

Kevin J. O'Brien, Lianjiang Li, and Mingxing Liu[†]

Bureaucrat-assisted contention in China is a type of collective action in which native-born local officials help socioeconomic elites launch or sustain popular action against outsider party secretaries by leaking information and sabotaging repression. Bureaucrats who assist local influentials are neither elite allies nor institutional activists. Instead, they unleash or support collective action as a weapon in a power struggle against ambitious, heavy-handed or corrupt superiors. Unlike mass demonstrations that are mobilized as a bargaining chip, bureaucrat-assisted contention hinges on a partnership with local elites who have their own grievances and pursue their own goals. Because it combines bureaucratic politics and popular action, this type of contention can help us understand underexplored aspects of political opportunities, framing, and mobilizing structures. In particular, it shows how participants in contention sometimes span the state-society divide, and how collective action can influence (and be influenced by) power struggles within a government.

Most popular contention starts in society. It emerges when people are dissatisfied with the status quo and frustrated that their grievances are being ignored (Marx and Wood 1975; Smelser 1962). In places such as China, disgruntled individuals may be infuriated about excessive taxation (Bernstein and Lü 2000; Chen 2012; Zhang 2015a), alarmed about unbreathable air (Deng and Yang 2013; Steinhardt and Wu 2016), angry about jobs lost and pensions withheld (Hurst and O'Brien 2002; Hurst et al. 2009; Chen and Tang 2013), furious about land expropriation (Sargeson 2013; Chuang 2014; Mattingly 2016), or disappointed that military service remains unrecognized and unappreciated (Diamant and O'Brien 2015; O'Brien and Diamant 2015; Hu et al. 2018). Then, some number of the aggrieved make a decision: routine institutional means to gain a hearing are wanting and quiescence is no longer an option. The best choice is to take to the streets or agitate online (Li and O'Brien 2008; Cai and Sheng 2013; Zhang 2015b; Yang 2009). Savvy protesters may exploit divisions within the government (Tarrow 1994) and succeed in locating "institutional activists" (Santoro and McGuire 1997; Zhang 2018; Ma 2019) or other insiders who are sympathetic to their cause (Lipsky 1968; O'Brien and Li 2006). But in the end, collective action usually depends on the initiative of people on the society side of the state-society ledger: disgruntled citizens who are ready to take a stand, band together, and set out to right a wrong.

But what if the impetus for contention also lies partly within the state? What if, for example, native-born officials in China help local elites launch or sustain popular action against outsider party secretaries by leaking information and sabotaging repression? And what if the officials who offer this assistance are neither elite allies nor institutional activists (cf., Zhang 2018), but instead seek to use the mobilized citizenry as a weapon in an internal power struggle?

Drawing on archival sources and interviews, this article explains how tensions between frequently rotated superiors and their locally born underlings can inspire social mobilization. Our argument hinges on an alliance that home-grown, midlevel bureaucrats in China form with

* Kevin J. O'Brien is Professor in the Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley. Lianjiang Li is Professor in the Department of Government and Public Administration, Chinese University of Hong Kong. Mingxing Liu is Professor at the China Institute for Educational Finance Research, Peking University. Please direct all correspondence to kobrien@berkeley.edu.

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community elites, who are encouraged to stir up collective action against outsiders who are interfering with cozy relationships and opportunities to engage in rent-seeking. We show that popular grievances are tapped into and provide kindling to ignite, but that the decision to mount or support a petition drive, demonstration or a dramatic rescue sometimes originates with native-born officials and socioeconomic elites who have their own personal and community-minded reasons to incite collective action. In the course of examining bureaucrat-assisted contention, we will show how overlapping interests and collusion between bureaucrats and entrepreneurs, retired officials and other local influentials can provoke contention and sometimes scuttle the plans (or careers) of leaders as highly placed as county or even provincial party secretaries.

Bureaucrat-inspired contention has taken place on a number of issues in China over the last few decades, including administrative mergers, land appropriation, wastewater removal, privatization of schools, and the location of trash incinerators, dams and power plants. Rather than focusing on any particular episode we will rely on data from a number of cases to explain how and why Chinese bureaucrats assist local elites in unleashing the masses on party secretaries who are brought in to rule a district, county, municipality, or province. Then, we will examine how ambitious, heavy-handed or corrupt secretaries inspire bureaucrat-assisted contention and what this says about several underexplored aspects of political opportunity, framing, and mobilizing structures. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications for theory and China of intrabureaucratic conflicts spilling over into collective action, and the impetus for contention being shared among local officials, socioeconomic elites, and members of the wider public.

