

## Passing the Buck to the Local Level: How Authoritarian China Survives

Jihyeon Bae<sup>1</sup>

---

*China's single party state has received a high level of popular support despite the many protests against its local governments and its authoritarian-style governance. There exist many scholarly debates on how the CPC maintains its resilience. Some suggest a high level of state oppression, while others emphasize Chinese society's lack of mobilization potential. The purpose of this research is to help explain the CPC's resilience in the face of protest, particularly focusing on state behavior. To this end, the following paper examines the case of the Wukan conflict by disaggregating the incident into a series of events and employs comparative data analysis to support its hypothesis. The study demonstrates that the central government portrays itself like a 'good cop' by shifting criticism to local governments, which it frames as a 'bad cop.' Analysis shows that this 'good cop bad cop' relationship is maintained in an institutionalized manner, through clear demarcation between central and local governments, as well as salient role differentiation. These findings are applicable to various fields of study. For example, it provides useful implications for understanding the future of China's authoritarian regime by suggesting that the maintenance of the central-local 'good cop bad cop' relationship is a fundamental behavioral institution the CPC relies on, both to manipulate its image in a positive way as well as avoiding negative attention. Consequently, the paper presents this central-local structure as an explanatory variable for the CPC's authoritarian regime resilience.*

---

**Keywords:** China, CPC, authoritarianism, central government, central-local relations, Wukan Incident, state-society relations

### Introduction

The People's Republic of China has maintained a one-party system for decades and the Communist Party of China (CPC) can even be thought of as working as a state on its own. Following conventional wisdom, highly authoritarian and repressive states are thought to be vulnerable to protest and thus regime overthrow. However, China shows little sign of

---

<sup>1</sup> Jihyeon Bae is a junior undergraduate student of international studies at Kyunghee International College. Her research interests include quantitative methodology and comparative politics, especially on issues related to East Asia regionalism, institutions and authoritarianism. She can be reached via email at jihyeonbae@khu.ac.kr.

authoritarian party-state subversion. Since the Tiananmen Square incident, there have not been comparatively large mass demonstrations against the authoritarian regime. This is puzzling in China where the number of middle-class bourgeois is increasing. Consequently, there has been a continuous debate over whether China will be able to sustain its single-party authoritarian regime. Some scholars cast doubts on the CPC's resilience, pointing out that declining economic performance could harm conventional justification of its harsh repression.<sup>2</sup> Other scholars highlight thousands of protests each year, claiming China is likely to experience unrest in the future.<sup>3</sup> It is true that there has been an increasing number of protests since the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> On the surface, one might interpret the increasing number of protests as a sign of mounting social contention between state and society. However, recent high-profile protests mostly deal with environmental issues such as the construction of factories or power plants. This is quite a different scene from that of the large-scale democratization movements that took place in developmental countries like South Korea in the 1970s and 1980s. Optimists of the CPC's resilience point out that the CPC tends to adapt to changing environments; after conducting regional social experiments and accumulating necessary information, the CPC develops effective mobilization strategies in response.<sup>5</sup> The CPC appears to be enjoying a high level of legitimacy and support from its people in the face of these protests.<sup>6</sup>

The research question at hand is how the CPC's authoritarian state control can maintain such a high level of popular support despite the increasing number of protests. There are two mainstream explanations on the origin of political trust.<sup>7</sup> First, society-based explanations suggest that

---

<sup>2</sup> Minxin Pei, "Is CCP Rule fragile or resilient?" *Journal of Democracy* 23, no.1 (2012): 27-41.

<sup>3</sup> Jay Ulferder, "Contentious Collective Action and the Breakdown of Authoritarian Regimes," *International Political Science Review* 26, no. 3 (2005): 311-334.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Jacobs, "Dragons, dancing ones, set off a riot in China," *The New York Times*, February 10, 2009, accessed July 2, 2018, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/10/world/asia/10unrest.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/10/world/asia/10unrest.html?_r=0); Murray Scott Tanner and Eric Green,

"Principals and secret agents: central versus local control over policing and obstacles to 'rule of law' in China," *The China Quarterly* 191 (2007): 644-670.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, Wen-Hsuan Tsai and Yen-Lin Chung, "A model of Adaptive Mobilization: Implications of the CCP's Diaoyan Politics," *Modern China* 43, no. 4 (2017): 397-424.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, Bruce Gilley, "Legitimacy and Institutional Change," *Comparative Political Studies* 41, no. 3 (2008): 259-284; Deyong Ma and Feng Yang, "Authoritarian Orientations and Political Trust in East Asian Societies," *East Asia* 31 (2014): 323-341.

<sup>7</sup> Referring to Marc J. Hetherington, "The Political Relevance of Political Trust," *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 4 (1998): 791-808, political trust means citizens' belief or confidence that government or political system will work to produce outcomes consistent with their expectations.

political culture leads to trust of the CPC. Lucian W. Pye explains that the Confucian tradition of ascribing moral virtue to the emperor explains East Asian authoritarian legitimacy.<sup>8</sup> More recently, Deyong Ma and Feng Yang suggested that authoritarian orientation is a significant cultural factor that affects political trust.<sup>9</sup> Societal explanations have their limitations, however, especially when trying to account for the survival of authoritarian regimes. For example, South Korea underwent a series of mass demonstrations against its authoritarian leadership notwithstanding its long legacy of Confucian tradition.

