The Illiberal Challenge of Authoritarian China

Elizabeth J. Perry

Abstract

A vibrant civil society and participatory public are often assumed to be fundamental pillars of democratization. However, the experience of contemporary China challenges this conventional wisdom. The Chinese case suggests that, rather than spurring democratization, a robust civil society and a restive public may actually work to strengthen and sustain an attentive authoritarian regime. Such is the illiberal challenge of Chinese authoritarianism.

Keywords: Democratization, authoritarian resilience, civil society, popular protest, rights consciousness, rules consciousness.

A vibrant civil society and participatory public are often assumed to be fundamental pillars of a working democratic system. Intermediate associations that connect families and markets to the state are prized for facilitating the aggregation and articulation of societal interests. A protest-prone public whose actions remain within the bounds of legitimate dissent is credited with safeguarding against the possibility of an authoritarian reversal. If the liberal challenge lies therefore in building a vigorous civil society in order to strengthen new democracies and decrease the likelihood of political retrogression, I write here of an illiberal challenge—that of Chinese authoritarianism, where a rising civil society accompanied by a surge in popular protest seems less conducive to democratization than to authoritarian resilience.

To be sure, China is not the only notable challenge to a theory linking civil society with democratic consolidation. Nearly fifteen years ago, Sheri Berman argued in a well-known article in World Politics that a strong civil society in interwar Germany worked to subvert, rather than to support, German democracy. As Berman wrote in 1997,
A robust civil society actually helped scuttle the twentieth century’s most critical democratic experiment, Weimar Germany. ... During the interwar period, Germans threw themselves into their clubs, voluntary associations, and professional organizations out of frustration with the failures of the national government and political parties, thereby helping to undermine the Weimar Republic and facilitate Hitler's rise to power. ... Had German civil society been weaker, the Nazis would never have been able to capture so many citizens for their cause.¹

Taking a page from Samuel Huntington’s classic analysis of political development and decay,² Berman argues that strong and responsive political institutions—governments and political parties—are necessary for civil society to exert the beneficial effects posited by neo-Tocquevillian proponents like Robert Putnam.³ In Weimar Germany, she found, the absence of such political institutions allowed civil society to play an illiberal rather than a liberal role.

A similar argument could be made about interwar Japan. Under Taisho Democracy following World War I, Japanese intellectuals and journalists, bolstered by labor unions and inspired by a variety of Western ideologies, joined public associations and mounted large but orderly street demonstrations in favor of universal suffrage.⁴ However, as in Weimar Germany, so also in Taisho Japan a rising civil society became critical of the weakness and unresponsiveness of government institutions—especially after the devastating Kanto earthquake of 1923, when the Japanese state proved unable to provide an adequate response to the crisis, leaving the major relief work to Buddhist charities and other nongovernmental organizations. It was in this situation of an awakened civil society that Japanese militarism gained ground.

Contemporary China is very different from Weimar Germany or Taisho Japan, of course. The People’s Republic of China does not lack for strong political institutions. Both the central government and the Communist Party are by almost any standard of measurement strong political institutions. More controversial, perhaps, I would argue that these are also quite responsive political institutions. The Chinese government is constantly trying to gauge public opinion—not only to suppress dissent—but also to address public opinion.

grievances and demands with new programs and policies. Under these circumstances, of strong and responsive institutions, the growth of civil society and grass-roots protest in contemporary China serves not to weaken a new democracy, as was the case in interwar Germany and Japan, but rather to stifle democratization by strengthening an existing authoritarian system.\

The argument that a robust civil society may work to buttress the Chinese Communist party-state is not original with me. It is an argument that the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs routinely makes. In reports and public statements, ministry officials often credit intermediate associations with helping to reduce the burden on the state by providing valuable public goods. In China, many so-called NGOs are actually GONGOs—government-organized nongovernmental organizations—which work closely with state agencies and officials. A prominent example is Project Hope, organized by the Communist Youth League, which brings new schools and teachers to impoverished regions of the country. The proliferation of young volunteers for Project Hope and many other nonprofit service groups accelerated markedly after the Wenchuan Earthquake of 2008. By relieving a strong, but certainly not omnipotent, state of some of the responsibility for supplying crucial goods and services, these associations help to reduce disappointment and anger that might otherwise be directed at the state.

As was the case in interwar Germany and Japan, the growth of associational activity in contemporary China has been accompanied by a surge in public demonstrations and protests. Among the many surprises of the post-Mao era has been the remarkable rise in popular protest. Despite the brutal suppression of the Tiananmen Uprising in 1989, the frequency of protests has only escalated in the years since. According to some estimates, China was rocked by some 180,000 mass disturbances in 2011 alone.

