
Contingent Participation: Media-citizen interaction in Wenzhou's “Civil Monitory Organization”

Meixi Zhuang*, Xiaoling Zhang†, Stephen Morgan‡

Mass media play an important role in grassroots democracy, yet the dynamics of media-citizen interaction remains under-researched. Using the case of “Civil Monitory Organization” (CMO) program in Zhejiang’s Wenzhou city, we show how local media and the local government to whom the local media are held accountable shape citizen participation. We develop the framework of “contingent participation” to analyze the constraints on local political participation. Based on our observation of the CMO activism, we typologize four participation behaviours: (1) symbolic participation, (2) instrumental participation, (3) managed participation, and (4) transgressive participation. We conclude that contingent participation yields paradoxical results inherent under authoritarian rule: it aims to mobilize citizens to solve governance problems, yet denies the free flow of information and full participation of citizens.

The Chinese government has rolled out a number of participatory programs at the local level over the past two decades that are designed to alleviate state-society tension. These programs cover a wide range of grassroots activities. They include deliberative consultations, village elections, public hearings and neighbourhood self-governance.¹ Among the 117 cases of local social management innovations in

*Zhuang Meixi is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political and Social Change at The Australian National University. She had previously studied at The University of Nottingham, The Chinese University of Hong Kong and Communication University of China. Her current research project looks at the public supervision politics in China. Email: meixi.zhuang@anu.edu.au (corresponding author). †Zhang Xiaoling is an associate professor at the School of Politics and International Relations, The University of Nottingham, UK. Her research interests span the transformation of media, culture and society in China. Taking interdisciplinary approaches, she has published widely on the shifting cultural and media landscapes in China, especially the new media technologies. ‡Stephen L. Morgan is Associate Provost for Planning at The University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC) and Professor of Chinese Economic History at The University of Nottingham, UK. His research is mostly focused on Chinese economic and business history, along with an interest in contemporary economic development, international business and strategic management. Twitter: @SimaHui1.

¹ See He B. & M. E. Warren, ‘Authoritarian deliberation: the deliberative turn in Chinese political development’, *Perspectives on Politics*, 9(2), (2011), pp. 269-289; Liu C., ‘The emerging urban grassroots democracy: A case study of community building and neighbourhood activism in Shanghai’, *The Virginia Review of Asian Studies*, 8, (2005), pp.25-42; Wang, Z. & Ma, D., ‘Participation and competition: innovations in cadre election and selection in China’s townships’, *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, (2014), pp.1-17; J. Fewsmith, *The Logic and Limits of Political Participation in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

2011, for instance, 60% focus on citizen participation.² Participatory governance innovations thus affect Chinese citizens' everyday political life and opens new possibilities for both the state and society. These forms of what might be called "grassroots democracy" comprise different institutional arrangements and power dynamics, which are under studied.

Many China scholars use the "state-society" relations as the analytical framework to understand local participatory reforms.³ Too often the approach is narrowly defined to focus on government-citizen interactions and the roles of local governments. It fails to identify other important forces. In particular, it neglects how the Chinese mass media influence public participation and the interactions between the media, local activists and state power. The mass media is considered an essential constituent and catalyst for the existence of the public sphere.⁴ But in China, the Party-state's censorship has become increasingly sophisticated, making China's media environment one of the most unpredictable in the world.⁵ Since Xi Jinping assumed the leadership role in 2012-13, his rule has led to a series of significant changes to Chinese domestic politics.⁶ To implement "democratic centralism", Xi launched a national-scale "mass line" campaign, which requires Communist cadres to collect and listen to the public opinion and formulate state policies in light of public opinion.⁷ Yet "democratic centralism" is anything but political liberalization, as there has been

² Zhang H., Lu, Q. & Wang X., 'The path study of social management innovation', *Chinese Public Administration*, 1, (2012), pp.30-33; Yang B., He Y. & Long W., 'Alienation of Civic Engagement in China? Case Studies on Social Governance in Hangzhou', *Voluntas* (published online), (2012), pp.1-23.

³ E.g. B. M. Frolic, 'State-led civil society', in T. Brook & B. M. Frolic (eds.), *Civil society in China*, (New York: M. E. Sharpe 1997), pp.46-67; Kang X. & Han H., 'Administrative absorption of society: A further probe into the state-society relationship in Chinese mainland,' *Social Sciences in China*, 28(2), (2007), pp.116-128; He Z., (ed.), *Democratic Supervision* (Beijing: Central Complication and Translation Press, 2013). Yan, X. & Xin, G., 'Participatory policy making under authoritarianism: the pathways of local budgetary reform in the People's Republic of China', *Policy & Politics* June, (2014).

⁴ J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Trans. by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), German original published 1962.

⁵ G. King, J. Pan, & M. Roberts, 'How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression', *American Political Science Review*, 107 (02), (2013), pp. 326-343.

⁶ Wang Z. & Zeng J., 'Xi Jinping: the game changer of Chinese elite politics?', *Contemporary Politics*, (2016), p.2; Y. Zheng & G. Chen, 'China's political outlook: Xi Jinping as a Game Changer', *East Asian Policy*, 7(5), (2015), pp. 5-15.

⁷ For the concept of mass line, see C. Shih, 'The democratic approach to mass line in China', *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 3(4), (1997), pp.353-371.

ideological tightening and increased press control under Xi's rule. In February 2016 during a visit to state media outlets Xi emphasized that the media must pledge absolute loyalty to the Party-state, confirming further ideological tightening and increased press control under Xi's rule.⁸

In this context, our paper on Wenzhou's Civil Monitory Organization (CMO), a state-supported citizen group, discusses media-citizen interactions in participatory reform. It aims to understand how local state-owned media ("local media" hereafter) play an intermediary role between local government and the CMO, and contribute to the formulation of different types of citizen participation. The Wenzhou municipal government in 2010 first launched the CMO. It was a response to problems bedevilling local development such as environmental pollution, poor urban planning and administrative inefficiency. The idea was that CMO participants could pressure officials to solve problems through media exposure. The program is under the municipal propaganda department, but in practice the department decentralizes regulating power to its media agents. At the time of investigation, the program had 44 subgroups with 6,000 participants. In 2015, the Peking University awarded "The Best Chinese Government Innovation" to the initiative.⁹ In the past five years, other cities and counties in Zhejiang, Fujian, Guangdong, Shandong, Guangxi and Yunnan have created similar supervision groups.¹⁰ With the rise of the CMO, the Wenzhou government claimed to have created a "Wenzhou Model of monitory democracy", yet its scope and effectiveness remain empirical questions.

