Collective resistance of Chengzhongcun villagers in China: a case of Guangzhou, Guandong Province

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COLLECTIVE RESISTANCE OF CHENGZHONGCUN VILLAGERS IN CHINA

A CASE OF GUANGZHOU, GUANGDONG PROVINCE

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors contributing to the emergence and persistence of collective action in *chengzhongcun* (literally known as "village(s) amid the city") in China. Based on a one-and-a-half month fieldwork in Guangzhou, China, this study was designed to answer the questions of what triggered collective action in *chengzhongcun* and how and why *chengzhongcun* villagers could sustain their collective resistance under a repressive local state.

While not denying the importance of the structural opportunity, rational considerations of the villagers and their cultural features were taken as crucial factors in triggering and sustaining collective action in *chengzhongcun*. First of all, rational considerations of the villagers had spurred them to converge and rejuvenate a social network which had long been weakening, while the cultural features embedded in the social network had strengthened solidarity of the protesters, leading to the emergence of collective action. Later on, when the local authority repressed the collective action, rationality and the cultural features of the *chengzhongcun* villagers together led to labor division among them, which in fact helped to sustain their collective action.

Foreword

I would very much like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Christian Göbel for his constructive feedback on my thesis drafts, which helped me better structure my thesis and inspired me to be more aware of the theoretical issues of collective action in the thesis. Thanks also go to a group of people who had helped me a lot during my stay in Guangzhou. Daisy, Emma, and Jianhua assisted me in finding my informants and interviewees by using their good social networks in Guangzhou, while Huang Li, Terry, and Yang helped me to find temporary accommodation in Guangzhou, saving me more time and energy for my fieldwork. Applause should also be given to all of my anonymous informants and interviewees, who have been very kind and cooperative.

I am also grateful for the consistent support and love from Tiezhu and my family. Especially, I would like to send my undying gratitude to my sister Yansu Kuang, who had taken care so much of me since I was a child and also helped me find a very important informant for this study through her friend Y.K. Chen. In order not to affect my thesis writing process, Yansu tried hard to hide her shocking and severe illness from me until I found out the truth for myself right before the second draft of this thesis was completed. When this thesis was being finalized, she passed away at the age of 36.

Goodbye, my dearest sister! I miss you so much!

Contents

Introduction

Background of research

Chengzhongcun, literally known as "village(s) amid the city", is/are the product(s) of rapid urbanization and the dual ownership (state-ownership and collective-ownership) land system in China. Under the dual ownership land system, urban land is state-owned while rural land, including farmland and peasant residential land, is collective-owned. To turn rural land into urban land, the urban authority has to pay the land-use right fees to the peasants and the village committees. The urbanization of the Chinese cities is actually a process of turning more rural land into urban land. When the urban authorities turn to the villages for land, they adopt two different approaches; one is to convert all of the village land, no matter whether it is farmland or residential land, into urban land; while the other approach is to turn part of it – usually the farmland into urban land – and leave the residential land untouched as they have to pay more compensation to relocate the peasants (Li 2008). It is the latter approach that the city governments adopt which leads to the emergence of *chongzhongcun*. So, in areas where urbanization accelerated, many villages that used to be on the outskirts of the city were surrounded by urban buildings and became "villages amid the city".

Chengzhongcun are not common throughout the country, but they are typical in some south China cities like Shenzhen and Guangzhou, which have seen rapid urbanization in the past three decades (Ibid). *Chengzhongcun* have been said to have contributed a lot to the development of the city as they became the main source of "self-help" housing for millions of migrant workers when the urban governments failed to provide affordable housing for migrants (Zhang, Zhao and Tian, 2003). However, the "inherent problems" of the *chengzhongcun* have displeased the urban authorities.

