Article

The Power of Empty Promises: Quasi-Democratic Institutions and Activism in China

Comparative Political Studies
1–35

DOI: 10.1177/0010414015617960
cps.sagepub.com
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Abstract

In authoritarian regimes, seemingly liberal reforms are often poorly implemented in practice. However, this study argues that even weak quasi-democratic institutions can offer resources to political activists. Formal institutions of participation offer politically anodyne frames for activism, allowing activists to distance themselves from political taboos. Weak institutions also allow activists to engineer institutional failures that in turn fuel legal and media-based campaigns. Evidence comes from the effects of China's 2008 Open Government Information reform. A national field audit finds that local governments satisfy just 14% of citizen requests for basic information. Yet case studies show how Chinese activists exploited the same institution to extract concessions from government agencies and pursue policy change in disparate issue areas. These findings highlight the importance of looking beyond policy implementation to understand the effects of authoritarian institutions on political accountability.

Keywords

non-democratic regimes, political institutions, contentious politics, government transparency, China

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Authoritarian regimes have long been criticized for the gap between *de jure* and *de facto* governance. Seemingly liberal, democratizing reforms that look good on paper may be highly deficient in reality. The rights they appear to enshrine are often subject to political interference when they conflict with higher political priorities of the state (Birney, 2014; Magaloni, 2006; Simpser, 2013; Truex, 2014).

This article theorizes how these quasi-democratic institutions influence political activism. However disappointing it may be to see such laws go unenforced, certain authoritarian institutions nonetheless offer resources to activists seeking to change government behavior. Specifically, two qualities of quasi-democratic institutions help activists even if the institutions themselves are weak. First, formal institutions of political participation create politically anodyne "frames" for activism. The presence of safe language for describing one's own political participation is particularly crucial in nondemocratic regimes, where the boundaries of permissible participation remain shifting and uncertain (Stern & Hassid, 2012; Stern & O'Brien, 2012). To the extent that activists can channel their participation into these institutions, these frames serve to distance their activities from political taboos.

Second, weak institutions produce institutional failures that fuel activist campaigns. When quasi-democratic institutions embody commitments by the state to respond to participation in predictable ways, they also implicitly define what constitutes institutional failure. This allows activists to participate in ways that ensure that such failures will occur. These failures can themselves serve as assets to activist campaigns. Episodes of institutional failure, and the resulting legal actions and media exposés, draw public attention to the state's "empty promises," increasing activists' chances to extract concessions from authorities or even to stimulate policy change.

These ties between weak institutions and activist opportunities emerge from this study of China's recent government transparency reform. The 2008 *Regulations on Open Government Information* ordered tens of thousands of local agencies to create new channels of political participation. However, an original field audit in a representative sample of local governments reveals its institutional weakness.[1] Implementation was highly uneven, and local governments frequently denied legitimate citizen claims. Despite these shortcomings, case studies of activist campaigns illustrate the mechanisms through which this institution provided resources for activism. These cases, based on interviews with activists, primary source texts, and journalistic accounts, help explain why previous scholarship on the reform observed "widespread and assertive" public use in spite of "impotent judicial protection" (Y. Chen, 2013; Horsley, 2010). Juxtaposing the field audit and case studies highlights two understandings of the impact of political institutions. In the conventional

understanding—the extent to which rules are complied with—the field audit demonstrates that China's transparency reform is weak. Yet the case evidence highlights a second type of impact: the creation of resources for activism.

These findings contribute to scholarship on authoritarian institutions, contentious politics, and Chinese politics. First, this work expands on regime-focused studies on quasi-democratic institutions by examining their effects on an important segment of society: activists seeking to change government behavior (Blaydes, 2010; Brownlee, 2007; Gandhi, 2008; Magaloni, 2006; Simpser, 2013). Second, theorizing how "empty promises" empower activists contributes to scholarship in contentious politics on the interplay of political activism and state institutions. In addition to the political opportunities created from declining state repression or divisions among political elites (McAdam, 1996), opportunity can also emerge from weak institutions that create both new frames and valuable episodes of institutional failure. This builds on an emerging literature on the "contradictions, conflicts, and ambiguities within the state" that create favorable conditions for political contention (X. Chen, 2012, p. 15). Finally, this study contributes to a growing literature on seemingly liberal institutions in China, addressing the growing importance of digital communications, the news media, and new opportunities for political participation (Hassid, 2012; He & Warren, 2011; Shirk, 2010; Stockmann, 2013; Yang, 2009). It shows how the *shortcomings* of these institutions actually benefit actors attempting to shape the state's exercise of authority.

Quasi-Democratic Institutions and Contentious Politics in Nondemocracies

Quasi-democratic institutions resemble political institutions found in democracies, including political parties, legislatures, mechanisms for delivering constituency service, a variety of electoral arrangements, and advisory councils. The adoption of such institutions by nondemocracies has produced a surge of scholarly interest over the last 20 years. One body of research explains the benefits that these institutions deliver to *regimes*. Quasi-democratic institutions help to manage conflict and competition among political elites (Blaydes, 2010; Brownlee, 2007; Gandhi, 2008; Lust-Okar, 2005; Magaloni, 2006; Malesky & Schuler, 2010; Simpser, 2013), solve commitment and monitoring problems between dictators and their allies (Boix & Svolik, 2013), distribute benefits to key social groups (Gandhi, 2008; Gandhi & Przeworski, 2006), and generate information for the regime (Dimitrov, 2014; Lorentzen, 2014; Magaloni, 2006; Truex, 2014).

A second body of research examines the effects of quasi-democratic institutions on society. Even if their purpose is primarily for sustaining the

authoritarian political arrangements, these institutions also influence policy and the distribution of public goods (Gandhi, 2008; Luo, Zhang, Huang, & Rozelle, 2007; Wang & Yao, 2007). The incorporation of social elites into these formal institutions has significant consequences for local governance (Mattingly, 2015; Tsai, 2007). Authoritarian executives and legislators also exhibit responsive and representative behavior despite being selected through relatively undemocratic processes (J. Chen, Pan, & Xu, 2015; Distelhorst & Hou, 2014; Manion, 2014a; Meng, Pan, & Yang, 2014; Truex, 2014).

Quasi-democratic institutions are often weak by design. Although they serve important functions by buttressing state power, they also fail to deliver on a variety of normative promises associated with democracy. In managing elections, regimes enjoy a "menu of manipulation" ranging from exclusion of opposition candidates to outright electoral fraud (Schedler, 2002; Simpser, 2013). Elections are implemented with fidelity only when they do not conflict with the overriding political priorities of the regime (Birney, 2014). Even when citizens can succeed in electing "good types" (Manion, 2014b), authoritarian legislators execute their representative functions within boundaries set by the regime, limiting their ability to enact political reforms (Truex, 2014).

Although quasi-democratic institutions are intended in part to reduce the threat of opponents unseating the regime, a growing literature theorizes their role in *facilitating* activism and popular resistance. Citizens seeking to change official behavior simultaneously participate in official institutions and engage in transgressive acts, producing "boundary-spanning" forms of contention (O'Brien, 2003). Activists can exploit multi-layered and horizontally fragmented political regimes to seek allies within state institutions (Mertha, 2008; O'Brien & Li, 2006), and state policies also shape the opportunity structure of civil society organizations (Hildebrandt, 2013). Authoritarian institutions can therefore shape contention in unintended ways. Institutions intended to channel citizen input into enhancing single-party rule may instead encourage "troublemaking" and discourage more moderate forms of participation (X. Chen, 2008, 2012; Hurst, Liu, Liu, & Tao, 2014).

