Critical Dialogue

Outsourcing Repression: Everyday State Power in Contemporary China. By Lynette H. Ong. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. 286p. $99.00 cloth, $29.95 paper.
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Few policies pit the state against the people whom it governs more so than asset seizure, especially if the seized asset is a personal abode. Through more than 200 interviews with both victims and perpetrators of such seizures in China, examination of untold numbers of government documents, and statistical analysis of thousands of protests related to seizure and demolition, Lynette Ong has written a book that at once makes important conceptual breakthroughs and provides readers with rich descriptions and analysis of the mechanisms for what she calls "everyday forms of repression." Even a strong state like the one in China does not always have to meet resistance with strong force. In fact, Ong shows clearly that more subtle tactics can result in lower costs and potentially greater payoffs for the state. This book provides an important piece of the authoritarian longevity puzzle. Following in the footsteps of classics by James Scott (*Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, 1985) and Yanhua Deng and Kevin O'Brien ("Relational Repression in China: Using Social Ties to Demobilize Protesters," *China Quarterly* 215, 2013), as well as more recent breakthrough works such as Daniel Mattingly's *The Art of Political Repression in China* (2019), Ong's book substantially deepens our understanding of the complex strategies that a strong state like China uses to expropriate from society. This book will inspire many follow-up studies not just on China but also on other authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes.

In the face of systematic exploitation and repression by the state or colonial powers, Scott (1985) posits that people are not powerless and can engage in low-level obstruction, ranging from pilfering to arson, which escalates the state's costs of governing. For the state, such low-level resistance presents a dilemma because deploying the full might of the state to repress it might trigger larger-scale collective action, which is much more costly or even impossible to quell. Yet, tolerating such "everyday forms of resistance" might prevent the state from reaching important objectives.

Ong astutely observes, however, that the state is far from helpless in the face of this low-level resistance. This is especially true for a regime with a grassroots-level presence such as the Chinese Communist Party, which can deploy "augmented state power." To terminate low-level resistance without a backlash, the state deploys violent entrepreneurs, or "thugs," to use coercive tactics to obtain compliance. Although ultimately employed by the state, these thugs' informal status allows the government to disavow their ties with them and even punish them if they unleash violence beyond the state's tolerance. Interviewing both victims and perpetrators of thuggish tactics, Ong carefully catalogs a whole range of tactics used to exert different degrees of pressure on targeted people. Furthermore, in a highly suggestive statistical analysis of more than 2,000 reported cases of land expropriation, Ong finds that the deployment of thugs reduces the chance of larger-scale backlash protests, compared to the deployment of official police forces. This finding suggests the real "worth" of these thugs to the government. Contrary to the popular belief that deployment of thugs would elicit a backlash, Ong's analysis shows that it may not be the case or at least that the deployment of thugs may be better than the alternatives for the government.

Despite the novelty of this finding, the data collected by Ong are far from perfect because they are based on reported cases of protests and repression, which are selected to be reported based on the size of the protests and their location. For example, protests occurring in Southern China are much more likely to be reported by the foreign media; at the same time, localities in Southern China have greater fiscal resources, which afford them greater ability to pay for "thugs for hire." At the very least, this selection issue should be addressed by including provincial- and ideally prefecture-fixed effects, as well as time-fixed effects. Future research on the impact of deploying various repressive agents should take advantage of exogeneous shocks that enlarged or tightened local government's budget constraints, thereby affecting their ability to hire and pay for thugs. Ong's hypothesis is an important one that should be retested using different empirical approaches.

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The state perhaps has an even more powerful tool against low-intensity resistance in "brokers": those who are willing to use their specialized social and political knowledge at the local level to persuade, cajole, and even threaten people into compliance. Through numerous interviews, Ong finds that an effective broker uses a whole range of emotional and economic appeals to garner compliance from previously recalcitrant people, thus saving the state many headaches. These brokers, many of whom are community workers at the neighborhood level, spend their days uncovering household-level information in their neighborhoods, which can then be deployed when the state needs it. This insight further adds substantial richness to the "relational repression" literature (Deng and O'Brien 2013; Mattingly 2019).

