

**Popular Contention in China
Center for Chinese Studies
University of California, Berkeley
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Thursday, October 5

Film Screening: China Blue

Shot clandestinely in China under difficult conditions, CHINA BLUE takes viewers inside a blue-jeans factory where two teenage girls, Jasmine and Orchid, are trying to survive the harsh working environment. Like many other young people in China, they have left their homes in the countryside in hopes of earning money to help their families; the reality they find is discouraging and often difficult. When the owner of their factory makes an important deal with a Western client, his teenage workers are forced to toil around the clock and a confrontation becomes inevitable. The film deals with topics such as working conditions, wages, protests, the effects of the international market, and even love; it brings the issues to life through vivid characters and a multi-layered perspective that takes examines the problems of both workers and management. CHINA BLUE is a deep-access account of what both China and the international retail companies don't want us to see – how the clothes we buy are actually made.

Discussion: Thomas Gold, Micha Peled, Katie Quan, Todd Carrel

Thomas Gold opened the discussion by asking director Micha Peled about the film-making logistics involved in such a sensitive topic. Peled described the strict controls that the Chinese government places on both domestic and international media. In order to obtain the footage for this film, he chose to break Chinese law and conduct the project without an official permit; he chose to travel as a tourist to avoid government supervision and censorship. Many factories refused to cooperate with the filmmaker, and since the larger factories often had strict “no media” stipulations in their contracts with larger international retailers, he sought out a smaller factory. Despite the harsh conditions depicted in the film, Peled emphasized that this factory was one of the better ones in China; the owner was proud of his factory and willingly cooperated, largely due to the fact that he thought the film was about hard-working first-generation entrepreneurs.

This admission prompted a discussion about the role of deception in documentary film work. Todd Carrel argued that deception should play no role at all, since the point of journalism is to be honest and open. He further argued that the same information could have been obtained through legitimate channels, and that since film-making itself is a reconstruction of reality, it is vital to conduct the project as honestly as possible. Peled disagreed, maintaining that information is effectively blocked by the government and by corporations. He sees film as an activist tool designed to jumpstart debates and educate people; his mission as a filmmaker is to get information out to the general public by whatever means are necessary. When asked by the audience about his honesty with the young factory workers, Peled clarified that he did not lie to them but refrained from sharing details; with respect to deception, he draws the line between those with power and those without.

Peled also addressed questions regarding factory interactions with international inspectors and local social networks. He explained that international inspectors generally went directly to the owner, from whom they received gifts and extravagant dinners; they never actually went onto the floor to talk with workers or examine conditions. In addition, local officials were very supportive of the factory. Due to the associated tax benefit, townships often engage in intense competition for factories, even going so far as to offer the services of the police to owners as a type of private security force.

Katie Quan addressed the role of NGOs, labor activists, and unions in China. Quan explained that NGOs are a politically new phenomenon in China, generally serving to educate people and occasionally taking cases. Civil society and labor organizations are beginning to make headway, but there are only several dozen in existence. In contrast, the government-approved All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) has a vast network, “representing” 80 percent of the workforce. Interestingly, the ACFTU has recently employed new tactics such as sending its staff to Wal-Mart stores to conduct clandestine campaigns, leading some to believe that it may not be the monolithic government tool that it has often been considered in the past.

Friday, October 6

Kevin O'Brien gave the opening remarks, explaining that this conference was inspired by a course he taught on collection action at UC Berkeley in 2005. The class was organized around concepts from social movements, involving articles that directly or sometimes obliquely dealt with the concepts at hand, providing snippets of provocative material. This conference gathers all of the authors together in one place in an effort to clarify thoughts and directions on the topic of popular contention in China.

Panel 1 - Opportunities

Organization, Mobilization, and Comparative Perspectives on Opportunity – Teresa Wright (California State University, Long Beach)

There have been two developments in the field of contentious politics. The first is a refinement of the study of political opportunity structures by breaking down political opportunities and movement characteristics and by specifying links between particular structures and outcomes. The second is attention to protests in non-Western and illiberal political systems. This article builds on these developments by identifying and comparing the influence of specific illiberal opportunity structures on student organization and mobilization in the mass protests of 1989 in China and 1990 in Taiwan.

In these two cases, there were four key opportunity structures: (1) single-party monopolization of state institutions; (2) official control and manipulation of information flows; (3) official control and manipulation of social organizations; and (4) official propensity to violently repress social groups. When these four structures were more pronounced, the fear and distrust of the students increased. This bred organizational instability and ineffectiveness, including a heightened need for pre-existing bonds of friendship, a tendency toward factionalism, and a tendency toward radicalization.

As perceived risk increased, those involved became less willing to abide by democratic decisions; if the organization were perceived as too timid, participants chose to exit the group rather than abide by majority opinion. The overall impact of this was organizational instability and ineffectiveness.

Wright identified three obstacles to broad-based mobilization across social groups: (1) a perceived need to demonstrate "purity" of ranks (2) a perceived need to avoid connections with groups having uncertain membership and/or proclivities; and (3) a perceived need to avoid connections with groups historically subject to official repression (i.e. workers in China, the Democratic Progressive Party in Taiwan). Students wanted to avoid being slandered, but this approach limited their organizations' ability to contribute to meaningful social change.

To the extent these structures exist in non-democracies, we find similar types of mobilization. For example, a culture of fear and distrust in Latin America has led to an attitude toward friendship networks as the only sound basis of organization building, since participants must have absolute trust in the competence and loyalty of their fellow leaders. The risk involved in non-democratic societal protests are inherently higher, so personal ties appear to be vastly more important in these contexts. The fear-laden environment generated by an authoritarian framework undermines organizational stability and effectiveness. Narrow mobilization strategies are necessary to counter perception of involvement by undesirable elements.

Wright concluded with three lessons. First, this research buttresses earlier findings that open flows of information are important in non-democratic settings. Secondly, particular forms of media manipulation can affect character of mobilization. Finally, the fear of repression aroused by these illiberal opportunity structures affects character of organization and mobilization, frustrating the formation of strong links across varied groups. In this kind of context, organization and mobilization may be inhibited to such a degree that effective, reform-oriented political protest is close to impossible.

How Institutional Evolution Creates Political Opportunity: The Case of the Xinfang System in China – Xi Chen (Louisiana State University)

While features of political institutions and their change were the key questions at the heart of political opportunity structure at its advent, they have often been ignored today. Chen examines two issues in his contribution. First, how can an authoritarian regime facilitate action? Second, how can one conceptualize institutional evolution? He attempts to bridge research on historical institutionalism with contentious politics, using the case of the xinfang system to illustrate his point. The xinfang system is one of the primary institutions dealing with state-society relations in China. Although originally designed to facilitate controlled participation, this system

began to create tremendous pressure on local officials. Chen argues that the institutional conversion of the xinfang system has given momentum to the dramatic increase in collective petitioning since the 1990s.

The xinfang system facilitates collective action in three ways. First, it creates strong incentives for ordinary people to mount collective action. It is strongly biased against moderate action and toward disruptive, trouble-making action; since the efficacy of moderate action is extremely low, there is little incentive to engage in it. Secondly, it exerts pressure on local governments to promptly respond to collective action in order to dissolve it. Finally, this institution tightly restrains local officials' capacity for repression.

The xinfang system is an excellent example of institutional conversion; it was designed for a different purpose but currently functions in a distinctly contrary manner. All of these tendencies were inherent in its design, however: selectiveness, ambiguous legitimacy of petitioning, and pressure-induced responsiveness. Until the 1990s, this system functioned to control participation, but it began to function for contention as the conversion process occurred in the early 1990s. This institution is an important means for the CCP to maintain relationship with ordinary people, so it has to be tolerant to some types of undesirable activities and even has to mobilize ordinary people to bring petitions at times. In this case, there are two mechanisms for institutional conversion in this case: (1) changes in institutional configurations (i.e. the transition from a command to market economy), and (2) an appropriation-reaction process.

Chen concluded by saying that many institutional adjustments carried out by the state to contain collective action have ironically made the system more favorable to collective petitioners. There are many institutional resources which facilitate collective action under state socialism. In addition, this study has explored a way in which institutional evolution can be widely applied to the study of the dynamic process of mobilization and demobilization. A proper conceptualization of institutional evolution should examine aspects of continuity and how continuity and change work together.

Discussant – David Meyer (University of California, Irvine)

These papers have taken concepts largely centered in Europe and the U.S. to China and spoken back to theory. Political opportunity structure is an attempt to address institutional agency structure. It is a way to see strategy as picking from an available menu and trying to maximize influence; it allows us to see how activists use or miss opportunities for mobilization and influence.