This study builds on previous research by developing a theoretical link between the characteristics of quasi-democratic institutions and opportunities for activism. Under certain conditions, these reforms represent important resources for activist campaigns, despite their weakness. First, when such institutions create legitimate modes of political participation, they permit activists to re-frame their campaigns as occurring within state-defined boundaries of political acceptability. This helps activists in the awkward position of demanding change from the government while steering clear of political taboos. Second, when these participatory opportunities are combined with

institutional weakness, they permit activists to engineer institutional failures. These episodes of failure are valuable for drawing public attention to hypocrisy and weakness within the state, increasing pressure on authorities to respond to activist claims. Before elaborating on these mechanisms, I first introduce the quasi-democratic institution that serves as my empirical focus and measure its institutional strength.

China's *Open Government Information* Reform

Even as the Chinese government became notorious for sprawling efforts to monitor and control information in the digital age (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013, 2014), it enacted national legislation to *increase* the availability of government information to the public. The 2008 *Regulations on Open Government Information* (OGI) state,

> . . . citizens, legal persons, or other organizations can, according to special needs, including their own production, livelihood, and scientific research, apply to receive relevant government information from departments of the State Council, local People's Governments at every level, and People's Government departments at the county level and above.[2]

This clause opened a new channel of political participation in China. Citizens could now formally request information from a vast number of government agencies. Mainland China is composed of 31 provincial governments, more than 300 prefectural governments, and nearly 3,000 county-level governments, with subordinate departments responsible for local education, taxation, land management, transportation, labor, construction, public security, and more. Each was now legally obligated to respond to disclosure requests from the public. The OGI disclosure request joined a handful of formal institutions—administrative lawsuits and appeals, voting in local elections, and petitioning—for all Chinese citizens to engage in legal political participation.

Why would an authoritarian political regime commit itself to greater transparency? Cross-national research suggests that transparency reforms are motivated by uncertainty over who will hold power in the future (Berliner, 2014), but China drafted and implemented this law when the ruling party faced neither prominent challengers nor risk of regime collapse. Instead, OGI appeared to be motivated by the confluence of intragovernmental agency problems and transnational pressures surrounding China's integration into the global economy. China's political system is characterized by central–local agency problems, in which the difficulty of monitoring local governments results in

local deviation from central policy (Lorentzen, 2014; O'Brien & Li, 2006). One stated goal of OGI was to address these problems by improving local implementation of the law. In the words of Zhou Hanhua (2002), an architect of the reform,

> . . . some grassroots government bodies and their personnel have low recognition of rule-of-law, low policy proficiency, and exhibit bureaucratic decay. Promoting a system of Open Government Information will inform the public of the work systems and procedures of administrative bodies, placing government action under the supervision of the broad public. (p. 38)

In addition to improving local policy implementation, a more immediate prompt for transparency legislation came from China's 2001 accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). In response to complaints from foreign investors about shifting and vague local policies, the accession included a commitment to establish designated enquiry points that would disclose all policies pertinent to foreign trade to any individual or enterprise (WTO, 2001). Zhou (2002) cites these pressures among the motivations for drafting the proposed legislation. Immediately following WTO accession, the municipality of Guangzhou adopted the first in a series of local transparency reforms. By 2007, local transparency regulations had expanded to cover half of all prefectural governments, a process that culminated in the national implementation of OGI in May 2008.[3]

The OGI reform stimulated public participation on an impressive scale.[4] The central government estimated that agencies processed 1.3 million OGI disclosure requests from citizens in 2011 "85% yishang de yi shenqing gongkai xinxi," 2009. This rate of one disclosure request per thousand citizens puts Chinese per capita use of freedom of information requests on par with Canada and Mexico, and well ahead of the United Kingdom, India, and Germany (Holsen & Pasquier, 2012). In contrast, Chinese courts accepted 136,353 administrative lawsuits against government agencies in 2011 (State Bureau of Statistics, 2012), nearly one order of magnitude fewer than the disclosure requests submitted through this relatively new institution.

Measuring Institutional Strength: A Field Audit of OGI

Although public use of this institution was widespread, public data shed little light on institutional quality from the perspective of ordinary citizens. Early studies blended research with activism, seeking to stimulate improved transparency in certain issue areas. They therefore used designs in which requesters informed government agencies that their behavior was being monitored by researchers. One such study reported that fewer than half of 113 cities

responded to researcher applications to disclose enterprises penalized for environmental violations (Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs & Natural Resources Defense Council, 2010). Another study of financial disclosure scored only one province over 50% on its transparency scale; the remaining provinces fell between 10% and 30% (Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, 2010). However, because these studies informed government agencies that their behavior was being monitored by researchers, it was unclear whether the results were informative about ordinary citizens' access to basic government information.

To measure the institutional strength of OGI, I conducted an original field study of local responsiveness to disclosure requests. This audit measured whether government agencies disclosed information when requests came from apparently ordinary citizens. The requesters in this study were research confederates employed by a Chinese research organization, but government agencies were not informed that their responses would be analyzed in academic research. This design reduces concerns about social desirability bias that may emerge when government agencies know their actions are being observed for research purposes.

A random sample (without stratification) of 60 county-level jurisdictions[5] in China was selected to receive information requests. The sample contained 30 counties, 11 county-level cities, 15 urban districts, and four minority regions. Counties within Xinjiang and Tibet were excluded from the sample frame due to concerns about more stringent political taboos in these regions. However, the resulting sample was similar to all unsampled county-level jurisdictions in both demographic and economic characteristics, as summarized in Table 1. Of 27 comparisons between sampled and unsampled jurisdictions, only one covariate (population growth rate) exhibited differences statistically significant at conventional levels.[6] Estimates of OGI disclosure rates from this sample are therefore likely informative of the national disclosure rates.

Controlled interaction with officials and government agencies is a popular research strategy in comparative politics (Berenson, 2010; Distelhorst & Hou, 2014; Malesky, Schuler, & Tran, 2012; J. Chen, Pan, & Xu, 2015, Putnam, 1994), but there are important ethical considerations to such research (McClendon, 2012), especially in developing countries where local governments may be resource-constrained. To ensure that disclosure requests would not distract local officials from other important duties, request materials were codesigned with the Chinese research organization. Requested information consisted of documents expected by the research organization to be readily available within the targeted bureaucracies.

Within each jurisdiction, three government agencies received requests via registered mail from citizens residing within the relevant province. These

Table 1. Field Audit Sample Summary.

	Observations	Sampled jurisdictions	Unsampled jurisdictions	*p* value
Log population	2,869	12.8	12.7	.61
Pop. growth (2000-2010) %	2,869	4.04	5.04	.03
Gender ratio	2,869	1.05	1.06	.50
Log Pop. density (person/km^2)	2,869	14.8	14.9	.62
Migrant population (%)	2,869	15.7	16.9	.55
Non-agr. households (%)	2,869	25.9	29.6	.14
Average years of education	2,869	8.46	8.72	.14
Illiteracy rate for age 15+ (%)	2,869	7.37	6.32	.37
Ethnic minority pop. (%)	2,869	17.3	16.2	.78
Unemployment rate (%)	2,869	3.00	3.30	.35
Agricultural workforce (%)	2,869	53.6	51.8	.56
Industrial workforce (%)	2,869	20.1	20.6	.77
Services workforce (%)	2,869	26.3	27.5	.54
GDP per capita (1,000 RMB)	2,821	23.7	25.0	.51
Log GDP per capita	2,821	9.89	9.89	.99
Log GDP	2,821	8.85	8.84	.97
Avg. GDP growth (2000-2010, %)	2,821	15.4	15.3	.96
Log agricultural output	2,821	7.15	7.13	.91
Log industrial output	2,821	7.95	7.97	.91
Log service sector output	2,821	7.73	7.69	.73
Enterprises	2,821	52.5	51.3	.92
Log total investment	2,821	8.50	8.43	.59
Log total savings	2,821	6.83	6.80	.85
Log government revenue	2,821	5.69	5.74	.77
Log government expenditure	2,821	7.21	7.14	.36
Log per capita govt. revenue	2,821	6.75	6.84	.43
Log per capita govt. expenditure	2,821	8.27	8.24	.66

Means of demographic and economic covariates of sampled (N = 60) and out-of-sample (N = 2,809) jurisdictions from the Open Government Information disclosure field audit. Data from the 2010 China Census and Provincial Statistical Yearbooks. Data for 48 jurisdictions are missing from the Yearbooks, resulting in fewer observations in the second half of the table. Reported p values from two-sided t tests assuming unequal variances. GDP = gross domestic product.

requests, summarized in Table 2 with translations provided in Appendix A2, sought information pertinent to public concerns surrounding transportation safety, education quality, and consumer rights. From the Bureau of Transportation, requesters sought lists of registered passenger transportation service providers. Traffic accidents associated with unlicensed buses and taxis are a public health concern in China.[7] Requesters asked the Bureau of Education for the credentials of elementary and secondary school teachers, which is informative of the quality of public education. Finally, requesters

Table 2. OGI Government Disclosure Field Audit Results.

