

Authoritarian Resilience Versus Everyday Resistance: The Unexpected Strength of Religious Advocacy in Promoting Transnational Activism in China

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This article examines one of the most sensitive forms of transnational activism—the money and services foreign advocacy groups provide to empower locals—and explores the reasons why some aid groups have been allowed to work in certain locations when conventional wisdom and experience would indicate otherwise. In a careful comparison of four Chinese cities with similar geographic, political, and economic conditions, we find that only one particular form of religious activist network has been tolerated and its rule-breaking nature has created a persistent activism of “everyday resistance.” Thus, decoding the mechanisms of its success, named “backdoor listing” and “minority-majority alliance,” can help to expand our knowledge about not only the possibility of religious freedom in China, but also our theoretical understanding of the transnational activism strategies that are being widely debated and employed to improve human rights worldwide.

Whoever is standing here today must be shivering and fearful; I am shivering tonight not because I may become like the speakers in previous days who got interrogated, detained, or arrested right after they left the rostrum. I am shivering and fearful because I do not deserve to represent the brothers and sisters who rise and defend the Cross of the Sanjiang Church in Wenzhou without reservation . . . I want to thank the Yongjia County Government, Oubei Town Hall, and officers and soldiers in Sanjiang. Despite the rush deadline your superior gave you, you exercised it civilly, rationally, and humanely! The Cross could stand here for forty days not only because our believers use our lives to defend it but also because you exercised the law with reason.

—Anonymous speaker in the public protest against demolition of the Sanjiang Church in Wenzhou, China, April 27, 2014.¹

INTRODUCTION

The massive crackdown on Christian symbols in the city of Wenzhou, the so-called Chinese Jerusalem that used to be recognized as a model of religious tolerance, is a vivid example of the complex and often ironic relationship between repressors, victims, and the activists intent on improving the situation. This repressive policy imposed by top leaders has brewed contention, stirred up demands for human rights protection, and ignited a conviction that the disputed policy would not be fully enforced on the ground. As noted in the above quotation, the crackdown has even engendered a degree of respect for frontline law-and-order agencies that have shown sympathy for the basic rights of activists. It is theoretically and practically interesting that this church as well as tens of thousands of other churches had “legally” existed (the demolished church in Wenzhou was owned by a legally registered congregation), were sponsored by religious advocates worldwide, and were tolerated by local officials for decades.

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¹The quotation is from unnamed activists who organized the Sanjiang Church protest. The full-text statement, titled “An Unfinished Sermon” is available at http://www.gospelherald.com.hk/news/chi_769.htm.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) keeps a close watch over and strictly regulates every social entity. It is particularly suspicious of individuals and groups with foreign connections and specifically forbids foreigners from engaging directly with local organizations.² Yet unexpected exceptions occur, and these exceptions vary among groups and locations. This article examines one of the most sensitive forms of transnational activism—the money and services foreign advocacy groups provide to empower local Chinese churches—and explores the reasons why some aid groups have been allowed to work in certain locations when conventional wisdom and experience would indicate otherwise.

Scholars often consider transnational activism in strong authoritarian environments such as China to be ineffective due to its strong economic performance, nonliberal culture, isolation from international society, and/or “authoritarian resilience” (Dickson 2003, 2007, 2008; Nathan 2003; Shambaugh 2008; Wright 2010). By the most optimistic estimates, transnational activism can be effective only when the outside world observes instances of bodily harm to individuals and infringements on their legal rights (Keck and Sikkink 1999). However, this effectiveness, when it poses a threat to national cohesion and integrity, is greatly limited in scope and, theoretically, should not work at all in a society impervious to outside criticism (Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999, 2013). This article presents evidence to support a different and more optimistic assessment of transnational activism in the context of Chinese authoritarianism. I argue that by building a local network, including government-sponsored social groups, transnational religious activists can pressure a strong authoritarian regime to incorporate basic freedoms and to build a space for activism, even if the society is closed to outside criticism and the state overtly ridicules and condemns advocacy as imperialism.

Why China? Why Protestant Activism?

Although all world religions have certain aspects of transnational activism and all Chinese religions have their grievances with the state, for the purposes of this article Protestantism was selected because of its more decentralized, grassroots yet transnational features in China. Unlike Tibetan Buddhism, Falun Gong (a Chinese spiritual practice), or Catholicism, all of which also sustain strong traditions of civil disobedience and transnational activism, Protestantism has no well-recognized international or national leadership. It is therefore easier to identify the impact of individual choices on the ground from messy church-state interactions. Using a Catholic incident as an example, when the tacit consensus of “dual approved” ordination between the Vatican and Beijing was broken due to illegal ordination in Hebei in 2010, it was hard to tell whether the problem was local or central. Although Protestantism is listed as one of the five legal religions and is forced to be “patriotic” along with other Chinese religions, Chinese Protestant activists are more internationally connected than their counterparts in other Chinese-approved religions. These features make them an appropriate choice for testing my claims.

Scholars of contentious politics, such as Charles Tilly, cite China and Iran as examples of “high-capacity undemocratic regimes” due to their highly effective institutions and programs for monitoring dissidents and their use of violence against them. This has resulted in extremely small civic spaces within these communities for political or social contention (Tilly 2003:47, 73). Katrin Kinzelbach applied the “spiral model” of human rights (Keck and Sikkink 1998) to China

²For example, in the “Regulations of Religious Affairs,” Article 4 states: “All religions shall uphold the principle of independence and autonomy. Religious groups, places of religious activity, and religious affairs shall not be under the control of a foreign power” (People’s Republic of China, State Council, “Regulations of Religious Affairs,” Premier Wen Jiabao, No. 426, November 30, 2004, trans. Peter Erickson. Available at http://www.orthodox.cn/contemporary/zjshwtli_en.htm). Translation of older religious regulation documents can be found in MacInnis (1989).

and found that countermovements waged by the state have successfully weakened the power of transnational networking (Kinzelbach 2013:164–81).

By contrast, Andrew Nathan (2003) and other China experts who adhere to the authoritarian resilience thesis believe that the CCP has found ways to overcome the social challenges arising from rapid economic development, the growing discontent toward/from social elites, and ongoing criticism from the West. However, the institutional advantages of advanced technology, legalism, intraparty checks and balances, and meritocracy that are highlighted in the authoritarian resilience literature can be used not only by the regime but also by skillful, low-profile, and “embedded” activists and advocates who are well practiced in getting around the rules (Ho and Edmonds 2008). A better understanding of how some transnational religious activists have won concessions and tolerance from Chinese officials can lead to an understanding of how advocates can facilitate a broader social and civic contentious space in China and, perhaps, in other authoritarian states in the future.

