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### The Unknown Terrain of Social Protests in China: 'Exit', 'Voice', 'Loyalty', and 'Shadow'

Johan Lagerkvist<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Asian, Middle Eastern and Turkish Studies, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden

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# The Unknown Terrain of Social Protests in China: ‘Exit’, ‘Voice’, ‘Loyalty’, and ‘Shadow’

JOHAN LAGERKVIST

*Department of Asian, Middle Eastern and Turkish Studies, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden*

**ABSTRACT** *As many as 180,000 social protests may take place in China every year. How should we conceptualize and explain the widespread phenomenon of social protests that take place in a situation where civil society is generally described as contained? An investigation of the Wukan incident, a specific protest that caught worldwide attention in 2011, shed new light on this paradox. The findings theorized in line with Albert Hirschman’s concepts of ‘voice’, ‘exit’, and ‘loyalty’ point to the existence of a fourth strategy and condition, ‘shadow’, introduced to better understand the actually existing non-registered groups that operate in the unofficial civic domain.*

**KEY WORDS:** Social protest, social media, China, political legitimacy, collective action, clans

## Introduction

When the world in 2011 witnessed the reverberations of the Arab Spring and the Jasmine democratic revolutions as they rippled through the Middle East, projections about their further spread to East Asia circulated in Western mass media. Long before the spring descended into a winter of coups, ethnic conflict, and war, it was already clear that this particular wave of democratic protest would barely reach the People’s Republic of China (PRC), ruled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Yet authoritarian China was, and continues to be, a country brimming with social protests. The estimates vary, but every year as many as 180,000 protests may take place.<sup>1</sup> This staggering number of outbursts of collective action indicates that serious challenges to the ruling party and its political legitimacy exist, be it in the form of socio-economic inequality, environmental degradation, endemic corruption, or problems of accountability and abuse of power—especially at the lowest levels of the formal political system. Yet surprisingly, quantitative surveys indicate that the institutions of governance score high on legitimacy among the Chinese public (Asia Barometer, 2009; Gilley, 2006, p. 512;

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*Correspondence Address:* Johan Lagerkvist, Department of Asian, Middle Eastern and Turkish Studies, Stockholm University, SE-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden. Emails: [johan.lagerkvist@orient.su.se](mailto:johan.lagerkvist@orient.su.se); [johan.lagerkvist@ui.se](mailto:johan.lagerkvist@ui.se)

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Whyte, 2012; World Values Survey Database, 2012). In the same vein several qualitative studies speak of a congruence of interests between officially registered non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the party-state, either labelled as ‘dependent autonomy’ (Lu, 2009), ‘lack of antagonism between NGOs and the state’ (Hsu, 2010, p. 260), ‘contingent symbiosis’ (Spires, 2011), ‘consultative authoritarianism’ (Teets, 2014), or ‘co-dependent state–society relations’ (Hildebrandt, 2013) to capture the survival tactics of Chinese NGOs and clever co-optation by the state. And Andrew Nathan has argued, ‘civil society is growing in scale and potential assertiveness, but remains under effective government surveillance and unable to form national linkages’ (2013, p. 3).

Thus, a paradoxical puzzle has emerged. Informants in survey after survey agree that most is well in the state of China, and ethnographic in-depth interviews reflect ambivalence on the part of informants. Nonetheless social protests are rampant, and the costs to contain them increase year-on-year in a context where civil society in China is said to have only ‘potential assertiveness’. So, who organizes the hundreds of thousands of social protests that occur in real-world China every single year, if not ‘assertive actors’ in the civic domain? What is it that these protestors find not well around them? From where do the sparks come that lead to massive protest organization and collective action in contemporary China?

To be able to seriously address both the puzzle and the lacuna, this article contends that the focus of attention needs to move from officially registered NGOs, which are resource-dependent on the state and therefore mostly docile, and go deeper into the social spaces of non-registered voluntary groups that lack formal ties to the party-state, i.e. the space I call the unknown terrain of social protest. Such voluntary groups can, for example, be clans of kinship that cater to everyday social needs that have been neglected by an economically neo-liberalizing state (Peck, 2010), ever mindful of increasing its cost-effectiveness. They can also be more amorphous constellations of ‘rightful’ protestors (O’Brien, 2006) that possess various skills rendering them the potential to mobilize discontent at the margins of society for assertive popular protests.

The purpose of this article is twofold. The first aim is to address the significant lacuna in the scholarly literature on China’s contemporary society: the politics of actual contention in organized collective action. The second objective is to conceptualize the appearance and agency of non-registered associational groups at the intersection between the county and village levels through the prism of the social mobilization that took place in the so-called Wukan incident, a social protest that occurred at the end of 2011, the year of the Arab Spring uprisings. In line with Albert Hirschman’s concepts of ‘exit’, ‘voice’, and ‘loyalty’ used to describe members’, customers’, and citizens’ options when confronted with decay and mismanagement in ‘a wide variety of noneconomic organizations and situations’ (1970, p. 1), it is possible to theorize such options as both strategies and conditions to ‘negotiate the state’ (Saich, 2002, p. 124). In other words, these options are both an embodiment of consequential choice and the ensuing situation that follows from it, the time frame of which may vary between settings and individuals at the lowest level of the polity, and in the civic domain of non-registered groups that surrounds this level.

