

Disguised Collective Action in China

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Abstract

How does civil society mobilize citizens in an authoritarian state that forbids organizations from coordinating collective contention? Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in underground labor organizations in China, this article theorizes a tactical innovation—disguised collective action—that lowers the cost of organizing contention under repression. Instead of forming organizations to facilitate collective action, organizations enable citizens to better contend as individuals. Departing from processes captured by the “dynamics of contention” framework, organizations act as unconventional mobilizing structures by coaching aggrieved citizens to make individual rights claims without engaging in perilous collective protests. Through a hidden pedagogical process, claimants are coached to deploy a repertoire of atomized actions that targets the bureaucratic mandate to maintain social stability and also appeals to officials’ moral authority. When effective, disguised collective action can secure concessions for participants while allowing activists to strike a middle ground between challenging authorities and organizational survival.

Keywords

authoritarian politics, contentious politics, mobilization, civil society, China, labor

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In extraordinary times, civil society can mobilize citizens to unseat authoritarian incumbents (Almeida, 2003; Bernhard, 1993; Bunce & Wolchik, 2011; Ekiert & Kubik, 2001; Gold, 1990; Havel, 1990; Weigle & Butterfield, 1992). Yet on an everyday basis, organizations typically face high barriers to coordinating contention in such states. Authoritarian rulers know that an organized civil society can challenge state power, so they seek to contain, co-opt, or channel organizations away from facilitating popular contention (Balzar, 2003; Gallagher, 2004; Hildebrandt, 2013; Unger & Chan, 1995; Wiktorowicz, 2000). When the risk of orchestrating protests and demonstrations is high, how do civil society groups organize citizens, if at all?

This article theorizes a tactical innovation—disguised collective action—that lowers the cost of organizing contention in an authoritarian state. Instead of forming organizations to facilitate collective action, citizens coordinate to better contend as individuals. In this way, they act as unconventional mobilizing structures by coaching aggrieved citizens to make rights claims without engaging in potentially perilous protests. This contrasts with the mobilizing processes captured by the dynamics of contention framework (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001) in that disguised collective action moves from organization to individual rather than vice versa. By channeling aggrieved citizens into individualized contention, activists strike a middle ground between challenging authorities and organizational survival.

Collective action takes place during two stages that are semi-hidden from state authorities: group formation and collective pedagogy. First, aggrieved individuals seize upon political openings within an authoritarian state to form illegal organizations. In polities where the freedom of association is restricted, forming organizations can be a risky endeavor (Boudreau, 2004; Johnston, 2006). Second, activists collectively coach aggrieved citizens on how to contend with state officials through a pedagogical process. However, at the point of confrontation, the organization recedes from view. Instead, activists send out contenders one by one to claim their rights using a repertoire of atomized actions. By challenging social stability and appealing to the moral authority of local officials, these actions lead to a process of rights bargaining between citizens and officials that yields more rapid gains than formal legal channels can provide. Thus, what appears from the state's perspective to be individual contention is actually the outcome of covert coordination.

This article analyzes disguised collective action in the setting of contemporary China, an authoritarian regime that to a certain extent tolerates popular contention (Cai, 2010; Chen, 2012; Lorentzen, 2013; O'Brien & Li, 2006; Weiss, 2014). However, one of the distinctive features of contention in China is that it largely lacks an organizational basis (Cai, 2010; Reny & Hurst, 2013). For the most part, protestors are “temporary communities” that

disband when their demands are addressed or when the state demobilizes them (Cai, 2010, p. 16). This absence of organizations from popular contention is paradoxical because China has undergone an associational revolution since 1989 (Howell, 2004; Saich, 2000). Since then, as many as eight million formal and informal organizations have emerged in China (Wang & He, 2008). Nevertheless, the party-state discourages civil society from participating in contention, in part by regulating and channeling organizations into social services delivery (Hildebrandt, 2013; Hsu & Hasmath, 2014; Simon, 2013; Teets, 2014) and in part by punishing organizations that mobilize collective action (Vala, 2012; Wright, 2008). My findings show that even under these conditions, civil society can pry open spaces for unconventional contention.

I observed disguised collective action in this setting during ethnographic study of underground labor organizations in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region located in Southern China during the Hu–Wen administration. Between 2009 and 2011, I engaged in participant observation inside these organizations as well as at the sites of contention—government offices and factory compounds, which yielded evidence of organizational activities beyond what activists discussed in interviews or promotional materials. In addition, I conducted 123 interviews as part of a larger project examining state–civil society interactions in contemporary China.¹

These findings contribute to scholarship on popular contention in non-democracies, mobilizing structures, and state–society relations in China. First, disguised collective action illuminates the palette of possibilities for popular contention in illiberal regimes. It is a form of “boundary-spanning contention” (O’Brien, 2003) that straddles the border between transgressive and contained action. However, unlike “rightful resistance” (O’Brien & Li, 2006) or the “weapons of the weak” (Scott, 1985), it is a form of *organized* activism in which civil society groups play a vital but under-the-radar role in coaching citizens to advance rights claims. As such, it blurs the lines between two distinct categories of contention: collective action such as strikes or protests (McAdam et al., 2001; Tarrow, 2011; Tilly, 2006) and individual action such as “everyday resistance” (Scott, 1985).

Second, this article theorizes a counterintuitive role for mobilizing structures. In the dynamics of contention framework (McAdam et al., 2001), organizations are among the mobilizing structures that bind movement participants together and amass the resources needed for sustained collective action (McAdam et al., 2001; Tarrow, 2011; Tilly, 2006; Zald & McCarthy, 1987). However, in many authoritarian states, civil society organizations are forbidden from mobilizing collective action and are instead channeled into social services provision (Alagappa, 2004; Wiktorowicz, 2003). This study finds

that rather than mounting the scale of disruption, activists guide citizens toward direct but individual confrontation with the state. Doing so increases the chances of organizational survival in an environment where the boundaries of political acceptability are not clearly defined (Stern & Hassid, 2012; Stern & O'Brien, 2012).