Transnational Religious Activism Versus Authoritarian State: Literature Review

My theory and research builds on and contributes to the existing literature by delving more deeply into the networking and competitive processes of practitioners on the ground. Relevant publications have disproven views of the state as being an unbeatable, unified control machine or, contrariwise, the presumption that feeble social actors can be empowered easily by outsiders to defeat repressors (Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999, 2013). Neither view is accurate. My research explores examples of persistent and often overlooked religious activism, and emphasizes the subtle differences between fully integrated, state religious-control agencies (i.e., the high leadership of the “patriotic” churches), registered congregations, and unregistered “underground” communities. To advance their religious freedom agenda, some transnational advocates have learned to use the semi-non-state actor (i.e., the registered church) as a “bridge” or “front” with which to collaborate with local officials to successfully bypass legal restrictions set by the central government.³

Recent literature reports similar findings in other areas (Hildebrandt 2013; Mertha 2009; Lin and O’Brien 2008; Schwartz and Shieh 2009; Tsai 2007). However, these new studies tend to focus on some sectors of the state and underestimate the transnational dynamics among other social actors such as registered, unregistered, and foreign advocacy groups, which my research has found to be essential to the success of Chinese religious activism. Studies of Jessica Teets and Anthony Spire have revealed that civil society/NGO/grassroots groups indeed can survive in China, but they have to act collaboratively, complementarily, and show no intention of disobedience (Spire 2011; Teets 2014).⁴ The interesting part of transnational religious activism is that the underlying relationship between the groups and the state is much more contentious and confrontational, and many of these religious groups are far more disobedient than their secular counterparts. In the eyes of the CCP, the mere existence of these groups already disobeys its will and order, which is why the story of “success,” or the uneasy tolerance in such bad relationships, is so intriguing.

Conducting Activism Under Authoritarianism

It is obvious that any activism in an authoritarian state, religious or not, is dangerous and difficult. The literature of social movements has provided insights regarding the key factors that may lead to successful or failed collective claims on public authorities. Those key factors are: local

³Many studies on Chinese environmental NGOs have found cooperation from Chinese environmental “GONGOS,” government-operated NGOs, to be helpful and essential (Wu 2002).

⁴The comparison between secular and religious social organizations would be an interesting topic. However, limited by space, this article focuses only on religious organizations and their activism.

and international political opportunity, organizational strength, and framing capacity (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996). Because the organizational strength of social forces is often limited in the beginning, the full impact of a contentious social movement takes time to unfold, and participants may not be aware of the common ideological frames uniting/driving their actions. Many studies have emphasized mechanisms and processes, especially how the coordinated action of common people can emerge from a specific political context (Tilly and Tarrow 2007:29–32). Hence, here are the questions: Could the same mechanisms or processes have a similar impact in autocracies as in democracies? In terms of mobilization—the most central process of all collective actions—can religious activists and advocates use the same strategies in China that have been utilized elsewhere?

Mobilization, the gathering of a civilian movement, needs to be done with great caution in an authoritarian setting because even just building an organizational and framing capacity alone is a confrontational, threatening act to the ruling regime. Religious groups are individually assessed by the Chinese government with respect to their organizational strengths, as well as their international origins, theological/ideological backgrounds, and track records in China and elsewhere. Furthermore, activists routinely face both friendly and hostile social groups for many different reasons. To resist censorship and crackdowns, the activists' first priority is to ensure the presence of a network that enables the transfer of money, materials, and knowledge into and out of the country. This network must also ensure that there is a basic tolerance of its operations so it will not be crushed before it can fully develop. Therefore, local activists tacitly align with outside standards, norms, and actions to avoid any suspicion of being "traitors to the state" or actively "aiding the enemy"—rhetoric often used by the governments of China, Iran, Egypt, and elsewhere.

Nonetheless, although both informality and some level of secrecy are necessary on the part of social activists, neither is a viable mechanism for survival or potential success, as a repressive regime will almost inevitably discover what is going on. Literature has focused on large international Christian groups and their developmental projects such as the Salvation Army or World Vision International, but the rule-abiding nature of these groups has prevented them from seeking alternative solutions and has weakened their ability to extend their scope of activity beyond their government-permitted roles (Hamrin 2007; Ma 2002). This article finds that the unexpected power of transnational religious advocacy is its ability to encourage an advanced form of "everyday resistance" (Scott and Kerkvliet 1986). Activists and believers work together to defy unjust regulations and restrictions in their everyday practices such as the display of religious symbols, maintaining unregistered congregations, hosting foreign missionaries, and developing underground cross-border networks and organizations. Evaluating groups that engage in the most common and crucial law-violating behaviors in China—cross-border mission-related activities—has revealed two mechanisms that lead to a more successful result.

The key is to seek collaboration, or at least recognition, from a government-sponsored social group. As shown in Wenzhou before the destruction of their church and elsewhere in China, the secret to success in everyday resistance against the state is for activists with local roots to win the assistance or tolerance of local officials. The second key is to align with the strongest social group available, one that is capable of fending off criticism and attacks from authorities and potential "spoilers" within the community. These "spoilers" may be diehard party vanguards, heads of competing social organizations, or a jealous second-in-command leader within its own group. The most effective weapon these activists have for defending their transnational network is not lawsuits, street protests, media exposure, or the "naming and shaming" approaches commonly used by Western social activists and nongovernmental organizations (Lake and Wong 2009). Such strategies have been ineffective in countries where basic freedoms of expression, movement, and association are limited (Cai 2010). A better alternative strategy for Chinese religious activists is to work from both inside and outside the system in order to know who is willing to help the network when it is vulnerable.

Hidden Mechanisms: Backdoor Listing and Minority-Majority Alliance

Transnational activism in high-capacity authoritarian environments requires that participants handle great repression under conditions of nonexistent or very weak societal support and a hostile legal environment. For locals, collaborating with foreigners is often dangerous enough to stop most cautious social leaders, but the rewards are also significant once participants are able to overcome these hurdles. The collaboration not only brings in needed resources and know-how, but also generates a law-breaking precedent that permits space for transnational activism to grow. To break through legal restrictions, participants work together in a tacit alliance in which both sides encompass registered groups through a mechanism of *backdoor listing* and foster a *minority-majority alliance* between registered and unregistered groups.