In addition to the general questions about the research puzzle posed above, two specific questions loom large. Employing the vocabulary of Hirschman, the first question asks what kinds of strategy the actors of the drama in Wukan, through their rhetoric and resourceful agency, directed towards the institutions of governance, and how the actors’ actions

can be explained. Second, can the specificity of the process of the unfolding Wukan incident help theorize the character of an emerging civil society, or more broadly the civic domain, in China?

In the following, an account and analysis of the Wukan land-grabbing incident are employed to answer these questions. This particular local conflict about corruption and compensation for collectively used land had been brewing for years. Wukan makes an interesting case. It is a microcosm of many of the issues that are the causes of local contentious politics at the village level, since it showcases the underlying structural dynamics across the country and makes generalizable conclusions possible.<sup>2</sup> Since domestic and foreign observers regarded Wukan as a successful social protest, the milieu and process that enabled both social mobilization and final outcome warrant a critical and deeper investigation.

The following analysis is based on face-to-face interviews conducted in Wukan. These are complemented by close reading of the media discourse in Western press reports, as well as Chinese commentary in both traditional and social media. Fieldwork was conducted in Hong Kong, Shenzhen, and Wukan from 19 to 28 November 2012. Semi-structured interviews were held with seven informants for between 45 and 90 minutes. Three of the interviewees were the young migrant-worker leaders who worked to set up both the physical media centre in Wukan and the protestors' presence on social media platforms. Two of the persons interviewed were related to leaders in the failed protest in the neighbouring village of Panhe. One informant was a leading representative of the new village committee. In Hong Kong, one Mainland Chinese scholar with the *China Labour Bulletin* was interviewed.<sup>3</sup>

Even if the village can be viewed as a microcosm of many of the problematic issues that beset local state–society relations in China, a methodological caveat should be flagged: No single social protest can in any way fully represent the multitude of specific situations across China. Different cases of mass incidents show dissimilar context and causes. Neglecting this fact would be to engage in 'invalid part-to-whole mappings' (Snyder, 2001, p. 98). It has been argued that such methodology has 'been especially common in research on Chinese politics' (Hurst, 2010, p. 164).

However, to say that Wukan is a single-issue event that only represents itself, limited to a corner of Guangdong Province, would be too far a stretch. Today, China has the world's largest internet population standing at 632 million (China Internet Network Information Center, 2014), who hold nationwide online conclaves to discuss the social protests that take place every week. Many Chinese Internet users who discussed the tumult in Wukan argued that there were many commonalities down to the smallest detail between Wukan and many other villages around China. They also pointed to structural and systemic similarities with other parts of the country. Thus, in the absence of other subnational cases to compare with in greater depth (although the failed social protests of some villages close to Wukan are accounted for), for the purpose of this article fieldwork interviews, overseas media discourse, and online commentary are used as proxies to attempt some 'bounded generalization that is applicable to other cases under similar conditions' (Acharya, 2011, p. 112). I agree that generalization 'on the basis of a single case ... may be central to scientific development' (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 228). Indeed, it is reasonable to argue that despite the differences between specific causes, under similar governance circumstances and in roughly the same kind of socio-economic environment, such a crisis, process, and outcome could emerge also in other Mainland China settings.

It is also necessary to beware of overly relying on facts in foreign press reports, which are known to follow a certain ideological ‘beat’ to fit with a political agenda of democratization, regardless of the inherent good or bad of such a mission. A final caveat concerns information published in Chinese Internet forums, as state censorship makes sure to delete the most ‘non-harmonious’, i.e. *fei hexie*, comments proffered by netizens.

Western press reports portrayed the Wukan incident as an ‘uprising’, the villagers as anti-state ‘rebels’, and the ad hoc leadership after the ousting of the sitting village committee as a ‘rebelliously self-governing body’ (Reuters, 2012). When state–society tension finally was resolved peacefully, some Chinese observers also considered the event a ‘turning point’ for how disputes over land could and would be handled in future (Ou, 2012). The uniqueness of Wukan was said to derive from the prudent handling of the incident by the provincial government.<sup>4</sup> That was the basis of the argument of the Chinese sociologist Sun Liping, that Wukan signified a new model for resolving social contradictions and contention in rural China, i.e. ‘realizing people’s interests while maintaining social stability’.<sup>5</sup> After a resolution to the crisis was found following the election of the former protest leader Lin Zulian as the new legitimate Chairman of Wukan’s village committee, more profound media commentaries in the West bearing a more sceptical message regarding the outcome were published. These writings warned against viewing the Wukan event as ‘new normal’, or anything ‘unique’ (Moses, 2011). Yet one year after the momentous conflict, optimistic reports of foreign correspondents were again filed for overseas consumption. Again journalists signalled the process in Wukan as reflective of inequality and of the rise of accountability due to contentious politics in rural areas, and the final outcome as a harbinger of broader reforms. Thus, the Wukan incident transformed from being a media event to an iconic event with strong symbolic value. Most journalistic accounts were infused by both overseas anticipation of a democratic breakthrough in China fuelled by popular protests against the government and perceptions of decision-making processes at various administrative levels in domestic discourse, as reflected by conservative state-controlled mass media and less restrained microblog commentary.

The conflicting, and recurring, arguments about the significance of Wukan, what really happened in the village, and its deeper meaning prompt a more thorough analysis. To some observers it meant that a bottom-up democratization of Chinese politics might be at hand. Others soon found out that this was an isolated incident that would not entail a domino-effect for the millions of villagers around China who suffer from poor quality of elections to their village committees and have little influence on decisions vital to their welfare and well-being. Thus, the next section outlines some of the basic facts of the case. The following sections explore, respectively, the critical role social media and traditional associational forms played in these events and the diversity of China’s emerging civil society. Then, a fourth strategic choice, ‘shadow’, is introduced to Hirschman’s list of options—exit, voice, and loyalty—to help resolve the research puzzle addressed by this article.

