

Governing a Social Volcano? Prospects for CCP Rule over Chinese Society in Transition

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Resilience and Sustainability of Authoritarianism

Many scholars have turned their attention to the question of how an authoritarian regime such as China's can survive and even thrive. This question is connected to the task of understanding and interpreting the changes currently going on within China. China in 2015 is very different from the China we knew in 1949 or 1978. What has occurred in the country over the past few decades may truly be termed a "great transformation."

In particular, China is on the verge of a transformation from quantitative growth to qualitative growth. Diverse socioeconomic issues are constantly arising, and Chinese society is so volatile and turbulent that it might well be described as a "social volcano." It is conjectured that how the Chinese state copes with the emerging socioeconomic issues will decide the sustainability of the Chinese Communist Party's rule.

Against this backdrop, this article discusses the rise of middle-class homeowners in urban China, their claims to private property, and the political implications of this development. By "homeowners" we mean people who have purchased their own housing. Having acquired private property and needing to protect their economic interests, these actors are now seeking to participate in public governance. This suggests that homeownership is bringing about a meaningful change in state-society relations.

Housing Reform and the Emergence of Homeownership

Housing reform—which in China means the commodification of housing—started in urban areas in the late 1990s. This is a major transformation for a socialist country, and it has been combined with retrenchment of the welfare state and the creation of private property rights. Having previously been a form of welfare goods distributed by the state, housing has now become a commodity that can be purchased in the market.

Once they became aware of their legal rights over their property, urban middle-class homeowners started to mobilize and find ways to defend their interests, through such means as petitions, litigation, and even collective action. Since property rights—as a newly emerged institution in China—have yet to be clearly defined, homeowners often feel that they have been cheated by developers and management providers, and they seek to defend their rights by fighting housing entrepreneurs or pressing the government to act on their behalf.



“Nail house” in Chongqing



Homeowners protesting against a developer whose housing did not come up to standard

One example of homeowners defending their interests is the case of the “nail house” (釘子戶) in Chongqing city, so called because the owner refused to let it be hammered down. Around the time when the property law was passed in 2007, the owner of the house refused to sell it to a developer, resulting in the property being left on an “island” in the midst of a redevelopment project. This image received a lot of exposure on the internet, and the homeowner became a symbol of citizens defending their legal property rights.

In its early phase, homeowner activism was a form of consumer activism that had its roots in the newly built residential complexes; the neighborhood homeowner committees (小區業主委員會) were at the center of these rights protection (維權) activities. One new development is the emergence of horizontal linkages between homeowners that transcend the boundaries of individual neighborhoods (or even operate across different localities).

How has this horizontal mobilization been made possible and what changes has it

brought to politics within neighborhoods and beyond? In order to answer these questions one has to understand the diversified modes of interaction between state and society in a newly created social space.

Horizontal Linkages in Homeowner Activism

The concepts of internal diversity and external engagement would be helpful in explaining the modus operandi of homeowner activism. Internal diversity concerns the endogenous evolution or diversification that takes place within a social group. Homeowner activism had a relatively simple common goal at the outset, but as time went on, the activists developed different ideas regarding the direction they thought it should take. In other words, a spectrum of collective interest representation has emerged among homeowners. External engagement is the term used to describe social actors' strategic interaction with the state for the purpose of achieving their goals. Through this interaction, social forces make use of existing limited institutional arrangements to make their voices heard by the state authority. Rather than confronting or being insulated from state power, social actors strive to find more ingenious ways to interact with the state. This kind of interaction may be expected to bring about incremental political change in China.

There are two representative homeowner organizations in Beijing that act as horizontal linkages between groups of homeowner activists. One is the Governance and Community Institute (和諧社區發展中心) and the other is the Bidding Committee of the Beijing Association of Homeowners' Committees (北京市業主委員會協會申辦委員會). The former is a legally registered organization that started out as a research team at Renmin University in Beijing, hence it has scholars and professionals at its core. By organizing what purport to be research-oriented activities (forums, seminars, and conferences), it has been able to expand horizontal connections between groups of homeowners and avoid manifest tension with the state authority. The latter is a de facto organization which has yet to be granted formal legal status, although it works with the connivance of the state authority. Composed of the leaders of homeowner groups from various neighborhoods, this organization claims to represent homeowner interests more directly. By adopting more aggressive behavioral strategies (including providing help to neighborhoods fighting against developers or management providers), it has established a contentious image.

Despite some differences in their behavioral strategies, these two organizations exhibit some commonalities in their efforts to engage with the state, in particular through existing institutional channels of representation and participation. They have made numerous proposals regarding forthcoming laws and regulations on property management and

grassroots governance, and have exerted pressure on local people's congress delegates and local governments in an effort to indirectly influence legislation.

State-Society Relations in Transition

Homeowner activism started from within neighborhoods and has now developed beyond neighborhood boundaries while seeking more representation and participation. What is notable in this process is that the state is not necessarily seen as the target of contention, but rather as an entity that can be utilized or cooperated with. Thus, we find a complex interplay between the state and society that goes beyond the usual confrontation or lopsided relationship.

With regard to authoritarian resilience—the big question posed at the beginning of this article—and authoritarian governance more broadly, the relationship between state and society in contemporary China may be seen as one of strategic interaction. The Chinese state has become more responsive to the demands of society and the space available for citizens to influence public governance is gradually expanding.

This is part of a process of negotiating and exchanging interest representation and regime legitimacy. Even without an effective representative body and competing political parties, the Chinese state still needs to be versatile in dealing with the diverse interests of its constituencies. That is how the Chinese state reconfirms the legitimacy of its rule. We need to examine more extensively the ways in which social actors participate in public governance as an advanced form of communication between the state and society, and how this participation facilitates and undergirds authoritarian governance. Understanding of authoritarian governance in transition could be enriched by studying other important socioeconomic issues as well as the issue of private property rights.