How Large-Scale Protests Succeed in China:
The Story of Issue Opportunity Structure, Social Media, and Violence

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Based on analysis of 26 large-scale protests in mainland China from 2011 to 2013, this study finds that the most important factor shaping large-scale protest outcome is issue opportunity structure. I argue that the issue opportunity structure in mainland China opens space for environmental protesters to use social media as an organizational tool in a way that defuses tension/violence and increases the chance of success. Emboldened and empowered by abundant political opportunities in the environmental issue area, protesters are able to organize via social media—a rather risky mode of organizing—to construct inclusive, flexible, consistent collective action frames to further exploit political opportunities and generate the high online visibility that renders police brutality less likely. This study suggests that analysis of the causal mechanism of protest success in China must be situated in the issue opportunity structure.

Keywords: political communication, protest in China, social media, violence, environmental activism

Social protests have sprung up in China in the past two decades. From 1993 to 2004, the number of collective actions nationwide increased from 8,700 to 74,000 (Howard, 2005). People from all walks of life are much more aware of the power of protest than ever before. As Chinese society enters a protest era, what makes a protest successful has become a key question for both activists and scholars. This article asks why certain large-scale protests in China have succeeded, and when social media factor into this success.

Joyce (2014) summarized two general approaches to defining success, namely goal achievement and realization of benefits. According to Jenkins and Klandermans (1995), a social movement can be considered successful inasmuch as the goal in the formalized statement is achieved. Although this dichotomous definition evades some complexity, I chose it because it aligns well with the nature of my

newspaper data in this project. The discussion section will address how complexity and the uncertainty of success relate to bias in news coverage.

Several scholars have conducted single case studies to explore why some protests succeed, but in the absence of cross-section or time series comparison their findings are hardly generalizable. The only large-sample study to systematically explore protest outcomes is Cai's (2010) book *Collective Resistance in China: Why Protests Succeed or Fail*. Based on an analysis of 266 cases from 1994 to 2007, Cai argued that protest outcome is conjointly determined by the political opportunity structure and protest strategies. More specifically, whether the government makes a concession hinges on protesters' capacity to either alter the government's cost-benefit analysis of repression versus concession, or trigger intervention by the provincial or central government. The costs of concession, as Cai explained, include political cost (e.g., deposed officials[2]), economic cost (e.g., lost revenue), and the appearance of weakness. In line with the rational choice perspective, Cai (2010) stated unequivocally that local governments are unlikely to make concessions if "demands threaten local governments' important goals such as revenue generation and/or local development (e.g., antipollution)" (p. 46). However, this statement runs counter to the growing salience of successful environmental protests in recent years. Despite the significant economic cost of terminating *p*-Xylene[3] projects, local governments across China have repeatedly made concessions in a spate of anti-*p*-Xylene protests in Xiamen in 2007, Dalian in 2011, Ningbo in 2012, Kuming in 2013, and Maomin in 2014. Furthermore, in 2009 several local governments also made concessions to victims of cadmium pollution in Liuyang and lead pollution in Fengxiang at considerable political cost, dismissing and prosecuting multiple party officials. Cai's rational choice model, which is based on an analysis of cases from 1994 to 2007, is increasingly inadequate to account for the emerging logic of protest success in the post-2008 era.

As numerous cases have defied the explanation offered by the earlier rational choice model that accounts for the micro dynamics between local governments and protesters, I argue that the type of issue itself is now an overarching factor in protest outcome, independent of micro-level government's calculation of the costs and benefits of repression or concession. Although Cai's (2010) model is still useful for exploring why some protests fail while others addressing the same issue succeed, it cannot explain why protests within one issue category are far more likely to succeed than protests in another category. As Yang and Calhoun (2007) contended, issue-specific public spheres are emerging as a new development in China. Many seemingly inconsistent government regulations pertaining to censorship, NGOs, online contention, and petitioning can be better grasped when the analysis is situated within an issue-specific public sphere. It is increasingly clear that toleration of civic participation is much greater in some issue-specific public spheres, such as the green (environmental) public sphere, than in others. Government's response to contention is also more differentiated on the basis of issue. Rauchfleisch and Schäfer's (2014) suggestion of the idea of a thematic public sphere, as typically exemplified by discussion on environmental issues, also implies the unique political opportunities embedded in an issue-specific public sphere.

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[2] Sacking corrupt officials can appease protest but also incurs political costs in terms of the resources used to train these officials.

[3] *p*-Xylene is a material often used to produce plastics. Long-term exposure to it can cause severe health problems.

Within the analytical framework of an issue opportunity structure derived from the political opportunity structure, my analysis incorporates another two important factors: social media and violence. My central argument is that the opportunity structure has opened more space for environmental activists to use social media to organize social protests in a way that defuses tension and violence, and improves the chance of success. In what follows, I first clarify what I mean by social protest and conceptualize and define issue opportunity structure, the role of social media in protests, and violence. Next I put those concepts to use, examining their relationship to protest outcome in the Methods and Data section. I present the findings and the limits of this research in the Conclusion and Discussion sections, respectively.