Second, statistics suggest a high level of legitimacy is the outcome of a state's successful ability to satisfy public demand for welfare. The conventional argument that authoritarian regimes are resilient by way of booming economic development, however, can easily be rebuked in the case of China.<sup>10</sup> Bruce Gilley provides empirical data that shows people's trust in the CPC is in fact negatively correlated with income.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, per capita GDP is negatively related to support for central state institutions. This reveals that there is more than economic prosperity that enables the CPC to justify its authoritarian rule and generate support.

Third, another school of statisticians claim the high level of support is the result of the state's suppression and monitoring system. Empirical evidence suggests the CPC does indeed harshly suppress its society from holding mass protests through various means, such as monitoring and blocking liberal media.<sup>12</sup> For example, the CPC has been continuously empowering coercive behavior among leadership by incorporating police security chiefs into its core leadership team in response to potential regime stability threats and local police are appropriated with bigger budget shares to prevent local demonstrations from escalating.<sup>13</sup> In

---

<sup>8</sup> Lucian W. Pye, "The State and the Individual: An Overview Interpretation," *The China Quarterly* 127 (1991): 443-66.

<sup>9</sup> Deyong Ma and Feng Yang, "Authoritarian Orientations and Political Trust," 323-341.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce J. Dickson, "Who wants to be a communist? Career Incentives and Mobilized Loyalty in China," *The China Quarterly* 217 (2014): 42-68.

<sup>11</sup> Gilley, "Legitimacy and Institutional Change," 259-284.

<sup>12</sup> Beina Xu and Eleanor Albert, "Media Censorship in China," *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 17, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/media-censorship-china>; Rowan Callick, "China delete app: cutting edge of Uighur suppression," *The Weekend Australian*, July 22, 2017, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/china-delete-app-cutting-edge-of-uighur-suppression/news-story/3c5c74a453a59ebdcdc6459348c312fe>.

<sup>13</sup> Yuhua Wang, "Empowering the Police: How the Chinese Communist Party Manages Its Coercive Leaders," *The China Quarterly* 219 (2014): 625-648; Stig Thøgersen, "Frontline Soldiers of the CCP: The Selection of China's Township Leaders," *The China Quarterly* 194 (2008): 414-423.

addition, as the CPC blocks disloyal citizens' expressions by censoring internet websites or writings, disloyal citizens increasingly "shadow" from society (this refers to the phenomena in which individuals make "social spaces of non-registered voluntary groups that lack formal ties to the party-state").<sup>14</sup> However, many survey results as well as qualitative interview analyses reject this idea and in fact suggest that Chinese people believe in the CPC's legitimacy, and thus are willing to show loyalty to the party.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike previous studies, this study claims that the central and local government's institutionalized "good cop bad cop" structure is a central factor behind the CPC's resilience in the face of increasing protests. The following paper will claim that the central government self-servingly manipulates the image of its local government as well as itself, through the institutionalization of a "good cop bad cop" system, to both frame itself as a hero and avoid the negative attention associated with protests which might challenge central authority. This hypothesis will be tested by investigating the Wukan incident - a recent political event wherein thousands of protestors were mobilized to address the problem of corrupt officials - with particular focus on how the central government has turned the popular criticism toward local officials. Comparative data analysis as well as recent policy analysis will be employed to reinforce the conclusions derived from the Wukan incident. As a result, this study will propose an alternative view of the changing nature of Chinese state-society relations.

## **Development of the Wukan Incident**

### *Grievance of the peasants*

Since the Tiananmen Square incident, there have not been any remarkable mass demonstrations in China. However, on September 21, 2011, rural villagers in the Wukan area grabbed the world's attention. Wukan, a village in Guangdong province<sup>16</sup>, had experienced conflicts since 1991 when local officials sold out communal land to private companies without consultation with the villagers. On top of this, they did not redistribute

---

<sup>14</sup> Johan Lagerkvist, "The Unknown Terrain of Social Protests in China: 'Exit', 'Voice', 'Loyalty', and 'Shadow'," *Journal of Civil Society* 11, no. 2 (2015): 137-153.

<sup>15</sup> World Values Survey Database, China (2012); Gilley, "Legitimacy and Institutional Change," 259-284.

<sup>16</sup> Technically, Wukan Village is in Donghai Town, Lufeng City which is in Guangdong Province. Although the degree of centrality and locality is relative, for the clarity and the main purpose of this research, I have used the term 'local' to denote village level and 'central' for provincial level and any higher level of authority indiscriminately.

any of the earnings. Tensions reached their peak in 2011 when the very last sector of communal land was sold by the local government, again sparing nothing for the people. This outraged the villagers, who were left with no land to cultivate.

#### *Outbreak of demonstration*

The villagers first initiated sit-in demonstrations in front of the local government building, which concluded with a violent conflict against local police. The local police maintain that one of the protestors attacked first, but a number of videos taken by the villagers contradict this account and show the police strike protestors first. It remains inconclusive who delivered the first blow. Subsequently, the villagers formed a Council of Representatives who took the lead in holding demonstrations. The situation again escalated when one of the protest leaders, Xue Jinbo, died in police custody, and the series of botched investigations that followed only added to this.<sup>17</sup> The villagers were infuriated with the corrupt officials and their repressive behavior. The crisis then transformed into a rebellion as the villagers continued to fight local bureaucrats.