Finally, this article engages with research on state–society relations in China. Over three decades of reform (1979 to present), modernization has vastly transformed Chinese state–society relations. One of the major changes has been the explosion of civil society organizations that are permitted to operate with a degree of limited autonomy from government and party institutions (Gallagher, 2004; Ho, 2012; Howell, 2004; Lu, 2009; Shieh, 2009). Mutually beneficial partnerships between Chinese nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and local states have formed under these conditions, which allow organizations to survive as long as they provide useful social services and refrain from directly challenging the authority of the party-state (Hildebrandt, 2013; Mertha, 2008; Spires, 2011; Teets, 2014). At the same time, the state remains intolerant of organizations that attempt to mobilize collective contention, even when their actions are circumscribed and their demands are for incremental political change. Existing literature therefore rightly asserts that popular protestors either lack effective organizations or bypass them, relying instead on informal networks to mobilize (Cai, 2010; Chen, 2012; Hurst, 2009).

This study suggests that civil society may play a greater role in facilitating contention in contemporary China than previously conceived. While scholars have largely examined popular contention and civil society in China separately, this study sheds light on the surprising linkages between the two. Even when organizations eschew involvement in mass protests, they may be hidden behind the lone, committed contender. The cautious disguising of collective action behind individual acts renders this process largely invisible from the outside. The close study of underground organizations serving a restive social group—migrant workers aggrieved by abuses in the workplace—illuminates a process of recruitment, coaching, and dissemination of tactics used to disguise collective action in contemporary China.

Organizing Contention Under Authoritarianism

Previous scholarship has explored both collective and individual modes of contention in authoritarian regimes. According to resource mobilization theory, civil society organizations are one type of mobilizing structure that amass resources and motivate participants to take collective action (Zald & McCarthy, 1987). Organizations can facilitate the “bloc recruitment” of

participants into a social movement and provide communication networks (McAdam, 1982, p. 129). They also re-define collective identities in accordance with movement goals (McAdam et al., 2001) and serve as the settings for framing processes—shared interpretations of problems and solutions (Benford & Snow, 2000; Gamson, 1990; Snow, 2013). Given the right set of opportunities, citizens can appropriate existing organizations such as churches, unions, or official associations and transform them into instruments of contention (Ekiert & Kubik, 2001; Gold, 1990; McAdam, 1982).

Even in the absence of formal organizations, informal networks created by religious, friendship, kinship, and patron–client ties can serve similar purposes (Beinin & Vairel, 2011; Denoëux, 1993; Opp & Gern, 1993; Wiktorowicz, 2003). In repressive settings, informal networks can provide an “organizational grid . . . a type of associational life that remains outside the surveillance of the state” (Singerman, 2004, p. 156). In lieu of organizations, “passive networks”—tacit understandings of commonality between atomized individuals—link participants together (Bayat, 2013, p. 23). Likewise, in post-communist states with weak civil societies, interpersonal networks performed similar functions to civic organizations (Gibson, 2001). In China, informal networks have been the basis for a wide ranging of mobilization, ranging from student activism (Zhou, 1993) to “cellular activism” (C. K. Lee, 2007) to worker protest (Becker, 2012, pp. 1381–1382; Hurst, 2009, p. 120). These informal networks provide the “micro-mobilization contexts” (McAdam, 1988) for collective action.

Alternatively, citizens can engage in individual modes of resistance, largely eliminating the need for formal organizations to coordinate action. Such “weapons of the weak”—foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, and pilfering—rely on tacit understanding among individuals that “mimics or substitutes for formal organizations” (Scott, 1985). Because coordination is tacit, there are no opposition leaders to round up or organizations to disband. In China, where the party-state has long kept a tight reign on organized dissent (Walder, 1986; Zhou, 1993), citizens have variously deployed “collective inaction” (Zhou & Benford, 1995), ironic framing (Thornton, 2002), and online critique (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013; Yang, 2009) to defy authorities. The cumulative effect of such individualized action can achieve transformative social change. For example, millions of peasant households purposefully misinterpreted central directives and accelerated one of China’s most sweeping reforms—the de-collectivization of agricultural production (Kelliher, 1992; Zhou, 1996). Such individual contention bypasses the need for coordinating collective action altogether and relies instead on aggregate power to effect political change.

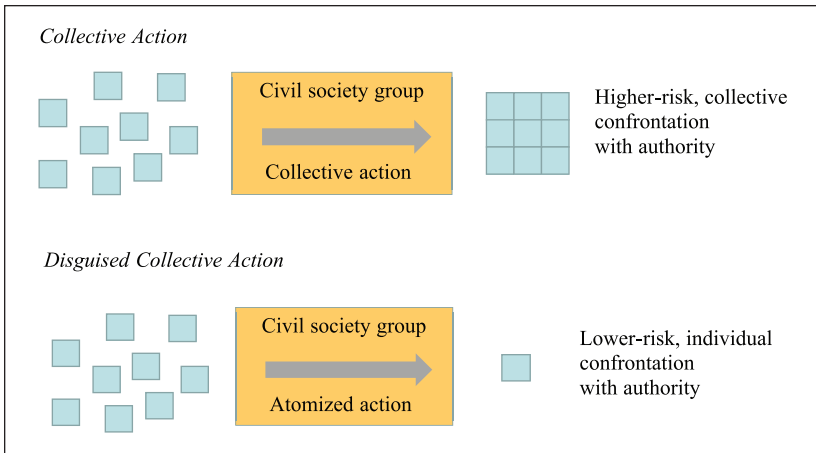


Figure 1. The role of civil society in facilitating contention.

Disguised Collective Action

Disguised collective action blurs the lines between collective and individual contention by transforming civil society organizations into mobilizing vehicles for the purposes of individual contention (see Figure 1). Confrontation with authority takes the form of atomized, individual actions, which constitute the “contentious performances” (Tilly, 2008) that induce officials to respond to aggrieved citizens. Although the pedagogical process is disguised, the atomized actions themselves are loud and performative confrontations between lone citizens and power holders. Disguised collective action therefore brings the aggrieved face to face with authorities in a highly dramatic, unpredictable, and solo encounter.