⁸ *Guardian*, 'Xi Jinping asks for 'absolute loyalty' from Chinese state media', February 19th, (2016), accessed

at:<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/19/xi-jinping-tours-chinas-top-state-media-outlets-to-boost-loyalty>

⁹ See an online announcement: "Announcement on the finalists of The Best Practice of Chinese Government Innovation," Nov, 16th, (2015), accessed at:

<http://www.socialinnovationaward.org.cn/html/wmycx/gongzuodongtai/2015/1117/901.html>

¹⁰ See the following news links for similar CMOs in other Chinese localities:

<http://www.haining.tv/news/folder17/2016-02-03/105046.html> (Zhejiang)

<http://xmzyz.home.news.cn/blog/a/01010047FD590CBAED6CF879.html> (Fujian)

<http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2011-02-26/123222019095.shtml> (Shandong)

http://wb.sznews.com/page/1721/2016-03/01/A21/20160301A21_pdf.pdf (Guangdong)

<http://gx.sina.com.cn/news/gx/2015-02-11/detail-iawzune0008922.shtml> (Guangxi)

http://www.yn.gov.cn/yn_zt/yn_kmnbn/yn_tpxw/201306/t20130603_10763.html (Yunnan)

A systematic study of the CMO activism also contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the complex pattern of Chinese grassroots governance. Most scholarships have identified its variegated nature, arguing that totalitarian, authoritarian and democratic elements coexist.¹¹ But not many have elaborated on exactly why and how (i.e., for what reasons, in what forms and aspects, to what extent and on what conditions) do different kinds of participatory dynamics take place. Just as Sherry Arnstein's classical "participation ladder" thesis has revealed, participation is not black or white. It varies in degree, depending on how power is distributed.¹² Of late, a few China scholars have started to pay attention to this issue, either by typologizing participation, or identifying different risk arenas.¹³ They have shown that China's governance reforms vary according to the level within the hierarchy of the political system and according to which population groups are involved.¹⁴ This study follows this argument, but goes a step further to argue that even at the same administrative level and with the same population group, there are still variations in participation behaviours and outcomes. From a local dimension, we discuss the opportunity and limits of sustaining public supervision under the current political illiberal environment. In particular, 1) how many risks spheres are there in Wenzhou and what are they? 2) how do risk spheres link to citizen participation? 3) how does each type of citizen participation operate in its own risk sphere?

We choose the CMO as the case study because it enables an analysis of the nuanced interplay between authoritarian institutions and political participation. Firstly, the CMO case involves frequent interplay between participants and the media,

¹¹ He B, 'The Theory and Practice of Chinese Grassroots Governance: Five Models,' *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 4 (2) (2003), p. 314.

¹² Arnstein, S. 1969. "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," *JAIP*, Vol. 35, No. 4, pp. 216-224.

¹³ See Unger, J., Chen, A., Chung, H, "Deliberative Democracy at China's Grassroots: Case Studies of a Hidden Phenomenon," *Politics & Society*, Vol. 42(4) (2014), pp.513-535; Yan, X. & Xin, G., 'Participatory policy making under authoritarianism: the pathways of local budgetary reform in the People's Republic of China', *Policy & Politics* June, (2014); Yang B., He Y. & Long W., 'Alienation of Civic Engagement in China? Case Studies on Social Governance in Hangzhou', *Voluntas* (published online),(2012), pp.1-23.

¹⁴ Yan, X. & Xin, G., 'Participatory policy making under authoritarianism: the pathways of local budgetary reform in the People's Republic of China'

which can be hardly found in previous case studies. Moreover, the CMO project has survived for more than five years. This allows us to study local participatory reform within a longer time range, and helps remedy existing studies' reliance on one-time snapshot fieldwork data generated from episodic social movements.¹⁵ During the past five years the CMO has produced many successful as well as failed cases. A study of these cases allows us to identify the factors that affect the making or unmaking of public supervision. This study combines in-depth interviews and archival method to gather data. Purposive sampling is adopted to ensure that important social groups are selected in terms of criteria that will allow the research questions to be answered.¹⁶ Among the 47 interviewees, there are 38 monitors (jianduyuan 监督员), five officials, and four media workers. We choose a relatively large number of monitor interviewees to understand how they perceive and experience input from the media and local government. Interviewees are approached through either snowballing or cold calls. Official documents from newspapers, online websites, TV and interviewees, media reports and blogs, posts and comments by monitors on social media have been valuable for depicting the local political ecology surrounding the CMO program.

Mass Media and Citizen Participation in China

Some scholars believe that the media are assigned the task of improving governance and secure state legitimacy. Yet given the information the media generate and the difficulties in controlling the flow of information, they may facilitate coordinated uprising and threaten political stability.¹⁷ Others see them as stabilizing forces or safety valve,¹⁸ while still others consider the Chinese media the most

¹⁵ We will discuss this limitation in the literature review below.

¹⁶ D. Silverman, *Qualitative Research* (London: Sage, 2011, third edition).

¹⁷ P. Lorentzen, 'China's controlled burn: information management and state-society relations under authoritarianism', *Introductory Chapter*, (2016), p.11, accessed at: http://peterlorentzen.com/research_files/Lorentzen_Controlled_Burn_Chapter1.pdf

¹⁸ E.g. Zhang, X., 'Breaking news, media coverage and 'citizen's right to know' in China', *Journal of Contemporary China*, Volume 16, Issue 53, (2007), pp. 535-545; Brady, A., *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009); King, G., Pan, J. & Roberts, M. 'How

censored industry.¹⁹ The complex nature of the Chinese media leads to contested views on its relation with the civil society. The mass media is a part of the Party-state system.²⁰ When social activism occurs, media workers may signal citizens about where the permissible boundary is. Some scholars hold the view that the mass media are crucial resources in social activism mobilization.²¹ These contesting views suggest that the nuanced relation between the mass media and citizen participation requires further exploration. To that end, we draw on two relevant literatures that relates to contentious politics and public participation for subsequent empirical analysis. Contentious politics refers to social activism such as petition, marches and protests which people enact to achieve political ends.²² Public participation, on the other hand, refers to civic engagement activities such as public budgeting and collective deliberation, where citizens become involved in the process that affects public governance.²³

Mass Media and Contentious Politics

The mass media provide channels for citizens to express grievances. Because journalists could identify flaws and miscarriages of state policies, the Chinese government may encourage them to break information blockage and expose

ensorship in China allows government criticism but silences collective expression', *American Political Science Review*, 107 (2), (2013), pp. 326-343.

¹⁹ Tsang S., 'Consultative Leninism: China's new political framework', *Journal of Contemporary China* 62(18), (2009), p. 874.

²⁰ Zhao Y. & Sun W. 'Public Opinion Supervision: Possibilities and Limits of the Media in Constraining Local Cadres', in E. Perry and Goldman J. (eds.), *Grassroots Political Reform in Contemporary China* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 2007), pp.300-324.

²¹ E.g. Chan A. 'From propaganda to hegemony, Jiaodian Fangtan and China's media policy', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 11:30, (2010), pp. 35-51. p.42; Sun, Y., Zhao, D. 'Environmental campaigns', K., O' Brien & Chen X. (eds.), *Popular Protest in China*, (Harvard University Press 2008), pp. 144-162; Cai, Y. 'Disruptive collective action in the Reform Era', K., O' Brien (ed.), *Popular Protest in China*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 2008), pp. 163-178; Xie, L. *Environmental Activism in China*, (London; New York: Routledge 2012), p.41.