Agency	Information requested	Justification for request	Disclosure rate [95% CI]
Bureau of Transportation	Businesses permitted to operate passenger transportation services and stations.	Transportation safety; assurance that bus services are licensed and regulated.	17% [7%, 26%]
Bureau of Education	Educational attainment of local elementary and secondary school teachers.	Education quality; assurance that teachers have appropriate qualifications.	22% [11%, 32%]
Bureau of Industry and Commerce	Businesses recently penalized for administrative violations and the regulations they violated.	Product safety and consumer rights; knowing which businesses have engaged in illegal or deceptive practices.	5% [0%, 11%]
Overall	—	—	14% [9%, 20%]

Content, requester justifications, and government responses for disclosure requests submitted to 60 randomly sampled county-level jurisdictions in China. In total, 26 agencies disclosed information in response to 180 requests within 30 days of submission. Expanding the time window to 60 days, one additional Bureau of Transportation satisfied the request. Standard errors clustered by county in the overall disclosure rate calculations. OGI = Open Government Information; CI = confidence interval.

asked for lists of enterprises cited for administrative violations from the Administration of Industry and Commerce. These administrative citations include selling substandard products, operating without a license, brand infringement, and use of misleading advertising. Knowing which businesses are cited for these violations aids consumers seeking to avoid inferior or unsafe products.

The audit shows that access to even these basic forms of government information was far from guaranteed. Local agencies disclosed information in response to just 14% of these requests within 30 days. The Bureau of Education was most responsive, providing data on teacher qualifications for 22% of requests. Next was the Bureau of Transportation, which provided lists of registered enterprises in response to 17% of requests. Finally, the Administration of Industry and Commerce offered detailed information on

administrative sanctions in response to just three of 60 requests (5%). The low rate of disclosure for administrative penalties may reflect the fact that such records include information potentially harmful to the penalized businesses, raising privacy concerns. Not only were disclosure rates low, but just 29% of the contacted agencies provided any sort of reply to these requests after 60 days, despite the OGI mandate that agencies respond to requests within 15 working days. It should be noted, however, that submitting requests via postal mail is not the only option for citizens. In-person and online disclosure requests may more reliably elicit formal responses from targeted agencies. Even so, these findings cast serious doubt on official claims that local governments satisfy more than 85% of applications for information.

Measuring institutional strength by "the degree to which rules that exist on paper are complied with in practice" (Levitsky & Murillo, 2005, pp. 2-3), China's participatory transparency reform was relatively weak. Even requests for relatively benign information on public goods and services were denied or simply ignored. Keeping in mind the limits of analyzing small samples of observational data, the field audit also sheds light on the sources of institutional weakness. As illustrated in Figure 1, the strongest predictor of disclosure is government expenditures per capita (see also Online Appendix A3). This suggests that institutional weakness results in part from limited state resources to respond to disclosure requests. Municipal governments in China face rising needs for expenditures that outpace their fiscal resources (Wong, 2013), making it difficult to hire new personnel dedicated to data management and disclosure.

Yet even high-expenditure counties are estimated to disclose information in less than one out of three requests (Figure 1, local regression line), and there are other sources of institutional weakness as well. Policy implementation can be ensured through horizontal accountability (O'Donnell, 1998), whereby agencies are supervised by other agencies, such as courts. However, Y. Chen (2013) shows that China's courts have provided anemic enforcement of the right to information embedded in OGI. In the early years of OGI, China's courts were hesitant to order officials to comply with citizens' disclosure requests. When they did issue such orders, agencies occasionally ignored them, reflecting the limited power that China's courts exercise over government agencies.

Institutional weakness may also come from officials' unfamiliarity with new rules and functions. When officials execute even well-written regulations, they typically cannot be trained to respond to every contingency. Implementing officials inevitably encounter new situations and respond using their own discretion. When discretion is combined with a thoroughgoing understanding of

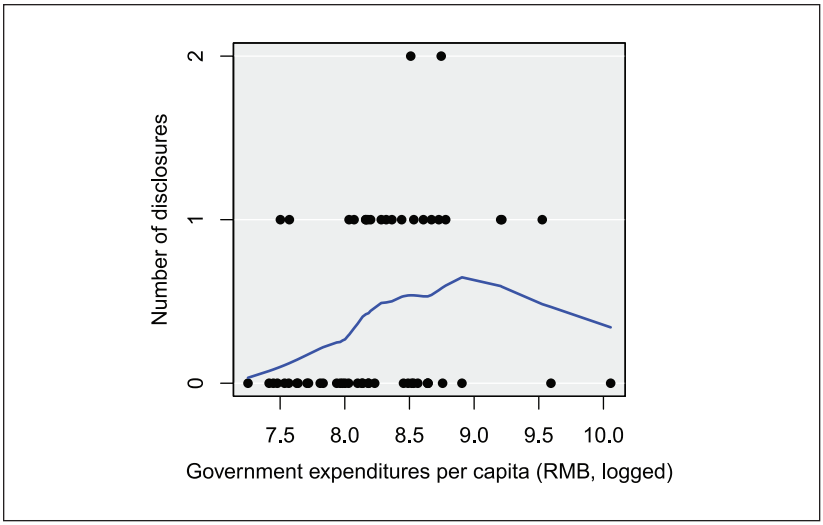


Figure 1. Government expenditures and information disclosure.
Number of bureaus within each county that disclosed information in the Open Government Information disclosure field audit, plotted over per capita government expenditures (logged). Local regression (lowess) line in blue. Higher expenditure counties were more likely to disclose than lower expenditure counties, but the relationship is masked in the full sample by the highest expenditure county on the far right.

policy and a strong sense of mission, it can result in more effective policy implementation (Lipsky, 2010). However, discretion and unfamiliarity with policy can produce more or less random variation in policy implementation. In the period of this study, China's OGI reform was new; officials may have been unclear about their new transparency obligations.

Finally, institutional weakness can also result from political boundaries on institutions that look nominally democratic. Even when quasi-democratic institutions introduce new opportunities for political participation, they remain limited by political taboos. In China, participation is generally closed on issues including religious freedom, opposition political parties, and minority rights. If seemingly apolitical requests to disclose budgetary information, city land-use plans, or other government information threaten the interests of powerful officials, the law offers little guarantee that government will prioritize citizens' right to information over elite interests. Although the requests submitted in the field audit eschewed such topics, these taboos represent another limitation of OGI.

Notwithstanding these sources of institutional weakness, previous research defined the benefits of OGI for activism by its occasional success in unlocking information or court cases in which judges sided with citizen plaintiffs over government agencies (Horsley, 2010). This study argues that the reform created opportunities for activists even when it *failed* to unlock information. Weak quasi-democratic institutions still offer two important resources to activists seeking to change government behavior.

The Power of Empty Promises

China's transparency reform exhibited institutional weakness—low enforcement and broad local discretion in implementation—common to quasi-democratic institutions in authoritarian regimes. Yet weakness does not imply worthlessness to social actors attempting to exercise power over political authorities. Certain features of weak institutions offer resources for activists. New channels of legitimate political participation allow activism to take place within politically anodyne frames, allowing activists to distance themselves from political taboos. Moreover, the very weakness of these institutions allows activists to engineer institutional failures, which can be exploited to put additional pressure on the state.

