In Search of Peace Studies in China: The Rise of Rights Movements, Conflict Resolution, and Prospects of Peace Studies

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Peace studies in China has had meaningful initial developments, but the sustain-ability of the field's development has been constrained by an authoritarian political atmosphere. Rights and justice are core issues in peace studies, but these remain unaddressed in China. Thus, this article highlights studies on rights movements as de facto peace studies in an authoritarian setting and compares the movement among the middle class and that of peasants/workers, which can help us understand current contradictions and disharmony in Chinese society. Maintaining the stability of a turbulent society is becoming a crucial agenda for the Chinese state. Accordingly, studies on rights movements will become increasingly important.

Keywords   rights movements, China, peace studies, conflict resolution, middle class, peasants, workers

Peace Studies with Chinese Characteristics

This article surveys the current state of peace studies in China. Admittedly, given the authoritarian characteristics of the Chinese polity and the resulting limited social space, peace studies in China sounds somewhat like an oxymoron. However, unique peace studies have developed in China with characteristics that enable them to survive under authoritarianism. Prior to embarking on a review of peace studies in China, it is first necessary to briefly mention the political environment of China, which may have influenced the development of peace studies.

China has maintained a stern authoritarian regime quite successfully, and open discussions of human rights and/or state violence within China have long been taboo. For instance, the Tiananmen incident was not discussed publicly for a long time. Each year, when approaching the anniversary of the Tiananmen incident (June 4), the Chinese government strengthened its censorship over the relevant information flow on the Internet. This year (2022) was no exception.

Numbers 89 or 64, which remind viewers of June 4, 1989, could not be searched online. The tank and candle, which also symbolize the massacre, were also blocked (Brouwer 2022; Gan 2022). Even though many years have passed since 1989, the state[1] has not loosened its control over politically sensitive incidents such as Tiananmen.

In recent years, human rights abuses targeting the Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang have attracted international attention. International non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and media have reported inhumane acts such as arbitrary detention, torture, forced labor, and sexual violence. In response, the Chinese government banned the relevant information flow and access to those regions, asserting that issues regarding Xinjiang are "China's internal affairs that brook no interference" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2021). Some foreign governments and companies have attempted to press the Chinese government to improve its human rights record, yet they have fallen short of their goals. Chinese consumers, particularly Gen Z, armed with vocal nationalism, have boycotted international clothing brands that declared they would stop importing Xinjiang cotton (Human Rights Watch 2021; Richardson 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has offered another opportunity for the Chinese authoritarian regime to reinforce its power. To completely block the spread of the virus, the Chinese government adhered to draconian authoritarian measures, such as the lockdown of certain cities. Under the guise of public security, surveillance of people's daily lives has been strengthened and violence during such processes has been justified. In some cases, Chinese citizens fed up with the "zero-COVID policy" started to raise complaints (BBC 2022; Feng 2021). However, rather than bottom-up pressure from citizens, local governments' financial strain is mostly responsible for the recent change in China's zero-COVID policy: many local governments simply cannot sustain the cost of mass testing (Huang 2022; Li 2023). Despite recent changes in official policy to tackle COVID-19, however, it cannot be denied that China has strengthened its ability to engage in "digital authoritarianism"—sophisticated technology that enables an almost ubiquitous surveillance system, as used in the recent pandemic period (Khalil 2020).

The above-mentioned episodes demonstrate that the Chinese government has not loosened its authoritarian grip on society. As such, open discussions of human rights and/or state violence, which are popular themes in peace studies in general, seem difficult, even as the object of academic research. Nevertheless, peace studies exists in China but with unique Chinese characteristics. Briefly speaking, peace studies in China—intended or not—serves to strengthen the state's official rhetoric to undergird the regime, rhetoric such as "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui*) and "peaceful rise" (*heping jueqi*). The state has often strategically deployed concept of peace. However, it is unrealistic to expect peace studies to play the role of a prosecutor who investigates the dark past and holds

the state accountable. Moreover, retaining limited participants and audiences, peace studies in China remains a non-mainstream discipline in academia, making it difficult for scholars to have an independent voice.