²² D. McAdam, S. Tarrow & C. Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); S. Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); T. Jacka, A. Kipnis & S. Sargeson, *Contemporary China: Society and Social Change* (Port Melbourne, Vic: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.258.

²³ See R. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1993).

wrongdoers within lower-level bureaucracies.²⁴ In China, this function is referred to as public opinion supervision. Chinese activists have long regarded journalists as their allies. In order to arouse government's attention, they often seek support from sympathetic journalists and leverage media exposure to magnify their voices. When contention occurs, concessions are likely to happen if activists can manage to locate claims in the media, who can lift petitioners' claims "to the ideological high ground".²⁵ Some scholars go further to propose the "co-empowerment" model.²⁶ This model shows that both activists and journalists empower each other to exploit limited space in news coverage, protect professional ethics, enhance journalistic credibility and strengthen ties with civil society.

Media allies are not always available, however. The media can offer power and attention, but they may subordinate activists' goals to their own purposes.²⁷ In political participation different actors manifest a wide range of responses depending on the degree to which an action threatens their interests. Current research reveals that mass media do not always act in full support of citizens.²⁸ Because media are held accountable to local government rather than citizens, when conflicts of interests break out, the Chinese mass media may moderate popular contention and channel public opinions in ways that gloss over social discontent. This is reflected in many aspects of news production and editing. For instance, agenda-setting research has found that the Chinese media outlets, whether central or local, are highly selective in reporting collective actions and NGO activities, in fear that critical reporting may provoke

²⁴ Zhao Y. & Sun W. 'Public Opinion Supervision: Possibilities and Limits of the Media in Constraining Local Cadres', in E. Perry and Goldman J. (eds.), *Grassroots Political Reform in Contemporary China* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 2007), pp.300-324.; Zweig D., 'To the court or to the barricades? Can new political institutions manage rural conflict', E. Perry & M. Seldon (eds.), *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*, (London; New York: Routledge2010), p.130.

²⁵ K. O' Brien & Li L., *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*. (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.62.

²⁶ Zeng F. & Huang Y., 'The media and urban contention in China: a co-empowerment model', *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 8:3, (2015), pp.233-252.

²⁷ J. Jasper, 'A strategic approach to collective action: looking for agency in social movement choices', *Mobilization: An International Journal*, 9(1),(2007), p.8

²⁸ E.g. Zheng Y. & Wu G., 'Information technology, public space, and collective action in China', *Comparative Political Studies* (38), (2005), pp. 507-536.

bureaucratic tension and social instability.²⁹ Framing research also indicates that the media often distort movement claims and discourses in their representation of popular contention.³⁰ Journalists may frame social grievances within the Party-state hegemony, to present reported events as safe and legitimate.³¹ Moreover, the media may repress specific forms of collective action if citizens' views conflict with those of the State. When local residents marched on the street to protest at Maglev train project in Shanghai, for example, local propaganda organ *Jiefang Daily* framed their peaceful walking as "undermining social harmony".³² Similarly, during an anti-PX chemical plant protest in Ningbo, *Ningbo Daily* aligned with the local government to criticize local protestors as "disrupting the overall stability of Ningbo city".³³ Teresa Wright's study of student movements in China and Taiwan showed how students rely on their media allies to achieve their goals, but at the same time they worried that their action would invite criticism from newspapers, radios and television reports.³⁴

Mass Media and Public Participation

In contrast with popular contention literature, literature on the relation between mass media and public participation is relatively scarce. Probably because participatory discourse often links with specific elements such as deliberation and rationality, existing scholarships tend to depict public participation as daily, peaceful

²⁹ For agenda setting theory, see M. McCombs & D. Shaw, 'The agenda-setting function of mass media', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36 (2), (1972), p.176; For agenda setting research in Chinese media politics, see Chen, D. 'The Dilemma and strategies of the mainstream media's reporting mass disturbance', *Journal of Southwest University of Political Science and Law*, 17 (3), (2015), pp.61-67.

³⁰ For framing theory, see E. Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1974).

³¹ J. Nie, B. Wang, 'Media frame alignment: the study of city newspaper report strategy on the citizen collective action--a case of Guangzhou Panyu', *China Media Report* no.1, (2013), pp.105-119; Zeng, F. 'Traditional Media as the Mediator: Frame Alignment and Policy Response', *Journalism and Communication*, no.1, (2013), pp.37-50.

³² Zheng W., 'Dilemma in NIMBY facility planning: a case study of magnetically levitated train in Shanghai', *Public Facility and Interest*, 35 (2), (2011), pp. 74-83.

³³ *Ningbo Daily*, 'Jointly Maintaining the Overall Social Stability', Oct, 27th, A1 (2012), accessed at: http://daily.cnnb.com.cn/nbrb/html/2012-10/27/content_540733.htm

³⁴ T. Wright, 'Student Movements in China and Taiwan', O' Brien & Chen (eds.), *Popular Protest in China*, p.48.

activities.³⁵ Many scholars portray journalists as a positive force, who facilitate public discussions and promote the development of the public sphere.³⁶

However, such thinking fails to catch the full dynamism of authoritarianism. Many places across China have seen an increase in public participation, yet China's "local democracy" is fraught with deep contradictions. As He Baogang and Mark Warren have observed, authoritarian participation is typically limited in scope and focuses on a limited range of problems.³⁷ Citizens are constrained by the fundamental Party-state principle that "government guides" and "citizens participate".³⁸ Scholars described those practices as "deliberative authoritarianism"³⁹, "consultative Leninism"⁴⁰ and "conditional autonomy within authority structures"⁴¹, a state of hybridity where control and deliberative elements co-exist.

In short, current literature oversimplifies Chinese mass media's behavioural propensities. It fails to fully recognize those specific factors that affect the mass media's roles in participatory activities. Are mass media always a supportive force in the social governance arena as some scholars have claimed? How do they respond to and shape citizen participation under different circumstances? We need a conceptual framework to understand better the nuance of media-citizen interaction.

Contingent Participation as Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Daniel Hallin's sphere theory and proposes the framework of "contingent participation" to understand the media-citizen interaction in the CMO

³⁵ See R. Madsen, 'The public sphere, civil society and moral community: are search agenda for contemporary China studies', *Modern China*, 19 (2), Symposium: "Public Sphere"/"Civil Society" in China? Paradigmatic Issues in Chinese Studies, III, (1993), p.194.

³⁶ E.g. He & Warren, 'Authoritarian deliberation: the deliberative turn in Chinese political development'; Fewsmith, *The Logic and Limits of Political Participation in China*, p.167; F. Zeng, 'People's Mouthpiece: How China's Urban Newspaper Represents Public Issues', *Journalism and Communication*, no.3, (2009), pp.93-100; C. Berry, 'Shanghai Television's Documentary Channel: Chinese Television as Public Space', Y. Zhu & C. Berry (eds.), *TV China* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2009), pp.71-89.

