Bases of Governance and Forms of Resistance: The Case of Rural China

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We shall know that a new era has begun not when a new elite holds power or a new constitution appears, but when ordinary people begin contending for their interests in new ways. (Charles Tilly 1986: 9)

People all over the world pursue their interests and resist what they see as social injustice. The specific forms they take in their pursuit and resistance vary across institutional contexts and over time, where different bases of governance – or power regimes – set different constraints and opportunity structures, and provide different repertoires of strategies for their collective action. In this light, an inquiry into changes in the specific forms of resistance over time sheds light on variations in the link between mobilization for resistance and the bases of governance in a society. In this chapter, our primary focus is on the relationship between the two in the context of rural China in the post-Mao era. Specifically, we examine changes in the forms of resistance and their implications for the evolving bases of governance in rural China since the late 1970s.

China provides a distinct case for the study of resistance because of its diverse and rapidly changing contexts. Most studies tend to focus on a society with relatively stable and/or coherent bases of governance, such as the traditional society in James Scott's Malaysian village, or specific episodes or events in a historical era, such as the Civil Rights Movements in the US or large-scale popular contentions in the former Soviet Bloc. In China, rapid institutional changes since the 1980s have generated the coexistence of multiple and often competing institutions as the bases of governance – authoritarian vs liberalization, planning vs markets, traditional values vs post-modern rhetoric. As a result, patterns of resistance tend to be multifaceted, sometimes parallel to, sometimes interrelated with, and sometimes at odds with, one another. Needless to say, the vast size and diversity within China have added

more complexities in the contrasting and interactive patterns of resistance within as well as across regions.

Another interesting aspect of the case of China is that the evolution of governance in the country over the last three decades represents a pattern distinct from other parts of the world in modern history. Tilly's (1986) work focused on the long historical process of the expansion of the central authority in France, in light of transitions from segmented local interests to the rise of a modern state and a capitalist economy involving highly interdependent and coordinated activities. His emphasis was on the gradual receding of the former and the expanding role of the latter. In contrast, institutional changes in China in general, and in rural China in particular, have undergone a grand trend of change in the opposite direction, i.e., moving from a singular center of authority to more diverse and multi-centered governance. New patterns of resistance provide clues to understanding the direction and extent of institutional changes in China.

A central theme of this chapter is to make sense of the patterns of resistance arising from disparate bases of governance, and how they are interconnected and interact with one another. We argue and demonstrate that the observed patterns of resistance suggest fundamental changes in the bases of governance rather than the resilience of the authoritarian state in the course of China's ongoing institutional changes. This chapter is organized as follows. We begin with a brief introduction to the institutional context – rural China in transformation – to familiarize the reader with the stable institutional structures and to identify the key issues for discussion. We then outline some relevant theoretical insights that help understand patterns of resistance in a comparative perspective. Our main focus is on the discussion of different forms of resistance in rural China, interactions among them, and their relationship to the bases of governance in China today. We conclude this chapter by considering

the implications of these observed patterns for understanding the extent of institutional changes versus that of authoritarian resilience in China.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT: RURAL CHINA IN TRANSFORMATION

China has witnessed great transformation in the post-Mao era, in which rural China occupies a particular position. It is not exaggerating to say that rural China has been both the barometer and the catalyst of these changes. Between the establishment of the People's Commune in the late 1950s and the late 1970s, rural China entered an era of collective farming where major decision rights were taken away from villagers and put in the hands of the centralized authority and their local agents – those officials at township and village levels (Chan et al. 1992, Friedman et al. 1991, 折晓叶、艾云 2014). The collectivization process was accomplished with effective political organization and mobilization (Liu 2006). Governance based on the centralization of authority suppressed open resistance of any form through a series of political campaigns, class labeling, and persistent political control. As a result, individuals had to resort to 'weapons of the weak' (Scott 1985) in everyday resistance, often shown in the form of 'collective inaction' (Zhou 1993). That is, instead of open protests, villagers used those forms of resistance characteristic of small-scale, low-key, informal and individual-based actions, such as passive participation, noncooperation, and the lack of enthusiasm toward state policies.

The land reform in rural China in the late 1970s initiated China's reform era, when collectively owned land was de facto privatized in the form of long-term lease to the villagers' households. Along with the decollectivization process, rural governance was fundamentally altered, as the collective

governance in villages dwindled and villagers gained greater autonomy in farming activities and everyday decision-making processes. This does not mean that the village collective or Chinese government has retreated from the scene. Despite great variations across regions, the village collective, in the form of a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) committee and village administrative committee, still exists and functions in managing collective assets and serving as the institutional link between the village and the government. During this period, the government made various attempts to hold on to its control over villages in order to collect agricultural taxes and fees, implement state policies such as family planning and, more recently, infuse state farming subsidies and land seizure for urban development (折晓叶、艾云 2014). Over the past three decades, along with the various forms of governance practiced in rural China, relationships among villagers, the village collective, and the state evolved, often in turbulent twists and turns. These changes are important contextual information for us to make sense of different forms of resistance in rural China (Perry and Mark 2003).

The Historical Trajectory of Change

These changes did not take place in a linear trajectory. Instead, they have evolved as part of interactions among changes in the institutions and in governance practice, shifts in state policies, and responses from the villagers in the decollectivization era. In the Mao era, as is well known, villagers were organized into the People's Commune, villages became production brigades. The historically unprecedented extent of organization in rural areas disrupted the traditional ways of problem solving and conflict resolution in rural China and directly linked peasants with the state (Oi 1989). Consequentially, forms of resistance were also transformed. Under the tight political control and organizational

weapons of the state, open protests became rare and villagers adopted a variety of hidden forms of resistance, such as the evasion of public duties, a lack of motivation in their work, and the pursuit of self-interests in quasi-market activities, such as disguised private farming and underground market transactions (Zhou 1993, 高王凌 2006).

