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## From the Great Rock to the Eastern Islet

The Politics of Citizen Engagement and Local Governance in China

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# From the Great Rock to the Eastern Islet

## The Politics of Citizen Engagement and Local Governance in China

WU GUOQUANG

Based on the examples of protest movements that took place in the villages of Taishi and Dongzhou, the article explores the limits of "citizen engagement" in China today.

### Protests in Taishi and Dongzhou: Citizen engagement vs. local governance

Taishi is a small village located in the Pearl River Delta, one of modern China's most prosperous regions. It is not economic success, however, that focused international attention on the village, but rather an unpleasant sequence of events in July 2005. It began when villagers filed a lawful petition to dismiss Chen Jingshen, a local Communist Party official who had been elected director of the village committee, stating that he had embezzled funds related to a huge land deal. When the petition went unanswered, many of the village residents took to the streets to express their dissatisfaction. The local authorities responded on 16 August by dispatching around 1,000 armed riot police to disperse the peacefully assembled villagers, who chose not to fight back and reacted to the violent crackdown with total silence. After using water hoses on the farmers and villagers, the police arrested 48 local inhabitants, including elderly women, who had signed the petition. The crackdown brought this village of not quite 2,000 souls into the limelight of international media reporting.<sup>(1)</sup> The villagers had the law on their side and were supported by some "outside" individuals – lawyers, journalists, university professors, and local people's congress delegates from Beijing and other parts of China.<sup>(2)</sup> The villagers' "strategy" consisted of bringing in the media and attorneys, acting within the limits of the law, and showing full respect for the Communist Party's proclamations. However, the local government of Panyu County, which includes Taishi Village, did not demonstrate similar adherence to the law and Party proclamations, but rather assumed the right to explain and interpret the law and proclamations at their will. County officials were also able to mobilize local media, which were completely under their con-

rol, to openly threaten the villagers, and claimed that sending police to the village was their way of preserving "social order." The police also considered it appropriate to physically assault villagers and those who came to Taishi to support them, as well as detaining individuals without legal procedures for weeks at a time. In short, all the violence that prevailed in Taishi was carried out at the hands of the local government.

This scenario was repeated several months later in Dongzhou, another small village in Guangdong Province, with the level of official violence increasing markedly in this case. The Dongzhou villagers claimed they had not been appropriately compensated for farmland on which a wind-power plant was being constructed. On 7 December 2005, more than 1,000 villagers staged a protest, during which the People's Armed Police opened fire and shot to death several farmers (reports of the number killed vary), while several dozen protestors were wounded.<sup>(3)</sup> Commentators described the clash as "another June 4th," referring to the Tiananmen

1. For media reports about the Taishi protests and crackdown, see, for example, Tim Luard, "China village democracy skin deep," BBC, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/asia-pacific/4319954.stm>, published on 10 October 2005, accessed on 17 February 2006; Tim Luard, "Conflicts mar Guangdong dream," BBC, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/4620450.stm>, published on 17 January 2006, accessed 17 February 2006. The chronology of the event's development can be found online at: [http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20050919\\_1.htm](http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20050919_1.htm), accessed 17 February 2006.
2. One of these people involved in supporting the Taishi villagers is Ai Xiaoming, a professor of Zhongshan University in Guangzhou. See, for example, Ai Xiaoming, "Taishi cun, wo de lingju (Taishi Village, my neighbour)," *Bingdian* (Freezing Point), as included in an online collection of articles and reports about the Taishi event: [http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20051005\\_2.htm](http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20051005_2.htm), and accessed 17 February 2006. See also Edward Cody, "In Chinese uprisings, peasants find new allies," *Washington Post*, 26 November 2005; and Edward Cody, "Chinese activists targeted by thug violence," *Washington Post*, 1 January 2006.
3. See, for example, Edward Cody, "Police open fire on rioting farmers, fishermen in China," *Washington Post*, 8 December 2005; Howard French, "20 reported killed as Chinese unrest escalates," *New York Times*, 9 December 2005; and Mark Magner, "China defends police shooting of villagers," *Los Angeles Times*, 11 December 2005. For an online collection of reports and articles and a chronology of the Dongzhou event, see: [http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20051209\\_1.htm](http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20051209_1.htm), accessed 24 February 2006.