Defining Social Protest in China

Social protest is one kind of collective actions. As McAdam (2007) wrote, "collective actions refer to emergent and minimally coordinated action by two or more people that is motivated by a desire to change some aspect of social life or to resist changes proposed by others" (p. 1). The emergent quality signals that collective action deviates from routine politics and operates outside institutional frameworks. The desire to change some aspects of social life points to its social or political dimension. Protest also differs from rebellion and revolution in that it does not intentionally seek regime change. I suggest that strikes, demonstrations, sit-ins, traffic blockades, and riots are all forms of social protest. Here social protests include both well-orchestrated marches and more spontaneous, unorganized, minimally coordinated riots.

McLeod (2011) defines social protest "as a form of political expression that seeks to bring about social or political change by influencing the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of the public or the policies of an organization or institution" (p. 4). But although it recognizes the political and social nature of protest, it does not distinguish itself from other forms of political participation such as elections, lobbying, negotiations, and parliamentary/congressional debate. What separates social protest from all the above forms of political participation is the degree of institutionalization: Lack of institutionalization is one of the defining features of social protest. For the same reason, some scholars call it contentious politics (McAdam, Tilly, & Tarrow, 2001). In some Western constitutional democracies where the right to peaceful assembly is protected, social protests are to some degree institutionalized, if not routinized. In China, by contrast, social protests are by no means institutional and are even unlawful unless approved ex ante. Although China's constitution nominally recognizes the right to peaceful assembly, any protest without prior permission from the government is viewed as an illegal act. As scholars are still debating how applicable the designation "social movement" is to the contemporary Chinese context, "social protest" is also a more accepted concept for the social phenomenon under study.

Issue Opportunity Structure

Protest outcome is conjointly shaped by protesters' strategies and social structure. The type of social structure that conditions a protest's outcome varies greatly across different times and regimes. Nonetheless, there are often different layers of social structure, some of which are more or less flexible or negotiable. I use the concept of *issue opportunity structure* to designate a rather rigid issue-based/issue-specific political opportunity structure. Previous scholars have used the concept of *political opportunity*

structure to explain protest outcome. Cai (2010) and Tarrow (1993) see political opportunity structure as a rather flexible social structure that is open to negotiation. In Tarrow's (1993) words, political opportunity structure is not just a fixed structure, but also an environment that activists alter. Cai (2010) wrote that the protest outcome depends on how much the activists can influence the government's calculation of cost and benefits. However, Cai and Tarrow may have overlooked a more rigid, stable opportunity structure at a higher level, one that is often predetermined by the zeitgeist (e.g., consistent government policies, national political environment, public sentiment, dominant culture, etc.) and thus much less malleable. Opportunity structure of this kind may take many forms but it is often a function of topical issues (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996). Different issues are seen as having different levels of opportunity. For instance, ending segregation in the United States would have been futile, had the issue of slavery not been resolved first. Likewise, some issues in contemporary China are less relevant or legitimate as public concerns, and some are even off-limits for public discussion. To neglect this conditioning effect of issue opportunity structure and its implications for political struggle in a given society and period is to turn a blind eye to the raison d'être of political struggle—the unequal distribution of material and symbolic resources among different issues and group interests.

Even in a democratic society, the public sphere is often skewed in favor of elite interests so that some issues are more legitimate than others. In authoritarian regimes like China, the structural conditioning effect of issue opportunity structure can only be more formidable by comparison. It becomes especially salient when protests in one entire issue category across different geographic locations are observed to be more successful overall. Obviously, the degree of political opportunity can differ drastically for different types of issues, particularly when some issues better fit the authoritarian government's agenda and enjoy wide public support. A secessionist protest in China can hardly succeed no matter how well the protesters exploit constraints facing local governments or how much attention protesters get from higher-level officials—political opportunities are simply nonexistent in the secessionist issue sphere. For a secessionist movement, the attention of higher-level officials—a path to success, according to Cai (2010)—would probably mean a devastating crackdown rather than leverage to get concessions from local functionaries. I am not arguing in any sense that an individual protester is bereft of agency, as I acknowledge that issue opportunity structure can enable individuals to use various kinds of strategies to amplify existing political opportunities. Nor do I suggest that this rather rigid and stable issue opportunity structure does not change at all. As the political climate shifts, some issues may rise from obscurity to prominence and legitimacy due to a collective effort over a long period of time. But the issue opportunity structure is unlikely to be altered by a single protest in China these days. Applying the concept of issue opportunity structure to the study of large-scale protests in China from 2011 to 2013, I propose the following research question and hypothesis.

R1:   *Is the type of issue associated with the protest outcome?*

H1:   *Environmental protests are more likely to succeed than protests based on other issues.*

Social Media

The advent of digital media has profoundly changed the logic of organization in collective action. Social media have played a prominent role in movement mobilization and organization. Whereas some scholars argue that social media as an organizational tool sharply reduce communication cost and the necessity of co-presence, thus effectively facilitating internal logistic coordination, resource allocation, and meanings/identities construction (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Gerbaudo, 2012, 2014), others propose a deeper change in the logic of organization in the sense of digital communication itself assuming an organizational logic (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Bennett, Segerberg, & Walker, 2014). In both accounts, social media use has facilitated organizing and mobilizing efforts in several pro-democracy, anti-austerity, and anti-globalization protests worldwide. How are social media used in street protests in China? Do they assume an organizational role? And how is that related to protest outcome? In this section I illustrate the organizational role taken on by social media in China and differentiate two modes of social media use in large-scale protests.

