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Rightful Resistance in Rural China

How can the poor and weak “work” a political system to their advantage? Drawing mainly on interviews and surveys in rural China, Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li show that popular action often hinges on locating and exploiting divisions within the state. Otherwise powerless people use the rhetoric and commitments of the central government to try to fight misconduct by local officials, open up clogged channels of participation, and push back the frontiers of the permissible. This “rightful resistance” has far-reaching implications for our understanding of contentious politics. As O'Brien and Li explore the origins, dynamics, and consequences of rightful resistance, they highlight similarities between collective action in places as varied as China, the former East Germany, and the United States, while suggesting how Chinese experiences speak to issues such as opportunities to protest, claims radicalization, tactical innovation, and the outcomes of contention. Although the focus of their rich, ground-level analysis is contemporary China, the authors make a compelling argument that wherever a gap between rights promised and rights delivered exists, there is room for rightful resistance to emerge.

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For Betsy and Lijuan

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Preface

We first noticed rightful resistance in the summer of 1994, when we were doing fieldwork on village elections in China. As officials and researchers in Shandong, Hebei, and Hubei described the problems rural leaders faced, they told us fascinating stories about “nail-like individuals” (*dingzibu*) and “shrewd and unruly people” (*diaomin*). We soon learned that villagers whom cadres labeled this way were often responsible for launching protests, including actions as small as trying to topple a village leader and as large as organizing an antitax demonstration that drew in thousands of farmers. That first summer, despite some promising interviews, we were not overly hopeful that we could discover a great deal about these people or what they did. After all, rural unrest was (and still is) a sensitive topic in China, on which sources were scarce, anecdotes rare, and fieldwork fraught with complications.

We returned home and started reading. Our initial search for examples of protests did not turn up much, although we did locate some informative articles in out-of-the-way Chinese journals and popular magazines. Still, we felt unsure what to make of these accounts, mainly because we did not have any complete cases that were as detailed as we needed.

This changed when we gained access to our first full episode of rural contention, in which dozens of villagers were struggling to oust a local Communist Party secretary who they were confident was corrupt. With the help of friends and colleagues, we interviewed a number of organizers and community members as well as the accused cadre; we collected letters of complaint and testimonies prepared by protest leaders; we also spoke with several township and county officials who had been drawn into the case. Following one episode of contention from shortly after it began to its conclusion proved more valuable than we could have imagined. It was particularly

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useful in bringing to light aspects of collective action that Chinese sources usually ignored, such as who the activists were, what tactics they employed, and how important it was to win support outside the village (O'Brien and Li, 1995).

As we continued to gather material on rural protest, it became clear that what we were observing did not fit snugly in the literatures on political participation, popular resistance, or social movements. It was neither as institutionalized as most political participation nor as uninstitutionalized as the "politics by other means" that social movement scholars usually studied. The contention we were hearing and reading about was more noisy, public, open, and consequential than James Scott's (1985) "everyday forms of resistance," yet still fell short of rebellion or revolution. This activity made use of authorized channels without playing exactly by the rules and rested on a familiar rhetorical strategy, but it did not involve quite the same accommodations with existing power relations or assertions of long-standing cultural conventions as "moral economy" claims (Scott, 1976; Thompson, 1971, 1991: 336–51). This type of collective action, we eventually realized, was not political participation, everyday resistance, or a social movement, but something else. Lacking a good term to describe it, we called it "policy-based resistance." At this point, we were working solely in a Chinese context and were content to distinguish "policy-based resisters" from "recalcitrants" and "compliant villagers" (Li and O'Brien, 1996).

Our efforts to figure out what about this contention might be interesting to a wider audience took much longer than we had expected. Once it became apparent that Chinese villagers were struggling to defend rights they had already been granted, or rights they believed could be derived from the regime's policies, laws, principles, and legitimating ideology, we decided that "rightful resistance" (O'Brien, 1996, 2001; O'Brien and Li, 1999; Li, 2004) was a more precise term than "policy-based resistance." But we were continually stymied in trying to gain a more complete understanding of the origins, dynamics, and outcomes of rightful resistance. At this stage, we were not sure whether this type of contention would spread, evolve, and have a significant impact, or if it was an epiphenomenon (characteristic of China in its transitional state) that would vanish without a trace. Owing to the sensitivity of research on social unrest, we found it difficult to arrange fieldwork in locations where we knew major episodes of rightful resistance had occurred. For almost eight years we only inched forward, relying on short stints of field research here and there, some survey work,

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and irritatingly incomplete accounts of rural contention available in Chinese sources.