Weak Institutions as Politically Anodyne Frames for Activism

When quasi-democratic institutions create new channels of political participation, they provide official frames for claims-making against the state. Frames provide the common understanding among participants surrounding the problems and goals of activism (Benford & Snow, 2000; Hurst, 2008).[8] Framing represents a major challenge for activists in nondemocratic regimes. Political activism seeks to change the behavior of government agencies and officials, and activist frames must therefore identify problems in government and the proper steps to remedy these problems. In nondemocracies, both asserting problems in government and advocating for changes in government behavior may verge on the politically taboo. Activists thus operate in a narrow band of political acceptability, advocating for political change without crossing over into opposition to the regime.

These challenges are exacerbated by the scope and uncertainty of political taboos under authoritarian rule. Although the availability of non-state frames has expanded widely in the reform era (Mertha, 2008), Chinese activists still struggle to frame their appeals in ways that insulate themselves from political risk. Triggers of political sensitivities include protests and issues surrounding "social stability, religious and ethnic conflict, the

one-child policy, and corruption among senior officials (Freedom House 2012).” This results in a wide variety of taboos for activists, including ethnic autonomy, religious freedom, cross-straits relations, criticism of top leadership, government corruption, political protests, and major health and safety scandals. Moreover, the definition of politically unacceptable activism in China is rendered deliberately uncertain by constantly shifting boundaries (Stern & Hassid, 2012), making it impossible for activists to enjoy confidence that their activities are politically safe. Violating political taboos may prevent activists from accessing the news media and the courts, which are subject to considerable political constraints (Stern & Hassid, 2012; Stockmann, 2013). These risks lead some activists to pursue self-limiting forms of activism that eschew collective action in favor of individualized contention (D. Fu, 2015).

When quasi-democratic institutions create new channels of political participation, they offer politically acceptable frames for claims that might otherwise trigger suspicions of enmity against the state. By conducting activities within institutions established and promoted by the state, activists render these claims more politically legitimate, allowing for more assertive activism. This role of framing differs from the prognostic, diagnostic, or mobilizational functions emphasized in previous research (Benford & Snow, 2000). Instead, its purpose is primarily to establish the identity of activists in relation to the political system. As these institutions are established and implemented by the state, activities taking place within them can be framed as politically anodyne. This measure of political legitimacy facilitates access to potential political allies such as the courts and press.

By allowing citizens to re-frame contentious claims within state-sanctioned institutions of participation, this function of weak institutions has family resemblance to the concept of rightful resistance (O’Brien & Li, 2006). Similarly, activists exploiting quasi-democratic institutions make use of government commitments to render their activism more politically anodyne. However, when political taboos are at stake, even rightful resistance that draws on the commitments of the powerful can be extraordinarily risky. Activists’ need for re-framing their claims does not come from an absence of relevant legislation. A variety of Chinese laws offer guarantees on sensitive political issues, including land takings and housing demolitions discussed below. Yet despite the presence of these elite commitments, activism that directly addresses these issues remains politically sensitive, limiting the ability of citizens to seek out allies in the courts or news media. However, when these claims are re-framed within other institutions (here, as issues of government transparency), activists can pursue them more assertively.

Failure Is an Option: Institutional Failure as Activist Resource

The second asset that quasi-democratic institutions offer to activists is due to, not in spite of, their weakness. When institutions embed government commitments to respond to participation in certain ways, they define institutional success and failure. Activists can use their participation to engineer institutional failures by making claims that they know the state will not honor. They can then exploit these failures to focus public attention on their campaigns, using lawsuits and media coverage to highlight the failure of the state to live up to its own commitments.

Institutional failures occur when political institutions fail to deliver on implicit or explicit commitments contained therein. Examples could include preventing eligible citizens from voting, denying the needy access to social services, deciding court cases on political rather than legal merits, or rejecting valid citizen requests for government information. Quasi-democratic institutions that open new channels of participation therefore tend to create new opportunities for activists to provoke institutional failure. Citizen claims via these weak institutions are frequently rebuffed. Although these rejections can be demoralizing experiences (O'Brien & Li, 2004), activists can exploit them to draw public attention to their campaigns. First, documented institutional failures may be legally actionable, allowing activists to pursue their campaigns in the courts. Even if courts do not honor activists' claims, legal proceedings are formal, public events that may attract the attention of both the bureaucracy and the broader public. Simply trying a case may focus attention on the activist cause and increase urgency for the government to respond. Second, these institutional failures offer an opportunity to attract public disapprobation of government through media coverage. Even when rejected appeals are not legally actionable, they can lead to publicity that increases pressure on government to respond. Weak institutions may produce government behavior that is inconsistent or flies in the face of common sense. When publicized, these failures paint a picture of government that is ineffective and self-contradictory.

Public attention is a source of power for activist campaigns, but attracting this attention and ensuring that it is sympathetic presents a major challenge (Gamson, 2004; Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). Public institutional failures help to achieve this by highlighting inconsistent or otherwise disappointing behavior by the authorities. So long as citizen actions to engineer these failures are not viewed as frivolous or excessive, the resulting publicity highlights the shortcomings of government, rather than intransigent or unreasonable activists.

Using institutional failures to attract public attention requires the presence of complementary institutions. Legal action requires institutions that permit citizens to sue government agencies. Publicizing institutional failures requires the presence of either traditional mass media organizations or a social media infrastructure with some independence from the government agencies targeted by the campaign. A totalitarian system in which these institutions were completely subordinated to the preservation of government power would curtail these activist tactics. At the same time, the exploitation of institutional failures does not require that the courts or the media be particularly strong institutions. Productive complementarities can arise even if these institutions are politically compromised, as they are in contemporary China.

Activist Campaigns and OGI

These dynamics emerged in the context of China's transparency reform, as illustrated in the following case studies of activist campaigns. Although OGI did not replace other important frames for claims-making in China, its introduction created new opportunities to re-frame potentially transgressive claims as politically legitimate requests for information. Because those requests were frequently denied, activists also exploited OGI to create institutional failures that garnered public attention through lawsuits and media coverage.

Two cases are presented in detail—one of ordinary citizens contending with local agencies over their property rights and another of semi-professional activists attempting to provoke broader changes in government policy. They are followed by briefer vignettes that highlight similar dynamics across a range of activists and campaign goals. Cases were identified through newspaper reports, interviews with journalists and academics, and review of publicly available legal documents during field research in mainland China between 2009 and 2011. Those selected for presentation were chosen to illustrate the two key benefits of quasi-democratic institutions: re-framing activism and creating opportunities to engineer institutional failures. They are not intended to offer statistically representative generalizations about all activism in China that made use of OGI. Instead, they illustrate how even weak institutions can be profitably exploited by activist campaigns. These dynamics are not restricted to a handful of individuals or issue areas; quasi-democratic institutions can be exploited by diverse actors for a variety of causes. However, estimating the prevalence of these dynamics (what proportion of activists in authoritarian regimes use similar tactics?) and the magnitude of

their effects (how much do these tactics, on average, change the probability of activist campaign success?) are left to future research.

Property Activists in Guangdong

An activist campaign in Southern China's Guangdong province illustrates how the transparency reform allowed activists to re-frame their participation and to engineer public institutional failures that ultimately helped their cause.[10] An urban district government approved the redevelopment of a tract of urban land, including plans for the demolition and relocation of more than 3,000 households. The affected homeowners were notified and shortly thereafter evicted in late 2008. However, they were extremely dissatisfied with the compensation offered, which was estimated to be 35% below market. Those with small apartments feared the low valuation per square meter would make it impossible to buy a replacement property at market prices.