Peace studies (*hepingxue*), as a field of study, developed relatively late in China. In 2000, the Department of World History at Nanjing University established cooperative relationships with the Centre for Trust, Peace, and Social Relations at Coventry University in the UK. Since then, personal exchanges between the two institutions have been ongoing, such as Coventry University professors opening relevant lectures at Nanjing University and Nanjing University professors receiving relevant training at Coventry University. In 2003, the Institute for International Peace Studies (*Nanjingg Guoji Heping Yanjiusuo*) was established as the first research institution focusing solely on peace studies in China. In 2005, the First International Peace Studies Conference in China was held in Nanjing (Luo 2017). This early developmental stage of peace studies in China corresponds with the state's active deployment of peace in official rhetoric, including the use of "harmonious society" domestically and "peaceful rise" abroad. The side effects of rapid economic development, such as the widening gap between regions and classes, undermined socioeconomic and geographical equality, and Hu Jintao's leadership emphasized the restoration of socialist values. Against this backdrop, some have claimed that peace studies could play a role in conflict resolution in Chinese society (Meng 2006).

In the early stages, small positive steps were taken, even under authoritarian circumstances. Chinese scholars have actively imported and been influenced by the preceding works of Western scholars. John Galtung's concept of positive and negative peace, in particular, has been widely cited by Chinese scholars (Jiang 2012; Li 1996; Liu 2010; 2015). Western scholars' works have been translated into Chinese and introduced into Chinese academia. Liu Cheng at Nanjing University translated many Western scholars' texts into Chinese; for example, Andrew Rigby's "Justice and Reconciliation: After the Violence" (Luo 2017), Egon Spiege's "Peace Studies: Basics and Issues" (Spiegel and Liu 2013), and David P. Barash's "Peace and Conflict Studies." Liu Cheng also introduced Rank's perspectives on peace and the trend of peace studies in the US (Rank and Liu 2005). International peace studies conferences have become more frequent since the first international conference was held in 2005. Some scholars have argued that peace studies in China has become more proactive since 2005 (Luo 2017), supported by many seminars, discussions, and undergraduate and postgraduate classes. In 2017, Nanjing in Jiangsu Province, a symbol and cradle of peace studies in China, was designated as the first "International City of Peace" in China (International Cities of Peace, "Nanjing, China," n.d.). After Nanjing, Zhijiang in Hunan Province and Weifang in Shandong Province became an International City of Peace in 2021 (International Cities of Peace, "Zhijiang, Hunan, China," n.d.; International Cities of Peace, "Weifang, China," n.d.).

After the early stages, Chinese scholars made persistent efforts to Sinicize peace studies. Some scholars stated that the root of peace can be found in traditional Chinese philosophies such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Mohism, which emphasize harmony and balance (Fu 2015; Li 1997). Others regard peace as the battle between "history-reality-future," stressing that peace studies should be built on the principles of Marxist dialectical materialism (Xiong 1988). This tendency to Sinicize peace studies has come to include claims to justify the official rhetoric of the Chinese leadership. Some purport that Deng Xiaoping made a critical contribution to peace studies in China because he emphasized domestic stability and a peaceful international environment as preconditions for China's development. Deng Xiaoping's foreign policy keynote had been "hiding brightness, nourishing obscurity" (*taoguang yanghui*); in other words, keeping a low profile while avoiding collisions with the West—a rational approach for China to bide its time until it had accumulated sufficient capabilities to confront the West. In Chinese peace studies, this approach has been justified by China's efforts to maintain world peace and stability. In a similar vein, some assert that Chinese leadership's emphasis on "harmonious society" enriched theories of peace studies (Meng 2006). Such claims have been further stretched to support and justify the notion of the "peaceful rise" of China. Another mission of peace studies is to eliminate the "China threat" characterization and establish China's image as a "peaceful power" (*heping daguo*) worldwide (Fu 2015). Chinese foreign policy keynotes are arcane and cannot be interpreted literally. Keynotes like "peaceful rise" and "peaceful development" (*heping fazhan*), signaling Chinese foreign policy's transition from reticent to assertive, are intended to convey China's strong will to acquire a central position in the international arena. At the same time, while being concerned about how the outside world regards China, such keynotes have been decorated with the concept of peace. This demonstrates the Chinese state's active use of peace studies for strategic purposes.

