Literature Review of Popular Resistance in China (2015)

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Literature Review:

Popular Resistance in China

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**Introduction**

In this paper I review the dominant theoretical approaches that have been covered by scholars in literature on popular resistance in China—in general the popular theoretical models advanced by Western pioneers of social movement studies. I evaluate the merits and limitations of these approaches, as well as analyze points of contention and compatibility between them. Following that I identify a research gap of popular resistance studies—namely the relationship between cultural framing and legitimacy—and suggest how it deserves more attention in the field.

Thus from this perspective, I have identified 2 major trends amongst scholars in my review of the literature on popular resistance in China. These trends are (1) the application of political process theory to understand power struggles in popular resistance and (2) the emphasis of authors on the vulnerability of state legitimacy. I argue that the use of these approaches have resulted in significant understanding of collective resistance phenomena in China, and may be further strengthened by an understanding of popular resistance as *cultural* phenomena.

**Popular Resistance in China**

Scholars of popular resistance in China have noted an increase in movements across the nation since the post-Mao era (Chan, Backstrom, Mason 2014, Chen 2014, Perry 2001, Zheng 2002). Events of popular resistance offer us various insights into social life in China. For one, collective action in communist China differs significantly from its counterparts in democratic Western countries. The Chinese Communist Party plays a far
more explicitly pervasive and influential role in social life compared to other countries. From another perspective, collective action in China also reflects the fact that the state is by no means an all-powerful entity that people are helpless to resist. While the state does wield substantial power via intertwined ideological and institutional means, the presence (and increase) of popular resistance highlights the agency of Chinese people and the leads us to consider the role of these people in affecting social outcomes in China. Perry (2001) notes that the state has not simply repressed all civil resistance, but has employed a variety of responses to different groups. While repression has been employed against many protesters (such as the Falun Gong), in other cases the state has tolerated and even encouraged protests. Cai (2008) writes that “authoritarian governments do not rely exclusively on repression; they may also make concessions.” (p. 413). Studying popular resistance thus provides us with an interesting site to better understand the exercise of agency in unequal power relations in China, as well as the dynamics and limitations of state power.

**Political Process Theory**

Advanced by pioneering scholars of social movements such as Doug McAdam and Sidney Tarrow, political process theory lists three crucial aspects for social movements to take place. The three aspects are insurgent consciousness, organizational strength, and political opportunities. McAdam (1982) and Tarrow (2008) both stress the political rather than psychological nature of why contentious politics take place. Accordingly, the phenomena of collective action is seen to take place because of available political opportunities, rather than psychological motivations. From this perspective, the presence
of grievances among people are not sufficient to explain why collective action may take place. The mobilization of such grievances into action, as well as the organization of various individuals with grievances into a group are conditions which must be met for collective action to take place. Political process theory thus seeks to explain the phenomena of collective action as calculated power struggles in the face of otherwise overwhelming opponents.

This approach is seen clearly in the work of Li (2002), Cai (2002, 2008), and Li and O’Brien (1996) who all identify changes in the political opportunity structure as well as the perception of these new opportunities by people as factors that explain their actions of resistance. The authors are agreed in their approach to understanding popular resistance as political rather than psychological phenomena, highlighting examples of how grievances are mobilized via discourse to form collective action. For example, Li (2002) identifies the advent of democratic village cadre elections as a shift in the political opportunity structure. She then goes on to demonstrate how villagers’ perception of the quality of such elections influences their decisions to resist state officials or not. Cai (2002) states how laid-off workers’ decisions to strike were calculated choices based on the perception of whether there were leaders were able to communicate and fight for their demands. Chang and Cooke (2015), while not explicitly mentioning political process theory, explain the rise of the legislation of the right to strike as the result of the right opportunities and preconditions, similar to political process theory. In discussing rural resistance, Walker (2008) also raises the salience of insurgent consciousness as she highlights the emergence of a shared notion of class between poor peasants and peasants.
who have lost their land as being crucial to the rise of sustained peasant resistance.

**Application of Theory for China**

The influence of Western social movements theorists is obvious in the literature. Theories such as political process theory and Tilly’s (2004) ‘repertoires’ of protest are easy to identify and provide solid frameworks with which power struggles in popular resistance may be analyzed. However, it must be noted that many examples of collective resistance in China do not fit the criteria of Western social movement theories. Most significantly, the theorists mentioned above tend to view social movements as *sustained* collective action, whereas many examples of collective resistance in the literature do not span over long periods of time. This could be due to the swift intervention of state repression as well as the large pool of low-wage labour available in China as compared to the West, reducing the leverage that workers have in the long run. Bruun (2013) has argued that popular resistance in China is likely to be started by ‘trigger events’, somewhat returning to psychological explanations for collective resistance in contrast to the political process theory’s view of the rational political protester. He adds that resisters are first “driven by simple causes rather than ‘ideology’” (p. 240), signaling that popular resistance in China may not have long-term goals that are fuelled by ideology and hence have no interest in becoming long-term movements. Chen (2014) similarly notes that the significant increase in civil resistance has largely consisted of “localized, nonpolitical, and opportunistic claim-making activities” (p8) rather than larger political-ideological action.

Additionally, Chen (2009) cautions against Western emphasis on disruption as a primary
strategy of popular resistance, writing that “an overemphasis on disruption tends to obscure other mechanisms, such as persuasion publicity, and elite advocacy” (p. 451). He highlights the reciprocal relations between elites and the poor in China compared to frequent Western conceptions of such relations as fundamentally antagonistic.