BUREAUCRAT-ASSISTED CONTENTION

Bureaucrat-assisted contention occurs in China when native-born officials assist local elites in launching or sustaining popular action. Instead of doing their superiors' bidding and coopting, demobilizing, or suppressing protest (Cai 2008; Chuang 2014; Deng and O'Brien 2013; Ong 2018; Chen 2017), disaffected officials aid disgruntled elites by leaking information and sabotaging repression. The targets of bureaucrat-assisted contention in China are invariably outsider party secretaries, who are rotated in and out frequently, and who serve as the ranking representative of the party-state in a locality.

The defining feature of bureaucrat-assisted contention is that officials facilitate challenges to state authority, sparking collective action that otherwise might not have happened or helping sustain dissent that would otherwise have swiftly been put to an end. Leaking information about useful government policies in general and a party secretary's wrongdoing in particular, can embolden discontented community elites to mobilize popular action. In Gangu county, Gansu province, for example, a county party secretary in 2006 planned to recruit underqualified relatives of his political cronies to teach in the local schools. A bureaucrat in the county general office leaked the secretary's plan to elders of a lineage whom the secretary had offended three years before. The elders began to mobilize opposition to the plan. Within two days, hundreds of young unemployed college graduates and their relatives gathered at the county government compound, demanding open and fair teacher recruitment. During the demonstration, several officials, who were allies of the leaker, led the protesters to the party secretary's office and pretended they were trying to stop the protesters from forcing their way in, when in reality they were urging them to do just that. The demonstration drew the attention of the municipal leadership and the party secretary was soon transferred out of the county (interview 1).

Undermining repression of a petition can also jumpstart collective action. In Jianli county, Hubei province, a county party secretary alienated his subordinates and local elites by selling the management rights for the county's best high school to a private firm in 2005. After the sale, the management firm refused to enroll underperforming children of local bureaucrats and community leaders.irate local officials immediately began to apply pressure on the secretary.

In a highly unusual and confrontational move, the county people's congress rejected the government budget at its annual session, reportedly citing the education expenditures as a justification, despite the secretary's strong endorsement of the spending plan. Still, the party secretary refused to give in and the management company went a step further by firing some weak teachers. An episode of bureaucrat-assisted contention then broke out. Several retired officials and local business people whose children or grandchildren had been rejected by the high school encouraged the dismissed teachers to lodge a collective complaint. When three of the teachers were intercepted on their way to the municipal government, local officials who opposed the secretary instructed the guards at the detention center to turn a blind eye to rules that ban detainees from making contact with anyone on the outside. The detained teachers were allowed to use their mobile phones to call their favorite students, who then mobilized other students to come to their rescue. As hundreds of students marched to the government compound to demand the release of the teachers, concerned parents rushed to the area, too. A large and boisterous crowd assembled. Worried that they would fail their annual performance review on the make-or-break criterion of maintaining social stability (Zhou and Yan 2014), municipal leaders put the county secretary under investigation and eventually he was removed (Yang 2011; interview 2).

Officials involved in bureaucrat-assisted contention sometimes only seek to have a measure they oppose reversed. At other times, they go further and deploy contention to topple their superiors. One sign of this latter strategy is offering assistance that officials seldom provide. In Yunnan province, a former deputy chairman of the provincial people's political consultative conference became famous in 2012 for championing villagers who had been lodging collective complaints to stop their land from being expropriated. He regularly received phone calls from community elites throughout the province, including businesspeople, lineage elders, and "peasant leaders" (Li and O'Brien 2008; Zhang 2015a), begging him for help. But he declined to act on a large majority of the pleas, because the cases lacked "political height" (*zhengzhi gaodu*), meaning they did not implicate the outsider provincial party secretary whom he was seeking to unseat (interview 3).

The presence of bureaucrat-assisted contention in China suggests a number of questions. In more open societies, opposition parties and politicians often play a role in staging demonstrations to achieve their own ends. Recent cases include the red-shirt army movement in Thailand (Forsyth 2010), the occupy-central movement in Hong Kong (Ortmann 2015), and the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan (Rowen 2015). China, however, is a relatively closed and order-obsessed authoritarian regime, where assisting popular contention is a high-risk venture for any bureaucrat (Ma 2019: 5). Only during the Cultural Revolution, when "it is right to rebel" became part of the ideology of the day, did officials sometimes organize mass demonstrations against each other, though even then this was always done for the purpose of "defending Chairman Mao" (Dittmer 2001). Throughout the reform era, the central leadership has been much more committed to party unity and vigilant about prohibiting insiders from drawing on popular support and disruption to improve their position in power struggles. What then motivates local officials to support collective action against party secretaries?