Here, one would have liked to see clearer conceptualization of the actions of these brokers and whether their role is repressive. The term "broker" denotes a purely voluntary transaction, but this may not be the case. These brokers are parastatal agents who can directly impose or indirectly recommend repressive measures on their targets. An elderly broker in the neighborhood can channel information on the social connections of residents to the authorities and recommend repressive measures such as detention and employment termination for residents perceived as "disharmonious." Ong's work focuses on the informational aspect of local agents, but their repressive roles also must be highlighted.

Drawing on years of fieldwork, Ong is able to describe not only the perspectives and actions of the interviewees but also their physical environment and livelihood. An important insight from this fieldwork is that villagers resisted expropriation not out of desperate material demand—many still lived comfortably—but out of a sense of injustice about how they were treated by the local authorities and their thugs. This collective memory of injustice can linger for years, creating focal points of resistance against further government expropriation. This insight suggests serial correlation in the localities of protests in China, something the field has not explored.

In addition to the substantial contribution of this book to our understanding of authoritarian repression, Ong's work also provides an important insight into a potential vulnerability in China's local political economy, following her previous works on local financial stress. Since the mid-1990s, local governments in China have accelerated the accumulation of debt to make up for revenue shortfalls and for accumulating unfunded mandates from the central government. By some estimates, local debt surpassed 70% of GDP in 2015, and it is likely that the ration is a higher ratio today (Bai, Chong-En, Chang-tai Hsieh, and Zheng Song, "The Long Shadow of a Fiscal Expansion," in *The Long Shadow of a Fiscal Expansion*, 2016). Only a healthy amount of land sales has allowed the Chinese government to continue ordinary operations and to meet the ballooning "stability maintenance" budget, which includes payments to local thugs and brokers. In 2022, however, land sales revenue fell by more than 40%, even as local governments were pressured by the center to maintain interest payments and so avoid a systemic financial crisis. Local governments' ability to pay local thugs and brokers has diminished quickly. In the short run, central transfers to finance zero-COVID policies have staved off the prospects of angry informal enforcers protesting against pay arrears all over China. Ong's meticulously researched work, however, suggests a scenario where a fiscal hiccup at the central level immediately leads to massive pay arrears for both formal and informal enforcers at the local level. This in turn develops into a crisis of governance at the local level that is costly to reverse. When that occurs, "everyday forms of resistance" may transform into revolutionary energy.

Response to Victor C. Shih's Review of *Outsourcing Repression: Everyday State Power in Contemporary China*

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— Lynette H. Ong

Outsourcing Repression is a study of everyday forms of repression that the Chinese state exercises to minimize the costs and backlash of its routine coercion on society. By using three methods— field qualitative interviews, quantitative analysis of newspaper reports, and content analysis of government documents—I demonstrate both the costs and benefits of outsourcing repression and the conditions under which the "average" gains will turn into liabilities for local authorities.

The analysis of newspaper reports, despite its usual caveats, allows me to discern the "average" returns to the autocrats of using violent thugs for hire. Even though thugs are (unsurprisingly) more likely to use violence against their subjects than will government agents, they are *less* likely to cause backlash compared to either the police or government officials. However, violent outsourcing strategies fail when excessive or undisciplined violence is used or when principal-agent problems occur. I illustrate the "failed cases" through in-depth case studies that I discovered through newspaper reports, which helped me identify potential field sites. Qualitative interviews in the case studies help me discern the mechanisms and conditions under which the violent strategy broke down and became a liability for the hiring authority. In short, the "average" quantitative data and "failed" qualitative case study complement each other to provide a more complete picture of the success and failure rate of the strategy.