In the early stage of the decollectivization era, between the late 1970s and early 1990s, an impressive rise in agricultural productivity greatly lifted the living standards of the rural population. Along with decollectivization, to a great extent the Chinese state, as represented by its local governments, withdrew from rural areas, which in turn reduced tensions and conflicts in the rural areas. This was a relatively peaceful period in rural China, with a low degree of tensions or conflicts, which tended to be isolated and small in scale.

Between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s, as the central government increased its pressure to extract resources from rural areas, there was a sharp rise in agricultural taxes and fees, which instigated strong, often violent, resistance from the villagers. There was large-scale resistance to tax collection and other related government policies (周雪光、艾云 2010).

Since the abolition of agricultural taxes in the mid-2000s, rural China entered a new era of relative loose coupling between villages and the state; as a result, the tide of resistance also receded. New forms of village governance, especially village elections, also directed villagers' grievances and complaints into institutionalized channels of conflict resolution. However, this era has been disrupted again in recent years as the pace of urbanization quickens and activities such as land seizure and migration fuel tensions and conflicts between villagers and the Chinese state.

To sum up, relationships among the state, local governments, and villagers have evolved considerably over time in the post-Mao era, exhibiting multifaceted processes and directions of institutional changes. Patterns

of resistance in rural China provide glimpses into and shed light on the evolving bases of governance and power relations in China's great transformation.

BASES OF GOVERNANCE AND FORMS OF RESISTANCE: THEORETICAL ARGUMENTS

In studying four centuries of popular struggle in France, Charles Tilly (1986) developed a line of theoretical arguments that link forms of resistance with the larger institutional context. He argued that the rise of a capitalist economy and the modern state in the nineteenth century produced the 'proletarianization' of society, engendered widespread discontent, and transformed disparate, isolated, and local conflicts and revolts to the macro, national level. Specific forms of resistance came from the repertoire of strategies in mobilization and collective action in the institutional context. Birnbaum (1988) focused on relationships between types of regimes and variations in collective action and empirically examined this causal model in different societies. His findings demonstrate that collective action cannot be fully understood without incorporating the state into the theoretical models. In a similar light, the importance of institutional contexts has been emphasized in the literature on social movements and other forms of resistance (McAdam et al. 1996, Migdal 2001, Tarrow 1989).

This line of argument has been explicitly or implicitly echoed in other studies as well. James Scott (1985), in his study of the weapons of the weak, made a similar argument. Social groups who lack resources or organizing capacities have to resort to other means of resistance, such as gossip and passive noncooperation to voice their complaints and resist what they see as social injustice. Drawing on Lukes' (2005) conceptualization of power, Gaventa (1980) situated his study of

'quiescence and rebellion' in an Appalachian valley to examine 'how power shapes participation patterns of the relatively powerless' (p. 13). In other words, we need to pay attention to specific institutional contexts, in particular the power relations and repertoires of the weapons of the weak, in order to make sense of different forms of resistance, and interpret them meaningfully.

Research on China in this area followed two somewhat discernable lines of research. One line tends to focus more on the specific institutional context and make sense of the variety of resistance on the bases of local knowledge. Many studies in Chinese belong to this category, as we will review and discuss below. Another line tends to use some theoretical frameworks – such as models of collective action or arguments about governance based on the rule of law – to interpret different forms of resistance. Political scientist Yongshun Cai (2010) examined the conditions under which collective resistance takes place and the likelihood of success and failures in popular contention. In his analytical framework, he distinguishes the central and local governments and sees them as having different preferences and costs, leading to different response strategies toward popular contention. Social movement organizers may exploit these differences and gain leverage by appealing to the higher authorities. In this light, the presence of various forms of resistance has been interpreted as the resilience of the authoritarian state, which 'allows its citizens to use conflict-resolution mechanisms while preventing [them from using] … non-institutionalized or illegal modes of action to pursue their interests' (Cai 2008: 89). O'Brien and Li (2006) interpret waves of popular contention in recent years as inspired and mobilized on the bases of emerging legal weapons for the weak (Li and O'Brien 1996, 2008). This line of argument was also consistent with patterns of resistance in the form of consentful contention in the former Soviet-style regimes (Straughn 2005).

In the Chinese context, Zhou (1993) developed an institutional argument that emphasized how the institutional structure of the authoritarian state in China shaped the forms and directions of individual actions as well as the opportunity structures, and consequentially systematically transformed unorganized interests into collective action. He proposed that the centralization of authority shaped similar life chances, sharing experiences among different social groups, and thereby lowering group barriers for mobilization. The centralized authority also cultivates similar grievances at different localities and work units, and channels these grievances toward the same target – the state and their local representatives. In addition, shifts in state policies and state-initiated political campaigns often provide opportunities for the outbreak of collective action. He also pointed out, in the spirit of Scott's concept of 'weapons of the weak', the role of 'collective inaction' in Mao's China in which individuals adopted noncooperation and passive response to state advocacy in their resistance to political pressures, where the authoritarian state prevailed and institutionalized collective action suppressed.