These actions are “atomized” in that they are deployed by lone citizens to induce local bureaucrats to respond to their demands. The repertoire of atomized actions ranges from verbal to performance threats, both of which signal to local bureaucrats that if the claimant’s grievances are not addressed, he or she will disrupt social stability. Verbal threats to officials may include, “I will take extreme measures (*jiduan shoufa*) if you don’t help me” or “I will call the media.” In the event that these verbal threats fail to elicit a response, activists may then instruct claimants to deploy performance threats. These threats range from staging an individual sit-in at a government office to stalking the factory boss. At the extreme end, it entails staging a “suicide show” (*tiaolou xiu*) such as threatening to jump off of one’s dormitory building. In

China, suicide can be seen as a form of social resistance (Lee & Kleinman, 2000). A “suicide show” is public and is designed to attract the attention of bystanders and the media.

Taken alone, these atomized actions appear to be louder, more public counterparts to “weapons of the weak” (Scott, 1985). However, in disguised collective action, they represent the outcome of a protracted pedagogical process in which activists coach participants how, when, and where to deploy these atomized actions. Through this process, activists transform organically devised atomized actions into strategic resources for contention. For example, whereas aggrieved citizens in China have committed suicide in resistance to forced demolition, land grabs, and labor conditions, among other issues, activists coach their participants to *threaten* instead of actually take these drastic measures. Activists may guide workers on the ordering of threats or combine actions depending on the idiosyncratic features of each case. These threats have credibility because of real cases of suicide as protest reported in the media (Chakraborty, 2013; Langfitt, 2013; McDonald, 2012). The following sections provide the empirical basis of these assertions, drawing on evidence from underground labor organizations in China. I begin with the formation of underground labor groups and then move into the tactical experimentation that led to the development of disguised collective action to mobilize their clients.

Underground Labor Organizations in China

This article analyzes the deployment of disguised collective action inside underground labor organizations in the PRD.² The demand for these organizations came in part from the inadequacy of other institutions to protect the rights of workers, particularly migrant workers. When in conflict with their employers surrounding industrial injury compensation, wages, labor contracts, work hours, or social benefits, migrant workers have few allies within the official union and the local state. A single state-run union, the All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), formally represents all Chinese workers and has been largely unable to defend their interests (Friedman, 2014; Gallagher, 2005; C. K. Lee, 2007). Without an effective union, workers must address their grievances through the legal institution of the labor dispute resolution system.³ However, this system has limited effectiveness because local authorities are mandated to attract investment and to maintain local social stability, incentives which run counter to faithfully implementing labor laws (Su & He, 2010). This gap between “the law in writing and the law in action” has created strong incentives for bottom-up worker mobilization (Gallagher, 2014, p. 83).

In response to the need for more effective advocates for migrant workers, a number of informal labor organizations emerged across China in the late 1990s and 2000s. Because these organizations were informal and in some cases unregistered, precise counts are difficult to obtain. My research identified 72 organizations across China in 2011, with the densest cluster of organizations in the PRD in Southern China (45).⁴ The rest were distributed across China, typically in large cities with high concentrations of migrants. In the PRD, the majority of labor organizations were founded by migrant workers who had endured the hardships of factory work, fought numerous labor battles, and had consequently acquired familiarity with the laws and procedures surrounding labor rights advocacy.⁵ They wished to “right injustices in society” (*da baobuping*) by assisting other migrant workers in claiming their labor rights.⁶ One prominent leader of an organization explained what prompted him to become a labor activist:

While I was working at a shoe factory in 1993 in Dongguan . . . There was a worker [in my factory] who peed on the wall after he got drunk. He got into a fight with a security guard who started yelling at him . . . the guard told the boss who said, “Which worker dares to create chaos in my factory?” The guard beat the worker to death . . . his family only got 50,000 RMB in compensation . . . [This made me realize that] workers have no value in the eyes of government and enterprise. (Interview, activist, 2010)

This migrant worker’s personal experience inspired him to found what would become one of the most active labor organizations in 2004. Like him, many other founders were also motivated by the sense that China’s legal system failed to protect the rights of migrant workers.

Labor organizations in the PRD assisted workers in disputes with employers over a range of issues including injury compensation, wage arrears, physical abuse by factory management, falsified labor contracts, social security, and illegally blacklisting workers.⁷ On a daily basis, activists also provided free legal counsel through telephone hotlines and in-person consultation. Organizations held regular legal education workshops where activists encouraged workers to demand their legal rights and offered pro bono legal aid. For example, one organization with 12 staff members was able to provide more than 30,000 individuals with legal consultation and more than 200,000 workers with educational pamphlets over 9 years.⁸ These legal services met a dire need of workers, many of whom had limited knowledge of labor rights and were daunted by the arduous labor dispute resolution process, which often entailed long delays.

A parallel goal was to provide social services that were difficult for migrant workers to obtain otherwise. Similar to work centers in the United

States that emerged in the 1970s to serve immigrant and marginalized laborers (Fine, 2006; Gordon, 2005), these organizations were often physically located in migrant worker communities. This allowed them to provide employment skills training, childcare, and social activities to their clients. These services met the practical needs of workers as well as the organizations' missions to forge collective identity among workers from different factories and native places. In addition, social activities provided a space for workers to exchange information about the labor conditions in their workplaces and to strengthen ties with other workers whom they otherwise would not have encountered.

Finally, a third goal of these labor organizations was to train workers to become future activists either as the staff of future organizations or as disseminators of labor rights knowledge. To this end, organizations cultivated networks of worker volunteers who were former beneficiaries. These volunteers assisted the staff members in recruitment, labor workshops, mock trials, and other cultural and social activities.⁹ Volunteers were also encouraged to attend the court hearings of other workers as a show of moral support and worker solidarity.¹⁰ They were called "volunteers" rather than members to avoid politicization, because formal membership implied that the workers belonged to an illegal union. This volunteer network served the dual purposes of expanding the organizations' influence in the worker community and training future labor activists.