INSTITUTIONAL TENSIONS

Like most forms of collective action, bureaucrat-assisted contention has historical precedents. When an emperor attempted to force members of the gentry to contribute more to state coffers, local officials and community elites sometimes colluded to instigate protests against stepped-up extraction (Wakeman 1975; Faure and Siu 1995; Siu 1992; Wong 1998; also see Zhou 2016). Contemporary bureaucrat-assisted contention in China can be traced to two institutional tensions, one between native-born officials and outsider party secretaries, and the other between outsider secretaries and local socioeconomic elites. As the "number one in charge" (*yibashou*) in every jurisdiction, party secretaries enjoy far more decision-making power than any other

official, but are unaccountable to the people they govern, unlike government heads who at least are formally elected by local people's congresses (Manion 2008). Since the 1990s, increasingly strict enforcement of the rule that secretaries must come from a different locality has deepened their detachment from the people they rule (Zhou 2016). Party secretaries are also rotated frequently, most often serving short terms of three to five years in a locality (Landry 2008). Operating under these institutions, secretaries sometimes ignore the interests of their subordinates as well as local elites when ordered to enforce decisions from above (Mei and Pearson 2014). At the same time, eager to score impressive "political achievements" (*zhengji*) that will enhance the likelihood of promotion, many secretaries are tempted to initiate eye-catching but often poorly conceived development projects (O'Brien and Li 1999). Worst of all, secretaries who find themselves "ceilinged" (Kou and Tsai 2014), because they have little hope of promotion owing to age, education, or lack of patrons, may behave like "roving bandits" (Olson 1993) and try to pocket as much as fast as they can before they must retire (Liu 2018).

Officials who assist popular contention, on the other hand, are typically "ordinary leadership cadres" (*putong lingdao ganbu*). This includes chairs and deputy chairs of people's congresses and political consultative conferences, heads of the public security bureau and the court, and directors of government bureaus. Although no less prone to corruption than their adversaries, native-born officials usually have a somewhat longer-term perspective than outsider secretaries on issues such as economic development and environmental protection. They also prefer to nurture and take advantage of opportunities for activities such as bribe taking, shady real estate deals, and nepotism over many years, while newcomers are inclined to engage in out-and-out plunder by "drying up the pond for fishing" or even "killing the chicken to get the eggs" (see Zhou 2016).

The term "local socioeconomic elites" refers to a stratum that includes individuals such as business people, retired officials, clan elders, retired school principals, and even local "rights activists" (Benney 2013). The core group, however, is made up of private entrepreneurs, who need to cultivate patrons in officialdom, when, for instance, seeking a business license or a tax reduction (Ma 2019: 15-16). Local influentials typically have deep ties with "ordinary leadership cadres," nearly all of whom have made their careers in their home town. Both groups have an interest in maintaining privileged access to scarce resources such as investment opportunities, good schools, and natural resources and farmland, and find themselves on the same side when party secretaries initiate or acquiesce to a decision to pursue an administrative merger, privatize a school, or place a trash incinerator in the community. Outsiders often threaten the cozy relationship that native-born bureaucrats and local elites have built up and can disrupt the ability of both parties to secure advantages they have grown to expect.

Bureaucrat-assisted contention is usually averted because the institutional tensions among native-born officials and outsider secretaries are contained within the bureaucracy. Although they do not always work overly hard to cultivate loyalty among their subordinates, party secretaries typically try to avoid alienating them. Acting on the centuries-old proverb that "even a strong dragon does not trifle with resident snakes" (*qianglong buya ditoushe*), secretaries may refrain from impinging on the interests of underlings or encroaching on their turf. After taking up a new post, they may make conciliatory gestures to soothe anxious subordinates. They, for instance, may announce that they have no desire to reshuffle directors of local government bureaus. Even ambitious or domineering secretaries often test the water first, size up potential rivals, and back off when they "touch the needle hidden in the ball of cotton" (*chajue mianhuatuan zhong you zhen*). For their part, underlings tend to tread carefully and avoid confronting superiors. They accommodate as much as they can and issue warnings only when their "core interests" (*hexin liyi*) are threatened. For instance, they may signal unhappiness about a secretary's "recklessness" or "lack of commitment to the long-term interests of the people" by voting against or abstaining in party committee meetings. Such warnings are usually enough to ward off further incursions. Even when the two sides do not get along well, tension usually simmers at a low level and then disappears because secretaries are rotated so often. As

a result, outsider secretaries and native-born officials in most circumstances maintain an uneasy truce that is characterized by under-the-table deals, negotiations, and constant, small tugs-of-war (Mertha 2009).

Tension turns into bureaucrat-assisted contention when secretaries either go too far with a new initiative or experience significant pressure from above. Facing a run-away leader, locally born officials have little effective recourse. The Leninist principle of democratic centralism does not empower subordinates to challenge superiors through institutional channels. In theory, officials can report wrongdoing through the disciplinary inspection system. But in practice, the system seldom can do much if a secretary has powerful patrons or is enforcing a decision from above (Li and Deng 2016; Manion 2016). When conflict reaches this point, local officials may become desperate and willing to take a gamble. They may turn to “nonorganizational activities” (*fei zuzhi huodong*) (interviews 4, 5, 6), by working with disaffected local elites and using mass mobilization to ratchet up pressure on a common enemy. Bureaucrat-assisted contention is a high-risk, high-gain strategy, borne out of dissatisfaction felt by midlevel officials and local influentials who cannot see another, better way to rein in ambitious, grasping or highhanded party secretaries.