Chengzhongcun have been described as "dirty, disordered, and dilapidated" complexes with a high crime rate. Li (2008) ascribes this to the limited land resources and high population density as well as insufficient regulation and management in the villages. But the urban authorities, which have viewed the *chengzhongcun* as "complicated and disordered" areas that cause them management problems, seldom recognize their responsibilities in the current situations in *chengzhongcun*. Scholars believe that the local authorities should have been stricter at the beginning in implementing the state limitation on housing areas per household by stopping villagers who built additional stories on their buildings to meet migrants' surging demand for cheap housing in the city (Zhang, Zhao & Tian, 2003). Moreover, once over-density in

chengzhongcun was already an accomplished fact, the local governments should have put more effort into maintaining the social order and physical environment of the villages (Ibid).

Instead, they are adopting a more radical action in eradicating the problems in *chengzhongcun;* that is, to rebuild them into modern communities, although the redevelopment projects are expected to bring disastrous impacts to the *chengzhongcun* dwellers, who are mainly migrants (Ibid). But the *chengzhongcun* rebuilding process in all cases, almost without exception, has been accompanied by resistance from the villagers, most of whom are not satisfied with the compensation offered by the authority or by the real estate developers.

As is the case in many other cities, the majority of the *chengzhongcun* villagers in Guangzhou resisted the *chengzhongcun* redevelopment plans because they were not satisfied with the compensation offered. But what is more interesting in Guangzhou is that, as the case developed, the focus of the villagers' resistance turned from the *chengzhongcun* redevelopment plans to the accused "corrupt" village officials.

Resistance became more intense with collective action breaking out in one village after another since the summer of 2009 when the Municipal Government of Guangzhou announced its plans to demolish nine of its 138 *chengzhongcun* before the opening of the 16th Asian Games to be held in the city in November 2010. Among the villages that have seen collective action, two were the most conspicuous in terms of the scale and intensity of resistance; one is mentioned as Village A and the other as Village B in this study.

Previous studies on collective action

Early political scientists and sociological researchers looking into the dynamics of collective action and social movements had a heated debate on whether the participants were motivated by rational considerations, such as the economic benefits, or led by their non-rationality, for example, emotions and cultural norms.

Before social movements started to grow in the US and Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, the theory of social movements, either from the Marxist perspective or from the modernization theory perspective, were mostly rooted in one explanation from economics, which was economic discontent (Perry, 2008). In the 1960s, there was a trend in the development of theory of movements with scholars shifting their attention from the Marxists' focus on the benefits of social class to the political economists' emphasis on individual

interests (Tarrow 1994, p14). Mancur Olson (1965) was the most influential of the group. In his book, *The Logic of Collective Action*, Olson introduced the rational choice theory to explain collective action, saying that public goods are the motive power for collective action but they are not enough to motivate rational, self-interested individuals to join collective action to achieve common or group interest. The reason for this is that individuals would try to maximize their personal welfare by avoiding the cost, because even if they do not contribute to the provision of the good, they could still share the benefits (Opp 1989, p44). As a result, more people in the group prefer to "free ride" unless there is coercion to force them to act or some incentive apart from the common interest offered (Olson 1965, p2).

But researchers of social movements soon opposed by arguing that people participated in movements not only because of self-interest, but also group solidarity, strongly held beliefs, and the desire to be part of a group (Tarrow 1994, p15). Some others denied economic explanations and dedicated themselves to the psychological explanations to social protests. For example, Gurr (1970) in his book *Why Men Rebel* raised the concept of "Relative Deprivation" which emphasizes the discrepancy between what is really offered to the people by the society/authority and the expectations of the people. Based on the "frustration-aggression theory", Gurr (1970) believed that the possibility of people's "rebellion" and the "destruction" of the "rebellion" were proportional to relative deprivation.

Nonetheless, academics in the field who upheld the resource mobilization theory argued that if deprivation was the root cause of social movements, social protests would emerge frequently, as individuals' frustration was commonly seen in every society (Perry 2008; Liu 2009). They have thus focused on the mobilization and the social network of the resisters to compensate for the limitations of the psychological approach (Ibid). According to McCarthy and Zald (1977), the resource mobilization theory scrutinizes various resources that must be mobilized, the connections between social movements and social groups, the importance of external support for movements, and the tactics employed by authorities to incorporate or control movements. In the resource mobilization model, protesters are regarded as rational actors who calculate the cost and gains from their participation in the social movements (Ibid).