I believe that the mixed-method approach is the strength of the study. If it was a purely quantitative study,

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I could have used other approaches, including a survey experiment, to further identify the causal mechanisms. Newspaper reports as a source of data are not without their problems, which the book acknowledges. But, given the time period the data cover—as far back as the 1990s—social media or other similar sources were not an option available to me.

To clarify the role of brokers, the book distinguishes three types: political, social, and economic. Although reducing information asymmetry is one of their essential functions, they also play a repressive role, albeit drawing on different power sources. Neighborhood aunties and uncles—social brokers who have lived in the communities for decades and thus possess informational advantages—can wield enormous social capital over the residents. By mobilizing these nonstate actors to "persuade" citizens—a repressive strategy on its own—the state can take advantage of their social capital by extension. In effect, social brokers who use their own social capital are doing the state's bidding of mobilizing the masses or persuading citizens to comply with its edicts.

Finally, as Victor Shih points out, the sudden reversal of China's zero-COVID policies has called into question the foundation of this repressive—and, more generally, governance— model, a point I made in my recent article ("China's Epidemic of Mistrust: How Xi's COVID-19 U-Turn Will Make the Country Harder to Govern," *Foreign Affairs*, 2023). The functioning of social brokers is largely based on trust, which has been eroded in the recent COVID policy debacle. Erosion of citizens' trust in brokers and the state may have significant implications for "everyday state power" in China. Furthermore, outsourcing also consumes the financial resources of local authorities. With declining GDP growth and rising local government debt, the availability of "stability maintenance" or *Wèi Wèn* funds available to hire thugs is dwindling. Under Xi Jinping's tight grip, the state–society dynamics in China that the book portrays from the Maoist era to the present day (with an emphasis on the contemporary period) are undergoing fundamental change, a topic on which I offer some preliminary observations in the concluding chapter.

Coalitions of the Weak: Elite Politics in China from Mao's Stratagem to the Rise of Xi. By Victor C. Shih. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 280p. $87.00 cloth, $32.00 paper.
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Coalitions of the Weak offers an original and insightful explanation of elite political outcomes in China since Mao's rule. The central dilemma for the Chinese state lies in the need for highly networked and experienced officials who can mobilize resources to consolidate regime power versus their potential for ultimately usurping the power of the rulers. When faced with this dilemma, Victor Shih argues that Chinese leaders often choose to surround themselves with weak coalitions, compromising the centrality of networks and resourcefulness for the sake of maintaining their unchallenged thrones. For Shih, however, weakness does not necessarily denote incompetence, as the term is typically understood in bureaucratic or elite politics, but rather individuals with a weak power base. Such a coalition of the weak will lead to neopatrimonialism, policy volatility, and political instability, but these results are a small price to pay for rulers who feel insecure about their power.

Drawing on a unique dataset and historical archives, Shih examines elite political dynamics after the Great Leap Forward under Mao's leadership. The ill-informed policy that resulted in disastrous agricultural harvests and massive famine created a negative shock to Mao's power base. To stay in power, he had to adjust the composition of his coalition in favor of the weak. Cadres with decades of experience in revolutionary struggle were either purged or forced into retirement and replaced by cadres who had no capacity to challenge his rule. This, in turn, introduced great elite instability during the Cultural Revolution and Mao's twilight years.

Coalitions of the Weak creatively contributes to the theoretical literature by introducing the trade-off that autocrats face in promoting personnel with strong versus weak networks that can be crucial in mobilizing resources to get challenging jobs done. Shih's argument that autocrats prefer personnel with weak networks challenges the conventional wisdom on the Chinese Communist Party's emphasis on meritocracy, as well as the comparative literature on revolutionary one-party dictatorship that attributes its strength to its incorporation of experienced and dedicated cadres. Yet, the trade-off is not one between loyalty and competence, which the existing literature has explored; it is about the density of the cadre-client's network, which determines the extent to which he or she will have to rely on the dictator-patron's patronage to survive.

