Social Movements in China

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Social movements in China: Augmenting mainstream theory with *guanxi*

Abstract
An extensive literature on social movements points to the role of social networks in movement recruitment and development. It is anomalous, therefore, that treatments of Chinese social movements seldom acknowledge the importance of *guanxi* networks. Theories of social movements are typically constructed on the basis of US and European cases and draw upon the intellectual formations of these regions. Through an examination of social movements in contemporary China it is shown that *guanxi* is not only relevant to the operation of social movements but to our understanding of how social movements are formed and also how they are suppressed and undermined by the state. It will be shown that by theorising social movements in China in terms of *guanxi* there is scope to augment social network approaches to social movements.

Key words: collective action, framing, *guanxi*, social networks, repression, social movement

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Introduction

The significance of social networks for the formation and operation of social movements is widely acknowledged (Diani, 1995; Diani and McAdam, 2003; Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994; Gould, 1991; 1993; McAdam and Paulsen, 1993; Snow et al., 1980). An extensive literature search, however, identified very few items in which discussion of Chinese social movements acknowledged a role for *guanxi*, the elemental basis of Chinese networks. A number of books devoted to collective action in contemporary China were also consulted; the majority failed to even include an entry for *guanxi* in their index. *Guanxi* is a form of long-term interpersonal relation formed and governed by implicit social norms, including *xinyong* (trustworthiness), *mianzi* (face), *renqing* (norms of interpersonal behavior), reciprocity in favour exchange, and obligation (Barbalet, 2014: 54; Qi, 2013: 310). The obligation generated in *guanxi* exchange is a resource frequently applied to instrumental purposes.

While *guanxi* operates through enduring ties China's post-1980s economic liberalisation has produced the conditions for the emergence of social movements, including peasant and also labour movements, which are typically spontaneous and short-lived. It will be shown below that while social movements in China are typically ephemeral and episodic events the social context in which they occur is characterized by long-lasting *guanxi* relations which are in numerous ways implicated in the expression of social movements as well as their curtailment. A likely reason for the absence of *guanxi* from studies of social movements in contemporary China is that sociological methodologies and theories applied to the study of Chinese societies and social phenomena are predominantly produced in America and Western Europe, from where they are disseminated to the rest of the world (see Connell, 2007; Qi, 2014). Indeed, the theories and methodologies which underwrite research on social movements in China are mostly adopted from studies of American and European cases, experiences and theorisation (Qi, 2012; Wu, 2009). It is of particular interest that in describing as well as conceptualising interpersonal connections in Chinese social movements the majority of studies refer to social networks even though *guanxi* may be a more appropriate term, possibly revealing an assumption that the two are equivalent or interchangeable (see Barbalet, 2015).

It is appropriate to ask whether theories which conceptualise social relations and institutions in the US or Europe are capable of universal application, as typically claimed by their proponents (see Bhambra, 2007; Connell, 2007; Qi, 2014; Rodríguez, Boatca and Costa, 2010). While not commenting on the cultural origins of theories and concepts, Melucci (1996: 3) draws cautionary attention to a mismatch between 'the inadequacy of the analytical tools available' and 'the increasing diffusion of … phenomena and their diversification'. Other researchers have begun to observe 'awkward' social movements, by which is meant phenomena that appear to be social movements, but did not fit currently available categories (Armstrong and Bernstein, 2008; Davis, 1999; Polletta, 2006). Davis (1999) earlier pointed out that the political process approach to social movements is a US-biased model inadequate for explanation of Latin American social experiences. One response to this type of problem within social movement research has been the development of more comprehensive theories that attempt to integrate social structure and culture, human agency and structure, affect and organisation and so on (Benford, 1997; Jasper, 1997). Another possible response, to be presented here, is to draw on non-Western, in this case, Chinese movements in order to further qualify, refine and expand conceptualisations in social movement theory.

