

Organizing under Duress

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ORGANIZING UNDER DURESS IN CHINA

How do organizations mobilize popular contention under repressive political conditions in an authoritarian state? While much has been written about civil society's role in challenging authoritarian incumbents (Bunce and Wolchik 2011; Beissinger 2007; Almeida 2003; Diamond 1994; Weigle and Butterfield 1992; Gold 1990), the micro-politics of organizing contention on an everyday basis in authoritarian political settings remain relatively obscure. This book casts a spotlight on one seemingly counterintuitive dynamic of organizing contention: *mobilizing without the masses*. In this dynamic, civil society organizations¹ refrain from mobilizing aggrieved citizens to take up large-scale collective contention. Instead, they coach participants to contend as individuals or as small groups. The process of coaching contention is a collective endeavor that takes place in the private harbors of organizational headquarters. In these relatively safe spaces, activists construct and disseminate pedagogies of contention that foster collective identity and consciousness. In conventional forms of mobilization, the fostering of collective identity and oppositional consciousness facilitates collective action (Snow 2013; Gamson 1992; Melucci 1989). Yet in mobilizing without the masses, only a single individual or a small band of the aggrieved engages in overt contention. While the organizational process is a collective one, it remains concealed behind a repertoire of small-scale or individualized contention.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHINA’S ASSOCIATIONAL REVOLUTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FLEXIBLE REPRESSION OF CIVIL SOCIETY

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

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

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

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

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

tactics. Where one would have expected the local state to be united in repressing underground groups, certain government agencies attempted to co-opt potentially threatening groups while others actively repressed or neglected them. Fragmented control, in turn, shaped the mobilizing strategies of underground organizations by creating political opportunities for activists to mobilize outside of legal channels in a process that I call “censored entrepreneurialism.”

In turn, the state exercised “competitive control” over the aboveground sector of civil society organizations – those that provided social services and did not typically threaten social stability (Chapter 4). In accordance with the broad political objective to outsource some social services to “society,” local states created markets for sub-contracting social services delivery to particular organizations. Different state agencies and Party organs competed for control over these markets and the regulatory power to manage organizations. Because the central party-state did not necessarily delineate the specific division of labor between different agencies and Party organs, local state actors clashed over new methods and regulations of managing civil society. In response to competitive control, civil society organizations that partnered with one state agency were more likely to accrue political legitimacy with other agencies. For example, partnering with the Bureau of Civil Affairs in Beijing sent political signals to the same bureau in other localities that the organization in question was politically “safe” to collaborate with. This triggered a “cascade effect” in terms of gaining political legitimacy, allowing the organization to expand its operations to different cities with the explicit approval of local state officials. Fragmented control and competitive control together constituted the broader operating environment for mobilizing without the masses.

BETWEEN COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL CONTENTION

Mobilizing without the masses provides a pathway to political agency for activists and participants of civil society organizations that is situated in between collective and individual contention. On the one hand, this dynamic departs from collective contention because its goal is not to coordinate mass protests or demonstrations. Rather, organizations participate behind the scenes by coordinating *non-collective* contention in the form of coaching individual workers to threaten social stability or by organizing small-scale contention such as flash demonstrations. At the same time, this dynamic also departs from individual contention because organizational vehicles are actively involved in directing these acts of contention. Moreover, it makes use of a repertoire of individual action that is far more confrontational and public than that of “everyday resistance” (Scott 1987). As such, mobilizing without the masses falls within the ecosystem of “boundary-spanning contention” (O’Brien 2003) that straddles the border between transgressive and contained actions (Figure 1.1).

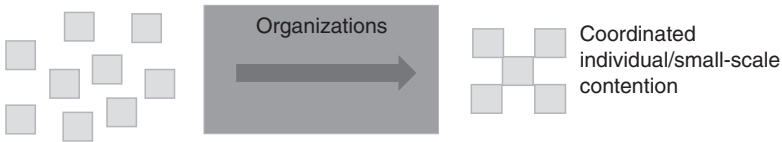
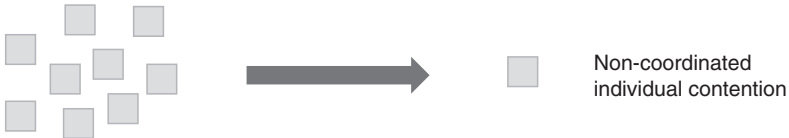
Collective Contention*Mobilizing Without the Masses**Individual Contention*

