting in self-serving distortions. Finally, the rapid horizontal dissemination of information on the Internet also makes it particularly dangerous. However, this depends to some extent on the state of the arms race between the censors and those who would work around them (Zheng and Wu, 2005; Deibert, 2015) as well as on the ability of the state to turn the Internet to its advantage as a tool with which it can enhance its own monitoring and control (Göbel, 2013). To the extent that the state can effectively shut down online discussion of a topic when desired, this makes it easier to manage this form of contention. By contrast, street protests cannot be rapidly suppressed without significant police action and may therefore persist for some time (Kuang and Göbel, 2013).

Civil society organizations, too, have been argued to serve a useful informational function for the government, providing feedback on the effectiveness of policies in their area of specialty and ideas for solutions (Teets, 2014). They are particularly valuable because they not only can identify social problems but are often willing to work to ameliorate them through their volunteer activities. Given perennially tight budgets, both local- and higher-level governments are often willing to accept this free help, even when the organizations are technically illegal (Teets, 2013; Spires, 2011). As an information channel, another strength is their particular expertise in certain policy areas. Notably, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) appear to have been given the most flexibility to operate in the environmental arena (Saich, 2000; Yang, 2016), one where technical expertise is particularly important and the information they can pass upward to policy makers can be quite valuable. NGOs that span more than one political jurisdiction are also more able to bypass local governments that might hope to suppress information that casts them in a bad light. This is a particular problem in the environmental arena (Wang, 2013), another reason why environmental NGOs have been more welcome.

At the same time, however, NGOs pose a particular threat. As long-lived organizations that often operate in more than one locality, they not only can act as a conduit for horizontal transmission of information, but also provide a ready-made group able to act collectively on this information if desired. As a consequence, the government permits the growth of an autonomous civil society only as long as these groups focus on areas that serve state interests and accept a certain degree of direct and indirect state control (Teets, 2013; Teets, 2014; Spires, 2011; Hildebrandt, 2013). By contrast, in some areas, such as labor rights, the potential threat of organization outweighs the

possible benefits of NGOs. By repressing attempts to form independent labor organizations, the state forces workers who want better treatment to make their demands through spontaneous strikes and protests. While Eli Friedman (2014) argues that this is a severe flaw in the system, my analysis suggests that this may be the best option from the party's perspective.

In this brief discussion, I have addressed each of these institutions separately, but their shared functions make it no surprise that they are tightly interwoven. Media coverage sends a message to citizens and local officials about how higher levels view protest (Huang, Boranbay, and Huang, forthcoming) or particular kinds of litigation (Stockmann and Gallagher, 2011). NGOs reinforce or undermine official messages by conveying stories to their members and collaborators about what really works and what might cross a line (Stern and Hassid, 2012; Fu, forthcoming). Each of these institutions serves as part of the CCP's information-gathering toolkit. Their commonalities are highlighted by the frequency with which researchers studying each separately have come to very similar conclusions. At the same time, explicit comparisons such as those I have sketched out here can highlight important differences and complementarities among them.

To sum up, while the government gathers useful information using a variety of mechanisms, many of them arguably less risky than protest, the practice of tolerating and even rewarding protests has special characteristics that make it a useful element of the broader institutional configuration. The inherent danger of protest ensures that only severely aggrieved groups will choose it. This matters a great deal because many groups have grievances that are factual, legally valid, or newsworthy, yet which are not so severe that these groups would support real challenges to the state. Protests can also be useful because their public nature means they can bypass or put pressure on local authorities who might otherwise disregard or suppress information about citizen grievances. While higher levels of government are always understandably concerned about the risk of a protest spreading, these special characteristics of protest as an informational tool give them a strong reason to respond to protests with forbearance and even sympathy, despite the many other sources of information at their disposal.

Conclusion

The study of contention in China has primarily been grounded in direct observations and accounts from protest participants. While this has generated important insights, it has sometimes resulted in an excessively cautious attitude toward attempts to theorize about the system as a whole. By thinking through the objectives and constraints faced by central leaders and

the particular information problems they face, this study offers new answers to four important puzzles. First, it suggests that protests are neither fully regularized nor fully suppressed because in order for protest to be an informative screening device, it must not only be costly and even dangerous, but also potentially rewarding. Next, it points out that the carefully narrow scope of typical Chinese protests is puzzling in light of standard theories of bargaining and of social movements, but makes sense as a response to a government strategy that aims to use protests as a screening device but minimize its costs of doing so. Third, it shows the contradictions between two common metaphors used to think about popular protest, the safety valve and the prairie fire. It proposes a third metaphor, the "controlled burn," which better captures the tradeoff the state faces between desirable vertical information flows and dangerous horizontal flows, and helps us better understand the conditions under which protest-as-screening-device can be used to increase the regime's safety rather than endangering it. Finally, this article broadens the discussion to consider how protest compares to other formal institutions and informal practices in modern Chinese politics that also serve informational functions.

As stated at the outset, this approach makes important simplifications and leaves out important aspects of Chinese politics. As a result, it by no means explains everything about China's contentious politics. Nevertheless, it demonstrates the insights to be gained through careful analysis of how different institutions and practices surrounding contentious politics might serve the central state's interests.[13] While it may be more appealing to focus on the strategies of Chinese citizens attempting to resist the state or push for social change, the whole picture cannot be understood without equal attention to the central state's objectives and the strategies it might use to achieve these.

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Notes

1. Prominent examples include O'Brien and Li, 2005; O'Brien and Li, 2006; Hurst, 2009; Xi Chen, 2012; Cai, 2006; Cai, 2010; Lee, 2007; Feng Chen, 2000.
2. This view contrasts with the idea that changing political behavior has instead been shaped by changing preferences, a growing "rights consciousness" (Li, 2010; Lorentzen and Scoggins, 2015).
3. On the other hand, horizontal information flows may benefit the center if they reveal a lack of support for policy change, a "disorganizing" effect demonstrated in Chen and Xu, forthcoming, and Little, 2016.
4. Although see Lorentzen, Fravel, and Paine (forthcoming) for discussion of the problems with drawing inferences about intentions from the public statements of political actors.
5. Lorentzen, 2013, examines this issue using formalized game-theoretic logic.
6. Dan Chen, 2016, is a recent exception.
7. In an unpublished paper, Sheena Greitens (2016) argues that the actual capacity of the security forces may not have kept pace with China's economic growth and increased needs for policing of all types, a view supported by the findings in Suzanne Scoggins and Kevin O'Brien, 2016, and Scoggins, 2016. However, even if this investment falls short of the state's needs, it reflects a desire to maintain the ability to reestablish control by force when needed.
8. For example, Wenfang Tang, 2016: 117.
9. Lorentzen, 2014, and Newland and Lorentzen, 2015, make related arguments in the context of media liberalization.
10. Jeffrey Becker, 2012, shows that even among the Pearl River Delta's migrant workers at foreign factories, the degree of coordination and cohesion varies dramatically, and this is a major determinant of who will protest.
11. Although Hurst et al., 2014, find that in some areas local-government-linked criminal gangs are so strong they can stop a protest before it starts.
12. For an analysis of how even rigged elections can sometimes be turned against authoritarian leaders, see Bunce and Wolchik, 2011.
13. Jessica Chen Weiss has made important contributions to our understanding of China's foreign relations by analyzing the state's strategic problem in encouraging or repressing anti-foreign protests (Weiss, 2013, 2014). See also Alexandre Debs and Jessica Chen Weiss, 2016, and Jeremy Wallace and Jessica Chen Weiss, 2015.

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