Meyer began with Wright's paper, stating that she had an important finding about the connection between opportunities and the types of social relations available to activists. Her paper provides a useful way of looking at social capital and the importance of trusting those around you. Paradoxically, when building of trust is less likely, the committed escalate quickly and become risk-takers due to their perception of the limited moments they have during which to act.

Meyer went on to say that these findings were path-breaking but criticized Wright for the incompleteness of her literature review. He recommended that she look at newer works examining over-time analyses of protests. Also, he questioned whether it made sense to examine the 1989 and 1990 protests as discrete events, suggesting that she look at the nesting of states in global contexts of revolutions elsewhere. For example, China was threatened by waves of protests in socialist states elsewhere; this may have affected activists as well, perhaps inflaming their passions for their respective causes.

An interesting finding of Wright's paper was that dramatic risk-taking behavior emerged because of the absence of a moderate option. Meyer argued that this is ripe for broader comparative studies elsewhere in the world. The theoretical and practical intent of the government is to permeate, infiltrate, and contain civil society; it was successful but eventually it faltered, and that faltering is important. He suggested that activists knew that adhering to a party line could provide mobility and stability, but due to global activities, they were *looking* for activities and openings for contention. Because the government did not respond positively, some leaders looked for ways to escalate, exacerbating splits within the student movement and increasing distrust. In Taiwan, activists were aware of a variety of potential outcomes; they were waiting to exploit openings with trusted allies at their sides, but their movements were split by the government's lack of response. When activists have something they might lose, it seems that the way they pursue their interest changes. More allies meant more risk of losing control or attracting state repression. Also, in these countries, alliances were based on friendship rather than interest, the latter being a hallmark of collective action in capitalist societies. These lines of research are worth pursuing further.

Turning to Xi Chen's article, Meyer discussed Chen's finding that as an institution develops, it can become different from the intention of its founders. Activists can find and create previously undiscovered opportunities within structures, which raises theoretical questions about the interaction of activists and institutions. The theory of political opportunity structure can be applied to practices; institutions can cause activists to pursue some channels rather than others.

Meyer assessed Chen's use of the xinfang system as interesting but not new, pointing out that there is continuity between other types of appropriation of existing institutions, even in California's referendum process. He was uncomfortable with Chen's use of broad capitalist transformation to explain a specific transformation, expressing a desire to see specific mechanisms illustrating which actors are doing what and why. Also, he asked Chen to clarify a number of issues in his paper. For example, how does a place to voice grievances relate to other roles in the Chinese system? Why does the government allow ordinary people a voice? He pointed out that to understand transformation, it is also necessary to examine change in content. Has the nature of the claims changed over time? Are there kinds that are represented through disruptive action and others represented through moderate action? Also, Meyer asked Chen to specify more clearly what this opportunity is for; Chen seems to be arguing that collective action is facilitated through incentives as central control is increased.

Meyer's other questions addressed the nature of petitions. What sorts of petitions get the best attention? Are the claims of disruptive collective actors addressed because their claims are assumed to be more serious? Claimants are encouraged to escalate tactics in order to get a response, which implies an overall escalation across Chinese society. Chen seems to think that reforms cannot take place because of a conflict in ideology and structure; however, Meyer disagreed, asked if a change in structure cannot in fact change the ideology. Also, is this method of petitioning an add-on or a substitute for other methods of collective action? Are the roots of transformation from above or from collective actors seeking to use existing openings to create further openings?

Discussion

Sidney Tarrow began the discussion with a historical reflection. He cited a conference held a few years ago which also attempted to discuss applications of social movement theory to non-Western countries; this conference failed miserably, falling victim to polemics about inapplicability and the need to address culture and enormous variation in the non-Western world. He predicted that this conference is different because it links to the broader project of developing the social movement canon globally and because of extraordinary creative confrontation between the theoretical concepts and the Chinese reality. This mixture of theory and empiricism is good.

Tarrow asked Wright about Lenin's "What is to be done?" The context for this work was an illiberal authoritarian system; it was a proposal for overcoming collective action problems using the vanguard party as a solution. However, the competing Menshevik solution was moderation, an adaptation of Western models to the authoritarian system. He asked if it was written in the stars that an illiberal context will produce the dysfunctional outcomes that she describes, or if it was something about the particular case. Citing his own work, he argued that repression does lead to disorganization, suspicion, factionalism, and radicalization; however, the other half of the response is institutionalization. For example, in Italy in the 1960s, large number of people responded with a very different strategy, and those proponents of a moderate course are running the government today. Is this because Italy was not an illiberal system or because there was something inherent to the movement that facilitated both strands of thought? There *was* an alternative response to the same illiberal situation.

Turning to Xi Chen's paper, Tarrow suggested that he contextualize what he calls changes in the institutional context for the non-Chinese specialist. Are the changes occurring in the institution or in the context? What are the relevant institutional changes?

Dingxin Zhao asked Chen what the petitioning process was leading to. Also, with respect to Wright, he argued that what she was describing was a Leninist party phenomenon, variations in movements and lack of mobilization; he suggested that there might be other mechanisms.

Guobin Yang commented that the student movement came into being because of mobilization, asking how this mobilization could be explained despite the lack of organization.

Yongshun Cai commented that Wright's case is more about collective action, which is perceived as a threat to the government; because of this, the government's response will be different from that to Chen's subject matter, which is more related to rightful resistance. He argued that there is no reason for central or local government to tolerate collective actions, so this distinction may shape the difference in opportunities for success.

In her response to the comments, Wright agreed with Tarrow that the alternative to radicalization should receive greater emphasis, adding that she hoped her paper did not imply that a moderate response did not exist. Instead, the problem was that a few students who took the radicalized course raised the pitch of the movement, making repression more likely for all. Even if a majority would choose the moderate course, they are overridden by the actions of radicals. Tarrow asked her how this linked causally to her major independent variable. Wright responded that variation throughout the course of movement needs to be addressed, citing an example of greater attempts to ally with workers after the hunger strike. In response to Meyer's comments, Wright explained that an examination of the international context was left out due to space considerations. She also touched upon the challenge of giving both sufficient context for non-China specialists and sufficient information for China specialists.

Xi Chen commented that many issues were left out of his paper, which tries to cut across a variety of contexts. He believes that the activities he describes are similar to those of rightful resistance.

Panel 2 - Recruitment

Attraction Without Networks: Recruiting Strangers to Unregistered Protestantism in China – Carsten Vala (University of California, Berkeley) & Kevin O'Brien (University of California, Berkeley)

Vala and O'Brien's contribution focused on how new members join a political or religious movement. Their research shows that they usually have to be recruited, and not from the movement's message alone.

Research done in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s focused on social networks as the best way to recruit new members. However, strangers are sometimes drawn in – how is this done? In the U.S., one often sees things like shocking animal rights photos or drums in streets, but these tools require unpatrolled public spaces. What if these aren't available and contact between recruiters and strangers are forbidden? What does this tell us more broadly about how people are drawn into activism?

In China from the 1950s on, Protestants were gathered into one movement, the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). Churches were shut down and abandoned for "home meetings." Today, the unregistered Protestant population is 20 to 40 million people, while official TSPM membership is 17 to 20 million. This growth has occurred through social networks (i.e. friends, family, and classmates).

Evangelists must address three questions. First, who is the best person to make contact? It is easier when recruits and recruiters have same social location. Like attracts like, so students are often sent to recruit other students, while painters might be sent to talk with other artists. Because of these similarities, recruiters can discuss common worries that can be targeted and addressed. Second, how should strangers be reached? Dealing with this challenge requires flexible strategies, especially when an organization wants to elude scrutiny and oppression. Door-to-door proselytizing is used, followed by social networks. Also, organizations use embedded messages in popular public performances such as Christmas plays at universities, drawing recruits through enticing contact events and places such as McDonalds. Third, where should this recruitment be done? In the U.S., it can be accomplished through the mass media and by tabling on the streets. In China, however, they have to create spaces that are "safe enough" in an authoritarian regime; these places often emerge in the ordinary flow of life, where state surveillance is frustrated.

What does this tell us about building a movement? It sheds light on when networks promote participation. This research suggests that networks matter less for drawing a person in than for completing conversion. Attraction is the first order of business, and it sometimes has to be done without networks. This paper also illustrates the advantages of networks, such as credibility, rapport, and uncensored flow of information. Some of this can be substituted for by choosing empathetic recruiters, seizing opportune moments, and capitalizing on interest. These strategies are all about "safe enough" spaces; creative strategies help reach people where networks don't extend. Finally, this research shows that no single factor explains participation in movements. They can grow without mobilizing personal networks; indeed, social networks are often a result, rather than a precondition for movements.