METHODS AND VARIATION

This study was a long-term project that combined ethnography with concept formation. In both the 1990s and the early 2010s, Liu conducted dozens of open-ended interviews with officials in Gansu, Hebei, Hubei and Zhejiang and observed that native-born officials sometimes deployed popular contention as a means to oust their party bosses. Then Liu and Li engaged in discussions about several cases of what we now call bureaucrat-assisted contention. Next, Li took the lead, after a 2012 conversation with O’Brien, in identifying the features of this type of collective action, its characteristic process of mobilization, and the interaction among the various parties. Liu and Li then conducted additional fieldwork in Hunan, Shandong, Yunnan, Shanghai, Guangdong and Zhejiang to confirm that the episodes we had located were not idiosyncratic local political dramas but shared certain institutional roots. Meanwhile, we collected accounts of bureaucrat-assisted contention on the Internet from Henan, Jiangsu and Sichuan. Finally, O’Brien wrote the introduction and conclusion, and worked with Li to sharpen the concept and incorporate the findings into the field of contentious politics. Throughout the research, we sought to achieve a “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer 1975) with our informants, while identifying themes in the empirics that clarified what was distinctive (and interesting) about bureaucrat-assisted contention.

Owing to the limited number of full cases we have in hand, it is difficult to speak about regional or temporal variation. Nevertheless, our hunch is that bureaucrat-assisted contention is more common in coastal areas where private enterprise has taken off and political loyalty has lost some of its luster, as well as in counties or provinces with a history of factionalism. There may also be an inverse U-shaped relationship, where this type of collective action is uncommon when party secretaries throughout the system are extremely weak or strong, and most common where ambitious outsiders fall in the middle: domineering yet vulnerable, not strong enough to lead local-born underlings to give up and resign (Li 2019), and not weak enough so that bureaucrat-assisted contention is unnecessary.

OPPORTUNITIES

From the perspective of protest leaders, divisions within a state are an important component of a political opportunity structure (Tarrow 1994; Meyer 2004; Li and O’Brien 2008; Zhang 2015b). For disaffected bureaucrats in China, opportunities often emerge when party secretaries

irritate local socioeconomic elites—people who typically have the moral and financial resources to mobilize collective action. Secretaries are particularly likely to generate openings for bureaucrat-assisted contention when they seek to enforce higher-level decisions that both subordinates and local influentials strongly oppose. In Pingjiang county, Hunan province, a new party secretary decided in 2014 to go ahead with a controversial plan to build a thermal power plant that would emit considerable pollution. Locally born bureaucrats had accused his predecessor, also a non-native, of “recklessly promoting the project.” The new secretary found himself subject to heightened pressure from the provincial party committee and the company that would build the plant, which was run by a former premier’s daughter. More ambitious than cautious, he attempted to force the plan through in the face of opposition from local business owners who were concerned about property values and the effect polluted air and water would have on tourism. To forestall possible collusion between his underlings and local influentials, the secretary called an emergency meeting of county officials, at which he announced his decision and issued a stern warning forbidding local cadres and their families from joining any protests against the plant (cf. O’Brien and Deng 2017). Native-born officials, however, did exactly what the secretary feared most. They seized the opportunity he had unwittingly created and leaked the secretary’s decision to entrepreneurs who had invested in local real estate and ecotourism. The business people immediately launched a mass campaign, cleverly framing their opposition in terms President Xi Jinping himself had used to preserve “clear waters” and “green mountains” for future generations. Seven demonstrations were staged in three days, drawing in hundreds of people. This led the county secretary to resign and the provincial party committee to shelve the plan (Zhou 2014; Li and Liu 2016). Angry that he had been outmaneuvered, the secretary posted an open letter on the Internet, accusing his subordinates of being “unreasonable,” “irresponsible,” and “indecent” (Tian 2014). He did not appear to realize that he had created the opportunity for popular action, and the threat to himself, by simultaneously alienating his underlings and harming the investments of local business people.