Another significant strand of peace studies in China highlights China as a victim in world history. Peace studies in China began by reflecting on the Nanjing Massacre and related issues, such as the Japanese invasion of China and the anti-Japanese war. Historical lessons from such history include some important themes in peace studies, such as opposition to war, trauma, and violence. As aforementioned, Nanjing served as the cradle for peace studies in China. It is home to the first research institution to focus solely on peace studies (the Institute for Peace Studies), the first international conference on peace studies, the first peace museum, and is the first international city of peace in China. Thus, Nanjing's symbolism and importance cannot be denied. However, peace studies should be able to transcend history and converse in the contemporary world. Critically speaking, Chinese peace studies does not deal with the many peace-related issues embedded in the lives of common people in the current empirical world. While shirking politically sensitive issues, peace studies remains

rhetorical, while being alienated from reality in China. Chinese society is full of contradictions and conflicts that have accumulated since its reform and opening up. Victims exist not only in the past but also in the contemporary empirical world: those who have suffered state violence during political upheavals and those who have sacrificed themselves during rapid economic development. Without dealing with such humans and their struggles to claim justice in an empirical world, peace studies are unpersuasive. Thus, extending their scope by substantializing themes and implementation methods is necessary for the sustainable development of peace studies in China.

While peace studies in China has made some meaningful initial developments, its developmental path suggests that it may be a long process to grow and bloom. Critically, peace studies in China has limitations as an independent academic discipline. First, it developed as a tool to reinforce the political logic of the state. Accordingly, its capacity to address the popular themes in conventional peace studies (e.g., state violence and transitional justice) is unlikely. Second, as a non-mainstream discipline in academia, peace studies has a very limited audience; thus, it is difficult to lead an academic discourse. Third, the implementation of peace remains rhetorical while being isolated from the current empirical world.

Given the constraints of official peace studies in China, this article discusses the studies that seem to be closer to the peace studies we generally expect; that is, studies on rights movements, which deal with common people's ongoing struggles to claim justice in the empirical world. Although not officially classified as peace studies in China, studies on rights movements deal with themes that are relevant to peace studies: issues that Chinese citizens are disgruntled about and the ways they try to claim justice, sometimes even incurring disadvantages while being branded as antagonists of the state. In that sense, studies on rights movements reflect real feuds between Chinese citizens and the state and the dynamics regarding how conflicts arise, settle, and are reproduced in China.

Peace and Conflicts in China: Rights Movements

Development of Rights Movements in China
The studies on rights movements in China, which are part of the research on state-society relations, provide useful windows through which we can observe how conflicts arise, are settled, and are reproduced in China. "Rights protection" (*weiquan*) refers to Chinese citizens' awareness of their legal rights and active attempts to further protect and enhance them in various issue domains. Such attempts became apparent in the 2000s. As the reform and opening in China proceeded, diverse socioeconomic issues emerged. In other words, the adverse effects of rapid economic development became increasingly serious. As Chinese citizens began to raise their voices about the various issues, Chinese society

began to resemble a volcano: volatile and turbulent (Whyte 2010). Given that maintaining social stability (*weiwen*) is key to the regime's sustainability, conflict resolution has become an important agenda for the state. Subsequently, Hu Jintao's leadership began to focus on balanced development for a harmonious society. The state provided relevant laws and official channels for problem-solving. Property law, which legitimizes private property in socialist countries, has been implemented since 2007. A series of labor-related laws were enacted in 2007 and 2008, including the Labor Contract Law, the Employment Promotion Law, and the revised Arbitration and Mediation Law. Such measures have provided official channels for aggrieved social actors to raise their voices and legitimize certain activities, ranging from outright protests to legal activism.