Discussant – Thomas Gold (University of California, Berkeley)

Thomas Gold opened by praising the paper for its richness in human content. Opportunity structure is variable, so this type of behavior is an improvisation. In China, there is a continuing deepening of market economy and society. Gold used an image of "creases of a reforming Leninist regime" to describe the results of the state's withdrawal from a totalitarian agenda, opening spaces, decreasing surveillance, and compelling people to be responsible for own careers and to make choices.

Although Vala and O'Brien's piece focuses on recruiters, Gold continually found himself thinking of the recruits. Changes in society have consequences for individuals, including heightened individualization, lack of models, and the delegitimization of socialism as an ideology. He cited Durkheim as a relevant theorist, seeing in China a clear case of anomy, excessive individualism, and great risk of suicide. Individuals are losing networks and resources to fall back on. In the process of dislocating change, people are vulnerable to what they see as a group to cling to. He asked about the importance of the seeking being done by people – which variable is more important, the seeking or the recruiting? This process may be a search for group solidarity.

Gold agreed with the conclusion that social bonds must be as much a result of recruitment as a precondition. Drawing upon Durkheim's idea of collective effervescence, he asked if the satisfaction of belonging to a group may trump the risks of being a believer during turbulent times.

He also wondered how many of the believers are consciously protesting or contending. By adhering to a religious community in an atheist country, they are contesting – but how much of this is a conscious statement? Is there a material benefit to being a member? He commented on the effectiveness of McDonalds as a site for networking and also asked about the number of recruiters who were actually overseas Chinese.

Discussion

David Meyer opened the discussion by expressing his approval of their research on networks; the variability of content of networks has been ignored due to dominance of a particular methodology, which has led to a simplification of empirical phenomena. Vala and O'Brien have the potential of adding nuance to this, through the idea of network by co-presence instead of as the strong tie that people generally postulate. His concern is whether there is a central institution providing scripts for this process and providing direction. He suspected that that there was a two-way communication process in action, with trial and error occurring on the ground level.

In response to Gold's comments, Kevin O'Brien explained that focusing on recruitment is a matter of trying to speak to the literature, an element that makes it somewhat bloodless and structural. The concept of "seeking" does not fit well within this framework.

William Hurst noted that, in his experience, two groups seem particularly susceptible to religious recruitment, especially with regard to the underground Protestant churches: laid-off workers in dire straits and very high status academics. In contrast, he had seen very few people in the middle strata drawn in by these movements. He asked what the variation might be across societal status.

A tension between this paper and Wright's was also pointed out. In Wright's work, fear and trust play a big role as intervening variables, but they don't seem to play a large role in this research. How can this be happening? Three possible reasons were given. First, the content might matter, meaning that religion may itself foster trust. Second, there may be a decreased perception of risk, since Protestants don't see themselves as anti-state. Finally, geography and location might play a role, with urban and rural people reacting differently to trust and fear.

Dingxin Zhao called on Vala and O'Brien to extend the comparison to different regions, to government-sanctioned religions, or longitudinally (i.e. during the three periods of Protestantism). He wanted to see a clear, deep mechanism explaining the activity in China.

A member of the audience brought up William Kornhauser's *Politics of Advanced Society*, which argued that unaffiliated and isolated individuals were most susceptible to recruitment.

Xi Chen suggested that there might be two types of recruitment. The first, which is very modern, uses tools such as Christmas plays and McDonalds. He suggested that the second, in more rural areas, might involve networks indigenous to that context.

In response to these comments, Carsten Vala explained that foreigners were kicked out of China, causing an indigenization of Protestantism. The Chinese started to recruit people, following scripts given to them by their old missionaries and adapting these scripts to local conditions. Chinese Protestants often identify with the Christian Church under the Roman Empire; their models are based on early foreign models and from Chinese living abroad. Comparing ideology to theology, these recruiters use a language very similar to that of the CCP, with ideas along the lines of "Only with a new party can we save China." They see Christianity as a means to transform the country and change the political culture, solving problems such as corruption. In response to Hurst's question, Vala postulated that the attraction for high status individuals is based on this line of thought. He also agreed that the argument for belonging is very convincing. He explained that his choice to focus on structural elements was a result of the difficulty of separating religious from political motivations. O'Brien added that these people were not displaced in any significant way, in comparison to migrant workers and the like.

Vala also addressed the question of whether these movements are resisting the state or anti-state, arguing that the political context that makes this a very important question. Many people do not see Protestantism as anti-state due to its indigenized character. However, as they become more involved in the movement, they start to become aware of the state's lies; consequently, their position is not anti-state but anti-state organization (i.e. anti-TSPM). They reject the TSPM as illegitimate for religious reasons. This is an example of "apolitical politics"; the participants do not claim to be political, but they reject state involvement. They seem themselves as creating a sphere different from the state-dominated sphere of religion.

Panel 3 – Frames, Leadership and Mobilization

The Reality of Perceptions: Structural Roots of Frames in Contentious Politics – William Hurst (Oxford University and University of Texas, Austin)

The study of collective action frames has focused on bringing agency into a structure-dominated field of analysis. The framing literature has limited itself to liberal contexts; however, in authoritarian contexts, something that could be called “mass frames” exists. These mass frames are patterns of interpretation through which individuals and groups perceive their circumstances and which influence their behavior accordingly. Mass frames are not shaped or deployed by leaders; rather, they are widely held, shaped through the lived experience of individuals as groups. They can affect behavior as much as liberal frames. Mass frames occur when open contention is not an option.

Sub-national regional political economies shape the frames through which Chinese laid-off workers perceive their grievances and the endeavor of collective action. Three main regional political economies are important: China’s heavy industrial heartland in the Northeast, the largely resource-extractive and light industrial political economies of North-Central China and the middle to upper reaches of the Changjiang River, and the booming market economy on China’s central coast.

In northeastern China, the “Maoist moral economy” frame resonates well; this frame blames reforms for destroying a successful order, an order in which there existed general conditions of equity, fulfillment of obligations by patrons, and employment stability. Due to the reforms, this has now been replaced by scarcity and chaos. This frame places responsibility for this on the central leadership and its reform agenda. In contrast, the “market hegemony” frame that has been accepted by many on the Central Coast argues that workers could be worse off; it blames individual failings for difficulties and puts the responsibility for finding jobs squarely on the individual. In the Upper Changjiang and North-Central regions, a third “keep your head down and muddle through” frame is widespread; this frame posits that reform has brought problems but also affords the dislocated new opportunities. One must work hard to find opportunities, but they do in fact exist.

Laid-off workers frame their individual experiences in ways that are consistent with their shared-life experiences; this has given rise to narratives of worker grievances. Ideational infrastructures formed in periods of important development can play a role where organizational infrastructures are blocked.

If organizations are not a factor and the media is off-limits, where do mass frames come from and how can we measure them? A structural explanation proves too broad. There are four factors to consider: (1) the general institutional environment; (2) norms widely held by a group and reinforced by daily activities; (3) shared lived experiences during particular historical periods (i.e. experiences of collective action during periods of crisis and struggle), the effects of which persist beyond those moments; and (4) the specific lived experiences of atomized individuals who form connections happenstance.

The question is: how far and how well can these frames travel? Clearly, leaders can play a role in forming strategic and liberal frames. What has been less emphasized is the role of mass frames, which step in to lead where organizations and leaders are forced out. We should focus on mass frames in authoritarian contexts; by doing so, we may discern their role in promoting noisy politics.

Framing Contention: The Role of Worker Leaders in Factory-Based Resistance – Feng Chen (Hong Kong Baptist University)

China has witnessed an increasing number of spontaneous, leaderless factory protests. This paper examines the role of leaders in framing conditions, which are in turn shaped by leader’s values. It stemmed from interview work revealing that almost all resistance actions were led by people who held a strong belief in Marxist socialism and who were former activists of the Cultural Revolution. This is a partial answer to the question of who protest leaders are – they are often people deeply immersed in the ideology of the Mao era with an experience of collective contention.

Framing cannot be readily applied to a society like China where public debates are controlled, media is censored, and freedom of speech is limited. Framing cannot occur when the public sphere is under control. However, this does not mean that factory resistance took place without a symbolic element. Leaders articulated the perceived problems.

The manner in which leaders framed contention was influenced by their personal intentions; these intentions were closely related to leaders’ biographies, which define them and account for ideational resources and the ways they can use them. Interviewees were involved in organizing contentions in three different factories. Their comments reflected an era where personal experiences were permitted with ideology. They were enthusiastic about

Maoist socialism and the Cultural Revolution, criticizing market reform using the language of these earlier periods. They generated similar discourse to a situation they perceived as “class struggle”.