Taishi, 2005. The local authorities dispatched around 1,000 armed riot police to disperse the peacefully assembled villagers.

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Massacre that the Chinese government carried out against student protestors in 1989.

Although the violent official responses to the villagers' actions in Taishi and Dongzhou shocked the world, such incidents are by no means exceptional in today's China. According to official statistics, the number of public demonstrations in China rose from 10,000 in 1994 to 87,000 in 2005 (the year the incidents in Taishi and Dongzhou took place), averaging about 240 per day, involving a total of some 5 million people.<sup>(4)</sup> What official reports neglect to mention is that the collective actions taken by ordinary citizens to influence official decisions usually failed, often because of violent crackdowns by local governments. At the same time, the Chinese government claims it has been making a genuine effort toward "good governance" under the slogan of "building a harmonious society," particularly through the "broadening" of channels through which citizens are able to participate in governmental processes for developing policy, legislation, and regulations.<sup>(5)</sup> Also, some observers recently found evidence of renewed implementation of political reform under Hu Jintao's leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. Concepts exported from

Western democracies such as "good governance" and "citizen engagement" are becoming fashionable in policy reports and official media. Likewise, some less fashionable ideas have also recently been revived in the form of "corporatist governance" with Confucian ethics. The corporatisation of politics, rooted in fascism, shares with the classical Chinese philosophy of governance the concept of realising collective good through political collaboration among social groups.<sup>(6)</sup> How did all these beautiful words lead to the crackdowns in Taishi and Dongzhou? How can one explain the government-sanctioned violence in Taishi and Dongzhou with these oft-repeated slogans, policies, guidelines, concepts, and even philosophies of "good governance"? Specifically,

4. See PRC Ministry of Public Security Press page: <http://www.mps.gov.cn/webpage/showNews.asp?id=1810&biaoshi=bitGreatNews>; and Xinhua News Agency: [http://www.xinhuanet.org/index.php?categoryid=1&p2\\_articleid=42&s=&](http://www.xinhuanet.org/index.php?categoryid=1&p2_articleid=42&s=&), accessed 11 October, 2006.
5. See, for example, the Chinese government white paper on "Building Political Democracy in China," published on 19 October 2005: [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-10/19/content\\_486206.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-10/19/content_486206.htm), accessed 14 March 2008.
6. For an analysis of corporatist governance, see Bruce J. Dickson, "Cooptation and Corporatism in China: The Logic of Party Adaptation," *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 115, no. 4 (Winter 2000-2001), pp. 517-540.

as civic consciousness rises and engages individuals to address local issues, does “citizen engagement” allow poor farmers in the Chinese context to defend their lands through protest? If the government responds to such protests with violent crackdowns, what kind of action is appropriate for Chinese citizens who dare to attempt to influence government policy?

This article will not attempt to answer all these questions, but rather will raise some further questions exploring what happens in today’s China when citizens attempt to protect their own rights through collective action. In particular, the article will address how the government responds to collective public demands for improvement of governance. This author considers such collective actions to fall into the category of “citizen engagement,” a concept that has recently emerged in the West to describe the participation of ordinary citizens in affairs of governance through channels beyond those provided by formal mechanisms of democracy such as elections.<sup>(7)</sup> Such activities may, conceptually, overlap with the “social movements” that have long been studied in sociology and political science, but they also possess some new features. For example, although “citizen engagement” may take the form of protests and other kinds of collective actions, they usually do not have obvious ideological colour, in contrast with the social movements born of ideology that are particularly seen in the contemporary Chinese context. Citizen engagement actions often focus on a specific, concrete issue that troubles the everyday life of average citizens, such as the dispute over land use for the villagers in Taishi and Dongzhou. As these villagers mobilised their collective strength, their aim was not confrontation with the government but rather a constructive interaction for the purpose of enforcing (rather than protesting against) existing laws in order to halt the abuse of power by particular government officials or departments. Such protests do not challenge the legitimacy of the state and its institutions in their role of enlarging social interests; rather they attempt to cooperate, collaborate, and engage with the state on both the legal and strategic fronts to defend social interests that have been recognized by the state.