While Hu Jintao's era was the heyday of rights movements, Xi Jinping's era has demonstrated a much more restrained atmosphere. With heightened power concentration and censorship, attempts to establish a civil society in China have subsided. Rights movements are not as active as before. However, the state cannot repress all masses unconditionally. Social stability should be preserved not just through repression but also through more sophisticated management methods. In particular, Xi has strengthened his power base through intensive anti-corruption campaigns, with Xi himself often emphasizing that "rule by law" (*fazhi*) is the base of modernizing governance, claiming that "[i]f people cannot redress their unfair treatment, confusion and uprising will ensue" (People's Daily Online 2014). The concept of rule by law has been utilized by Xi strategically and is expected to continue for the time being. At the same time, he cannot completely wipe out social space while purporting to support rule by law. Although social space is more limited than it was in Hu's era, there is still space for social actors in Xi's era. The current political environment suggests that social actors should be shrewder and more strategic in terms of which rights they claim and how.

Typologies: Strategies and Issue Domains
Although the Hu and Xi eras exhibited somewhat different features, the nature of authoritarianism has not changed significantly. Authoritarianism demonstrates some degree of flexibility. Even authoritarian China cannot unconditionally press all social actors. The state must deploy diverse and selective strategies to address social discontent. Similarly, social actors must engage in strategic thinking and behavior. Tang (2016) mentions that Chinese authoritarianism has populist features in that it enjoys a high level of regime support by permitting the selective expression of public anger. Thus, rather than regarding authoritarianism as a constant, a comparative and balanced understanding of interactive state-society relations is necessary.

Table 1 suggests that the state or society can adopt either hard or soft strategies. Specifically, a state's choice can be more complex than that of a hard or soft dichotomous division. When displayed from hard to soft, it can be as follows:

Table 1. Typology of State-Society Relations in China

		Society's Strategy	
		Soft	Hard
State's Strategy	Soft	III	IV
	Hard	I	II

Note: Possibility of change in governance or policy: IV>III>II>I.
Source: Hsu and Chang (2021, 45).

"repression, penalizing, co-optation, rewarding, purchasing services propaganda, competition, exhausting, accepting the case, compensation, consultation, mediation, policy innovation, and cooperation with society" (Hsu and Chang 2021, 48). Similarly, society's strategies may form another spectrum from strong resistance to cooperation with the state (ibid.). Thus, both state and societal actors can choose from a range of options.

The issue domains can range as well, including "land, environment/public health, labor, economic management, community, equal rights, culture/religion/ethnicity, and patriotism/nationalism." (ibid., 47) Among the many issues relevant to rights protection, for convenience's sake, this article compares and contrasts two issue domains: (1) middle-class citizens' concerns regarding their properties and living conditions, and (2) peasants' and blue-collar workers'[2] complaints regarding their working conditions and treatment.

These two issue domains are important "vent sites" of Chinese society that have become progressively more volatile and turbulent. The former concerns the relative winners of reform who have climbed the social ladder; for instance, middle-class rights activists that have gained tangible (e.g., private property) and intangible (e.g., social status) assets. For these people, activism is a way to test and confirm such assets, and they tend to be flexible in choosing their behavioral strategies. The latter concerns the relative losers of reform who have descended the social ladder. In the past, the proletariat took pride as the core class of the socialist regime, but have now been relegated to the lower class of Chinese society. Facing relative deprivation, the movement of these actors has been more challenging and demanding.

The state's responses to these social actors vary. For convenience, Table 1 shows the simplified results for the four dyads: hard-hard, hard-soft, soft-hard, and soft-soft. These outcomes are the result of the interaction between the state's and society's behavioral strategies and the respective issue domains' characteristics.

Two Types of Rights Movements
In the process of protecting rights, conflicts between relevant actors are inevitable.