This contention had a popular base: workers who had lost their jobs and were facing a decline in position. In this context, Mao symbolizes protection for the working people. However, workers’ sentiment does not automatically provide a collective action frame. Leaders in the factory must articulate nostalgia in a coherent way that connects unfairness and injustice in politics with the construction of solidarity. These leaders used the vocabulary of the Cultural Revolution to define factory disputes as class struggle. In this context, market reform is seen as the negation of the basic principles of socialism, the class revenge of capitalists on the working class. The conflict is framed as an issue of who should be in control of the factory.

Cultural Revolution experiences also account for the way contentions were organized. Participants in the Cultural Revolution learned to rebel, argue, mobilize rhetoric, and organize group activities. These experiences inform leaders’ reactions to contentious situations, especially those perceived as being related to class struggle.

Chen concluded by identifying two contextual variables. The facilitating variable is the state’s continuing legitimation of socialism during market reform. The constraining variable is institutions that restrain leaders’ choice among methods of contention. Workers realize that their suffering is class-shared, but they have to confine it to the individual workplace, avoiding cross-factory efforts because they know these larger efforts will not be tolerated.

Protest Leadership in Rural China – Lianjiang Li (Chinese University of Hong Kong) & Kevin O’Brien (University of California, Berkeley)

Based on archival sources and interviews in seven provinces and in Beijing, this contribution examines two basic questions: what do protest leaders in rural China do? And how do villagers become protest leaders?

Protest leaders are individuals who initiate collective actions (i.e. group petitions, mass demonstrations) that target power holders. They literally lead the charge, a role critical to starting collective action; in leading, they shoulder the brunt of the repression, significantly reducing the risk for other protesters. They also shape collective claims, publicizing central policies and often mobilizing participants through dissemination of information. Much like “framing” elsewhere, protest leaders construct an interpretation of the nature and source of a grievance that can be used to mobilize people. They also recruit core activists, mobilize new followers, orchestrate acts of contention, plan protest campaigns, and organize cross-community efforts. Villagers typically became leaders in two different ways. Sometimes, long-time public figures initiate actions on their own or in response to requests from villagers. Other times, the leaders are ordinary villagers who seek redress for a personal grievance and then generalize their claims.

Demographically, leaders are predominantly male, middle-aged or older, among the better educated in their cohorts, and neither the richest nor the poorest in the village. They possess psychological traits such as assertiveness and efficacy. Biographically, their experiences tend to include alienation and empowerment.

Local government repression was present in the form of fines, confiscation of valuables, destruction of homes, beatings, labor education, and jail sentences. This repression was effective. However, it also strengthened the determination of protest leaders, making them more prone to adopt confrontational tactics by enhancing popular support and by increasing costs of withdrawal. Repression also results in the radicalization of claims.

In conclusion, protest leaders are a small fraction of the population, but their prominence of late is an indicator of wider discontent. A crackdown on leaders may put an end to contention, but it may also inspire more spirited defiance.

Discussant – Sidney Tarrow (Cornell University)

Commenting on the richness of these three papers, Sidney Tarrow chose to focus his comments on three main points. The first was the agency-structure dichotomy raised most pointedly by William Hurst in his paper and by Feng Chen in his discussion of worker-leaders. Comparing the concept to the American civil rights movement, he argued that only when combined with an innovating form of collective action in a changing opportunity structure did rights become the central collective action frame of the movement. The lesson of the civil rights movement is that symbols of revolt are not drawn like musty costumes from a cultural closet and arrayed before the public, nor are new meanings unrolled out of whole cloth. In China too, frames are woven from a blend of inherited and invented fibers in a way that cannot be reduced to social construction. Structure and agency come together in the political process of mobilization. Tarrow suggested that the process-oriented approach developed by Western scholars should be applied to China as well.

His second point focused on the framing of movement messages by non-movement sources such as the media and the state. Both the Chinese and American episodes demonstrate that framing is often outside the control of both

movement organizers and their intended supporters. Not only the media, but the state and the opposition to challengers contribute to what Hurst calls “mass frames”. However, there is another subtle twist: the structuring effect of the workplace in framing contention. Particularly when there is a disjuncture between the claims of ruling groups about spreading goods and the situation that workers see around them, the structure of everyday life may be a more important source of framing than either ideological or organizational aggregation.

The problem of aggregation and non-aggregation in Chinese collective action was the subject of Tarrow’s third point. In Feng Chen’s paper and Li and O’Brien’s work, the issue of non-aggregation of worker contention is central. Will workers and others in China be able to overcome the institutional and political inhibitions to aggregation that these authors point out? Tarrow sees three potential hypotheses in these papers: empowerment through framing, social appropriation of existing practices and institutions, and transformation of existing practices. Tarrow expressed skepticism about the first hypothesis, arguing that without significant relational mechanisms, it is difficult to accomplish cross-factory or cross-village collective action. He also suggested that the current leadership has shown much more solicitude for the growing inequalities in Chinese society than its predecessors; this may imply that they are on the edge of taking more seriously the meaning of the term “socialist” in their official ideology and permitting the empowerment of modest levels of contained contention.

Discussion

Graduate student Dann Naseemullah suggested that mass frames are related to the idea that people have a world view; framing is often seen as volunteeristic and intentional, but perhaps it can also be more unconscious and natural. William Hurst replied that frames are never chosen in a vacuum.

Another audience member asked about protest leaders’ intentions and ultimate aims. Li and O’Brien responded that it is difficult to comment on leaders’ sincerity. Protests start out as strategic and they change over time; most people lose and drop out, while some escalate their actions. Leaders claim that they are targeting local officials who are grievously wrong. O’Brien suggested that this relates to their successes and failures with their present attempts, an idea which runs again the grain of some of the opportunity literature.

Carsten Vala inquired about the power of ideological frames versus face-to-face personal connection, asking if these things can be spread without a personal leader and positing that a relational connection seems more important than a frame. Feng Chen responded that both are important. Many workers live in the same area, so it is very easy for leaders to go to every building to talk to potential participants and urge them to join in collective action. Since the leaders are willing to stand up, it is easy to mobilize the others. O’Brien added that there is a weakness in “mobilizing structures” in the China literature, in the transition from framing to actually mobilizing people. Liberal structure scholars don’t have to worry about this, but what are authoritarian, illiberal mobilizing structures?

Rachel Stern was interested in the role that international frames play, since people are tapped into international discourse. What are the joys of being a peasant leader? Is there a network of peasant leaders? Li responded that initially, the joys of leadership come with a sense of trying to do something for everyone else. In the rural community, being respected is very important. An unintended consequence of repression is that a leader gains a lot of moral prestige, in addition to free meals and good wines. With regard to networks, he explained that a picture in his presentation depicted a group of leaders working on a proposal to establish a county peasant society. The head leader was invited to a training session in Beijing with some other activists and went back to his hometown to try the ideas out.

O’Brien brought up the idea of “nail-like villagers,” some of whom think of themselves as world historical figures. This strong feeling of personality does not come out in a lot of work. Tarrow commented that this concept should be more prominent in O’Brien and Li’s paper. Dingxin Zhao pointed out that the nature of leaders who become dominant is related to the regime. The regime rewards leaders, so they have an incentive to stay leaders. O’Brien added that people are also encouraged to continue in light of the humiliation they will face by giving up.

Guobin Yang commented on the importance of honor and the negative consequences of backing down once someone has staked out a position. He asked if there are similarities and differences in the framing of friends, and between peasants and workers, suggesting that “Maoist moral economy” should be as powerful in the countryside as among workers. Feng Chen suggested that peasants use laws, while workers tend to use rhetoric and social values, since the Chinese labor laws will not help them. O’Brien pointed out that peasants have been extended rights in recent years, while workers have had them taken away. Hurst disagreed with Chen, claiming that workers use legal rights but only in regions where there is an expectation that they may be enforced. Workers’ claims are typically about entitlement to some kind of benefit transfer, whereas villagers’ claims are about withholding something from the state (i.e. crops). One of the issues for workers is that they are dispersed into cellular organizations, but workers’ housing projects can be used for mobilization. The problem is that they are discrete entities; in the village, it would not be very difficult for everyone to make contact if everyone decided they were interested.

O'Brien suggested that the notion of a radical flank effect should be researched. When someone becomes radical, he is encouraged to become more radical, a process which delegitimizes the center. This is a concept waiting to be discovered.