Seeking to challenge the expropriation, the homeowners quickly identified questionable practices in the relocation and demolition process. They found that demolition began months before the required demolition permit was obtained, and the compensation formula appeared to use preposterously low estimates of land value. They first attempted to directly contest the expropriation through administrative review and litigation in local courts. However, the actions of government authorities were repeatedly upheld. Their challenges rebuffed, the homeowners began to see pursuing claims through ordinary legal channels as futile: "When the verdict on the first hearing was announced, we got the feeling that this [administrative lawsuit] was completely useless."

To this point, the case resembles thousands throughout China. Political incentives to spur economic growth and state control over increasingly valuable land have resulted in land expropriations unfavorable to homeowners and land tenants (Hsing, 2010), pitting local social elites against local officials (Mattingly, 2015). Disputes between land occupants, local governments, and development corporations have become a significant source of social unrest (Cai, 2010). This link between property disputes and social unrest has rendered such activism politically sensitive and risky for individuals to engage in.

However, rather than continuing to pursue direct legal challenges or escalating to disruptive collective action, the homeowners responded by re-framing their activism as appeals for government transparency. They pursued the same agencies for information disclosure surrounding the land sale and demolitions, generating a politically safer narrative for both media coverage and administrative lawsuits. Their disclosure requests targeted a range of

agencies involved in the development project, including the State Land Resources Bureau, the Development and Reform Commission, the Bureau of Construction, and the Bureau of Water Resources.

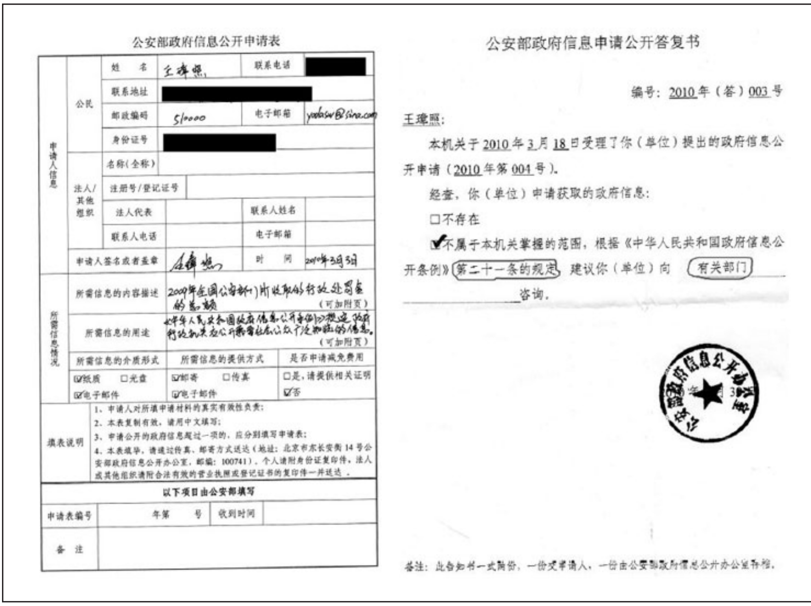
These requests were frequently rejected, but rejections allowed them to file administrative lawsuits against the agencies. In China, suing government agencies requires plaintiffs to establish that a government agency has taken a "specific administrative act" that resulted in infringement of "[the plaintiff's] lawful rights and interests." Plaintiffs must present evidence that a government act caused them harm. This can be difficult to substantiate in court, even more so when harm occurs through government *inaction*. Rejected OGI requests served precisely this purpose, providing legal evidence of rights infringed through the inaction of government. When agencies denied requests for information, OGI requires agencies to provide notice of their decision within 15 days of an application for government information. When requests are denied, agencies typically provide a document stating that the request was denied, as in the right panel of Figure 2 (unrelated to this anonymous case). In this example, the Ministry of Public Security declined a request to disclose the total sum of administrative penalty fees it collected in 2009; "Upon review, the government information that you requested does not fall under the scope of this agency . . . you are recommended to apply to the relevant agencies."

The legal value of these documents led the Guangdong property activists to strategically pursue institutional failure. They engineered these failures by making requests that they knew government agencies would not satisfy:

> We ask them to disclose things we could not get. And when we ask, we have already concluded it will be impossible for them to give these to us . . . If they do disclose, then we look at the information they disclosed for loopholes or anything illegal. Then we sue. If they do not disclose, then we sue them for not disclosing. No matter what, I'm gonna sue them once.

The courts accepted and considered these cases according to government transparency obligations in the OGI regulation, rather than questions about the legality of the land-taking. When courts ruled against them, the activists converted these additional institutional failures into further legal action:

> [I]f I use an information case to sue them, they need to find an excuse for not disclosing to me . . . no matter whether the reason is rational or irrational. Then, I have one more illegal thing they did in my hands . . . if they say they can't disclose to me because it touches on a third party's interests, they are distorting legal principles. That is also an illegal action, and furthermore they give it to me written in black and white. This might be useful to me later.[11]



公安部政府信息公开申请表

申请人信息 / 公民	姓　名	[illegible]	联系电话	[redacted]
	联系地址	[redacted]		
	邮政编码	510000	电子邮箱	yoolasw@sina.com
	身份证号	[redacted]		
法人/其他组织	名称(全称)			
	注册号/登记证号			
	法人代表		联系人姓名	
	联系人电话		电子邮箱	
申请人签名或者盖章		[illegible]	时　间	2010年3月3日
所需信息情况	所需信息的内容描述	2009年全国公安部门所收取的行政处罚金的总额（可加附页）		
	所需信息的用途	[illegible]（可加附页）		
	所需信息的介质形式	所需信息的提供方式	是否申请减免费用	
	☑纸质 □光盘 ☑电子邮件	☑邮寄 □传真 ☑电子邮件	□是，请提供相关证明 ☑否	
填表说明	1、申请人对所填申请材料的真实有效性负责； 2、本表复制有效，请用中文填写； 3、申请公开的政府信息超过一项的，应分别填写申请表； 4、本表填毕，请通过传真、邮寄方式送达（地址：北京市东长安街14号公安部政府信息公开办公室，邮编：100741）。个人请附身份证复印件，法人或其他组织请附合法有效的营业执照或登记证书的复印件一并送达。			
以下项目由公安部填写				
申请表编号	年第　号	收到时间		
备　注				

公安部政府信息申请公开答复书

编号：2010年（答）003号

王建照：

本机关于2010年3月18日受理了你（单位）提出的政府信息公开申请（2010年第004号）。

经查，你（单位）申请获取的政府信息：

□不存在

☑不属于本机关掌握的范围，根据《中华人民共和国政府信息公开条例》第二十一条的规定，建议你（单位）向有关部门咨询。

备注：此告知书一式两份，一份交申请人，一份由公安部政府信息公开办公室存档。

Figure 2. Records of information request and government rejection.
Source. Left panel: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_5dbcbbe00100hzi9.html. Right panel: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_5dbcbbe00100ilx0.html
A citizen's request for information and the reply from the Ministry of Public Security. A university student requested that the Ministry disclose its total annual revenue from administrative fines, and the Ministry replied by claiming it did not have the relevant information. These images were posted by the requester to his blog, and they resulted in the newspaper article, "Internet User Writes to Request Information Disclosure, Ministry of Public Security Replies: Please Seek Relevant Departments," which appeared in the Southern Metropolis Daily on April 4, 2010. (http://gcontent.oeeee.com/6/9a/69a5b59951110b36a/Blog/e14/f67da8.html).

Are lawsuits against the government helpful if citizens never prevail? Although courts in China operate within political constraints (Lubman, 1999), citizens do occasionally obtain favorable rulings. Yet even unsuccessful lawsuits generate publicity and provide opportunities to mobilize support from other political actors (O'Brien & Li, 2004). China's media has shown considerable interest in publicizing legal cases that challenge government agencies, so long as they avoid political taboos (H. Fu & Cullen, 2008; Liebman, 2005). Officials therefore have an aversion to becoming the target of even fruitless legal cases and try to prevent citizens from initiating administrative litigation against their agencies (O'Brien & Li, 2004).

