

The Wukan Uprising and Chinese State-Society Relations: Toward “Shadow Civil Society”?⁺

Johan Lagerkvist*

Swedish Institute of International Affairs/Stockholm University

Abstract

As many as 180,000 popular protests may take place each year across the People’s Republic of China. In September 2011 one such protest – in Wukan village of Guangdong Province – became a global media event. The purpose of this article is to address social protest mobilization in the Chinese countryside and emerging civil society through the prism and worms-eye view of the Wukan incident. Two questions are posed. First, was the Wukan incident in any way special? Second, does collective action and evolving state-society relations as witnessed in Wukan herald a more democratic future for China? The many arguments about Wukan being a “China in miniature” and statements on its implications for state-society tensions and an emergent rights-seeking civil society clearly warrant a deeper investigation of the actors and social phenomena involved, such as a clan networks and employment of new media strategies. This article argues that these phenomena indicates how a “shadow civil society” takes shape beyond the perimeters of officialdom, yet temporarily accepts the confines and mechanisms of the formal political system.

Keywords: *China, civil society, popular protest, Wukan, clans, media strategy, village elections*

JEL classification: *H11, H12, P26, Z18*

1. Introduction

In 2011 the world witnessed the reverberations of the Arab Spring through North Africa to Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula, and the subsequent ousting of incumbent political leaders Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak from their seats of power in Tunisia and Egypt. As the Jasmine democratic revolutions rippled through the region of the Middle East, projections about its potential journey

to the Far East circulated in Western mass media. Eventually this particular wave of democratic protest did not reach authoritarian China with force. Yet it is a fact that every year as many as 180,000 popular protests take place across the People's Republic of China (PRC). At the end of 2011 one of these local and mostly isolated conflicts came to worldwide attention. A protest that had started in September in the tiny fishing village of Wukan, Guangdong Province, peaked in December and a peaceful outcome was by no means certain. The street protests were prompted by a drawn-out struggle that had been brewing for years regarding a conflict over compensation for collectively used land that had been sold to commercial developers. The dispute then escalated on December 11 when the Party Secretary who had ruled Wukan for 40 years were, Ben-Ali-like, thrown out by the approximately 10,000 villagers. Locals erected barricades at the inroads, and with their families and protest banners occupied the small public square. During the standoff that followed, with the Communist Party leaders and police squadrons of the nearby city of Lufeng on one side and the Wukan villagers on the other, many foreign reporters sneaked into the village as the People's Armed Police were awaiting their orders across the barricades.

In line with the prevalent view of popular rebellions against corrupt autocracy in the Middle East, several Western press reports portrayed the Wukan incident as an "uprising", the villagers as anti-state "rebels" and the ad hoc leadership after the ousting of the sitting Village Committee as a "rebelliously self-governing body".¹ During the peak of state-society tension, some Chinese observers also considered the event a "turning point" for how government-society disputes over land could and would be handled in future.² The uniqueness of Wukan was said to derive from the careful and prudent handling of the incident by the provincial government.³ That was the basis for the argument of the Chinese sociologist Sun Liping, that Wukan signifies a new model for resolving social contradictions and contention in rural China, i.e. "realizing people's interests while maintaining social stability".⁴ After a resolution to the crisis was found, i.e. in the aftermath of the election of the former protest leader as the new legitimate Chairman of Wukan's village committee, more profound media commentaries in the West bearing a more skeptical message regarding the outcome were published. These writings warned against viewing the Wukan event as "new normal", or anything "unique".⁵ The conflicting arguments surrounding the meaning of what really happened in Wukan and various postulations about its implications for state-society tensions and an emergent rights-seeking civil society warrant a deeper investigation of the Wukan story.

Most journalistic accounts were infused by both foreign anticipation of a democratic breakthrough in China fuelled by popular protests against the government – and perceptions of decision-making processes at various

administrative levels in domestic discourse, as reflected by conservative state-controlled mass media and less restrained microblog commentary. The purpose of this article is to address and theorize social protest mobilization and emerging civil society in the Chinese countryside – replete as it is with discontent about official corruption – through the prism of the Wukan incident. Two questions are posed. First, were the Wukan incident’s origins, process, and ultimate outcome in any way novel and special? Second, do the actions on the part of the state and emergent civil society indicate that social and political reform is now underway, fast forwarding to a more inclusive and democratic politics in China? These questions are reasonable as the ultimate outcome of the Wukan event was seen by some to signify a turning point in the balance between central and local power in China, whereas others viewed it as heralding nothing new. These research questions are underpinned by the hypothesis that although the incident was not necessarily unique, it did display novel features and as such may be a harbinger of new social phenomena, i.e. the re-forming and re-centring of old institutions aided by contemporary media strategies. If that were indeed the case, such a mix would be important for understanding future challenges to vested institutions of power in rural China.