The topic of collective memories was raised. Guobin Yang suggested that they stem from the historical memory of the Cultural Revolution, a shared past with links to a radical experience. This is a way of building solidarity. Memories of the past are often told deliberately in contrast to the present, as a critique of the present. O'Brien added that this applies to the Great Leap Forward as well, with people exhibiting nostalgia for things they never personally experienced. He suggested that as these memories become more distant, it is easier to look at them with rose-tinted glasses; if so, this type of collective memory might have a longer influence than previously imagined. Tarrow countered that the existence of collective memory is not the issue – rather, the issue is what exactly people remember. Why do people remember some things and not others? Mass frames have to be seen in a differentiated way. Why are some people more likely to be influenced than others? He suggested we should hypothesize between the relations of structures and of ideas.

Graduate student Rongbin Han suggested that the state response has been characterized solely as repression, but the state also has a strategy for co-opting the movement leadership.

In his response to the comments, William Hurst suggested that international frames are limited and that most workers are ignorant about what is going on. He discussed three dimensions of nostalgia: relational, ideational, and material. Laid-off workers combine all three, but rural Chinese only exhibit relational and ideational. He suggested that the examination of nostalgia needs to be more systematic. Also, he agreed that information on protests elsewhere leads workers to protest; for example, there were a large number of protests in 1989 and people heard vague things about them. It is unlikely that a clear organizational means (i.e. unions) will materialize in the near future, but if information about major protests can spread in real time around the country, he thinks there may be a possibility a widespread worker movement. On the issue of framing by third-parties, Hurst's idea is that at given moments in time, the state mobilized the working class in ways that have left clear marks on present perceptions. Thus, there is a lag to some of this unintended framing. He agreed that protests are clearly a process, not just a matter of structure and agency; consequently, he is examining interactions. He asked if opportunity, instead of framing, was the main mover in political process studies, a suggestion with which Meyer and Tarrow disagreed.

Referring back to his earlier metaphor about symbols being drawn from a closet, Tarrow argued that it is a matter of two things: the mustiness of the image and what is done with it. He disagreed with the notion that one had to choose between appealing to an internal or external audience. The way these symbols are reshaped in the light of the way that protesters perceive the current political opportunity structure makes this interesting.

Feng Chen expressed pessimism about prospects for the labor movement overcoming constraints. In China, the regime is trying to prevent labor from becoming a social actor and it has been effective in doing so. He disagreed about repression being the only state response; at least in the labor sector, there are other ways in which it tries to diffuse tensions. Chen believes that repression is inevitable if (1) there are cross-enterprise actions and (2) if the government suspects that there are hostile external forces involved. Otherwise, the state has other means to diffuse contention.

Panel 4 – Culture

Theorizing the Role of Culture in Social Movements: Illustrated by Protests and Contentions in Modern China – Dingxin Zhao (University of Chicago)

Culture exercises its impact on almost every aspect of social movements; this article focuses on how patterns of social movement activities are shaped by the existing conditions in a society. Culture is a repertoire of competing symbols, languages and other resources to be appropriated by a population at a given time and place. Culture is not a text – it is a scene of competition.

There are three mechanisms through which culture impacts social behavior. On the first level of interest and strategy, culture functions as a tool-kit from which actors select different pieces in order to construct lines of action. This mechanism captures humans' capacity to appropriate culture. It is a major source of cultural change, and it changes slowly and at the margins, which gives culture continuity and stability even during turbulent times. At the second level of value and ideology, culture functions as a script or text that shapes social action. In contrast to the first mechanism, this is not a matter of gain or loss, but rather of right or wrong. The third mechanism shapes social actions at the level of instinct, habit and taken-for-granted routines. Actors act out cultural codes instinctively without invoking a visible thinking and decision-making process.

Chen made several propositions that depict the role of culture in social movements under different structural conditions. First, the bigger the role that Social Movement Organizations (SMOs) play in a social movement, the

more likely that the movement actors are able to treat the cultural repertoire as a tool-kit and use it creatively for their perceived benefits. Secondly, when a movement is poorly organized, the development of the social movement is not determined by the nature of strategies or by the frames of the movement but by the dominant “schemata of interpretations” shared by the public. Third, under unsettled lives, movement actors are more able to actively and creatively appropriate the existing culture or even introduce new cultural elements in a strategic manner, while under settled lives, the actors tend to follow familiar cultural scripts and taken-for-granted assumptions to fight for their goals. Fourth, movement actors are more able to treat the cultural repertoire as a tool-kit and to use culture scripts in a creative manner under a democratic state than a totalitarian regime. Finally, in a repressive authoritarian regime, even if a movement is well organized, the political culture will lead a movement to develop strategies that follow the cultural scripts of the old regime.

Discussant – David Meyer (University of California, Irvine)

Meyer applauded Zhao’s ambition in tackling the topic of culture. Culture is context, resources, constraints, products, practices, and norms – it is everywhere and contradictory. It exists in subcultures and organization, not just globally. All of these things make cultural analysis very difficult.

He asked Zhao how he could discern causal relationships with this model. How can one distinguish when culture is volitional and when it is constrictive? Why and how do people use it as critique and legitimation? There is a strategic element to employment and deployment of cultural symbols; activists can be more or less conscious about how and why they use them. So, when can one abandon the traps of culture and be volitional? The idea of type organization is provocative, but it also produces constraints with its own cultural logic.

Breaking cultural patterns is difficult and not always volitional. When society breaks down, it produces unsettled lives and unsettled relationships and the possibility of volitional choices increases – but it is also possible that the process would have the opposite effect. Meyer suggested that some might hold fast to a set of secure norms when society begins to disintegrate.

Discussion

Sidney Tarrow praised the challenge and boldness of Zhao’s paper. Given that there are a number of directions this paper could go, he suggested that Zhao take the most promising hypothesis and run with it. By using a single hypothesis to lay out a general perspective, Zhao could argue that he was not going to try and empiricize the entirety of such a huge problem; instead, Zhao could use one episode in Chinese contentious politics and show how structure produces different ways of using culture. Tarrow pointed out that he did not know a single stage theory that argued about culture being plugged in according to different conceptions of culture at different stages of a moment. If Zhao could illustrate this, it would do more than a theoretical elaboration would to encourage a culturalist line of thought. Linking mechanisms to structures is the next step.

Zhao responded that organizations provide constraints but if they are very poorly organized, these constraints are not that strong. If the action is spontaneous, a person resorts to what he is most familiar with. He agreed with Tarrow’s comments, particularly those regarding linking mechanism to structure. Structural conditions shape the mechanism’s roles, making culture very problematic.

Meyer was interested in the circumstances under which activists can treat culture volitionally. Organization is necessary for action, but it can also be a constraint. As organization increases, more volition is possible, but if organization increases a great deal, it becomes a constraint. Once you give empirical examples, it causes problems. O’Brien suggested that Zhao pick a case that illustrates what he wants it to, versus a generalization.

Tarrow suggested that there is a role for hypothesis generation and refinement in and of itself. Zhao’s proposals are so new that it is not a time for testing them; it is a time for generation and refinement, both of which can be done with a single case.

Sunday, October 7

Panel 5 – Tactics and Their Consequences

Lawful and Unlawful Strategies of Contention in Rural China: Evidence from a Survey of Rights Consciousness – Ethan Michelson (Indiana University) & Jennifer Choo (University of California, Berkeley)

In this paper, Michelson and Choo examine the kinds of people which challenge state authority. They identify three dependent variables: strategies of contention, beliefs about the sources of rights, and legal and political frames.

This presentation focused on the first variable alone. This work is an attempt to bridge law and society literature and collective action literature and also to incorporate private and familial contention.

Their data was based on a 1994 survey collected by the National Statistical Bureau involving 5,500 respondents in 18 counties and cities in six provinces. Questions attempted to assess respondents' responses to a variety of grievances; these responses were then classified as social strategies, legal strategies, private vengeance, or "lumping it". Michelson and Choo also examined the contextual effects of big cities, small cities, suburban villages and remote villages. In both cases, they found an artificial preference for using the judicial system which appears constant. They argued that as institutional supports corrode, people turn more to individualized methods of redress. People in big cities demonstrated a high preference for private vengeance, a trend mirrored in remote villages with very scarce financial resources. In contrast, suburban areas which have benefited from reforms and have more wealth expressed a preference for administrative redress.

Michelson and Choo also examined the element of guanxi. They found a preference for using social connections and for strong laws in big cities, while remote villages had a low preference for social connections and strong laws. Suburban villages preferred good CCP policy, while remote villages preferred hard work. They also found a correlation between reliance on social connections and the preference for private vengeance.

A variety of other effects were examined. No gender effects were apparent in the survey data. In terms of experience effects, people who had never hired a lawyer and those who had hired one three or more times expressed similar preferences for private vengeance, suggesting disillusionment with the legal system. Looking at the effect of people's confidence in the court system, the least level of confidence also correlated with a preference for private vengeance. Cohort age effects figured most prominently in preferences for private vengeance and lumping, with older people being less willing to use private vengeance. In addition, those individuals with more education preferred legal solutions, while those with less education resorted to socialist solution.