#### *Intervention of the central party*

After a series of conflicts, Guandong provincial party leader, Governor Wang Yang, held a face-to-face meeting with the villagers and intervened by authorizing the establishment of an interim municipal working group. Lin Zulian, the leader of the village's representatives, delivered the villagers' demand to Wang Yang's representatives. Under the authorization of Wang Yang, a working group launched an investigation of local officials' misdeeds as well as holding the reelection of village leaders. Wang fired Wukan's village chief and deputy chief, Xue Chang and Zhuang Liehong, and pardoned Wukan protestors from prison. He also promised to redistribute the confiscated land to the villagers. Placation here was successful in that it calmed protests and at least temporarily satisfied the villagers' demands. According to the negotiation deal, Wukan would hold a village-level vote in March 2012. Lin Zulian, who had led the negotiation with Wang Yang to great effect, was elected

---

<sup>17</sup> The official explanation was cardiac arrest. But his family said Xue's body had heavy bruising and his thumbs had been pulled back and broken. See James Pomfret, "Special Report: Freedom fizzles out in China's rebel town of Wukan," *Reuters*, February 28, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-wukan/special-report-freedom-fizzles-out-in-chinas-rebel-town-of-wukan-idUSBRE91R1J020130228>.

with the villagers' support. However, Wukan faced a second phase of crisis in 2016 when the new village leader and the former demonstration leader Lin Zulian, was arrested in the middle of the night before the day a meeting with the central party was scheduled to be held. The villagers suspected the incident was the local authorities' attempt to block Lin from discussing the land redistribution issue; ergo, alerting central party leadership to the need for intervention on the issue. Unjustified custody once again led to village demonstrations.

#### *Aftermath of the protests*

Local officials, however, were punished for their misdeeds, the villagers were pacified by elections, and the CPC was framed as the savior of Wukan. Previous research confirms that the Wukan people expressed their discontent towards the local authorities but they did not cross the line to challenge the legitimacy of the central party.<sup>18</sup> Simon-Pearson, in a similar vein, observes: "In high profile incidents where protests against land seizures gain media attention, central government officials will often play the role of good cop, punishing corrupt local officials. This tactic allows them to appease protesters and create good publicity but does nothing to eliminate the incentives for corruption that remain."<sup>19</sup> The Wukan incident, in short, showcases that the central party succeeded in diverting blame onto the local government. Next, we will examine how the CPC's role as a good cop prevented protests from growing larger.

#### *What deterred Wukan from developing democratic momentum?*

The Wukan incident could have triggered a larger anti-corruption or democratization movement, itself being a bold protest against repressive authority. Indeed, it was a critical juncture which could have aroused people's attention toward the state's repressive governance, as well as their desire for civil freedom of assembly and expression. The villagers could have questioned the validity of the state's monopoly of repressive power, the CPC's pervasive corruption, as well as failing authoritarian governance. However, it turned out the Wukan incident lacked the

---

<sup>18</sup> Ankit Panda, "Chinese Democracy: Is This How the 'Wukan Moment' Finally Ends?," *The Diplomat*, June 21, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/chinese-democracy-is-this-how-the-wukan-moment-finally-ends/>.

<sup>19</sup> Wendy Simon-Pearson, "The Wukan Model: Democratic Reform or Political Maneuver?" *Diplomatic Courier* 6, no. 6 (2012): 68-70.

potential to develop into a mass civil rights movement. It is important to note here that the usurper of land rights in this case were the local officials, not the central party, demonstrating that the villagers' revolt was specifically aimed at the local government.<sup>20</sup>

Existing literature provides explanations focusing on the goal of the protests from the very beginning as well as the ways in which the villagers-versus-the-bad-local-government structure was framed. At the beginning stage, the Wukan protest was not designed to achieve democratic rights, but proprietorship. Demonstrations born out of civil rights consciousness would be a reasonable indication of democratization. The Wukan incident, however, was driven largely by 'instrumental civil rights consciousness,' meaning that villagers were not conscious about their civil rights *per se*, but were about their land property rights. Interviews with the protestors imply that the villagers intentionally used the term "democracy" after witnessing foreign reporters' interest in the term.<sup>21</sup> One of their interviewees even specifically asked the western reporter not to frame their protest as an 'anti-CPC revolt.' It can be inferred that the term "democracy" and the use of western media were simply a means of grabbing the attention of the CPC, which the people believed to be willing to help. The villagers believed that if their words were delivered to the party center, the party would investigate their corrupt municipal government and help solve the problem.

In a similar vein, Johan Lagerkvist uses the concept of "loyal opposition" to explain the Wukan incident's failure in developing into democratization momentum.<sup>22</sup> The protestors revolted against the local police and officials while still maintaining a high level of loyalty to the central party. There are several reasons for this. First, local authorities are at the frontline of repressing citizens and more likely to violate citizen's rights. Second, local authorities oversee daily governance and are believed to be responsible for dealing with the citizen's demands.<sup>23</sup> Building on the idea of loyal opposition, the protest slogans used by the

---

<sup>20</sup> Ruoyun Hua, Yuxin Hou and Guosheng Deng, "Instrumental Civil Rights and Institutionalized Participation in China: A Case Study of Protest in Wukan Village," *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 27 (2016): 2131.

<sup>21</sup> Hua, Hou, and Deng, "Instrumental Civil Rights and Institutionalized Participation in China: A Case Study of Protest in Wukan Village," 2131.

<sup>22</sup> Lagerkvist, "The Unknown Terrain of Social Protests in China," 137-153.

<sup>23</sup> Yongshun Cai, ed., *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); Dickson, "Who wants to be a communist? Career Incentives and Mobilized Loyalty in China," 42-68.