Through an examination of social movements in contemporary China the present paper will show that *guanxi* is not only relevant to the operation and mobilisation of social movements but it will also indicate how our understanding of the nature of *guanxi* can be expanded by considering its operation in the context of social movements. It will be shown that by theorising social movements in China in terms of *guanxi* there is scope to augment standard social networks approaches to social movements. An ever-present element of the incidence of social movements in China is the likelihood of official suppression. An aspect of this is the way in which *guanxi* is used by state authorities in their attempts to repress and undermine social movements. This paper provides an exploratory examination of *guanxi* in social movements in mainland China through a discussion of both social movement theory and Chinese cases. In particular, the contribution to the social movement literature of the discussion below is through revision of the extant understanding of the nature and role of social networks in social movements. Whereas current research typically focusses on organized social networks, a consideration of *guanxi* networks in social movements in China revises accepted assumptions concerning identity, tie-strength and volitional possibilities in networks. The role of social networks in social movement recruitment and mobilization is widely acknowledged; discussion below indicates that *guanxi* networks affect the emergence, development and outcome of collective actions. *Guanxi* is utilized not only by activists but also by the state, in the suppression and repression of social movements. Thus an examination of *guanxi* expands understanding of the network-movement interface and therefore of both the forms and applications of social networks in social movements and the variable forms and possibilities of social movements themselves.

Importance of *guanxi* in Chinese society
Before considering the connection between *guanxi* and social movements it is necessary to indicate the significance of *guanxi* in Chinese society. In Western Europe, the US and other societies influenced by Protestant culture individuals are presumed to be autonomous, to behave on the basis of decisions determined by their individual will and subject to the rule of law. Individual rights, identified in and secured through a legal constitution, specify the basis and scope of individual autonomy. In Chinese society, on the other hand, individuals are embedded in social relationships in which there are obligations defined by the roles through which social engagements occur. Chinese society, in this sense, is composed of 'overlapping networks of people linked together through differentially categorised social relationships' (Hamilton and Wang, 1992: 20; see Fei, 1992).The Chinese conception of an individual is based on the individual's interaction with others as bearers of roles and hierarchically structured positions. An individual is not only defined by his or her fulfillment of role obligations but individuals achieve their purposes through mobilisation of his or her social connections. Pye (1968: 173-174) provocatively says that the very basis of a Chinese person's understanding of the world is in the 'web' of relationships in which he or she is embedded, that the manipulation of *guanxi* becomes naturalised as a necessary means for the accomplishment of tasks.

It is not claimed here that these forms are unique to China. Indeed, particularistic ties similar to *guanxi* have been noticed in disparate societies which, like China, have an enduring agrarian basis (Beinin and Vairel, 2011; Clark, 2004; Eisenstadt and Roniger, 1984; Lim, 2012; Michailova and Worm, 2003; Piattoni, 2001). The assimilation of *guanxi* with Italian *clientelismo*, Russian *blat*, Egyptian *wasata* (*wāsiṭah*) and similar phenomena is typically

achieved by regarding them all as variants of clientelism. While this is possibly an acceptable approach at a level of high generality it leads to misunderstanding of the details of particular cases. Indeed, clientelism has a number of characteristics in general that are not replicated in *guanxi* in particular, including the necessary mediation of a patron in general distributive relations as well as enduring asymmetrical power relations (Clark, 2004: 946; García, 2014: 799-800). The obligations of *guanxi* are located in horizontal relations of esteem rather than vertical dominance-dependency relations, as in clientelism, and where *guanxi* is an expression of political patronage (Wank, 1999, 2009) it is facilitated by exchanges between different forms of power, political and economic, that would be disrupted by significant power inequalities.

Whilst arguably having traditional origins *guanxi* was strengthened during the Mao era. It is ironic that while the Communist party made vigorous endeavours to uproot traditional elements of Chinese culture, including particularistic relations (Vogal, 1965), *guanxi* became important as an unintended consequence of the party's bureaucratic control of goods and resources because it was a culturally available means of circumventing such control (Gold, 1985; Yang, 2002). Additionally, the dependency of individuals on their *danwei* (work unit) in cities and *shenchan dui* (production team) in villages created a 'culture of organised dependency' that was negotiated by *guanxi* relations (Walder 1986). Because *guanxi* involves personal connections in the formation and maintenance of long-term relationships party members relied on *guanxi* to secure loyalty in achievement of political goals. The importance of *guanxi* operates at all levels of the Chinese Communist polity and society (Jacobs, 1979: 239; King, 1991).