In fact, the property activists never won a single court case against a government agency, but their OGI-fueled legal campaign eventually attracted

sufficient public attention to change their fortunes. During yet another court hearing on an OGI lawsuit in 2011, a high-ranking local official appeared in court to defend his agency's actions. The court appearance by a ranking official was covered by a local newspaper, and less than 2 weeks later, the activists finally received a new offer of compensation: more than double the initial offer and 43% above the estimated market price. They accepted and concluded their campaign after 2.5 years.

This case shows how new opportunities for participation created by quasi-democratic institutions offer resources for campaigns. The OGI reform allowed these expropriated homeowners to re-frame property rights activism as transparency activism. The weakness of OGI then permitted them to engineer and exploit institutional failures by filing lawsuits that attracted public attention, ultimately resulting in success. To show that these tactics are not idiosyncratic to financial disputes between citizens and government, the following case draws out similar dynamics in a campaign to change government policy.

Wu Junliang's Budgetary Transparency Campaign

The opportunities created by institutional failures, and the possibilities for driving policy change, are illustrated by the case of Wu Junliang's budgetary transparency activism.[12] Wu ran a financial services firm in Shenzhen, but he had an abiding interest in budgetary transparency in China. Was the Bureau of Education spending on teachers' salaries or investing in new school construction? How much did local governments spend on lavish overseas "observation and study tours" for civil servants? Wu viewed such questions as integral to public accountability and good governance. Yet through the mid-2000s, very little information was available on how local governments and central ministries spent public funds in China.

In 2005, Wu founded the *China Budget Network* website and recruited two employees of his own firm, Chinese returnees from overseas, to assist him. Aside from their regular duties, they could dedicate up to two hours daily to researching and promoting budgetary transparency in China. When OGI took effect in 2008, they took particular interest in Article 10, which instructs government agencies at and above the county level to emphasize disclosure of "financial budgets and accounts." The team immediately applied for disclosure of budgets from 37 local governments and central ministries. However, only one agency disclosed detailed budgets in response ("Shenzhen gongmin de," 2008, For this and other Chinese newspaper articles, please see:"CitingChineseArticles.xlsx"). The most common government justification for rejection was that government budgets constituted "state secrets" and were therefore illegal to publish.[13]

In 2009, Wu's group again applied for budgetary disclosure from a variety of government agencies, including the large municipalities of Guangzhou and Shanghai. The previous year, Guangzhou had replied to their request with the familiar claim of state secrecy: "According to 'The Guangzhou Scope of Specific Work Secrets' issued by the Guangzhou State Secrets Protection Bureau . . . the content you applied to disclose is a 'work secret.'"[14] However, in 2009, it surprised the activists by agreeing to share the budgets of 114 municipal agencies, which were made publicly available via the Bureau of Finance website. In contrast, the Shanghai Bureau of Finance replied, "State secret; disclosure not granted." The contradictory behavior of China's second and third largest cities was immediately highlighted in the press. One headline read, "Guangzhou Finance Bureau Publishes Government Budgets, Can Other Official Websites Follow Suit?" ("Guangzhou caizhengju gongkai zhengfu yusuan," 2009). The *Guangzhou Daily* published an article reprinted by more than 100 online media on Guangzhou's disclosure and Shanghai's rejection:

> . . . this year [Wu Junliang's Group] applied for budgetary disclosure from 33 agencies. To date they have received formal replies from the Shanghai Bureau of Finance, the Guangzhou Bureau of Finance, and the Shenzhen Futian District Bureau of Finance. Shanghai and Futian respectively replied "disclosure not granted" and "pardon our inability to disclose." ("Guangzhou wangshang gongkai 114 ge zhengfu bumen caizhng yusuan," 2009)

The Shanghai government had strong legal basis for its claim of secrecy. China's State Secrets Law grants broad discretion in the definition of state secrets, including sensitive economic information, and the campaigners' requests had been previously rejected by other governments (including Guangzhou's) for precisely this reason. Yet despite this sturdy legal foundation, the Shanghai authorities quickly reversed course in the face of public attention. On October 29, the Bureau of Finance published "Regarding an Implementation Plan for Further Promoting Disclosure of City-Level Budgetary Information," which included commitments to disclose more detailed budgetary information (Shanghai Bureau of Finance, 2009). They did not immediately publish departmental budgets, but their reply to Wu shed the pretense that government budgets were state secrets:

> Financial disclosure is important content for open government information. According to the demands of both this city and the nation, deepening reform of the financial management system and promoting disclosure of budgetary information are important actions for creating "Financial Administration in the Sunlight. (*yangguang caizheng*)" We will earnestly implement [the plan for budgetary disclosure] . . . further deepening publicized content and opening channels of disclosure.[15]

Media coverage of Wu's campaign and the turnaround in Shanghai preceded an enduring change in government budgetary transparency. In 2011, six Shanghai district governments published the budgets of subordinate departments on their official webpages, and by 2014, at least 14 of 16 had done so.[16] Guangzhou also continued to publish departmental budgets each year since 2009.[17] Today, this level of budgetary transparency is being diffused nationwide. In January 2015, a revised Budget Law of the People's Republic of China took effect, requiring that any government budget be disclosed to the public within 20 days of approval.

Media coverage of Wu's campaign was not merely serendipitous. He carefully considered when to share the results of his requests with journalists. In his own words, "It is challenging to handle an event such that it becomes 'an incident.'"[18] In dealing with the press, he took care to select moments when public attention was not distracted by major sporting events or natural disasters. Because media coverage of institutional failures was a source of power, Wu's activists used publicity as a threat when exhorting government agencies to disclose. In a written exchange with one of Shenzhen's district governments, one transparency volunteer wrote,

> Is there legal basis for the State Secrets department's determination that the "2008 [district] Departmental Budgets" we applied to disclose are secret documents? Please specify: which article, which clause? . . . The People's right to know is the highest principle; please grant it sufficient recognition. We will continue to discuss this matter with you. If we continue to receive this treatment, we will consider submitting this to the district chief and the district People's Congress, and *inviting the press to discuss*.[19]

Although OGI erratically fulfilled its commitments, as when it unlocked the Guangzhou municipal budgets, its institutional weakness was also exploited by Wu to drive media coverage and policy change. When public attention focused on the absurdity of one city classifying government budgets as state secrets while another posted them to the Internet, one of China's most powerful local governments reversed itself and publicly affirmed the principle that such information should be shared with the public.

OGI in Other Activist Campaigns

Activists in other campaigns also exploited opportunities to re-frame and pursue institutional failures created by the transparency reform. First, reframing politically sensitive activism was not limited to property disputes. OGI also helped to re-frame activism targeting government financial

malfeasance surrounding the Three Gorges Dam. As a national construction project, the Three Gorges Dam incited controversies surrounding both its environmental impact and the human cost of relocating 1.3 million residents to accommodate its massive reservoir. Corruption and embezzlement of project funds ensnared hundreds of officials, including at least one death sentence ("Corrupt Official Steals Three Gorges' Cash," 2005; "Three Gorges Corruption," 2000). Although these episodes were publicly reported, the political significance of this project rendered activism highly risky. One advocate for the displaced population was attacked and partially paralyzed after meeting with police in 2006 ("China Says Activist Broke His Own Neck," 2006).