As small, semi-legal organizations, these groups kept incomplete records of their staff and activities, which fluctuated with their financial solvency. The 11 organizations I directly studied in the PRD ranged from two to 12 staff members, the vast majority of whom were migrant workers.¹¹ Like many NGOs in China, these organizations operated illegally. While some registered as businesses with the Bureau of Commerce, others were completely unregistered. Thus, despite organizing workers' rights activities and maintaining a paid staff, these organizations had no legal standing in China. In addition to their lack of official legal status, a number of labor organizations in the PRD were "blacklisted" by the Guangdong Provincial Politics and Law Committee as agents of social instability in 2009.

Repression and Tactical Experimentation

Chinese labor organizations operated under a repressive political environment. The Chinese state was wary of labor organizations for at least three reasons: their advocacy for workers, their mobilizing tactics, and their funding sources. First, labor organizations claimed to represent the interests of workers, a symbolically important group to the Chinese Communist Party. The emergence of

grassroots labor organizations that were not connected to state or party institutions symbolically challenged the party-state's monopoly over representing the "proletariat" of 210 million migrant workers, a socially excluded and economically exploited population. Second, organizations coached some disgruntled workers to disrupt social stability, which was a key pillar of the Chinese regime's legitimacy (Shue, 2004).¹² Finally, many of these organizations' funding came from foreign organizations, which further raised the Chinese government's suspicions that "hostile international forces" were infiltrating domestic civil society groups to foster anti-regime movements. For these reasons, the party-state under the Hu–Wen administration (2003–2013) sought to contain the growth of labor organizations and to limit their mobilization potential.

Under such conditions, experiencing or witnessing state repression as well as activists' interpretations of repression spurred them to experiment with different tactics. Repression catalyzed the tactical experimentation process by signaling that overt collective action was dangerous and could result in organizational death. Organizations that staged collective action—such as signature campaigns, strikes, or demonstrations—became targets of crackdowns. For example, one prominent labor organization organized a public signature campaign in support of a proposed amendment to the labor law. Within 2 hr of soliciting thousands of pedestrians to sign a long red banner, the police detained the head activist and confiscated the banner. Just days before the organization was to stage a second signature campaign, local authorities raided the organization's headquarters and forced it to end operations. The lead activist described the process of the crackdown:

7 a.m. the day before our [signature campaign] event, we received an anonymous phone call asking where our office was located. We assumed it was a worker who needed help. As soon as we came to the door, there were three or four plain-clothed men who grabbed my cell phone from my hand. We thought they were the mafia . . . They treated us like criminals. Then they showed their badges and said we're from the Bureau of Civil Affairs. It turns out that eight different government agencies had coordinated the crackdown. They had mobilized some 40 people to storm our office.

(Interview, activist, 2010)

Rumor of this crackdown spread quickly among labor activists in South China. This witnessing of repression spurred a search for lower risk mobilization strategies.

However, witnessing state repression alone was not enough to engender tactical innovation; activists' interpretations of the causes of state repression

also influenced their tactical choice. When activists interpreted the cause of state repression (organizational closure) to be a direct consequence of staging overt collective action, as opposed to a periodic crackdown, they engaged in tactical de-escalation. Interpreting repression was critical in the Chinese political environment due to the ambiguity of the rules of the game. The local Chinese state did not communicate definitive boundaries for activism but instead induced activists to impose constraints on their own actions. For example, when State Security agents invited activists to “tea” (an informal interrogation), they did not specify which activities were off-limits and which were tacitly tolerated. Likewise, when the authorities closed down an organization, they did not inform activists of the specific reason for their closure, leaving the latter to conjecture which of their actions warranted acute retribution.

Activists learned that to increase chances of organizational survival, they needed to disguise organizational involvement in collective action. In the words of one activist who witnessed the closure of another labor organization which had staged a small-scale worker demonstration:

I think [the organization who organized the demonstration] could use even more radical tactics, but they should not do so using the name of their organization. They should make individual casework the primary focus of their organization . . . if you want to do long-term work, you can't lay conflicts out on the table. (Interview, activist, 2010)

This activist interpreted the crackdown to be a direct result of this organization's radical tactics—staging a demonstration. Thus, instead of radicalizing activists (Almeida, 2003; Della Porta, 1992; Deng & O'Brien, 2015; Goldstone & Tilly, 2001), repression induced Chinese labor activists to de-escalate their contentious tactics. The combination of witnessing state repression and interpreting the causes catalyzed a process of tactical experimentation that led to the innovation of disguised collective action.

Pedagogical Process: Coaching Atomized Action

Instead of taking to the streets with pamphlet or bullhorn in hand, activists concealed the pedagogical process of coaching atomized actions from the public and the state. This coaching took place within the confines of the organization's headquarters, which were often in unmarked apartment buildings with no plaques indicating the organization's identity. The pedagogical process entailed two components: educating citizens on their legal rights and coaching them to claim these rights as individuals using both legal and

extralegal means. Although the legal workshops were purportedly about legal education, they actually combined legal education with instruction on deploying extralegal tactics to claim rights. Providing this extralegal means of rights redress was critical in the Chinese context because legal institutions often failed to address workers' grievances.

Pay It Forward,¹³ an underground labor group in Southern China, coached atomized actions through its legal workshops. These workshops provided platforms for workers to practice grievance articulation, a prerequisite for verbally confronting authorities. On the surface, the organization offered monthly legal lectures, daily visits to injured workers in nearby hospitals, pro bono legal aid, and occasional social events. But their "legal services" also functioned to instruct workers on pursuing extralegal means of rights redress.