Social Media as an Organizational Tool

The traditional view regards social media as similar to previous communication and information technologies in reducing communication and coordination cost. As a low-cost, interactive information platform, social media can help with internal logistic coordination, the construction of common identity and issue frames, and amplification of messages to the public. A more radical view considers communication as organization. Drawing on the insights of the organizational logic of peer production, it argues that the structure of the digital network enables an organic process of information production, curation, and dynamic integration, whereby the act of sharing accomplishes organization (Bennett, Segerberg, & Walker, 2014). Which view can better explain the organizational role of social media in protests in China?

Some scholars have conducted discourse analysis of social media data in protest events (see Bondes & Schucher, 2014; Tong & Zuo, 2014), but few have used social media data to investigate the organizational mechanism of social media in street protests. While the question whether China's digital network possesses organizational characteristics awaits empirical evidence, I preliminarily postulate that the mechanism of communication as organization is not yet present in large-scale street protests in China for two main reasons.

First, the framework of communicative organization derives largely from the observation of digitally enabled large-scale, cross-regional protest. This mechanism is most prominent in a crowd-enabled protest built upon a loosely connected, evenly distributed digital network such as Occupy Wall Street (Bennett & Segerberg, 2014). Although cyber protest in China may exhibit some characteristics of peer production, digitally enabled large-scale offline protest taking place in multiple locations has been very rare. The digitally enabled but contained and rather short-lived local protests in China differ from the Arab Spring or Occupy Wall Street, and may suggest a different organizing logic.

Second, the dearth of crowd-enabled large-scale offline protests in China not only reflects off-line political control, but also suggests that the digital network consisting of blogs, forums, QQ, Weibo, Renren,

and websites may not possess crowd-organizing potential, probably because of both Internet censorship and the digital information infrastructure. A crowd-enabled organizing mechanism relies on a stitching or cross-cutting mechanism that joins and bridges different sub-networks, as seen in the 2009 "the Wave" movement in London and Glasgow, and the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States (Bennett, Segerberg, & Walker, 2014). The commercial media ecology in China, however, has led to considerable incompatibility among the various social technology platforms. For instance, no effective stitching mechanism has emerged to connect China's two largest social media platforms (measured by the number of users)—WeChat and Weibo. Moreover, existing micro stitching mechanisms such as hyperlinks can be quickly intercepted, as when hyperlinks in Weibo posts directing traffic to activists' personal blogs are blocked. To make matters worse, the government can easily interrupt the curation mechanism within one media platform. For example, a movement hashtag that enables information curation can be nipped in the bud long before it curates useful information from noise. Thus fragmented, digital platforms in China cannot be integrated into a coherent protest space, and the information curation and integration vital to communicative organization cannot be achieved. Therefore, I argue that the organizational effect of social media in street protests in China may be limited to internal logistic coordination and meaning construction. Next, I will explain two modes of social media use in protests, namely the *pickup* and *organization*.

Pickup vs. Organization

I posit that the use of social media in street protests in China follows two distinct logics: pickup logic and organization logic. Organization logic refers to the use of social media as an organization tool for the internal logistic coordination, resource organization, and strategic framing that can achieve consensus mobilization and action mobilization. Pickup logic refers to protesters', bystanders', and citizen journalists' use of social media to pick up the protest event and communicate it in the networked public sphere that often induces an event-specific virtual crowd. Under the first logic, social media are part of a protest's organization and initial mobilization process. Under the second logic, social media are only used to report and communicate the event after the protest breaks out. The difference between the two logics can be grasped in two ways. First, when used as an organizational tool, social media offer abundant information about a protest before it occurs; but when social media function only as a pickup mechanism, little information can be found before the protest starts. Second, using social media as an organizational tool leads to extensive issue framing at the onset of a protest, but when used as a pickup tool they display information about the occurrence of protest rather than framing issues upon its outbreak.

This distinction is analytically useful because it shows that social media's role in the emergent, spontaneous type of protest differs from the role they play in another, more deliberate type. Previous studies in China have pointed to two contrasting types of protest: one motivated by simple causes and set off by trigger events (Bruun, 2013), and the other characterized by strategic framing and rational media and discursive strategies. I find that social media are likelier to follow the pickup logic in the first type of protests, represented by the Qianxi protest, where the initial mobilization was completed through on-the-scene emotional contamination; and likelier to go by organizational logic in the second type, as seen in the Wucan protest, where social media were used to accomplish consensus mobilization and action

mobilization. The hybrid form of social media use is also observed in some cases, as pickup logic does not exclude the possibility that protesters who join the protest later may organize through social media.