FIGURE 1.1 Comparing dynamics of contention

The Dynamic of Collective Contention

Mobilizing without the masses is situated in between two familiar modes of contention: collective contention and individual contention. In the “dynamics of contention” framework, collective action is the ultimate aim of mobilization (Tilly and Tarrow 2015; Tarrow 2011; McAdam et al. 2001). This focus on collective action is expressed in the definition of contentious politics: “discontinuous, public *collective* claim making in which one of the parties is a government” (McAdam et al. 2001: 9, emphasis added). This definition emerged from the study of social movements in which the mobilizing process culminates in collective action by both challengers and their opponents. To achieve their goals, challengers either create new organizational vehicles or appropriate and transform existing vehicles into instruments of contention. The mobilization process is set in motion when challengers perceive an opportunity or a threat and begin to press for change (McAdam et al. 2001: 45). Each link in the mobilizing process builds towards a moment of climactic collective action – an iterative exchange between challengers and opponents that disrupts status quo politics. In this model, tactical innovations – protests, demonstrations, petition drives, or boycotts – by challengers are by nature collective acts that offset their lack of institutionalized power (McAdam 1983: 735). Contentious activities peak at moments of tactical innovation and ebb when the opposition (the state) adopts successful counter-tactics (McAdam 1983).

In this dynamic, mobilizing structures are the ties that bind movement participants together. Mobilizing structures include meso-level groups, informal networks, and professional social movement organizations (Zald and McCarthy 1987: 23). Given the right set of structural opportunities, challengers can appropriate existing organizations that were not originally intended to be used for contention and transform them into instruments of social movements that serve several major functions. For example, these organizations may play a key role in amassing the human, material, and cognitive resources needed for mobilizing sustained collective action. Mobilizing structures facilitate the “bloc recruitment” of participants into the movement (McAdam 1982: 129). They also furnish leaders with the communication networks necessary for disseminating tactics and growing the movement beyond its local origins. Mobilizing structures then re-define the collective identities of movement participants in accordance with the movement’s goals (McAdam et al. 2001). Organizers construct collective identities and provide motivation for collective action by building frames, which is generally understood to be interpretations of the struggle and of possible solution (Snow 2013; Benford and Snow 2000: 232; Gamson 1975). Once participants come to identify themselves as the constituents of a group with a common goal, they are more likely to engage in collective action. Finally, mobilizing structures are also laboratories for devising and disseminating tactical innovations. For example, in the American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, three key institutions – black churches, black colleges, and the southern wing of the North American Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) – were critical in disseminating then-novel tactics such as lunch counter sit-ins, freedom rides, and bus boycotts (McAdam 1983).

In authoritarian settings, informal networks can substitute for formal mobilizing structures (Beinin and Vairel 2011; Wiktorowicz 2003; Denoëux 1993). In the dense urban settings of Egypt, informal ties essentially form an “organizational grid ... a type of associational life that remains outside of the surveillance of the state” (Singerman 2004: 156). Among left-wing groups in Italy, kinship and friendship ties were critical to recruitment into networks carrying out political violence (Della Porta 1995: 167–8). Similarly, informal networks including kinship, friendship, religious and social ties have played a key role in facilitating collective action in China. For example, informal networks facilitated student activism during the 1989 Democracy Movement (Wright 2001; Zhou 1993) as well as workers’ protests (Becker 2012; Hurst 2009; Lee 2007b) and church recruitment (Vala and O’Brien 2008). Virtual informal networks created by online chat rooms and social media also served as a mobilizing vehicle (Yang 2009). Regardless of the type of network, the primary purpose of mobilizing structures is assumed to be facilitating collective action. Moreover, collective action can be considered a part of a broader social movement process to the extent that it “challenges the behavior or the legitimacy of specific social or political actors, not of single individuals” (Diani and Bison 2004).