More than a few China scholars have heralded the recent protest activity as a definitive break with the Maoist past that indicates a “rising rights consciousness” propelled by a newly awakened civil society. The consequence, they suggest, could be a threat to both the legitimacy and the longevity of the communist system. Political scientists Kevin O’Brien and Li Lianjiang write of contemporary China:

The notion of being a citizen is seeping into popular discourse... . We should not underestimate the implications of rising rights consciousness and a growing fluency in “rights talk” in a nation where rights have traditionally been weakly protected, [on grounds that] today’s rightful resistance could

---

... evolve into a much more far-reaching counterhegemonic project.6

Similarly, historian Merle Goldman argues that, “by the century’s end the sense of rights consciousness ... had spread ... beyond intellectual and elite circles ... to the population at large. ... The transition from comrade to citizen in the People’s Republic of China has begun.”7 Goldman writes: “A growing consciousness of citizenship and organized efforts to assert political rights ... signify the beginnings of a genuine change in the relationship between China’s population at large and the state at the beginning of the twenty-first century.”8

There is considerable justification for emphasizing the role of “rights talk” among Chinese protesters. An unmistakable discourse of “legal rights” (hefa quanli) permeates the manifestoes, petitions, and slogans put forth by protesters in both city and countryside. Moreover, the protests are sometimes instigated by newly established grass-roots citizens’ organizations: environmental NGOs, homeowners’ associations, house churches, virtual networks formed over the Internet, and the like. But the temptation to depict these features as presenting a new and growing challenge to the authority of the Chinese communist state should probably be resisted.

The tendency on the part of many analysts to frame the discussion of contemporary Chinese protest in terms of concepts such as “rights consciousness” and “citizenship” creates expectation of a fundamental transformation in Chinese state-society relations that appears unwarranted. When placed in historical perspective, the evidence that emerges from an examination of recent NGO activism and grass-roots protest does not, in my view, offer grounds for an optimistic prognosis that state authoritarianism is eroding under the pressures of a newly awakened and assertive civil society.

To be sure, the protests that roil the contemporary Chinese landscape present significant challenges to the central leadership. Although most of the protests are directed in the first instance against grass-roots officials, protesters often take their petitions to higher levels—including all the way to Beijing—if a local resolution is not forthcoming. Moreover, the protests can be highly disruptive when vociferous demonstrators surround government offices, march through city streets, stage sit-ins in public places, and block traffic on busy highways and railways. Taking full advantage of international connections, media attention, and cyberspace contention to publicize their cause, protesters

---

8 Merle Goldman, Political Rights in Post-Mao China (Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Asian Studies, 2007), 74.
have in time wrung some significant concessions from the state; for example, the rolling back of harsh vagrancy laws following the controversial Sun Zhigang case in 2003, the abolition of the national agricultural tax in 2006, the promulgation of a new property rights law the following year, and more recent moves to privatize collective land ownership.

Yet, however visible and vocal (and sometimes violent) these protests may be, participants usually go to great lengths to demonstrate their loyalty to central policies and leaders. In this respect, today’s protests perpetuate certain core features of both Mao-era and pre-Mao-era protests. Among these features is a pronounced penchant on the part of protesters to advance their claims within the “legitimate” boundaries authorized by the central state. To be sure, these boundaries have shifted in significant ways over time. But whether we are talking about the post-Mao reform period or the Mao era (or even the imperial period), Chinese protesters have shown a consistent tendency to “play by the rules.” Although the language of “revolution” articulated by “comrades” in Mao’s day has been supplanted by a language of “rights” proclaimed by “citizens” today, it is not readily apparent that most protesters in the two periods differ fundamentally in either their mentality or their relationship to the authoritarian state. Rather than interpret protest in contemporary China as emblematic of a seditious rights consciousness, in which a newborn civil society asserts autonomous interests against the state, I see these protests as reflecting a seasoned rules consciousness that expressly acknowledges, and thereby serves to undergird more than to undermine, the authority of the state.9