Party secretaries may also be implicated when opponents use their political allies against them. In Yunnan province, a provincial party secretary was tripped up by an opportunity generated by his own greed and a follower who could be attacked easier than he could be. In the 2000s, the provincial party secretary, who was from Shaanxi and had made most of his career elsewhere, set out to amass a fortune before reaching retirement age. He took large bribes from local mine owners and promotion seekers, and dismissed many officials without good reason, angering a powerful group of native-born officials known as the Qujing Gang. The secretary’s misdeeds also drew the attention of Yang Weijun, a former leader of the local consultative conference who had long been working to combat high-level corruption in Yunnan (Wang 2014, Zhang Huan 2014; Zhang Liuchang 2014). The Qujing Gang struck back at the secretary by reporting his corruption to the Central Discipline Inspection Commission and by giving Yang evidence of the bribe taking to hand-carry to Beijing. But the Qujing Gang’s disclosures failed to have any effect because the secretary had close ties with a member of the Politburo Standing Committee. The secretary, after learning of the campaign being waged against him, retaliated by subjecting his opponents to anticorruption investigations, which landed some of them in prison. The Qujing Gang appeared to be defeated, but then discovered an opening that they could exploit. Protests against land appropriation were underway near the provincial capital that were targeting several of the secretary’s loyal followers. The Qujing Gang linked up with Yang Weijun and community leaders who were leading the contention to get to the party secretary. Yang then led a group of “rights-defense representatives” (*weiquan daibiao*) to the office of the provincial consultative conference to deliver a petition about the wrongdoing of the secretary’s allies. Later, he gave a long speech at a mass meeting outside the capital, criticizing the county officials who mishandled the protest, and naming their patron in the provincial government (Wang 2014; Zhu 2015; Liu 2014; interview 3). Although a clear opportunity to challenge the provincial secretary had not existed, actions deep in the bureaucracy made him vulnerable to bureaucrat-assisted contention.

FRAMING

Framing, broadly speaking, consists of defining grievances as an injustice, attributing them to a target or system, and convincing the aggrieved they need not accept their plight and have a realistic chance of prevailing and having justice served (Benford and Snow 2000). An essential element of framing is aligning competing claims of groups or factions of a movement into a commonly accepted framework (Snow et al. 1986; Snow et al. 2014), in part by striking a balance between minimizing risks for participants and maximizing mobilization. Framing in bureaucrat-assisted contention is distinctive in that it involves frame alignment between officials and elites who share a common enemy but not always common goals. Frames for bureaucrat-assisted contention possess two noteworthy features. For one, framing typically has a strongly localist flavor, which helps it resonate with the audience to be mobilized (Noakes and Johnston 2005: 2) and fortifies the identity component of the frame (Gamson 1992). Beyond conjuring a group of the aggrieved into being, “working for the locality” also disguises that elites and officials often have unspoken motives and that addressing public grievances is usually far from the first thing on their minds. Second, frames are unusually precise in pinpointing the source of a grievance and exploiting the vulnerabilities of a target. Thanks to information leaked by officials, local elites know exactly what wrongdoing secretaries have committed and have hard evidence of their excesses or misbehavior. In the Gangu county case discussed above, the party secretary denied that he had a secret recruitment plan. Protest leaders silenced him by displaying his namelist of preferred candidates (interview 1). An even more dramatic episode of framing with devastating accuracy occurred in Gaoping county, Jiangxi province in 2015. Eager to attract investment to boost his career prospects, a county secretary reached an agreement with a developer who wanted to build resort villas near a scenic lake. The secretary ordered the leaders of the township where the lake was located to carry out the construction plan. Local lineage elders, however, strongly opposed the project because it entailed the relocation of their clan’s ancestral tombs. A township official who had poor relations with the township secretary saw an opportunity to stop the construction by using the secretary’s words against him. After adjourning a closed-door meeting about the construction project, the secretary walked out of the room and was stunned to see dozens of agitated villagers gathered outside. Confronted by “the masses,” the secretary insisted that the meeting was about other, unrelated government business. A young villager then began to play back a recording of the secretary explaining the plan to build the villas during the meeting that had just ended. It turned out that the locally born official had told lineage elders about the meeting beforehand. The clan leaders then mobilized lineage members who shared their belief that ancestral graves should not be tampered with and ill fortune would result if they were. During the meeting, the disaffected official had secretly recorded the secretary’s speech and sent the audio clips to the young man’s mobile phone (interview 12). Incriminating information, persuasively communicated, made all the difference. The audio clips not only proved that the secretary was plainly lying, they also provided incontrovertible evidence that a misdeed had occurred and pinpointed the culprit. Naming (Felstiner et al. 1980-81), this case reminds us, is often the easy part of framing, because everyone can complain that they have been wronged in some way. Information made available to protesters by insiders can do much to help shape an effective, “adversarial” claim by assigning blame for an injustice to a particular person (Gamson 1992).