Even this kind of “citizen engagement,” however, was answered with violence by local agencies of the Chinese state, a fact that highlights the difficulties citizen engagement often encounters in today’s China. Although incidents of citizen engagements and their associated tragic consequences typically occur as local events relating to non-political issues, this essay suggests that the difficulties of citizen engagement in China are intrinsically national and political

in nature. In other words, one cannot ignore the very real political boundaries that political authoritarianism in China has set on civic activities while applying Western concepts such as “good governance” or “citizen engagement.” This does not mean that China’s authoritarian political institutions are unaffected by citizen engagement, or that Western notions of democracy are not applicable to China. A realistic understanding of Chinese politics and society, however, must take into consideration fundamental institutional constraints on citizen activism. The unuttered assumption that China’s globalised and marketised economy has made it politically indistinguishable from a democracy, or at least from a country in the process of democratisation, is misleading.

This essay will first analyse the local interaction between citizens, their collective actions for engaging in governance, and the local government’s responses to citizens’ engagement, with the goal of assessing the politics of local governmental-citizen confrontation. It will then examine the triangular relationship between citizens, local government, and the central leadership, and discuss the options of the authoritarian state in this relationship. The concluding section will be devoted to some basic observations concerning the place of political authoritarianism in understanding the politics of social progress in China.

## Local governmental resistance to citizen engagement: The pitfall of development

By their nature, citizen engagement and collaborative governance are concerned with local public affairs, or at least are conducted locally even though they may deal with issues that have implications beyond the local area. More concisely, all public issues, whether global or national, take on a local focus when residents rise up to voice their concerns and take action through public channels to deal with the issues.<sup>(8)</sup> Local government thus plays a vital role in the process. In China, however, as evidenced in the cases of Taishi and

7. For the concept and practice of “citizen engagement,” see, for example, Katherine A. Graham and Susan D. Phillips (eds.), *Citizen Engagement: Lessons in Participation from Local Government*, Toronto, Institute of Public Administration of Canada, 1998; Cliff Zukin, Scott Keeter, Molly Andolina, Krista Jenkins, and Michael X Delli Carpin, *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2006. Also, Larry N. Gerston, *Public Policymaking in a Democratic Society: A Guide to Civic Engagement*, Armonk, New York, M. E. Sharpe, 2002; William J. Doherty, *Professionals as Citizens: Civic Engagement Skills for Practitioners*, London, Routledge, 2006.
8. Katherine A. Graham and Susan D. Phillips, “Making Public Participation More Effective: Issues for Local Government,” in Graham and Phillips, *Citizen Engagement*, *op. cit.*





Taishi, July 31, 2005. Villagers protest against corruption of local officials.

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Dongzhou, local government is more often the major obstacle to citizen engagement in public affairs. One has to comprehend this in order to understand the politics of governance in today's China.

Local Communist Party cadres and officials have many reasons for taking a negative attitude toward citizens' actions. The most powerful imperative, and perhaps also the most justifiable in the context of China, is their overwhelming concern for economic development. Previously measured by GDP growth and now measured with a slightly more sophisticated system of "governance performance," economic development is still the backbone of the system. This imperative is justifiable (1) because economic development has been the "central task" of the Party and state since the post-Mao era began in 1978, and (2) because the current leadership, despite its initiative of "scientific perspective of development" that seeks a balance between economic growth and social development, puts equal emphasis on "concentrating on construction and wholeheartedly promoting development." As Hu Jintao has repeatedly emphasized, "the essence of scientific development is development."<sup>9</sup> It is therefore politically correct for Party committees and governmental authorities at various levels to do whatever is necessary to stimulate local economic development, although

they are expected to hold social discontent on a tight leash. This "developmental mentality" is ironically the root of many disputes between local officials and citizens, including the land use issues that caused the mass protests in Taishi and Dongzhou. Indeed, in both of those cases local Party and government officials defended their violent response by arguing that the villagers' collective action would scare away foreign investors,<sup>10</sup> implying that the protests had to be promptly suppressed in order to guarantee effective implementation of the government's "central task."