To evaluate the innovations and implications of contemporary protest, it is instructive to revisit earlier eras. Looking back on Mao’s China (1949-1976) from the vantage point of today, there is a temptation to subsume that entire period under the rubric of totalitarianism and to interpret the repeated outbursts of popular contention that occurred in those years as state-sponsored mobilization rather than as socially generated protest. From the anti-American demonstrations of the Korean War through the Red Guard rampages of the Cultural Revolution, we are inclined to regard collective action under Mao as orchestrated by the central state, usually in the person of the Great Helmsman, Chairman Mao himself. But a closer examination of that era, with the aid of increasingly accessible archival sources, suggests that to discount the social power of collective action under Mao would be a serious misreading of the historical record. Crucial as state signals were in generating the mass movements of the Maoist era, the popular contention that erupted in the course of those political campaigns anticipated the contemporary scene both ideologically and

Take the massive strike wave that rolled across urban China in 1956-1957.\textsuperscript{10} Party Central estimated that more than ten thousand labor strikes had erupted across the country during this half-year period. Although the walkouts by workers were certainly stimulated by Mao’s Hundred Flowers Campaign, and, in particular, his speech “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People,” the protests evidenced notable spontaneity and presented real challenges for factory managers, trade union cadres, and local party officials alike.

Typically, the labor disputes of that period began by raising demands, mostly for higher wages and improved welfare benefits, to the factory leadership. When these were not dealt with at the factory or enterprise level, written petitions were lodged with higher authorities. The workers set deadlines by which they expected a satisfactory settlement, and often staged rowdy meetings to publicize their grievances. If the demands did not meet with a timely response, the protest would often evolve into a strike, slowdown, collective petition movement, or forcible surrounding of cadres—activities that were categorized (then and today) as naoshi, or outright “disturbances.”

Even at the height of the 1956-1957 strike wave, protesters demonstrated a preference for operating within the boundary of the law. Shanghai’s pedicab drivers, for example, sought legal counsel to ascertain that their requests were consistent with state regulations. The 1956-1957 strikes evinced a wide repertoire of protest behavior. Many workers put up big-character posters and wrote blackboard newspapers explaining their grievances; some went on hunger strike; some threatened suicide; some marched in large-scale demonstrations—holding high their workplace banners as they paraded vociferously through city streets; some staged sit-ins and presented petitions (often on bended knee) to government authorities; some mustered “pickets”—armed with staves and other makeshift weapons—to enforce public order; some organized action committees and liaison offices to coordinate strikes in different factories and districts. In many cases, workers surrounded grass-roots cadres, raising various demands and imposing a deadline for a satisfactory response, refusing to disband until their requests had been met.

While we tend to think of Mao’s China—in contrast to the post-Mao era—as a period of international isolation, the importance of foreign influences on the 1956-1957 strike wave was considerable. Just as the example of Poland’s Solidarity movement would inspire Chinese workers in the 1980s, so at this earlier juncture the Hungarian revolt was a powerful stimulus for labor unrest. A popular slogan in the protests of 1957 was, “Let’s create another Hungarian Incident!” There was awareness—as would be the case in the Tiananmen

Uprising of 1989—of China’s being part of an international socialist world. Another slogan in 1957 was, “We’ll take this all the way from district to city to Party Central to Communist International.” Some workers, hearing that Khrushchev was about to visit Shanghai, planned to present their grievances directly to him. Although it turned out that the Soviet leader did not make his trip until the following year—well after the antirightist crackdown had dashed any hopes of a direct encounter with restive workers—the parallel with 1989, when protesters tried to share their grievances with Gorbachev, is noteworthy.

The organizational infrastructure of the strike wave of 1956-1957 indicated far more independence from state control than a totalitarian image of Mao’s China would suggest. Workers printed up their own handbills and manifestoes to publicize their demands, and formed autonomous unions to press their claims. In one district of Shanghai, thousands of workers joined a “Democratic Party” (minzhu dangpai) organized by three local workers.

Despite this remarkable display of social ferment, it would be wrong to characterize the strikes of 1956-1957 as an expression of a proto-democratic civil society rising up in opposition to the authoritarian state. For one thing, the involvement of grass-roots cadres in many of the incidents cautions against drawing a clear line between state and society. For another thing, the protesters were asking for an opportunity to enjoy fully the socialist promises of the new regime, not clamoring for its overthrow.