### **The peak of the Wukan incident**

Central and provincial leaders in China like to portray themselves as benign, and in many countryside localities this image remains largely intact. Although central leaders in Beijing are far from the scene of contention, they hold ultimate responsibility for systemic flaws of the polity. However, the distance to central power, as referred to in the old, much used proverb ‘the mountains are high and the emperor far away’, benefits central,

provincial, and local officials alike. For local officials, the power of the central government is too distant from everyday governance to effectively enforce policy implementation in what at times appear to be decentralized fiefdoms. More often than not Beijing is unable, or unwilling, to intervene. Yet local people's trust in the sincerity of officials at higher administrative levels continues to be relatively solid.

When on occasion a local blame game starts, accusations are directed at the local officials. Such perceptions about malign local leaders and benign central cadres were seemingly played out also in the Wukan case. On 21 September 2011, the people of Wukan organized a large march through the streets of the village, intensifying the struggle that peaked in mid-December the same year, when a peaceful outcome was highly uncertain. The street protests were prompted by a drawn-out struggle that had been brewing for years regarding a conflict over compensation for collectively used land that had been sold time and again to commercial developers. This land-grab dispute came to a climax on 14 December when Party Secretary Xue Chang, who had ruled Wukan for 42 years, was thrown out by more than 13,000 villagers, who then erected barricades on the roads leading into the village, overturned police cars, and with their families and protest banners occupied the small public square (He & Xue, 2014, p. 128). During the standoff that followed over the next few days, with the Communist Party leaders and police squadrons of the nearby city of Lufeng on one side and the Wukan villagers at their barricades on the other, many foreign reporters were transported incognito into the village by the youngsters of Wukan, while People's Armed Police were awaiting orders from the provincial political leadership on how to proceed.

It was only after the 'benign' Governor and Party Secretary of Guangdong Province, Wang Yang, gave the matter high-level attention in December 2011 that his deputy, Zhu Mingguo, was soon engaged in a face-to-face dialogue with the Wukan villagers, effectively bypassing county-level officials of the cities of Shanwei and Lufeng whom the villagers did not trust after years of alleged corruption and collusion with the ousted village leaders. The leader of the villagers' ad hoc negotiating team, Lin Zulian, met with Zhu Mingguo and the Shanwei Party Secretary Zheng Yanxiong. At that meeting Lin demanded the immediate release of those villagers who had been detained, the return of the body of Xue Jinbo, another village leader who had died while in police custody, the acceptance of the Provincial government of his team's authority, and the resolution of the land dispute as stipulated by law (Qu, 2012). It did not take long for Zhu Mingguo to agree to Lin's demands, and the Wukan stalemate was ended through this high-level involvement of senior provincial leaders. It was also decided that a properly held village election should be organized, something that had never been done during the previous corrupt reign. Thus for the first time ever, Wukan would implement the election practices stipulated in the Organic Law of the Villagers Committees of the People's Republic of China (1998).

In March 2012, the voting in Wukan resulted in the leader of the ad hoc negotiating committee, Lin Zulian, being elected as new chairman of the village committee. Legal scholar Hand (2012) regarded Wukan as a step in a longer series of such popular protests of state-society contention that further the cause of constitutionalism, i.e. one day legal power will match political power regarding interpretation of the articles in the Chinese constitution. One observer argued that: 'Given the evolution of events, what took place in Wukan could be called a revolution' (Ou, 2012). Yet another scholar argued to the contrary that it was not even about politics: 'Although non-political, these protests can easily

mobilize thousands of people and destabilize the localities' (Lai, 2012). One can agree that the leaders' insistence on referring to lawful settling of the land dispute was hardly revolutionary rhetoric. But even if it was not, they had reasons to appear cautious when confronting an authoritarian repressive state, and to *post facto* display compliance can be tactically wise, especially if it is preceded by acts of contentious politics.

### The media strategy of Wukan villagers

Despite increasingly effective surveillance of digital communications across China, the balance of power between civil society and the party-state continues to shift due to the use of social media in times of mobilization of social protests. Such changes depend on rapid dissemination of information and news that, despite intensifying control, continues to transform an already attentive public into an active and even assertive public (Welzel & Dalton, 2014), going from being stand-by onlookers to people that actually 'do citizenship' (Dahlgren, 2009).

In the context of Wukan, it is important to appreciate the protestors' establishment of a media centre in the house next to the residence of the villagers' temporary leader, the clan elder Lin Zulian. This centre, which catered to the needs of journalists from Hong Kong and Taiwan, Japan, the USA, and European countries, made possible instant news diffusion of the Wukan conflict to the outside world as it unfolded. The way young Wukan villagers managed to harness social media platforms to advocate their cause on Sina Weibo and on Tencent Weibo and publically 'did citizenship' in their village certainly had a definitive impact on ramped-up media coverage of the event and the final outcome. Furthermore, the stepping in of the Party Secretary, Wang Yang, to resolve the crisis peacefully by sending his deputy to Wukan may have to do with it becoming a national and even a global media event. Wang's profiling as an alternative politician able to solve issues of social contention harmoniously in the run-up to the 18th Party Congress in October 2012 may also have influenced the successful solution.<sup>6</sup>