Backdoor listing—working under or with legally registered companies or social groups—decreases the risk of a government crackdown and provides some opportunities for activism. Google China is one well-known example of exploiting this backdoor listing mechanism. The company remains operational in China through its Hong Kong office even after it was forced to “leave” in 2010.⁵ Some foreign advocacy groups also adopt this strategy and work with Chinese-registered NGOs⁶ or universities, which have legal status and strong government backing. For example, the German-based NGO, Transparency International (IT), allies with law and public administration professors in China and established its first Chinese office under Tsinghua University in 2009.⁷ Through various “backdoor” exchanges, consulting, and dialogue brokered by Chinese academics and experts, IT has persuaded the Chinese government to adopt the concepts and procedures developed by IT to conduct its own research on corruption and publish an official transparency and anti-corruption report in 2010. Similar practices have been recognized in a wide range of China studies literature (Hirono 2008; Ma 2002; Xie 2009).

Advocacy groups often cannot control how the authorities perceive them, but they can work to improve the persuasion process, for example, by establishing or borrowing a legal front to operate as a “backdoor” to access institutional benefits such as name recognition and legal protection. A social organization from the United States would face more suspicion than similar groups from Scandinavian Europe or Singapore, for instance, because diplomatic tensions have been rising since the U.S. government initiated its “human rights diplomacy” campaign in the 1990s. It would also be much easier for Chinese co-workers or foreign nationals recruited from large overseas Chinese communities in places like Taiwan, South Korea, or Hong Kong to gain tolerance than for their Western sponsors.

In a minority-majority alliance, a foreign advocacy group may pursue its activism more safely when there is a tacit form of collaboration between the aid-receiving minority group and the rest of the community that is not directly benefited by transnational involvement. The majority group would have to agree to welcome this foreign entity and share the resources it brings in. In contrast to cases in Asian and Latin American democracies, where local activists can only passively block or minimize foreign involvement (Hertel 2006), locals in an authoritarian society can both welcome as well as aggressively reject foreign involvement by provoking authorities to intervene. A concrete sign of this kind of minority-majority collaboration is sharing aid resources

⁵The legal cover for its local offices and personnel is its legal proxy Google Hong Kong. Today, Google still provides email, searching, maps, and other services to the China market through its Hong Kong servers, although connections are under constant threat of cutoff and tight censorship.

⁶NGO—nongovernmental organization; any nonprofit, voluntary, citizens’ group that is organized on a local, national, or international level.

⁷Jun Liu, “Transparency International Officials Said How They ‘Infiltrate’ China—The World’s Largest Non-Governmental Anti-Corruption Decrypts the Path to China,” *Southern Weekend*, July 15, 2011, available at <http://www.infzm.com/content/61346>, accessed January 14, 2016.

between registered and unregistered social groups. The alliance does not need to be formal and it is often kept in secret because churches are reluctant to be seen as aiding “the other side” for practical and ideological reasons. Yet it is essential because either side could call the authorities and jeopardize the cooperation.

I have paid special attention to four types of behavior associated with these two mechanisms—backdoor listing and minority-majority alliance: (1) foreigners are able to break the law and deliver forbidden services and funding to locals, (2) locals share the aid, (3) officials watch but do nothing, and (4) there are observable cross-province outreach activities.

Important insights about transnational activism follow from paying attention to these two mechanisms. First, while help from foreign agencies in general is welcomed and empowering, foreign agencies are not at the center of these operations. Rather, local Chinese groups will decide when and whether or not it is wise to accept foreign aid/involvement. Chinese Protestant groups, registered or unregistered, realized long ago that their natural allies are not resourceful foreign organizations, since foreigners are vulnerable to anti-imperialist discourse and their support is often unreliable. Locals have to find a way to protect those foreigners and market their proposals as beneficial and harmless to the country, when in actuality the proposed action may break from the old practice and force the authorities to consent to a new norm.

Recent literature has begun to address bottom-up, locally-based, non-Western activism in the discussion of the “dark side” of international campaigns (O’Neill 2005; Mutua 2009), the “blocking efforts” of local actors to international norms (Hertel 2006), and the “evolution” of transnational activism (Rodio and Schmitz 2010). However, a real-world alternative to current internationally-led enterprises is scarce. As an unintended consequence, restrained foreign advocates in China may provide a possible format for more balanced transnational cooperation in the future.

Additionally, advocacy networks in an authoritarian setting must be cautious about the range of their activism, and participants must try very hard to avoid being seen as “transnational.” In other words, unlike their counterparts in democratic societies, activists in China try not only to avoid the language of internationalism, but also to limit the scope of their operations. While their actions clearly involve a wide range of civil and political rights ranging from freedom of speech to the socioeconomic rights of poor and marginalized populations (Tsai 2007), very few local religious advocates or activists frame their issues beyond the legal rights of individual citizens according to the Chinese Constitution.

In fact, the core of the fight involves their organizations’ right of association and assembly, a much more dangerous demand for this type of government. The absence of a global framing or a broader demand for civil and political rights is a careful choice by these participants. Differing from their German or American counterparts, religious advocates and activists in China face a much more closed society, subjected to decades of atheism and anti-imperialist education against foreign-imported religions. Nevertheless, the avoidance of global issue frameworks does not prevent the advocacy networks from working globally and frequently collaborating to challenge religious regulations on Chinese Christians.

Chinese Protestant activism provides a more useful example of transnational activism because of its special attention to China’s imperialist legacy. Unlike their 19th-century predecessors, who were aided by international forces who often overshadowed their local partners, foreign Protestant groups today not only have to rely heavily on their local associates, but they also try very hard to avoid being seen as part of the old system. Localization is not just a framing issue for foreign-born Protestant denominations; it has been realized and practiced in large Chinese communities in Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, Canada, and the United States (Koschorke, Ludwig, and Delgado 2007:89–95). Because Protestant groups have become important agents of human rights promotion in these parts of the world (Im 2006; Rubinstein 2006), their members become natural allies of activists fighting for broader freedoms and rights in China (Lerner 2006; Witte and van de Vyver 1996). Many Chinese political dissidents are Christians or turn to Christianity after

being persecuted by the authorities; frequently, religious persecution and political repression by the same party turn two fights into one (Inboden and Inboden 2009; Wright and Zimmerman-Liu 2013).

A well-known religious and political activist is Yu Jie, a popular writer in China who became a devout Christian in 2003 and co-founded an underground Protestant church in Beijing. He has been involved in many human rights cases ever since and wrote a memoir and books for his jailed friend, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo. Before and after Yu was exiled in 2012, Christian and non-Christian supporters in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and North America helped publish his 30 or more banned books.