China's embrace of the market economy since 1978 has been described as leading to a society with three layers of institutions: the state, the market, and *guanxi* networks (Boisot and Child, 1996). Rather than a distinct institutional layer, however, *guanxi* networks are embedded in both the state and market. It is important to note that the state and market, while notionally distinct, are not separate but interconnected. With the closure of state-owned enterprises and the disbandment of production teams *guanxi* relations are less relevant for such things as the allocation of housing. But the continuing interconnection of plan and market creates both the need and the opportunity for the use of *guanxi*. A new form of *guanxi* network arises in these circumstances between private business and officials. Business-persons need the assistance of officials for access to licenses, resources, venues, protection and so on as 'favours'. At the same time, officials need business to stimulate the local economy as demonstration of the officials' competence in managing the new reform environment (see Wank, 2009). Marketisation has not eliminated *guanxi*, therefore, as some scholars (Guthrie, 1998) predicted, but strengthened the instrumental aspects of *guanxi* networks. *Guanxi* remains an important component of the social fabric of mainland China today. Indeed, *guanxi* is fundamental 'to the understanding of Chinese social structure' not only in mainland China but also in Taiwan, Hong Kong and among overseas Chinese populations elsewhere (Gold, 1985: 674; King, 1991: 63). Given the significance of *guanxi* in Chinese society it is unlikely that it has no role to play in social movements in China.

An absence of formal channels for Chinese social movements
Resource mobilisation theory, which is dominant in the field, holds that social movements are primarily mobilised through the facilitation of formal organisation (McCarthy and Zald, 1977: 1215). Although the role of social networks in the formation of social movements is increasingly recognised as significant, as when social movements are defined as 'networks of informal

interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organisations' (Diani, 1992: 8), there remains a strong focus on organised networks in which there are varying degrees of institutionalisation, rule-governed procedures and routinised membership so that the identity of members is given by the groups to which they belong. In this consideration it is of interest that one of the rare studies of *guanxi* networks in social movements in China indicates a reverse situation in which 'individual characteristics, identities, and ties that construct the network' are primary in setting the character of the movement 'rather than the profile, characteristics, and relations of organizations' (Xie and Mol, 2006: 274).

The difficulty with approaches to social movements that define them in terms of formal organisation, for the study of social movements in China, is that in China it is illegal for civic organisations to engage in collective action. Workers are not allowed to form unions independent of the state-controlled 'All-China Federation of Trade Unions' (ACFTU) (Chen, 2007: 65-69; Pringle, 2011) whereas in the West workers' struggles can be supported by independently resourced, organised and managed actions. In China state-controlled unions act as mediators and brokers between the state and the workers. Also, they operate as mechanisms of state control rather than as channels for workers to express their grievances and defend their collective interests. Although the authorities may grant citizens the right to hold demonstrations and lodge complaints, in the name of maintaining social stability they nearly always prohibit popular action. The State Council's 'Regulation Concerning Letters and Visits' (1995, revised 2005) allows complainants to petition as a group, but does not permit them to send more than five representatives to plead their case at any one time (Article 12 [1995], Article 18 [2005]) (Li and O'Brien, 2008: 7).

Given the limit and restrictions of formal channels in voicing collective grievances, collective action in China is more likely to be initiated and structured through informal networks. *Guanxi* networks are typically drawn on by collective actors, whether urban protesters or rural activists. In the construction of Chinese environmental movements, for instance, individual connections and relations among friends, relatives, colleagues, neighbors and so forth are key building blocks (Xie and Mol, 2006: 272). Not only do activists draw on existing *guanxi* connections in voicing their grievances, in both urban and rural settings activists engage in building new *guanxi*, especially with officials, journalists and others who may provide leverage, information or in other ways contribute to an action against local government, officials or entrepreneurs and commercial interests. Also, informal networks including *guanxi* may be used strategically to divert the attention of officials so that charges against collective activists of disruption of social order can be avoided (Li and O'Brien, 2008).