Then, in early 2003 good luck came our way. With the help of Yu Jianrong, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Science, we gained access to dozens of protest leaders in Hunan province. In the course of joint fieldwork by Yu and Lianjiang Li in January and March 2003, as well as through transcripts and videotaped interviews that Dr. Yu generously shared with us, much new information came to light and much that we had dimly perceived came into sharper focus.¹

Making sense of these interviews (and our other evidence) entailed moving from single incidents to general patterns to an underlying logic. Rather than presenting our China findings in great detail, as we have done elsewhere, this book focuses on some of the more theoretical implications of rightful resistance: how, in particular, this form of protest speaks to the literature on contentious politics.

This study is organized like an episode of collective action: it works its way from origins to dynamics to consequences. Chapter 1 defines rightful resistance and explains its relationship to other types of popular contention. In Chapter 2 we explore the onset of rightful resistance by examining opportunities for protest in rural China and how activists perceive them. Chapters 3 and 4 highlight the boundary-spanning nature of rightful claims and tactics and discuss a trend toward claims radicalization and tactical escalation.² In the last two chapters we consider the significance of rightful resistance: Chapter 5 examines its effects on policy implementation, protest leaders, and the wider community, whereas Chapter 6 investigates possible consequences for Chinese state-society relations and political change, particularly those related to policy innovations, institutional reforms, and the spread of citizenship practices.

Although this book dips into many topics, it is in no way comprehensive. Among other things, we do not spend much time worrying about regional variation; nor do we provide an all-around treatment of rightful resistance (and its analogues) in Chinese history. The book is largely conceptual and “universalizing” (Tilly, 1984: 97, 108) rather than causal and variation

¹ For more on the interviews in Hengyang county, Hunan, see Appendix B.

² Throughout the book, our time frame is the post-Mao era. When we refer to “recent” trends or “new” developments, the point of reference is typically the 1980s or early 1990s. Claims radicalization and tactical escalation have, of course, occurred many times in China’s past, including just before the 1911 Revolution and again during the “Great Revolution” of 1925–27.

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seeking.³ For readers interested in the reach of our findings in China, we encourage them to investigate whether our hunches and survey results (often summarized in long footnotes) hold up in different regions, for different policies, at different times.⁴

We have also not been able to examine as many concepts as we had hoped to. We had thought about including chapters on framing, mobilizing structures, high-risk activism, repertoires of contention, grievances, leadership, and elite allies. But we just did not have enough data to do them justice. The hooks we did end up with were chosen according to two simple principles: where did we have the most to say to students of contentious politics, and where was the lowest-hanging fruit to be found? There are certainly many other points of entry for Sinologists who wish to engage the contentious politics literature, and we are delighted to see that a number of our fellow China scholars, using their own fieldwork and findings, have begun to exploit them.⁵

Nearly all the questions addressed in Chapters 2 through 5 are drawn from the contentious politics literature, and we discuss (often in glancing fashion) many familiar concepts and theories. But we have seldom found it necessary to jump in decisively on one side or the other in ongoing debates.⁶ Instead, our approach has been to position the China case in relation to the literature by appropriating whatever explained our findings

³ On “the parallel demonstration of theory” and using comparison to group cases, highlight similarities, and refine theories, see Skocpol and Somers (1980). O'Brien (2004) suggests how concepts drawn from the comparative literature can be used to understand the significance of interviewees' comments, place findings in relation to others, and generalize (ever so modestly), as China scholars repackage their ground-level evidence for disciplinary colleagues who have been working with grand theories that only apply in a limited context.

⁴ The appendixes also present a number of testable hypotheses and some additional survey findings.

⁵ Examples of this are becoming too numerous to list. On framing, see F. Chen (2003), Hurst (2004), Lee (2000), and Thornton (2002). On mobilizing structures, see Cai (2002) and Hurst (2004). On the repertoire of contention in China and its historical roots, see X. Chen (2004), Perry (1985, 2003a, 2003b), and Thornton (2004). On grievances, see F. Chen (2000, 2003), Hurst (2004), Landry and Tong (2005), and Michelson (2004, 2005). On elite allies, see Bernstein and Lü (2003), Cai (2003), and Guo (2001). On collective memories, see Lee (2000) and Perry (2003a, 2003b). On emotions, see G. Yang (2000a). On the biographical consequences of contention, see G. Yang (2000b). On leadership, see Bernstein and Lü (2003), Cai (2002, 2003), and Thornton (2004). On policing protest, see Tanner (2005). On the spatial origins of mobilization, see Zhao (2001). On political opportunities in comparative perspective, see Wright (2001).