The skilful management of a vast amount of Weibo postings by Wukan's youth quickly brought the incident from local cover-up trouble to international spotlight, and thus kept the authorities from concealing what happened in Wukan. Pictures of villagers occupying the central square were quickly disseminated through millions of Weibo accounts. Worried officials at both the provincial and central levels found it problematic to censor relevant keywords as the news from Wukan spread like wildfire across China's Internet. However, what really set it apart from other popular protests in rural China was not its virtual presence, but the establishment of a physical media centre, which catered to both outside journalists and real-time diffusion about the conflict to the outside world. A similar protest, in the neighbouring village of Panhe, which occurred one month later received only a fraction of the media attention afforded to Wukan. When the new village leader, Lin Zulian, in retrospect was interviewed and asked why the later domino protests in nearby Panhe, Haimen, and Longtou had failed, whereas his had succeeded, he was certain about one fundamental factor:

Several factors may have contributed: maybe the fact that Shenzhen and Hong Kong are not far away. But more than anything, it was the media factor. And these things depend on the situation at hand [ . . . ] I think it was the use of media that separates us



from the other sites of protest. It was extremely difficult to suppress the news and therefore to cover up our demonstration.<sup>7</sup>

The lack of media attention given to other nearby protests against land grabs, despite the heavy use of police violence there, may explain why their popular protests did not result in an ending whereby the state was ‘negotiated’. Although the behaviour was just as corrupt there, no lofty words on better rural governance were spoken by Governor Wang Yang (Xu, 2012). Visibility of protests is clearly of utmost importance. To reach out to policy-makers—via public opinion channels—above the local administrative level, every social protest mobilization needs an effective media strategy in today’s China. Wukan’s youth, many having worked in urban environments as migrant-workers and competent in the arts of digital communication, set up Wukan’s online media presence, primarily on Tencent’s QQ messaging service and a microblog account with the Tencent and Sina brands. A convenient wifi-connection was installed for foreign journalists, as special care was taken to attract their interest.<sup>8</sup> More importantly, as overseas social media such as Facebook and Twitter are blocked inside China, reporters could still access them as Wukan youth knew how to circumvent the ‘Great Firewall’. Altogether seven young people organized the online and offline operations of the media centre. As argued by a Mainland Chinese informant with the NGO China Labour Bulletin in Hong Kong:

This new young generation of migrant-workers are very skilled in the use of new media technologies, and far more demanding regarding wages and working conditions.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, interviews with the two young informants who took the lead in carrying out Wukan’s media strategy pointed out that the positive atmosphere between different generations of clan elders and incoming youth was very helpful. Crucial strategies and decisions were well prepared and mutual respect existed between Lin Zulian and the media-savvy youth. As one of the men argued:

A key to success was the combination between the ideas of the young people and the old, such as Lin Zulian, who really listened to us. Middle-aged people and people of influence in Chinese villages usually do not listen to the young. In other places, such as Haimen where university students were active, there was no preparation in advance, and no mutual listening. They were too fast to get their message out on Weibo and other social media.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, without sound preparation and solid cross-generational understanding, visibility on social media alone does not further the aims of social protests. The statement above testifies to a fascinating role of ‘the old’ in a contemporary setting where most observers tend to look towards ‘the young’ and their ‘early’ adoption of social media, leading to noticing widening gaps between generations. Yet, in Wukan something of a generation *shrink*, not a generation gap was the case—precisely in a time of global alarm about atomistic youth glued to smartphones.

This observation is linked to another phenomenon that is missing in most reports on Wukan. It concerns the importance played by the revived clan system, comprising different generations, in rural areas. Those sceptical foreign observers who pointed out that there was

'no new normal' with the Wukan incident neglected clan power in their analysis. But as argued by the Chinese sociologists He and Xue: 'In Wukan, the revitalized and reinvented clan system is of great significance in forming a collective identity and bringing about communal resistance' (2014, p. 132). Since the clan, this ancient kin-based institution, is becoming increasingly important in local state–society relations, it impacts on the terrain that harbours future social protests in rural China. When the economic reforms started in 1978, the clan system was weak and fragmented. Today, however, it has been rebuilt to a considerable extent (Guo, 2002). When the market forces were 'liberated' in China during the 1980s, the same was also true for the clan system that was regarded by Maoism as hopelessly backward and feudal. Nowadays, clans are revived as family rites are remembered and ancestral temples repaired. Yet, their function is far from just being social and religious. In recent years clan leadership and influence both in society at large and over Communist Party branches and village committees at the lowest administrative level have increased markedly (Su, Ran, Sun, & Liu, 2011, p. 438). The reinvented role of assertive clans—which together with other non-registered associations operate at the margins of the formal party-state apparatus—is an important factor alongside the new techniques and social technologies they use to protect their interests.

Interest in Wukan continued to draw attention of social media users, especially on Sina Weibo. Postings from January to May 2012 regarding the new and correctly organized election to the village committee were much discussed in the Weibo-sphere. However, the popular tweets by lawyer Yuan Yulai regarding the long-term consequences of the Wukan incident were deleted (Bandurski, 2012). Nonetheless, some statements on China's readiness and prospects for democracy continued to circulate, and these caught the attention of many Chinese microbloggers.<sup>11</sup>

In earnest the censors at Sina Weibo deleted the most controversial postings on the long-term and broader implications of rural democracy for Chinese politics. Yet from the tweets, it is still possible to distil a picture that citizens across the country perceived the incident's origins as similar to corrupt practices elsewhere and—if properly conducted—free elections could serve as a remedy. In retrospect these tweets presenting Wukan as a signal of democratic change coming to China as a whole seem premature. Nevertheless, the Wukan incident can serve as a prism to understand the strategies and conditions available to new social actors and long-forgotten associational groups such as clans that combine powerful networks of kinship and prestige with new organizational possibilities by social media.