The incentive to be "wholeheartedly" engaged in "development" rather than in citizen-oriented governance is powerful not only because of its prominence in official programs. Momentum has also developed from the personal and professional benefit that individual cadres accrue from development-related activities such as foreign investment and high-speed growth. Local economic performance can be an important factor in the career development of local officials, while the effect of local residents' assessment of official per-

9. The latest elaboration by Hu on this point can be found in his speeches to delegates to the 11th National People's Congress, held in March 2008: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/misc/2008-03/08/content\\_7746961.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/misc/2008-03/08/content_7746961.htm), accessed 14 March 2008.

10. See notes 1, 2, and 3.



Demonstration in Taishi, July 2005.

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formance is negligible. Even for officials and cadres who lack driving professional ambition, measures that promote economic development can bring tremendous personal benefit in the form of salaries and incomes that increase in line with the improved economic performance of their localities. They enjoy better benefits, they build majestic homes with taxpayer funds and then legally assign the houses to themselves and their families, they upgrade their automobiles through the government budget, and they enjoy frequent opportunities to travel abroad, attend banquets, and participate in other forms of entertainment, all at the public expense.<sup>(11)</sup> Moreover, the potential for illicit profit expands when the local economy prospers. Construction projects enable local cadres to shave a significant share of the budget, public or private, into their own pockets. Creating local investment also provides opportunities to take bribes – for example, cadres' children are more likely to become the chairmen or CEOs of companies jointly sponsored by overseas investors and local governments. Economic prosperity is, therefore, not only a major source of political legitimacy for China's Communist regime, as many have noted; it is also the main ore deposit that individual officials and cadres can mine, legally or illegally, for their personal enrichment. The entrepreneurial nature of the Chinese state<sup>(12)</sup> pertains

not only to its developmental function, but also to the entrepreneurial behaviour of local governmental cadres who profit personally from their public power.

This entrepreneurial spirit is not the sole motivating force of the Chinese state and its local agents. The state is fully aware of its political functions beyond profit-making and safeguarding profit-making. The primary political condition for economic development is unfaltering social stability, narrowly defined as a social situation without mass protests or any event that publicly air social conflicts or question government legitimacy. If such an event occurs and gains momentum, as in the case of Taishi and Dongzhou, the local authorities are usually reluctant to respond with administrative improvements, which would indicate that there must

11. For evidence and discussion on this point, see Guoguang Wu, "Social Tension and Political Adaptation under Globalization," in Guoguang Wu and Helen Lansdowne (eds.), *Socialist China, Capitalist China: Social Tension and Political transition under Economic Globalization*, London, Routledge, forthcoming.

12. For the concept of the entrepreneurial state in China under reform, see, for instance, Marc Blecher, "Development State, Entrepreneur State: The Political Economy of Socialist Reform in Xinju Municipality in Guanghan County," in Gordon White (ed.), *The Chinese State in the Era of Economic Reform: The Road to a Crisis*, London, Macmillan, 1991; Shawn Shih-hung Shieh, *The Entrepreneurial State: Local Governments, Property Rights, and China's Transition from State Socialism, 1978-1990*, a Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1996; and Jane Duckett, *The Entrepreneurial State in China: Real Estate and Commerce Department in Reform Era Tianjin*, London, Routledge, 1998.

have been some wrongdoing or malfunction in local governance, that someone among the local authorities should take the blame, and that the citizens' grievance was justified to some degree. Blaming colleagues or subordinates often results in local leaders undermining their own powerbases, which are rooted in the Party-state political hierarchy rather than in popular elections. Attributing any merit to the protests would also provide incentive for local residents to repeat collective action in the future when they are discontent — an obvious political danger that local authorities are bound to make every effort to avoid.