The analysis in this article is based on interpretations of the media discourse in selected Western news agencies and newspapers, and my readings of some influential Chinese scholars’ commentary on Wukan’s role as a potential “pointer” towards more accountability and democratic politics in China. It is obvious that one single social protest cannot in any way represent the multitude and complexities in all of China. What is of interest is the birds-eye discourse and interpretations on the meaning and significance of the Wukan incident and some of the arguably novel features involved in setting the media agenda and achieving a final resolution to the immediate crisis that seemed to satisfy both the provincial government and protest leaders. The enormous media attention surrounding the Wukan incident is in itself enough to warrant a case study. This article proceeds in four steps. First, I situate the current situation and dynamics within the literature on civil society, especially works with a focus on China or Taiwan. Second, I account for the rise of social protests in the Chinese countryside in recent years. Third, I outline what happened in Wukan during and after the conflict. Fourth, I interpret what the wider significance of the incident may be and point to some of the major actors and phenomena involved.

2. Popular Protests and Civil Society as Anti-State

How the concept of civil society should be understood in a non-Western, de facto post-Marxist, yet still Leninist one-party state such as China’s is part of

larger theoretical debate in the social sciences. Is the concept of civil society and social capital (Cohen and Arato, 1994; Putnam, 1992) at all useful in a non-Western context? Although it should be commonplace to argue that there is a middle ground between universalism and relativism/particularism with ethnocentric undertones and context-rich nuanced understanding of the emergence of civil societies in the global South, the issue continues to be raised by a variety of people throughout the world.⁶

After the beginning of the “third wave” of democratization and the Eastern European “velvet revolutions” in the beginning of the 1990s, the concept of civil society quickly rose to prominence, both in academic circles and among those interested in policy democratization. Civil society was instantly presumed to be an ideal support pillar for both initial and subsequent phases of democratization in the developing world (Bratton, 1994, 1996). Much criticism has been directed at this ideal-type construction of civil society, seen as inherently progressive and furthering the task of democratization. It has also been argued that the interplay between state, market and civil society is much more complex than that posited by a sharp dichotomy between state and civil society, often oversimplified and at times viewed through a Western ethnocentric lens (Alagappa, 2004; Hann and Dunn, 1996).

In the social science literature, definitions of civil society abound. The definition offered by John Keane captures its essence and conditions: “It both describes and envisages a complex and dynamic ensemble of legally protected non-governmental institutions that tend to be non-violent, self-organizing, self-reflexive, and permanently in tension with each other and with the state institutions that ‘frame’, constrict and enable their activities” (1998: 6). As such the civil society model has been judged unsuitable as a description of Chinese realities (Madsen, 1993). Instead many China scholars fall back upon models of corporatism to explain the state’s continued containment of civic associations. Others have tried to escape normative assumptions inherent in models of an idealized public sphere and civil society (Brook and Frolic, 1997; He, 1997).

Not fully embracing either corporatism or the civil society model, *dependent autonomy* has also been proposed to explain continuity and change in state-society relations (Lu, 2009). And it is still a fact today that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the Chinese context rarely strive for independence from the state. Yet the conventional framework of a “state versus civil society” dichotomy has envisaged the rise of a robust and autonomous civil society in China since the late 1980s. And an oversimplified dichotomy still prevails in the overwhelming majority of reports from and research articles on China. Whereas anti-state social movements and political groupings such as Falungong and the China Democracy Party, intent on

overthrowing or subverting the political order, have emerged in recent decades, they are exceptional. Even the jailed Nobel Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo ostensibly sought *not* to overthrow the existing political system through his Charter 08 manifesto. In fact, the Chinese party-state has developed a pragmatic and instrumentalist framework for state-society relations: traditionally controlled mass organizations such as trade unions as well as quasi-NGOs funded and sometimes even founded by the state. Very few newly formed civic associations seek autonomy from the state. To the contrary, many strive to get strong state institutions as their registered sponsors for legitimacy, protection, and support.

Yet, an increasing tendency of non-sanctioned social activism among many groups in society, ranging from peasants and migrant workers to city intellectuals, must also be acknowledged. Growing income equality, social divides, and a stalled political reform process are the reasons generating and fueling discontent. One Chinese scholar, Jia Xijing, has argued that: "In China, the relationship between civil society and the state is in a dilemma. The CSOs want to free themselves from interference from the state while at the same time they try to rely on the government." (2008: 172) Important structural reasons also undergird this trend of increasing discontent and social conflict. Among the most salient is the fact that the Chinese state is no longer the country's largest employer. And the party-state does not control all politically sensitive information disseminated through the new communication networks. Against this trend in society are party-state strategies invoking historical, economical and political arguments for social stability.