Their legal workshops drew 30 to 50 attendees, the majority of whom were male workers between 15 and 55 years old. On the day of one such workshop in 2010, workers filed into the office. The all-male staff invited them to sit on little stools placed in a circle and instructed each worker to stand up, introduce themselves, and articulate their problems to the crowd. Speaking in front of a large group was a daunting experience for many factory workers, as many of them did not have formal education beyond elementary or secondary school. Because the inability to clearly articulate grievances is a critical barrier to making rights claims (Fu, 2009), so activists taught workers how to construct a narrative of their grievances and demands. They coached workers to reverse power hierarchies in their minds and to demand their rights as citizens rather than as supplicating subjects. For example, a lawyer taught workers to approach officials with confidence:

When you go to the labor bureau, you should speak with a loud voice and as if you've got all the reason in the world. Workers are the ones keeping the civil servants employed; not the other way around. So don't speak like you're begging them to do a favor. The first step to rights protection (*weiquan*) is to speak up! (Participant observation, legal workshop, 2010)

Throughout this process, workers learned not only the law but also how to confront bosses and labor bureau officials. Staff members also taught them the biases of the legal system, thereby breaking script with the state's official propaganda about the law as a weapon:

The law is written for the rich . . . We need to do things our own way, from our own perspective. Sometimes, we have to use forceful means . . . We don't discourage using illegal methods to protect your rights. (Participant observation, legal workshop, 2010)

Critique of the labor law was followed by coaching workers how to deploy the repertoire of atomized action. The heart of the pedagogical process involved presenting narratives that demonstrated the efficacy of atomized action. These narratives communicated to citizens that atomized action delivered; it granted individuals their rights often more rapidly than the legal system could. During each legal workshop, activists vividly recounted stories of workers who wielded atomized action and triumphed. A classic narrative that activists used as a pedagogical tool was that of a female migrant, Li, a 26-year-old waitress at a restaurant in the suburbs of a city in Guangdong Province. In 2008, she injured her hand while working at a factory, and her boss had refused to pay for medical treatment. Activists first taught her about her legal right to injury compensation; then they assisted her in filing claims through legal institutions. When legal channels failed to yield results, they coached her to engage in a series of tactical escalations. She charged into the local labor bureau to confront the Labor Bureau Chief. Even after making a scene at both the labor bureau and at her factory, Li still did not receive any compensation. With few other options, she escalated the threat by staging a “suicide show”:

I became so angry, I went back to the factory dormitory and was going to jump off the building, take down the labor bureau with me, see if they die! Then somebody dialed 110 [the emergency line]. 110 came and tried to mediate with the factory, [they] said that if someone dies from the dispute, the factory’s going to have to pay. So they [the police] called up the district labor bureau; they were all there. A few days later, the labor bureau called to ask if I wanted to mediate in private or if I wanted to get my proof of industrial injury done [the first step of the legal channel for industrial injury compensation] (Interview, worker-participant, 2010)

Although Li was previously brushed aside by labor bureau officials, her suicide show caught their attention; neither the police nor the labor bureau wanted a death on their hands. A worker’s suicide would not only disturb social order but also attract unwanted publicity over the local labor bureau’s failure to protect workers’ legal rights. Li eventually received a sizable payment for her injury.

Activists used her case repeatedly as a pedagogical tool before stunned audiences at legal workshops. Her case cast light on not only how workers used atomized action to target the local state but also what lessons they learned from such a rights activism strategy. Li learned that the law was useless and that extralegal strategies, such as atomized actions, were more effective in claiming rights. Activists affirmed this message by narrating her

experience repeatedly during legal workshops and encouraging other workers to follow her example.

Atomized Actions and Rights Bargaining

Disseminating these narratives was a core element of the pedagogical process, but actual contention took the form of atomized actions which, when used effectively, initiated a process of “rights bargaining.” This was an informal institution in which the local state and social actors including the contender, the employers, and activists negotiated over the price of legally guaranteed rights. In this negotiation, legal rights were transformed into commodities to be haggled over between state and society. Rights bargaining rarely resulted in the full implementation of legal rights, instead delivering a compromise between the various stakeholders (Chen, 2012; C. K. Lee & Shen, 2011; C. K. Lee & Zhang, 2013). Bureaucrats ended up “paying off” contenders by persuading a third party to offer the citizen partial compensation. The citizen, in turn, retracted his or her threat to call journalists, to threaten suicide, or otherwise to disrupt social order. As a result, the local state preserved social stability in exchange for addressing citizens’ claims.

The case of Ms. Chang illustrates how activists coached workers to threaten officials and the ensuing rights bargaining process. Chang suffered a severe arm injury while operating machinery at her factory, and her boss refused to pay for medical treatment. She first sought the township labor bureau and arranged for mediation with a factory representative, but this was ultimately unsuccessful. The severity of Chang’s injury prevented her from waiting for the formal labor arbitration process to conclude, which would take at least 45 days. Under such circumstances, she had two choices: continue waiting or deploy extralegal actions. At the labor organization’s office, she told activists that she was prepared to bring a bucket of gasoline into the labor bureau as a threat. The activist remained silent at first, neither encouraging nor dissuading her, but when she again sought his approval, he replied, “Go ahead, but be careful not to hurt yourself.” He also encouraged her to exhaust all of her resources at the local government offices first before she took extreme measures. He instructed her to take the following actions:

Go to the labor office, then to the labor union, then to the Women’s Federation. If all else fails, call up seven or eight of your hometown folks or relatives and stage a sit-in at the labor office. (Participant observation at *Pay It Forward*, 2010)

Chang left *Pay It Forward* with a final piece of advice from the staff member: “If they really don’t help you, tell them your arm is rotting and that you can’t wait any longer” (participant observation at *Pay It Forward*, 2010). Despite visits to the Women’s Federation and the local chapter of the state-run trade union, Chang was told nothing could be done about her case besides waiting for labor arbitration. As a last resort, she confronted the official in charge at the township labor bureau:

Chang: But my arm can’t wait! If it becomes paralyzed, then even if you pay me 100,000 yuan it’ll be useless.