The one stone that can kill two birds, i.e., protecting local networks among cadres and reducing further potential for social unrest, is to politicise local conflicts and their resulting unrest by attributing protests to enemies of the state, or “hostile forces” in China's current parlance. In this way the actions of the citizens, however moderate their demands, are interpreted as criminal rather than constructive, and as a political plot engendering social tension rather than a civic effort engaging citizens to improve governance. Where such a trouble occurs, the local government is authorised to carry out a crackdown, and this crackdown in turn serves to demonstrate the local officials' ardent commitment to, and effective implementation of, Party policies. In fact, the central Party-state has for years emphasised the requirement of “*shoutu youze*,” literally meaning that local cadres are “duty-bound to defend the territories of their jurisdictions” in terms implying that the regime is at war against invaders in its efforts to maintain social stability. Consequently, the Party-state tends to reward rather than punish local officials who suppress the emergence of social discontent.

This doesn't mean that all local leaders follow this option. Some may personally and politically prefer to negotiate with citizens who use collective actions to settling disputes, and some even like to listen to the voice of protesters to improve their governance. But such cases are extremely rare. Both the logic described above and the historical record since 1989 powerfully demonstrate that positive, moderate, and constructive ways of dealing with social protests and other forms of citizen action often result in increased political risk, if not political suicide, for governmental officials in terms of individual careers and group unity.<sup>(13)</sup> Without a democratic political framework, local Chinese officials are not accountable to the citizens under their governance, but rather to the higher authorities and to their subordinates within the Party-state power hierarchy, right down to the grassroots level of village heads.<sup>(14)</sup> Officials of course have nothing to gain by intentionally irritating villagers, but whenever problems in

governance arise — and this usually involves disputes between citizens and local governmental officials and/or their grassroots agents — they are presented with the choice of supporting the citizens, from which they gain nothing but more potential for trouble, or victimising the citizens, and thereby protecting what they have and potentially gaining more.

### The politics of defining a political boundary: The national-local-citizen triangle

This chain of non-democratic accountability within the Chinese political hierarchy also helps explain why the national leadership doesn't intervene in cases such as Taishi and Dongzhou to reinforce the law, justice, and village autonomy, even though public opinion anticipated such interventions immediately after the crackdowns occurred in Guangdong. Special interest groups have managed to secure local power bases within business communities and bureaucracies with little restriction since the 1990s, at considerable cost to the public interest. The national leadership is not usually bound to these interest groups, and if their activities conflict with the government's image among citizens and, in particular, China's international reputation as a whole, national leaders may on occasion sacrifice some local cadres for general political and policy considerations. This motivation, however, cannot be overestimated, because the Chinese national leaders, like their counterparts at the local level, conduct their statecraft within a non-democratic institutional framework. This means that their legitimacy and powerbases are not rooted in popular support, but rather among their subordinates, especially local authorities, on whom they rely to sustain their positions of power and to implement their policies.<sup>(15)</sup>

In the triangular relationship between national leaders, local governmental officials, and ordinary citizens, the national leaders have the most discretion in making political decisions, but not to the degree that they are able to arbitrarily

13. A prime example is the differing opinions of national leaders on how to deal with the Falun Gong protest in Zhongnanhai in 1999; Zhu Rongji was reported to hold a moderate attitude while Jiang Zemin insisted on imposing a crackdown, with the result that Jiang apparently gained the upper hand at the cost of Zhu's position being undermined.
14. Susan Shirk notices a similar logic of “bottom-up” constraints in authoritarian Chinese politics, although in a different historical context. See Susan L. Shirk, *The Political Logic of Economic Reform in China*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993, particularly Chapter 1.
15. For the importance of local implementation in China's policy process, see, for example, Kenneth Lieberthal and David M. Lampton (eds.), *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Decision Making in Post-Mao China*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992.



victimise local governmental officials. Local cadres do all the dirty work for the national regime in areas such as coercive family planning and stimulating economic development at the cost of social justice and environment, and can hardly be expected to tolerate being made the scapegoats of high-minded and hypocritical policy concepts such as “people-oriented” policies and “harmonious society.” If discontent in the grassroots bureaucracy should build up to a level where it could become part of a power struggle in Beijing, it could potentially disrupt or even destroy the career of a national leader. For this reason, while the national leadership occasionally throws its weight behind ordinary citizens as a reminder to local emperors that they cannot abuse their power too much, it will more reliably cast its lot with local officials for the mutual benefit of their legitimacy, policy interests, and political careers. In particular, the individual leaders of today’s Chinese Party-state do not enjoy the unquestioned legitimacy of their revolutionary predecessors; they need to make more effort to gain the loyalty in their ranks that, for an authoritarian regime, is much more important than social justice at the local level.