The state still plays a central role in the making of resistance in the post-Mao era (黄冬娅 2011). In an ironic twist, the same theoretic logic also sheds light on the changing patterns of resistance in rural China in the post-Mao era, but in the opposite direction. Simply put, the economic reform in the post-Mao era has greatly altered the institutional bases of governance. For example, the abolishment of collective institutions led to the weakening of political authority in rural areas and the revival of traditional organizations; new institutions of rural governance such as village elections and other forms of coops provide new mechanisms of mobilization. Large-scale migration of peasant labor to urban areas also adds an important role in shaping resistance in rural areas, as it provides an exit option and at the same time imports new means of mobilization into rural

areas. As the bases of governance evolve and are intertwined with elements of centralization and decentralization, power relationships between the powerful and the powerless have changed, which has reshuffled the repertoire of social protest, making some weapons of the weak more accessible and effective, thereby inducing new forms of resistance. All these changes have been taking place along several fronts at the same time, and they often interact with one another. We now turn to outline these key aspects below.

First, in light of the main theoretical arguments on social mobilization and collective action, institutional changes in China have altered several key parameters for collective resistance in terms of the availability of resources and opportunities for mobilization. Along with economic development and greater mobility, there is a great differentiation of social groups and heightened class awareness. For example, the flow of migrant workers gives rise to or strengthens the formation of interest groups based on their hometown origins, worksites, or sectors where they have shared experience. The weakening of the *hukou* registration system[1] opens doors to broad association and spatial mobility among social groups, and significantly enhances their mobilizational capacities.

The gradual relaxation of political repression and control in the post-Mao era has steadily reduced the cost of political participation and participation in social protests. With the weakening of political control, opportunities for collective action have also opened up (Solinger 2000). For example, the widespread practice of IOUs – delays in payments – in those sectors where migrant workers concentrate often triggers large-scale social protests demanding payment. Abuse by government officials also triggers social protests, large and small, some spontaneous and some well organized.

Over time, opportunities for collective action have also changed, with the past four decades seeing significant variations. In the

early post-Mao era of the late 1980s, the policy of decollectivization greatly reduced the presence of the political authority in rural life; as a result, tensions between villagers and the state also decreased. The era of resource extraction between the 1990s and early 2000s saw intensive interaction and even confrontation between the central authority, its local government agents, and the villagers, inducing large-scale, open resistance during this period, often in the form of refusal of tax collection and other acts of noncooperation toward government advocacies. Such interactions and tensions have become intensified in the recent era of urbanization over issues related to land seizure, public goods provision, and conflict resolution.

Second, the bases of governance have been transformed significantly, inducing new forms of resistance. The single most important reality is that the state is no longer able to play an encompassing role of control over every aspect of the social life. In rural areas, with decollectivization, land was returned to villager households, giving the villagers the decision rights in what to grow, whom to sell to, and at what price. This also freed millions of surplus labor into the pool of migrant workers that flowed to cities near and far. Along with this grand trend, the village collective authority – the village committee and the village party secretary – also played a significantly lesser role than in the collective era, creating alternative venues and social space for interest articulation and mobilization (Zhou 2011).

An important consequence is that traditional institutions were revived and new institutions emerged in this era. Traditional institutions such as kinship organizations and informal social networks have revived and expanded. They interact with formal institutions and play a central role in rural governance (Tsai 2007, 杨嵘均 2014, 肖唐镖 2006, 肖唐镖等 2001, 贺雪峰 2009).

As new institutions emerged or existing institutions were revived or refurnished into new functions, they have greatly widened the venues and alternative mechanisms to voice complaints, to solve problems, and to seek conflict resolution. For example, the emergence of village elections since the late 1980s has gradually become an effective institutional channel, enabling villagers every three years to elect village leaders to represent their interests and to replace those they no longer trust. The increasing importance of *xinfang* (信访), an official petition mechanism, provides another institutional channel for individuals to have their complaints heard by the higher-level officials. These new institutional mechanisms and forms provide alternative bases of interest articulation.

Third, the role of local governments, such as that of township governments (equivalent to the People's Commune in the Mao era), has also undergone major changes. In the 1990s and the early 2000s, local governments were pressured to extract resources from villagers in the form of agricultural taxes and fees, and to effectively implement state policies such as family planning and taxation. These efforts led to widespread open protests. Since the early 2000s, with the abolition of agricultural taxation, local governments have played a more diverse role across regions and areas, inducing distinctive patterns of popular contention accordingly.

Despite these significant changes, one thing is obvious: the state and local governments are still at the center of the solution space, inducing a variety of grievances, conflicts, and challenges in its direction. For example, to meet the goals of 'social stability maintenance', the Chinese government adopted multifaceted strategies, including economic incentives, to resolve or cover up social conflicts, or to diffuse conflicts in different directions (Cai 2010, Lee and Zhang 2013). The variety of dispositions and response tactics by local governments in turn have induced multifaceted forms of resistance and mobilization.

To sum up, sometimes explicitly but often implicitly China has witnessed a shift from political power-based governance to multi-centered governance. This shift is especially

evident in rural China, where the grip of political authority has loosened and multifaceted processes have developed to a greater extent than in urban areas. With these changes in the distribution of resources for social mobilization, in opportunity structures, as well as in the changing role of governments as their potential targets, it is not surprising that forms of resistance have evolved significantly in the recent decades.

The proceeding discussion provides several lines for us to trace and identify patterns of resistance in rural China. We now turn to empirical observations made over the last four decades. In our discussion below, we first catalogue different forms of resistance and then interpret the interconnections among them.