Although not every Protestant advocate or political dissident agrees with the publicized strategy of Yu Jie, a widely recognized although unspoken consensus has arisen for cosmopolitanism—the respect for, desire for, and pursuit of broader individual freedoms. People in this vast transnational network of religious activism act like “rooted cosmopolitans,” to use the term employed by Mitchell Cohen and Sydney Tarrow; they began as ordinary participants such as businessmen, investors, English teachers, charity workers, or plain tourists, but the deep connection with, sympathy for, and understanding of the people they serve transform them into mobilizers, entrepreneurs, and “reformers” whose plural loyalties and resources create valuable opportunities for change (Tarrow 2005). Those who stay in China have to cover up their religious and foreign identities. They blend into regular business and social transactions and are rarely subjected to anti-imperial and anti-religious discourse and persecution because they keep a low profile, only aiding their cause when the opportunity arises.⁸

METHODOLOGY AND CASE COMPARISON

My research began with a year of participant observation in anonymous locations in China during 2010–2011 after I identified four cities in two neighboring provinces that had similar socioeconomic features but different levels of religious freedom. I updated and verified my findings in five additional trips to other provinces from 2012 to 2015. I witnessed directly how activists dealt with government repression, organized silent disobedience, and managed their complicated relations with foreign advocates. The fieldwork produced 150 face-to-face interviews, including leaders of registered and unregistered churches, grassroots activists, staffs of religious establishments, university faculty, and provincial and local officials. In particular, I followed missionaries around and conducted participant observations in major Chinese cities, which provided critical details for tracing causal mechanisms of successful activism.

Based on personal interviews, participant observation, and archives in seven Chinese provinces with significant numbers of Christians, including Shandong, Henan, Anhui, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Hubei, and Sichuan, I further employ the methods of agreement and difference to construct a case comparison to isolate the mechanisms associated with effective religious activism.⁹ The comparison is based on the observation of one U.S.-originated mainline Protestant activist group in four selected Chinese cities and explains why the advocates have been either able or unable to promote progress in those locations. The narrative of this activist organization, codename Mission X, gives prominence to the two mechanisms—backdoor listing and minority-majority alliance—that I theorize are critical to the success of transnational activism. Although these four

⁸For example, Miwa Hirono has documented Christian businessmen from Hong Kong who founded the earliest groups of foreign NGOs that were allowed to enter China after the 1950s (Hirono 2008:Ch. 4).

⁹Despite criticisms of these methods based on the methodological standards set by John Stuart Mill ([1843] 1974), it is reasonable to apply these methods here, since structural features of subnational cases are much more controllable than national cases. For debates of these methods, see Collier and Mahoney (1996), Dion (1998), George and Bennett (2005), Ragin (1987), and Skocpol and Somers (1980).

Table 1: Summary of the four research sites' major features

Cases	Freedom of Protestant Activism	BL ^a	MA ^b	Political Openness	Economic Autonomy	Geographic Remoteness
City H	Low	No	No	No	No	No
City W	Moderate	Yes	No	No	No	No
City T	Moderate	No	Yes	No	No	No
City S	High	Yes	Yes	No	No	No

^aBL, backdoor listing.

^bMA, minority-majority alliance.

cities are not identical, distinct developments there are happening in nearby regions (mainly in the East and the Yangtze River area) at approximately the same time, and these developments control for environmental factors, such as geographic remoteness, economic autonomy, or regional political openness.

City H and City W are located in Province A, and City T and City S are in nearby Province B, where rapid trains connect each city with commuting times of about two to five hours. Due to safety concerns, names and locations are kept confidential. Table 1 summarizes the basic characteristics of these cities.

These four cities are located in the industrial center of economic prosperity in the past three decades, generating around 15 percent of national GDP each year. Unlike Yunnan or Fujian, where the political atmosphere is argued by some to be more relaxed due to localism and distance from Beijing, Provinces A and B are situated at the core of the Chinese economic engine, which makes them equally vulnerable to scrutiny and interference from Beijing. Their economic significance creates similar political conditions in which top officials are charged by the CCP with higher expectations and also severe consequences if they fail to reach designated goals.

Local Opportunities for Activism

The economic significance of this area not only creates political constraints but also affords opportunities for activism, if proper strategies are used. Although the provinces are growing wealthier and far more developed than other parts of China since reform began, they each have very limited autonomy in terms of either setting general economic policy or altering existing social policy regarding religious freedom in their districts. Local leaders cannot be negotiated with in terms of granting more legal rights, but they do have powers to implement and enforce restriction over these rights. Rights advocates and activists have the best chance to influence these officials in terms of flexibility in enforcing those laws and regulations. This requires a deep understanding of the “dos and don’ts” of local politics, which foreigners often lack.

Administrators of religious affairs appointed by these local party cadres have little political incentive to change their practices unless forced or persuaded to do so. They and other local administrators are ordered to create a stable and friendly environment to attract foreign investment and, therefore, additional revenues for local authorities.¹⁰ This creates a dilemma but also an opportunity when a foreign advocacy group is in town: even though religious advocacy is deemed harmful by the party’s ideology, the foreign group could still help the local economy and advance personal promotion prospects by channeling donations, technological assistance, and skilled personnel from outside the area. For example, many foreign missions are conducted under the

¹⁰The other important and related source of revenue for local governments is from granting or selling land usage to corporations (Wong 1997).

cover of businesses such as publishing firms or foreign investment companies; other missionaries work as aid workers, teachers, or scholars in charity programs or academic exchanges.

When the foreign groups work in an isolated setting and stay in their sanctioned space, such as a campus or inside a factory, the chances of political constraint are less likely. Confrontation comes when these foreigners begin to expand their religious work to local churches and reach out to the larger population: this alerts authorities to possible violations of state policy. However, just like many other law-breaking behaviors tolerated by Chinese authorities, from tax evasion to unlicensed birth, enforcement depends on the judgment of frontline officials. When a foreign missionary is invited to deliver a Sunday service in a Chinese church, for example, should officials stop it? When a foreign denomination tries to donate a new church building, should the Administration of Religious Affairs allow it? While state policy clearly forbids such collaboration, practices vary significantly. In City S, such illegal behaviors and more are tolerated and even quietly encouraged by local officials; in City H, proposals like these would be rejected and activities shut down with no exception. At the same time, a similar collaboration in City W and City T faces a median level of obstacles, depending on the situation. In my observation, the variable treatment of foreign advocacy depends on the existence of the two mechanisms, backdoor listing and minority-majority alliance, identified previously, which I will discuss in greater detail next.