One Three Gorges activist, Ren Xinghui, sought to draw attention to the unaccountable use of public funds in financing the project. The Three Gorges Project Construction Fund was financed by surcharges on nearly every electricity bill in China. Each individual charge was negligible, but between 1992 and 2006, the fund accumulated roughly 73 billion RMB.[20] Instead of directly questioning the legality of the fund and its oversight, Ren used OGI to re-frame his Three Gorges activism in terms of government transparency obligations. He requested information for "scientific research," referring to the permissible bases for information requests in Article 13 of the OGI regulations. This politically neutral frame permitted him to file disclosure requests, sue the Ministry of Finance, and attract media coverage for his case, without directly leveling accusations about government waste or corruption.[21]

Historical grievances from political campaigns dating back to the 1960s were also re-framed using the new transparency institution. During China's Cultural Revolution, millions of "class enemies" were forced to relinquish urban properties to local governments. In theory, houses were temporarily leased, but in practice, this often meant the permanent loss of property. In many families, the sense of injustice surrounding these lost properties remains strong, especially in light of the skyrocketing value of China's urban land. Many extended activist campaigns seek to reclaim property or win compensation for their losses. These claims are politically sensitive, not only due to their connection to land disputes but also because they recall a sordid period in the history of the Communist Party. As unresolved historical grievances for a significant number of urbanites, these claims offer a possible foundation for sustained urban unrest (Y. Chen, 2013, p. 300).

The transparency reform opened a new frame for these old grievances: publicizing official documents. Urban housing departments had records of home ownership during the periods of Cultural Revolution expropriation.

Use of OGI in this way was particularly common in Shanghai, where the very first transparency lawsuit addressed this issue (Horsley, 2007). In fact, the early success of activists in re-framing their claims and reinvigorating debates over Cultural Revolution injustices led the Shanghai government in 2006 to classify documents pertaining to housing history as state secrets, which effectively prevented future lawsuits.[22] This case also illustrates limits to the use of quasi-democratic institutions to re-frame activism in repressive environments. Certain political taboos remain closed (or can be closed by dictate) no matter how they are re-framed.

Consumer advocates also used institutional failures to induce concessions from government. One south China consumer activist applied for information disclosure to several local market regulators. These agencies replied with highly inconsistent responses to identical requests for information, spanning rejection, delayed disclosure, full disclosure, and denial that the agency had jurisdiction over such information. The activist then used these official documents to sue a local agency and simultaneously granted interviews to local journalists. The resulting newspaper coverage highlighted the contradictions among government agencies. One headline read, "Anticounterfeiter Requests Government Disclosure of Administrative Penalties, 7 Departments, 7 Different Answers" "Dajiaren yaoqiu zhengfu gongkai xinghzeng chufa," 2009. Another article explicitly addressed the institutional weakness of the transparency reform, noting "a large gap in implementation and effort between citizens' right-to-know and Open Government Information" ("Gongmin susong zai gei zhengfu xinxi gongkai buke," 2009). Similar to the Guangdong property activists discussed above, the consumer advocate lost both his court case and the appeal. However, the agency responded to the negative media attention by regularly publicizing the information sought by the activist, a practice that continues today.

Even consistent policy implementation can become an institutional failure when it flies in the face of common sense. In 2011, graduate student Li Yan applied to two dozen central government ministries for basic information on the roles of their vice ministers for a research paper. Despite the evidently reasonable nature of her request, several ministries refused her or established frivolous barriers to acquiring the information. The failure to disclose even general descriptions of these officials' duties produced incredulous media coverage:

> Without a doubt, vice-ministers' division of labor is information that should be proactively disclosed. Failing to disclose what should be proactively disclosed is already a neglect of one's duties; facing a request for this information, how could they say no? ("Fu zongli fengong neng gongkai," 2011).

In the wake of this negative publicity, the ministries eventually complied with her requests ("Zhengfu xinxi gongkai xuyao 'Li Yan men'," 2011)

Quasi-Democratic Institutions and Authoritarian Accountability

Weak quasi-democratic institutions can thus benefit activists through two mechanisms. When they create new opportunities for participation, they offer politically anodyne frames for activism. By participating through officially recognized channels, activists can identify themselves as operating within the bounds of political permissibility. Second, these institutions repeatedly fail to deliver on state commitments. Activists can provoke these failures to facilitate legal action and media campaigns. Both provide opportunities to sustain activist campaigns and attract the attention of the public and higher-level officials, important determinants of campaign success (Cai, 2010; Mertha, 2008).

The campaigns described above show how the political consequences of quasi-democratic institutions are shaped through an interactive process with society. In this sense, the institutions themselves are "amphibious," characterized by "indeterminacy in the character and functions of individual institutions, and of boundaries among them" (Ding, 1994). Citizens can alter their function through a process of institutional conversion (X. Chen, 2008; Thelen, 2003). These findings elaborate the concept of boundary-spanning contention (O'Brien, 2003), in which contention takes place in the gray area between officially permitted and transgressive acts. Similarly, quasi-democratic institutions offer an opportunity to cloak potentially transgressive claims in official language and channels of participation. The goals of such activism may extend beyond the existing legal commitments of the state. These campaigns may pursue fundamental changes to the culture of government and public expectations of the state. Wu Junliang's campaign sought to raise public expectations for budgetary transparency, even though Chinese law permitted continued secrecy. Citizen claims are thus not rigidly constrained by existing laws and regulations. Instead, activists use the resources embodied in these formal institutions to pursue their own interests. The resulting activism is "rightful" insofar as it strategically deploys the commitments of the powerful (O'Brien & Li, 2006), but it goes beyond these commitments to incorporate the activists' own agendas and exploits media coverage to extend its reach beyond local jurisdictions.

This study examined one institution that created new opportunities for political participation and embodied commitments by the state to respond in

Table 3. Quasi-Democratic Institutions and Potential Opportunities for Activist Use.

Institution	Opportunities for public participation	State commitments to public
Participatory transparency institutions Y. Chen (2013) Horsley (2007)	Requesting disclosure of government information.	To respond within defined time frame; to disclose information in response to valid requests.
Institutions permitting legal challenges to government actions O'Brien and Li (2004) Pei (1997)	Filing lawsuits against government agencies; offering testimony in court.	To follow legal procedures; to admit public testimony; to decide case according to facts and law.
Constituency service and petitioning institutions X. Chen (2008) Hurst, Liu, Liu, and Tao (2014)	Appealing for government assistance; reporting official malfeasance.	To respond to requests in timely manner; to make efforts to investigate and solve problems.
Deliberative meetings He and Warren (2011) Ergenc (2014)	Attending public meetings to express opinions before officials.	To permit attendance and participation; to adapt policies to feedback.
Elections of officeholders Blaydes (2010) Magaloni (2006) Manion (2014b)	Casting votes; campaigning for candidates; participating as candidates.	To permit citizens to vote; to permit campaigns; to accurately tally votes and appoint officeholders.
Legislative institutions Gandhi (2008) Malesky and Schuler (2010) Truex (2014)	Submitting proposals or comments.	—
Political parties Brownlee (2007)	Joining political parties.	—

certain ways. These qualities opened the door for citizens to re-frame existing claims in new, state-approved language and to engineer public institutional failures. Yet quasi-democratic institutions vary, and some may be more amphibious than others (Table 3). Authoritarian institutions allowing citizens to challenge the state in court (such as China's Administrative Litigation Law) and encouraging citizens to request constituency service from the state share many features with participatory transparency laws. They offer state-legitimated channels of mass political participation, and they embody state commitments to respond to this participation in certain ways. These institutions are expected to offer resources to activists similar to those identified in this study. Future comparative research may shed light on these dynamics by contrasting different types of quasi-democratic institutions (e.g., transparency reforms vs. legal challenges) or different variants within an institutional type (e.g., OGI vs. village financial transparency reforms in China).

Quasi-democratic institutions that lack these qualities—such as authoritarian legislatures or political parties with restricted memberships—are unlikely to afford the same resources for activism by the public. Without channels of mass participation, there are not the same opportunities to re-frame activism in the guise of permissible political activities. Absent public commitments by the state to respond to participation, activists cannot engineer the same institutional failures that proved valuable to the campaigns above.