Forms of Resistance in Rural China: Continuity and Change

At the risk of oversimplification, we characterize the following general trends of changes in forms of resistance in rural China in the post-Mao era, in contrast to the forms of resistance in the Mao era. First, there is a shift from hidden, small-scale resistance to more open, large-scale protests; second, there is a rise of new forms of resistance, reflecting the availability of new resources and channels of mobilization. Both trends result from the significant changes in the bases of governance – and power relations – over the last three decades. Below, we take a closer look at several salient forms of resistance in rural China and discuss the relationships between these forms of resistance and the larger context of institutional changes in rural China.

Open, Social Protests

The most significant change in forms of resistance in rural China in the post-Mao era is the rise of open, social protests. In the collective era, open protests rarely surfaced in rural China. Violence and conflict occasionally erupted (Perry 1985), but more often than not they were not directed at the government authority, and seldom made the news.

Since the 1980s, however, open protests or other open forms of protest, such as 'sit-ins' in front of local government headquarters, have become a routine phenomenon all over China. Because of the lack of reliable statistics on social protests, it is impossible to make a comprehensive estimate of the extent of open protests in China, especially in rural areas where official records have never been systematic or accurate. But a general, rising trend of open protests over the years is unmistakable. In his study of mass protests including both urban and rural areas, Chen (2009) observed that 'public protests, officially labeled "mass incidents" (群体性事件), have accelerated dramatically since the mid-1990s, growing almost fourfold in the period between 1993 and 1999, and tenfold between 1993 and 2005' (p. 88).[2] In the Mao era, social movements outside the institutional channels were rare because of tight political control as well as positive incentives for compliance in the webs of organizations (Walder 1986). In this light, the presence of large-scale open protests signaled a significant departure from Mao's power regime.

As we noted before, the rise of open social protest has resulted from the confluence of several grand trends in China. The relaxation of political repression has greatly reduced the costs of participation in social movements. Rapid, large-scale social changes cultivated grievances in all corners of society, from family planning and tax collection, to land seizure, and especially the widespread abuse of power at local levels. At the same time, the emergence of a civil society and the availability of social resources provide greater mobilizational capacities for the powerless.

We should be cautious in interpreting the nature of these episodes of open protests. They tend to be more spontaneous, temporary, and short-lived. Often, they take

the form of 'riots', or 'the participation of those who do not have direct stake in the incidents' (于建嵘 2010). For example, in the 'Weng-an incident' in Guizhou Province in 2008, a female student's death was ruled 'suicide' by the local police. But the suspicion of the abuse of power and a police cover-up triggered a large-scale demonstration. Within half an hour of walking to the county government compound, the demonstration of a few dozen grew to more than a thousand; within the next few hours, more than 20,000 gathered, which led to confrontations and riots.[3] Similar episodes took place in many other areas as well. Clearly, the form of such local protests reflects less the legitimation and institutionalization of social movements as an effective means of resistance; rather, they erupt from time to time largely as a result of the weakening power of political control.

Village election

If open protest is at one end of the spectrum along which forms of resistance are distributed, at the other end is the institutionalized form of village election. Since the late 1980s, a new form of governance has emerged on the horizon of rural China – the institution of village election. The central government adopted the new governance form of village election to allow villagers to elect the members of their own village committees to govern village affairs. Historically, village affairs were governed by the CCP committee appointed from a top-down process, and the village committee played a subordinate role in village governance. The 20 or so years of village election have gradually changed the landscape of rural governance (O'Brien and Han 2009).

Of course, the process was by no means a linear one of progress toward democracy. There were frustrations, chaos, and setbacks over the course of the development of village election. We draw on our own study to illustrate this process. In one township of 27 villages in Northern China, village election has evolved in three phases over the last 20 or so years (Zhou 2009, 周雪光、艾云 2010). In the early years of village election, the party committee's dominance still prevailed and village election was at best an act of window dressing that no one took seriously. In the second phase, especially in response to the increasing taxation burdens of the late 1990s and the early 2000s, when widespread large-scale rural protests erupted, village election became a ground for social mobilization in resistance to top-down resource extraction. Villagers organized themselves to elect their own leaders and spokesmen, and in this process challenged the CCP authority in the rural areas. In one village, a villager proclaimed that, if he were elected, he would lead the village to resist the government effort in tax and fee collection; he was duly elected as the village head, despite the township government's manipulation and intervention. In other cases, conflicts within villages disrupted the village election process.

Over the years, peasants have learned to use village election as an institutional channel to pursue their own interests and to voice their complaints. In the third phase of the process since the mid-2000s, along with the abolishment of agricultural taxation and with the village election as an institution firmly in place, villagers gradually learned to make use of village elections to select those cadres that could best represent their interests. In one village there used to be severe tensions between two kinship factions. One faction tried numerous times to disrupt the village election process so as to prevent the opposite side from being elected as the village leader. However, with the institutionalization of village election over time, the majority of the villagers organized themselves into a stable coalition to ensure that village election was carried out and their voices heard. Gradually, village election became stabilized, disruptions disappeared, and the pursuit of interests evolved 'from disruptive confrontation to ordered competition', as one township government official observed.

The evolution of village election reflected the larger processes of institutional change in rural governance in China, and corresponding changes in forms of resistance. Since Mao's collectivization era of the late 1950s, rural China had been under the repressive political control of the state (Friedman et al. 1991). As a result, open protest was suppressed and only tacit resistance (collective inaction) was involved. In the post-Mao decollectivization era, villagers gained autonomy in agricultural activities, and the political grip on rural life has been gradually loosened. The emergence of village election provided a legitimate channel for villagers to voice their interests and concerns. These changes in the bases of rural governance have generated new forms of resistance through new institutional channels.