Preliminary implications of this data are that this 1994 snapshot foreshadows things that have borne through with time. Erosion of sources of institutional support has led to increased use of legal and extralegal solutions. Urbanization will probably exacerbate these trends. Younger people tend more toward private vengeance and litigation. There is a cohort effect on people's preferences with socialist rights frames. As the older cohort dies, people will turn more toward legal institutions, but will those institutions really be there to meet the rising demand? Rising education also increases this demand. With the increasing volume of disputes and the erosion of institutional supports, the question is whether private vengeance will also increase.

Disruptive Collective Action in China in the Reform Era – Yongshun Cai (University of Science and Technology, Hong Kong)

This paper looks at the effectiveness of disruptive tactics in the Chinese context. Legitimacy is often an important factor in judging the appropriateness of disruptive actions. In the Chinese context, however, legitimacy is important, but it is not decisive in the sense of whether the use of disruptive tactics is also subject to the interpretation of the government. The relevant factors here are media exposure, cadres, and the size of the protesting groups. A large group employing disruptive tactics is most likely to succeed, while a small group will be repressed.

Cai proposed three reasons to explain why protesters turn to channels which are often not effective. The first is the ineffectiveness of the legal system, which poses constraints for people who want to sue the government. The second is the ineffectiveness of petitions; the legitimacy of the central government is damaged when they cannot or will not grant petitions because people think the government lacks determination or capacity. The third factor is the difficulty and conditionality of media access; very few people succeed in bringing their case forward in this manner. Each of these three channels has serious limitations, so people resort to disruptive tactics.

These tactics are used both defensively and aggressively. In most cases, they are justifiable. Rarely, they are not and lack legitimacy, a phenomenon common to all societies. Disruption can take many forms, including protests, strikes, demonstrations, attacks on government agencies, and traffic blockage. However, disruptive tactics are not necessarily destructive. Cai collected 74 cases, which are not representative; however, he wanted to examine the rationale behind government intervention or repression. Protesters succeeded in 19 cases; the central government intervened in five, while the provincial government intervened in ten. The rest of the movements failed.

The basic idea was to obtain intervention from high-level authorities. There were three factors influencing whether the government intervened: media exposure, involvement of casualties, and size of protest. The media is rarely allowed to report ongoing protests; however, they can sometimes report when the official is at the county level or below or when the media responds faster than the government. The latter often occurs in cases where the media expose cases in other regions, since censorship takes time to coordinate. The combination of media exposure and casualties almost always leads to intervention. Also, due to the threat of intervention from above, protesters do not always need actual intervention to succeed.

Failures are much more common, since not many cases involve casualties and media access is limited. A big factor is the size of protests, but large protests are also rare. A large protest is defined by the police as more than 500 people. Disruptive tactics are risky for obvious reasons. All modes of collective resistance are theoretically illegal, so it gives the local government discretion as to how they can punish participants. They are likely to use repression when resistance is persistent and likely to escalate and when resistance seriously challenges their power.

Repression cannot stop disruptive action. Disruptive action does not have a formal method of mobilization, which makes it hard to capture. Also, rural tactical escalation is almost spontaneous. Disruptive action is conditionally effective, based on the size of the protest. However, this research has limitations because some cases are not reported.

Discussant – Sidney Tarrow (Cornell University)

These papers are very different, based on two very different traditions of analysis. Mao described China as “poor and blank”. As Tarrow looks at the work going on today, China is rich and colorful. These works provide us with a colorful and contradictory tapestry. Yesterday we heard about the effectiveness of petitions, but now Cai argues that they are ineffective – both may be true.

Michelson and Choo’s survey research finds a strong preference for legal strategies and a weak preference for lumping; this is useful because it is not intuitive. It may turn out that survey research is hard to believe in China, but it is instructive to have a line of research that provokes a different answer. Those using traditional methods should potentially be less certain about the validity of those methods and try to think harder about forms of triangulation that can be applied to the same question. A combination of survey and institutional or ethnographic work might be useful, for example; this may be a useful outcome of this conference.

Much of this research follows closely the existing literature about state-citizen responses in the West. The importance of education is a classic finding in Western surveys, as are urban-rural differences. Tarrow suggested that Michelson and Choo make use of more comparative survey research. There are post-socialist cases where survey research has been used, and the traditions of survey research are well developed in Eastern and Central Europe and in Russia. This comparative literature would give a broader context and framework to the Chinese case.

Tarrow pointed out that contentious politics can often take individual forms (i.e. use of courts, petitions, legal strategies); this work is not about social movements, but that does not make it less interesting. Social movements are just one part of contentious politics, so it is helpful to bring about a broad approach. This is a way of bridging the law and society literature and the contentious politics. If we look at these findings more broadly across time, we can track the dynamics.

Tarrow also offered some criticisms of the paper, particularly relating to the mode of data presentation, which seemed difficult to understand. He suggested that Michelson and Choo use less figurative presentations and more tabular ones; they might also look into odds ratios, a simple way of showing that a particular result will be associated with something. In addition, he was uncomfortable with the classification of “use of administrative channels” as a “socialist” response, expressing skepticism about the accuracy of this assertion; a preference for administrative channels could also indicate a preference for statist solutions.

In addition to this, the actual findings were somewhat debatable, as acknowledged by the presenter. However, even if findings are debatable, this “debatable-ness” is likely to be constant over time. If we regard this data not as “China” but as a snapshot of Chinese opinion at a certain place in time, we can place it in a more dynamic framework longitudinally. This does not justify a more literal interpretation of the findings, but if you believe there is a certain kind of reality that can be tracked over time, we can still get a portrait of the changes in Chinese politics.

Tarrow also asked about the importance of state violence. Students of Chinese politics seem to assume that the government beats people up. Is this characteristic of China, of all authoritarian systems, or just ones that are moving toward a transition? Can this violence be used by survey researchers as a measure?

Tarrow described Cai as working in a well-practiced Western tradition that he then goes beyond. He offered a number of further considerations that might be taken into account. First, although rule-breaking is the core of disruption, the use of entirely legal modes can also have disruptive effects, depending on the quantity of participants. Secondly, an action can be more or less disruptive due to context and due to who is carrying it out. Sometimes unexpected protesters can cause disruption just by virtue of violating common expectations. Third, actions can take place in private and be highly disruptive. Fourth, Cai misses any examination of political opportunity structure; Tarrow asked if there is any evidence of a different probability of success under different opportunity situations, calling on him to link processes to particular structural situations. He suggested that Cai be as attentive as possible to context and content and take advantage of the fact that large scale data collection can provide evidence of changes over time.

Cai's main finding of protest size can be compared to protests in other countries to place China in a comparative context. The data modestly support this finding. Will this change in response to the government's realization that this is no way to run a political system? No government likes to respond only to large-scale protests; it is a question of social control and of how the government wants to be seen by the rest of the world. This can lead to a recursive effect, in which case the media can become a much more meaningful outlet as an early warning signal for the government. Examples of taxi strikes tell us that disruptive action may fail at first but have a larger role in setting the agenda, suggesting the possibility of short-run failure and long-run agenda-setting success.

Tarrow assessed that this paper is correct in focusing on process, but it does not go beyond focusing on individual protests. Cai could also look at a longer time period or a larger scale, enabling him to examine the dynamics involved in third parties and opportunity structures.

Discussion

With respect to Yongshun Cai's paper, David Meyer agreed with Tarrow that cumulative effect is absolutely critical. You treat each event as discrete, but in description you admit a context; there is a cumulative effect of the threat to be contentious. Cai talks about local authorities being in a fundamentally different position than in the West because they are not autonomous; their responsiveness to the threat of central intervention gives activists leverage. Commenting on Choo's contribution, he suggested that the most useful research would be that of Michael McCann. It is a double-sided relationship; the legal system is supposed to turn causes into cases, providing social control and resolution without disruption, but on occasion, court decisions can be used to spur greater collective action. Court decisions signal other actors, providing legitimacy and voice with which they can press their claims. This has the potential of happening in China.

Dingxin Zhao suggested that Michelson and Choo use more recent data for comparison, as more recent data might be more reliable. In addition, a member of the audience suggested that there may be variation in confidence in legal institutions over time, with confidence being high at the beginning of legal institutionalization and then sinking into disillusionment over a longer period.

Xi Chen wanted to see more discussion of legitimacy and security. He suggested that disruption can decrease or enhance legitimacy because it is a type of framing activity, a way to diminish an opponent's legitimacy; also, disruption is risky, but sometimes people deliberately escalate actions in order to increase their level of security.