### **Models of China's emerging civil society**

At the end of the Maoist era and the beginning of market reforms in the late 1970s and 1980s, civil society in Mainland China was described as hardly existing or merely emerging. From the body of research on China's civil society, it is obvious that the Chinese party-state has developed a pragmatic and instrumentalist framework to control both traditional mass organizations, such as trade unions and women's organizations, and new NGOs. It has been argued that few newly formed civic associations seek autonomy from the state. To the contrary, many strive to have strong state institutions as their registered sponsors for legitimacy, protection, and support. Despite a cumbersome registration process with the state, the number of these registered NGOs has increased from a mere 4446 in 1989 to 387,000 in 2007 and 511,000 in 2013 (He, 2014; Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2009).

However, even this spectacular increase says little about the situation on the ground. Official statistics include only registered organizations. Non-registered grassroots organizations are not part of what is on government books. Quite possibly millions of organizations exist that do not have a government sponsor unit and yet engage in social service provision. According to one estimate, the number of such truly non-government organizations may have been as many as eight million already a decade ago (Wang & He, 2004).

Therefore, more interesting than what is officially registered are the voluntary groups that in great numbers take shape in non-monitored, unofficial social spaces. These groups of individuals ranging from peasants and migrant-workers to city intellectuals do not, for various reasons, register with the authorities. And more importantly, due to their de facto autonomous character these constellations of citizens feel less constrained in their efforts to mobilize discontent. This perceived lack of restriction helps to explain why social protest mobilization increases, as the high estimate of the number of mass incidents indicates. A long period of relative status quo in state–society relations in place since high economic growth began to restore legitimacy after the crushing of the social movement for equality and democracy in 1989 has been shaken in both rural and urban areas due to problems related to corruption, inequality, land-grabbing, and environmental degradation.

Such unofficial organizations consist of non-registered NGOs, informal NGOs, as well as those NGOs that are registered as business operations due to the fact that no supervisory organ wished to engage them. Many such groups uphold significant autonomy in social terrain that the state lacks resources to oversee. In some localities they may work without state agents fully knowing of their existence, while officials in other parts tacitly accept the work of such groups without interfering (Spires, 2011, p. 25).

Arguably, the overwhelming part of research on an emerging civil society in China has so far focused too narrowly on the formal political system's oversight of both classic Leninist mass organizations and registered NGOs. That is the reason why terms such as 'dependent autonomy' and models of corporatism seem to accurately describe state co-optation of voluntary organizations, and make approaches that better account for contention and opposition between state and society regarding rights and accountability seemingly irrelevant to explanations of state–society relations in China. Yet more importantly, this is only the top of the iceberg, which amounts to the whole civic domain. As the enormous estimate of non-registered associations indicates and social protests reveal, there is the 'unknown' reality of voluntary associational life at the level of China's 934,000 villages left to account for by researchers. As the village committees are outside the formal administrative levels of China's already fragmented political system (Lieberthal & Oksenberg, 1988), this is the point where Leninist guardianship of society ends (Manion, 2000, p. 427), and the majority of social protests occurs. Therefore this arena is commensurate with models of civil society where voluntary groups are 'in tension with each other and with the state institutions that "frame", constrict and enable their activities' (Keane, 1998, p. 6) and where social protest entrepreneurs more easily move between the overlapping horizontal sectors of what Cohen and Arato call political society, economic society, and civil society (1992, p. 20).

### **Embodiment of 'exit', 'voice', 'loyalty', and 'shadow' in local state–society relations**

The outcome of the negotiations in Wukan village suggests that the protestors sought resolution to an economic conflict, i.e. in economic society, which had its origin in

misconduct by local officials in political society. Despite harnessing a broad array of social forces in the civic domain, i.e. civil society, to mount powerful street protests that also included turning over police vehicles, the protest leaders simultaneously made sure to display loyalty to the existing polity. The raising of their voices to protest went no further than demanding proper institutionalization of democratic village elections as outlined in the Organic Law of the Villagers Committees of the People's Republic of China (1998). Their wish corresponded well with how the Governor of Guangdong, Wang Yang, publically understood and spoke about Wukan's significance. At the annual session of the National People's Congress in March 2012, Wang said there was nothing special about the village elections in Wukan: '[T]he elections were held according to the organization rules of the village and the election regulations of Guangdong province. There was nothing new about this' (Wei, 2012).

Interestingly however, such exemplary, non-corrupt elections did not spread to nearby villages outside Wukan such as Pinghai, Longtou, and Panhe (Lim, 2012). Despite the rule-of-law commitment of the provincial government, it was more important to prevent the domino of social protest from falling further than to uphold the Organic Law in places where untoward local manipulation continued to render elections meaningless. The government deployed different tactics for different locales.