A common argument for the long-established status quo in state-society relations in China is that economic growth won back the legitimacy lost in the aftermath of the Tian'anmen massacre in 1989. From then on, people were encouraged and compelled to focus on personal wealth creation and to refrain from collective political participation. As a result, the technocratic and pragmatically oriented party-state has dominated the formal political process and been able to stem any threat of challenges from a dormant civil society. On the other hand, in line with modernization theory, there is the argument that with an increase in post-material values, such as environmentalism and feminism, a new young generation of "critical citizens" will eventually solidify (Wang, 2005). For a long time the regime-enhancing effect of economic progress outweighed the expected regime-eroding effect of generational and ideational change. Regarding this inertia, the situation has been labeled "authoritarian resilience" and China's "trapped transition" (Nathan, 2003; Pei, 2006). These labels illustrate the fact that civil society in China is still in a formative and emerging stage, even if the number of registered nongovernmental organizations increased from a mere 4,446

in 1989 to 387,000 in 2007 and 414,000 in 2008.⁷ However, even this spectacular increase says little about the situation on the ground. Official statistics only include registered organizations. Non-registered grassroots organizations are not on government books. In what I see as a *shadow civil society* are quite possibly millions of organizations that have no government sponsor unit and yet cater to the needs of huge numbers of people. According to some estimates, the number of such “shadowy” and truly non-government organizations may be as many as 8.31 million.⁸ Although some manage to stay quasi-autonomous, most NGOs are heavily monitored by the party-state and meet significant institutional barriers such as a cumbersome state-registration process (He, 2007).

As a research field popular protest in China is very dynamic with most contributions investigating the causes and processes of social unrest, political grievances and popular protests in the countryside (O’Brien, 2008; Oi, 2004; Edin, 2003). Many have focused on the underlying origins of protests, i.e. an evolving rights consciousness. Whereas some have studied social protests and village elections and governance at the local level, few look at the “negotiating format” of social protests involving organized NGOs, non-registered associational groups, whose activities are increasingly fuelled by new types of mass media,⁹ which increasingly lessen the information and knowledge gaps between urban and rural China. Brewing social discontent in rural areas was one significant reason why President Hu Jintao held an “important speech” at the opening ceremony of a seminar attended by provincial and ministerial-level officials in Beijing on February 19, 2011, ahead of the annual meeting of the National People’s Congress in March 2011. It was pretty much a standard talk containing the usual pronouncements about necessary ingredients of China’s stability cocktail. But attention ought to be paid to his emphasis on the need for innovation to enhance “social management with Chinese characteristics” – especially what regards containment of the restive microblogging sphere, where information goes viral within seconds *inside* China’s Great Firewall.

3. Social Protest Dynamics in China

The outgoing President Hu Jintao and his Prime Minister Wen Jiabao have not, however, managed through their programme on “the new socialist countryside”¹⁰ to pacify the countryside during their ten-years in office – or been able to stem the increase in social and popular protest in rural China. Ironically and to the contrary, the drive to vitalize the countryside and rescind rural taxes to pacify China’s interior may have backfired as rural people now expect more benefits and more beneficial policies.¹¹ In early 2000, official statistics and reports on the increase of so-called mass incidents started to

get published in China. As many as 80,000 protests took place in 2006 alone. In 2007 they had increased to 127,000. Thereafter the central government bureaucracy stopped issuing these reports. For 2011, Tsinghua University scholar Sun Liping estimated a staggering 180,000 protests.¹² Does it amount to a “social volcano” about to erupt (Whyte, 2009)? While few observers believe China is about to become engulfed in revolutionary fervor leading to regime change, the tension and social discontent channeled into social protests is a worrying phenomenon for the Chinese party-state. This unease goes a long way to explain why China, as the government disclosed in March 2012, spends more taxpayer money on internal security than on its armed forces, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).¹³

A case of power abuse at the local level that for many Chinese illustrated the tensions between entrenched Party interests at the county level and village leadership, and received much media attention both domestically and overseas, was the mysterious death of village leader Qian Yunhui of Zhaiqiao Village, near Yueqing city, in Zhejiang Province. Eye witness accounts detailing the unclear circumstances of Qian’s gruesome death kept fuelling suspicion and an unwillingness to accept the official story of the local government that Qian’s death under a truck outside the city was an accident. Hardly any online commentaries from China’s more than 538 million Internet users indicated belief in and acceptance of, the conclusion of a so-called citizen investigation team that was invited by the local authorities to search “independently” for the truth in this case.