The power to effect social and political change derives from the disruption created by sustained collective action. Defined as “the application of a negative sanction [or] the withdrawal of a crucial contribution on which others depend” (Piven and Cloward 1979: 24–5), disruptive collective action can take the form of blockades, sit-ins, and strikes which can be an explosive source of power because they reinforce solidarity among demonstrators, obstruct the daily routine of opponents, and broaden the conflict (Tarrow 2011: 99–105). However, disruptive collective action alone is insufficient to effect long-term political change; such action must be sustained. This can be challenging because activists may eventually be absorbed into conventional politics while participants may defect from the movement or become demobilized by state repression (Tarrow 2011: 104–5). Alternatively, organizations that are established to sustain a movement may also paradoxically become impediments to advancing social movement goals as they succumb to what Robert Michels famously termed “the iron law of oligarchy” (Michels 1911). Large bureaucratic organizations can get in the way of organizing disruptive politics, thus becoming a hindrance to the continuation of collective contention (Piven and Cloward 1978). The discontinuation of all forms of collective action, either due to repression or due to the inability of the movement to sustain momentum, is seen as a failure of mobilization, leading social movements to “evaporate” into individual resistance (Tarrow 2011: 12). To summarize, in the dynamic of collective contention, mobilizing structures – whether in the form of organizations or informal networks – can enable disruptive collective action.⁸

The Dynamic of Individual Contention

In contrast, studies of contention in authoritarian states shed light on a wholly different dynamic of individual contention (Bayat 2013; Rev 1987; Scott 1985). Perhaps the most renowned conception of individual contention is James Scott’s “weapons of the weak” – “a repertoire of individual acts ranging from foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage” (Scott 1985: preface, xvi). Driven by the most basic need to survive, the oppressed draw upon a repertoire of individual contention to thwart their oppressors without assembling en masse and without challenging the symbolic class structures in society (Scott 1987; 1985). In this dynamic, there is no need for organizations because actions are taken in informal, non-institutionalized settings. Furthermore, because the immediate goal of everyday resisters is to improve their own livelihoods rather than to challenge the structural conditions of oppression, resisters do not need organizations to

⁸ This is of course not always the case. Scholars such as Piven and Cloward (1978) have argued that mobilizing structures such as formal organizations may prevent disruptive collective action. In any case, the analytical focus of social movement literature is on whether or not mobilizing structures facilitate *collective* action.

mobilize them (Scott 1985). Due to this individualistic nature, participants do not confront the types of collective action problems faced by those in conventional social movements (Olson 1965). The possibility for free riding is minimal, as each contender reaps individual rather than collective rewards. While these individual actions may over time produce an accumulated effect that may trigger wider social change, these individual contenders do not explicitly coordinate their actions in order to mobilize for the purposes of attaining a shared goal.

Bypassing formal organizations is also a feature of the “social non-movements” observed in the urban areas of the Middle East (Bayat 2013). In polities where the state limits the scope and type of organizational life, citizens resort to a set of “collective practices by non-collective actors ... *rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leadership and organizations*” (Bayat 2013: 15; emphasis added). These may include illegally tapping into the electricity grid, street vending, squatting, and other such informal activities that are not explicitly sanctioned by the state. For example, when rural migrants become urban squatters in Cairo and Istanbul, they do so without necessarily consulting each other and also without apparent leadership (Bayat 2013: 16). Instead, each actor decides to occupy land out of their own initiative and to meet their own needs of survival. Because actors do not explicitly identify themselves as sharing a common goal with like-minded individuals, they do not see the need to make use of organizing vehicles. The absence of an organization enables participants to dodge state crackdowns on urban activism as it becomes more difficult for the state to identify and punish contenders (Bayat 2013: 23).

Passive networks (Bayat 2013) play a pivotal role in forging a sense of common identity among urbanites participating in social non-movements. However, these passive networks differ from organizations in that they do not pull bystanders into the conflict, nor do they actively coordinate contention. These networks have been conceived as “instantaneous communications between atomized individuals, which are established by tacit recognition of their commonalities directly in public spaces or indirectly through mass media” (Bayat 2013: 23). Individuals recognize each other’s similar social positions through noticing “similar hairstyles, blue jeans, hang-out places, food, fashions, and the pursuit of public fun” (Bayat 2013: 19). This mutual recognition, for example, between contenders engaged in the same act of street vending in urban slums, enables them to form common identities.

The power of individual contention derives from the aggregation of atomized acts over time. In his study of Hungarian peasants resisting the centralized agricultural production, Istavan Rev argued that the advantages of being atomized included a tacit and shared understanding between individuals that they were not completely isolated, despite not having a formal organizational structure:

They were atomized, but not completely lonely. They knew that they were part of a secret mass of more than two million. They knew that even the apparatus joined them

secretly, that individual officials hoped that the peasants' resistance would provide the necessary alibi for their survival. There were government agents, secret police, military in the villages, too. But the peasants had their own language of gestures, which was common to all; it was not necessary to ask questions, since the discourse referred to immediate, concrete things. They just lived their lives and their way of living gradually changed the political system around them.