Wukan villagers are unsurprising. People broke into chants of “Return our land!” and “Lin Zulian is innocent!” but at the same time, shouted “Long live the Communist Party!” According to an interview, Wukan villagers believed the central party would be able to solve the problem as soon as it recognized the issue, deeming the central authority their last hope.<sup>24</sup> Even participants of such demonstrations believe in the CPC’s good intent and governance, spoiled only by corrupt local governments. In fact, after the CPC’s intervention, the people did not continue protests regarding any issue involving the party’s legitimacy, civil rights, or repressive state behaviors.

Wukan’s potential for a democratization movement has thus been discouraged by several factors. First, from the very beginning, the people were not resentful towards the CPC, but were instead frustrated with their corrupt local government. Wukan villagers specifically targeted the local officials from the outset and explicitly demarcated local grievances from central ones. Second, when the local-level conflict appeared to escalate into a larger scale conflict capable of grabbing international media attention, the central party injected itself directly into the incident on the side of the Wukan villagers. Chinese society’s dichotomous perception of central and local government essentially structured the Wukan incident. The CPC aptly played the role of the “good cop,” as the villagers expected. It is important to note, however, that while a challenge to a particular policy does not necessarily challenge authority, the CPC’s “good cop bad cop” role framed the Wukan protest as a challenge to the local level government’s authority.

### **CPC’s Institutionalization of the “Good Cop Bad Cop” System**

Analysis of the Wukan case provides evidence to support the claim that the CPC has truly institutionalized its “good cop bad cop” system. In order to explain how the CPC played the role of hero in the Wukan protest, it is important to first examine the structure of central-local government relations. The “good cop bad cop” system is not an improvised measure by the CPC, rather it is a highly institutionalized one where the central government is bound to be generous and local governments are systematically shaped to be repressive. This is accomplished through “demarcation” and “role differentiation” processes. Central and local

---

<sup>24</sup> “Wukan: China’s Democracy Experiment,” *Al Jazeera*, April 3, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/specialseries/2017/04/wukan-china-democracy-experiment-170403074626458.html>.



governments should first be clearly demarcated in order for each level of government to effectively take on different roles. These two levels of “demarcation” and “role differentiation” allow for citizens to develop two different images of government - this becomes the groundwork for the central government to inject its ‘good cop bad cop’ image into state-society relations.

### *Demarcation*

First, China’s center-local demarcation is clearer than that of any other authoritarian regime.<sup>25</sup> As was the case in Wukan, central and local cadres have a unique political arrangement. Each stakeholder is in the position of either good cop or bad cop in a systematic manner: local governments are institutionalized to be more repressive while central governments are institutionalized to be more generous, certainly from the perspective of the public. Fundamentally, China has a high level of decentralization, which allows central and local governments to take separate roles and statuses. Consequently, the public’s perspective on the state diverges at the level of state. Shi and Dickson’s analysis of survey data points out many significant implications.<sup>26</sup> Their empirical research shows that Chinese citizens who do not trust local governments may trust the central government. Unlike conventional state-society relations, China’s relations are characterized by a triangular relationship among the central state, local state, and society. Similarly, Guo points out that Chinese villagers tend to view the state in two distinct elements, *i.e.*, center and local.<sup>27</sup> Based on qualitative interview sources, Li Lianjiang (李连江) argues that, “villagers who have more trust in higher levels sharply distinguish between the center’s intentions and its capacity to make local officials implement potentially beneficial policies.” To put it another way, Chinese people tend to believe their well-intentioned central government has a desire to provide welfare and decent governance, which is often disrupted by corrupt local government officials.<sup>28</sup> This

---

<sup>25</sup> Gabriella Montinola, Yingyi Qian, and Barry R. Weingast, “Federalism, Chinese Style: The Political Basis for Economic Success in China,” *World Politics* 48, no. 1 (1995): 50–81.

<sup>26</sup> Tianjian Shi, “Cultural Values and Political Trust: A Comparison of the People's Republic of China and Taiwan,” *Comparative Politics* 33, no. 4 (2001): 401-419.; Dickson, “Who wants to be a communist? Career Incentives and Mobilized Loyalty in China,” 42-68.

<sup>27</sup> Xiaolin Guo, “Land Expropriation and Rural Conflicts in China,” *China Quarterly* 166 (2001): 422-439.

<sup>28</sup> Lianjiang Li, “Political Trust in Rural China,” *Modern China* 30, no. 2 (2004): 228-258.

phenomenon, where the people project a positive image onto the central government while projecting a negative one on the local government, can be further highlighted by comparative data.