Guanxi and the emergence of social movements

While formal organisations of protest and collective action are illegal in China there is nevertheless much evidence of a significant rise of social unrest and collective action since marketisation. In 2010, 'China was rocked by 180,000 protests, riots and other mass incidents—more than four times the tally from a decade earlier' (Orlik, 2011). According to research by the Chinese Academy of Governance, this number of 180,000 incidents in 2010, is double the number of protests that were reported for 2006 (Taylor 2012). Researchers associate protest action with widening inequality, official corruption, environmental pollution and violations of rights. Since economic reform the disbursement, restructuring, or privatisation of many state-

owned enterprises has led to the loss of entitlements and employment for millions of urban Chinese (Chen, 2000, 2006; Friedman and Lee, 2010). Also, urban development has displaced similarly large numbers of rural families from their land and homes, as well as contributing to a significant degradation of the environment (O'Brien and Li, 2006; Walker, 2006; Wang, 2012).

Migrant workers are another group of people numbered in the hundreds of millions who suffer serious exploitation and abuse, including substandard housing, unsafe work environments and failure of a significant number of employers to pay wages (Becker, 2012; Chan and Ngai, 2009; Chan and Siu, 2012). The different forms of grievance that emerge from these and similar conditions often lead to mass protests, especially after the legal channels for resolving grievances have been exhausted and found to be ineffective because of official unresponsiveness, violation of citizens' rights through corruption, or repressive tactics by authorities – or a combination of these (He and Xue, 2014; Michelson, 2008; O'Brien and Li, 2006).

Official unresponsiveness to grievances in many cases is itself associated with *guanxi* networks. Officials in China are effectively discouraged from responding promptly and effectively to citizens' complaints. With an absence of institutions of effective public supervision, including free elections of officials and a press free of political interference, local officials and courts are under no civic pressure to address public grievances. It is not unusual for local political, legal and media leaders to be involved in *guanxi* networks through which their shared interests are protected. Local party leaders typically control key personnel appointments, including membership of local political and legal committees, head of the Department of Propaganda, and managers of leading state-owned local newspapers and TV stations (Lai, 2010: 827). Within such institutional arrangements *guanxi* inevitably plays a key role in official promotions (Zhong, 2003). In these circumstances appeals from disenfranchised groups for justice will be seen as disruptions of public order.

Officials who are not part of the networks of power holders are aware of the risks they would take if they were to report or address corrupt behavior or infringement of legitimate economic and social rights by the power holders. This has the effect of reinforcing official indifference and unresponsiveness to public complaints. As a result of officials' unresponsiveness to their grievances and complaints discontented citizens may be led to resort to collective action, even violence, and intentionally disrupt public order, destroy public property and attack government offices. The rationale is that by escalating a state of tension protesters may attract the attention of some higher authority to their grievances and hope that the higher authority will investigate and possibly intervene so that the contentious issues can be resolved (Lai, 2010: 830; O'Brien and Li, 1995, 2006).

In addition to widened inequality and officials' unresponsiveness to grievances, another factor which contributes to social unrest is corruption. Because *guanxi* provides particular instead of general access to resources and operates through personal relations rather than formal structures, there is a tendency for it to facilitate corruption, bribery and malpractice even if it is not inherently corrupt (Qi, 2013). Yang emphasises that '*guanxixue's* shift into corruption now benefits the official-business classes and hurts the bulk of society as a small social segment quietly amasses public wealth' (2002: 466). Indeed, the 1989 June Fourth Movement gained wide popular support for opposing corruption and patronage (Zuo and Benford, 1995). It was

animated by the unequal access by the party-elite's offspring to scarce resources, including educational opportunities and key state and business employment (Mu and Thompson, 1989). Managerial corruption has been identified as a critical factor that shaped laid-off workers' sense of injustice and drove them to protest (Chen, 2000). This corruption typically occurs in the transfer of state property to private enterprises in which public or collective resources become private wealth. It is not unusual for managers of state-owned enterprises to favour those private entrepreneurs who are in their *guanxi* networks so that both parties may benefit from the transfer at the expense of the welfare of the previously employed workers.