Official: [irritated and yelling] So, what do you want me to do? I can’t take cash straight out of the boss’ drawers and give it to you!

Chang: But you guys are responsible for doing something. If you’re helpless, then I’m even more helpless. *If you push me like this, then I can only take extreme actions!* I’m not leaving [this office] today!

Official: Be my guest! (Participant observation, township labor bureau, 2010)

The official’s impassive response to her first threat left Chang speechless. Following further text message instructions from the activist, she went directly into the Bureau Chief’s office to appeal to him.

What ensued was a process of rights bargaining in which two officials pleaded with Chang to empathize with the government’s difficulties and impressed upon her that both the state and workers needed to make mutual allowances. The officials re-framed the issue, turning the rule of law into a personal negotiation. The conversation between Chang and the Bureau Chief illustrated the dynamics of rights bargaining:

Bureau Chief: My knife is only so long, understand?

Chang: If you aren’t willing to help me solve this . . .

Bureau Chief: It’s not willingness; it’s a matter of capability. I can’t rob the factory to pay for your medical expenses . . .

Chang: Okay, okay. So I said it wrong. Your knife can’t slaughter that pig, right? If even you guys don’t have that ability, then I am even more helpless. Aren’t you here to serve workers? If you aren’t willing . . .

Bureau Chief: Didn’t I already say? It’s not that we’re not willing; it’s just not in our capacity to . . .

Chang: I know, but you have to consider it from my point of view. I can wait but my arm can’t. I’ve already been injured badly; this is going to affect me for life!

Bureau Chief: See if you can borrow some money from friends or relatives

Chang: *If you push me to the edge then I will have to take extreme actions . . . then you'd have to bear the consequences.* (Participant observation, township labor bureau, 2010)

In this bargaining process, the official agreed to compromise by “assisting” the worker in seeking her claims. The rule of law was not invoked. Instead, the legal right to injury compensation was turned into a personal favor bestowed upon Chang by benevolent officials. Under such circumstances, Chang’s only weapon was an ambiguous but powerful verbal threat: “If you leave me with no other options, I’ll take extreme actions.” The Bureau Chief first denied any responsibility for her actions. Yet a few minutes later, he ordered a team of labor inspection officers to investigate Chang’s factory.

The inadequacy of the rule of law—exemplified by the long wait for arbitration—necessitated the escalation of atomized actions. Chang’s persistent threats to take extreme actions induced the Bureau Chief to respond. Unlike the inferior-level official, he would have been held accountable for the mishandling of an emergency incident disrupting social stability. Throughout this process, the activist played a critical role in coaching Chang behind the scenes. Although Chang eventually won her lawful right to employer-paid medical treatment, the process of rights activism was a painstaking and risky one of bargaining for rights that were nominally guaranteed by the labor law.

I encountered numerous similar cases of workers coached by labor activists to deploy atomized actions during my fieldwork in South China. The examples above illustrate one of the most vexing and life-altering problems that workers face: workplace injuries that can permanently debilitate. Although it may appear that injured workers would pursue individual forms of activism even without the aid of an organization, many workers needed considerable encouragement and guidance from activists to take action.¹⁴ The deployment of atomized actions often incentivized local state officials to respond faster to citizen demands, even if the response fell short of full implementation of the labor law.

Atomized Actions and State Response

Why do atomized actions elicit a response from the state? When an aggrieved citizen deploys the repertoire of atomized actions, she both makes a public disruption of social order and lodges a symbolic appeal to the moral authority of local bureaucrats. Maintaining social stability is a key bureaucratic mandate (Birney, 2013) and a pillar of the Chinese party-state’s legitimacy (Shue, 2004).¹⁵ Accordingly, the performance of local officials (provincial, city, district,

township, and villages) was evaluated based on how well they managed social instability. The one veto rule (*yipiao fojue*) stipulated that any outbreak of “mass incidents” such as collective protests, strikes, or petitions would discount the local bureaucrats’ achievements in other areas, including economic growth (Edin, 2003; Liu & Tao, 2007; Sun et al., 2010; Tsui & Wang, 2004).

While collective contention calls for immediate dispatch of the hard and relational repression (Deng & O’Brien, 2013), atomized actions are more contained threats, which usually elicit soft repression, such as buying off the individual protestors and harassing the organizations involved. However, despite their limited scale, atomized actions can nevertheless induce official response by creating a public disruption. If the individual contender carries out the threat, such as committing suicide by jumping off a building, he or she would threaten social stability by attracting a crowd of bystanders and negative media attention. Moreover, there is a possibility that if the officials did not handle the case effectively, a citizen’s public suicide would trigger further social unrest. This would, in turn, negatively impact the performance evaluation of the local bureaucrats in charge. Thus, without having to rally other protestors, the individual wielder of atomized actions elevates the nature of the grievance from a routine procedure that could be dealt with inside the Labor Bureau into an emergency incident requiring immediate state response.

Second, atomized actions make a public appeal to the moral authority of local officials. This performativity distinguishes atomized actions from other forms of quiet resistance such as “weapons of the weak” (Scott, 1985). Atomized actions are meant to attract public attention, which is amplified by the possibility of media coverage. Unlike “rightful resistance” (O’Brien & Li, 2006), performances of suicide threats, sit-ins, and other apparently desperate acts are not couched in any legitimizing language of the central or local state. In fact, the performance of threat is purposively public and loud to attract audience participation from journalists to bystanders and other aggrieved citizens. These “contentious performances” (Tilly, 2008) publicly pose the question, “What kind of a state would force its citizens to threaten to jump off of a building to claim his or her basic legal right?” The combination of these two mechanisms—the threat to social stability and the appeal to moral authority—can induce officials to respond to atomized protestors.