Empirical data shows China's remarkably high level of decentralization compared to that of other authoritarian regimes.<sup>29</sup> For example, Chinese municipal governments on average appropriated 54.85% of their entire expenditures from 1995 to 1998. This is a noticeable difference, compared to the decentralization index of authoritarian regimes, which is 17.76% on average. In other words, China is three times more decentralized than other authoritarian states.<sup>30</sup> This effectively means more authority and responsibility is transferred to local governments and thus, there are more opportunities for local officials to be subjected to blame by the people. Other authoritarian states centralize not only political and fiscal authority, but also centralize blame and responsibility. This characteristic element of Chinese political arrangement can be further elucidated by comparing subnational expenditures among authoritarian regimes.<sup>31</sup>

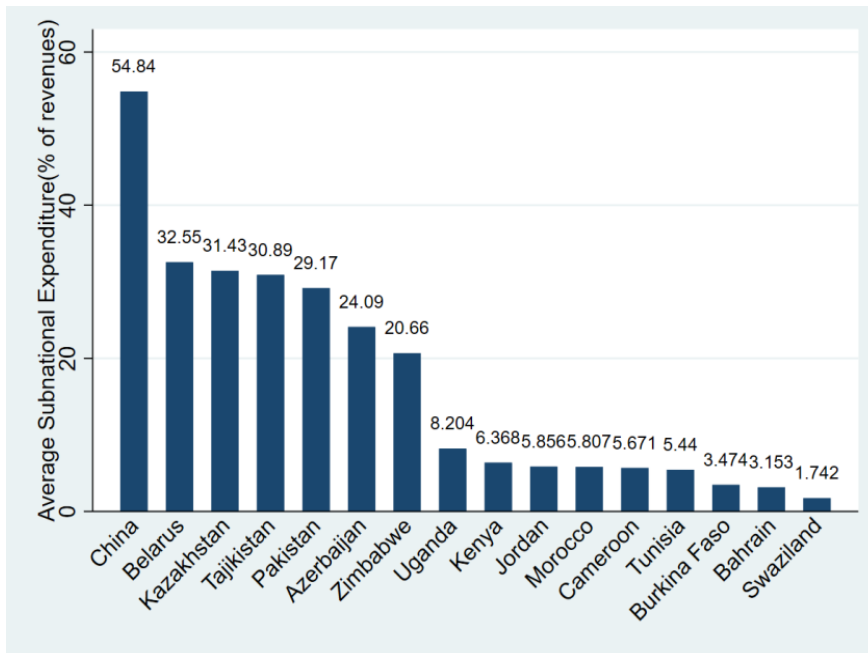
As figure 1 illustrates, China has distinctively high levels of decentralization compared to other authoritarian countries. China devolves certain tasks and responsibility to local level officials and officers unlike other centralized authoritarian states. This enables China's central government to utilize the political strategy of passing the buck to the local level, which may otherwise be nonviable for other countries. This is primarily due to China's allowing certain autonomous decisions to be made by local officers, thereby imposing higher levels of responsibility on the local governments. When local officers assume responsibility for dealing with local issues, it becomes possible for the CPC to differentiate the roles and responsibility of the two levels. Next, we will explore how the CPC frames these two different roles in a way

---

<sup>29</sup> In the case of China, only data from the years 1995 to 1998 were available. For the sake of conciseness, a simple average of other authoritarian regime's observable expenditure data was calculated. Despite the fact that each country had different years for observation, a simple average was used for comparison because variation within time gaps was negligible. In order to focus on authoritarian regimes, POLITY IV Individual Country Regime Trends were considered. Given ranges from -10 to 10, with scores increasing with the level of democracy, this article categorized countries that have scored below zero in a group of authoritarian regime. See "Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800-2013," Polity IV Projects, accessed May 20, 2018, <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm>.

<sup>30</sup> Steve Hess, "Foreign Media Coverage and Protest Outcomes in China: The case of the 2011 Wukan rebellion," *Modern Asian Studies* 49, no. 1 (2014): 177-203

<sup>31</sup> Subnational expenditures denoted as the percentage of total government revenues are based on IMF Global Finance Statistics.



**Figure 1.** Sub-national expenditures.<sup>32</sup>

that favors the interests of the central authority, based on the demarcation between central and local level governments.

### *Role differentiation*

Second, institutions bind the roles and responsibilities of the central and local governments. Based on the demarcation between central and local levels, the CPC exploits a “bad cop good cop” rhetoric, which functions as a major source of popular support for the central government. Municipal governments are responsible for maintaining stability in local areas. Bearing such responsibility, as Cai notes, incentivizes local officials to prevent popular protests even through repressive measures.<sup>33</sup> Local officials should make their best effort to prevent social revolts, or at least keep them low profile, in order to be recognized by the central bureaucrats. Such recognition can help a local official secure entrance into party leadership, guaranteeing lucrative benefits. Local governments are therefore more likely to depend on repressive measures rather than striking deals, since the latter is difficult to achieve with so many

<sup>32</sup> IMF Global Finance Statistics, graph drawn by the author.

<sup>33</sup> Yongshun Cai, “Local Governments and the Suppression of Popular Resistance in China,” *The China Quarterly* 193 (2008): 24-42.

contentious civil groups and, even if a deal goes through, it can still be costly for local governments to handle in the end. In other words, local governments are structured to be 'bad cops.' As was the case of Wukan, village officials used police forces to suppress protest potential from the beginning, even though the sit-in demonstrations were staged in a peaceful manner. The local police also tried to silence foreign reporters, thereby deterring protesters from eliciting the central government's intervention. Li's empirical analysis demonstrates local officials' use of coercive measures - behavior aimed at preventing villagers from reaching higher levels of government to escalate their complaints.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, the central government selectively intervenes in local protests, usually when they garner too much attention and pose the potential to grow larger. In addition, as the authoritarian central government has the capability to block, maneuver or direct media into certain directions and actions, the CPC can easily disseminate propaganda that praises the party. This further enables the central government to frame their role as the good cop. One evidence that demonstrates the CPC's desire to be the good cop can be found in the PRC's 2005 Decree of the State Council on regulations of letters and visits. Two important observations can be made from the seven chapters in the decree.<sup>35</sup> First, the CPC is willing to acknowledge public opinion and petitions. Second, those petitions and letters can only be delivered by following administrative steps that start from the local officials. The decree highlights that local governments should first deal with local petitions. The public's direct visit or letters to the central government are seemingly prohibited in order to force local governments to take responsibility. This once again reinforces the good cop bad cop routine in that the central government wishes to listen to the voices of the public, but only through the proper administrative channels of its local governments. However, since more petitions reflect public dissatisfaction and the local governments' failures, public petitions are frequently dismissed and local officials retaliate. This deliberately puts more pressure on local governments to handle social dissatisfaction preemptively and, at the same time, systematically insulates the CPC from public petitions.