DISCUSSION

The experience of Mission X in these four cities is a good illustration of how the presence of one or both mechanisms could affect the fate of its operations. It is evident that officials would tolerate this transnational engagement if Mission X is willing to work under a “Three-Self Patriotic Movement” (TSPM) cover.¹¹ Registered TSPM churches are mobilized as monitoring agencies to check on Christian crowds. In addition, this tolerance is also conditioned by how well Mission X is able to manage the uneasy relationship between local house churches¹² and TSPM congregations.

Religious Advocacy in City H, a Low-Freedom Locale

Mission X returned to China in the early 1990s and tried to rebuild its missionary projects after its eviction 40 years previously. City H was one of the earliest entry points for many Christian missions before the 1950s, and the American denomination represented had been strong there. Although the historical ties have not been completely severed (thanks to churches in Taiwan and Hong Kong that were built by the American evictees from that time), Mission X quickly found that sponsoring its own church was dangerous and costly in the current environment. In comparison, aiding local churches is more feasible, though it is still very difficult. Mission X has visited City H and other locations to negotiate with authorities on different occasions, but it is not allowed to take any role in the community other than conducting a few closed-door lectures in government-sanctioned schools and seminaries. In addition, any outreach to unregistered congregations would be seen as a serious offense and might result in eviction. As a result, Mission X has been able to conduct a few talks with city officials about the possibility of returning old properties, but no actual progress has been made in the past 20 years.

¹¹TSPM churches are officially sanctioned and government controlled. They are not a recognized denomination but they protect and promote Christian tenets while acting as an instrument of the Chinese government.

¹²House churches are a distinctive phenomenon of Christianity in China. They are autonomous, independent, unofficial, and underground. They are usually isolated from each other and usually in want of financing.

The tougher restriction is not limited to Mission X. In City H, the backdoor listing mechanism in general is absent because officials strictly forbid foreign religious organizations to operate alone or to collaborate with registered entities in any form, while this is sometimes possible in other cities. Officials are also happy to turn one Christian group against the other. Unaffiliated congregations will be visited and harassed by police and TSPM clergymen. Because of this tougher state oversight of religion, the chance for any group to pursue a minority-majority alliance is also very slim. Although many foreign missionaries are living in City H, they all work under high secrecy, serve only foreigners, and restrict any contact with local churches in order to prevent trouble.

One of the university professors I interviewed in City H describes the alignment of the city government as “110% by the book,” perhaps because the province’s economic significance attracts more attention from the top (Interview No. 85). This means tougher regulations not only on regular church business but also on the enforcement of the patriotic “Three-Self” policy,¹³ which casts contacts and exchanges between foreign groups and local congregations as serious offenses. In the few congregations serving foreign expats, students, and visitors, passport checking is routine before every Sunday service. In all local churches, any involvement of foreign individuals requires a written approval from top officials, which in reality means “no” to almost any proposal. Once I asked a pastor ministering in a historical church if he would open it for my American students to visit, and the answer was simple: “Professor, you do not want to do that because we have to file a request all the way to the top” (Interview No. 83).

In contrast with other cities I studied, church leaders in City H are extremely cautious about church-to-church collaboration. Underground church leaders have expressed a similar concern about promotion-minded officials eager to demonstrate party loyalty but add another factor—competition between congregations. Independent local congregations have developed in City H for almost a century and never died out, even under harsh repression during the Cultural Revolution. After the open-door policy and economic reforms enabled foreign missionaries and aid to return to China, TSPM churches lost many members to the more “spiritual” house church congregations that do not have to “put the Party before God.” TSPM leaders are particularly unhappy about the support “illegal” congregations have received from the city’s prosperous economy and outside supporters, while legal churches must avoid those potential patrons. Many house church leaders believe resentment from the TSPM is a key reason they are watched closely and constantly harassed by police and agents from the Ministry of Public Security.¹⁴ One house church congregation I visited has had to move twice in the past three years because the TSPM church across the street kept complaining to local police about its “illegal religious activities.”

City H represents an environment in which transnational collaboration is almost nonexistent because the backdoor listing and minority-majority strategies are unavailable to social groups. Foreigners cannot obtain a legal front to operate openly by working with registered groups because those groups are afraid that would open the door to competition from strong unregistered groups to accept aid from foreigners. The lack of any church-to-church collaboration reflects the overall problem of the weak Protestant movement in City H, where officials have little incentive to back down from the old position of targeting advocates and activists. Reports of arrests and harassment of Christian activists are frequent, and confrontations between authorities and house church members have surfaced. The lack of religious freedom and social space for related activism

¹³The “Three-Self” belief statement, which gives the church its name, includes self-governance, self-support (financial independence from foreigners), and self-propagation (evangelical missions, either targeting on foreign or Chinese nonbelievers, are forbidden in principle).

¹⁴One quick review of the religious control machine of Chinese authorities: “The 610 Office: Policing the Chinese Spirit,” 16 September 2011, *Jamestown Foundation China Brief* 11(17):6–9. Available at www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4e785ec82.html, accessed September 29, 2011.

Table 2: Statistics of religious repression in four cities

	1982–1992		1993–2003		Post-2004		Total
	PD ^a	%	PD	%	PD	%	
(1) City H	8	4%	66	36%	111	60%	185
(2) City W	0	0%	1	25%	3	75%	4
(3) City T	2	7%	16	55%	11	38%	29
(4) City S	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0

^aPD, Numbers of political prisoners jailed for religious reasons.
Source: Filtered from political prisoner database of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China.

in City H is surprising in light of its vibrant economic and social activities, but is unavoidable when activists and potential foreign patrons are isolated by circumstances.

Religious Advocacy Using Backdoor Listing in City W

Although City W and City H share the same provincial locality (four hours by train), Mission X meets with totally different treatments. While Mission X can utilize its historical ties in both cities, only City W welcomes Mission X to take part in its charity work. As a partner of a TSPM-operated NGO, Mission X has regularly supplied money and personnel to this charity organization with little interference in the past 20 years. City officials acknowledge the collaboration but insist on the registration policy that demands that all participants and resources have to be grouped under this TSPM label.

Like many missionary agencies, Mission X has considered funding a business firm registered in Shanghai or Shenzhen to bypass this TSPM-operated NGO and handle donations directly, but that plan has failed and money still goes through local TSPM accounts. Many global missions and denominations from Europe and North America follow similar paths, and these efforts have created a trusted circle of religious NGOs in the city. Since selected foreign missions are allowed to operate under the legal front of the TSPM, the religious scene is much more vibrant in City W. Many Christians told me how large-scale, thousand-people outdoor rallies were held near City W—an activity that is strictly forbidden and even unthinkable elsewhere in China.