The Efficacy and Impact of Disguised Collective Action

To be sure, not every atomized protestor succeeds. The effectiveness of atomized actions in winning compensation depends on a confluence of idiosyncratic factors, such as how credible an individual claimant appears in uttering

the threat, the ranking of the state official threatened (whether he or she is a low-level bureaucrat or a leader whose reputation is at stake), media involvement, and the persistence of the individual worker. Even if all of these conditions are favorable, there is still a possibility that officials or factory management may call the bluff of worker threatening to take action and ignore the challenge. After all, official inaction—the purposeful ignoring of popular protest—is a common response to popular contenders in many authoritarian states (Bishara, 2015), and it is easier to ignore an individual contender than a mass of protestors. Thus, atomized actions are far from fool-proof tactics to secure gains under any condition.

Moreover, even if atomized actions succeeded in securing compensation in the short term, they may lose efficacy over the long term as the state absorbs this form of contention through paying off or demobilizing individual claimants. Already, local authorities have routinized many forms of popular contention, including protests, strikes, and group petitions by using a “carrots and sticks” approach—a combination of compensation and repression (Chen, 2012; C. K. Lee & Zhang, 2013; Su & He, 2010). Much like collective protest, atomized actions risk becoming part of this routinized transaction between the state and society, which can result in the de-politicization of protest as citizens become satisfied with monetary payoffs rather than consequential socio-political change. In fact, atomized actions perpetuate the routinization of rights bargaining between state and society in an authoritarian state where negotiating over the price of rights is part of a larger institution of protest control (Chen, 2012). In this sense, these labor organizations could be seen as unwitting tools of state domination.

Given these considerations, is disguised collective action a compromised mode contention that pales in comparison to its collective action counterpart? To address this, one must conceptually distinguish the goals of atomized actions from those of the broader tactic. If one were to evaluate this tactic solely on the basis of the gains won by successful atomized threats, then it may indeed appear to be underwhelming next to labor strikes or protests. The scale of disruptions matters for protest success (Cai, 2010), and at best, atomized actions can win significant compensation for one individual at a time. However, the ultimate purpose of disguised collective action is not just to win compensation for its participants but also to lower the cost of coordinating contention in a repressive state that forbids these organizations from operating. Accordingly, the impact of this tactical innovation should be evaluated on two additional criteria: organizational survival and the formation of collective consciousness.

First, the organizations that deploy disguised collective action are relatively resilient. Unlike temporary protest communities (Cai, 2010) that

disband at the conclusion of an episode, underground labor organizations are engaged in a long-term struggle with the state. They have been able to survive despite repression in part because strategic adaptations. Even though disguised collective action unquestionably challenges authorities, it still sends a signal to state officials that activists understand and abide by the informal boundaries of activism—the forbidden terrain of mobilizing direct collective action. Furthermore, bureaucrats on the receiving end of disguised collective action often cannot distinguish between acts coordinated by underground organizations and those that are purely autonomous. Thus, even though underground groups are monitored and occasionally infiltrated by the security apparatus, they can still disguise their involvement from agencies that directly interact with aggrieved citizens, such as the courts and labor bureaus.¹⁶

Second, the pedagogical process of disguised collective action fosters collective consciousness. Labor organizations in the PRD teach their participants to claim equal citizenship in a polity that institutionally excludes migrants from enjoying equal social benefits. In the hidden pedagogical process, activists create and disseminate frames—collective interpretations of problems and solutions (Benford & Snow, 2000)—that draw attention to this broader struggle for equal citizenship. They inspire workers to think about the structural factors that caused them to suffer—collusion between business and the state, lax implementation of laws, and the state policies that contribute to growing inequality of wealth and opportunity. They thus disciple participants to identify themselves as rights-bearing citizens rather than as subalterns (*di ceng*). They also call upon participants to “pay it forward” by disseminating tactics through informal networks at their workplaces and to become volunteers after their own cases were resolved.

This transformation in citizenship consciousness is significant in light of the importance of social citizenship in China’s political and cultural context. Since imperial times, social citizenship—the protection of the basic right to subsistence—has been a cornerstone of the Chinese state’s legitimacy (Perry, 2002; Perry & Goldman, 2007). In post-reform China (1979–present), the party-state has championed lifting of hundreds of millions out of poverty as its primary achievement. Yet it has institutionally excluded migrants from enjoying equal social rights (A. Chan, 2001; K. W. Chan, 2012; Fong & Murphy, 2006; Pun & Lu, 2010; Solinger, 1999). Organizations play a role in motivating marginalized subjects to demand the right to *equitable* social citizenship beyond the right to a basic level of subsistence. Thus, even as these organizations are channeling citizens into individual forms of contention, they are also instrumental in forging collective consciousness and propagating citizenship rights.

Conclusion

In a high-capacity authoritarian regime like contemporary China, civil society must invent new ways of organizing that lower the political cost of everyday contention. This article presented a counterintuitive dynamic of civil society organizing, challenging the assumption that organizations primarily facilitated collective contention. Disguised collective action is a tactical innovation that enables activists to cloak the group element of organizing behind a facade of atomized actions. By coaching citizens to threaten local stability through “suicide shows” or other disruptive threats, organizations induce local bureaucrats to engage in rights bargaining, which results in more rapid concessions to citizens than would be obtained through formal legal channels.

This study documented disguised collective action among underground labor organization, but similar innovations may emerge among other organizations both within China and elsewhere. Three types of environments are conducive to disguised collective action. First, an opening in the political opportunity structure is necessary for the emergence of even semi-autonomous groups under authoritarian rule. In a totalitarian regime like North Korea, underground groups would presumably be unable to form, let alone organize disguised contention. Only when citizens have access to mobilization resources, including informal and formal organizations, can they begin to escalate protests (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). In partially liberalized authoritarian regimes like China, citizens can take advantage of the political opportunity to form their own groups, even when such organizations lack official legal standing.

High political risks to organizing collective contention are also conducive to the emergence of disguised collective action. Although protests are not uncommon in contemporary China, it remains extremely risky for civil society groups to organize collective protests or demonstrations. Working under this constraint, other groups in China have strategically chosen to hide collective action. Similar to underground labor organizations, protestant house churches in China are extremely vulnerable to police crackdowns. They therefore face a similar challenge of keeping their collective coordination largely hidden from the state. In 2012, when leaders of one of Beijing’s most prominent underground churches were detained by police, the church covertly coordinated their members to visit detained leaders one by one. When the police detained one visitor, another would follow until the local police station was overcrowded and was forced to release the church members (Interview, church member, 2012). This collective coordination of atomized protest resembles the disguised collective action of underground labor groups.