Negotiating the Boundaries: Alternative Forms of Resistance

Between the extremes of open protest and institutionalized village election, there lie a variety of activities that villagers use to voice grievances and resist injustice in their everyday life. Along with the decentralization of rural governance, the abuse of power at the local level has become rampant. In response, the central authority has gradually allowed greater room for contention against the local abuse of power, and new legal institutions, rules, and regulations have gradually become accessible to the rural population, leading to different forms of collective action (Cai 2010, O'Brien 2002). Villagers make use of these symbolic as well as other resources to resist what they see as injustice; in so doing, they renegotiate the boundaries between the powerful and the powerless. Below, we discuss a few forms that are well documented in the literature.

Rightful Resistance: The Case of Xinfang (信访)

As the basis of social protests varies significantly, so do scholars' interpretations of them.

One line of argument emphasizes the use of legal rights to challenge the abuse of power (O'Brien and Li 2006). According to O'Brien (1996: 33):

> Rightful resistance is a form of popular contention that (1) operates near the boundary of an authorized channel, (2) employs the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful to curb political or economic power, and (3) hinges on locating and exploiting divisions among the powerful. In particular, rightful resistance entails the innovative use of laws, policies, and other officially promoted values to defy 'disloyal' political and economic elites. It is a kind of partially sanctioned resistance that uses influential advocates and recognized principles to apply pressure on those in power who have failed to live up to some professed ideal or who have not implemented some beneficial measure.

Note that the very presence of resistance independent of the officials indicates a significant departure from the Mao era, when all symbolic power was tightly controlled by the government officials and their representatives. This is indicative of the great dispersion of symbolic resources in the post-Mao era that become available to individuals and social groups for mobilization and contention.

We now focus on one particular form of rightful resistance, the so-called *xinfang* (or *shangfang* 上访), or 'letter petition', which is a distinct form of grievance resolution beyond the boundary of local work units. Individuals are allowed to write their petition and grievances to the higher authority. This has been an institutionalized form of grievance procedure since the early days of the People's Republic of China, and official *xinfang* bureaus were set up at different levels of public administration to receive and process such grievances. But it did not play a prominent role in the Mao era, because the strong organizations of workplace often dealt with these grievances before they arose beyond local boundaries.

But situations have changed significantly in the reform era. With the weakening of the work units under official control, and the weakening of local authorities in rural areas,

problem-solving capacities at the local levels have declined drastically. As a result, *xinfang* has become an increasingly popular strategy of filing complaints in China. Moreover, individuals go beyond merely writing letter petitions; many spend much of their life visiting these *xinfang* bureaus at different levels day after day, up to the highest *xinfang* bureau in Beijing, generating visible and tremendous pressures upon the political authority.

Although there is a noticeable shift from covert action to more vocal, open resistance, weapons of the weak are still widely practiced in rural areas. Partly because of the difficulty of organizing for resistance and partly because it is less costly nowadays to engage in individual-centered resistance, we observe more instances of individual-based but persistent resistance. *Xinfang* has merged as a popular strategy in this context. This trend has accelerated in the last decade as the Chinese leaders emphasized that 'stability maintenance' (维稳) was the priority of the local governments. In this light, *xinfang* activities have often been treated by governments at all levels as a threat to social order, or the coded words 'stability maintenance'. As a result, local governments spent tremendous time and energy to silence grievances by all means (吴毅 2007, 欧阳静 2011). In one township in the mid-2000s, one third of the staff of the township government worked on *xinfang*-related issues (申端锋 2010).

There is a sizable literature on *xinfang* in rural areas. Earlier studies focused on the rightful resistance or *weiquan* (protecting one's rights), in particular those weak groups that resorted to rightful means such as *xinfang* to voice their grievances and protect their rights. Yu Jianrong (于建嵘 2006) provided a case of rightful resistance in rural areas of Hunan Province. In this case, the leaders of popular contention aimed at the larger goal of protecting the villagers' rights in voicing their opinions as well as their interests, and engaged in mobilization to challenge local cadres. To do this they made use of the legal rights and procedures and drew from cultural

resources such as those role models of resistance in history.

These instances of resistance are not only rightful but also tactical. That is, villagers use both 'reason' and 'law' and other tactics in their interactions with authorities so as to gain an upper hand in their 'negotiations' (覃琮 2013). In this sense, *xinfang* is an intriguing, or one may say, twisted form of resistance. That is, it seeks solutions within the bounds of institutional rules by violating these rules. The main strategy is to draw the attention of the higher authorities to intervene into local problems. Since the institutional channel of *xinfang* was not intended to solve problems and is not capable of doing so, the best one can hope for is to draw the attention of the higher authorities to the local issues beyond the *xinfang* channel. For many who resort to *xinfang*, it provides a legitimate channel to get one's voice heard, a weapon of the weak to defy and challenge the local authority, with or without local problems solved or justice done. As a result, more symbolic actions such as large-scale public petition and repeated appeals are used to move beyond the boundary of *xinfang* in order to get the attention of, and induce interventions from, the higher authorities.