While the resource mobilization theorists recognize the rationality of the participants, cultural elements are also valued. Charles Tilly (1986), who was considered one of the most influential scholars in resource mobilization theory, highlighted the effects of social networks as well as culture in social

movements when many other researchers have written a great deal about the associations of various demographic and social background variables within social movements, and protest and emphasize their importance in people's participation in collective resistance (Opp 1989, p180; Perry 2008). Tilly believed that people with the same background and with mutual interactions were more easily mobilized and that a certain "protest repertoire" – a strategic frame or discourse – was established by the organizers of the movements. Other sociologists who also emphasized the importance of cultural elements in social movements included Doug McAdam (1982), who, in his book *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency 1930-1970*, emphasized the importance of religion (with the church as a network and religious songs and symbols as mobilization tools) in the civil movement of the black Americans.

Thus, the political process model, which was based on the resource mobilization theory, was developed by scholars including Tilly, McAdam, Sydney Tarrow, and others, and has now become the dominant approach to explaining social movements and collective action. According to the political process model, there are several elements for the emergence of social movements, including a political opportunity structure, a mobilization network, a protest repertoire, and a strategic frame (Perry 2008). Tarrow's (1994) book *Power in Movement* was taken as a showcase of the political process model, in which he applied the basic elements of the model to explain the "cycles of contention" (Perry 2008). For the political process theorists, the actors in social movements are still rational and their decision to join collective action or not is largely subjected to their perception of the political opportunity and their possibility of success. In the meantime, they highlight the importance of social networks and culture that is represented in the protest repertoire and strategic framing of the protesters.

In the mid-1990s, when the political process model was very popular in the field of social movement studies, Tilly, McAdam, and Tarrow introduced the concept of "contentious politics" to include different forms of contentious politics, comprising collective action, social movements, and revolutions under one research agenda. In their book *Dynamics of Contention*, the three pioneers in the field searched for explanatory mechanisms and processes to replace the variables checklist seen in the classic social movement that include opportunity, threat, mobilizing structures, repertoires, and framing (Till, McAdam, & Tarrow 2001, p32). To them, the classic models all treated the political phenomenon as "autonomous casual forces" but not a process of social interaction (Ibid). In order to get the connections of the variables and social actors right, they gave up the idea of setting up general models of all

contention or its varieties but looked for "robust, widely applicable causal mechanisms" that explained the most important features of contention (Ibid).

However, the political process and contentious politics models were criticized by some scholars like Armstrong and Bernstein as having viewed social movements as purely political, thus failing to recognize the complexity of the society and the importance of culture (Calle 2009). Armstrong and Bernstein (2004) argued that the political process and contentious politics models rely greatly on a state-centered structuralism and therefore cannot explain sexuality and gender movements which are usually not targeting the state but challenging existing cultural classification systems. Therefore, they made reference to institutional and feminist theories to develop a multi-institutional politics approach to re-conceptualize the relation between "material and symbolic realms".

To be concise, the scholars mentioned above have been debating on which elements, no matter whether rational or non-rational, are more dominant in contributing to the emergence of social movements. These social movement theories have been of great reference to the studies in the collective action of the Chinese social groups such as the rural peasants and workers. For example, Perry (1983), who studied the causes of the peasant collective action during 1845-1945 in north China, highlights that the actions of the peasants were mainly directed by the rational decisions (to compete for resources in a harsh environment) while in the meantime influenced by the locality of the peasants. Cai (2002), who studied the collective action of laid-off workers in China, argues that the local authorities in China have one constraint, which is that they do not have the right to use force at will as long as the action of the workers is peaceful and legitimate, which creates an opportunity for the workers to take direct action, while O'Brien and Li (2006) explain the emergence of the collective action in rural China from the structuralist's view by arguing that the gap between the rights that the upper-level authorities promised and what the local authorities actually delivered has been an incentive for rightful resistance. The concept of rightful resistance as raised by O'Brien and Li is profoundly influential in understanding collective action in rural China today. This concept emphasizes that the Chinese peasants no longer confine their collective petitioning to the appeals for economic benefits, but also to the appeals about the violations of local governments and village officials to their political and economic rights, which are secured by national laws and policies of the central government (Liu, 2009). Under this conceptual frame, O'Brien and Li believe that the collective action of the

peasants has both characteristics of political participation and political resistance (Ibid).