(Rev 1987: 348)

The combined power of millions of peasants acting on their own accord to hide produce from central state collectors resulted in systemic changes as the state had to accommodate peasant resistance. Rev saw the Hungarian peasants as taking part in what Charles Tilly called a "reactive form of collective action" (Tilly 1976: 369, cited in Rev 1987: 343–4).⁹ In other words, Hungarian peasants' power was found in their prolonged, uncoordinated but extensive atomized actions that inadvertently pulled local state officials into their web of resistance and dissimulation (Rev 1987: 339).¹⁰

Examining urban dwellers' resistance in the contemporary Middle East, Asef Bayat makes a similar argument that the cumulative effect of everyday action results in social change when there is a certain threshold of people engaged in the same acts of "quiet encroachment" (2013: ch. 2). The power to bring about social change accumulates through disparate individuals performing ordinary acts of transgression over a long period of time (2013: 22). Similarly, in "weapons of the weak," power also comes from the aggregation of small acts such as foot-dragging, sabotage, arson, petty theft, and others (Scott 1987: xvi). To borrow James Scott's analogy, "just as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy nilly, a coral reef, so do thousands of individual acts of insubordination and evasion create a political and economic barrier reef of their own" (Scott 1987: 422). The power of individual contention lies not in its explosiveness but in its ability to change the status quo through the accumulated effect of minute acts.

Beyond weapons of the weak and social non-movements, structural constraints in many authoritarian states limit the scope and forms of mobilization. When collective action does erupt, it often appears as "flashes in the pan" rather than as sustained social movements. In these polities, mobilization can take on self-limiting forms (Beinin and Vairel 2011). In communist Eastern Europe, citizens devised "oppositional speech acts" against authorities,

⁹ According to Tilly, a reactive collective action is defined as "group efforts to reassert established claims when someone else challenges or violates them" (1976: 367).

¹⁰ Local state officials in Hungary contributed to peasant resistance by turning a blind eye to their illegal behaviors of withholding produce from the central state. Officials also abetted peasants in selling their produce on the black market and falsified information in their reports of local production to superiors, all with the goal of maintaining their own survival in the system (Rev 1987: 339).

including political graffiti, hit-and-run protests, joke-telling, and making comments about or critiques of the regime in private spheres (Johnston 2005: 108–34; 2006). In Syria under the regime of President Hafiz al-Asad (1971–2000), citizens used underground short stories, jokes, cartoons, and other such popular media to subvert the regime's symbolic and rhetorical power (Wedeen 1999: 25).

In China, where the party-state forbids independent collective organizing (Zhou 1993: 55; Walder 1986: 19),¹¹ citizens have long learned to contend without organizations, instead devising creative forms of individual contention. For example, between 1978 and 1989, Chinese peasants who pushed for de-collectivization of farmland had few available organizational resources apart from the Chinese Communist Party. According to Daniel Kelliher, “Most alternative organizations were suppressed, surviving only underground or behind closed doors of private homes. Peasants were left standing alone to face the new state they had brought to power” (1992: 22). Consequently, millions of peasants defied state policies by de-collectivizing agricultural production through individual actions such as bribing officials to permit an individual family to farm land (Zhou 1996). These practices gained traction as peasants across the country began to adopt them, eventually creating a bottom-up push for de-collectivization (Zhou 1996; Kelliher 1992). In addition, aggrieved citizens have also repurposed official institutions such as the petitioning system to press for claims as individuals (X. Chen 2008). Increasingly, the party-state has channeled citizens (particularly workers) away from the petitioning system into settling disputes through the legal system (Gallagher 2007). However, given the continued restrictions on collective contention outside of the official trade union and the repression of NGOs and law firms that facilitate activism, workers have resorted to individual legal mobilization according to the labor dispute system (Gallagher 2014). In some cases, they have also resorted to taking extreme actions including self-directed or other-directed violence aimed at garnering the attention of the media and the public which, in turn, place pressure on authorities to respond (Gallagher 2014). Finally, aggrieved individuals have also turned to collective inaction such as absenteeism or inefficiency at the workplace, evasion of public duties, and expressing lack of enthusiasm for state-initiated campaigns (Zhou 1993: 66). Others have devised creative means of expression such as posting traditional rhyming couplets at the entrance of their homes that satirize the Communist Party (Thornton 2002) and posting online critiques of authorities (King et al. 2013; Yang 2009). All of these forms of individual contention bypass the need for formal organizational vehicles.