According to Shih, two groups of weak leaders were promoted by Mao as he pursued this strategy. The first were the officers of the Fourth Front Army, who were previously labeled "counterrevolutionary splittists," as long-term Mao loyalists were being purged. The second group were junior propagandists, or the "scribblers," who were promoted during the Cultural Revolution for reasons other than their ideological zeal. Together, they allowed Mao to hang onto power—unchallenged—in his twilight years, following the departure of the ambitious Lin Biao from the political scene. The tainted military officers and junior propagandists had no resource capacity to challenge Mao's power even if they had wanted to.

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As Shih argues, such coalitions of the weak similarly explain the rehabilitation of Deng Xiaoping and the emergence of Xi Jinping as the new ruler. Lacking a strong power base in the People's Liberation Army, Deng had to share power with tainted military officers, which gave rise to collective decision making in elite politics under his rule. Based on the same logic, Shih argues that collective rule by weakly networked elites during the 1980s and 1990s left a power vacuum that contributed to Xi's ascendance to power. Even though his "father had belonged to the weakest of the revolutionary era factions to emerge out of the Cultural Revolution" (p. 193), Xi Jinping nonetheless emerged as the leader.

Shih advances these arguments persuasively, drawing on a unique dataset of elite politicians and historical archives. His arguments, if taken wholeheartedly, may challenge some conventional wisdom regarding Chinese politics. Given the multiple, often conflicting interpretations of Maoist elite politics by Chinese historians (Teiwes and Sun, Tang, MacFarquhar, and so on), Shih's arguments appear particularly useful in explaining Mao's prolonged and unchallenged rule despite his disastrous policies and ill health.

To extend the analytical leverage beyond Maoist politics, Shih leaves several parameters of the arguments underspecified. First, what is (are) the scope condition(s) of the arguments? The Great Leap Forward is the structural shift that marks the beginning of Shih's analysis. But what is it about this ill-conceived and disastrous policy that is so indispensable in his analytical framework? He hints at the proclivity of weak leaders to adopt this strategy: "this style … was well suited for an increasingly ill dictator with declining cognitive capacity to rule until his dying day" (p. 191). That sounds intuitive; weak and insecure leaders will not want to be surrounded by strong followers who may threaten their power. However, how would this style explain the outcomes in subsequent periods: Why were the post-Mao elite leaders insecure and so pursued their own coalitions-of-the-weak strategy? The Tiananmen massacre aside, there was no comparable disastrous event or exogenous shock that shook the power base of the elite leaders in the post-1979 high-growth era. Therefore, this related question arises: How does the coalition-of-the-weak strategy explain the lineup of Xi loyalists in the upper echelons of power in the Twentieth Party Congress?

My second question pertains to the definition of a weak coalition: Why is "weak" defined as the density or centrality of a given network? Why does the depth of network influence matter—and more than competence does—in consolidating regime power? Will competent deputies not help solidify a ruler's power and threaten it at the same time? Certainly, it would be challenging to measure the competence of military and civilian officials in the Maoist era, given the lack of formal education of these officials. But the lack of clarification on this critical point weakens its analytical leverage.

A related question is how the weak coalition argument fits with the more prevalent argument of factional elite politics to which Shih himself has contributed. A coalition of the weak appears to me to be a smaller subset of factional networks, in which one has a less dense factional network compared to other peers or competitors who are part of denser factional networks. For instance, Xi's faction consisting of those who served with him in Fujian and Shanghai will be less dense than the Communist Party Youth League, which is a nationwide network. By this measure, Xi Jinping will belong to a weaker coalition compared to Li Keqiang, who rose through the ranks in the Youth League, despite Xi's princeling background. In short, there is both synergy and tension with the factional politics literature that Shih could have explored to augment the analytical power of his argument.

My third and last point (albeit a minor one) concerns the presentation of Chinese names, of which there are plenty. The non-Chinse reader could have benefited from a systematic tree diagram or chart to refer to for understanding how each individual fits into the grand scheme of the argument or specific era of politics. This is a minor point about the presentation of material that could be addressed in future editions of the book.