³⁷ He & Warren, 'Authoritarian deliberation: the deliberative turn in Chinese political development', p.269.

³⁸ Xiong G., 'Let Social Organizations Play More Important Roles in Emergency Management', *The Science of Leadership Forum* (24), (2015), pp.4-8.

³⁹ He and Warren, 'Authoritarian deliberation: the deliberative turn in Chinese political development'.

⁴⁰ Tsang, 'Consultative Leninism: China's new political framework'.

⁴¹ Cai, 'Disruptive collective action in the reform era'.

program.⁴² Hallin's sphere theory describes areas of media coverage where a topic may fall. According to how specific issues are understood and received by the public, Hallin diagrammed concentric circles. From the innermost to the outmost they are: firstly, the "sphere of consensus", which contains uncontroversial, widely agreed commonsense issues which "journalists do not feel compelled to present an opposing view point or to remain disinterested observers".⁴³ Secondly, the "sphere of legitimate controversy", which is where contestation and debates often take place. Thirdly, the "sphere of deviance", which includes issues that are considered inappropriate for news reporting, such as taboos. Zhang and Guo demonstrated that Hallin's theory could be applied to the practice of journalism in authoritarian China: the sphere of consensus is the innermost zone which encompasses well-contained social issues; the outside one is the sphere of deviance, a zone of taboo issues which an authoritarian regime brooks zero tolerance; in between is the sphere of legitimate controversy, a gray zone where negotiation and repression co-exist between media organizations and the Party-state.⁴⁴

(Figure 1 about here)

We adapt the sphere theory to describe the limits for political expression. Such limits appear particularly salient in an illiberal state like China where the Party-state influence is all- pervasive. Citizens' cooperation with the media can never be completely free from power constraints because the media respond differently to different social issues according to their level of political sensitivity. Within an asymmetrical power relationship, the will of the state and the media's censorship policies largely determine how far citizens can go. According to the degrees of

⁴² Hallin, D., *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University press 1986).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.40

⁴⁴ Zhang X. & Guo Z., "Hegemony and Counter-hegemony: The Politics of Dialects in TV Programs in China," *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 5:3, (2012), pp. 300-315.

political sensitivity, we further typologize four participation behaviours (see Figure 2).

Type I: Symbolic participation. Symbolic participation stays in the sphere of consensus because its discourse encompasses the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ideology and government policies. Chinese government often delegates its media agent to launch this kind of activity to meet some procedural requirements or propaganda purposes. Other labels include “formalism”,⁴⁵ “ceremonial civic engagement”,⁴⁶ “propagandistic civic engagement”,⁴⁷ or simply a “show”.⁴⁸ The media do not allow participants’ free expression in this scenario. The objective of symbolic participation is not to delegate power to citizens, but to enable powerful elites to educate citizens. Citizens are alienated as a tool for government to achieve propaganda purposes and exercise social control.

Type II: Instrumental participation. Different from symbolic participation, this form targets at technical, community-based tasks that citizens can directly undertake, such as garbage disposal and green space maintenance in neighbourhoods. Instrumental participation allows genuine public participation to take place, since citizens can play a crucial role in affecting governance. Instrumental participation stays in the sphere of consensus because it can easily secure support from both state agencies and social actors. Firstly, it happens in policy areas that are low in risk, without conflicting with

⁴⁵ He B., ‘Participatory and Deliberative Institutions in China’, in *The Search for Deliberative Democracy in China*, L. Ethan and He B., (New York: Palgrave 2006).

⁴⁶ Yang et al., ‘Alienation of Civic Engagement in China? Case Studies on Social Governance in Hangzhou’.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Jiang Z., ‘Democratic living meeting becomes a show’, Dongfangwang, August 1st, (2014), accessed at: http://opinion.china.com.cn/opinion_28_105728.html

state interests or targeting at critical power abuse.⁴⁹ Secondly, it yields to better services and public goods, which promotes government legitimacy and public interest. Thus, the local government is more likely to support civic initiatives of this kind. Journalists are also happy to report those innocuous activities. In this scenario, they serve as the facilitator through empowering local populace and communicating their voices to the public and the authority.

Type III: Managed participation. Managed participation in this paper largely harks back to Cai Yongshun's concept by the same name. According to Cai, the Chinese political system has flexible space for citizens to stage rightful resistance; yet such participation is confined within the boundary established by the Party-state, which affect the cost of political action and the odds of success.⁵⁰ The same logic applies to the CMO activism, since part of supervision activities target at social issues with legitimate controversy. Managed participation usually happens outside residential enclaves, which affect local populace on a wider scope. On the one hand, it involves valid claims backed up by official policies, which state agencies could hardly dismiss. On the other hand, it may arouse vested interests, trigger bureaucratic tensions and social conflicts. Typical issues include official corruption, state malfeasance and policy failure. In managed participation, citizens are allowed to express their opinions to a limited degree, but they lack the power to ensure that their voices have substantial impact on the decision makers. As agents of the local propaganda department, media workers are assigned the task of managing supervision activities. Wary that public participation may backfire, the media may apply

⁴⁹ For low-risk participation activities, see Yan X. & Xin G., 'Participatory policy making under authoritarianism: the pathways of local budgetary reform in the People's Republic of China'.

⁵⁰ Cai Y., 'Managed Participation in China', *Political Science Quarterly*, 119 (3), (2004), p.427.

ensorship to contain popular contention while restricting citizens from spinning out of control.

Type IV: Transgressive participation. Transgressive participation falls into the sphere of deviance. Inspired by the concept of transgressive politics, which refers to those forms of collective activities that cross the boundaries of the system and trespass into forbidden zones, we propose transgressive participation in our typology.⁵¹In this study, transgressive participation does not necessarily mean disruptive behavior. But because it involves locally sensitive issues, it can be hardly contained by the existing corporatist framework. Since different levels of media systems may have different perceptions of what it means by “politically sensitive”, in real-life situations many cases are actually boundary spanning. For example, accusations against corrupt municipal officials are usually labelled as “having ulterior motives” by a municipal government, but the Central government may view them as wake-up calls. In the meantime, transgressive participation also contains political taboos that are by no means irreconcilable with the Party-state hegemony, such as religious freedom, democratization and Falun gong. When transgressive participation occurs at a local level, the media are likely to stop acting as citizens’ allies. It may also act as the state’s accomplice and repress transgressive action.

(Figure 2 about here)

Empirical findings

Type I: Symbolic Participation

The local government and its propagandist apparatuses often utilize the CMO to promote state projects. The Wenzhou propaganda department calls such activities “compulsory action” (guiding dongzuo 规定动作) to stress the importance of the

⁵¹ McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, p.8.