The findings in this article on the embodiment and expression of various strategies and conditions such as loyalty to government policy and institutions in the Chinese countryside in phases of mobilization and de-mobilization can be theorized in line with Albert Hirschman's concepts of 'exit', 'voice', and 'loyalty'. Conceptualizing the use of these options available to agents within a system who may have one foot outside formal structures, or to actors who are wholly on the outside, facilitates a more nuanced understanding about responses to declining legitimacy of various socio-political institutions and in specific situations, including the institutions of the political system, the state, or the conditions of rural society. 'Exit' from the nation-state, as when seeking affiliation with underground secret and criminal societies or even overseas exile, is a radical option open to a mere minority. Yet if many of these few are the nation's economic or epistemic elite, their lack of confidence in and loyalty to the existing polity should worry the Communist Party as it fears loss of revenue and brain drain. The economic elite may be opportunistic supporters who have exchanged loyalty for corrupt exploitation and may remain loyal only as long as economic growth rates are high (Wei, 2014). The rich red capitalists, well-connected princelings, or pro-Western political dissidents may consider exiting from the Chinese political landscape. However, to the majority of Chinese citizens such opportunities are not available.

Thus, the option described by Hirschman as 'exit' could more productively be conceptualized as 'shadow', as it corresponds better with socio-political realities and existing options in rural Chinese society. It carries Hirschman's notion of strategic choice, but it can also refer to a condition of individual or collective existence. Just as with 'exit', agency can operate and drive actors between 'shadow', 'voice', and 'loyalty'. 'Voice', or speaking truth to power, as in a social protest, is possible within limits, but only if discontent trumps both individual and broader concerns about social stability, or if policy rewards or tactical shifts in exchange for loyalty can be negotiated. Moreover, as the findings from Wukan show, especially in relation to adjacent villages, being able to quickly organize one's own arena for expressing and choosing 'voice' or 'loyalty' is needed to mobilize a successful protest. If 'voice' goes further than mere vocal opposition to

include also mobilization of collective action, such behaviour needs to be carefully dressed in words and deeds showcasing both patriotism and ‘loyalty’.

The notion of a loyal Chinese society as highlighted by the Wukan case corresponds to the idea of a loyal opposition, whereby opponents of particular policies and governance do not seek the overthrow of the political system, yet are able to voice opposition to government policies. The transition theorist Juan Linz also used the term loyal opposition to describe reform-minded elements of the Spanish nomenklatura under General Franco’s rule. Linz postulated that a semi-opposition, i.e. elements that are not dominant in the political system, may yet choose to ‘participate in power without fundamentally challenging the regime’ (1973, p. 191). This was precisely the choice made by the Wukan villagers, as the Wukan incident proved not to be a turning point in either state–society or rural–central relations, since no challenging anti-government slogans were used. The semi-oppositional status of Wukan was manifest as both ‘voice’ and ‘loyalty’ were chosen and expressed in an economic conflict, which was underpinned by the bad governance of former village leaders and the county-level government.

Yet if loyalty is no more than ‘feigned compliance’ (Pye, 1968), it could also be characterized as thin and unstable. Unstable loyalties that percolate in the unknown social terrain of China indicate that political legitimacy for rural governance, especially considering the ramped-up state programme of stability maintenance, could be significantly weaker than the robustness that is commonly suggested by quantitative surveys such as the recent rounds of the Asia Barometer and the World Values Survey. If the quality of loyalty is thin, it also follows that given deteriorating circumstances related to governance and livelihood, more groups could move from the strategies and conditions of ‘shadow’ and ‘loyalty’ to ‘voice’ and become more serious than just a semi-opposition.

Viewing the government’s handling of the event in a more optimistic light, Ou Ning argued that Wukan was indeed a turning point since the incident evidenced how the Guangdong government transcended its fixation with maintaining stability to recognize that the appeals of the Wukan villagers arose out of concern for their livelihoods, rather than out of some animus against the Party or China’s political system. It was indeed because the villagers did not display any outright ‘animus against the Party’ and successfully expressed loyalty to the existing institutions of governance in the demobilization phase of the protest that they secured a peaceful resolution. Therefore, Wukan did not lead to any fundamental policy changes nor did it start a domino-effect. It was a conflict about livelihood and bad governance, yet the issue of thin loyalty and feigned compliance runs deep, as indicated by the demands of the villagers to hold democratic elections (Wei, 2012). The elected leader of Wukan’s new legitimate village committee, former protest leader Lin Zulian, himself argued in March 2012:

As a Party Secretary, I understand our country’s policies for rural areas and at the same time support the work of village committee. Self-government can be realized when the village committee play its own role and the party branch provides policy support. (quoted in Qu, 2012)

But when interviewed in December 2012, he responded more ambiguously to questions about relations between the party-state, village committees, and the broader civic domain. In particular, asked if land grabbing in rural China was a systemic, institutional, or legal issue, he said: ‘That is all very complex, but I see it as not just as an issue about

rights and legality. It is linked to systemic flaws too. It is also a system malfunction.<sup>12</sup> Thus Lin Zulian exemplifies through his personality the pragmatic drift between different strategies and conditions in China's emergent civil society.