Beyond precisely identifying the vulnerabilities of a target, the framing of bureaucrat-assisted contention often has a strong localist flavor, with all residents of an area identified as “us” and outsider secretaries labeled as “them.” Most party secretaries are outsiders in every sense of the term. Many do not even have their families living with them (interviews 7 and 16). Relying on information concerning where secretaries hail from and where their families remain, the frames that back up bureaucrat-assisted contention invariably feed suspicions that secretaries do not care about the long-term welfare of the local population. In Songjiang district, Shanghai, a university area, the party secretary approved the construction of a lithium battery

factory in 2013. Many residents worried that the plant would pose a substantial environmental hazard. Officials who opposed the secretary let word out that his original work unit was a central ministry and that he had been sent down to a lowly district only to gain leadership experience. Furthermore, they made known that he was so confident about a pending promotion to Beijing that he left his family in the capital, over 1000 km away. Community elites, particularly leaders of homeowners' associations, college professors who had bought homes in the area, and owners of property management companies, used the leaks to mobilize local residents, who were outraged that the secretary was seeking to burnish his record at the expense of the health of thousands of university students and the local property market. A mass demonstration was organized, which alarmed Shanghai's Party Secretary, who was being considered for promotion to a vice-premiership. Eager to maintain a sterling record in "stability maintenance" (*weiwen*), the Shanghai secretary immediately stepped in and terminated the project (Liu Dan 2013; interviews 10 and 11).

A "protect our hometown" (*baowei jiaxiang*) frame is an effective way to mobilize residents and expose outsiders as compromised by conflicting loyalties, careerism or greed. In Qidong county, Jiangsu province, activists in 2012 distilled localism down to its purest form. They spurred residents to join bureaucrat-assisted contention against a wastewater pipeline project a party secretary refused to oppose by simply asking: "Are you a Qidonger?" (interviews 8 and 9). The same frame was adopted to draw local officials, elites and ordinary citizens together against an outsider who was promoting a mining project in Shifang county, Sichuan in 2012 (Yan 2014; interview 9).

The "protect our hometown" discourse is particularly useful in framing bureaucrat-assisted contention against administrative mergers (Ma 2019: 11). Since the early 1990s, turning counties into municipal districts has drawn the ire of many local officials who are worried about losing autonomy and control over their budgets (Ma 2019: 9-10), as well as experiencing a reduction in rents they can extract from local businesses. Being absorbed into a city is also seen as a threat by many local elites, who stand to lose influence over new, more distant officials and who would have more difficulty gaining access to land, natural resources, licenses and other benefits that local cadres had been willing to provide (Ma 2005; Zhan 2017). To mobilize collective action against mergers, native-born officials and community leaders often seek to kindle a sense of pride in their hometown. This claim, even when somewhat far-fetched, can be effective in stirring a public that otherwise has little to gain (or lose) from an administrative reorganization. In 2005, for example, the party secretary of Hubei province decided to merge Daye county into Huangshi city. The change directly threatened the interests of local officials who held shares in several local mining firms. To stop the merger, they leaked the plan to owners of the companies, who immediately began to worry about losing their business licenses after the reorganization. Daye's secretary did not stand up to defend the entrepreneurs because a decision to promote him to deputy mayor was in the offing. Instead, he sought to reassure them and calm them down. The mine owners, however, were unmoved. They mobilized a large petition drive which eventually led to dozens of protesters breaking into government offices and ransacking them. Knowing that most of Daye's residents were indifferent about the merger, the mine owners hired hundreds of local toughs, paid them handsomely and put them up in high-end hotels. On the day the petition was delivered, the mine owners hired bus companies to give the protesters free rides from the county to Huangshi city. At the urging of local officials, the mine owners also called on all of Daye's residents to defend the county's glorious history as the birthplace of China's metallurgy industry ("Daye" literally means "great smelting"). Should there be a merger, they argued, the city of Huangshi, which was only established in the 1950s, should instead be renamed after the county (interview 15). A localist frame had transformed real (and manufactured) popular pride into group solidarity, while cloaking the self-interest of bureaucrats and entrepreneurs with claims that they were simply pursuing justice and protecting the rights of Daye residents.

A localist frame is a recurring feature in Chinese bureaucrat-assisted contention. It also was adopted in Lingbao county, Henan province, which is the hometown of the philosopher

Lao Tzu, the legendary founder of Taoism. In 2010, many local cadres opposed the Sanmenxia party committee's decision to transform the county into a city district. Like their counterparts in Daye, they feared that they would lose opportunities to extract unwarranted payments, in their case, ones derived from mining, tobacco cultivation, and apple orchards. So they leaked the merger plan to a group of retired officials, including a respected former chairman of the county people's congress. They also made the proposal known to dozens of business people in the county congress and political consultative conference, who began to worry that their products might lose a well-known brand name. Again, the general public had little at stake in the merger. As had happened in Daye, officials and business people in Lingbao appealed to hometown pride to mobilize a series of demonstrations. Officials did their part by releasing information that revealed how the municipal government had been siphoning off the county's natural resources since the 1980s. The business people used this knowledge to rile up the public, comparing the municipal government to a colonial power (Liu 2010). Precise, localist framing that appealed in different ways to local bureaucrats, elites, and the broader populace generated enough pressure that the municipal authorities put off the merger. The county secretary who acquiesced to the reorganization was left discredited and disgraced. In short order, he was shuffled off to a position in the municipal people's congress and quietly went into semi-retirement at the age of fifty-one.