While many scholars believe that collective action of the Chinese peasants is grounded in rational thinking, Ying (2007) argues that morale, which is unique in the Chinese culture and can be best represented by the term "*qi*" (vital force), should be highly valued. By analyzing the interaction between the peasants and the local state, Ying (ibid) concluded that the grass-roots authorities' resort to force in suppressing peasant activists is counteractive as it provokes the peasants to fight to the death for their dignity. Zhao (2006), who compared the collective action in the Western world and China, says that most of the social movements in the West have been institutionalized while those in China are not, as the political system lacks space for collective action organization. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to the emotion and culture that exists in the living environment and social network of the Chinese people.

Purpose of the present study

While many scholars have looked into the causes of collective action of rural peasants and workers in China, no one has studied the dynamics of collective action of *chengzhongcun* villagers. This case study is thus designed to fill the disparity by examining the factors that contribute to the occurrence and persistence of collective action in *chengzhongcun* in China. Questions to be answered in this study include 1) What triggered collective action of the *chengzhongcun* villagers against the accused "corrupt" village officials despite the fact they had long perceived the village officials to be "corruptive"; and 2) Why and how could the *chengzhongcun* resisters sustain their collective action despite the local state having taken some repressive measures.

Regarding the case of collective action in *chengzhongcun* in Guangzhou as an interactive process between the resisters and the state, I try to look into the mechanism behind the contentious action of the *chengzhongcun* villagers. While not denying the importance of the political structural gap for collective action in *chengzhongcun*, I argue that the rational considerations and the local cultural features embedded in the social network of the *chengzhongcun* villagers were crucial to the occurrence and persistence of their collective action. To support this, I will explain how economic considerations of the villagers had led to the rejuvenation of their long "hibernating" social network and how local cultural features of the villagers had helped to enhance the solidarity of their network. I will further support this argument by analyzing how these two factors had together led to a phenomenon that had never

before been broached and explored by other scholars; that is, the labor division among the resisters, which in fact helped to sustain the collective action in *chengzhongcun* after the local state took repressive measures that actually reduced the opportunity for collective action.

As I have mentioned earlier in the thesis, the existing research on collective action contains a debate on whether rationality or local cultural features are more important to the emergence of collective action. Many scholars, especially those who engage in the studies of social movements and collective action in the Western context, are usually divided into two groups whereby one highly values the importance of rationality while the other values the significance of culture. The findings in this study show that both factors should be highly esteemed, if not equally. As the findings are quite in accordance with some studies in collective action in other settings in China, this study would contribute to people's understanding of collective resistance in the wider Chinese context.

As the first case study of collective action in *chengzhongcun*, this study also offers scholars who are interested in the field some inspiration. As a case study, the findings of the present research might not be generalized in other cases but the study may have important references for other cases on collective resistance in *chengzhongcun*.

Methodological framework

Design of study

This study adopts the qualitative research strategy. A case study with two embedded units (two *chengzhongcun*) is designed to answer the research question. Researchers adopting the research approach of a case study usually use qualitative techniques, for example, participant observation and unstructured/semi-structured interviews, because they are particularly helpful in generating rich and interesting data (Bryman 2008, p.53). Case study researchers are encouraged to use multiple sources of evidence instead of individual sources of evidence (Yin 2003, p.97). Thus, a triangulation design was made.

Selection of samples

The researcher of this study conducted purposive sampling to choose the samples. In this research there are two levels of sampling, including sampling of cases and sampling of respondents.