William Hurst asked Cai about how people make decisions regarding what tactics to use.

Kevin O'Brien suggested that disruption is a dodgy word; the terminology "transgressive" and "contained" applies to contentious politics. Boundary spanning claims might be considered dubiously transgressive, contained, or in flux between the two. Many of the issues addressed in this conference involve disruption of one sort or another – are all of us in the disruptive category and is there a spectrum?

Tarrow cited a growing literature in the West on police containment of protest that shows dramatic changes over time. He asked who originally defined a "large" protest as on with over 500 participants; if the government only responds to large-scale protests, then this definition is a political act. He wanted to know about the degree of discretion that police have in dealing with these protests. O'Brien added that the rules of engagement change with these numbers.

Choo began by acknowledging that a more comparative approach would be useful. She clarified a number of detail-related questions, explaining that many issues are still being examined and that future research will be split into two papers, making the whole project less confusing. She emphasized that she and Michelson are not claiming that their data reflects actual attitudes; they are simply looking at variation, which should be feasible.

Cai pointed out that while his data is based on newspapers and rulings from 1996 to the present, most cases are from 1998; he needs more time to see a clear pattern. He agreed that there are many forms of disruptive tactics; in many cases, leaders and participants do not plan things beforehand. In response to Xi Chen's point, he suggested that legitimacy does not always matter and that sometimes the issue has more to do with context.

Panel 6 – The Media and the Internet

Manufacturing Dissent in Transnational China: Boomerang, Backfire or Spectacle? – Patricia Thornton (Trinity College)

In China, the spread and development of the worldwide web and the concurrent suppression of syncretic quasi-religious organizations have given rise to several transnational cybersects that continue to serve as nodes of contention, both on- and off-line. A perfect storm of political constraints, especially in the aftermath of the 1989 demonstrations, left interesting hallmarks on these groups, making them more unstable and highly adaptable. New

legal restraints were placed on the organization of new civic groups; because this opportunity was not available, sects incorporated themselves as for-profit or non-profit organizations, giving them both a spiritual and entrepreneurial orientation and providing them with a rich source of material resources.

Consequently, when the government tried to rein them in, these groups had significant material resources in exile which allowed them to survive the repression. This is a common feature among marketed social movements. When repression began, the groups moved abroad and used the Internet as a way of connecting exiled leaders with rank-and-file membership on the mainland. Initially, they were little more than bulletin boards but they eventually diversified virtual operations. They developed complex digital ontologies, which offered participants opportunities to communicate in new ways; they also incorporated the organizational core into cybersects which seek to remain anonymous within PRC while connecting members transnationally. They are now savvy players applying pressure to the government with their “boomerangs” of transnational support. However, high-profile activities also have a potential for “backfire” and scandals which may tarnish their reputations.

Beyond these two potential outcomes, there is a more fundamental insight which raises problems for students of contention. These groups are associated with certain newspapers and own controlling interests in independent media; by engineering “spectacles” within the media sphere, they are attempting to go beyond “marketing a rebellion” to international NGOs and supporters, attempting to mobilize followers and media allies to garner support. This promotional media transcends venue shopping, blending objective news with strategy. For them, success lies not in successful framing but in the ability to conflate the actual with the virtual.

Thornton proposed that under the guise of providing alternative media, these movements seek to broadcast a blend of “news” to a broader audience with the aim of generating support for their cause and dissent against the government. She looked at three movements in particular: Falun Gong, Famen/Quan Yin, and Zhonghua Yanhseng. Thornton argued that the widespread availability of new technology has changed claim making, reducing cost, increasing effectiveness and spawning new organizational forms. But how do you assess the strength and credibility of these virtual networks? The methodological problem is that they were originally designed to communicate information within a group but can also manufacture spectacles of protest for which the Internet is an ideal medium. She noted, however, that this desire of movements to present themselves as having armies of support is not a new phenomenon. Thornton proposed that this repertoire of electronic contention blurs the boundary between framing and institutional organization.

Contention in Chinese Cyberspace: A Field Approach – Guobin Yang (Barnard College and Columbia University)

Yang discussed contention in cyberspace, not just contention that makes use of the Internet as a tool, arguing that contention in Chinese cyberspace should be viewed as a phenomenon in its own right. Some of these occurrences have been powerful, spilling over into mass media, affecting public opinion, and changing policies and regulations. The focus of the field approach has been on the control of the Internet. Yang examines the paradox of why increased control and increased contention have been occurring simultaneously. He advocates looking at the broader landscapes of contemporary Chinese life and the rise of new Internet culture in a broader field of popular contention. It is crucial to look at how people interact in cyberspace, but it is also difficult to collect systematic data.

Politically, the government promotes the use of Internet while also increasing control, meaning that this control has to be selective. There is a hierarchy of sensitive issues in Chinese political sphere, which creates an opportunity for Internet contention. The contention focuses on three areas: neo-nationalism, vulnerable and disempowered individuals, and corrupt officials at the top-level. This reflects the political constraints in Chinese cyberspace.

Internet culture provides a social basis for individual users to engage in protest activities; playful users may be mobilized as contentious activists. Common practices of Internet use such as cross-posting are important in understanding the diffusion of protests online. Major websites have become hubs of information that attract many users and become even more crucial sources of information; they are “affinity networks” susceptible to certain types of issues and discussions. Contention is part of a broader picture of Internet culture.

Yang points out two channels in the relationship between mass media and the Internet. In the first, the issue is debated on the Internet, spilling into the media afterward. In the second, the print media brings up an incident which is then brought into cyberspace, causes more widespread virtual contention. He analyzes discursive interactions such as the “issue-taking” mechanism through which an issue is brought up and challenged by others on the basis of information and position, gathering responses and diffusing things into a more widespread discussion.

Yang showed that Internet contention interacts with many areas of Chinese life. Its growing frequency is the result of discourse construction happening in relation to a fragmented political field, a playful Internet culture, mass media institutions, and a landscape of popular contention.

Discussant – Rachel Stern (University of California, Berkeley)

Rachel Stern proposed that Thornton and Yang are both trying to answer the same main question: the Internet changed everything, but how? They give two specific, coherent answers. Thornton claims that the Internet has spawned new organizational forms, linking leaders in exile with followers in China and allowing them to bypass the state through use of their own financial resources. This suggests that exile no longer means political irrelevance. Yang sees the Internet as a mode of contention in its own right, a change in the repertoire of contention. In contrast to Thornton, Yang focuses on the Internet's ability to link people within China internally instead of internationally.

Stern posed a number of questions for Thornton. With respect to the creation of new media outlets to create dissent, why is it so important to appear legitimate? She suggested that more clarity was needed in Thornton's discussion of the "boomerang" effect. Who are the international allies these groups are trying to reach and to what ends? Do these goals change after exile? Is there a radicalization effect? Are there conflicting or competing goals within these organizations?

She pushed Yang on his definition of Internet contention. Is it about collective grievances and a specific agenda or simply "water cooler grumbling"? Is it important to define the intent of these Internet users? Do they think they are engaged in contentious acts? These seem like spontaneous outpourings of complaint and emotion without a leader – are there certain key agitators? How many people are repeat posting? The answer to this might allow one to get a sense of the leadership, the people trying to shape these debates. Stern also questioned that online interactions take place among Internet users, not among challengers and opponents. She suggested that Chinese authorities lurk on these systems and asked if there was a possibility that some posters are actually agents of the state. On the Internet, as with all public speech in China, there is a constant awareness of an outside audience. People are engaged in a tacit interaction with power, so the potential audience shapes the discourse that takes place.

Discussion

David Meyer suggested that Thornton and Yang have to point to the connection between contention online and contention offline. Does the virtual become real? When the debate takes place online, all kinds of outsiders can intervene and use it for their own purposes, as a vehicle for beating the Chinese government. There is an assumption that one website represents the tip of an iceberg, but it may just be an ice cube. The Internet provides access and information flows previously unimaginable, rendering exile a completely different thing and changing a tool used by authoritarian governments for centuries. However, activists also have much less control over what they are doing, which is worth examining more closely.

Sidney Tarrow questioned the utility of the field approach for Yang's work. He echoed Meyer's question about the relationship between online and offline activity. Yang focuses usefully on the spin-off of online activism into offline outcomes – is online activism a field or part of a broader field? Tarrow was struck by the free enterprise nature of Internet activism as described in Thornton's work; people can declare themselves a social movement with very little effort. The problem is that when someone tries to build a movement, there are many different foundations and activists have a much easier time declaring themselves their own movement when they've actually just latched on to something else. There are problems of dispersion and control with competing social movement pieces. The ease of entry into Internet activism makes it difficult for movement leaders to maintain control of their own project.