In rural areas a similar pattern of corruption has become commonplace. *Guanxi* connections between city or town officials on the one hand and developers on the other facilitate the appropriation of land from peasant families who are themselves outside these local elite *guanxi* relations. Peasant families' land is typically appropriated without adequate compensation. Corrupt *guanxi* connections between officials and developers frequently involve construction projects which lead to environmental damage in residential areas, urban and rural, because of contraventions of due process. In rural areas corruption seems to be most common in villages of average wealth in which cadres attempt to maximise their short-term material benefits from their limited access to collective resources (Wang, 2012). Those in the *guanxi* networks of village leaders benefit the most. It is reported in one case study that even though peasants made a series of complaints and protests against the misconduct of a village leader who enjoyed a lifestyle beyond his means they were ineffective because that leader bought off the township officials with whom he frequently drank and gambled, matters of common knowledge among the villagers (O'Brien and Li, 1995).

Social movement targets and framing
In the mainstream social movements literature it is understood that in order to seek benefits for their constituency or to achieve recognition by authorities social movements typically target the state (Gamson, 1990). In this way activists 'frame' a social movement. In mainland China, on the other hand, no collective action with similar expectations could operate by directly targeting the state (Chan and Ngai, 2009: 289; Chen, 2006; O'Brien and Li, 2006). There are a number of reasons why collective action in China is not explicitly directed toward the state. First, the state does not tolerate actions, collective or otherwise, that target its policies or ideology. The state would regard such attempts as a direct challenge or threat to its rule and legitimacy and they would immediately and relentlessly be repressed. A common pattern in China is for mobilised workers or peasants to charge that local officials fail to carry out the central policy, and to hold that local officials are corrupt and despotic, and to suppose that if informed of local injustices the central state authorities will respond with sympathy and upright morality. Aggrieved villagers, reported in some studies (see O'Brien and Li, 2006), believed that their chances of getting justice are higher the further from local leaders and the closer to central leaders they pitched their appeals.

The notion of 'frames', then, refers to the interpretive packages developed by activists in order to mobilise their potential adherents and constituents (Snow and Benford, 1988). Social movements in mainland China are typically framed in a way that avoids targeting the central government. Indeed, in China frames are carefully developed not only for mobilisation of collective action but also to avoid persecution by the state and if possible to seek alliance with it. Although widely

regarded as a pro-democracy movement directed against the party-state, the 1989 June Fourth leaders were careful to avoid denying the Communist party's legitimate leadership (Zuo and Benford, 1995: 142) and instead 'framed' corruption, profiteering and the creation of inequalities. As indicated in the previous paragraph, leaders of collective action usually attribute their woes to local violations of a central policy, thus placing the blame for injustice squarely with local officials, thus identifying the central government as a powerful potential ally (Li and O'Brien, 2008: 6). Such a view is not entirely mistaken. While the upper-levels of government seem to be tolerant of local officials' malfeasance or abuse of power in serving so-called public interests, they are less tolerant of officials' abuse of power for corrupt personal gain (Cai, 2010: 71). Collective-action leaders accordingly frame their protests against local officials' corrupt behaviour, which typically involves rent-seeking *guanxi* practices (Wank, 1999; 2009).

It is of interest that the framing strategy of mobilised laid-off workers typically does not challenge the government's policy concerning restructuring state-owned enterprises but instead targets collusive agreements between state-owned enterprise managers, local officials and outside investors, that is, those who corruptly profit from privatisation at the expense of workers. Similarly, peasants typically do not openly express dissatisfaction with the implementation of birth control policy but frame their complaints against officials' corruption or misconduct which typically involves rent-seeking *guanxi* practices. Displaced homeowners do not protest the central government's policies of socialist economic advancement; their protest against land appropriations and new constructions are typically in terms of damage to the environment and the rent-seeking *guanxi* practices of local officials and developers through which they are displaced without proper compensation.