MOBILIZING STRUCTURES

How bureaucrat-assisted contention is mounted also has several notable features. In social movement theory, mobilizing structures are normally located within society (McAdam et al. 1996: 143-144; Munson 2010). Bureaucrat-assisted contention does rely on social networks and organizations such as lineage groups, internet chat groups, NGOs, and business associations. Interestingly, however, it can also turn the government hierarchy itself into a mobilizing structure. In Changxing county, Zhejiang province, contention broke out after the Huzhou city party committee decided to turn a county into a municipal district. Changxing's outsider party secretary accepted the merger, but local officials and local elites did not. To underscore its opposition, the county business association applied for permission to organize a demonstration against the merger (Liu Jun 2013). In an even bolder move, the association called for its members to go on strike and keep their businesses closed until the decision was reversed (interview 13). What many people did not know is that county officials had used the bureaucracy to help stir the association into action and assemble the opposition. At the encouragement of locally born officials, several township heads announced their collective resignation as a protest against the reorganization. To dramatize their resolve, they posted their resignation letter on the Internet (Liu Jun 2013). It turned out that the township officials' daring gesture originated with a guarantee from a senior leader of the county people's congress, who assured them that they would not lose their jobs if they joined the contention (interview 13). The government hierarchy has also been relied upon elsewhere to encourage officials to boycott or sabotage repression. In Yuhang district, Hangzhou, for example, several county officials opposed the construction of a trash incinerator. At their behest, every township head suddenly went missing when the city police came to look for help in halting a protest involving hundreds of villagers (Heng 2014; interview 14).

With officials refusing to take part in repression or even undermining it, bureaucrat-assisted contention can be remarkably resilient. In Hunan province, resistance to excessive taxation in the 1990s and early 2000s was spirited and persistent, in part owing to bureaucrats who tipped off protest leaders when party secretaries dispatched the police to arrest them (Li and O'Brien 2008; Zhang 2015a; Zhang 2015b). The resistance to land appropriation in Jinning county, Yunnan province lasted from 2012 to 2014. It continued for so long in large part because of the support of a provincial official and other cadres who provided the local elites who led the protest with evidence of the provincial secretary's corruption (Liu 2014; interview 3). That the bureau-

cracy itself could be used as a mobilizing structure reminds us of the opportunities provided by a far-flung, multilevel state where officials are not always on the same page and that movement entrepreneurs can be located both within the bureaucracy and in society.

SOME CONSEQUENCES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY

As the episodes discussed in this article have made clear, bureaucrat-assisted contention is difficult to pull off but often works. A coalition of convenience between native-born officials and local elites can generate enough pressure, when coupled with social mobilization, to get the better of a party secretary in a district, county, or even a province. Ironically, in a regime obsessed with “harmony” (*hexie*) and stability, the disruptiveness that makes bureaucrat-assisted contention relatively uncommon can also make it effective, by showing officials at higher levels that something is seriously awry. This echoes the popular Chinese saying that “big disturbances lead to big solutions, small disturbances lead to small solutions, and no disturbance leads to no solution,” (Cai 2010: 112)¹ and suggests that although mobilizing the disaffected and making a commotion is risky in an authoritarian setting, drawing together a range of aggrieved parties, crossing the state-society border, and creating a spectacle (O’Brien and Deng 2015: 470) can produce results.

Bureaucrat-assisted contention is of course not always successful, and more research is needed to understand when and where it fails. Still, repeated recourse to this type of collective action can have lasting consequences by reconfiguring the relationship between secretaries, local officials, and socioeconomic elites. Once they force concessions or drive a secretary away, native-born bureaucrats are inclined to revive their cooperation with local influentials and launch contention again against a secretary’s successor. Aware of what happened last time, new appointees are often more cautious and work harder to avoid simultaneously alienating local officials and elites. Over time, bureaucrat-assisted contention may not even need to be unleashed to have an effect. After more than a decade when maintaining stability has been the regime’s top priority (Zhou and Yan 2014), a credible threat is often sufficient to check a secretary’s power, ambitions or avarice.