Although Chinese citizens do not target the state as their main adversary, their rights-claiming activities are often regarded as a clash between the state and society. This is because those who seek to advocate for their rights often challenge the original boundaries set by the state, including its customs, rules, and regulations. Claiming rights can also target "friends" of the state who are on the side of actors, such as local officials or entrepreneurs. Thus, intended or not, rights claimants' activities strain the state.

The first type refers to the middle-class people's awareness and protection of their rights regarding their residential spaces and related problems. These people have obtained economic and social status as beneficiaries of the reform and opening; for example, through purchasing housing in the city core in big cities since housing commodification commenced in 2008. After becoming homeowners, they first started to question the issues related to physical housing per se (e.g., the quality of built housing, unclearly specified ownership, and management of public facilities in apartment complexes), clashed against relevant business actors (e.g., developers and management companies), and then moved on to complain about the living environment (e.g., opposing the construction of garbage incineration facilities and toxic chemical plants near their residences). Relatively well-educated and armed with legal knowledge and social capital, urban middle-class citizens have exhibited flexibility and shrewdness in deploying various strategies to defend their interests. Over the past few decades, their rights-claiming activities evolved to include a range of approaches from contentious activities (e.g., street demonstrations) to seeking participation in relevant policy processes.

The state-society interactions in the first type (the interaction between the state and middle-class rights activists) tend to generally be soft-soft interactions (III in Table 1). Of course, a middle-class citizens' rights movement can also take a hard stance with aggressive behavioral patterns, such as street demonstrations. However, their behavioral patterns, on average, tend to be soft. Comparatively speaking, issues raised by urban middle-class rights activists are not recognized as politically sensitive by the state. Such recognition has required a certain amount of time to develop. When middle-class rights activists first emerged in the 2000s, the state was suspicious of the intentions and goals of these activities, but it had to discern whether they were dissidents or not. Although the first generation of homeowner activists shared the experience of being monitored by public security police, through cumulative encounters they were able to assure the state that the aim of their activism was not to challenge the legitimacy of the Chinese state but rather to undergird it. They demonstrated their usefulness in supporting governance; for instance, the Chinese state by itself cannot address problems related to environmental degradation, which has become ever more serious and widespread across the country. Beijing and Guangzhou's middle-class activists and environmental NGOs accessed the local governments and suggested

better ways of waste sorting, reduction, and incineration. Starting from anti-waste incineration campaigns near apartment complexes, middle-class activism advanced to policy advocacy (Johnson 2013). Through such activities, middle-class activists assured the state that they could supplement the state's successful governance.

Essentially, the middle-class citizen movement did not aim to overthrow the regime, which demonstrates the possibilities and limitations of a movement organized by middle-class people. These are people rich in human connections and who have organizational resources. Utilizing their connections (*guanxi*) based on their social status, they can lobby to enhance their group interests. Organizations they have established (such as homeowners' committees and environmental NGOs) possess favorable conditions for their survival in China compared to other types of organizations. At the same time, they do not break the norms of the authoritarian system. Such a moderate feature widens the room for negotiation between the state and society. As long as the state does not recognize these actors and their activities as dangerous, it is likely to allow these social actors more room. Thus, unless society takes an extraordinarily aggressive approach, state-society interactions are more likely to be soft-soft interactions (III in Table 1).

The second type concerns those left behind during the reform and opening process. Peasants and workers comprised the core of the socialist regime. Indeed, they buttressed the birth and development of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Rural areas and peasants were the power base of Mao's struggle to establish the PRC and served as a supply base when the Chinese state first chose to develop urban areas (i.e., unbalanced development). Later, rural residents flowed into cities and formed a cheap labor force (migrant workers) who were willing to work under poor working conditions and low wages. Such a work force bolstered China as "the world's factory" (Chan 2001; Chen 2007; Cooney 2006). However, ironically, as the reform and opening up proceeded, these people became the relative losers. The gap between urban and rural areas (i.e., the gap between the rich and poor) widened. Against this reality, which was far from the egalitarianism advocated by the socialist regime, these people started to voice their accumulated complaints. Their behavioral patterns tended to be more direct and rougher than those of the middle-class rights activists: well-known patterns of the worker movement include suicides and strikes (Chan, Selden, and Pun 2020).