Guangzhou was taken as the case study for two reasons. Firstly, it is one of the fastest developing cities in China with a large number of *chengzhongcun*. Secondly, right before this study was planned collective action had taken place in several villages in Guangzhou, which offered us more opportunities to observe the development of the problem.

Within the case of Guangzhou, two *chengzhongcun* were chosen because they were the most wanted for redevelopment by the Guangzhou authority and also the resistance in both villages was more intense and persistent than in the other villages in Guangzhou.

As we have previously discussed the selection of the case and the embedded units in the case, the latter paragraphs will contribute to the selection of the samples of interviewees. In this research, both forms of purposive sampling, including snowball sampling and theoretical sampling, were used to sample interviewees.

In practice, I used my social networks in Guangzhou to find key informants in the villages. My first informant, Sun (fictive name), was introduced to me by a friend of my sister Yansu. Sun is a middle-aged man who runs a clinic in his family building in Village A. I paid a few visits to his clinic, where I talked with him and some of the villagers who came to visit him from time to time, including some activists that I was able to later talk to in some scheduled interviews.

My attempt to find respondents in Village B was more difficult at the beginning but surprisingly smooth after I got to know five women with the help of a village primary school teacher who was introduced to me by my college classmate. These women are the mothers of five pupils from the village, to whom I gave English lessons three times a week during my stay in Guangzhou, so I had the chance to talk with their parents after the lessons. From the conversations with the mothers I got to know the general information about the village and some stories about the past resistance organized by the villagers. The most valuable information I gained from them was that there were still many villagers (at least dozens) sitting on a construction site every day and that I could go and talk with them. I did so and collected a major part of my fieldwork data from the participant observations, as well as the interviews with the protestors there.

Selection of the interviewees was quite random at the beginning but more purposive later. At first, I mainly talked to old villagers in sit-down strikes only because most of the protesters there were in their 60s – retirement age. Gradually, I tried to talk to younger villagers in the hope of balancing the demographic situation of my pool of interviewees.

One more point that should be noted is that due to the sensitivity of the topic and time constraints, it was very difficult to approach the organizers of some collective actions as well as the accused village officials, although I did go to village committee offices as well as the street community office (the upper-level governmental unit of a village committee). Instead, two journalists (given the anonyms of Xi and Jia respectively), who had been to the collective action in Village A were interviewed and one governmental official (Li) who was not directly linked to the events but had knowledge of the hidden rules and inside stories of the authorities was consulted.

Data construction

The researcher of this study stayed in the field for one-and-a-half months from mid-January to the end of February 2010 to construct data, which mainly came from observations, interviews, and documents / texts.

The primary data used in this thesis includes observations in the field, especially on the sit-down strike site in Village B, focus interviews with five informants in the primary school of Village B, semi-structured interviews with 12 protestors (six men and six women), and random talks with some other participants at the sit-down strike site in Village B, semi-structured interviews with an informant (Sun) and four activists (one men and three women) in Village A, semi-structured interviews with two journalists and one governmental official, materials collected on the field including villagers' petition letters, replies from authorities of different levels to the petition of the villagers, leaflets and slogans of the protestors, and videos and photos of the collective actions provided by the villagers.

Secondary data in the study includes books and academic thesis/articles related to the topic, news reports by local journalists, and online webpage/blog/forum information written by anonymous villagers/witnesses.

Limitations of the data construction process

Though I managed to collect rich data in the field, there were some limitations to the data construction process.

Firstly, some information was lost when I was interviewing the protestors on the sit-in site, as the situation did not allow me to use recording or take notes. The reason for this is that the site was very near to the police station, which was just across the street and the police came over from time to time to warn the protestors about their illegal assembly. Protestors kept telling me that I should not keep any proof of conducting interviews on the site, otherwise I would be in serious trouble if the police noticed that I was there carrying out interviews, not to mention that there might also be some "spies hired by the

village officials" around. So all the field notes I have were not taken on the field but were memories recorded right after I left the field. To reduce the effects of this to the least extent, I tried my best to re-confirm the points that were not clear in the subsequent interviews. Moreover, my background as a Cantonese who speaks the same dialect as the *chengzhongcun* villagers and has a good understanding of the Cantonese culture also helped me reduce the loss of the information from our conversations.