A scholar on rural politics, Wu Danhong, argued in the magazine *Southern Metropolis Weekly* that the Qian Yunhui case reflected a credibility crisis for local governments that now inhibits effective governance in the countryside.¹⁴ Wu explained how discontent had been brewing in Zhaiqiao Village for a long time, accelerating from 2003 onward when the plans for an electrical power plant unfolded. Due legal process was neglected and local critical voices were suppressed and silenced. Wu pointed out that local officials have too many vested interests in the local economy – they have to build a track record of economic growth and personal careers – and are thus players as much as referees and guardians of fair play. The bottom line was that this must change, or people’s trust in officials and their governance practice will not be regained. As one post commenting on Wu’s article bluntly stated, “I believe that before long, we’ll enter a period of peasant and migrant worker uprisings.” A report on the economic and social crisis in the countryside published by Shanghai Normal University in August 2012 seemed to vindicate some of this apprehension. The report argued that migrant workers that now lose employment positions in the cities, in the wake of the global recession and falling demand for Chinese exports, have no land to return to, and moreover no skills to till the land. According to the authors of

the report this vulnerable and growing group of peasant-workers located in cities without urban household residence permits has become a serious risk for stability.

To counter such inflammatory online commentary and also worrying arguments from serious scholars, the Chinese party-state spends many resources to build arguments supported by traditional Confucianist orientation to activate traditional ideas and backing for social order and legitimacy for control policies in both popular mass media and scholarly discourse. The researcher Zhu Liqun is one such example. Pointing to the teachings on authority, order and responsibility by the 12th century neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi, she argues that given the specific Chinese cultural context “most Chinese CSOs still see non-governmental behavior as a citizen’s responsibility in collaboration with government” (Zhu, 2011: 77). This is a too sweeping and generalizing argument much in line with the current tenets of the outgoing CCP leadership under Hu Jintao. It is also testimony to the fact that few Chinese scholars on civil society dare publish research that thinks outside the thought framework of the political sloganeering of Chinese think-tank scholars.

Regarding the outcome of popular protests, it seems that protests that involve more people attract more attention. Social protest scholar Cai Yongshun found that from 261 cases, those that involved more than 4,000 protesters stood a better chance of achieving a successful outcome. To him this proved the logic that “a big disturbance leads to a big solution” (2010: 126). Other important criteria concerned access to journalists, attracting the attention of higher-level tolerant-minded officials, being able to utilize a variety of personal connections to exert pressures on local officials, and linking a specific grievance to other governance problems in the locality. Arguably, all of these criteria existed in Wukan.

5. The Standoff at Wukan

I noted above that in the weeks and months following the peak of the Wukan incident, both domestic and foreign reporting and analysis focused on the stalemate and related discussions on the Chinese Internet, the final resolution, and its wider significance and implications. Although the issue underlying the spectacular outburst of discontent in Wukan was insufficient compensation for village farmland sold to real estate developers, i.e. “land grabs with Chinese characteristics”, reportage also dug deeper into the systemic problems of Chinese politics at the local, provincial, and national levels, as well as into the dynamics and mismatching of policy implementation between them. Thus, the open conflict also reflected the governance crisis of a late Leninist party-state, as outlined by some Chinese scholars such as Wu Danhong.

Central and provincial leaders like to portray themselves as benign, and in many countryside localities this image still retains much legitimacy. To outside observers this legitimacy may seem puzzling, since the Party central in Beijing is often far from the scene of contention yet holds ultimate responsibility for defects of the political system. Paradoxically, the distance to central power, as referred to in the old and much used proverb “the mountains are high and the emperor is far away”, is of benefit to central, provincial and local officials alike. For local officials, the power of the central government is too distant from everyday governance to effectively enforce policy implementation in what at times come across as rural fiefdoms. More often than not Beijing is unable or unwilling to intervene. Yet belief among local people, the *laobaixing* 老百姓, and trust in the good heart and sincerity of officials at higher administrative levels continue to be strong. When on occasion a local blame game starts, accusations are directed at the local officials. And such beliefs about evil local leaders and benign central cadres seem to have played out also in the Wukan case, especially after the Governor and Party Secretary of Guangdong Province, Wang Yang, gave the matter high-level attention in December 2011. His deputy, Zhu Mingguo, was soon engaged in a face-to-face dialogue with the Wukan villagers, effectively bypassing county level officials of Lufeng that the villagers did not trust. The ousted village leaders who were accused of corrupt selling of villagers’ land had colluded with higher administrative officials at the township level to be able to stay in power through rigged elections to the village committee for over forty years. It is important to appreciate the fact that the setting up of a media centre that catered to foreign, Hong Kong and Taiwanese journalists made possible real-time dissemination of the conflict to the outside world and intense media coverage of the event as it unfolded. On the morning of December 20, the leader of the villagers’ ad hoc negotiating team, Lin Yulan, met with Zhu Mingguo and the Shanwei party secretary Zheng Yanxiong. At the meeting Lin put forward three concrete demands. First, he insisted on the immediate release of three detained people from the village and the return of the body of Xue Jinbo, another village leader who had died while in police custody. Second, he wanted the Provincial government to accept the authority of the team/ad hoc committee of which he was in charge. And third, regarding the origin of the whole conflict: the land dispute had to be resolved as stipulated by law.¹⁵ It did not take long for Zhu Mingguo to agree to Lin’s demands and the Wukan stalemate was ended through this high-level participation of senior provincial leaders. It was also decided that a new village election would be held. A new election had to reinstate correct practices and secure voting according to the organic law on village committee elections.¹⁶ From the standpoint of the provincial government, it is obvious

that high-level cadres and leaders cannot step in to negotiate every time a “mass incident” blows up. This is too costly and may trigger the unleashing of a process of falling dominoes, whereby local and provincial governments are perceived as too weak. This may actually ultimately yield much more repressive and violent dynamics.