How are the two types of social media use related to protest outcome? Is protest organized via social media more likely to succeed? To investigate the relationship between social media use in large-scale protests and protest outcome, I propose the following research question and hypothesis.

R2:   *What are the relationships between the two types of social media use and protest outcome?*

H2:   *Protests that use social media as an organization tool are more likely to succeed than those that use social media only as a pickup tool.*

As the macro issue opportunity structure may shape micro protest strategy, the relationship between social media use and protest outcome may be conditioned by the issue opportunity structure. Hence, the association between issue and social media use should also be taken into account. I propose the following research question and hypothesis.

R3:   *What is the relationship between the protest issue and social media use?*

H3:   *Environmental protesters are more likely to use social media to organize protests.*

Violence

Violence has also been studied as a factor contributing to protest outcome. Violence is defined here as damage to person or property. As Chen, Sheng, and Chen (2011) wrote, acts that lead to physical injury borne by more than one person or significant property damage, such as burning police cars, should be considered violent. Previous studies on the effect of violence on protest outcome show mixed results. Gamson (1990), in his study of social movements in the United States, observed a positive effect of violence on success, whereas other scholars reached the opposite conclusion, as Snyder and Kelly (1976, in Cai, 2010, p. 12) did in their analysis of movements in Italy. Cai (2010) agreed with Snyder and Kelly's claim that nonviolent protests are more likely to succeed, as 73.8% of his 107 violent cases failed while 67.5% of 154 nonviolent cases did; however, the significance of the difference between 73.8% and 67.5% is assumed rather than tested. If applicable, a two-sample *t* test suggests that the difference is not statistically significant. Hence, there is no definitive conclusion as to how violence affects protest outcome. Would the result be any different for large-scale protests from 2011 to 2013? I propose the following questions.

R4:   *Does violence contribute to success in large-scale protests in China?*

R5:   *Is violence associated with a specific protest issue?*

Methods and Data

I defined the scale of protests by the turnout of protesters on the streets. According to the Chinese police department, a large-scale protest has more than 500 participants (Cai, 2010). Therefore, I used the threshold of 500 participants to filter protest cases in China from 2011 to 2013. Using the search term "protest" AND "China" in the LexisNexis database, I collected 26 relevant protest events from international news reports between 2011 and 2013. A protest was coded as successful if news reports state or imply that the protesters' goal was met. Important facts of every case, such as protest outcome, number of protesters, and so on, were cross-checked with at least two reliable news sources. Next, I will address two questions: why newspaper event data, and why LexisNexis.

Using newspaper data is not only a common practice in the social-movement studies research community, but also probably the most reliable and practical way to study protests in China. Social movement scholars first used newspaper data 30 years ago. Social movement theories such as political mobilization theory, political opportunity theory, and protest cycle theory originated from analyses of newspaper data, which many scholars argue are particularly useful for quantitative analysis and studies of past protest events (Earl, Martin, McCarthy, & Soule, 2004). Although newspaper data, like any other type of data, inevitably produce bias due to imperfect sampling methods, scholars commonly agree that they are nevertheless suitable for studying protest outcome, as the media tend to cover most successful cases (Earl et al., 2004; Lipsky, 1968). As long as the sample contains an appropriate number of unsuccessful cases, it stands to reason that relying on news coverage as the sampling method will not lead to the common problem of selection on outcome variable. Moreover, reporters are rather well positioned to observe the use of social media in protest. They usually interview protesters about their organization and mobilization strategies, which oftentimes include how social media is used in organization and mobilization. Journalists also often include social media posts in their reports as evidence. Of course, analyzing social media data would be a more direct way to probe the use of social media. However, compared to Twitter data, data from Chinese social media like Weibo and WeChat are less available and reliable to researchers. The algorithms social media companies use to filter out data are often opaque, so the representativeness of data collected through an application program interface is questionable. In addition, policies on the use of social media data in China have become increasingly restrictive.

The LexisNexis database encompasses various types of renowned mainstream media from multiple countries, such as *South China Morning Post*, *BBC*, *CNN*, and *The New York Times*. I cross-checked the facts of each case to make sure they were supported by at least two renowned news sources, alleviating the problem of bias produced by a single media outlet. Some may argue that international media can exhibit a common bias in covering protests. The LexisNexis database, which includes only English-language-based newspapers and wire service providers, probably has some degree of bias,[4] but Chinese-language-based newspapers and wire service providers in mainland China are likely equally if not more biased. As mouthpieces of the Chinese Communist Party, a range of Chinese news outlets—the

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[4] WiseNews and Factiva, which include overseas Chinese newspapers, were not available at the institution where the research was conducted. And no study has shown WiseNews or Factiva to be better than LexisNexis for studying protests in China.

Xinhua News Agency and *People's Daily* among them—can be pressured to intentionally produce biased coverage of protests.