¹¹ In his study of work and authority in Chinese industry, Walder (1986: 19) argued that a defining feature of communist regimes is their “extra-ordinary ability to prevent organized political activity even from reaching the stage of collective action.”

Dynamic of Mobilizing Without the Masses

Mobilizing without the masses is situated between the dynamics of collective and individual contention. It begins with individuals who share a common grievance; despite repeatedly seeking redress from the state and from employers, they are thwarted at every turn. However, instead of deploying individual resistance, the aggrieved turn to civil society organizations for assistance in making claims for legally guaranteed rights. Within these organizations, leaders assemble the aggrieved individuals and reframe their individual complaints into a problem shared by millions of their brethren. By bringing participants face-to-face with similarly disadvantaged individuals, organizers construct a collective identity as citizens of a polity that has denied them their legal rights. Recognizing the high risks to mobilizing en masse, activists coach participants to contend individually or as a small group. Thus, while the organizational process frames a collective problem and fosters collective identity, the contentious action is individualistic.

Participants are taught to deploy a repertoire of contentious performances against state officials or employers. According to Charles Tilly, “participants in contentious politics learn, follow, and innovate within rough scripts for claim-making” (Tilly 2008: 201). However, whereas Tilly’s analytical focus is on the range of contentious performances that make up *collective* contention, mobilizing without the masses highlights individualistic contentious performances. In the context of contemporary China, organizers train individuals to adopt a repertoire of contentious performances including but not limited to verbally threatening state officials; contacting journalists with their grievances; staging sit-ins at government offices; holding flash demonstrations; and, in extreme cases, threatening to commit suicide in a public space. In contrast to the weapons of the weak (Scott 1985) and “social non-movements” (Bayat 2013), which silently eat away at structures of power, the performances of mobilizing without the masses are purposefully loud and public. Despite the fact that the contenders act alone or in small groups, their purpose is to attract bystanders and to encourage media coverage of their performances.

In mobilizing without the masses, the power to effect change derives from threatening the political incentives of otherwise unresponsive authorities and from the pedagogical process of training citizens to engage in individual contention. One might suspect that a single individual’s contentious performance lacks the disruptive power that comes from collective action. However, individual contention can be powerful when it threatens the interests of authorities. In the context of contemporary China, the power to change state officials’ behaviors comes from threatening a key bureaucratic incentive to maintain social stability. The “one veto rule” (*yipiao fojue*) stipulates that any outbreak of “mass incidents” (*quntixing shijian*) or collective contention would negatively affect the evaluation of local cadres, who are expected to maintain social stability in their jurisdiction (Wang and Minzner 2015; Sun et al. 2010). In other words, local leaders are incentivized to settle

threats to social stability as quickly as possible. Because local bureaucrats' performances are evaluated based on their ability to keep order in their jurisdiction, this mandate can be a powerful weapon for citizens. In mobilizing without the masses, activists coach individuals to stage contentious performances such as performances of suicide ("suicide shows") or flash protests that directly threaten social stability. As a result, even though the contender may be an individual, they can induce authorities to address their claims by threatening local social order. Fearing that the scale of social disruption may grow when it is covered by the media, state officials are incentivized to respond to a citizen's demands.

Mobilizing without the masses also derives power from the pedagogical process itself, which fosters collective consciousness through constructing frames – shared interpretations of a problem and of a solution (Benford and Snow 2000). When activists teach participants to engage in acts of individual contention, they are simultaneously reframing individual grievances as part of broader common problems shared by millions of others. Snow and Benford (1988) divide core framing tasks into three types: diagnostic framing; prognostic framing; and motivational framing. In terms of diagnostic frames, activists encourage participants to attribute their problems to such structural factors as the collusion between business and the state, lax implementation of laws, and the state policies that contribute to socio-economic inequality. In terms of prognostic and motivational frames, activists narrate cases of successful contention in order to inspire their participants to confront power-holders in similar ways. Through the pedagogical process, participants begin to identify as citizens with equal rights to healthcare, labor protection, and social security. They learn to claim their rights as equal citizens in a polity with unelected political leaders, weak legal institutions, and a government mired in corruption.