Ties and information in networks and *guanxi*
In standard social network analysis weak ties provide information while strong ties provide solidarity. In social movement theory weak ties are regarded as more effective than strong ties in the dissemination of activism (McAdam, 1982, 2003; McAdam and Paulsen, 1993; Morris, 1984). Strong ties, on the other hand, are held to encourage participation and provide an incentive or basis for solidarity. In a classic discussion Granovetter (1973) shows that while strong ties characterise well-defined groups weak ties link them to each other, especially by communicating what he calls 'non-redundant' information to members of strong-tie groups. Granovetter (1973: 1371) points out that 'those to whom we are weakly tied are more likely to move in circles different from our own and will thus have access to information different from that which we receive'. Thus new information, according to Granovetter, comes from outside strongly bonded groups and is therefore conveyed through weak ties, not strong ties. Social movements in contemporary China, on the other hand, display a different pattern of information flow and tie strength.

Without being able to rely on government officials to provide accurate information, individuals in China typically obtain information about their legal rights and formal procedures through informal channels (Becker, 2012: 1385). Becker (2012) shows that rather than relying on traditional ties of rural society, including prior family or regional connections, migrant workers are more likely to rely on newly established urban ties in order to obtain information, including information about the legal system, dispute options and strategies for organising collective action. It is of particular interest that Becker shows that information derived from urban ties not only

facilitates the protests of migrant workers but in particular facilitates nonviolent protest by expanding the number of protest options available, allowing migrants to avoid the costs of workplace violence. In contrast, individuals relying primarily on traditional rural ties are more likely to use violence in their protest actions.

A feature of bureaucracy in China is not only that it operates hierarchically but also that there is a lack of transparency in decision-making and dissemination of information. In rural protests information about central government policies and the misconduct of officials is provided through the activists' strong *guanxi* ties with select village cadres (Wang, 2012: 709), not through the weak-tie network links that Granovetter holds disseminate information. Particularistic *guanxi* networks can provide information to their members only on a privileged and secretive basis (Barbalet, 2015: 1046-1048) rather than as a free flow found in the account of standard network theory which reflects American experience. Information from village cadres not only provides activists with information that contributes to the framing of the movement, how to mobilise their collective action, but also provides information helping shape tactics because it tells them how far their action can go. By possessing inside information protesters have knowledge of the regime's capacity to prevent and contain conflict (Wang, 2012: 698). Given the nature of this information its disclosure will incur serious risks for the informer. There is a strong incentive, therefore, against an informant providing such information to a weak tie.

Like village protesters, mobilised urban residents also access their *guanxi* networks to gain information which is often crucial in their decision-making for collective action. Cai (2010: 95-109) reports the case of an urban housing neighbourhood, called BG, built by the Shanghai government in the early 1990s on rural land. Residents in BG engaged in a nine-year collective action, from 1993 to 2001, against the building of a twenty-six-story building on an open greenbelt area. The first leader of the collective action was replaced by another with extensive *guanxi* networks and who was familiar with the laws and regulations concerning city construction. Through his strong *guanxi* networks the new leader, Tan, obtained two pieces of crucial information: a construction plan which indicated that the project was illegal, and a report on the project by the Street Office which Tan conveyed to the media to discredit the project. Tan's strong ties with a district official enabled him to know the limits of government tolerance so he was aware of the boundaries of effective protest. He also obtained advance information concerning district government intentions which also aided him in choosing appropriate strategies. As the real estate company was owned by the city government the protests challenged the interests of local power holders, and Tan's informant therefore took great risks. Nevertheless, his *guanxi* connection with Tan, based on trustworthiness, *ganqing* [emotional feelings of personal closeness] and obligation, meant that the confidential information was available to the protest movement through its leader. Similar instances of the provision of sensitive and confidential information crucial for the success of protests and provided through *guanxi* are reported elsewhere (Xie and Mol, 2006).