Analysis of Issue and Protest Outcome

Figure 1 shows that the most common protest issue in the data set is environmental protection, followed by land seizure and migration. Six of the protest outcomes are unidentifiable. Table 1 lists the numbers of successful and unsuccessful protests for each issue.
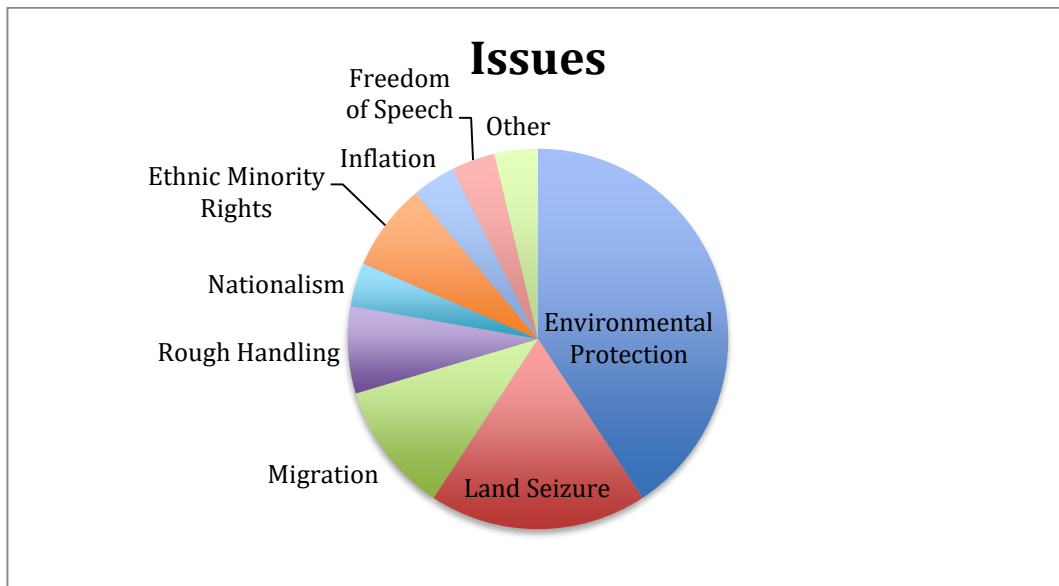
Source: Author's dataset

Figure 1. Protest issues.

Table 1. Protest Outcome by Issue.

	Environmental Protection	Land Seizure	Migration	Rough Handling	Ethnic Minority Rights	Other
Success	9	2	1	1	0	0
Failure	1	0	1	1	2	2
NA	0	3	2	0	0	1
Total	10	5	4	2	2	3

Source: Author's dataset

Table 1 suggests that environmental protests are more likely to succeed than other types of protests. To test H1, I propose the null hypothesis that among large-scale protests, environmental protests are not more likely to succeed than nonenvironmental protests. Table 2 is a bivariate contingency table for statistical analysis.

Table 2. Issue and Protest Outcome.

	Environmental Protest	Nonenvironmental Protest	Total
Successful	9	4	13
Unsuccessful	1	6	7
Total	10	10	20

Source: author's dataset

Since not all expected counts are higher than five, a condition that a Chi-square test must meet, I used the one-side Fisher's Exact Test to examine whether the relationship between issue and outcome observed in the sample also exists in the population. Fisher's Exact Test returned a p-value of 0.028, meaning that out of a thousand samples drawn independently from the population by the same sampling method, only 28 samples would show that nonenvironmental protests are likelier to succeed than environmental protests. As I set the alpha level at 0.1, the null hypothesis can be rejected. The evidence strongly suggests that environmental protests are generally more likely to succeed than nonenvironmental ones.

Analysis of Social Media Use, Protest Outcome, and Issue

To distinguish the two modes of social media use by protesters I used media reports, such as interviews with activists about how a protest started or journalistic pieces containing social media content. If a report said a given protest was organized on social media platforms, then I coded it as following the organizational logic. If the report said the protest was only communicated via social media, I coded it as following the pickup logic. If the report said nothing about social media use, I coded it as not applicable. Table 3 is a bivariate contingent table showing protest outcome and use of social media.

Table 3. Social Media and Protest Outcome.

	Organizational Logic	Pickup Logic	Total
Successful	6	4	10
Unsuccessful	0	4	4
Total	6	8	14

Source: Author's dataset

To answer R2 and test H2, I proposed the null hypothesis that large-scale protests in China following the pickup logic of social media are not less likely to succeed than protests following the organizational logic. Fisher's Exact Test returned the p-value of 0.069, and the null hypothesis was rejected. Protests following the pickup logic of social media are less likely to succeed than those following the organizational effect.

It is also worth noting that only six protests were organized via social media, but all of them succeeded. Social media as organization appears to be a sufficient condition for success. Close examination of six[5] cases suggests that five are environmental protests. Moreover, of the nine successful environmental protests, five[6] were organized by social media, three were reported only via social media, and one was not applicable. The association between protest outcome and social media use seems to be mediated by the issue of environmental protection. To answer R3 and test H3, I proposed the null hypothesis that social media are not more likely to be used as an organizational tool in environmental protests than in nonenvironmental protests. Table 4 is a bivariate contingent table showing protest issue and use of social media.