One might propose that the strike wave of 1956-1957 was merely an anomalous exception to the Maoist pattern of top-down mobilization were it not that we find very similar expressions of popular contention a decade later at the height of the Cultural Revolution—often regarded as the quintessential expression of totalitarian rule. In the winter of 1966-1967, several months after the onset of the student Red Guard movement, a so-called “wind of economism” (jingjizhuyi feng) swept across China’s industrial workforce.11 The term referred to a spate of protests animated by socio-economic grievances and demands. As had been the case during the Hundred Flowers Movement ten years earlier, these Cultural Revolution protests were accompanied by an impressive display of spontaneous social organization. In Shanghai alone, the police archives hold records of over 350 unofficial labor associations that were formed in this brief two-month period. In most cases, their names—albeit parroting the state-approved “revolutionary” language of the day—indicated their relatively modest objectives: “Rebel Revolutionary Headquarters for Housing Difficulties,” which sought a resolution of housing complaints; “Rebel Headquarters for Revolutionary Bachelor Workers,” which called for transfer to Shanghai of workers’ families living in the countryside; “Revolutionary Rebel Headquarters for Permanent Residents with Temporary

11 The following discussion is based on Elizabeth J. Perry and Li Xun, Proletarian Power: Shanghai in the Cultural Revolution (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997).
Household Registration,” which demanded resolution of residency problems; and so forth.

As had been the case during the strike wave of 1956-1957, rebel workers in the Cultural Revolution were led by a diverse mélange of party and league members, ordinary workers, and officially designated “activists” and “backward elements.” Yet this complex intermingling of state and society at the grass-roots level did not prevent the protests from presenting serious challenges to government authorities. And the outcome was often surprisingly favorable to the protesters. During Shanghai’s “wind of economism,” the pressure of worker demands led cadres at all levels to turn over huge sums of money as restitution. The city of Shanghai as a whole paid out some 35 to 40 million yuan in the single month of January 1967 in the form of higher wages, subsidies, welfare provisions, divisions of union accumulation funds, factory dividends, and the like.

Although most of the organizations that formed spontaneously during the wind of economism were soon suppressed, a number of their demands later came to be accepted as official policy. As a direct response to the demands of protesters, temporary workers who had entered Shanghai factories before 1966 were converted to permanent status and differences between union and nonunion members in medical and other welfare benefits were abolished by the Labor Bureau.

The upsurges of 1956-1957 and 1966-1967 are but two examples of a much broader phenomenon that is observable throughout the Mao era. From the earliest days of the new communist regime to the final months of Mao’s life, widespread popular protest was a continuing reality. Often (but not only) stimulated by state-sponsored mass campaigns such as the Hundred Flowers Movement and the Cultural Revolution, the protests invoked central state authority (including, of course, the incendiary utterances of Chairman Mao himself) to justify their claims. These were classic cases of what O’Brien and Li have dubbed “rightful resistance”; yet they pointed not toward an incipient awakening of social citizenship in opposition to state control—but rather to a persistent attempt (traceable back to the imperial era) by Chinese protesters to work an authoritarian political system to their own advantage.

In short, the line that is so often drawn between the Mao period, and the pre- and post-Mao periods, may be less sharp than is often suggested. In the post-Mao era, as local governments imposed higher taxes and surcharges to compensate for the lack of revenue that followed in the wake of decollectivization, tax riots blazed across the Chinese countryside. By the 1990s, tax resistance had reached alarming proportions, with frequent reports of beatings, property destruction, arson, and other violence targeting local cadres; instances of peasants killing village cadres (and sometimes being hailed as heroes by their fellow villagers for doing so) were openly reported in the Chinese press.

The public sympathy that such protests elicited derived in large part from the fact that they generally followed a series of recognized stages, in which
villagers dutifully acknowledged the authority of the central state before devolving into localized violence. Most protests began with a collective petition, or letter of complaint, that chided grass-roots officials for failing to abide by higher-level dictates. Despite the frequency and scale of these protests, they were constrained by protesters’ pronounced willingness to play by the rules. As Thomas Bernstein and Lu Xiaobo note in their co-authored book on these tax protests,

The peasants’ positive orientation toward the Center legitimated but also limited protests. ... Villagers’ tactic of clothing protest in the authority of the Central Committee and State Council undoubtedly made it more difficult for local officials to assign negative political labels to such acts. But this limitation also meant that collective actions did not turn into social movements.12

Despite its failure to “turn into a social movement,” the rampant tax resistance was regarded very seriously by the Chinese leadership, which took the extraordinary step of abolishing the national agricultural tax in 2006. Since then, the focus of rural protest has shifted from tax riots to land disputes. The lucrative sale of collective lands by corrupt village and township cadres who neglected to consult or adequately compensate their fellow villagers led to widespread—and often violent—protests. In the face of ambiguous government regulations that do not clearly specify the property rights of various agencies and actors, the latitude for confusion and conflict is great. The 2007 property rights laws and subsequent high-level deliberations over land privatization are efforts to come to grips with this unresolved dilemma.