Freedom of information activists have also pursued variants of disguised collective action. Following the passage of China’s freedom of information

laws in 2008, activist Wu Junliang organized a group of citizens to solicit information disclosure from the government but under the guise of individual action. Wu maintained in media interviews that he was not part of an organization, and he called the individuals whom he employed “volunteers.” These “volunteers” devoted up to 10 hr per week to sending letters requesting disclosure on government spending *in the name of individuals* rather than in the name of an organization (Distelhorst, 2013). By obfuscating the organizational element of their activism, freedom of information campaigners were attempting to lower the costs of contention, just like their counterparts in labor activism. Further research may identify similar tactics in other civil society groups dealing with environmental, AIDS/HIV, gender, and ethnic minority advocacy, all of which face high political risks if they organize overt collective contention.

Finally, disguised collective action is more likely to be adopted by activists with high stakes in organizational survival. In the case of labor organizations, mainland Chinese activists who were former low- or semi-skilled factory workers had high stakes in organizational survival because labor activism was their primary source of income. With scarce financial resources and extremely limited access to policy makers, these activists faced the challenge of delivering tangible compensation for their clients while also prolonging organizational survival. This drove them to experiment with disguised collective action. Likewise, in a different context, one would expect entrepreneurially minded leaders with high stakes in organizational survival and few resources to adopt disguised collective action. Conversely, one would expect leaders with lower stakes in organizational survival to continue to mobilize overt collective action, even if such actions came at a high cost.

Disguised collective action challenges the assumption that organization-driven contention is synonymous with overt collective action. When the cost of collective action is forbiddingly high, activists may choose to strategically de-collectivize contentious action at the point of encounter with the state. This counterintuitive mobilization process of *from-group-to-individual action* contrasts with the more commonly recognized *from-group-to-collective action*. In the midst of repression, disguised collective action allows civil society to organize citizens under duress. By channeling citizens into atomized protest, organizations can champion citizenship rights and foster collective consciousness without mobilizing the masses.

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Notes

1. A discussion of research design and methods is provided as an online appendix to this article. This research protocol was approved by Oxford University, Central University Research Ethics Committee.
2. By referring to these organizations as “underground,” I mean that they lack legal standing and are considered by the state to be threats to social stability. A comparable unit of analysis is China’s “underground” protestant churches that also operate illegally and are harassed by local authorities (Reny, 2014; Vala, 2012).
3. The labor dispute resolution system involves mediation, arbitration, and litigation and can entail a lengthy legal process for workers claiming their legally guaranteed rights.
4. This estimate is based on a compilation of organizations identified from my fieldwork in 2009–2011 and those identified by other scholars. See C. K. Lee and Shen (2011), Zhang and Smith (2009), He and Huang (2008), and Huang (2006). The methodological appendix explains how organizations were identified.
5. Out of 31 PRD organizations with recorded data on founders’ identity, 18 were founded by migrant workers. The remaining organizations were founded by Hong Kong activists and domestic scholars, lawyers, journalists, and former entrepreneurs. See methodological appendix for further discussion.
6. One exception is the well-known Institute of Contemporary Observation founded by the scholar Liu Kaiming.
7. A common dispute that activists assisted in was claiming injury compensation, which is perhaps the most complicated and lengthy type of labor dispute in China. Many founders and activists were themselves formerly injured factory workers.
8. This number should be interpreted as an upper bound because activists have incentives to inflate their clientele reach. See methodological appendix for an extended discussion on clientele impact.
9. This aspect is somewhat similar to mutual aid associations that emerged during the late 19th century in Italy, France, and Britain (Putnam, 1993). Although their manifest purpose was apolitical, both types of organizations nevertheless served to generate collective consciousness (Putnam, 1993).

10. These were sometimes contentious events, as court authorities felt pressured by the presence of workers inside the courtroom, fearing that they may trigger social instability should the ruling be unfavorable (participant observation, district court, 2010).
11. Due to the fluctuating nature of these organizations, existing studies vary in terms of number estimates. In the Pearl River Delta (PRD), estimates range from 30 to 35 (Xu, 2013) to 25 to 30 (He & Huang, 2008) to 30 to 50 (Franceschini, 2014). Howell (2015) reports that interviewees gave estimates of 40 to 100 organizations in all of China. See the online appendix for an extended discussion of organizational size.
12. This is particularly the case for labor organizations in the PRD, which adopted more radical tactics than their Beijing counterparts. For a discussion of Beijing-based labor organizations, see C. K. Lee and Shen (2011).
13. All names of organizations and individuals are pseudonyms.
14. Although injured workers are more likely to pursue individual forms of activism even without the aid of an organization, this group could also gain significant leverage acting collectively (through collective petitioning or demonstrations) precisely because of the grievous nature of the abuse. However, the organizations channeled them into individual contention. Moreover, the labor organizations featured in this study dealt with a range of labor issues beyond workplace injury including employers' failure to pay wages, false labor contracts, forced time off, and physical abuse by factory management, among others.
15. Under the Hu–Wen administration (2003–2013), investment in maintaining internal security was exceedingly high, surpassing the military defense budget (Blanchard & Ruwitch, 2013).
16. Even so, disguised collective action does not eliminate the risk of repression. Activists are regularly invited out to have “tea” with the state security (informal interrogation) and are occasionally arrested by local police. Yet because of an ideological and personal commitment to advancing labor rights, they persist in their activism. When their organizations are forced to close in a particular jurisdiction, they relocate to other jurisdictions and continue to operate. As a result, some of these organizations have been engaged in a sustained struggle with local authorities for almost two decades, far outlasting the duration of episodic collective protests.

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