Since *xinfang* is one of the very few legitimate channels of voicing grievance, there are variations of *xinfang* activities for other purposes. In recent years, scholars have paid attention to so-called interests-driven *xinfang*; that is, an increasingly large number of individuals use the grievance procedure as 'hostage taking' to force local authorities to give in and provide better terms in problem solving (郭伟和 2014). Since the early 2000s, the central government leadership has put a great emphasis on 'stability maintenance'. *Xinfang* has been used as the barometer of the effectiveness of stability maintenance to evaluate local officials' performance. That is, a higher level of *xinfang* incidents was viewed by the higher authority as the ineffectiveness of local officials in governance, which may negatively affect

their career advancement. As a result, some individuals used the act of *xinfang* as a threat in their bargaining with local authorities, to gain material compensation and job opportunities, among other benefits. *Xinfang* became a strategy to generate political pressures upon local authorities to pursue private interests (田先红 2012).

Neither Rights Nor Interests: The Logic of Appropriateness

Legal rights and interests are not the only bases of resistance. Another important source of resistance is *lunli* (伦理), a Chinese expression of the social norms and expectations associated with one's social roles. Violation of these norms and expectations arouses resentment and grievances, and provides a basis for popular contention. This line of argument resembles the logic of appropriateness in everyday life and contention in response to injustice, which is different from either rightful or utilitarian orientation.

In a series of studies (应星 2007a, 应星 2007b, 应星 2009), sociologist Ying Xing explored grassroots mobilization and advocated a line of argument that focused on *lunli* (伦理), or the logic of appropriateness, which is embedded in the local cultural and moral context. He emphasizes the repertoire at the grassroots level, especially the role of the so-called grassroots leaders, who do not fully accept elites or unorganized grassroots individuals. Instead, they have their own goals and logic of action. Their grassroots mobilizations are characteristic of expediency in interest expression, duality in organization, and ambiguity in political orientation. His case studies revealed that collective action often arose spontaneously without careful organization. The grassroots leaders do not fit the typical 'elite' label in that (1) they do not have upward mobility opportunities; and (2) their identity is not always clear, some overlapping, some independent of, the official sphere of power (e.g., village committee).

Their logic of political action is carefully disguised to avoid directly challenging the political authority that may induce political repressions.

The importance of the logic of appropriateness in social mobilization and resistance is also echoed in other studies. Sociologist Zhe (折晓叶 2008) discussed what she called 'the resilient weapon of the weak', i.e., those moral claims and justifications, in the mobilization of nonconfrontational resistance. Some scholars also proposed similar ideas of noncontentious politics (陈锋 2014). For example, when implementing government policy on road construction, a village incurred heavy collective debts and led to the depletion of collective assets. These public projects, poorly managed, aroused strong resentment among the villagers, who engaged in noncooperation by refusing to take part in the payment of collective debt. When the village leader attempted to sell collective land on which an abandoned temple was sited to alleviate collective debts, the villagers voiced their grievance and resistance by calling for the restoration of the temple, and gathered a total of over RMB30,000 in donations overnight from all over the village, defeating the village leader's efforts (Zhou 2012).

It is interesting to note that *lunli*-based norms and expectations have always been part of everyday life in the Chinese culture, but its role in mobilizing for popular contention has become significant and salient only in recent years. Its effectiveness is related to the larger processes of institutional change, especially the shift from political power-based to multi-centered governance, where norms, expectations, and noncooperation have become increasingly important.

Varied as these different forms and motivations may be, their behaviors share a salient characteristic; that is, they are all directed toward the state and its local representatives, either in contention or in search for solutions. This recognition highlights the distinctive institutional context of China, where the central government is seen as the

center for problem solving and conflict resolution. This also points to another key feature of the larger institutional context, that is, relative to other social groups or institutions, the governments and their local representatives still hold considerable authority and resources in addressing various social and economic issues at local levels.

Other Forms of Resistance: The Role of Social Media and Technology

In recent years, the advance in communication technology and social media has introduced new dynamics in state–society interactions and in forms of resistance. On the one hand, new communication technology greatly extends the reach of the state in advocating its policies and political communication, and broadens its legitimate bases for governance. On the other hand, these officially stated claims and rationale may be at odds with the actual implementation processes and local adaptations. Moreover, communication technology and social media can also become the weapons of the weak by allowing their voices to be heard and their complaints coordinated (Yang 2013). Of course, relative to urban China, rural China is considerably less wired and has less access to the communication technology. But if urban China is indicative of the general trend, the significance of new communication technology and social media no doubt will play an increasingly critical role in new forms of resistance.

Indeed, communication technology and media have already been playing an important role in the organization of resistance in rural areas. The Wukan case below provides an excellent example in which both official media and international media played their salient roles in instigating, mobilizing, and perpetuating popular contention. Even in everyday life, media are now playing a larger role than before. In our fieldwork, we often heard local officials complaining that the villagers knew too much about their civil and legal rights, making it difficult for local officials to implement policies in a flexible way and to get things done at will. On the occasion of village elections, defiant villagers often held a copy of the village election law to challenge local officials' manipulation of election procedures. On those occasions involving negotiations between local officials and villagers over issues such as the public use of private property (e.g., site of electricity tower in one's field), or government subsidies to villager households, villagers became informed of the specific policies and regulations through the Internet, and they used this knowledge to challenge those behaviors of the local officials that are at odds with state policies.

AN ILLUSTRATION: THE WUKAN CASE

In the proceeding discussion, we have touched a range of issues, from state policies, local governments, to traditional organizations at the village level. To put these different pieces together, we now take a closer look at a major case of collective action in one village against the abuse of power by village cadres. This episode has been widely published in the Chinese social media. The main materials below are drawn from an elaborate investigative report by the research group from the School of Public Administration at Tsinghua University (清华大学公共管理学院社会管理创新课题组 2012).