While the Chinese countryside has seethed with tax riots and land disputes in the post-Mao period, the cities have been no less immune to popular contention. But even students and workers clamoring for “democracy” have—like their rural counterparts—taken pains to play by the state’s rules. A striking feature of the so-called democracy movement of 1989 (like the 1986-1987 demonstrations that preceded it) was the deference that protesters paid to state authority. Aware that the state was particularly wary of worker-student connections, students scrupulously honored police cordons and even dispatched their own “pickets” (jiucha dui) to ensure that workers remained outside their inner circles. Student petitioners who attempted (unsuccessfully) to gain a hearing with the top leadership went so far as to drop to their knees and kowtow up the stairs of the Great Hall of the People in a time-honored ritual of humble subjects showing their respect for government authority. Although

the students’ action could certainly be interpreted as an ironic critique of the communist state (for resembling a “feudal” imperial regime that required such obsequious behavior of its people), the widely reported incident was presented by the Chinese (and foreign) press at the time as a clear indication of the students’ respect for authority. One might have expected protest to subside after the brutal suppression of 1989. Yet, the opposite occurred. Labor unrest grew in both frequency and scale, often spilling outside the factory doors into public spaces. Protest marches down major city thoroughfares, sit-ins at government offices, barriers erected at key intersections, and other disruptive displays of discontent became common features of urban life. Even so, urban unrest—like rural protest—remains limited in its targets and demands.

Playing by the rules involves adopting official language to signal that one’s protest does not question the legitimacy of the central state. In today’s China, where the government trumpets “rule by law” and where bookstores and television and radio broadcasts are replete with government-supplied legal information, protesters routinely invoke laws and regulations to justify their demands. Sociologist Ching Kwan Lee describes a protest by laid-off textile workers in Liaoning, who marched behind banners and presented a petition that read in part,

Here are the discrepancies between the Bankruptcy Law and the situations of our enterprise. First, the procedure of bankruptcy was illegal. According to Instructions on Bankruptcy of State-Owned Enterprises passed by the Liaoning People’s Government Office ... there must be approval by the Workers’ Congress and the superior department of the enterprise. ... None of this is true in our case. ... Second, workers received absolutely no livelihood allowance and this is a violation of Clause Four in the Bankruptcy Law.13

The invocation of legal rights is indeed a prominent feature of popular protest in contemporary China. But whether this points to a newfound rights consciousness, rather than a familiar practice of presenting one’s demands in terms acceptable to the state in order to receive a sympathetic hearing, is debatable. When Ching Kwan Lee asked workers in Liaoning whether they were fighting for citizens’ legal rights, she was greeted with scorn. One worker representative explained to her, “Because you are talking to the government, you have to talk about laws and regulations. Otherwise, they can ignore you.” Just as “comrades” in Mao’s China spoke the language of “revolution” to gain

the ear of the ruling authorities, so today’s “citizens” present their grievances as a matter of “legal rights.”

Contemporary Chinese protesters (like generations before them) play by the rules of a widely understood—albeit ever-evolving—game whose operating procedures are shaped by interaction with (and testing of) government authorities. In the main, Chinese protesters go to considerable lengths to demonstrate that their actions are intended to support and strengthen—rather than to subvert—the authority of the state. This they do through the self-conscious use of the state’s own rhetoric, presenting their claims in terms authorized by the laws, policies, and statements of the central government and its leadership.

China lays claim to one of the oldest and most robust traditions of protest of any country in the world. Passed down through such media as folk stories, legends, and local operas, familiar repertoires of popular resistance were for centuries a major means of alerting an authoritarian political system to the grievances of ordinary people. Today, scholars often portray contemporary China as distinguished by the advent of a legal consciousness unknown in earlier eras, but it is remarkable how many instances of collective protest during the pre-communist era were connected with the filing of lawsuits. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century local gazetteers confirm that, even in the poorest regions of the country, court cases were routinely initiated by all sectors of society. Legal channels were a well-recognized means for villagers to advance collective interests. When such efforts failed to bring about the desired outcome, protest often ensued.