Secondly, due to the sensitivity of the topic and the difficulty of approaching the accused village officials, most of the descriptions of the reactions of the local authorities came from the villagers' side, which might have been exaggerated. However, the triangulation design of this study would have compensated for this, as the authenticity of the data from interviews was tested by the evidence from observations and documents.

Theoretical framework

This study draws on the political process theory to examine the factors in the occurrence of collective action in *chengzhongcun* in Guangzhou. As we have introduced earlier, there are four basic elements in the political process model, including a political opportunity structure, a mobilization network, a protest repertoire, and a strategic frame.

A political opportunity structure is the openness or accessibility of a political system for political actors to organize collective action (Arzheimer & Carter, 2006). Kitschelt (1986) views political opportunity structures as "specific configurations resources, institutional arrangements, and historical precedents for social mobilization which facilitate the development of protest movements in some instances and constrain them in others". A mobilization network is the connection that exists among people who may or may not come from the same category but have the same background and different kinds of interactions (Perry, 2008). Charles Tilly believes that this network, which he named as "CAT-net", is a major source of collective action (Ibid). The concept of repertoire was originally from the theatre, which means that a specific play can be performed in many different ways and the ways of performance are different in different times or due to different directors and actors (Ibid). Based on this concept, Charles Tilly developed the idea of protest repertoire to explain the different ways of protest or the available tactics protesters could adopt in any given society in a particular period (Goodwin & Jasper 2003, p252). The concept of strategic frame overlaps somewhat with the concept of protest repertoire and means the way that the

activists or protest leaders mobilize people by demonstrating their ideas and by creating symbols and rhythms that could arouse potential followers to generate cultural resonance (Perry, 2008).

Inspired by the contentious politics literatures, which emphasize the interaction between the participants of collective action and the state, I look at the contention of the *chengzhongcun* villagers as a dynamic process. By analyzing the interaction between the resisters and the authorities, this study tries to examine the connection of different factors in the emergence and development of the collective action in *chengzhongcun*.

Though this study uses the political process model to examine the factors contributing to the emergence and persistence of collective action, it does not imply the political process theory is fully applicable for the case. The applicability of the model is criticized as the case in this study shows that both rationality and culture should be highly valued concerning their importance to the emergence of collective action in *chengzhongcun*, while the political process theory values the significance of culture much more than that of rationality.

Rationality and culture as the two major factors in triggering and sustaining collective action seems contradictory in nature but they are not mutually exclusive in the case of *chengzhongcun*. Rationality means that people count the gain and loss when they encounter a problem and they chose the most economical way to achieve their goals. It is seen more in individuals in a more marketized society that values the traditional cultural constraints and less in a community with strong social and cultural attachments. Culture on the other hand is a rather broad concept, which takes everything that differ *chengzhongcun* villagers from other social groups in China and in the Western context into account. The beliefs, ideologies, values, and other understandings of the world collectively shared by the social group would thus be recorded. *Chengzhongcun* villagers as a social group is rather integrated with the urban marketized society while at the same time preserves many rural cultural traditions and customs, and were found to have embraced rational thinking and local cultural norms when they were making decisions during their resistance against the local cadres.

Ethical considerations

All of the interviewees in this study and all of the people who helped me during my stay in Guangzhou were well aware of my research. Because of the sensitivity of the topic in China, especially when the case is still progressing,

all of the names of my informants and interviewees and even the names of the villages have remained confidential throughout the thesis.

Disposition

Guided by the interaction between the two social actors, the *chengzhongcun* villagers and the state, this thesis will be divided into three parts. The first part will contribute to the emergence of collective action in *chengzhongcun* in Guangzhou, in which factors in the occurrence of the collective action will be examined. The second part will deal with the response of the authorities to the collective action of the villagers, while the last part will explain how and why the villagers sustained their resistance by the means of labor division.