Within China, a range of contemporary institutions encourage public participation and establish state commitments to respond. In addition to local elections of varying quality that give rise to contentious episodes (Kennedy, 2002; O'Brien, 2003), these also include deliberative institutions such as citizen evaluation forums, legislative hearings, and consultative meetings (Ergenc, 2014; He & Warren, 2011), all of which have similar properties to the Open Government Information reform. They create officially recognized frames of public participation while also embedding political constraints that can lead to institutional failures and public disenchantment. China also has institutions of what democracies would term "constituency service" that span both traditional petitioning offices (X. Chen, 2008) and modern digital channels (Distelhorst & Hou, 2014; Hartford, 2005). Examination of these institutions, as well as other weakly implemented legal guarantees such as environmental impact assessments, is a promising avenue for extending this research.

There are limitations to the conclusions we can draw from research on a single country. Yet China's transparency institutions are not unique among nondemocracies. In a global wave of transparency legislation (Ackerman &

Sandoval-Ballesteros, 2006), governments such as Angola, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Uganda, and Uzbekistan have adopted similar transparency institutions. Expanding our purview to weakly institutionalized democracies, participatory transparency institutions also appear in Bangladesh, Guatemala, Nepal, Pakistan, Thailand, and Ukraine. Similar to China's transparency reform, these laws are plagued by uncertain implementation, low official awareness of their obligations, and weak legal guarantees (Banisar, 2006; Mendel, 2008).

The power that Chinese activists draw from the empty promises of OGI also contributes to our understanding of political opportunities in nondemocratic regimes. A rich literature on political opportunity has grown out of the study of social movements and contentious politics, demonstrating how even nondemocratic states create opportunities for contention when political elites find common cause with activist citizens (Johnston, 2012; Mertha, 2008). China's transparency reform highlights how political opportunities also emerge from weak institutions and even institutional failures. From the vantage of institutional design, these opportunities are somewhat counterintuitive. Political constraints intended to weaken quasi-democratic institutions also produce new opportunities for contention. At the same time, creating new opportunities for effective activism need not weaken authoritarian regimes. To the extent that increased participation brings policies more in line with public preferences, the political opportunities created by such institutions may enhance regime stability, even as they facilitate some forms of contention. Recent research highlights how apparently contentious activities such as collective protest and watchdog journalism may be managed in such ways as to be regime-strengthening (Lorentzen, 2013, 2014). An empirical evaluation of the consequences for regime stability is left to future research.

The claim that institutional weakness can be exploited to improve governance represents a different perspective on the political consequences of authoritarian institutions. The growing empirical and theoretical literature on nondemocratic institutions documents their limitations as true tools of democratic accountability (Blaydes, 2010; Brownlee, 2007; Gandhi, 2008; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Lust-Okar, 2005; Magaloni, 2006). Yet even when quasi-democratic institutions are subordinated to other political mandates (Birney, 2014; Truex, 2014), they still create resources for activists. These activists, in turn, work to change official behavior and government institutions. This suggests an alternative approach to studying how authoritarian institutions contribute to government accountability. Their value comes not only from the fidelity of their implementation but also from their capacities to re-frame activism and to fail spectacularly.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Yongxi Chen, John James Kennedy, Daniel Mattingly, Edward Steinfeld, Lily Tsai, and seminar participants at Brown University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and University of Toronto for helpful feedback on previous versions. Thanks also to Yiqing Xu for sharing data on Chinese counties.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The author acknowledges generous financial support for this research from the MIT MISTI Global Seed Fund, the Boren Fellowship and the U.S. Fulbright Award.

Notes

1. Levitsky and Murillo (2005) identify two dimensions of institutional strength: "(1) *enforcement*, or the degree to which rules that exist on paper are complied with in practice; and (2) *stability*, or the degree to which rules survive minor fluctuations in the distribution of power and preferences, such that actors develop shared expectations based on past behavior" (pp. 2-3). The field audit and theory developed here operationalize institutional weakness as low enforcement of rules and broad discretion in implementation (i.e., Dimension 1), as opposed to instability over time.
2. Article 13, Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Open Government Information (OGI; Zhonghua renmin gongheguo zhengfu xinxi gongkai tiaoli), adopted by the State Council April 5, 2007. Effective May 1, 2008 (http://www.gov.cn/zwgk/2007-04/24/content_592937.htm).
3. Author collection of local transparency regulations in China. At the start of 2003, 4% of prefectural governments were subject to local transparency regulations. By 2005, coverage had expanded to 19% of local governments, and on the eve of OGI implementation, it reached 50%.
4. Shi (1997) defines political participation in the Chinese context as "activities by private citizens aimed at influencing the actual results of governmental policy" (p. 21). When citizens or organizations request previously unavailable government information, they seek to increase government transparency. Even when the stakes of individual requests are small, they may have a large aggregate impact in terms of both increased government transparency and new bureaucratic processes to support transparency.
5. In China's administrative hierarchy, provinces are composed of prefectures, and prefectures are composed of county-level jurisdictions. These include counties

(*xian*), county-level cities (*xianji shi*), urban districts (*qu*), and variously titled subprefectural minority autonomous regions.

6. This may be related to the exclusion of Xinjiang and Tibet from the sample frame. When those provinces are also excluded from balance tests, the estimated difference in population growth falls to insignificance.
7. The Ministry of Public Security has exhorted Chinese citizens to avoid patronizing such "black cabs" (*hei che*) for safety reasons (http://www.mps.gov.cn/n16/n1252/n1837/n2557/4318550.html).
8. Benford and Snow (2000) define a collective action frame as a "a shared understanding of some problematic condition or situation they define as in need of change, make attributions regarding who or what is to blame, articulate an alternative set of arrangements, and urge others to act in concert to effect change" (p. 615).
9. Freedom House (2012).
10. The property activists case is based on seven open-ended interviews (five with the lead activist, one with a second activist, and one with a journalist who covered their story) and related media coverage. Although some aspects of the case were publicized in China's domestic media, the participants were offered anonymity during candid interviews.
11. Interview, Guangdong housing activist, May 2010.
12. This case is based on 50 pages of source material from their campaign, including field notes, conversation transcripts, and written correspondence with government agencies, as well as a two-hour interview with Wu Junliang and a second budgetary transparency activist in April, 2010. Secondary sources consulted as cited.
13. In 2008, 10 agencies responded to their disclosure requests by claiming that government budgets were state secrets, five claimed that budgets were not within the legislated scope of disclosure under OGI, and two argued that Wu's team failed the needs test for disclosure. The remainder did not respond. In total, 73% of the agencies failed to reply within the legally mandated 15 working days.
14. "2008 Budget Application Summary" (*2008 nian yusuan shenqing jiyao*), Unpublished field notes.
15. December 7, 2009, communication from Shanghai Bureau of Finance. Recorded in "Summary of 2009 Departmental Budget Applications" (*2009 nian bumen yusuan shenqing huizong*). Unpublished field notes.
16. Author compilation of Shanghai district government departmental budgets disclosure, per publicly available documents posted to district government websites as of April 2015.
17. Guangzhou's departmental budgets can be found on the respective bureau websites. For example, budgets for the Guangzhou Environmental Protection Bureau from 2009 to 2015 are available at http://www.gzepb.gov.cn/root43/gov/146/1112/list.htm.
18. Interview, April 2010.
19. China Budget Network. 2008. "Shenzhen [district government] Finance Bureau Application Process." Unpublished Field Notes. Emphasis added.

20. Seventy-three billion RMB is US$9.4 billion at late 2006 exchange rates. ("Gongmin Ren Xinghui zhuiwen sanxia jianshe jijin," 2010).
21. The rejection of Ren's request, "Notice on Open Government Information, 2009 #39," is available on his blog (http://renxinghui86.blog.sohu.com/143274984.html). The full text of Ren's lawsuit is also available online (http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_449d613d0100hc7a.html).
22. It remains unclear exactly how many requests addressed real estate disputes from the Cultural Revolution, but the determination of these documents' secrecy is cited in public court records. For example, "Chen vs. Shanghai Huangpu District Housing Bureau." Shanghai No. 2 Intermediate Court, 2010 (http://www.shezfy.com/view/cpws.html?id=22529); "Min Gao Guan," (2012).

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