At the same time, it should be noted that although bureaucrat-assisted contention is invariably carried out in the name of a locality, success does not always benefit local residents or even the people who were mobilized to take part. In Shifang county, Sichuan province, for example, a group of mine owners joined forces with native-born officials to stage a noisy antipollution protest that halted the construction of a large, new smelting operation. But the bureaucrats and business people had colluded simply to drive out a competitor who the mine owners feared would be a more efficient and cleaner competitor, and who the officials worried would be more difficult to shake down. The contention and its reputation for instability turned the county into an “orphan” (*guer*) that was out of favor with higher levels of government and investors. The collective action had succeeded in blocking the new plant, but the county lost out on a 13.7 billion yuan (US\$2.2 billion) investment that would have boosted local incomes, while the mine operators continued to pollute as much as they had before (Yan Dingfei 2014; interview 9).

For students of social movements, bureaucrat-assisted contention draws attention to some less-appreciated aspects of three concepts that have been at the heart of the field for decades. First, it says something unexpected about divisions within the state and defections that provide openings for social forces. Opportunities can arise when a leader pushes subordinates into the arms of local elites who have their own complaints about the leader. Institutional tensions and alienating decisions can generate a rough-and-ready partnership that unites middle-level bureaucrats and influential members of society who have the wherewithal to mobilize the public. Second, like everything associated with bureaucratic-assisted contention, frame alignment cuts across the state-society divide. Local elites use leaked information to turn broad grievances (e.g. dissatisfaction with the environment) into actionable demands. With crucial assistance from

within the state, claims home in on a named culprit and specified offences, and bureaucrats and local elites draw on hometown pride to package their charges in a discourse that emphasizes protecting local interests. Lastly, as with opportunities and framing, mobilizing structures span state and society. Leaders antagonize local influentials and subordinates within the government. Although local elites deploy social networks and other means to pull the public into contention, what stands out is how much of the impetus for protest lies within the state, and how actions by leaders and their subordinates both fuel collective action.

Bureaucrat-assisted contention also reminds us that familiar concepts such as opportunity and mobilizing structures must be contextualized when they travel to illiberal countries that lack active intermediary organizations. This type of collective action arises in China not because SMOs exploit splits within the state, as is often seen in more open societies, but because disaffected officials inside a divided state look outward and cobble together an alliance with societal forces. China's dearth of SMOs, in this sense, is a structural feature of its authoritarian system that draws three aggrieved parties together and leads native-born officials to a build a makeshift, informal mobilizing structure that, to some degree, takes the place of a conventional SMO, and makes coordination and collective action possible. In this challenging opportunity structure, what appears to be a strength of the state (i.e., its ability to suppress civil society organizations) can create a vulnerability, and what appears reckless for officials (i.e., mobilizing elites and fomenting contention) can be an effective way to confront one's superiors.

Bureaucrat-assisted contention neither fits snugly in state-society ways of thinking nor with imagining that a thick, black line exists between members of the state and challengers. Instead, it highlights two actors (bureaucrats and local elites) in a four-party game that also includes leaders and the public. Contention originates in the middle reaches of the government and is energized by a bureaucratic power struggle that draws in aggrieved people from the higher reaches of society. The impetus for protest is shared and midlevel officials are full-fledged participants in contention, not just champions, elite allies or "institutional activists" (Santoro and McGuire 1997; Yang 2019; Ma 2019). Bureaucrat-assisted contention is mutually constituted and hinges on parties working across the state-society divide. Disaffected bureaucrats and elites both play a critical role, as each pursues a common target for their own reasons, with the public brought in as a supporting player to ratchet the pressure up one final notch.

NOTES

¹ The case for the effectiveness of disruptive tactics in democracies reaches back at least as far as Gamson (1975), Piven and Cloward (1979) and McAdam (1982). For more on the debate over "disruption vs. moderation," see Giugni (1999: xvi-xviii) and McAdam and Su (2002). In China, the evidence is mixed, with some scholars arguing that tactical escalation in the wake of policing mistakes can generate leverage and concessions (O'Brien and Deng 2015), while others find that "troublemaking but not disruptive tactics" are most effective (Chen 2012: 182-84). Overall, evidence from China on "the power of disruptive collective action" (Cai 2010, chapter 6) shows that a "supportive regime" and "level of democratization" (Amenta, Caren, Chiarello and Su 2010: 299) may not be as crucial as some political mediation models suggest.

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INTERVIEWEE LIST

1. Government official, 2014, Lanzhou.
2. Government official, 2016, Wuhan.
3. Government official, 2015, Kunming.
4. Policy researcher, 2014, Guangzhou.
5. Policy researcher, 2018, Shanghai.
6. Government official, 2009, Shanghai
7. Policy researcher, 2016, Beijing
8. Policy researcher, 2016, Beijing.
9. Policy researcher, 2016, Beijing.
10. Policy researcher, 2017, Shanghai.
11. Policy researcher, 2017, Shanghai.
12. Policy researcher, 2017, Guangzhou.
13. Government official, 2015, Hangzhou.
14. Policy researcher, 2017, Hangzhou.
15. Government official, 2009, Wuhan.
16. Policy researcher, 2014, Beijing.