Even if Wukan was no turning point that propelled changes in state–society relations the words of Liu Zulian illustrate underlying structural changes and therefore offer a glimpse of how rural society in China is becoming increasingly active and assertive in a condition of ‘shadow’ outside formal state–society relations, and at the interface of the formal–informal, official–unofficial dichotomy. Yet this phenomenon can also be considered as embodying a ‘loyal society’ that for the time being is paying lip service to the existing political structures. As argued by Hsu, ‘the most prevalent late-twentieth century conceptualization of civil society draws heavily upon Tocqueville’s individualist model, which is why China scholars tend to look for evidence of Tocquevillian voluntary associations in today’s Chinese NGOs’ (2010, p. 264). The individualist model may indeed blind us to what registered and dependent NGOs can say and do, but as social protests are organized by others, elsewhere, it is there, in the condition of ‘shadow’, that we should look for different evidence. As argued by Fulda, Li, & Song, ‘Unregistered CSOs can expand their scope of activities quite considerably when they receive support from leaders in the party-state bureaucracy’ (2012, p. 677). Non-associational and ad hoc formations of interests simmering outside formal structures sometimes exist with local officials accepting activities that from an orthodox party-state perspective can only be described as illegal. Even for these groups Spires (2011) argued that a sort of ‘contingent symbiosis’ with the state exists. Thus, some non-registered organizations (though not all) may have one foot in the open and formal arena of political society of political structures and officialdom, whereas the other foot is firmly placed in the condition or strategic choice of ‘shadow’. Yet as parts of civil society that are non-registered are becoming mobilizers of protests, as in the village of Wukan, or even agents of change, it may be that symbiosis is already in a stage of disintegration. In the Wukan case both the media-savvy youth at the ad hoc media centre and the various clan groupings belong to this shadowy associational realm. Their de facto status as non-registered associations and non-voluntary (you are born into a clan) make them fall outside standard definitions of civil society. As such they speak to a reality where informal organizations and non-registered voluntary groups constitute an important part of emergent civil society that is about to spring to life. Popular mobilization through the appropriation of new media skills intermeshes with the phenomenon of non-registered organizations.

Regarding the outcome of social protests in China, it seems clear that protests that involve more people attract more attention. Social protest scholar Cai Yongshun found that of 261 cases of protest around China, those that involved more than 4000 protestors stood a better chance of achieving a successful outcome, proving the logic that ‘a big disturbance leads to a big solution’ (2010, p. 126). Other important criteria concerned access to journalists, attracting the attention of higher level tolerant-minded officials, being able to utilize a variety of personal connections to exert pressure on local officials, and linking a specific grievance to other governance problems in the locality. Arguably all these criteria, to which was added a sophisticated media strategy, existed in Wukan. And along with some other exceptional cases of Chinese rural protests, Wukan also made it all the way to world press headlines. But, as noted above, exemplary elections did not spread to nearby villages outside Wukan. In nearby Longtou, where locals lacked a clear media strategy, also in Governor Wang Yang’s Province, Guangdong, villagers were not

optimistic about the future: ‘No we don’t think Wukan will influence us that much [ . . . ] The government has dealt with Wukan, but our situation is still messy, and they’re not dealing with us’ (Lim, 2012). Thus, the ultimate outcome in Wukan did not signify a turning point in the balance between central and local power in China.

It is clear that both old and new factors are coming into play into the arena of local power politics. In addition to Cai Yongshun’s understanding that successful social protests need access to journalists, the new social context described as harbouring potential for ‘connective action’ (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011) necessitates expansion of the media variable to include also media agency on the part of protestors. It was by way of the skill of young workers and the determination of older clan leaders that the protest leaders of Wukan could increase their visibility on social media platforms and rapidly emerge from ‘shadow’. In this way unofficial social organizations that are critical of local institutions of governance may alternate between staying outside formal state–society relations in ‘shadow’ and choosing to exercise ‘voice’ through mobilizing a social protest as in Wukan when the circumstances induce them to do so.

### **Concluding remarks**

This article has addressed a paradox in Chinese society. On one hand, informants in quantitative surveys such as the Asia Barometer rank government performance high, and qualitative research holds civil society in China to be dependent on the state, possessing at most ‘potential assertiveness’. On the other hand, social protest is widespread and increasingly costly. This article theorized the puzzle of China’s emerging civil society, or more broadly the civic domain, by employing Albert Hirschman’s concepts of ‘exit’, ‘voice’, and ‘loyalty’ to explain the situation and unfolding of a specific social protest in Wukan village in 2011. The findings on the embodiment and expression of various strategies and conditions such as loyalty to government and institutions in the Chinese countryside, in different phases of protest mobilization, make possible a conceptualization of the options available to citizens as well as popular responses to socio-political and socio-economic ills. It was argued that the option described by Hirschman as ‘exit’ could more productively be conceptualized as ‘shadow’, as it corresponds better with socio-political realities and available options in rural Chinese society. The ‘shadow’ concept carries Hirschman’s notions encapsulating the choice of strategies as well as the conditions of individual or collective existence that these choices lead to after the choices have been made. Just as with ‘exit’, agency can operate and drive actors between ‘shadow’, ‘voice’, and ‘loyalty’. ‘Voice’, or speaking truth to power, as in a social protest, is possible within limits in the authoritarian setting of the PRC, but only if discontent trumps both individual and broader concerns about social stability, or if policy rewards or tactical shifts in exchange for loyalty can be negotiated.