As the Taishi event was unfolding, Premier Wen Jiabao, a leader with a good reputation for defending ordinary people’s interests, visited the Guangdong region, and was widely expected to say a word or two criticising local cadres who were violating the procedures of village democracy.<sup>(16)</sup> Wen maintained a complete and noticeable silence, however; he even went so far as to tell the visiting British Prime Minister Tony Blair and EU leaders around that time that village democracy was being genuinely carried out in China, and that this democratic training would lay down a foundation for the participation of farmers in higher-level elections.<sup>(17)</sup> Wen’s popularity arose in part from his claim that he accesses websites everyday by himself (rather than through secretaries) in order to learn the views of ordinary people, so he should have had many channels of information about the events in Taishi, not only from domestic websites boiling with condemnation of local governmental violence, but also from headline stories in the Hong Kong newspapers to which Chinese leaders enjoy privileged access. Indeed, given the proximity of Guangdong Province to Hong Kong, national leaders invariably pay special attention to the Hong Kong media when visiting Guangdong.

Wen Jiabao’s silence could not have come as a surprise, however, to close observers of his political circumstances and Chinese politics in general. The Communist Party Central Committee had scheduled its annual plenary meeting soon after Wen’s Guangdong trip, and the central agenda item

was a resolution on the next five-year plan of national economic development.<sup>(18)</sup> As the primary administrator of China’s booming economy, Wen needed the support of this decision-making body and its more than 300 members, which includes all major cadres of provincial-level units. Under the chain of authoritarian political accountability, cadres of the Panyu County government had an interest in supporting the village head of Taishi who was being accused of corruption by villagers; Guangdong provincial leaders had an obligation to protect Panyu bureaucrats from attacks by negative public opinion; and the national leaders, including Wen Jiabao, for all his assumed support for lawful civic action to improve local governance, depended on Guangdong’s provincial leaders to consolidate their personal powerbases and implement their policies of economic development and social stability. While provincial leaders might be even more dependent on the central leadership for advancing their careers, the increasingly decentralized system embedded in decades of economic reform has tilted the politics between the national centre and the localities more in the direction of reducing central autonomy.

The local governmental strategy of politicising local conflicts adds another heavy-weight factor to this balancing game between politics and governance, between local power and national policy, and between authoritarian accountability and popular legitimacy. This politicisation easily transforms the regime’s concern for social stability to an overwhelming obsession with the security of the regime and the state that lends ideological and international significance to local issues. As international media tried to cover the Taishi and Dongzhou protests, their professional ethics were attributed to “foreign hostile forces.” When lawyers, professors, and other civil rights activists from Guangzhou, Beijing, and other parts of China made efforts to assist the Taishi and Dongzhou farmers, they were labelled “political dissidents” who were chal-

16. Wen inspected Guangdong in 9-13 September 2005, as reported by official Chinese media: <http://www.southcn.com/news/gdnews/zygz/wen2005/>, accessed 14 March 2008.

17. See Wen’s September 2005 conversations with European leaders, including UK Prime Minister Blair and European Union Commissioner Barroso, in which Wen emphasized grassroots democracy, at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2005-09/05/content\\_3447958.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2005-09/05/content_3447958.htm), [http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2005-09/06/content\\_3450485.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2005-09/06/content_3450485.htm), and <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page8133.asp>, accessed 14 March 2008. Weeks later when Wen met a French journalist, he repeated the points about Chinese democracy and political reform. See: [http://ln.dzw.gov.cn/show\\_doc.asp?id=1992](http://ln.dzw.gov.cn/show_doc.asp?id=1992), accessed 14 March 2008.