Movement outcomes and *guanxi*
Research reported in the social movement literature indicates how social ties have positive impact on movement recruitment (Diani and McAdam, 2003; Gould, 1991, 1993; McAdam and Paulsen, 1993; Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson, 1980), solidarity (Useem, 1980) and identity (McAdam and Paulsen, 1993). Few studies focus on the impact of social networks on the

outcomes of collective action. In his study of job attainment, Bian (1997) shows that strong ties are advantageous in accessing influence, which is difficult to obtain. *Guanxi* networks with government officials and media can play a significant role in the outcome of a collective action.

The *guanxi* networks of movement leaders and participants with government officials can play a crucial role in achieving an outcome desirable to the protesters. Studies of collective actions (Cai, 2010; Xie and Mol, 2006; Wang, 2012) show that protesters have a higher rate of success if the protests are undertaken by people with insider connections. Protesters are also better positioned to escape state persecution if they have ties with the authorities (Su and Feng, 2013: 61). The media can also be a powerful ally for protesters but for the majority of individuals who encounter injustice the media is not accessible, though connections with media journalists can lead to exposure of injustice (Cai, 2010: 89).

The role of the media in protest movements in mainland China has a number of dimensions. Public exposure of official misdeeds may damage the reputation of local government. If a collective action escalates to the extent that it attracts foreign media attention then there may be fear among officials of damage to the reputation of the state. Exposure by media typically affects the outcome of a collective action. Cai's (2010) research mentioned above reports that the media in Shanghai were restrained through local power holders' *guanxi* connections from reporting the urban protests. The protest leader, Tan, had indirect *guanxi* links with a journalist at the Shanghai branch of the Xinhua News Agency. Journalists who did not know Tan but shared a common strong-tie link with him, investigated the case and informed city leaders if the issues were not appropriately settled the Agency would file a report for internal circulation to central leaders. Such a report of misconduct by local leaders may lead to them losing their positions or at the most extreme, their lives. This 'threat' proved to be one of the crucial reasons for the success of this particular collective protest.

Because of the influence of the mass media social movements frequently attempt to form links with journalists. In a case study of an environmental movement Xie and Mol (2006) show that media coverage raised the profile of the NGO involved, gaining it public support, and exposing an aspect of state action. Because of the strong connections which the leader of this movement had with journalists it was possible to develop a media campaign to influence public opinion, a main plank in the strategy of the anti-dam campaign. The wider the media reports of a movement and the injustice it opposes the more likely it is that the movement will attract the attention of central leaders. Central state leaders are more concerned with the public reputation of the state than local officials and may positively contribute to a resolution of injustice. On the other hand, drawing attention to an injustice that the state is responsible for may lead to state repressive action against the movement.

Repression and suppression of social movements
The literature on social movements predominantly considers social networks in terms of their positive contribution to movements. But any consideration of social movements in mainland China has to pay attention to the way in which social connections are mobilised to destabilise and repress collective actions. In discussing the control and repression of collective action in China the literature is principally focused on state repression, especially in terms of police surveillance and coercion. The role of social connections and especially *guanxi* in the

suppression of collective action, on the other hand, has failed to draw significant research attention. It will be briefly shown here that *guanxi* is not only drawn upon as a means of destabilising and demobilising collective actions but that this approach to the management of social movements in China is likely to be initiated by the state.

Power is classically known to take coercive, utilitarian and normative forms, each of which is employed by different organisational elements of the state in controlling the population subject to its rule (Etzioni, 1964; Mann, 2012: 6-12; Neumann, 1950: 168; Russell, 1967: 26). Coercive power is employed by the army and the police, utilitarian or material power takes the form of costs and benefits usually connected with employment and state entitlements associated with employment, while normative power involves persuasion and influence of opinion through education, ceremonial honouring and so on. It is frequently reported that in China the police force is widely used in dispersing collective action, especially in its early stages. Local governments frequently employ thugs to intimidate, discourage and destabilise collective action with coercive repression. When local officials are under pressure to maintain social order, however, the use of coercive power may be counter-productive. In these circumstances local governments may draw on 'relational repression', relying on relatives, friends, and native-place connections of protesters to defuse popular action (Deng and O'Brien, 2013: 534).