Table 4. Social Media and Protest Issue.

	Environmental protest	Nonenvironmental protest	Total
Organizational logic	5	1	6
Pickup logic	4	9	13
Total	9	10	19

Source: Author's dataset

The Fisher's Exact Test returned a p-value of 0.049, suggesting that social media are more likely to be used as an organizational tool in environmental protests. Isolating the effect of social media from the compounding effect of issue opportunity structure is beyond the scope of this article, but their concurrence indicates that the organizational effect of social media on protest outcome is heavily influenced by the issue opportunity structure, as the use of media and the effect thereof are necessarily embedded in media ecology and political structure (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

Analysis of Violence and Protest Outcome

To answer R4 and R5, I ran the Fisher's Exact Test on Table 5 and Table 6. Table 5 puts protests into four categories—successful violent protests, unsuccessful violent protests, successful nonviolent protests, and unsuccessful nonviolent protests. Table 6 presents the numbers of violent environmental protests, nonviolent environmental protests, nonviolent nonenvironmental protests, and violent nonenvironmental protests.

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[5] The six cases of protest were in Jiangmen, Qidong, Dalian, Shifang, Nanjing, and Wukan.

[6] The five cases were in Dalian, Qidong, Shifang, Jiangmen, and Nanjing.
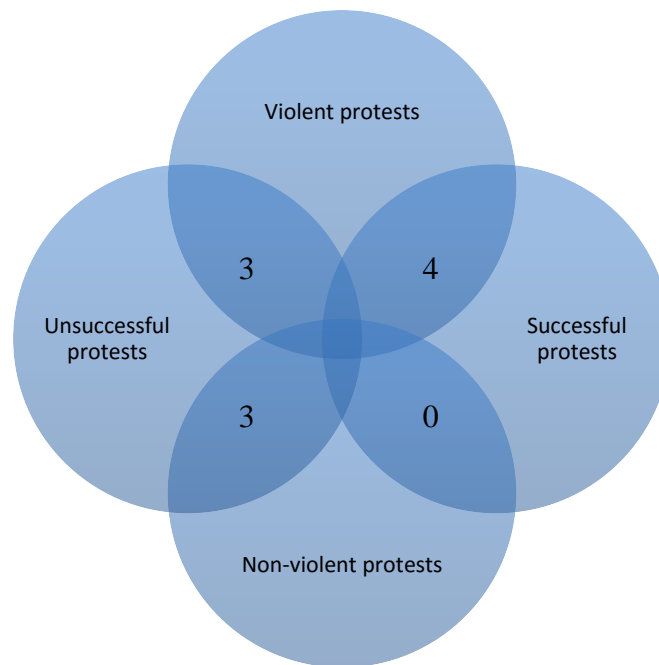
Table 5. Violence and Protest Outcome.

	Violent protests	Nonviolent protests	Total
Successful	9	4	13
Unsuccessful	3	4	7
Total	12	8	20

Source: Author's dataset

Table 6. Violence and Protest Issue.

	Violent protest	Nonviolent protest	Total
Environmental protest	5	5	10
Nonenvironmental protest	11	5	16
Total	16	10	26

Source: Author's dataset

Figure 2. Violence and protest outcome for nonenvironmental protest.
Source: Author's dataset

A scan of the above two Tables suggests that violent protests are more likely to succeed and that violence is likelier to occur in nonenvironmental protests. Nonetheless, the Fisher's Exact Test returned 0.25 and 0.29 respectively, meaning that neither observation is statistically significant. The observed relationships in the sample may not be present in the population. In addition, Figure 2 examines the relationship between protest outcome and violence in the case of nonenvironmental protest. It shows that violence is a necessary but insufficient condition for nonenvironmental protest to succeed.

Conclusion

First, the analyses show that large-scale environmental protests are more likely to succeed than protests based on other issues. Why is their success more likely? Is it because large-scale environmental protesters of all stripes from different places in China are often adept at exploiting the constraints facing the government, as Cai's (2010) model suggested? Or is it because environmental issues themselves are already considered legitimate concerns that local governments have to address, regardless of how protesters might shape their calculations of cost and benefit? If Cai's (2010) model still works, in the sense that protest success lies in protesters' ability "to exploit the constraints facing the government or to (re)shape the latter's cost-benefit calculations in a way that suppressing or ignoring an act of resistance is not a feasible or desirable option" (p. 2), then any association between issue and success is unlikely because protesters from different areas inevitably have differing capacities to exploit government's constraints. Hence, I argue, the reason for these protests' likelier success is that political opportunities abound in the environmental issue sphere.

But how do I know political opportunities abound in the issue area of environmental protection? Political opportunities for a social movement can be analyzed as having four aspects—government's willingness to repress the movement by force, divided social elites, political participation channels, and potential political alliance (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004; Tarrow, 1996). I argue that (a) political participation is growing in the environmental issue sphere; (b) Chinese political elites are split regarding environmental protection; and (c) environmental protesters have many potential allies.