---

<sup>34</sup> Li, "Political Trust in Rural China," 228-258.

<sup>35</sup> "Decree of the State Council of the People's Republic of China No.431: Regulations on Letters and Visits," State Bureau for Letters and Calls, November 24, 2009, accessed May 5, 2018, [http://www.gjxfj.gov.cn/2009-11/24/c\\_133327663.htm](http://www.gjxfj.gov.cn/2009-11/24/c_133327663.htm).

The CPC also displays a form of “good cop bad cop” strategy in its financial behavior with local governments. Since the 1990’s, when financial decentralization had accelerated, local governments had to make their own revenue for their expenditures. While they were left to make their own governmental budget, they were also responsible for maintaining social stability. As a consequence, local governments suffered from budget deficits as they even faced hardships in providing salaries to their local police personnel. Eventually, local governments had to depend on coercive mechanisms to raise revenue by extracting fines from citizens or collecting fees from local businesses.<sup>36</sup> Due to the hardships of the local governments, the CPC reformed budget plans in November 2003 by allocating more funding to county-level security departments.<sup>37</sup>

This reform, however, was another plan favoring the central government. The allocated budget, which is transferred from the higher-level government, is strictly regulated in its usages. Money coming from the central government can only be used for public welfare projects like constructing buildings, upgrading welfare facilities or purchasing new methods of transportation. On the other hand, costs for investigations and other repressive measures had to be handled by local revenues that again had to be extracted from fines and charges.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the new budget reform eventually serves the central government. On the surface, the central government had explicitly increased the budget for local governments and funding by the central government would surely be used in a way that increases the people’s welfare, thus strengthening popular support. However, local governments still have to extract money from and repress the public in order to manage their populace and become eligible for promotion. These policies imply the central party cares deeply about maintaining a generous image to its public, while implicitly passing the buck to local level officials.

---

<sup>36</sup> “The Politburo’s Predicament: Confronting the Limitations of Chinese Communist Party Repression,” A Freedom House Special Report, January 2015, accessed via: [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/12222014\\_FH\\_ChinaReport2014\\_FINAL.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/12222014_FH_ChinaReport2014_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> The General Office of the CCP Central Committee, “The Decision of the CCP Central Committee on Strengthening and Improving the Work of Public Security (in Chinese),” November 18, 2003, accessed June 1, 2018, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64184/64186/66691/4494638.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Xie Yue, “Rising Central Spending on Public Security and the Dilemma Facing Grassroots Officials in China,” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 42, no. 2 (2013): 79-109.

The CPC has institutionalized this central-local relationship by giving its local governments more discretion and autonomy compared to other authoritarian states.<sup>39</sup> However, the CPC has multiple mechanisms to make local governments play the bad cop, that ensure the CPC's control over the people. First, the CPC uses the media to blame local officials as it deems necessary. As discussed above, the party-controlled media publicly blamed Wukan village officials' corruption, engraving an unfavorable image of them. This helps the CPC maintain its own legitimacy to rule. The hardships Chinese people face in everyday life come from their local government's corruption and the central government has endeavored to rectify these injustices. The Wukan incident is a perfect demonstration of this model: corrupt local officials were exploiting innocent citizens until the heroic central government rectified the injustice. By utilizing the media, the CPC can reinforce the 'bad cop' images of local governments as they pass the buck. This structure has the dual effect of enabling people to express their dissatisfaction instantaneously, while at the same time preventing the accumulation of discontent so large that it sparks large-scale domestic revolt. What makes this situation so beneficial for the central party is that even a 'controlled burn' itself is immune to the central party's resilience. Thus, it can be argued that the central and local government have their own role and image, according to the CPC's institutionalization of its current central-local relationship. This mechanism enables the CPC to further legitimize itself notwithstanding the increasing number of social demonstrations.

Maintaining this center-local political arrangement through a blame-sharing structure is a persistent factor in explaining the CPC's resilience. If the central government maintains a good cop image and passes blames onto local governments, this begs the question: wouldn't local governments mobilize villagers and try to blame the central government? There is, in fact, a strong incentive for local governments to maintain their bad cop roles. First, local governments are fully incentivized to seek a positive evaluation from the central government in order to enjoy both material and political benefits. A local official's tenure is determined by his or her performance in each village as well as by the stability of his or her incumbent districts. Also, chief local police officers,

---

<sup>39</sup> Pierre F. Landry, "Authoritarianism and Decentralization," in *Decentralized Authoritarianism in China: The Communist Party's Control of Local Elites in the Post-Mao Era*, ed. Pierre F. Landry (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1-36.

local courts and administrative officials are picked by the local party committee and the Ministry of Justice of the People's Republic of China. Thus, local head officials are likely to be loyal to the central party committee to begin with. When they succeed in governing their district in a stable manner (in particular preventing unrest from escalating into revolt), they can position themselves for promotion into central party membership.