On March 2012, the voting in Wukan resulted in the leader of the ad hoc negotiating committee, Lin Yulan, being elected as new chairman of the village committee – with a slim majority ahead of other prominent clan leaders in the village. Some Western observers of the Wukan incident argued that: “the villagers were vindicated in full view of the international media after several months of protest”.¹⁷ Legal scholar Keith Hand, for example, viewed Wukan as a popular incident in a longer series of such popular protests of state-society contention that further the cause of constitutionalism, i.e. that one day legal power will match political power regarding interpretation of the articles in the Chinese constitution. It may well be that with more popular protests against a plethora of unfair outcomes regarding disputes with local state organs debate on constitutionalism will increase. One observer argued that: “Given the evolution of events, what took place in Wukan could be called a revolution.”¹⁸ Another scholar argued to the contrary that it was not even about politics: “Although non-political, these protests can easily mobilize thousands of people and destabilize the localities.”¹⁹ That the clan leaders of Wukan referred to lawful settling of the land dispute is hardly a revolution, but surely it is about contentious politics. And assuming, as some have done, that Wukan will become a model for rebels and conflict mediators all over the country is also stretching its significance – perhaps even in the wrong direction. A missing part in almost all reports and analytical commentaries that I have come across is the clan element of the Wukan incident.²⁰ Those skeptical observers who pointed out that there was “no new normal” with the Wukan incident did not incorporate clan power in their analysis. I would argue that this is problematic as it seriously distorts interpretations of Wukan’s implications for state-society relations in the future. In recent years clan leadership and influence in both society at large and over Communist Party branches and village committees at the lowest administrative level have increased markedly (Su *et al.*, 2011: 438). Thus, it is an understatement that there has been a forceful return of the clans in rural China. When the economic reforms started in 1978, the clan system was weak and fragmented, whereas today it has been rebuilt to a considerable extent (Guo, 2002). When the market forces were “liberated” in China during the 1980s, the same was also true for the clan system that was regarded by Maoism as hopelessly backward and feudal. Now clans are revived as family rites are remembered and ancestral temples repaired and built anew.

6. Non-Registered Associational Groups and “Shadow Civil Society”

Given the Chinese transition from a historically rather passive society to a more active social system where individuals are actually engaged in “doing citizenship” (Dahlgren, 2009) outside the perimeters of sanctioned NGO territory, the term *shadow civil society* goes some way to capture the phenomenon that huge swaths of emergent civil society in China that are non-registered are becoming agents of change. In the Wukan case both the media savvy youth at the ad hoc media centre and the clan groupings belong to this shadowy associational realm. Their de facto status as non-registered associations and non-voluntary characteristics (you are born into a clan, it is a lineage group marked by a specific surname) make them by definition fall outside the definition of civil society employed by Keane in the beginning of this article. Nonetheless, clans may have both legal/registered and illegal/non-registered offsprings as they may support charities that register with the government, or organized crime groups that are more generally referred to as “*hei shehui* 黑社会”, or black society. Moreover, they use “shady” and illegal means to disseminate their non-state sanctioned views of media events/incidents/conflicts mobilizing opinion and people for their cause. I contend that it speaks to a reality where informal organizations and non-registered associational groups constitute an important part of emergent civil society, which is about to spring to life such as happened in Taiwan in the 1980s (Weller, 1999).

In contemporary China burning issues regarding corruption and lack of rule of law, the holding of democratic village elections, and popular mobilization through the appropriation of new media skills intermesh with the phenomenon of non-registered organizations. These organizations consist of non-registered NGOs, informal NGOs, as well as those NGOs that are registered as business operations due to the fact that no supervisory organ wished to engage them. However, Chinese shadow civil society and related social organizations and socioeconomic aggregated interests continue to choose to dock into political society since they do not foreshadow any oppositional alternatives. Therefore, in the void of cumbersome registration procedures for social organizations (*shetuan* 社团), political institutions uninterested and dis-incentivized from higher administrative levels, and a general responsible governance deficit in the Chinese countryside a shadow civil society, continue to grow. Hypothetically then – just like in Taiwan in the 1980s – organizations in this shadowy realm may, consciously or not, be preparing for an alternative social reality with a different set of rules and norms for civil society organizations. Thus, many people conceive of an alternative sociopolitical reality, sometimes with local officials accepting and condoning activities that, from an orthodox party-state perspective can

only be described as illegal. As argued by Fulda *et al.*: “Unregistered CSOs can expand their scope of activities quite considerably when they receive support from leaders in the party-state bureaucracy” (2012: 677). Thus, such organizations have one foot in the open and formal arena of political society of political structures and officialdom, whereas the other foot is firmly placed in the shadows.