Statistics also support my personal observations (Table 2). Fewer arrests and less harassment are reported in City W than in City H. While illegal foreign missions and underground congregations are growing rapidly in both cities, City W has only four recorded cases of religious imprisonment, while City H has 185. In addition, the majority of the cases in City W happened after 2004, which indicates a relatively easy relationship between Protestants and the government in City W, with the recent increase possibly the consequence of the growing Protestant population and activism in the previous period. In addition, local religious affairs officials seem to have better relationships with TSPM churches and even with house church congregations, according to my interviewees.

The surprisingly low level of religious persecution, and especially the relative harmony in a city with hundreds of underground churches, is no accident. My interviews with City W’s Christians show that few people have a sense of hostility between registered and unregistered congregations. Perhaps partial foreign support of unregistered congregations eases their dissatisfaction and suspicion of TSPM, and therefore both groups are more willing to let the other side go its own way. The special opportunity for freedom and social space in City W is related to its lively NGO scene and promoted by religious organizations, universities, and city officials. According to the National Census, the number of grassroots NGOs in City W has grown 49 percent since 2001,

and the proportion of religious NGOs in all registered groups is 1.5 percent, 10 times higher than the national average.

A local religious NGO leader told me City W is “freer” because of strong support from influential figures in TSPM, who introduce foreign advocacy groups while convincing the party and public security agencies that these groups are beneficial to the nation. However, this collaboration is very selective, and only certain denominations from certain countries are welcomed. For example, Mission X is welcomed because of the positive role played by its key leaders in the formation of an important Christian publishing organization in China.

The story of Mission X in City W reveals the importance of backdoor listing. Despite various background and diplomatic issues, the critical distinction between a “tolerable” and “dangerous” American advocacy group in the eyes of Chinese government officials is whether the relevant group brokers foreign influence coming from unfriendly nations and through unauthorized channels. Said in another way, the more unfriendly and unauthorized foreign support the advocacy group provides, the more likely the government will consider the advocacy group a threat until proven otherwise. Consequently, transnational advocacy becomes possible in such an environment when advocates adopt engagement strategies to “prove” first that they and their foreign partners are not hostile to the leadership. Such proof includes various benchmarks, from sharing information to sharing aid with government-approved religious establishments. Advocating a new practice or a new idea under authoritarianism is not always a zero-sum game; government wants the leadership intact, and advocates want the freedom to expand and deliver more resources. There is an understood middle ground where both sides can get the things they most want, though reaching this point may require some skills and mastering a certain “secret handshake.”

One publicized example of this secret handshake is the creation of the Amity Foundation, which represents a good illustration of the publishing organization in City W. From Mao’s period until the late 1980s, distribution of religious texts was a major source of contention between the Chinese government and foreign Christian advocacy groups. Advocates sneaked hundreds of Bibles into China in their luggage and risked arrest for smuggling. However, with the help of Christians in Taiwan and Hong Kong through underground negotiations, the American Bible Society and other Christian organizations reached a secret agreement with the Chinese government. This allowed foreigners to donate about 1 million USD every year to create an NGO, managed by the government-sanctioned TSPM church, to produce “legal” copies of the Bible in China.¹⁵ Foreign church denominations and Bible societies provided funding, training, and translation work. The Chinese partner organized a printing facility in Nanjing and produced 1 million Bibles for government-censored retailers each year. Amity Printing Company (APC) is now the world’s biggest global Bible-printing company, taking orders in 80 languages.¹⁶

The story of the Amity Foundation is consistent with the collaboration observed in City W. The Chinese government is pleased by the fact that Bible distribution is in the hands of trusted Chinese NGOs, and foreign advocates have solved the long-term problem of gaining important spiritual and theological access to the Chinese Christian population. Following the same logic, Mission X can introduce and develop activities not permitted by state policy by building a working relationship with a TSPM NGO. When authorities begin to feel content with the new practice, they loosen control over similar activities conducted by other organizations, even by illegal ones. The much lower level of religious persecution in City W is strong evidence of that spillover development. This is a successful “backdoor listing” method used by policy

¹⁵Nanjing City is the parish of former Anglican Bishop K. H. Ting, later the highest leader of TSPM from the 1950s to today. Amity Foundation is now the largest Christian charity organization in China, receiving from 400,000 USD to 1 million USD in foreign donations annually. Bible printing has become an independent “business” separate from the foundation.

¹⁶Information from interviews and website; available at www.amityprinting.com/english/about.asp.

entrepreneurs, using a charity organization to encourage a positive attitude on the part of local officials toward Christians and a valuable precedent of operating a transnational collaboration legally. The precedent benefits both registered and unregistered groups.

Nonetheless, this top-down method of backdoor listing has limitations. The government-sanctioned NGO has little intention of promoting cross-church collaboration, since it is unwilling to share its resources with unregistered congregations. While backdoor listing expands the space for transnational activism, the scope of this activism is very selective. Only mainline Protestant denominations and their social charities are welcomed.

Backdoor Listing with TSPM in City T

Because of its experiences in areas like City H and City W, Mission X believed that a house church was the only reliable partner in China; it kept its high-level relationship with TSPM but realized that duplicating the publishing organization in other cities would be difficult. Since the early 1990s, Mission X was invited by many house churches to conduct secret seminars and church services in many cities in China. Its reputation is growing, and a personal network of a hundred churches has been built across a dozen provinces from Guangdong in the deep South to Heilongjiang in the far North, but the underground nature of the operation still worries the leaders of the mission: the collaboration solely relies on the negligence of watchdogs or the ability of house church members to hide their activities. Their usual visits last only three days to a week; they make contact with a very select and small number of people; and they have to jump from one location to another from time to time, which makes their overall exposure to and influence on the community short-lived and unsustainable.

Nonetheless, in 10 years, Mission X became an international operation bringing missionaries with various professions back to China. Their return met with the upsurge of Christianity in the countryside and a great demand for theological trainers and preachers in the 1990s. One advantage comes from its appearance in several large overseas Chinese communities, in particular Hong Kong and Taiwan, and recruitment of skilled practitioners with language expertise. In 2000, the dean of a TSPM-run seminary heard about Mission X from his house church friends and tried to contact its missionaries on the ground. One of my interviewees described the uneasy encounter: "We were nervous about the request for a meeting because we did not know whether the police would be waiting, but since it came from someone we knew for years, we thought it won't hurt to have a meal with this person . . ."