The majority of state-society interactions in the second type (interactions between the state and peasants/workers) tend to fall into I and/or II in Table 1, in which the state adopts a hard strategy against them. Occasionally, type IV interactions (in which the state adopts a soft strategy toward them) are observed. At this point, the state deploys a temporary carrot-giving strategy. The state regards peasants/workers as politically sensitive and remains vigilant against any possible risk of failing to control them. The state's hypervigilant attitude seems

to have originated from its moral inferiority. Indeed, the state is indebted to the peasants and workers for achieving China's current prosperity. However, rather than being rewarded for their sacrifices, peasants and workers were relegated to the periphery of Chinese society. The current generation of such peasants and workers, unlike their parents and grandparents who accepted any treatment as given, vehemently protest their unjust treatment. As have-nots, their expressions of accumulated discontent are straightforward and unreserved, with the mindset of having nothing to lose. While this class of people (the proletariat) lacks the resources that the urban middle class has, their cause—their demands to the state for egalitarianism and for their wants to be met (such as ending their unfair/ unequal treatment)—retains moral superiority, insofar as China claims to be a socialist state. This feature may encourage these actors to take bold steps to demand that the state fulfils their requests. Such activism, when grown on a large scale, can pose challenges to the legitimacy of a regime. Thus, such a possibility may make the state hypervigilant against the rights activism of this class of people.

The state's response to peasants/workers' rights movement has been mixed. On the one hand, the state knows that it is necessary to provide outlets to express discontent and frustration. Thus, the state sometimes allows room for social actors to vent their resentments. However, it should be noted that such behavior of the state is a short-term carrot. Even after offering the carrot, the state switches to the hard stick after a certain time interval. A representative example is the case of Wukan Village in Guangdong Province, which gained international prominence when villagers rose up and demanded justice for land-grabbing by local officials in 2011. Their collective action lasted for several months, and eventually the Guangdong provincial government intervened and allowed villagers to hold democratic elections for the village committee. A protest leader won the election by a landslide and became the new village leader, giving China observers hope for grassroots democracy. Indeed, Wukan Village was extolled as a model for grassroots democracy. However, several years later, the directly elected chief of the village committee (the former protest leader in 2011) was suddenly arrested on bribery charges. The villagers did not believe the charges and planned another round of protests. However, after being intimidated in many ways, their movement lost momentum. Thus ended the so-called "democratic" experiment in Wukan Village (Lee 2017; McDonell 2016). Such cases are common in China. The state can temporarily exhibit some flexibility; however, regarding uprisings from the bottom, the state ultimately takes a hard stance. In hard-hard interactions (II in Table 1), there is little room for negotiation between the state and society.

Implications of Rights Movements in China

The origin of rights movement studies can be traced back to the tradition of

searching for civil society in China, which triggered scholarly attention to emerging social actors and their potential to bring change to the Chinese polity. Although such studies have subsided in recent years (particularly in the Xi era), there have been continuous efforts to identify the sprouts of civil society in China (Ho 2008; Howell 2007; Saich 2000; Zhang and Baum 2004). The reflection on the social actors discussed in this article provides both possibilities and limitations for identifying civil society in China, which may relate to those of peace studies in China. Below, I detail some ways in which rights movement studies are connected to civil society studies and the implications that can be found by surveying the relevant research trends.

First, middle-class rights activism concerns the emergence of the so-called "bourgeois" in Chinese society. Based on the acquisition of private property (housing) in a socialist country, they started to raise their voices about legal rights to their properties and then moved on to discussing other relevant issues regarding quality of life (e.g., the environment and public health). Witnessing such activities that have become quite visible since the 2000s, and in light of Barrington Moore's (1966) assertion of "no bourgeoisie, no democracy," China observers have started to question whether economic rights can be developed into political rights. While earlier studies focused on the emergence of middle-class homeowner activists per se (Cai 2005; Read 2003; Shi and Cai 2006; Tomba, 2005), later studies focused on highlighting their contentions and political participation (Chung 2015; Yip and Jiang 2011).