Li points out an interesting aspect of local government-media relations, called "cross-region media supervision."<sup>40</sup> Some local media affiliated with local authorities attempt to spy on other local governments' wrongdoings in order to remove a competitor from promotion to the central cadre - competition among local governments are tough.<sup>41</sup> Under these circumstances, few local officials are likely to disobey the central government. Once local officials find themselves within the central party's favor and make it to the party-center's inner group, officials are rewarded with lucrative benefits and privileges. If local officers choose to defy central authority, on the other hand, the central government can accuse the officials of incidental issues, like corruption, which it can then easily pursue. Thus, it is not surprising to see local governments trying their best to get on central party's good side. Even from the local government officials' perspective, the central government is a good cop to whom they should be loyal.

Second, the long-term dominance of the CPC appears guaranteed in China for the foreseeable future. Brownlee mentions that there is a "binding commitment" within the CPC that once party members show loyalty to the central government, they are guaranteed long-term benefits from the party.<sup>42</sup> If there were other parties that could threaten the CPC's long-term stability or that could provide greater benefits for defecting from the CPC, then local officials might indeed choose to defect. However, because the CPC indisputably provides loyal members with comparatively better benefits, local officers would prefer to be bad cops and suppress local revolts based on a personal cost-benefit analysis.

---

<sup>40</sup> Cheng Li, "Think National, Blame Local: Central-Provincial Dynamics in the Hu Era," *China Leadership Monitor* 17 (2006): 1-24.

<sup>41</sup> Local media is usually maintaining a symbiotic relationship with local power due to their need to gain political support from local authorities. For further Chinese local media strategy, please refer to Jingrong Tong, "The crisis of the centralized media control theory: how local power controls media in China," *Media, Culture & Society* 32, no. 6 (2010): 925-942.

<sup>42</sup> Jason Brownlee, "The Political Origins of Durable Authoritarianism," in *The Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization*, ed. Jason Brownlee (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 16-42.

Conversely, there are little to no incentives for them to defect from the central party and side with local villagers. In this way, local officials' roles as 'bad cops' are powerfully institutionalized.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Not all non-democratic regimes are overthrown, nor are they vulnerable to democratization by way of economic development. China is a well-known party state which maintains the resilience of its authoritarian regime by utilizing a 'good cop bad cop' system that garners popular support, despite the increasing number of public protests. On top of previously identified elements often considered main pillars of authoritarian regime resilience, this paper suggests that China's central-local relationship, characterized by a 'good cop bad cop' structure, is one essential pillar of the CPC's resilience. First, by looking into the case of Wukan incident, this paper claimed that the central government maintains legitimacy by shifting blame to local officials. Second, by analyzing recent policies and budget appropriations, this paper argued that China has institutionalized this 'good cop bad cop' structure into state-society relations. Recent policies as well as the CPC's behavior suggests that the central government attempts to frame itself as the heroic and benign 'good cop,' while shifting the burden to local governments who play the role of the 'bad cop.' At the same time, this kind of unfair playing field is unchallenged by local governments due to the high level of incentives that the CPC provides to local officials who succeed in getting promoted within the party.

Currently, it appears the Chinese people believe that corrupt local officials who fail to follow the central government's command are troublesome.<sup>43</sup> However, in the long run, people may begin to doubt the central government's capacity to effectively reign in and exercise control of its local governments. It is unlikely the routine of blaming local governments will protect the central government from receiving its fair share of blame forever. The central government also makes mistakes. Additionally, the local government's possible defection from the CPC can be another crucial challenge that the party must address. When the burden on local governments exceeds a tipping point, which could be precipitated by any number of crises caused by the CPC's treatment of its local governments, it could risk the entire 'good cop bad cop' structure that has

---

<sup>43</sup> Guo, "Land Expropriation and Rural Conflicts in China," 422-439.



facilitated the CPC's popular support so well. Given these two challenges, China's resilience should be considered strong, but not without challenge in the foreseeable future. There may come a day when the CPC has to confront growing social contention and social dissatisfaction. This paper thus suggests further research be conducted to test whether central-local relations can help explain the resilience of other authoritarian states other than China. Accordingly, the role of civil societies in authoritarian states should be guided by society-centered academia.