CMO's propaganda function.⁵² A high-level propaganda cadre claimed that the CMO should spread "positive energy" (zhengnengliang 正能量) through "soft interpellation" (rouxing ganzhao 柔性感召). Another cadre was more direct: he believed that the program was launched solely to meet administrative goals set by the government.⁵³

The CMO is under constant pressure to perform symbolic participation due to its close affiliation with local propagandist apparatuses. Many monitors are willing to invest time to perform propaganda activities in the belief that their powerful allies will someday return to them crucial support. A monitor running a stationary store said: "Frankly speaking propaganda is unnecessary. However, if you don't give face to them (allies), they won't support you in return."⁵⁴ In symbolic participation, monitors are often portrayed as having a strong presence. But in fact they are deprived of the freedom of speech, thus functioning as no more than a backdrop for elite performance.

Symbolic participation can be further divided into three categories. The first category is image building, where monitors perform as "mass representatives". They act in city publicity films and non-commercial advertisements. On such occasions they either commend the rapid development of Wenzhou, or promote state-sanctioned moral values such as "protecting local environment" and "being a well-mannered citizen". For example, an interviewed retiree once acted as a passerby in a "guerrilla interview" prepared by a journalist, though he was informed of the interview a month earlier.⁵⁵

A second kind of symbolic participation is ceremonial engagement, where monitors gather as vanguards of state projects. A typical ceremonial engagement is

⁵² Zhang H., 'Wenzhou: Civil Monitory Organization becomes the city guard', *Banyuetan*, no.1, (2014), accessed at: http://wzrb.66wz.com/html/2014-01/17/content_1583278.htm

⁵³ Interviews with two government officials in Wenzhou, Dec 30th, 2014.

⁵⁴ Interview with a monitor, April 11th, 2015.

⁵⁵ Interview with a monitor, Dec 30th, 2014.

live broadcast of “mobilization meetings” (dongyuan dahui 动员大会), which is arranged for the sole purpose of supporting the government’s decisions. In 2015, the Wenzhou municipal government launched a river management project named “Five Water Treatment”. With the aim of “building a beautiful water-town”, the project encouraged everyone to “take part in river management and understand the knowledge of Five Water Treatment”.⁵⁶As requested by the Wenzhou propaganda department, the local TV station ran a series of live broadcast of ceremonies. Reports, meetings and rituals were carefully prepared in advance to ensure that no accident happened. Monitors performed various roles in those mobilization meetings. Some were dressed in light yellow uniforms and stood in rows before the rostrum as the audience. Others waved large red flags on the rostrum as a way of boosting morale (see Figure 3). Only one or two “excellent representatives” had the chance to deliver speeches after cadres finished, but without exception they were vetted and censored. These scenes were later broadcast to the public, showing that the “Five Water Treatment” project had gained public support.

When monitors attend important live events, the anchors may not let them speak in order to ensure “safe broadcasting”. This happened in a monthly live event “Questioning Officials Time”. On that day, monitors prepared to challenge officials, but were thwarted. CB, an insurance company manager, was furious the next day when he saw a news photo portraying the “active involvement” of monitors:

Photos do not mean the truth! Last night in the live broadcast studio, monitor JCH raised his hand many times when he saw two state departments pass bucket to each other. In front of so many people, he was not even given a chance to speak! This is

⁵⁶ Wenzhou municipal propaganda department, ‘Announcement: Initiating the First ‘Netizen Watching Water-town’—Five Water Treatment Micro-news Competition’, accessed at: <http://gov.66wz.com/system/2015/12/10/104658515.shtml>

absolutely weird. Without monitors' active involvement, the program "Questioning Officials Time" is very likely to degenerate into "comedy, farce and satire".⁵⁷

A third kind of symbolic participation is inspection tours, a common way for state authorities to scrutinize projects operated by their subordinates. On these tours, officials would select citizen representatives to do such things as watching the blueprint of construction projects or going for invited fieldtrips, but they seldom increase the government responsiveness.⁵⁸ It is difficult for inexperienced citizens to give input if the tone of the event has been preset. In 2014, for instance, the Wenzhou TV station organized a tour to a local "example community" to check the river management progress. Upon arrival many monitors found the water quality unsatisfactory and they frowned. However, the journalist who had been in advance contacted by a community cadre warned them that the general tone of this news coverage had to be positive. Shortly afterwards the community cadre joined and accompanied them as their guide. Monitors were left speechless. In subsequent media portrayal, the inspection results were invariably "satisfactory", with only "minor problems".⁵⁹ The media manipulated monitors' opinion as public opinion. Little space was left for free deliberation and engaged argument.

Monitors have expressed strong disapproval of such activities. A cartographer complained: "This is just going through the motion. With our presence the government could brag 'look we have invited citizens already so don't say we are not sticking to democratic principles'."⁶⁰ A costume shop owner said: "On those fake monitoring activities officials would warmly greet us by saying 'we welcome supervision'. But how can we evaluate their performance in their presence?"⁶¹ A

⁵⁷ Online comment by a monitor, April 16th, 2016

⁵⁸ Yang et al., 'Alienation of Civic Engagement in China? Case Studies on Social Governance in Hangzhou',

⁵⁹ For example, see a recent news report released by *Wenzhou Daily*, Su, Q, 'CMO Examining Implementation Work of 'Wenzhou Entrepreneur Goes Back' project', *Wenzhou Daily*, August 26th, (2015), accessed at: <http://www.wzxc.gov.cn/system/2015/08/26/012112878.shtml>

⁶⁰ Interview with a monitor, April 8th, 2015

⁶¹ Interview with a monitor, May 20th, 2015

security guard who went for a food market tour was also critical: “I suspect journalists of negligence. By the end of the tour I stumbled across a few peddlers in the market who were selling mouldy foods. I pointed that out but the journalist just ignored me and called it a day.”⁶²

(Figure 3 about here)

Type II: Instrumental Participation

Monitors have real power in instrumental participation. Firstly, it involves community-based matters that are important to everyday lives. Secondly, these matters are usually concrete and specific issues, which monitors have knowledge about and can be addressed quickly. A ceramic shop owner referred to these matters as “chicken feathers and garlic skins” (jimaosuanpi 鸡毛蒜皮). In instrumental participation, monitors and the media establish a symbiotic relationship: monitors play a big role in news making such as searching for news sources and recording evidences; in return newspapers and TV stations station power and protection for monitory activities.

Instrumental participation has a different power dynamic from symbolic participation. Citizens can freely express their opinions, make collective decisions and pressure government bodies for accountability. Initially monitors only played a supplementary role and acted as commentators, but over time experienced monitors have taken initiatives to orchestrate investigations. For example, the retiree ZS is a persistent fault finder. He often wanders around streets where he lives to check urban sanitation and environmental upkeep. During 2014 he organized more than 60 monitory activities, most of which were about everyday run-of-the-mill matters, including public bicycle maintenance, manhole cover maintenance, green belt protection, parking, and so on (see Figure 4).