This transformation in citizenship consciousness is especially important in China. Since imperial times, social citizenship – the protection of the basic right to subsistence – has been the cornerstone of the Chinese state's legitimacy (Perry 2008; Perry and Goldman 2007). In post-reform China (1979–present), the party-state has championed lifting hundreds of millions out of poverty as its primary achievement. Yet the state has not been able to provide equal social citizenship to a variety of groups. Among them are the hundreds of millions of migrant workers who suffer social exclusion under China's national household registration system. In this context, civil society organizations play a critical role in teaching migrant workers to demand the right to *equitable* distribution of social and economic resources. Importantly, this claim goes beyond the right to a basic level of subsistence. Activists teach rural citizens that they should enjoy the same rights as urban citizens and that the poor should be treated by the state the same way as the rich. Thus, although mobilizing without the masses may be individualistic in terms of the contentious action, its ambitions can be as broad as changing participants' grammar of contention so that they demand rights as equal citizens rather than as subjects of a benevolent authoritarian state.

TACTICAL INNOVATION

Under flexible repression, civil society organizations in China devised three tactics: the pedagogy of micro-collective action; the pedagogy of atomized action; and the pedagogy of discursive action. All three fall under the broader dynamic of mobilizing without the masses. They emerged from activists' experimentation with different methods of rights advocacy that reduces organizational risk but still facilitates rights claims. They can be placed on a continuum from most to least risky for both the organization and its participants. In the pedagogy of micro-collective action, the riskiest of the three, activists organize small bands of citizens to engage in flash demonstrations which are limited in scale and duration. Because these tactics pose an immediate, public threat to social stability, they often result in organizational closure or the harassment of activists involved. During the pedagogical process, activists coach participants to attribute their grievances to broader structural factors such as the state's collusion with business interests. At the same time, activists construct motivational frames that provide participants with the rationale for taking collective action. The combination of diagnostic and motivational frames inspires participants to stage small-scale collective action, which involves only a handful of contenders. The distinguishing characteristic of micro-collective action is its symbolic nature; participants' primary aim is not to extract specific concessions from the state but to demonstrate that it is possible to act in solidarity for a common cause.

The pedagogy of atomized action, the second riskiest tactic, involves training individuals to threaten state officials with the possibility of disrupting social order should the latter continue to delay or prevent redress for the aggrieved contender. This tactic can win concrete gains for participants while building their collective consciousness of belonging to a broader population who share similar grievances and obstacles in seeking redress. While the collective element of organizing takes place at the headquarters of the organization, it is by no means the heart of the contentious process. It is atomized action – suicide shows, sit-ins, soliciting media coverage, stalking factory bosses – that induces bureaucrats to respond. Atomized action brings aggrieved and powerless citizens face-to-face with authorities in highly dramatic, unpredictable, and individual encounters.

Atomized action resembles weapons of the weak in that it uses individualistic action to thwart the aims of the powerful (Scott 1985). However, unlike weapons of the weak, there is a clear organizational element: groups coach citizens on the timing, tactics, and proper execution of contention. This collective coaching is hidden behind a façade of individual contention, thereby constituting a type of “disguised collective action” (Fu 2017a). Moreover, in contrast to the hidden, quiet nature of the weapons of the weak, the success of atomized action hinges on the loud and public communication of credible threats. These atomized contentious performances threaten to undermine social stability.

Whereas state security agents frequently target organizations that coordinate collective action, those organizations that promote the pedagogy of atomized action avoid the harshest repressive measures.

Finally, the pedagogy of discursive action is the least risky tactic because activists construct a counter-narrative of their participants as “new citizens” (*xin gongmin*) without threatening social stability directly. Making use of didactic drama, poetry, and music, activists deploy cultural mobilization to assert the identity of their participants as equal citizens. In the context of migrant workers in China, this counter-discourse is particularly important because official and popular discourses describe migrant workers as “peasant workers” whose rural household registration status does not entitle them to enjoy equal rights as urbanites. Furthermore, migrant workers are depicted as lacking in civility and in education and are thus culturally marginalized. In the face of such institutional and cultural discrimination, activists coach participants to contend by adopting a counter-discourse that affirms their status as equal citizens. Through visual art, performance pieces, essays, and other modes of artistic expression, these activists subvert dominant narratives concerning marginalized subjects and encourage migrant workers to think of themselves as entitled to the same social and political rights as their urban counterparts. In contrast to the two previous tactics, activists also attempt to influence the discourse of government officials and the wider public on migrant workers. They do so through a grammar of persuasion, rather than threatening social stability. By forging strategic partnerships with critical political insiders – government officials, journalists, and scholars – activists attempt to change the dominant discourses surrounding migrant workers and to generate debates regarding the merits of migrant workers’ associations. If successfully established, these synergistic partnerships permit activists to amplify their claims for equal citizenship to the state and the broader public.