7. The “Loyal Society” of Wukan

According to the observer Ou Ming, Wukan was a turning point since it showed how “the Guangdong government moved beyond its habitual fixation with “maintaining stability” to recognize that the appeals of the Wukan villagers arose out of concern for their livelihoods, rather than out of some animus against the Party or China’s political system.” I would argue that it is probably just because the villagers did not display any outright “animus against the Party” and displayed loyalty to existing political structures that they secured the peaceful resolution of this particular conflict. And thus, it can hardly be regarded as a turning point as there was no outright anti-party, anti-government or anti-state statements expressed. It was more about an economic conflict and discontent about mismanagement by certain leaders of the existing village committee that made villagers demand their removal and the holding of a new open and democratic election to the village committee. As the newly elected leader of Wukan’s new legitimate village committee, former protest leader Lin Yulan himself argued in March 2012:

As a party secretary, I understand our country’s policies for rural areas and at the same time support the work of village committee. Self-government can be realized when the village committee play its own role and the party branch provides policy support.²¹

Thus Wukan offers a glimpse of how rural society in China is becoming increasingly active in a realm of shadows outside the purview of the state. Yet simultaneously it can also be considered as embodying a “loyal society” that for the time being is paying lip-service to the existing political structures. The notion of loyal society corresponds to the Western, originally British, idea of a *loyal opposition*, whereby opponents of particular policy and governance do not seek the overthrow of the political system yet are able to criticize and oppose government policies.

8. Conclusion

The answer to the first of two research questions posed at the beginning of this article about the uniqueness of Wukan is that it belonged to a unique

set of cases insofar as the villagers themselves were capable of setting up a media centre and getting their message across to the outside world, thus ensuring high-level participation of senior Provincial leaders in direct negotiations. The second question, regarding Wukan's symbolic and concrete significance for propelling more democratic politics in China, is not easy to answer as interpretations go in different directions. On the one hand, the clever usage of media strategies and an increasing rights consciousness can be regarded as a stepping stone on the road to more inclusive and democratic politics. On the other hand strong segments in rural areas, i.e. the clans of Wukan society, what I termed *shadow civil society*, can be perceived as a loyal opposition. They wished to see proper institutionalization of democratic village elections as outlined in the *Organic Law of the Villagers Committees of the People's Republic of China*. And their wish corresponded well also with how the relatively liberal Governor of Guangdong, Wang Yang, publically pronounced on Wukan's significance. At the annual session of the National People's Congress in March 2012, he pointed out that there was nothing special about the village elections held in post-conflict Wukan: "[T]he elections were held according to the organization rules of the village and the election regulations of Guangdong province. There was nothing new about this."²² Arguably the "real new" of Wukan was the holding of fair elections according to the organic law. But such exemplary model elections did not seem likely to spread to nearby villages outside even tiny Wukan.²³ Thus, it seems evident that too many democratic projections were made in both domestic Chinese and overseas commentary as Wukan society in fact displayed more pro-state and pro status quo features than behaviour intent on democratic revolution. What they protested against was gross corruption and abuse of power.

In sum the outcome of the negotiations at Wukan suggests that the protestors sought policy change – as is the case generally with most rural social protests – not regime change, as they were not openly opposed to Communist Party rule. They ousted incumbent corrupt cadres and wanted more representative and honest people to take their place. Moreover, the stepping in of the Party Secretary, Wang Yang, to resolve the crisis peacefully by sending his deputy to Wukan may have had to do with intense media attention at home and overseas – rather than his positioning of himself as a smart alternative politician in the run-up to the 18th Party Congress in October 2012. The conflict in Wukan was not really an "uprising" against an omnipresent all-powerful Chinese state as many observers informed by models of anti-state civil society assumed. It is curious that non-registered ancient institutions such as rural clans infused with patriarchal ideology that accordingly should rather be regarded as uncivil society (Whitehead, 2004), existing outside officially recognized civil society, are supporting rather than

subverting the late Leninist party-state. One of the major lessons of the Wukan incident is the incremental return of clan leadership as a powerful institution in a “shadow civil society”, its use of media strategies, and its increasing influence over existing political and social structure in rural communities in the PRC. That is a phenomenon that merits close attention and further theorization as Chinese society and its power configurations continues to evolve in the decade ahead.