The Chinese central government itself participates actively in environmental protection. The idea of sustainable development and green GDP was actively promoted by the Hu-Wen administration. Some environmental issues, like air quality, can command national attention. For instance, a documentary on air pollution titled "Under the Dome" went viral in early March 2015, garnering over 100 million views within 48 hours of its online release (Hatton, 2015). Environmental NGOs generally enjoy support from China's Ministry of Environmental Protection (Economy, 2011), so many grassroots environmental NGOs have greater autonomy to engage local residents in environmental protection than do other types of NGOs (Sima, 2011). Environmental issues are more relatable to the wider public and suitable for the government's development goals, so myriad participation channels exist for environmental protection.

The divide between the central government and local governments is another source of political opportunity. The central government's environmental goals are often in tension with local government's concern for economic growth and stability maintenance (Zeng, Dai, & Wang, 2014), two of the most important factors for cadre career advancement. Consequently, national environmental regulations are

often weakly enforced or poorly implemented locally. In other cases, local governments cancel industrial projects already approved by the Ministry of Environmental Protection lest they trigger social instability. The divide within the Chinese political system, particularly between local governments and the central government, presents plenty of political opportunities for protesters in the area of environmental protection.

In addition, public figures, environmental NGOs, and journalists have taken the protesters' side in many cases of environmental contention in China. Journalists from traditional media often assume the role of contention experts in local environmental protests, providing access to media resources and expertise. Many environmental journalists have worked in environmental NGOs (Tong, 2015), and their experiences and social capital are great assets to local protesters. These allies are crucial to relaying and amplifying protesters' messages, framing environmental issues, and exploiting other opportunities that are imperceptible to protesters.

Other issues are in either closed structures or half-open structures. Issues like freedom of speech and Tibetan independence are in closed structures because they have very few political opportunities in any of the above aspects. The issue of labor probably has an increasingly closed structure, as exemplified by the prosecution of the labor movement leader Feiyang Zeng in late 2015. Although issues concerning specific social groups—migration, for example—may come to national attention because of a phenomenal issue campaign or extraordinary circumstances (Yang, 2010), environmental protection generally has a rather broad citywide or even countrywide reach.

Second, the analyses point to a strong association between organizational social media use and protest success; meanwhile, the effect of social media use also correlates strongly with the issue. Hence, I suggest that the organizational effect of social media is embedded in the issue opportunity structure in China. Though some scholars contend that social media create political opportunities for protesters (Zeng et al., 2014), I argue that social media do not create political opportunities but only take advantage of existing ones. Nowadays digital history is increasingly easy to trace, so organizing collective action via social media generates high visibility and is therefore highly susceptible to political surveillance and control in authoritarian China. Moreover, the power law distribution of most online activities makes certain information hubs easy targets for governmental maneuvers (Buchanan, 2002). In other words, organizing large-scale protest via social media is risky in China. Without existing political opportunities like a divided elite, attempts to organize collective action via social media in China are rather easy to undermine. Therefore, the existing issue opportunity structure conditions effective use of social media to organize protest in China. That is why most large-scale environmental protests in my data set use social media as an organizational tool, and why most large-scale protests organized via social media are environmental protests. Thus, the issue opportunity structure in China opens a space for large-scale environmental protesters to organize protests via social media and improve the chance of success.

But given the plethora of opportunities in environmental issues, how do social media function as an organizational tool helping protesters achieve success? I posit that the core mechanism at work is a strategic, well-conceived framing process (Snow, 2007). Social media, as inclusive, interactive platforms, lend themselves to dynamic internal discussion of and competition between frames, allowing protesters to

construct flexible, inclusive, consistent collective action frames at very early stages of contention. Using social media to construct separate diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames, protesters can strategically divide social elites and seek wider public support through consensus mobilization, action mobilization, and social mobilization (Klandermans, 1984). As Zeng et al. (2014) pointed out, Yintan residents used social media to strategically construct their protest as a NIMBY protest, thereby increasing the legitimacy of the contention.

When intension and purpose are built into the framing process through social media, protesters too are more likely to adjust their frames to further exploit existing political opportunities via frame extension, frame amplification, frame bridge, and frame transformation (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986). A discourse analysis of Weibo posts on the Wukan and Haimen protests found that only residents of Wukan managed to attract national attention by amplifying the previous frame of land seizure to include more mainstream values, whereas the Haimen protest reached a much narrower audience because of its parochial frames. Another common strategy is frame extension. For instance, protesters in both the Dalian and the Kunming protests chanted, "Police officers are people too," extending the collective action frame to include the police in an effort to divide the opposition.