⁶² Interview with a monitor, Oct 14th, 2014

Instrumental participation attracts the attention of journalists who report “livelihood news” (minsheng xinwen 民生新闻). Journalists are happy to help not only because livelihood issues are usually less sensitive, but also because local readers welcome news of this kind with which they can easily identify. A newspaper editor said: “For the past five years livelihood issues have been an important focus for the CMO. They are all about small things but people can feel and see them.”⁶³ The media give monitors public exposure so that they become famous. Those who frequently appear on TV have become local celebrities. Once when a retiree ZS and his group entered a village, local villagers shouted: “Look, that’s Uncle Yin. His team is coming to help us!”⁶⁴ They surrounded him and complained about their village cadres’ poor performance. Without media exposure, it would have been much more difficult for monitors to exert influence in the local community.

Media exposure also reduces the likelihood of meeting undesirable situations. For instance, cadres accused of laziness would suddenly change their attitudes when a camera is pointing at them. An entrepreneur monitor ZF, who runs a health food shop, said:

These shrewd guys have a knee-jerk disliking to us and always ‘play Taiji’ with us (meaning shunning responsibilities). But usually they give some promises if we bring a TV reporter. It is not the camera, but the eight million local audiences that they are facing.⁶⁵

Cadres’ words are recorded as evidence. If follow-up investigations find reported problems unaddressed, skilful editors would cut contradictory episodes altogether. Then they would frame stories with a typical title of “[xxx department], where is your promise going?” so as to exert further pressure on concerned officials in charge.

⁶³ Interview with an editor, Dec 31st, 2014

⁶⁴ Interview with a monitor, Dec 30th, 2014

⁶⁵ Interview with a monitor, Dec 30th, 2014.

(Figure 4 about here)

Type III: Managed Participation

When monitors try to go beyond everyday matters and target social issues in a broader scope, they may encounter a highly unpredictable situation where legitimate claims can easily become controversies. For media workers, these claims often sit near the fuzzy boundary between the acceptable and the unacceptable. The government has to be responsive to these claims as they are directly related to public interests, and can help enhance government legitimacy. On the other hand, they are controversial because they may challenge officials' authority, put pressure on state departments and spread "negative energy" (funengliang 负能量) to the public. Demarcation between instrumental participation and managed participation is not clear-cut. Whether a political action will be managed is determined by how much it challenges existing local policies and power alignments. For example, it is reasonable for monitors to speak for the vulnerable groups, but such actions are likely to be viewed as deleterious if they go against government policies. In a similar vein, no one would question the legitimacy of investigating companies accused of violating consumer rights, but the story might be different if these companies are backed up by the local government. Journalists are highly aware that activities of this kind need to be carefully managed. Firstly, media workers are full-time employees. They risk being fired if they are overly critical of officials. Local officials may take out their anger on daring journalists who exposed their misconduct, orchestrating punishments such as dismissal.⁶⁶ Secondly, local media can directly affect the outcomes of the monthly performance appraisal of government departments. According to informants, media reports are usually being given certain weights in the scoring project designed by the local performance appraisal office (kaojiban 考绩办). Government departments

⁶⁶ Bernstein & Lu, *Taxation without Representation in Contemporary Rural China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). p.186

will receive negative scoring if there is any negative news coverage relevant to their work. Wary of their careers, officials charged of wrongdoing sometimes pester journalists. The propaganda department may also repress negative news reports in order to give face to wrongdoers. Because of this, local media often take a conservative stance to avoid any unpleasant consequence.

In everyday practice, monitor-journalist disputes are common. The disagreement could be as general as whether local policies are legitimate, or as specific as whether officials were practicing favouritism. Journalists constantly moderate monitors' claims and behaviours so that they fall within officially acceptable boundaries. Our investigation shows that moderation is achieved through various editing strategies. The first method is cutting, which is used when people say something "inappropriate". The second method is fabrication—simply distortion. The third method is selective reporting, including priming and framing--media workers may cite monitors' words out of context, piece together different speeches into a coherent one, or deliberately highlight particular aspects of an event while ignoring others.⁶⁷

Journalists used the mixed method of fabrication and cutting in the "last nail household" case.⁶⁸ In 2011, the Wenzhou government launched an urban planning project, including the building of a new road as the main artery linking the downtown to the railway station. The project progressed slowly because of problems relocating residents the project made little progress. One owner would not move, stubbornly staying in his house, which stood alone like an exposed nail in the middle of the new road. The municipal government gave the local TV station a political task, asking journalists and the CMO to expose the "last nail household" and persuade the owner to sign the tentative contract to get compensation and move as soon as possible. The monitors did not welcome the explicit intention of municipal cadres after they had

⁶⁷ For priming theory, see Iyengar & Kinder, *News That Matters: News & American Opinion* (University of Chicago Press 1987); for framing theory, see Goffman, 1984

⁶⁸ See Zhou J. & Yang X., 'CMO Dialoguing with the last 'nail household' in Ningbo road', *Wenzhou Daily*, June 16th, (2012), accessed at :<http://www.wzsee.com/2012/0716/148465.html>

met with Mr. He, the household owner. Different from other relocated households, Mr. He had a built-up area of 900 square meters. But the tentative contract did not mention the exact site for resettlement, or provide a fixed compensation package for him. All monitors present agreed that Mr. He had a valid reason to refuse to sign the contract. As monitor YZ stated:

The government must give due respect to citizens who sacrificed themselves for the development of the city. They need reasonable compensation. I felt so sad when I saw those relocated people cry. On that day a journalist asked one of them: “Do you support the decision of the government?” I was angry and shouted at that journalist: “Stop it! Are you human? Can you sleep at night?”..... Later I went further in front of the camera: “The ‘Three Revisions and One Demolition’ (sangai yichai 三改一拆) policy is implemented wrongly. I suspect the government of dereliction of duty, because for many years they are neglecting citizens’ interests.”⁶⁹

YZ’s criticism was “politically incorrect” not only because it was out of sync with the Party line; more importantly, it criticized the municipal government rather than a specific state department. The sharp contrast between a powerless relocated householder and a strong government politicized the comment, which was far too sensitive for full coverage. After the editors’ moderation, the comment appeared much softer: “Now that the concerned work unit has decided to undertake the project, it must make effort to provide the relocated household with a satisfactory plan”.⁷⁰Such was the watered down criticism that a state-controlled local media could offer.

Media workers also use a priming method to conceal the unpleasant parts of cadre-mass interaction. The priming effect is achieved by “calling attention to some

⁶⁹ Interview with a monitor, Dec 31st, 2014.

⁷⁰ Zhou and Yang, ‘CMO Dialoguing with the last ‘nail household’ in Ningbo road’.

matters while ignoring others”.⁷¹ Mass media can influence the standards by which governments and officials are judged. This happened in a TV studio where monitors engaged in dialogue with officials on public transportation. In the Q&A session, a monitor had a heated debate with an SOE cadre. The monitor urged financial disclosure, to which the head refused and asked an editor to cut the episode.⁷² When the recording was released two weeks later, the monitor had disappeared from the scene. The head’s response was also edited, with the amicable response remaining and the confrontational one deleted. A similar episode occurred to a new item on public forum about river management. Those monitors who questioned the project timetabling were humiliated by two street committee officials, and a serious quarrel followed. The news report the following day portrayed the conflict as “monitors asking sharp questions”, “street officials giving positive responses”, with both showing “team work spirit”.⁷³ Such distortion affects the public’s political judgment about the local government, leaving them with an impression that officials perform really well in these deliberative meetings.