Overall, *Coalitions of the Weak* is essential reading for those interested in Maoist politics and elite political dynamics in China. More broadly, it should be of great interest to scholars concerned with how authoritarian leaders make choices between strong resourceful deputies and weak, tainted, or less connected deputies who will faithfully serve, rather than challenge, their power. It should be widely read by graduate students, China scholars, and all those interested in autocracies in the years to come.

Response to Lynette H. Ong's Review of *Coalitions of the Weak: Elite Politics in China from Mao's Stratagem to the Rise of Xi*

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— Victor C. Shih

In Professor Ong's detailed and comprehensive review of *Coalitions of the Weak*, she raises several conceptual issues. First, she highlights the vague scope conditions of the "weak coalition" argument. In the introduction, I set forth the broad condition that the theory is most applicable to regimes with "well-defined selectorate bodies and hierarchies" (p. 11). Beyond that, indeed, the book never states the scope conditions clearly. In part, I did not do so because I do not think that coalition compositions can be reduced further to institutional or historical conditions. Ultimately, the dictator has some agency on which

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coalition strategy to pursue. Throughout the book, I imply that the argument is the most applicable to cases in which the dictator or leaders would like to hold power or influence for life. As Ong points out, I make many references to Mao's poor health toward the end of his life. Indeed, the coalition of the weak is helpful toward the end of a dictator's life because weak officials will not dare to challenge even a sickly dictator. If leaders really wanted to retire from politics for good at a certain point, they would have much less concern about ruling in poor health and would want to select strong successors to maximize the survivability of the regime, but that clearly was not the case for Mao or even for Deng and his colleagues.

Another point raised by Ong is the historical context of the Great Leap Forward, which coincided with Mao's deployment of the "coalition-of-the-weak" strategy. Given the absence of a disaster during the 1980s, why did we still observe the tendency to promote weak successors? First, I suspect that Mao would have converged on some version of the weak coalition strategy even without the Great Leap disaster, because he clearly wanted to rule for life. The book focuses on the post–Great Leap years to control for Mao's diminished prestige and power after the disaster, rather than to highlight the Great Leap disaster as a reason why Mao pursued the weak coalition strategy (p. 30). To be sure, after veteran elites criticized Mao in 1962, he realized the merits of removing these well-connected veterans, but he likely would have come to the same realization later. In the 1980s, many surviving veterans wished to hang onto influence, if not power, for life, which explains their pursuit of the weak coalition strategy. Again, I should have stated clearly the desire to pursue power and influence for life as a scope condition of the theory.

A more profound point that Ong raises is the relationship between the weak coalition argument and factionalism, which posits that authoritarian leaders cultivate support coalitions composed of officials who share previous experiences with them. This book is actually a critique of factionalism and does not present a "subset" of the factionalism argument. Members of Mao's weak coalition did not have friendly relationships with him. The scribblers were too young and of junior status to have known Mao before 1965. Their junior status was correlated with the limited size of their networks, as chapter 2 shows. Members of the Fourth Front Army were criticized and demoted by Mao wholesale because they sought to split the party in the 1930s. Yet, Mao strategically used these individuals as pawns in senior-level positions in the 1960s and 1970s. A shortfall of the book is its failure to specify the conditions under which dictators pursue a factional versus the weak coalition strategy. Intuitively, when senior leaders in one-party regimes face definite retirement, especially due to pressure from other powerful politicians, factionalism seems to be the prevailing strategy. When aging leaders seek to prolong their power and influence until the end, purging powerful colleagues and installing coalitions of the weak seem to be the optimal strategies. In the Twentieth Party Congress, we have not seen a coalition of the weak because Xi is still in his prime as a leader. At the Twenty-First and Twenty-Second Party Congresses, we may indeed see a stronger tendency to use a weak coalition strategy.

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