Teresa Wright pointed out parallels with the China Democracy Party and Thornton's argument, citing differences in resources as a decisive factor. The China Democracy Party has no resources, so even though they are using the Internet in the same ways, they are not very successful. She disagreed about the Internet changing the meaning of exile, positing that the Internet gives exiles the feeling that they can still do something, but that they all know deep down that they cannot accomplish much. How do you measure the impact? Wright suggested that maybe this online activism is leading to something and perhaps it is just wishful thinking. She wanted to see more probing about the larger importance of media information flows in authoritarian contexts, showing how the Internet intersects with opportunity structures.

In response to Thornton's paper, William Hurst pointed out that these websites are not easy to access in China. Users have to know how to get to them through convoluted routes. Also, when groups do take over media channels, the general populace is not always receptive. He suggested that the conventional wisdom on exiles is that they do not have any impact – if the Internet enables these religious sects, how is it going to enable them to have a political impact in China?

In a final barrage of questions, Choo suggested that Internet users are mostly highly educated young males. She asked if there any kinds of networks arising among users, expressing an interest in looking under the surface of these Internet protests. Xi Chen pointed out that most post-1989 social movements heavily rely on online resources,

asking if this suggests that people are sharing with each other and forming a new concept of the public. Tarrow asked if talking between Internet activists led to talking to the authorities – is this interaction a precondition for contentious politics or a substitution for it? Zhao called on the writers to think about key mechanisms such as the message and cultural hegemony. An audience member pointed out that there is a hierarchy of acceptable dissent on the Internet, suggesting that it may be incorrect to talk about dissidence in cyberspace when the government is “allowing” what’s going on and heavily regulating it. This may just be a way for an elite group to vent frustrations, actually weakening activism.

In response, Thornton agreed that Internet activists can never know who is listening or watching. In the real world, security onlookers sometimes infiltrate movements and immediately become violent as a pretext to crush the contention; on the Internet, these people are trolls who misrepresent themselves. Also, when a leader dies, the entire movement can collapse. She suggested that individuals in exile are just trying to be a thorn in the side of the government, not seeking any genuine change.

Yang argued that leadership in cyberspace takes different forms. It would be methodologically problematic to try and examine agency – the focus is the discourse. Some messages have more influence than others, so this may be a better way of looking at impact; a kind of leadership emerges out of the discussions. Unless an official identifies himself as an opponent, Yang maintained that he had to be considered a participant in the protest debate, suggesting that position does not really matter because different viewpoints can help push the debate forward. With regard to the relationship between online and offline contention, he argued that in order to understand the importance of Internet contention, we have to analytically conceptualize it as a phenomenon in its own right. Much of the literature on cyber activism talks about the Internet as a resource, not taking more spontaneous Internet contention into account. He defended his use of “field”, claiming that it helped him to avoid dichotomies between structure and agency with its emphasis on embeddedness.

Panel 7 – Summing Up

Sidney Tarrow argued that this specialty is new, but it is also old. There exists a distinguished literature on Chinese contention focusing on rebellion and revolution. It is striking how little that literature is referenced in the papers from this conference; there seems to be a sociological break corresponding with the historical break we have in knowledge. If the literature is relevant, why isn’t it being drawn upon?

The characteristics of Chinese politics provide intellectual ammunition for scholars of contentious politics. The enormous rapidity of change is data for these scholars, making it a much more interesting case than those which are changing much more slowly. China is a country with broad regional variation, as seen in Hurst’s work and in political economy, which gives analytical leverage for turning general, abstract questions into regional questions. It is difficult to study change over time, so breaking things into subcultures can help to give a better idea of the realities of contentious politics. He also cautioned the participants to not lose sight of traditional ethnographic methods as they experiment with newer forms of systematic data analysis; rather, they should try to attempt triangulation.

Tarrow listed a number of open questions for research on contentious politics in China; the first set involved methodological questions. Are surveys reliable in a semi-authoritarian system in which respondents assume that surveys are government tools for collecting information? Also, protest event analysis is often based on official media sources, so researchers must ask themselves who is responsible for the media and what their interest is in publishing certain pieces of information. Tarrow was also struck by the absence of explicitly comparative work. Most of the papers made no comparison between China and other countries; these comparisons could be set against general benchmarks or more closely hewn to post-socialist systems.

Tarrow’s substantive questions started with the relationship of contentious politics to economic grievances and cycles. China possesses great economic variation between regions, so this can be tapped for information regarding the relationship between economic variables and the level of contentious politics. He was surprised by the relative absence of reference to diffusion to forms of transnational contention. On the issue of internal diffusion of contention and lack of aggregation, is it a mechanical causal relation (i.e. a Leninist institution leading to lack of aggregation) or is there an intervening area (i.e. weakness of trust)? Is there diffusion without networks? Is it the case that when lateral diffusion is inhibited, something else will fill that space?

Finally, Tarrow addressed a number of theoretical issues. He suggested that the relationship between contention and institutional processes is the most interesting area of research in an authoritarian system. China’s current institutions are adapting to and being transformed by contentious politics; he called on the conference participants to pay more explicit attention to this relationship. He argued that the issue of structure versus agency versus process can never be solved, suggesting that one should look at process in order to illuminate the other two elements. Tarrow also brought up the question of whether there is a radical flank effect operating in Chinese

contention. Escalated forms of contention result when institutional forms are unsuccessful. This conference did not cover the long-term effects of escalated forms of contention upon the boundaries of tolerated contention in China. They will never be accepted, but when people are repressed, what happens next? Will those who use violent forms of contention open up these boundaries more than they have been in the past?

Addressing the participants of the conference, **David Meyer** pointed out that they are positioned to influence the field of contentious politics because of the attention currently being focused on China. The key thing is to speak back to theory and think about concepts as being translatable across different contexts. One deficiency in the theory is that it does not deal with China very much, but there are all kinds of gaps that can be addressed; China scholars should try to speak to people who will never go to China or write about it.

Meyer pointed out that China is a huge opportunity because of its size and scope and the political democratization that may or may not be taking place. He was struck by the variability of opportunities across space, institutions, constituencies, and time. It appears to be a transformation of institutions both by reform from above and by activists from below.

These conference papers speak to opportunity questions. The next step is examining the relationship of collective actors to one another; the area of leadership research is ripe for development. Also, as pointed out by the Internet papers, the literature on tactics is inadequate, providing further room for contributions. How does the intended audience affect the tactics one chooses? Also, writers should ask themselves about the consequences of what they are finding, since policy outcomes always help to make written work more interesting.

Rachel Stern began her comments with a suggested introduction, posing the question: Where are we on the same page? First of all, we recognize that organization is difficult – Teresa Wright’s work tells us why. It is natural that we see organization as accidental and spontaneous at times. This makes possible a certain kind of flexibility for movements that leads to policy outcomes. Secondly, the starting point is that the Chinese context is indeed repressive, but we can ask about what this translates to in practice. Most protest is performed within the hegemony, with acknowledgement of the party’s legitimacy being the first step. There are informally but carefully delineated boundaries for protest, particularly relating to foreign involvement and cross-mobilization. Third, we can offer some insight into what factors make for a successful protest. Dramatic action is helpful, especially when it is disruptive, well-timed, and involves a large number of participants. Drama demonstrates seriousness of intention and attracts media attention. The challenge to all of this is the rapid pace of change that makes this work similar to trying to hit a moving target.

She also pointed out gaps that did not come up in the papers or discussions. For example, no one wrote about grievances, which may be the easiest and best way to organize issues into two camps. She suggested that there are two logics of protests. The first is the “no choice” school of protest revolving around subsistence issues, carried out by workers, peasants, and disadvantaged groups. The second is an emerging nascent opposition that is aspirational and involves a proactive rhetoric, such as that carried out by Protestants and Internet contenders. Looking at these distinctions may help us understand the issues. There is a tension between when identities just exist (as in Hurst’s paper) and when they need to be manufactured. Stern suggested that the answer may differ across these two logics of protest, with the first involving extant identities and the second involving constructed ones.

Stern also addressed a gap between the tactics and frames used inside a movement to attract followers and outside a movement to attract external allies and support. She suggested that there may be a greater disconnect between these in an authoritarian state than in a Western democracy; this is the gap between what a movement tells its followers and what it tells the state. Finally, she posed a question about whether contention is as disorganized as it seems or if there is an incentive to make it appear disorganized and less threatening.

Kevin O’Brien concluded by saying that this conference is positioned at the beginning of a subfield in Chinese politics. It has provided the participants with an opportunity to think about what comes next and to imagine the growth of more specialized topics toward which they might all work together in the future.