In the early stage, middle-class citizens' activities tended to take the form of contentious vocal consumer activism. The state was initially suspicious of these actors. However, through cumulative interactions, the state determined that these people did not intend to overthrow the regime and started to allow some room for them. While maneuvering this room, middle-class citizens could evolve their activism from contention to participation. A positive evaluation of this outcome is that Chinese middle-class citizens' aspiration to attain "political efficacy," even in a limited institutional setting (non-competitive authoritarianism), has made some achievements. For instance, some middle-class homeowner activism has moved on to writing proposals to amend existing rules and regulations regarding private property (Chung 2015). In other cases, environmental activists armed with professional knowledge have persuaded relevant government officials to accept their advice regarding garbage incineration measures (Johnson 2013).

Conflict resolution in this realm has revealed possibilities for utilizing institutional channels. Middle-class rights activists have demonstrated adroitness in utilizing multiple platforms such as courts, elections, public hearings, and academic seminars, which proved to be moderately effective. For their own survival in the authoritarian system, rather than being an adversary of the state, these actors may have learned to cooperate with the state and utilize such opportunities to further enhance their interests.

Some critique such state-society interactions as the state's utilization and/or incorporation of social actors, which is an extension of state corporatism (Hsu and Hasmath 2014; Thorton 2013). However, others argue that it is more realistic and desirable to find ways to "dance with the authorities" (Lee and O'Brien 2021). Overall, compared to peasants/workers, middle-class rights activists deploy more sophisticated strategies to utilize or interact with the state. A tentative finding in this field is the strategic cohabitation between state and society (Fulda, Li, and Song 2012; Spires 2011).

Second, peasants and/or workers' rights activism reflects a challenge from the bottom; in other words, the push from the traditional proletariat class that previously endured and buttressed the rapid economic development of China. As in the case of Wukan Village, in some cases, researchers have attempted to find possibilities for a sprouting civil society. However, more often than not, scholars reconfirmed the state's dominance over society in this realm (Friedman 2014a; He 2008; Lee 2007; Lee and Shen 2014; Zhang and Smith 2009). Instead of utilizing institutional channels or sophisticated strategies, peasants and workers often adopt aggressive strategies. The following details why. Sometimes workers choose to adopt moderate strategies. As these social actors lack sufficient legal knowledge, activists and legal professionals committed to enhancing labor rights have supported workers in suing employers for malpractice. However, such routes involve considerable time, money, and energy consumption, with a low possibility of winning the case. Such routes also test the claimant's endurance both physically and mentally. Thus, while taking such routes is possible, it is unlikely to become a popular option (Stockmann and Gallagher 2011). A related feature of China's workplaces is that official unions (the All China Federation of Trade Unions) are not recognized by workers. As typical state-corporatist organizations, these official unions cannot represent workers' interests from a bottom-up perspective. Lacking organizational resources, workers have no choice but to resort to wildcat strikes and other disruptive actions (Chan 2009; Friedman 2014b). Besides strikes, another form of disruptive action by aggrieved workers has been suicide (such as the series of suicides observed at Foxconn) (Chan, Selden, and Pun 2020). In other cases, migrant workers plan explosive terror attacks at public facilities, such as schools, train stations, and airports. Such aggressive expressions of discontent can threaten society. If such activities can be expanded horizontally (i.e., if disgruntled peasants/workers form alliances across villages/cities), it could be curtains for the regime. In light of the success of the Solidarity union and political movement in Poland, the Chinese government is aware of the danger of an uprising from the bottom. Although the peasants' and workers' claims of justice and equality are morally superior, the state is not ready to accept them. Thus, the basic reaction from the state is a hard-line strategy—repression. Guangdong has been known for having an active labor movement. However, in the mid-2010s, Guangdong provincial government embarked on

a sudden crackdown on labor NGOs, arresting relevant staff. This case shows that the fates of labor NGOs and activists often lie at mercy of the state (Cao 2015). Another strategy of the state is to cellularize (that is, to individualize and/or regionalize) activism so that it does not grow as a collective power (Chen 2007; Chung and Chung 2016). Thus, while an uprising in a single factory or one region is sometimes allowed, uprisings across factories or regions are prohibited.[3] Another common strategy involves quick economic compensation and/or proactive quashing, which prohibits social actors from moving on to the next step, like forming alliances or affecting legislation. Overall, conflict resolution in this realm has not yet been sufficiently institutionalized or suppressed. In other words, it reconfirms the state's dominance over society.