Media workers also utilize a framing method to selectively influence local audiences’ perception of social injustice. As gatekeepers, the media has the power to set agendas, and organize and present events and topics. For example, a journalist agreed to help homeowners to lodge complaint in a housing dispute. However, when monitors showed evidence that the homeowners were beaten by the police for acting against local cadres, the journalist backed off and refused to report this episode, saying that this was a separate matter. Subsequently, the news coverage focused exclusively on housing quality, without mentioning a word about the violence.

⁷¹ Iyengar & Kinder, *News That Matters*, p.63

⁷² See the last fifteen minutes of the video recording, accessed at: <http://tv.dhtv.cn/peoples/zqmyjjz/000004990.html>

⁷³ Wenzhou Publicity Net. ‘The first 2014 large-scale tour of ‘river leader forum’ commences’, Wenzhou Publicity, Sept 5th, (2014), accessed at: <http://www.wzxc.gov.cn/system/2014/09/05/011770209.shtml>.

Type IV: Transgressive Participation

Transgressive participation includes political taboos, activities or issues that deviate from the permissible boundary set by the municipal government. The major difference between managed participation and transgressive participation is that the former leaves citizens with some negotiation space, whereas the latter is not to be tolerated in the eyes of both officials and journalists. Taboo topics seem far away from an officially recognized organization. However, things changed in 2014 when a provincial campaign against illegal church buildings commenced. In April 2014, a Christian church at Wenzhou's Sanjiang County was ordered to be torn down, as it was said to have violated the zoning regulations.⁷⁴ Monitors were stunned, because county officials had previously lauded the Sanjiang church as a model project.⁷⁵ Locals speculated that a high-ranking official was hostile to Christianity and he used zoning regulation as a tactful cover.

Angry monitors who suspected the local government of selective policy implementation decided to find the truth, but obstacles stood in their way. Because religion in China is politically sensitive, local media that the CMO has frequent contact with shield from offering any support. Journalists felt unable to disagree with the state authorities. In fact, official news coverage on the anti-demolition activism was predominantly negative. Activists were criticized as “instigators”, “having ulterior motives” or “allying with foreign reactionary forces”.⁷⁶ Moreover, in fear of

⁷⁴ Relevant news reports can found here: Ian Johnson, “Church-State clash in China coalesces around a toppled spire,” May 29, (2014), *New York Times* http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/30/world/asia/church-state-clash-in-china-coalesces-around-a-toppled-spire.html?_r=0; “China begins demolition of 'oversized' church,” *The Guardian*, April 28th, (2014), accessed at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/28/china-demolition-oversized-church-sanjiang>

⁷⁵ Qiluren, ‘Five thousand Wenzhou Christians resist violent demolishment by the local authority’, April 13th, (2014), Newsmith.net, accessed at: <http://www.newsmth.net/nForum/#!article/Bible/73277>

⁷⁶ Anonymous commentator, ‘What is the motivation behind smearing ‘Three Revise and One Demolish’ policy: four points on how to implement ‘Three Revise and One Demolish’ policy’, August 22nd, (2014), *Zhejiang Daily*, accessed at: http://zjrb.zjol.com.cn/html/2014-08/22/content_2795813.htm?div=-1#; Anonymous author, ‘Protect legal sanctity and stick to fair principle: Yongjia government demolishes Sanjiang illegal religious building according to the law’, April 29th, (2014), *Wenzhou Daily*, accessed at: http://wzrb.66wz.com/html/2014-04/29/content_1634713.htm

jeopardizing their personal career, journalists were reluctant to help monitors to lobby sympathetic officials. Monitors had made many attempts to reach their media allies, but the media kept their distance.

Transgressive participation is not always about human rights issues. Because of the institutional control imposed by the corporatist structure, most monitoring groups cannot monitor their immediate patrons—their affiliation/supervision agencies. As a result, some legitimate controversies slip into the sphere of deviance and are never addressed.⁷⁷ This happens when the monitors’ immediate patrons – their affiliation/supervisory agencies, become the target of supervision. An example is the Social Relief CMO (SR CMO) at Wenzhou’s LW district, which is affiliated with the local Labour and Social Security Bureau. The SR CMO was set up primarily for monitoring social security fraud, but it never managed to wage an action because officials in the Labour and Social Security Bureau are often involved in such frauds. A monitor from SR CMO said: “A high-ranking official in the bureau abused his power to get a social security grant for his wife, but how can I supervise a man who shares the same office building with me?”⁷⁸ Similarly, another monitoring team once received a petition letter from a group of villagers whose land had been expropriated. Villagers named the local cadres whom they suspected of graft and bribery in the expropriation. Monitors were shocked to find one of their immediate patrons on the list. They could do nothing other than secretly help village petitioners spread the information online. A monitor sighed: “Yes, the Communist Party says that all cadres are subject to mass supervision, but who would be foolish enough to have his subordinates expose his own mistakes?”

⁷⁷ Kang & Han, ‘Administrative absorption of society’.

⁷⁸ Interview with a monitor, April 8th, 2015.

Discussions and Conclusion

This paper addresses the much-understudied role of media in political participation by first proposing a new framework and then applies it to the case of CMO in Wenzhou. It fills an important missing link in scholarly literature on the one hand and makes important steps towards theorization on the study of political participation on the other.

As the above analysis reveals, the extent of citizen participation is highly contingent upon how much the topic of citizen action is related to the interests of the local government and whether it conflicts with the local media's censorship policy. The likely scenarios or contingent participation are summarized in Table 1. An issue would stay in the sphere of consensus if it involves minimum conflicts between the state and the society. The government encourages monitors to help propagate official projects and policies. It is also happy to let monitors act on matters as long as these are sufficiently trivial and small. But if monitors' demands challenge state authority or cause political tension, they will be discouraged or even prohibited by the local government. In the participatory processes, local media workers are held accountable to the propaganda department rather than to monitors. They monitor the CMO on behalf of the propaganda department. They send participants signals about where the permissible boundary is, and play different roles in different contexts, based on their expectations of likely outcomes the CMO's political action may bring to local officialdom and society.

The contingent participation framework helps us understand the behaviour of local media towards public participation. Contrary to the belief that Chinese journalists would try to push for more autonomy in investigative reporting,⁷⁹ what we have observed is tightening rather than expansion of journalistic autonomy. Media workers err on the safe side because of the unpredictable nature of political sensitivity

⁷⁹ Zhang, 'Breaking news, media coverage and 'citizen's right to know' in China'.

in monitory action and the fluid boundaries between different spheres. Despite 30 years of profound changes that has led the Chinese Party-state to rule with more subtlety and even allow occasional negotiation with the media, media workers at the local level are not always willing to take full advantage of the “gray zone”. Journalists in Wenzhou are constrained from fully exposing the dark side of the local society or acting against the local bureaucracy.