**State Legitimacy**

Even more present in the literature than popular social movement theories is the issue of the legitimacy of the state. Despite the recognition of the state’s impressive influence and power, almost all of the literature references the vulnerability of state legitimacy that the state has to take into account when dealing with popular resistance. Glanville (2010) traces the concept of legitimate rulership to Ancient China, referring to Confucian conception of the mandate of heaven for the people’s benefit. Cai (2008) writes that in the case of authoritarian governments, “repression undermines the regime’s legitimacy” (p. 413), highlighting that the dynamics of state power are not simply ‘up to the state’. Chen (2009) describes various methods of protest which are in line with, rather than against state ideology. Such protests are effective in that they force the state to live up to its espoused ideologies. When the state makes concessions to uphold its ideologies, it demonstrates that its legitimacy is something vulnerable as well as requiring constant reinforcement. Chan et al. (2014) go further to argue interestingly that since the Tiananmen Square protests, “The purpose of protests has transformed from challenging the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party to informing upper-level of party members the blunders of local governments and local grievances.” (p. 105-106). This view is supported by Cai (2008), Li and O’Brien (1996), and Perrys’ (2001) findings
which depict a fragmented rather than monolithic state—particularly distinguishing
between the local and central government. Zhang’s (2015) writing offers insight into the
vulnerability and dynamics of state legitimacy: “The legitimacy of the CCP in the post-
Mao era is often said to be built on two pillars – sustaining economic growth and
maintaining social stability...That is to say, the Party’s pursuit of economic growth is not
the goal, but a means through which to strengthen the regime’s legitimacy and to
maintain its monopoly of political power.” (p. 15-16)

Cultural Framing of Legitimacy
Legitimacy is constantly referred to as a primary means by which the state maintains
power. Yet legitimacy is not a material resource which the state may keep hold of but is
socially-determined and vulnerable to public questioning at any time. Legitimacy is also
not something only the state seeks but resisters may also seek legitimacy in order to
mobilize support from the public or concessions from the state. Perception of legitimacy
however is a complex process, involving competing claims to legitimacy as well as media
representation (Zhang 2015). This paper argues that the primary way in which groups
seek legitimacy is through cultural framing. By drawing upon cultural meanings to frame
its interests and actions as legitimate, groups stand a higher chance of succeeding in their
aims. A lack of attention has been given to understanding legitimacy as the result of
cultural framing however. Most articles have taken legitimacy discourses for granted and
have let them ‘speak for themselves’, rather than investigate the cultural frames
employed by resisters (and state officials) in understanding why something is considered
‘legitimate’.
From this perspective, Zhao’s (2010) article on the role of culture in social movements offers significant insights into how we may study the relation between culture and legitimacy. Zhao identifies three ideal types of how culture may shape protester actions, via “interest and strategy, value and ideology, and instinct and habit” (p. 36). His identification of ‘interest and strategy’ which he calls the ‘tool-kit’ (Swidler 1986) mechanism, is highly similar to the concept of cultural framing I have mentioned above. The difference here is that Zhao emphasizes how actors using the cultural tool-kit are working within the cultural discourse, whereas my emphasis is on the agency and creativity of how actors strategically appropriate cultural discourses to their interests. Significantly, Zhao’s other two ideal types describe how culture shapes social actions on the level of conscious and subconscious belief. He argues that much of social movement literature has dismissed subconscious cultural belief as ‘irrational’ behaviour, rather than analyze it on the level of culture as taken-for-granted phenomena. Noting that these are ideal types that are often intertwined and convoluted in real life, Zhao’s theory nevertheless offers significant insight into the cultural dimension of collective resistance.

Building further on my proposed research gap, I look at Zhang’s (2015) concept of ‘legitimacy leverage’ in his study of worker resistance in China’s automobile factories. Zhang writes: “despite workers’ deep cynicism, the Communist Party’s official ideology and its public commitment to “safeguarding the legitimate rights and interests of workers,” provide Chinese workers with ready-made languages and legitimate claims on the basis of an ideology that the state could not rebut” (p. 17)
The recognition of state ideology as political opportunity here allows workers to make demands based on the legitimacy of their relationship with the state. This is possible through what Zhang calls ‘legitimacy leverage’ where workers employ the cultural-ideological discourse of the state itself—discourse which the state seeks to live up to for the sake of its legitimacy—so as to achieve their interests. Yu’s (2006) article depicts the cultural frames used by peasant resistance leaders in presenting their resistance as in line with state ideology and thus legitimate. In his article, a resistance leader declares to county authorities, “In order to implement the central government policies, I need to support the central government policies that are good to the peasants, so even if I die I am not afraid.” (p. 146). Here we see the peasant leader mobilizing popular cultural discourse of ‘the centre is good, the local officials are corrupt’. This is just one example of how cultural framing may be used to substantiate claims of legitimacy.

**Conclusion**

The work of Tilly, McAdam, Tarrow, and other influential social movement theorists have contributed greatly to understanding China’s popular resistance landscape, particularly in understanding why and how popular resistance is an increasingly normalized phenomena in a non-democratic and more explicitly repressive society. However—as with broader theoretical application in general—there are areas in which Chinese collective resistance does not fit neatly into Western models of viewing social phenomena. This gap is observed when we consider the difference in state-resisters relationships. The fragmented nature of the state, along with the general absence of independent and reliable NGOs and unions, present scholars with collective resistance
phenomena that at times demands more explanation than political opportunity can provide. The difference in Chinese versus Western approaches toward state legitimacy highlights this point. I thus propose greater attention be paid to culture as a key dimension (particularly cultural framing of legitimacy) in understanding these differences, as well as China’s culturally-distinct popular resistance phenomena.
References