LABOR ORGANIZATIONS IN CHINA

This study is based on ethnographic research inside labor organizations in China which formed in the early 1990s and late 2000s to advocate for the rights of one of China’s largest disadvantaged populations: 270 million migrant workers who inundated large metropolises in search of economic opportunities.¹² The founders were largely migrant workers with limited formal education who

¹² This study draws upon 18 months of participant observation inside labor organizations in China and 123 interviews with multiple stakeholders. As a participant observer, I accompanied workers to the sites of their confrontations with the authorities, including labor bureaus and courtrooms. This allowed me to observe first-hand worker interaction with various state actors and to analyze state actors’ reactions to workers’ rights claims. I attended meetings and conferences in which activists networked with sympathetic local officials. I observed the daily activities of each studied organization, including recruitment trips to nearby hospitals, legal consultations with workers, and workshops in which activists coached participants on contentious tactics.

helped other workers defend their labor rights through the legal system. Due to the difficulty of registering as a social organization, the majority of these migrant worker organizations either registered as commercial businesses or remained unregistered. Similar to what has happened to the worker centers that emerged in the 1970s in the United States to organize immigrant workers (Fine 2006; Gordon 2005), these labor organizations are based within the migrant communities where these workers live. This allowed them to reach skilled and unskilled workers employed in various factories and from diverse backgrounds. Many organizations sought to provide practical assistance to members, such as legal aid, childcare, libraries, and employment skills training. They were organizationally structured like NGOs in that they had a distinct leadership hierarchy and received their funding from foreign foundations. Moreover, they did not typically provide monetary assistance or insurance to worker-participants.

These organizations sought to address two types of injustices that migrant workers faced: labor exploitation in the form of a range of workplace abuses (Lee 2007a; Pun 2005; A. Chan 2001) as well as institutionalized discrimination in the form of the household registration system (K. W. Chan 2010; Solinger 1999; Wallace 2014). In assisting workers on issues related to exploitation – wages, contracts, work hours, industrial injuries, and managerial abuses – these organizations provided pro bono legal consultation and representation. They coached workers to navigate the official labor dispute system, which was often inefficient and failed to protect workers' rights as stipulated by the 2008 Labor Contract Law.

Labor organizations also aimed to address a second problem that migrant workers faced – the household registration system (*hukou*) which institutionally excludes those with rural registration from enjoying equal access to urban social services and public goods. This system, which has been compared to South Africa's system of apartheid (Alexander and Chan 2004), is a state institution that restricts and regulates the mobility of peasants from rural to urban China. It systematically discriminates against migrants by depriving them of the right to permanently reside in the cities. Consequently, migrant workers cannot enroll their children in urban schools, nor can they access equal opportunities for employment, healthcare, housing, and other such social services. The *hukou* system effectively relegates migrants to the status of second-class citizens and bars them from rights to the city (K. W. Chan 2010; Wallace 2014). In response, grassroots labor organizations have advocated for *hukou* reform, calling on policy-makers to revise current regulations in order to guarantee migrant workers equal access to urban social services. Such advocacy has become ever more pressing in light of an estimated additional 350 million

I also conducted 123 interviews with activists, workers, scholars, officials, lawyers, journalists, and enterprise representatives. See the Appendix for an extended discussion of data and methods.

rural residents who are expected to migrate to cities across China by 2050, which would create further migrant demands for access to urban public goods and social services.¹³

The Chinese party-state is wary of labor organizations for at least three reasons: their advocacy of labor rights; their mobilizing tactics; and their funding sources. First, labor organizations advocate for the rights of workers, an important constituency of the Chinese Communist Party. Grassroots labor organizations symbolically challenge the ACFTU monopoly on representing the proletariat. Second, while some labor organizations advocate for migrant workers' rights through legal channels – offering legal consultation and representation – others coach disgruntled workers to disrupt social stability. This is important because preserving social stability is a key pillar of the Chinese regime's legitimacy. On the surface, activists provide a range of non-threatening social services. Yet, they also surreptitiously mobilize the poor and marginalized to engage in individual action or small-scale collective action. Finally, many of these organizations' funding comes from foreign organizations, which further raises the Chinese government's suspicions that “hostile international forces” are infiltrating domestic civil society groups in order to facilitate anti-state resistance movements. For these reasons, the party-state has sought to contain the growth of labor organizations and limit their mobilization potential. Under these conditions, activists are pressed to devise tactical innovations.