18. The CCP held its 5th Plenum of the 16th Central Committee on 8-11 October 2005. The Plenum passed the central leadership’s recommendations regarding the 11th Five-Year Plan, a significant document in guiding China’s economic development. See: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2005-10/11/content\\_3606215.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2005-10/11/content_3606215.htm), accessed 14 March 2008.



lenging the legitimacy of the regime. This politicisation justified the local crackdowns as a defence against a political conspiracy to “overthrow” the government, and was inevitably endorsed, rather than punished, by the central government.

Globalisation has expanded the international networks of China’s citizen engagement, at least in terms of sharing information. The movements in Taishi and Dongzhou were no exception, even though they were more remote politically, and in the case of Dongzhou, also geographically. While this international element can help local citizens, it also provides local bureaucrats with an excuse to take action against citizen engagement in the name of defending “state sovereignty.” This is especially effective in attracting national leaders’ vigilance in defending Chinese political institutions, and appeals to a popular resurgence of nationalism. Yes, the Chinese government welcomes foreign funds and assistance in promoting gender equality, environment protection, and poverty relief. But there is a pitfall. As long as the government itself is involved (and especially if it is the dominant force), such Chinese-foreign collaborations are generally politically safe (apart from a few cases in which internal factional, departmental, and political conflicts have led to some such collaborative programs being labelled “foreign spy programs”). But the situation can be extremely difficult when it is civil society organisations that are receiving foreign funds and assistance.<sup>(19)</sup> For example, activists from Chinese AIDS organisations have been detained by the Chinese police and charged with releasing “state secrets” that were in fact merely statistics on China’s AIDS problems. Collaborations require information sharing, but the Chinese government can arbitrarily classify any information flowing out of China as a “state secret.”

This touches on the legal dimension of citizen engagement and collaborative governance. Needless to say, China has achieved some progress towards the rule of law, which has helped enlarge the space for citizen engagement. Any progress inevitably encounters political barriers, however, if legal procedures challenge, or have the potential to challenge, the political considerations of the regime as a whole or of certain national leaders at any given moment. The power to define such “challenges” rests in the hands of political leaders, rather than in laws and legal procedures. In other words, the Communist Party and state leaders have the discretion to find enemies among citizens, to locate “foreign hostile forces” behind international collaborations, and to determine the impropriety of existing Chinese law in settling governance problems. Politics may no longer dominate daily life in China, but when it does intervene in daily life,

through the acts of either the central or local authorities, the legal system can provide little defence against it, as seen in the cases of Taishi and Dongzhou. In other words, it is politics rather than any other element that determines whether laws and the legal system serve merely as convenient tools of governance, and whether political considerations vastly overwhelm even the best intentions of national leaders and legal and political institutions. The boundary between what is regarded as citizen engagement to improve governance and what is construed as “hostile actions” undermining the current regime is therefore arbitrarily determined by authoritarian politics rather than by the intentions of the citizens engaged in a collective action; likewise arbitrary is the boundary dividing “citizen engagement” from confrontation with the government.

## Back to the basics, back to the questions: Conclusions

It is obvious that citizen engagement in China can be effective if it doesn’t question public authorities; but it always meets tremendous problems when touching political boundaries set by the state, either national, local, or both. This reveals a series of dilemmas that arise from efforts to improve local governance and citizen participation in these efforts. Boundaries dividing politics from other aspects of life are often described as a sign of progress in China’s reforms, given that totalitarian autocracy kept politics at the forefront of everything.<sup>(20)</sup> It is true that only through such boundaries can civil society emerge in the spheres beyond state control, and citizen engagement can develop on politically “soft” issues that are directly relevant to people’s daily lives.<sup>(21)</sup> But these boundaries are not always easy to draw; many problems of local governance are rooted to a greater or lesser extent in the shortcomings and malfunctions of local political institutions and the personnel responsible for them, and citizen engagement that aims to improve local governance is therefore often at odds with the interests of local Party-governmental authorities.

Existing political boundaries are uncertain and shifting. In the positive sense they are moving to allow more space for citizens’ freedoms. For a pessimist, however, the shifting

19. Yongshun Cai, “Managed Participation in China,” *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 119, no. 3 (Fall 2004), pp. 425-451.