Wukan is an administrative village in Guangdong Province. In April 2009, an anonymous flier circulated that charged the village cadres with corrupt behaviors. It triggered waves of discussions and mobilization among the villagers. Social media was used for self-organization under the official radar. The problems and issues had been accumulating over the previous two decades, as collective land was contracted or sold out without proper compensation to the members of the village. Another set of issues was related to an inappropriate village election through which the current cadres were put into office.

As some of the land leases neared their expiration dates, interested parties wanted to take part in sharing the benefits of future land use. Disputes over the use of collective land resurfaced as a result.

The mobilization led to a series of *xinfang* between June 2009 and March 2011, and these collective efforts proved to be unsuccessful in resolving the problems. Frustrations then turned to an effort to organize collective protest among the dissatisfied villagers. In September 2011, the villagers took to the street charging the village officials with corruption and abuse of power in land development, and held their protest in front of the city government. The demonstration erupted into violence, causing damage to the properties of the developers. Local police intervened and four organizers were arrested. The arrest led to more protests and confrontations between the villagers and police the next day, with more injuries on both sides.

The popular contention led to the paralysis of the village government and the emergence of new leaders in village self-organization, operating independently of the local government. During this period of time, self-organized village representatives negotiated with local officials to resolve corruption cases, but the responses from local government were seen as being far short of meeting the key demands of the villagers, especially regarding land development.

In response, the protest leaders organized a new round of protest events, which led to another collective *xinfang* on November 21, 2011. The demonstration was well organized, peaceful, and orderly. But the official news report was so biased that villagers were outraged, and they decided to organize their own media conference a few days later in their village, which was attended by a large number of nonofficial media, including international media. These events gave the local government an excuse to claim that the protest was manipulated by the 'enemy forces' outside China and the local government took confrontational measures by arresting the protest's organizers. The arrests, and a

subsequent death in detention, led to more confrontations between the villagers and local authorities.

In December 2011, the provincial government finally intervened and sent a delegation, which resolved this episode by penalizing those involved in the corruption. In the subsequent, open village election, a new group of village leaders were elected, formally closing this dramatic episode that involved extensive as well as intensive interactions between the villagers, and local and provincial governments, as well as involving both domestic and international media.

The Wukan episode involved a multitude of events of resistance, confrontation, negotiation, and crackdown. The resistance took different forms, from the weapons of the weak such as gossip and complaint in the early years, to spontaneous organizing, to effective self-organizing, coordinated demonstrations, and negotiations with the governments, to the use of formal institution of village election to reach the final resolutions. These different forms of resistance coexist in the reform era, reflecting the broad, multiple bases of governance in rural China in particular and in China in general. These forms and strategies are already available in the repertoire of response strategies, but their legitimate use and activation are contingent on the evolving conditions that emerge from the interactive processes among the villagers, local elites, and the governments at different levels.

It is also worth emphasizing that, although the central authority was not directly involved in this episode, there is no doubt that it has been the central target of social mobilization, either as the direct target or as the implicit, indirect one. However locally situated these actions of resistance were, the reaction of the higher authority, especially that of the top leaders, is the single most important factor on the minds of both those local elites initiating resistance and those local officials dealing with such resistance.

Finally, the boundaries among these forms and strategies are fluid and variable, again

depending on interactions between the participants and the political authorities. Such dynamics of interaction induce different forms of responses in future interactions. To a great extent the use of specific forms of resistance depends on the constraints imposed by the governments. Indeed, as some studies have shown, local governments' tactics in absorbing local residents into the system of social welfare may mute the rightful resistance (Chuang 2014). The dynamic, interactive process may give rise to different conditions that induce variable, and at times multiple, forms of resistance.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have surveyed different forms of resistance in rural China in the post-Mao era. In a comparative perspective, there is a large literature on the variety of ways in which the powerless resist the powerful – from social movements, collective action, and riots, to noncompliance and gossip, as illustrated here and in other chapters in this Handbook. How do we locate the varied forms of resistance in rural China in this larger landscape?

Forms of resistance provide an insightful lens through which to understand larger issues about power relations between the powerful and the powerless and to make sense of the evolving bases of governance. A central argument developed here is the reciprocal relationship between bases of governance and forms of resistance in rural China: the former provides stable channels of interactions, a repertoire of strategies, and solution spaces, which shape and induce forms of resistance; at the same time, resistance of various forms in turn contribute to changes in the bases of governance in a society. In this light, the various forms of resistance reveal equally various bases on which the political regime governs. These multiple bases shape the

various venues by which the state comes in touch with the citizens, and the powerful with the powerless, and induce different forms and intensity of resistance. For example, the rightful resistance noted by O'Brien and Li (2006) and consentful contention by Straughn (2005) indicate that, even in a repressive regime, the officially proclaimed rhetoric and rules may serve as a basis for individuals to articulate interests and engage in effective, often open, resistance. At the other extreme, the significance of infrapolitics, or hidden transcripts (Scott 1990), in the forms of gossip and noncompliance implies that these informal, small-scale acts carry political meanings in defiance of the domination of the powerful.

Research on the forms of resistance greatly broadens our understanding of the relationship between the powerful and the powerless. Social movement theories tend to focus on overt, organized protests and various tactics. Such strategies and actions are appropriate in a literal, democratic context where the articulation of interests from the bottom up is legitimate, and formal channels are readily available. However, in those contexts where the relationship between the powerful and the powerless is asymmetric, other forms of resistance become more meaningful and less risky that deny or weaken the legitimacy of the political regime, and constrain the arbitrary power of the powerful. This is an important insight, for it directs our inquiry into those areas that are often hidden from the official gaze, those hidden forms of resistance, whose meanings need to be interpreted and whose actions need to be made sense of.