The willingness of imperial-era protesters to play by the rules is clear in an eyewitness account by an American observer in 1896, who describes nineteenth-century complainants as turning to disruptive tactics only when their initial petition effort failed to produce the desired result:

I once saw a procession of country people visit the yamens of the city mandarins. ... Shops were shut and perfect stillness reigned as, twenty thousand strong, they wended their way through the streets, with banners flying. ... “What is the meaning of this demonstration?” I inquired. “We are going to reduce the taxes,” was the laconic answer. Petitions had been tried in vain and now, driven to desperation, they were staking everything on a last appeal. ... The conflict was with the mandarins only; the rioters were under strict discipline, and still professed loyalty to the supreme government. ... Entering the yamen ... to watch the proceedings, I noticed a

---

14 Lee, Against the Law, 116.
company of rioters guarding a portion of the building while their comrades were eviscerating the rest. Inquiring why they were mounting guard instead of joining the looting, they answered simply, “This is the treasury, and no man shall touch the emperor’s money.” Their grievance was not taxation, but excessive charges made by local officers.  

As this example suggests, protests in the imperial period—like protests today—frequently began with the presentation of petitions, usually written in deferential language that referred to the authority and benevolence of the central state in order to condemn the illegal and venal behavior of local officials. If the petitions did not elicit a sympathetic response from the yamen, they might evolve into riots that would either be crushed by military force or resolved by some sort of compromise with higher-level authorities.

Of course, not all Chinese protests were (or are) as orderly or obedient as this particular incident might suggest. China’s history, like that of other nations, is replete with indiscriminate mob violence and bloodletting; and, as is also true elsewhere across the globe, such rampages still erupt today. Yet, China differs from many other countries in that its dominant modes of unrest have for centuries taken the form of highly scripted protest repertoires intended not only to register indignation, but also to signal an interest in negotiation with an authoritarian state whose strong and responsive political institutions regard such deferential expressions of popular discontent extremely seriously.

The argument here is definitely not that China has remained unchanged since imperial or Republican days. It has, of course, been transformed, politically as well as economically and socially, in amazing and almost unimaginable ways over the last three decades—let alone the last three hundred years. My point is simply that widespread popular protest targeting lower levels of the government and framed in the language of the central state is more likely an indication of politics-as-usual than a harbinger of some tectonic shift in state-society relations. Under an authoritarian system in which the ballot box has never been an effective means of conveying popular concerns to the political leadership, protest has often served that purpose instead. So long as the central state responds sympathetically yet shrewdly to the grievances expressed in widespread protest, the political system is strengthened rather than weakened.

Chinese political theory—from Confucian notions of the Mandate of Heaven to Mao’s injunction that “it is right to rebel”—recognizes popular revolt as an expected expression of social grievances. The successful management of disturbances was the sine qua non of long-lived dynasties. As the astute observer of Chinese popular protest, Thomas Taylor Meadows, wrote in 1856:

---

“In China it is precisely the right to rebel ... that has been a chief element of a national stability, unparalleled in the world’s history.”¹⁶ This is not to say that Chinese authorities (with the notable exception of Chairman Mao) actively encouraged popular protest. Riots and revolts were ruthlessly repressed by imperial rulers, who feared such expressions of discontent as a cosmic sign that their grip on the Mandate of Heaven might be slipping. A similarly hostile attitude prevails today. Nevertheless, central leaders’ willingness and capacity to respond sensitively to protesters’ demands (by such actions as dismissing unpopular local officials, providing disaster relief, promulgating new laws, and other concrete remedial measures) has been a key determinant of their political longevity.

To propose, as many observers do, that Chinese protesters today are articulating a new understanding of state-society relations, in which conceptions of legal rights are altering popular consciousness so as to undermine state legitimacy, is to point toward the likelihood of bottom-up political transformation. An escalation in the number of protests is often equated with a rising civil society believed to be approaching some tipping point after which political liberalization and democratization (or in some scenarios regime collapse or revolution) becomes unavoidable. To suggest, as I have tried to do, that what we are seeing in China today is not a new “rights consciousness” but a familiar “rules consciousness,” in which savvy protesters frame their grievances in officially approved terms in order to negotiate a better bargain with the authoritarian state, leads us to a less optimistic—but perhaps more realistic—expectation. By this logic, the political implications of popular protest will be determined less by societal pressure than by state response. For this reason, the large and growing state investment in “stability maintenance” (weiwen), indicative of a frightened state that turns to coercion rather than compromise, is particularly worrisome.

In conclusion, the case of China suggests that we may need to further revise the common assumption linking civil society and democracy to recognize that a rise in associational activity and popular protest is not only no guarantee against a retrogression from democracy to authoritarianism; under certain conditions, a robust civil society may actually work to strengthen and sustain an attentive authoritarian regime. That, I would submit, is the illiberal challenge of Chinese authoritarianism.