20. For the retreat of the party-state and politics during the Chinese reform era, see, for example, Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar (eds.), *The Paradox of China’s Post-Mao Reforms*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1999, particularly the Introduction.

boundaries mean that citizens can never be sure of the bottom line that the state draws for their engagement, a bottom line that the state is not reluctant to take coercive, violent action to defend. The cases of Taishi and Dongzhou clearly reflect the problem: the local authorities decided that legal actions were illegal, and crackdowns followed. The collective movements did not question governmental authority, but still encountered political boundaries that shifted to contain their activity. Similarly, when ordinary Chinese citizens engage to fight against a spreading epidemic, gender inequality, governmental corruption, improper land use, environmental pollutions, or other such issues, they believe they are helping the government at the same time as they are helping themselves, but powerful figures within the government may beg to differ. The nature of their engagement, and even of their lives, can be suddenly and arbitrarily interpreted as something completely different by those who are empowered to define the intention and implications of every action.

The conclusion is therefore quite plain: regime type matters for citizen engagement. Just as democracy provides a basic political environment for collaborative governance through citizen engagement, political boundaries set by non-democratic institutions often become barriers to citizen engagement and collaborative governance, as in the case of China. Of course formal, procedural democracy is insufficient for citizen participation and good governance, and that is why various forms of substantive participation under the concept of citizen engagement and collaborative governance have emerged in the West. However, this does not deny the utility of the formal democratic political framework in providing a minimal foundation for progress in citizen-oriented governance. Lacking such a framework, China's citizen engagement remains subject to non-democratic constraints imposed on governance improvement. Even top-down accountability takes on a negative logic, as national leaders feel constrained from supporting citizens' actions deemed "hostile" by local authorities. The limited "reach of the state," in the term proposed years ago by Shue to discuss state-society relations in China,<sup>(22)</sup> in this case becomes detrimental to social activity in the triangular relationship between central-local-social interaction, just as an omni-present state inevitably decreases social autonomy. This institutional framework produces a political environment in which beautiful promises can be made at the national level while boundless disillusion dominates local practice. The official doctrine of "harmonious society" therefore prevents bottom-up efforts to resolve the problems that disrupt social harmony.

As mentioned at the beginning, this essay is designed to

raise more questions than answers regarding Chinese citizens' efforts to influence public affairs, a trend arising from expanding space for social activity under limited liberalisation and the increasing pitfalls of economic development under political authoritarianism. At this point in the discussion, we are left with many questions: How can citizen engagement be possible without a participatory political framework? What difference does the absence of democracy make for citizen engagement in authoritarian China? Can "collaborative governance" mean collaboration between the state and some state-selected social groups while rejecting other social groups? Who can legitimately decide this selection? When citizen engagement involves elements of civil disobedience, can it still be considered "collaborative governance"? Can concepts that are rooted in Western democratic societies, such as "citizen engagement," "collaborative governance," and "good governance," be applied the same way in an authoritarian state?

Taishi literally means "great rock," and Dongzhou "eastern islet." When political boundaries spring up like "great rocks" before citizens on their way to improving Chinese governance, China seems more like an "eastern islet" in the democratic world than a country embracing political, social, and cultural (rather than economic) globalisation. Of course citizen engagement can be a way to push democratization forward, rather than simply surrendering to the constraints of non-democracy. But that is another story, given how the Chinese state arbitrarily detects a democratic pulse even in apolitical citizen engagement. •

#### Glossary

|                       |         |
|-----------------------|---------|
| Chen Jingshen         | 陳景深     |
| Dongzhou              | 東洲      |
| hexie shehui          | 和諧社會    |
| kexue fazhan guan     | 科學發展觀   |
| kexue fazhan guan,    | 科學發展觀，  |
| diyi yaoyi shi fazhan | 第一要義是發展 |
| Panyu                 | 番禺      |
| shoutu youze          | 守土有責    |
| Taishi                | 太石      |
| yi ren wei ben        | 以人為本    |

21. For the importance of, and interactions between, political boundaries and social activism in democracies, see Charles S. Maier (ed.), *Changing Boundaries of the Political: Essays on the Evolving Balance between the State and Society, Public and Private in Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

22. Vivienne Shue, *The Reach of the State: Sketches of the Chinese Body Politic*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1988.