Notes

- + The author would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their remarks. Thanks also go to Dr Michael Baaz for his constructive comments on this paper, presented at a Swedish Research Council workshop held at Lund University, 7 September 2012.
 - * Dr Johan Lagerkvist is Senior Research Fellow with the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI) and Associate Professor at Stockholm University. He is currently working on the project “Challenging state power in China: The formation of new citizen norms in emerging civil society” financed by the Swedish Research Council. His main research interests include China’s emergent civil society, mass media and internet development in China, Chinese foreign policy, China’s role in “South-South” cooperation and in the developing world, especially Africa. He has published articles in journals such as *International Journal of Communication*, *Columbia Journal of International Affairs*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, *China: An International Journal*, *China Information*, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, *Peace Review*. His latest monograph is *After the Internet, Before Democracy: Competing Norms in Chinese Media and Society*, Bern: Peter Lang (2010). <Email: Johan.Lagerkvist@ui.se>
1. Reuters, “Some Chinese Aggrieved Find Inspiration in Rebel Village”, January 22, 2012. <<http://ca.reuters.com/article/topNews/idCATRE80M07N20120123?sp=true>>
 2. Ou Ming, “What Wukan Means”. <<http://www.alternativearchive.com/ouning/article.asp?id=864>>
 3. It was viewed as a card played in the higher-level political game between politburo members Guangdong’s Party Secretary Wang Yang and Bo Xilai, who before his fall from grace was the Party chief of megacity and Municipality of Chongqing.
 4. 中青报: 乌坎选举填平民众心中的沟壑. <<http://news.sina.com.cn/pl/2012-02-06/033223886066.shtml>>
 5. See for example: Russell Leigh Moses, “Will Wukan Be the New Normal?”, *Wall Street Journal*, 28 December 2011 <<http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2011/12/28/will-wukan-be-the-new-normal/>>.
 6. Although from very different protective viewpoints, either “they can never be like us” or “we can never become like you”, unlikely comrades in arms such as right-wing essentialists in Western Europe and the cadres of the Chinese Leninist Party-state join hands in this ethnocentric project. Equally ethnocentric

- is the extreme universalistic idea that culturalist particularisms are primordial misunderstandings.
7. The Ministry of Civil Affairs, "The Statistical Report on the Development of Civil Affairs in 2008".
 8. See Wang Shaoguang and He Jianyu, "Associational Revolution in China: Mapping the Landscapes", in *Korea Observer*, Vol. 35, No. 3, 2004, pp. 485-533.
 9. Jack Qiu is a notable exception. He has studied workers use of cell phones and Internet behaviour. See his *Working-Class Network Society: Communication Technology and the Information Have-Less in Urban China*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009.
 10. "Fact and Figures: China's Drive To Build a New Socialist Countryside", March 5, 2006. <http://english.gov.cn/2006-03/05/content_218920.htm>
 11. Interview with China Central Television (CCTV) journalist covering the countryside, Qufu, August 9, 2012.
 12. "China Cracks Down in Wake of Riots, Bombings", *Bloomberg*, June 13, 2011. An interesting comparison would be democratic India, a rising economy that also has to deal with huge income disparities and rural-urban divides.
 13. "China Domestic Security Spending Rises to \$111 Billion," Reuters, March 5, 2012. <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/05/us-china-parliament-security-idUSTRE82403J20120305>>
 14. Wu Danhong, "The Qian Yunhui Case Interrogates Public Trust in the Government". <http://www.nbweekly.com/Print/Article/11795_0.shtml>
 15. Qu Yunxu, "An Insider's Account of the Wukan Protest", *Caixin*, March 19, 2012. <<http://english.caixin.com/2012-03-19/100369893.html>>
 16. *Organic Law of the Villagers Committees of the People's Republic of China*. <<http://www.china.org.cn/english/government/207279.htm>>
 17. Francois Godement, "China at the Crossroads", ECFR.
 18. See Ou Ning, "What Wukan Means". <<http://www.alternativearchive.com/ouning/article.asp?id=864>>
 19. Hongyi Lai, "Escalating Unrests, No Revolution: Protests in China in 2011", China Policy Institute, Nottingham.
 20. One exception is the report by NPR correspondent Louisa Lim, "Voting Is Victory, At Least for Rebel Chinese Village", March 4. <<http://www.npr.org/2012/03/04/147888068/vote-in-small-chinese-village-holds-big-meaning>>
 21. Qu Yunxu, "An Insider's Account of the Wukan Protest", *Caixin*, March 19, 2012. <<http://english.caixin.com/2012-03-19/100369893.html>>
 22. See Zachary Wei, "Rebel Village Vote: No Big Deal?", March 5, 2012. <<http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2012/03/05/wukan-rebel-village-vote-no-big-deal/?mod=WSJBlog&mod=chinablog>>
 23. In nearby Longtou, also in Governor Wang Yang's Province, Guangdong Province, villagers were not optimistic about the future: "Now we don't think Wukan will influence us that much [...] The government has dealt with Wukan, but our situation is still messy, and they're not dealing with us." Louisa Lim, "Voting Is Victory, At Least for Rebel Chinese Village", March 4. <<http://www.npr.org/2012/03/04/147888068/vote-in-small-chinese-village-holds-big-meaning>>