BOOK PREVIEW

Part I of the book examines the broader institutional environment for mobilizing without the masses. Chapter 2 explains the structural conditions that gave rise to informal labor organizations in the broader context of China's associational revolution. It presents the distribution of informal labor organizations nationally and distinguishes between aboveground and underground sectors. It also compares the two largest clusters of labor organizations: those in Beijing and those in the Pearl River Delta. Chapter 3 examines the strategy of fragmented control deployed by local agencies to govern underground civil society. Contrary to the widely held assumption that state and underground civil society must necessarily engage in a zero-sum struggle, the Chinese party-state permits the simultaneous occurrence of both synergistic and antagonistic interactions. The outcome of these interactions is that these underground organizations engage in “censored entrepreneurialism” – a combination of self-censorship and bargaining for survival and resources. Chapter 4 turns to the strategy of competitive control deployed by local agencies to govern aboveground organizations that do not pose an immediate threat to the social stability. Competitive control encourages synergistic interactions between state and society, which conform to the logic of a competitive market.

¹³ J. Woetzel et al., *Preparing for China's Urban Billion*, McKinsey Global Institute, 2009.

Part II of the book delves into the tactics of mobilizing without the masses. The preface situates these tactics in the broader theoretical framework of the relationship between repression and mobilization. Chapter 5 analyzes micro-collective action, which attempts to inspire participants to take symbolic action demonstrating their solidarity to the state and to opponents. Chapter 6 examines atomized action, a tactic that lowers the organization's risk of being repressed by the state. Chapter 7 examines the final tactical innovation, discursive action, which refrains from threatening social stability in favor of cultural mobilization and persuading state officials to permit the freedom of association. Combined, these chapters illustrate both the organizational and participant outcomes of these alternative tactics of mobilization.

The conclusion discusses whether mobilizing without the masses is a form of political compromise with the state. It argues that such a dynamic is both a product of state repression as well as a genuine form of mobilization that transgresses certain political boundaries, albeit not necessarily through direct confrontation. It also illustrates how features of this dynamic are reflected in other contentious sectors of Chinese civil society and the possibilities for discovering this dynamic in authoritarian states elsewhere. Ultimately, mobilizing without the masses demonstrates that the meeting of two weak actors – vulnerable organizations and marginalized citizens – can shape the very grammar with which citizens demand their rights from officials in authoritarian states.

Part I of this book builds upon and extends these theories by taking a disaggregated approach to examining everyday state control over civil society in China. Such a bottom-up perspective is important because very rarely does the central blueprint for state control translate into local implementation exactly as the rulers intended. This is especially true in a decentralized authoritarian state like China where central mandates are purposefully left ambiguous to allow for local states' flexible implementation (Heilmann and Perry 2011). In such a context, the analysis of the repression–mobilization nexus must take into account the diverse range of local actors – including bureaucratic agencies whose primary charge is not policing – that improvise state control. Moreover, horizontally disaggregating state actors across the same administrative level enables one to trace the origins of certain control tactics to a particular state bureau. It also helps to explain why the local state appears to be working at cross-purposes to coopt or contain or even facilitate grassroots activism. The micro-politics of repression on the ground also reveal the interactions between the actors carrying out coercion and activists in everyday settings – inside courtrooms, teahouses, and bureaucrats' offices. Although less dramatic than encounters between the riot police and protestors or between the military and demonstrators, these interactions nevertheless shape activists' perceptions of the boundaries of permissibility. This, in turn, translates into adaptive mobilization.

Chapter 2 presents the landscape of labor organizations in China, explains their emergence, and analyzes their regional variations. Chapters 3 and 4

examine the political environment in which these organizations operate. As discussed in the introductory chapter, China's party-state has adopted a strategy of flexible repression over civil society that seeks to foster the growth of obedient civil society organizations while limiting the mobilization potential of less obedient, more restive organizations. Flexible repression manifests in two strategies at the sub-regime level: competitive control over aboveground civil society and fragmented control over underground civil society. Taken together, these strategies shape the operating environment in which Chinese labor organizations learned to mobilize without the masses.