Prospect of Peace Studies in China

This study surveys the current state of peace studies in China. While peace studies in China began relatively late compared to other countries, they have made some meaningful positive developments since the early 2000s. It reveals several constraints on independent disciplines under authoritarianism. Contrary to what we expect from conventional peace studies, Chinese peace studies have lacked discussions on current peace- and conflict-related issues in Chinese society (i.e., state violence and transitional justice). Thus, this article borrowed the lens of another discipline—studies on rights movements—to discuss one of the important themes in peace studies: conflict resolution in Chinese society. Studies on rights movements reflect Chinese citizens' struggles and claims to acquire justice and fairness in their daily lives. Additionally, rights are basic conditions for human existence and comprise the basis of human security.

This study specifically focused on two types of rights movements (middle-class people's rights movement and peasants/workers' rights movement) in China and compared them. Both types of rights claimants attempt to acquire justice and equality, which are basic conditions of human existence, and such activities have legal grounds. Studies on such social actors and their activities help us understand what kind of contradictions and disharmony can be seen in modern Chinese society and how they can disturb its sustainable development if not settled smoothly. The process through which efforts are made to resolve existing conflicts is close to "positive peace" as defined by Galtung. In that sense, although not specifically studying peace in China, studies on rights movements can be used to fill the void of official peace studies.

The discussion in this article suggests both the possibilities and limits of conflict resolution (and further peace studies) in the Chinese context. The sustainable development of peace in China has been restrained for several reasons. The Chinese state basically adopts a "divide and rule" strategy. The

middle-class rights movement has gained scope for survival and development. However, it avoids crossing the red line set by the state. Thus, the middle-class rights movement has limitations in generating dramatic changes in an authoritarian context. In contrast, while the peasants/workers movement has moral superiority and legitimacy over the state, due to concerns about the political fallout such a movement can bring, the movement is suppressed rather than encouraged—despite the Chinese state's emphasis on egalitarianism since its birth.

Coercion (or repression) remains a valid tool for authoritarian rule (Yang 2017). However, rather than wielding repression unconditionally, depending on the target population groups' characteristics and behavioral patterns, the state decides on a particular coping strategy (from various options ranging from brutal repression to cooperation with society). When the state acknowledges that finding a balance between repression and concession through political arrangement is a reasonable choice (Cai 2008), and thus conflict resolution through non-coercive ways (such as the use of institutional channels) increases, there will be more possibility to further discuss rights activism (as well as peace studies) in the Chinese context.

Maintaining stability in a turbulent society is a crucial issue for the Chinese state. As long as the contradictory structure that has produced injustice and inequality remains unaddressed, conflict will continue. As such a situation can threaten the overall stability and sustainable development of the country, conflict resolution is a thorny but crucially important agenda. Studies on rights movements will, therefore, become increasingly important in the near future. Although we cannot expect to see radical change from the rights movements in the Chinese context, the issues pertaining to rights will expand: the middle-class rights movement has already shown an initial evolution from property rights to environmental rights and relevant civil rights. Although not immediate, such a trend may extend to the realms of political, religious, and human rights. Thus, we need to focus on studies on Chinese society that deal with rights and examine how they facilitate peace discussions.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1.   The state refers to the "party-state" throughout this article.
2.   Hereafter, "worker" means "blue collar worker."
3.   Foreign companies become easy targets for such activities with the connivance of

local governments. Such events can be tools to tame foreign companies.

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