⁶ Our discussion of the consequences of contention in Chapter 5 is an exception in that it is openly hortatory. Chapter 2 also adopts a largely structuralist orientation to “political opportunity” and then shows how perceptions might be layered into such an account. In

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best. This has enabled us to underscore commonalities between protest in China and protest elsewhere, while suggesting bridges between different theories and perspectives. It also means that readers hoping to find clear-cut statements that, for example, failures are more crucial than opportunities in spurring tactical innovation, or perceptions of opportunity are more important than structural opportunities, may be disappointed. Instead, they will have to settle for seeing what rightful resistance in the Chinese countryside can tell us about tactical innovation, radical flank effects, the strategic dilemma, object shift, venue shopping, unpacking political opportunity, blame attribution, transgressive versus contained claims, the biographical consequences of protest, the pleasures of protest, and so on, as we learn what evidence from China and theory can offer each other.⁷

Looking back over our decade-long collaboration, we feel fortunate and grateful for many reasons. Beyond what we have learned, our work has deepened our ties immeasurably, as we evolved from adviser and advisee into frequent travel companions, daily sounding boards, and close friends. Writing in tag-team style, usually nine time zones apart, enabled us, as Marc Blecher once put it, to reap the benefits of a “globalized production system.” It also ensured that each of us would wake up nearly every morning to find an inbox filled with an improved version of the muddled, question-laden text we had e-mailed across the Pacific the night before.

Our field trips and surveys were made possible by generous financial support from the Asia Foundation, the China Times Cultural Foundation, the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, the Henry Luce Foundation, Hong Kong Baptist University, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Ohio State University, the Pacific Cultural Foundation, the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong, the Sun Yat-sen Culture & Education Foundation, and the Institute of East Asian Studies, Center for Chinese Studies, and Department of Political Science of the University of California at Berkeley. For able research assistance in the nooks and crannies of the contentious politics literature, we thank Kevin Wallsten. Margaret Boittin skillfully wrestled the Word indexing tool to a draw and responded (with unflinching cheer and frightful speed) to our requests to add just one more

general, we feel that “debates” in the field are often overstated and that many theorists are not as strange bedfellows as the introductions of countless articles and books would suggest.

⁷ On Chinese politics, perhaps being “on the verge of maturing from a ‘consumer field’ (dependent for its analytical insights upon imports from the study of other countries) to a ‘producer field’ (capable of generating analyses of interest to comparativists in general),” see Perry (1994).

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set of subcategories. As we shared thoughts and papers with colleagues over the past decade, we benefited greatly from comments by Thomas Bernstein, Lucien Bianco, Marc Blecher, Anita Chan, Donald Clarke, Neil Diamant, Maria Edin, Randle Edwards, Edward Friedman, Thomas Gold, Peter Gries, Lei Guang, Kathy Hartford, Daniel Kelliher, Stanley Lubman, Ching Kwan Lee, Kenneth Lieberthal, Xiaobo Lü, Melanie Manion, Ethan Michelson, Andrew Nathan, Michel Oksenberg, Stanley Rosen, James Scott, Tianjian Shi, Dorothy Solinger, Ralph Thaxton, Stig Thøgersen, Jonathan Unger, Lynn White III, Tyrene White, Brantly Womack, Dali Yang, Guobin Yang, Dingxin Zhao, and David Zweig. We owe a special debt of gratitude to Elizabeth Perry and Charles Tilly, both of whom read the manuscript from front to back, and both of whom provided a host of helpful suggestions that improved the book in ways we could never have come up with on our own.

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Chapters 1, 3, and 5 draw to varying degrees on our previously published articles: "Rightful Resistance," *World Politics*, 49(1) (October 1996), 31–55; "Neither Transgressive Nor Contained: Boundary-Spanning Contention in China," in Peter Hays Gries and Stanley Rosen (eds.), *State and Society in 21st Century China: Crisis, Contention, and Legitimation* (New York:

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RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), pp. 105–22; and “Popular Contention and Its Impact in Rural China,” *Comparative Political Studies*, 38(3) (April 2005), 235–59. Several pages in Chapter 6 were adapted from “Villagers, Elections, and Citizenship in Contemporary China,” *Modern China*, 27(4) (October 2001), 407–35. We are grateful to Johns Hopkins University Press, Taylor & Francis Books Ltd., and Sage Publications Inc., for permission to use copyrighted material.

For our wives and daughters, Betsy, Lijuan, Brenda, Joyce, and Molly, we hope this book provides a small return on the many sacrifices they made while we were working, either in China or tethered to our computers at home. And yes, Molly, you’re right: “That’s enough work for today. Going to the park is much more fun.”

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