The local state in mainland China increasingly attempts to suppress collective movements through use of material and normative power. There are a number of advantages for officials in drawing on interpersonal connections in controlling and dispersing social movements. This approach does not reflect directly on the authorities as a repressive force. By encouraging the relatives, friends and native-place associates of social movement leaders and members to use their *guanxi* to dissuade their contacts from participation in collective action the state is at one remove from the management of social movements and is in that sense hidden. It is a preferred option for the state because coercive force or violence potentially escalates collective action, widens the constituency of participants and may bring new charges of injustice. This would indicate an inability of local officials to maintain social order and also expose their misconduct. Relocating the lines of conflict, from the public arena in which the police confront protesters, to the private or domestic arena, in which friends and relatives pressure individuals in social movements to withdraw, effectively suppresses movements and preserves social order without direct or publically visible state involvement.

The use of *guanxi* connections to suppress social movements typically arises through the organisation of 'work teams'. They recruit local officials, staff of public organisations, including schools or factories, and the beneficiaries of government payments such as pensioners. These are all categories of people directly subject to government influence and likely to have possible ties with protesters. Indeed, individuals who have strong *guanxi* with protesters are obvious targets for recruitment to these work teams. Work team members are expected to use their personal influence to persuade relatives, friends and fellow townspeople to stand down from involvement in protest and collective action. Those members of work teams who fail to 'transform' the protesters assigned to them may be subject to punishment, including suspension of salary, removal from office and possibly prosecution (Deng and O'Brien, 2013).

The use of interpersonal connections for the demobilisation and suppression of social movements may be most effective in stopping particular episodes or instances of action but cannot guarantee a complete demobilisation of a social movement. The major function of 'relational repression' lies in its capacity to limit the duration and scope of popular actions. In their study of this approach Deng and O'Brien (2013) report that some protesters withdrew from social action because of their concern for their associates and loved ones, especially fearing that they would lose their salary or suffer adverse career prospects. They also report that work team members, instead of acting as an agent of the government, occasionally played a mediating role when conflicts between protesters and the authorities arose. Some work team members, they also report, left their village for fear of being denounced by their peers. Each of these three possibilities becomes more likely the stronger the social movement. A counter strategy adopted by protesters is to recruit tent-sitters who do not have close relatives in government employment or public organisations.

Conclusion

Through an examination of social movements in contemporary China the paper shows that *guanxi* is not only relevant to the operation and outcome of social movements but also to our understanding of how *guanxi* itself operates in the context of social movements, their development and advancement as well as their repression. When considering the contribution of theories of social movements based on American and European experiences it is important to recognise that many of the assumptions concerning the role and significance of formal organisation and the political state cannot be simply transferred to the Chinese context. The theoretical understanding in the literature of the role of social networks in social movements in particular needs to be carefully reconsidered in the context of social movements in China.

Although *guanxi* is seldom mentioned in studies of social movements in mainland China it has been shown here that *guanxi* plays a significant if not crucial role in shaping and directing collective action. The standard approach of social network analysis, that weak ties are the source of new information while strong ties promote solidarity, has been shown here to not apply to the Chinese case. An examination of collective actions in China shows the importance of distinguishing types of information in terms of what *guanxi* networks are most likely to provide, and the costs of obtaining information useful to social movements. Finally, the role of *guanxi* in suppressing collective action as an alternative to direct state repression has been indicated. In all of these considerations the characteristic features of the Chinese case, including the state's monopoly of formal organisation, the significance of the local-state/central-state distinction, and the special qualities of *guanxi*, remind us of the limitations of theories drawn from mainstream global north experience and of the need to qualify, refine and expand the conceptualisation of social movements and develop social movement theory to understand collective action and protest not only in contemporary China but in general terms.

encouragement. Finally, I acknowledge the helpful comments of the journal's anonymous reviewers.

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