The meeting resulted in a new form of collaboration between Mission X and the local TSPM in City T and City S. It was an unprecedented and potentially dangerous move, yet a reasonable one: Mission X needed a stable local partner that could provide a more long-term, sustainable local collaboration, while the local TSPM leaders needed funding while remaining confident about facilitating such illegal transactions. The major characteristic of City T is its strong TSPM theological seminary. Its leadership shows a high level of openness, which is rare in the TSPM system. State religious affairs officials used to demand that each Chinese region could have only one seminary, and that each theological seminary could only enroll students from the neighboring five to six provinces. Consequently, interested students from local churches overwhelmed all seminaries in China, but few of the seminaries dared to break the state's unspoken rules by opening more seminaries to accommodate the overflow. By contrast, City T's seminary openly welcomes students from provinces outside its parish, even students recommended by unregistered congregations. It is a bold move at a time when government agencies have total power over all religious decisions.

The dean and the chairman of the TSPM from City T spoke openly with me about their problems and how Mission X had become a vital partner in their activism. In the mid-1990s, when the school and parishes were overwhelmed by the rapid growth of Christianity in the countryside, a generous funding from Mission X helped to solve their problems and initiated their school

operation. Such a generous gesture was rare at that time when most foreign advocacy groups donated only to house churches or large, national endowments such as the Amity Foundation. The project has created a friendly cycle in which the two sides have constantly interacted and produced collaborations far beyond those the religious affairs bureaucracy would usually allow. The dean explained how they could do this: “We tell Bureau of Religious Affairs what they must know, and they won’t bother to approve or disapprove our projects because they don’t want to get in trouble . . . We have their trust [that things won’t get out of hand]” (Interview No. 83).

The story of City T’s seminary is typical of how backdoor listing works to “win” over local officials. Foreign advocates—missionaries, aid workers, or regular educators with missionary purposes—respond amicably to the TSPM’s requests and form a quiet, strategic alliance. Later, TSPM clergy informally introduce outside visitors to the local establishment through casual lunches or accidental visits by local officials to schools, churches, orphanages, or other institutions the foreigners promise to work with. After casual handshakes and nodding, local officials will evaluate the foreigners and their organizations from these informal visits and personal impressions. After a few evaluation rounds, carefully planned transactions will be executed and foreign advocates will gradually have more opportunities to engage in activities and be invited to participate in bigger local projects based on feedback from the transactions. From my fieldwork in City T, the 10 years of informal alliance have established an impressive record of credibility for the participants in this silent religious advocacy. Its foreign advocacy group has been able to deliver Sunday services, teach training seminars, organize missionary and charity work, and deliver money directly to churches or a selected aid group. One senior pastor of a foreign denomination has been invited to chair the first vocational school that TSPM plans to open.

Minority-Majority Alliance Bridging Competition to Cooperation in City S

The mutual trust between foreign missionaries and TSPM leaders is critical to fostering a backdoor listing action that allows new “illegal” practices to exist. However, backdoor listing alone is not enough to secure the survival of this transnational collaboration. The state policy of “no foreigners” still persists, and anyone who acknowledges a collaboration could sabotage it simply by reporting it to provincial or central authorities, which could lead to a shutdown or crackdown from security agencies.

The second important component of successful activism is to bring in the majority group that is not directly benefited by foreign involvement. It is a challenging task because most of the Christian communities in China are deeply divided. TSPM leaders would report house churches’ violations to authorities when they believed they are “stealing sheep”; house church leaders would attack TSPM by criticizing its legitimacy and corruption, and also taking away its followers. The competition and conflict would become even fiercer when some gathering places or properties are in a “gray” status in which multiple parties could claim leadership or ownership (Yang 2006). One religious affairs officer once shared a joke with me: “We often call Christianity (pronounced ‘jī du jiào’) as ‘jī dù jiào’ (meaning jealousy in Mandarin) because there are so many quarrels between churches and they ask us to step in.” He reminds me that while a crackdown is sometimes ordered from the top, most of the persecutions in his district came from internal disputes over financial interests, and then government officials have to take action when civic petitions are made.

Foreign advocates can do little to mediate the situation, and they are often asked to take sides; if they choose a house church in one place, the door to TSPM would be closed, and vice versa. The success of Mission X in City S comes from avoiding this common problem. Two main reasons it can do so in this place are that the sense of historical grievance is not as severe as in other places, and key local leaders are willing to share resources (e.g., introducing Mission X and enrolling house church students in the official seminary).

Historically, Province B where City S is located was a second-tier Christian mission site in the early 20th century, received fewer foreign missions, and therefore suffered less during political

oppression. This calmer history gives the local TSPM a special advantage. Many congregations joined TSPM or developed less resentment of TSPM, and fewer house churches remained underground, so Christians have had fewer feuds arising from the oppression in the 1980s. While house church development created tension between Christians and authorities elsewhere, the situation in City S was much better because the growth was under the TSPM label. When the number of Christians reached a level that worried authorities, the local TSPM branch was strong enough to negotiate with authorities, make foreign friends, and provide resources to lure new congregations under its umbrella. Almost all congregations in City S have joined the local TSPM. "We have a very small house church population now," the pastor says. Table 2 demonstrates the value of these alliances also: there have been no cases of religious prisoners reported in the past 30 years in City S. Some might say that the situation in City S is TSPM co-opting house churches. From my observation, it also can be said that house churches are transforming the nature of TSPM in this location. The fact is that although neither side can openly talk about the improvement, the overall relationship between the two kinds of churches has improved. This kind of improvement rarely happens in other parts of China. Therefore, the cooperation is better described as a "quiet" form of alliance, not co-option.

The story of Pastor Chen in City S demonstrates how a minority-majority alliance works. He was the son of a house church leader, a graduate of City T's official seminary, and the first to get official permission to study abroad in Mission X's theological seminary. Due to the openness policy set by progressive church leaders, his "bad background" had not stopped his career and his chance at an education. The multiple connections even made him popular with the local bureaucracy, and he eventually became the head TSPM clergyman in City S.

Although City T has grown faster in terms of economic and civil society development, City S has seen greater improvements in conditions favorable to religious expression and activism in the past five years. Local leaders like Pastor Chen can even provide protection to operations evicted from City T and elsewhere. While I was in the field, I heard that when gatherings and meetings of Christian leaders had become too sensitive and attracted interference within City T, the network moved its activity to City S for better protection. As I was told during my visit: "There are too many informers there [City T]." I witnessed Pastor Chen and his allies move a Chicago-based 10-person missionary group from City T to City S in response to a warning from friends in the government. One winter, I learned that a group of house church leaders from Shanghai were enjoying their "retreat" in the city as guests of Pastor Chen because "it is still too dangerous for all of us to meet in our own cities."