By the same logic, an inquiry into the bases of governance helps us identify causal mechanisms that give rise to different forms of resistance. Different bases of governance shape different repertoires of strategies for resistance, as well as attach different costs and returns to these strategies, thereby affecting the likelihood that a strategy is activated.

The presence of the repertoire, or the specific 'tools' available in it, does not necessarily mean that they are equally available for activation. Indeed, in a given space and moment of time, there are different benefits and costs associated with these options; hence the critical importance of opportunity structures. And it is worth noting that opportunity structures are not 'out there'. Rather, they emerge and evolve as a function of the interactions among the parties involved. Empirically, as we have observed in this chapter, large-scale but uneven institutional changes have led to both temporal and spatial variations in forms of resistance. If the rise of the modern state in European liberal democracies has led to the grand trend of larger, more centrally oriented social movements, the varied forms of resistance in China seems to indicate an opposite direction.

Seen in this light, there have been considerable changes in the bases of governance in rural China as reflected in the forms of resistance over the last three decades. Historically, rural China was governed by the so-called minimalist state, and historically a variety of local mechanisms and institutions were in place for problem solving (Huang 2008). In the People's Republic, the Mao era witnessed the imposition of highly organized collectives as the bases of governance in rural areas, which hence greatly constrained and reshaped the repertoire of strategies for resistance. In the post-Mao era, in contrast, the sheer volume and the variety of forms of resistance in rural China have increased significantly, an indicator of the general relaxation of political control and the emergence of a civil society.

Moreover, a variety of institutions have emerged or revived for conflict resolution, ranging from bilateral negotiations, local authority intervention, and arbitration, to lawsuits in the courts, indicating fundamental changes in the bases of governance in rural China. Michelson (2007) found that, most of the time, conflicts are resolved during bilateral negotiations (47%), and only a very small

minority of the cases will reach the institutional channels of court, judicial offices, or administrative offices. Interestingly, economically distressed regions are more likely to resort to the legal justice system. He proposed a model of the 'dispute pagoda' along which both grievances and appeals, and forms of resistance gradually climb up. This model seems sensible in describing conflict resolution in the daily life of rural China, and is corroborated in other studies of conflict resolution in everyday life. Broadly speaking, these diverse paths of institutional channels may have succeeded in diffusing pressures of social inequality and distributional injustice (Whyte 2010). Nevertheless, we have observed, from time to time, large-scale resistance and contention challenging the abuse of power as in the Wukan episode.

To return to the issue in Tilly's quote at the beginning of this chapter: in what ways do the forms of resistance indicate continuity and changes in the bases of governance in China? Political scientist Andrew Nathan (2003) developed a line of argument on 'authoritarian resilience' to account for the capacities of the authoritarian state in China to adapt to changing conditions so as to survive crises and challenges. His discussion almost entirely focused on the strategies and tactics of the authoritarian state, with remarkable capacities in learning, in flexible adaptation, in institutional building, and in engineering economic growth; in so doing, the authoritarian state was able to gain legitimacy from the citizens through its economic performance. Following a similar logic, Cai (2008) also sees the emergence of the variety of resistance as an indicator of the capacities of the authoritarian state in accommodating political diversity while effectively maintaining its control.

Our preceding discussions suggest an alternative interpretation. We argue that the new forms and the larger scale of resistance reflect fundamental changes in the bases of governance in rural China. These changes have compromised and weakened the traditional

governance of the authoritarian state. In this sense, rural China has witnessed a quiet revolution from below. Take for example the new institution of village election. As the Wukan episode showed, this simple form of participatory democracy became the ultimate basis for conflict resolution among the villagers and between villagers and the political authority. In other instances, e.g., 'taking hostage' of local governments through the *xinfang* mechanism, the widespread resistance to agricultural taxes and fees of the 1990s, and tensions arising in land seizure in the process of urbanization, all these new forms of resistance and contention indicate considerable changes in the bases of governance, and the considerable extent to which the authoritarian nature of the state has been transformed, despite the familiar authoritarian power and even harsh, repressive measures often exercised even today. Instead of the resilience of the authoritarian state, we emphasize the extent to which the authoritarian state is being transformed, as reflected in the extent of change in the diverse bases of governance, and in the patterns of resistance in the everyday life experiences of its villagers and citizens.

A focus on patterns of resistance and their implications for the evolving bases of governance direct our attention to substantive social science research, to make sense of how China is governed not only on the basis of the official rhetoric or formal institutions but also, more importantly, on those micro events, dynamics of interactions, and considerable diversities at local levels. In this light, patterns of resistance have far-reaching implications for understanding power relationships and bases of governance, across spaces and over time, in a comparative perspective.

Notes

1 The '*hukou*' registration system, adopted in the early 1950s, divided the population in China into 'urban' and 'rural' categories, and prohibited, without official permission, mobility between the two categories. The large-scale flow of the migrant workers from rural to urban areas since the 1980s, although on a temporary basis, has greatly weakened the *hukou* system.

2 See also the unpublished working paper by Chen, Chih-jou Jay. 'Policing Protest in China: Findings from Newspaper Data'.

3 http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E7%93%AE%E5%AE%89%E9%AA%9A%E4%B9%B1 (accessed August 4 2016).

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