### Bibliography

- Al Jazeera English, "Wukan: China's Democracy Experiment," Al Jazeera, April 3, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/specialseries/2017/04wukan-china-democracy-experiment-170403074626458.html>
- Brownlee, Jason. "The Political Origins of Durable Authoritarianism" in *The Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization*, ed. Jason Brownlee, 16-42. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Cai, Yongshun. "Local Governments and the Suppression of Popular Resistance in China." *The China Quarterly*, no. 193 (2008): 24-42.
- Cai, Yongshun, ed. *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010.
- Callick, Rowan. "China delete app: cutting edge of Uighur suppression." *The Weekend Australian*, July 22, 2017. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/china-delete-app-cutting-edge-of-uighur-suppression/news-story/3c5c74a453a59ebdcdc6459348c312fe>.
- "Decree of the State Council of the People's Republic of China No.431: Regulations on Letters and Visits." State Bureau for Letters and Calls. November 24, 2009. Accessed May 05, 2018, [http://www.gjxfj.gov.cn/2009-11/24/c\\_133327663.htm](http://www.gjxfj.gov.cn/2009-11/24/c_133327663.htm).
- Dickson, Bruce J. "Who wants to be a communist? Career Incentives and Mobilized Loyalty in China." *The China Quarterly* 217 (2014): 42-68.
- Gilley, Bruce. "Legitimacy and Institutional Change." *Comparative Political Studies* 41, no. 3 (2008): 259-284.
- Guo, Xiaolin. "Land Expropriation and rural conflicts in China." *China Quarterly*, no. 166 (June 2001): 422-439.
- Hess, Steve. "Foreign Media Coverage and Protest Outcomes in China: The case of the 2011 Wukan rebellion." *Modern Asian Studies* 49, no. 1 (2014): 1-27.
- Hetherington, Marc J. "The Political Relevance of Political Trust." *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 4 (1998): 791-808.
- Hua, Ruoyun, Yuxin Hou and Guosheng Deng. "Instrumental Civil Rights and Institutionalized Participation in China: A Case Study of Protest in Wukan Village." *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 27 (2016): 2131-2149.
- Jacobs, Andrew. "Dragons, dancing ones, set off a riot in China," *The New York Times*, February 10, 2009, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/10/world/asia/10unrest.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/10/world/asia/10unrest.html?_r=0).
- Lagerkvist, Johan. "The Unknown Terrain of Social Protests in China: 'Exit', 'Voice', 'Loyalty', and 'Shadow'." *Journal of Civil Society* 11, no. 2 (2015): 137-153.
- Landry, Pierre F. "Authoritarianism and Decentralization," *Decentralized Authoritarianism in China: The Communist Party's Control of Local Elites in the Post-Mao Era*, edited by Pierre F. Landry, 1-36. Cambridge:

- Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Li, Cheng. "Think National, Blame Local: Central-Provincial Dynamics in the Hu Era." *China Leadership Monitor* 17 (2006): 1-24.
- Li, Lianjiang. "Political Trust in Rural China." *Modern China* 30, no. 2 (2014): 228-258.
- Ma, Deyong and Feng Yang. "Authoritarian Orientations and Political Trust in East Asian Societies." *East Asia* 31 (2014): 323-341.
- Montinola, Gabriella, Yingyi Qian, and Barry R. Weingast. "Federalism, Chinese Style: The Political Basis for Economic Success in China." *World Politics* 48, no. 1 (1995): 50-81.
- Panda, Ankit. "Chinese Democracy: Is This How the 'Wukan Moment' Finally Ends?" *The Diplomat*, June 21, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/chinese-democracy-is-this-how-the-wukan-moment-finally-ends/>.
- Pei, Minxin. "Is CCP Rule fragile or resilient?" *Journal of Democracy* 23, no.1 (2012): 27-41.
- "Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800-2013." Polity IV Projects. Accessed May 20, 2018, <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm>.
- Pomfret, James. "Special Report: Freedom fizzles out in China's rebel town of Wukan." *Reuters*, February 28, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-wukan/special-report-freedom-fizzles-out-in-chinas-rebel-town-of-wukan-idUSBRE91R1J020130228>.
- Pye, Lucian W. "The State and the Individual: An Overview Interpretation." *The China Quarterly* 127 (1991): 443-66.
- Shi, Tianjian. "Cultural Values and Political Trust: A Comparison of the People's Republic of China and Taiwan." *Comparative Politics* 33, no. 4 (2001): 401-419.
- Simon-Pearson, Wendy. "The Wukan Model: Democratic Reform or Political Maneuver?" *Diplomatic Courier* 6, no. 6 (2012): 68-70.
- Tanner, Murray Scott and Eric Green. "Principals and secret agents: central versus local control over policing and obstacles to 'rule of law' in China." *The China Quarterly* 191 (2007): 644-670.
- The General Office of the CPC Central Committee. "The Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Strengthening and Improving the Work of Public Security (in Chinese)." November 18, 2003. Accessed June 1, 2018, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64184/64186/66691/4494638.html>.
- "The Politburo's Predicament: Confronting the Limitations of Chinese Communist Party Repression." A Freedom House Special Report. January 2015. Accessed via: [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/12222014\\_FH\\_ChinaReport2014\\_FINAL.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/12222014_FH_ChinaReport2014_FINAL.pdf).
- Thøgersen, Stig. "Frontline Soldiers of the CCP: The Selection of China's Township Leaders." *The China Quarterly* 194 (2008): 414-423.
- Tong, Jingrong. "The crisis of the centralized media control theory: how local power controls media in China." *Media, Culture & Society* 32, no. 6 (2010): 925-942.
- Tsai, Wen-hsuan and Yen-Lin Chung. "A model of Adaptive Mobilization: Implications of the CCP's Diaoyan Politics." *Modern China* 43, no. 4 (2017): 397-424.
- Ulferder, Jay. "Contentious Collective Action and the Breakdown of Authoritarian Regimes." *International Political Science Review* 26, no. 3 (2005): 311-334.
- Wang, Yuhua. "Empowering the Police: How the Chinese Communist Party Manages Its Coercive Leaders." *The China Quarterly* 219 (September 2014): 625-648.
- "Wukan: China's Democracy Experiment." *Al Jazeera*, April 3, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/specialseries/2017/04/wukan-china-democracy-experiment-170403074626458.html>.
- Xu, Beina and Eleanor Albert, "Media Censorship in China." *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 17, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/media-censorship-china>.
- Yue, Xie. "Rising Central Spending on Public Security and the Dilemma Facing

Grassroots Officials in China.” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 42, no. 2 (2013): 79-109.