Contingent participation hinders democratic participation. Firstly, it does not effectively help to mitigate the principal-agent problem of the Chinese bureaucratic system. Media tightening impedes the vertical information flow from monitors to the municipal government. The latter is often left in the dark and could not effectively obtain the information about lower-level officialdom. Secondly, media censorship impedes the development of the local public sphere. What could be observed so far is an increasing gap between the media representation and the monitors’ actual performance. For example, the stance of monitors towards land appropriation is distorted. Our fieldwork reveals that they were ridiculed by some relocated households as “fifty cents” (wumao 五毛, meaning state-sponsored commentators), while they had tried hard to protect the rights of the relocation households.

Contingent participation may follow two possible pathways, depending on how critical factors (the local government, media and participants) change and interact with each other. One is co-optation. Symbolic participation may overwhelm other types of participation if the local government becomes increasingly conservative. Since the open-minded Municipal Party-secretary Chen Derong left office and the new Party-secretary took over, the local public sphere has been waning. The CMO has shown a stronger tendency to compromise. Circumstances have pressured the CMO to take up propaganda as one of its jobs.⁸⁰ Thus, it remains uncertain as to whether the CMO will be completely absorbed into the propaganda apparatus. A

⁸⁰ Interview with a monitor, April 8th, 2015.

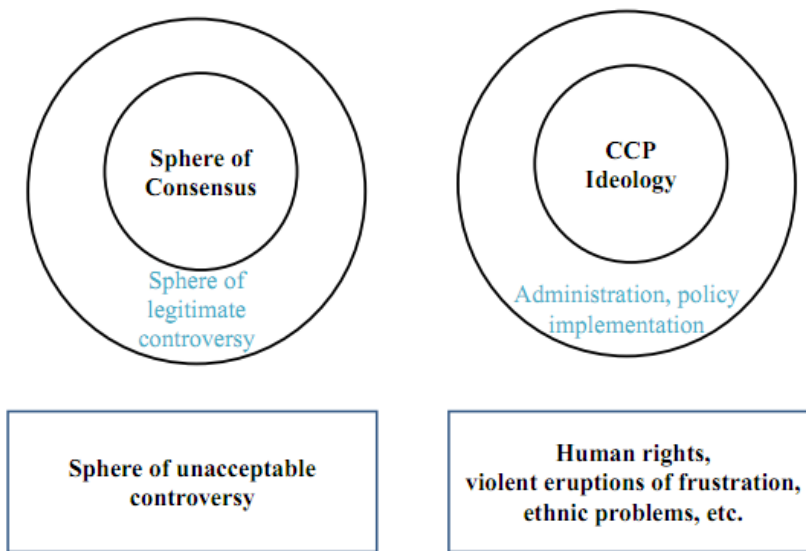
strikingly different pathway is backfiring. Public participation is an on-going learning process that facilitates civic consciousness and activist networking.⁸¹ As long as limited forms of participation exist, the CMO will continue to serve as a venue for potential political mobilization. At critical moments (such as those related to severe environmental pollution or policy failures), the CMO is likely to rise up against the local government and defend local public interests.

To conclude, contingent participation reveals the contradiction inherent in the authoritarian political system. Media-monitor cooperation was originally proposed to solve problems, yet it has failed to realize its goal because in many circumstances monitors face the political alienation. At the heart of contingent participation is the irreconcilable tension between improving governance and maintaining stability. Improving governance requires citizens' deep engagement in public affairs. But such processes can spin out of control: it may generate politically sensitive information, increase the level of social discontent, and even facilitate coordinated resistance if grievances are widespread. In this sense, the "democratic centralism" of the mass line that Xi Jinping promotes does not facilitate but impede democratic participation. While this single case study is limited in scope, the problem our empirical investigation has revealed is structural. Similar phenomena probably also exist in participatory reforms in other Chinese localities, which could make an important research agenda for the future research.

⁸¹ A recent article discussed this scenario. See Zhu, Z. 'Chinese Environmental Actors Linking Up Backfired Government Action and the Spillover Effect of Contention: A Case Study of the Anti-PX Protests in Maoming, China', *Journal of Contemporary China* (published online), (2017), pp.1-15.

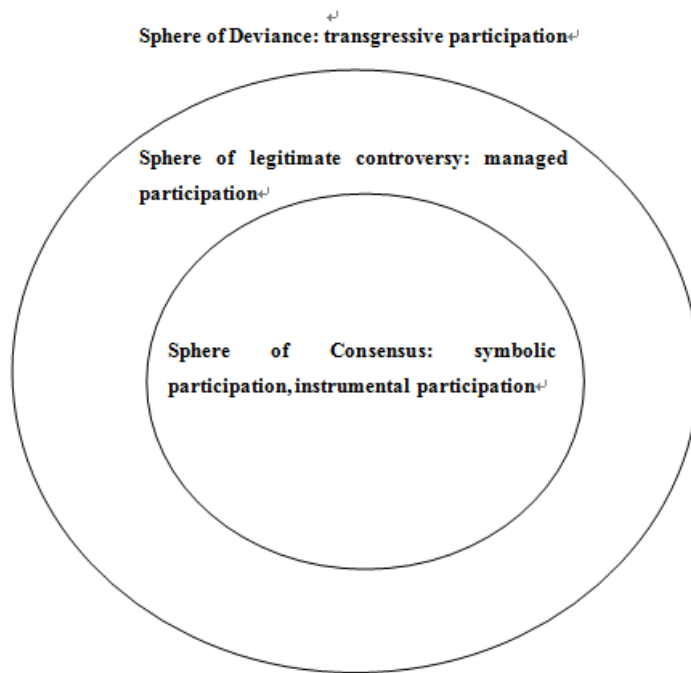
Tables and Figures

Figure 1. Sphere of Consensus, Legitimate Controversy and Deviance, and its application in China



(Source: Zhang and Guo, 2012)

Figure 2. Four participation types within the framework of “contingent participation”



(Source: see text for details)

Figure 3. Monitors in mobilization meeting



(Source: Wenzhou TV station, 2014)

Figure 4. Monitors addressing people's complaints in local residential community



(Source: Fieldwork data, Photographed by Zhuang Meixi, 2014)

Table 1. An overview of contingent participation

Participation behaviour	Risk sphere	Examples	State's attitude	Media's role
Symbolic participation	Consensus	Mobilization meeting, inspection tour	Promote	Manipulate
Instrumental participation	Consensus	Garbage disposal, green space maintenance	Encourage	Facilitate
Managed participation	Legitimate controversy	Relocation of nail households, unlawful action by local powerful business	Discourage	Control
Transgressive participation	Deviance	Religious freedom, critical power abuse by top leadership at municipal government	Forbid	Inhibit, insouciance

(Source: see text for details)