The conflict in Wukan belongs to a unique set of cases in which the villagers themselves were capable of setting up a media centre and getting their message across to the outside world, thus ensuring high-level participation of senior provincial leaders in direct negotiations. More importantly, however, their strategic behaviour was an embodiment and expression of ‘loyalty’, and consequently not an open statement of opposition to the regime or polity. The fundamental issue is of course *how loyal* they were, and if the

position taken by the clans of Wukan and media-savvy youth can be perceived as a ‘loyal opposition’. Arguably domestic observers, foreign journalists, and even the Wukan villagers themselves hyped democratic projections resulting from the conflict, when it in fact reflected more status quo features than real revolutionary behaviour. What the villagers protested against was gross corruption and abuse of power. What the government sought to contain was the spread of social protest to other parts of Guangdong Province. To that end officialdom deployed different tactics for different locales. Obviously, for a country as large and heterogeneous as China, subnational cases are likely to yield different processes and outcomes in different socio-economic settings. That said, ‘loyalty’ to the party-state institutions cannot be taken for granted. It appears thin, and voluntary ad hoc groups and constellations moving in and out of a condition of ‘shadow’ can quickly mobilize social movement activity.

As the staggering numbers of millions of non-registered associations indicate and hundreds of thousands of social protests reveal, the reality of voluntary associational life at the level of China’s 934,000 villages has yet to be fully researched and accounted for. Since the village committees are outside the formal administrative levels of China’s fragmented polity, this is the point where Leninist guardianship of society ends, and the majority of social protests occur. Therefore analysis of this largely unknown social terrain and the protest mobilization that springs from it does not square with the prevailing literature on Chinese civil society where co-opted registered organizations are described as in a condition of dependency. The debate on emerging civil society has stagnated around a consensus assessment of dependent and docile registered social organizations. That body of research neglects on the one hand the existence of ‘shadow’ in which the non-registered social organizations discussed in this article reside, and on the other the fragility of the co-dependency and semi-autonomous existence of registered social organizations based on feigned loyalty and sinister co-optation in order to gain resources in the form of money, unpaid labour, nominal support, and information/intelligence.

On the societal side of state–society relations a future research agenda on emergent civil society in China ought to systematically engage in investigation of the unmapped social spaces in the unofficial civic domain, of rural as well as urban areas, wherefrom collective action against fraud and environmental social protests spring. On the state side of this relationship, especially in the light of deepening market reform and search for a guiding moral ethos underpinning continued socio-economic transformation under the powerful authoritarian leadership of General Secretary Xi Jinping, a productive way to study state strategies to co-opt society would be to interrogate the rationale of the Chinese state capitalist version of neo-liberalism (Lagerkvist, 2014, [in press-a](#), [in press-b](#)). Is it perhaps akin to German post-war neo-liberalism, i.e. ordoliberalism, with its powerful focus on a grounded ethos of a strong state to salvage sustainable economic growth and perpetuate social stability? Models of a civil society that opposes the state, demands accountability, or claims adherence to rights do fit with Chinese realities, as the increasing numbers on social movement activity and protests indicate. The non-registered groups that operate in the unofficial civic domain demonstrate a civil society assertiveness that actually exists in China. A research agenda that encapsulates the dependencies, strategies, and conditions of ‘voice’, ‘exit’, ‘loyalty’, and ‘shadow’ as well as the multitude of actors who roam in-between these conditions needs to be pursued. Aided by systematic collection of empirical evidence such a project would



greatly improve our understanding of how state–society relations in the People’s Republic evolve in the years ahead.

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### **Notes**

1. In early 2000 official statistics on the increase of so-called mass incidents started to get published in China. As many as 80,000 protests took place in 2006. In 2007 they had increased to 127,000. Thereafter the central government bureaucracy stopped issuing these reports. For 2009 Tsinghua University scholar Sun Liping estimated that 180,000 protests took place, see ‘China Cracks Down in Wake of Riots, Bombings,’ Bloomberg, 13 June 2011.
2. Many social protests, or ‘mass incidents’ as the Chinese government calls them, have their origins in land grabs by local officials who engage in corrupt practices of selling collectively owned land to commercial real estate developers.
3. Because the interviewees spoke under the condition of anonymity, their names are not revealed in this article.
4. It was viewed as a card played in the higher-level political game between politburo members Guangdong’s Party Secretary Wang Yang and Bo Xilai, who before his fall from grace was the Party chief of megacity and Municipality of Chongqing.
5. 中青报：乌坎选举填平民众心中的沟壑，<http://news.sina.com.cn/pl/2012-02-06/033223886066.shtml>
6. During 2012 in the run-up to the 18th Party Congress in China, Wang Yang repeatedly made use of the mass media to boost his liberal and reformist credentials. On 29 August 2012, for example, he was quoted in Guangzhou Daily saying that ‘vested Party interests must be smashed’.
7. Author interview with village leader Lin Zulian, conducted in Wukan, 26 November 2012.
8. Author interview with person 1, leading the media work, conducted in Wukan, 28 November 2012.
9. Interview, in Hong Kong, 27 August 2012, with representative of China Labour Bulletin on the rise of a ‘new generation of migrant workers’, who, with better education and knowledge about digital communications than the older villagers, were able to set up a media centre fast.
10. Author interview with person 2, leading the media work conducted in Wukan, 28 November 2012.
11. The tweet of one user, @韩志国, was retweeted 7500 times and received 700 original comments. This user thought the election illustrated the great potential influence of ordinary people on both welfare and human rights issues. Another user, @中国微观察 argued, ‘The fact that China’s most uneducated villagers understand the details of democracy proves that the Chinese can adapt to democracy.’ This posting was retweeted 3900 times and received 950 original comments. The user @王琰006 referred to a blog post by Tsinghua University sociologist Sun Liping that was retweeted 741 times saying: ‘This incident

has the potential to promote Chinese society toward democratization and long-term political stability. The problems of Wukan are really the problems of China in miniature.'

12. Author interview, conducted in Wukan, 26 November 2012.

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