Third, violence, although statistically insignificant, appears more often in large-scale nonenvironmental protests than in environmental ones. This observed relationship suggests that the use of violence is probably embedded within the issue opportunity structure too. In closed issue areas like secessionism and freedom of speech, protesters may not tend toward violence except in certain extreme cases, such as self-immolation, that do not qualify as large-scale protests in this study. If perceived as bound to fail, nonviolent protests in highly sensitive issue areas can be a deliberate choice. Two of the three nonviolent unsuccessful nonenvironmental protests in Figure 2 related to Tibetan independence; the other was about freedom of speech. None of those protests seemed able to achieve success anyway. In open issue areas such as environmental protection, violence still happens, though not quite as often as in issues in half-open structures (e.g., the issue of land seizure, which lies between an open and a totally closed structure). Violence is largely a joint product of deliberate choices made by police and protesters whom the issue opportunity structure constrains and empowers in different ways. In large-scale environmental protests, police often deliberately refrain from violence because the early adoption of social media as an organization tool enables high visibility. More precisely, the opportunity structure opens space for environmental protesters to use social media as an organization tool, which in turn induces high visibility of potential police brutality, thereby restraining the use of police force in protest confrontations. Hence, restraints on police officers' use of force might reduce the occurrence of violence in environmental protests.

But even when police officers exercise self-restraint, protesters can still provoke violence. For instance, protesting villagers in Qidong smashed police cars, occupied the government building, looted government properties, stripped off the party secretary's clothes, and held the mayor hostage while the police largely refrained from forceful action. Though the high visibility of police brutality often devastates government's legitimacy, protesters' use of violence, even when rendered highly visible on the Internet in China, does not seem to hurt their cause as long as the issue is seen as legitimate and justified. This may help explain the lower proportion of violent cases in large-scale environmental protests (due to police

restraint) compared to nonenvironmental ones, even though violence still occasionally breaks out in environmental protests.

Violence occurs most often for issues in half-open structures. Use of violence is probably more often a protest strategy for exploiting political opportunities in the cadre evaluation system, where issue opportunities are somewhat limited. Chen (2012) documented acts of troublemaking in collective appeal incidents and found that the cadre evaluation system in China encourages troublemaking and, in some circumstances, extreme tactics. Local officials in China are evaluated on several factors, and the ability to maintain social stability is central to cadres' career advancement (Landry, 2008; Whiting, 2004). Troublemaking or adoption of violent tactics signals ineptitude at maintaining social stability, giving protesters extra leverage to win concessions from the local government. For example, the Shifang party secretary and mayor were both ousted after violent protest broke out. Violence in protests is an effective strategy for expanding existing political opportunities by gaining leverage over local officials.

Fourth, Figure 2 suggests that violence is a necessary but insufficient condition for large-scale nonenvironmental protests' success. Though an insufficient basis for conclusions, these few cases suggest that the effect of violence on protest outcome should be examined within the issue opportunity structure. Future research should include more cases to test the hypothesis that all successful large-scale protests in half-open opportunity structures are violent.

Discussion

With this article I contribute to the current understanding of protest outcome in China as follows. First, I highlight the prominence of issue opportunity structure in shaping large-scale protest outcome, thus providing an alternative to previous explanations that better accounts for the pattern of success skewed in favor of environmental issues. I argue that issue opportunity structure can explain much of the variation in protest outcome in China. Of course, the fact that not all large-scale environmental protests succeed suggests that other social factors are at work. Future research should obtain other sources of data to delve into the unsuccessful environmental cases and generate new theories. Second, I distinguish two modes of social media use in large-scale protests in China and find that the use of social media as an organization tool is closely associated with protest success and environmental issues. Organizing via social media in China involves significant risk because it generates visibility, so media-enabled success is heavily conditioned by the issue opportunity structure. Organizing via social media promotes a more inclusive, flexible, consistent framing process that can increase the chance of success, but this is possible only because the issue area offers many political opportunities in the first place. Furthermore, early adoption of social media as an organizational tool in environmental protests generates high visibility, which constrains the use of police force in protest confrontation.

Social movement studies have long relied upon newspaper data. Nonetheless, my data drawn from media coverage might be influenced by description bias and selection bias in news reports. Three factors—the scale of protest, geographic location, and violence—are considered likely to produce selection bias (Barranco & Wisler, 1999; Earl et al., 2004; Smith, McCarthy, McPhail, & Augustyn, 2001). Bias from oversampling large-scale protests would not much impact on my findings because I study only large-scale

protests in China. Geographic bias would not significantly skew my findings either, as my cases are fairly distributed across China's different regions. Granted, violent cases more easily capture media attention, but the numbers of violent and nonviolent cases are roughly equal in my sample. The chance of oversampling violent protests is therefore relatively low.

However, the description biases inherent in news reports might affect my findings. As Earl et al. (2004) pointed out, there are two kinds of description biases—missing information and inaccurate information. News reports do not usually cover protesters' motivation and mobilization processes. Not all reporters follow protest outcome or cover protesters' media strategy. Thus my data set is missing some values of protest outcome and social media. In addition, although most information concerning time, place, and violence in news reports is accurate, media's short attention span or the spotlight effect may produce incomplete and hence inaccurate conclusions. Lack of consistent follow-up can render the reported protest outcome inaccurate. Local officials may go back on their word, resuming operations at unsafe chemical plants a few months after the ebbing of media attention to protest, as happened in Haimen. Because international media seldom publish follow-up pieces on protest events in China, some unsuccessful cases might be mistakenly coded as successful. Future research needs to triangulate with other methods, such as fieldwork, to alleviate this potential problem.

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