References

- Alagappa, M. (ed.) (2004), *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia: Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bratton, M. (1989), "Beyond the State: Civil Society and Associational Life in Africa", *World Politics*, Vol. 41, April, pp. 404-430.
- Cai Y. (2010), *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Cohen, J.L. and A. Arato (1994), *Civil Society and Political Theory*, Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Edin, M. (2003), "State Capacity and Local Agent Control in China: CCP Cadre Management from a Township Perspective", *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 173, pp. 35-52.
- Fulda, A., Li.Y. and Q. Song (2012), "New Strategies of Civil Society in China: A Case Study of the Network Governance Approach", *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 21, No. 76, July, pp. 675-693.
- Guo Z. (2008), "The Study of the Structure of Clan Leadership in Chinese Rural Areas", *Open Times*, No. 2. <http://docs.china-europa-forum.net/doc_558.pdf>
- Hand, K. (2012), "Constitutionalizing Wukan: The Value of the Constitution Outside the Courtroom", *China Brief*, Vol. XII, Issue 3, February, 2012.
- Hann, C. and E. Dunn (eds) (1996), *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models*, London: Routledge.
- He, B. (1997), *The Democratic Impact of Civil Society in China*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Jia Xijing (2008), "Zhongguo Gongmin Shehui Zhishu Baogao" [Report on China's Civil Society Index], in Gao Bingzhong and Yuan Ruijun (eds), *Zhongguo Gongmin Shehui Fazhan Lanpishu [Blue Book on Civil Society Development in China]*, Beijing: Peking University Press, pp. 172-173.
- Kang X. and Han H. (2008), "Graduated Controls: The State-Society Relationship in Contemporary China", *Modern China*, Vol. 34, No. 1, pp. 36-55.
- Keane, J. (1998), *Civil Society: Old Images, New Visions*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Leijonhufvud, G. (2008), "China's Social Stability at Stake: Village Elections and the Internet", *SIIA Papers*, No. 5.
- Lu Yiyi (2009), *Non-Governmental Organisations in China*, London: Routledge.
- Madsen, R. (1993), "The Public Sphere, Civil Society and Moral Community: A Research Agenda for Contemporary China Studies", *Modern China*, Vol. 19, No. 2, April.
- Nathan, A.J. (2003), "China's Changing of the Guard. Authoritarian Resilience", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 14, No. 1, January, pp. 6-17.
- O'Brien, K. (2008) (ed.), *Popular Protest in China*, Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Oi, J.C. (2004), "Realms of Freedom in Post-Mao China", in W.C. Kirby (ed.), *Realms of Freedom in Modern China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Ou Ning (2012), "What Wukan Means". <<http://www.alternativearchive.com/ouning/article.asp?id=864>>

- Pei, M. (2006), *China's Trapped Transition: The Limits of Developmental Autocracy*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Pesqué-Cela, V., R. Tao, Liu Y. and L. Sun (2009), "Challenging, Complementing or Assuming 'the Mandate of Heaven'? Political Distrust and the Rise of Self-Governing Social Organizations in Rural China", *Journal of Comparative Economics*, Vol. 37, No. 1, pp. 151-168.
- Putnam, R., R. Leonardi and R. Nanetti (1992), *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Su, F., T. Ran, X. Sun and M.X. Liu (2011), "Clans, Electoral Procedures and Voter Turnout: Evidence from Villagers' Committee Elections in Transitional China", *Political Studies*, Vol. 59, Issue 2, pp. 432-457.
- Weller, R.P. (1999), *Alternate Civilities: Democracy and Culture in China and Taiwan*, Boulder: Westview Press.
- White, G., J. Howell and X. Shang (eds) (1996), *In Search of Civil Society: Market Reform and Social Change in Contemporary China*, Oxford: Clarendon.
- Whitehead, L. (2004), "Bowling in the Bronx: The Uncivil Interstices between Civil Society and Political Society", in *Civil Society in Democratization*, Abingdon: Frank Cass.
- Whyte, M.K. (2010), *Myth of the Social Volcano: Perceptions of Inequality and Distributive Injustice in Contemporary China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Zheng Y. (2012), "China in 2011: Anger, Political Consciousness, Anxiety, and Uncertainty", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 52, No. 1, pp. 28-41.
- Zhu Liqun (2011), "Civil Society and Governance: the Chinese Experience", in A. de Vasconcelos (ed.), *Global Governance: Building on the Civil Society Agenda*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, pp. 67-78.