Because the domestic alliance between Pastor Chen and other churches has been built, funding and services have flowed into City S seamlessly. Foreign missionaries have performed Sunday services openly in churches within Chen's parish. Mission X's missionaries and workers are invited to remain long term, and some of them are offered formal positions in TSPM's schools. Furthermore, this transnational network is stepping up their cooperation since the Sichuan earthquake disaster relief effort in 2008 and has organized joint missions to other provinces. The progress is less likely due to Mission X's strength or resources than to the strength of local activists like Pastor Chen in protecting outside participants and their networks from abroad. They are able to do so because they handle local spoilers and law enforcement agencies effectively. Potential spoilers, like competitive church leaders, are satisfied because they share the resources, and officials appreciate the trust and benefits they offer. For example, I saw that Pastor Chen received phone calls from the local police chief and other church leaders asking questions about foreigners in the city. His personal guarantee quieted the investigation and safeguarded continuous cooperation.

Four Cities, One Lesson of Activism

In summary, advocacy played out in four Chinese cities has illustrated the process of how a special kind of local religious activist, especially one with some form of affiliation with officially sanctioned social organizations, can facilitate transnational activism by helping foreign sponsors deal with authorities and complex local environments. Comparing four metropolitan regions in China has identified two mechanisms—sponsorship of foreign groups by registered churches (backdoor listing) and friendly gestures from registered churches to unregistered churches (minority-majority alliance). Each city region I studied has different levels of these two kinds of relations—one type of relationship exists between foreign groups and government-sanctioned facilities, and the other between locals from sanctioned and unsanctioned churches.

The evidence here is consistent with my expectation that a foreign advocacy group obtains the highest level of freedom and tolerance only in cities with high levels of both kinds of relationships. Most importantly, by comparison, one city is not so different from another in terms of its societal, economic, and political conditions. Therefore, the varying levels of freedom strongly suggest that the closeness of the relationships produced by participants' strategic choices, represented in the two key mechanisms of backdoor listing and minority-majority alliances, is essential to the improvement or deterioration of religious freedom in these locations. In short, City S's better record of religious freedom, which includes a wide range of transnational activities that cannot be conducted in other places, is the result of a successful advocacy strategy adopted by Protestant groups over the last two decades.

CONCLUSION

This article explains why some activists are able to keep the repressive regime at bay while others cannot. By joining forces with locals, they see through the state's tough discourse and realize that officials have little to gain and a lot to lose by using violence against them. Protestants can conduct various prohibited activities as long as no insider reports them directly to the security agencies, or if there are influential insiders to mediate the contention. Religious freedom is largely respected when a network conjoining these two mechanisms is formed, at least for people inside this network.

This finding is counterintuitive because conventional wisdom used to state that little transnational activism could survive in such an environment (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Kinzelbach 2013; Tilly 2003). Indeed, it would be overly optimistic to think that the breakthroughs these Protestant activists have achieved are permanent and that officials cannot take the granted rights and space back. The recent demolition of churches in Wenzhou has made this clear. In addition, foreign Protestant personnel are welcomed but still under tough scrutiny. While officials have the power to formulate policy depending on their interpretation of the doctrine granted in constitutional and guiding documents, all regulations are written by communist ideologues who see Protestant organizations as a cultural front for Western imperialists. In actuality, there is little reason for the state to grant permission for foreign Protestant organizations to aid local churches, since the national Three-Self policy clearly forbids them to do so. Yet, the growth of transnational Protestant activism in the past few decades has largely proven this view wrong. In Chinese cities, the freedom a Protestant group can enjoy is clearly not fixed or dictated by the goodwill of the government nor by a government policy shift on Christianity.

Conventional power or a structural thesis cannot adequately explain the variations in the success of activism in different locations. Repression sometimes happens in locations with the strongest Protestant congregations, while better conditions are possible in places with few Christians. Instead, the strategic choices of advocacy groups and local opportunities are critical in explaining the variation. By departing from the conventional criticisms used by human rights

lawyers and religious freedom activists, this article shows that the major predictor of freedom in such an authoritarian state does not lie in the government's failure to meet its constitutional duties. In fact, the CCP takes the Constitution and its legal promises seriously, and frontline officials especially take them to heart. Enforcement of the law, contaminated by anti-imperialist discourse, hurts activists and limits the effectiveness of transnational advocacy. The CCP created the Constitution with no opposition; many administrative decrees and regulations were enacted to reflect and strengthen the ideological and political viewpoints of the discourse. The rigid interpretation and despotic political structure mean that officials cannot deviate far from the Constitution and key policy documents.

Nonetheless, fully executing those decrees and regulations laid down by the central government is virtually impossible for local officials. As observed in Wenzhou and most of my research sites, the resilience of unregistered congregations, usually two or three times larger than registered churches, has proven that Chinese Christendom cannot be cheaply controlled and fully co-opted. When a full-scale crackdown is as equally undesirable as inaction, frontline officials are flexible and selective in enforcing regulations and registrations. Their flexibility in exercising the law *civily, rationally, and humanely*, using the Wenzhou activists' term, is more likely when the "right people," such as registered groups in my cases, are involved in the activism. Since 2013, there have been increasing reports of TSPM churches involved in public protests against demolition and removal of church crosses. The everyday resistance may upgrade to a nationwide confrontation if the situation for Christians continues to deteriorate; the silent yet powerful collaboration between some TSPM churches and house churches may become more possible when both of their freedoms are under attack.¹⁷ All the evidence indicates that religious activism deserves our attention more than ever.

The lessons here are applicable beyond promotion of religious freedom. Rights advocates can learn from this experience how to build more effective partnerships, especially how to utilize the gaps between central and local authorities. The tough stand of the current Xi Jinping government is adding more fuel to the conflict between not only religious affairs officials and believers but also the central and provincial governments. It is pivotal that advocates' resources and attention are aiming in the right direction. The both rooted and cosmopolitan nature of Protestant activism increases the chances of success and teaches us a valuable lesson that such sensitive activism can survive amidst resilient authoritarianism. The mechanisms recognized here show that when proper transnational strategies and local alliances are obtained, a previously powerless social group can expand its freedom and social space to engage a broader social agenda.

Can these mechanisms be applied to other resilient authoritarian countries? The lawyer and activist Mohamed S. M. Eltayeb (2001) has found that even in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan—where religious persecutions are severe, persistent, and motivated by political purposes—activists are still able to combat oppression by using legal, political, cultural, and social approaches. Since countries of this kind usually possess state-sponsored social entities such as universities, media, religious organizations, business associations, charities, and even human rights watch groups, it is reasonable to expect that similar strategies that have worked in China could work in those countries, too. The broader applicability of this theory awaits future inquiry.

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