Emergence of collective action

The first questions that students who study collective action usually ask themselves are why and when do the people with grievances decide to go onto the streets to express their dissatisfaction and anger. Some scholars consider collective action as the expression of a crowd's deprivation, anomie, and mentality, but a look at modern history shows that the level of deprivation people suffered and the disorganization of the society cannot be the source of collective action because these preconditions are more constant than the collective action caused by them (Tarrow 1994, p81). Instead, political opportunities and the incentives they provide for collective action are considered by political process theorists to be the causes for the breakout of social movements (Ibid), though some scholars of the group also emphasize the importance of emotions in the activists' initial recruitment of members (Aminzade and McAdam 2001, p47).

Due to feelings of deprivation people may desire to protest, but it can hardly explain how the people manage to come together and make collective decisions on when and what they should do to challenge their proponents. In the case of *chengzhongcun* in Guangzhou, villagers had perceived that the village officials were "corrupt" for a long time (Sun, 2010/01/27; BW4, 2010/02/03) but they had never been able to organize collective action until the summer of 2009 when the authority announced plans to redevelop the communities. Why did the collective action not come earlier? It was of course not a coincidence that almost all the villages involved decided to participate in collective action at the same time. There was certainly some relation with the development plan. But then why was the focus of their resistance not on the

development plan but corruption? In this part, answers to these questions will be given, but before that we will examine the forms of resistance that the *chengzhongcun* villagers took to protest against the local authority.

Forms of resistance in *chengzhongcun*

Political process theorists believe that the forms of collective action taken by protesters are embedded in the specific social structures of the time. The whole set of methods that a group of people use to make their claims was given the name of the "repertoire" by Charles Tilly in his book *The Contentious French* published in 1986. According to Tilly, repertoire is a structural and cultural concept with which people know what they should do, what they are expected to do, and what exactly they will do when they are engaged in conflicts with others (Tarrow 1994, p31). The repertoire changes over time and the changes depend on major fluctuations in interests, opportunity, and organization, which in turn are correlated with changes in the state (Ibid). In contemporary China, under the protest repertoire, which is subject to the strong authoritarian state and the absence of civil society, actions taken by resisters include mediated contention, in which resisters hope to seek grace from intercessors, and direct action that depends on a "public rallying call and high-pressure methods" aimed at pressing village officials to make immediate concessions (O'Brien & Li 2006, p69; Tarrow 1994, p78).

In the case of *chengzhongcun* in Guangzhou, mediated contention in the form of group petitioning and direct action in forms of a public meeting and sit-in were seen.

The previous studies about resistance in China show that protesters usually try individual or collective petitioning first to see if the upper levels of government could help mediate and solve the problems. When they notice that mediated contention is not effective, they start to plan direct action. The same happened in *chengzhongcun*. Before the direct action of the *chengzhongcun* villagers broke out, there had been a time of collective petition, whereas before the collective petitioning which followed the authority's announcement of the *chengzhongcun* redevelopment plan, individual petitioning had been seen from time to time.

Some villagers in Village B started mediated contention as early as 20 years ago (BM2, 2010/01/29; Petition Letter B, 2009/09/07), while those in Village A have been petitioning for at least a few years (AM1, 2010/02/08; AW1, 2010/02/08). In both *chengzhongcun* that are studied in this thesis, there have been some activists who carried out investigations and claimed that they had collected enough "evidence" to prove that the villages' Party

secretaries, both of whom have been in office for more than 30 years, had been exercising cronyism and abusing their power for personal gains (AM1, 2010/02/08; AW1, 2010/02/08; BM2, 2010/01/30). Some of them had also reported their "evidence" to related governmental departments of different levels but without any positive feedback (Ibid). For example, villagers in Village B recalled that a former congress representative at provincial level had sent complaint letters to the governmental departments at upper levels from time to time for 20 years but never received "positive replies" (BM2, 2010/01/30). Some of them claimed that they had to stop because the village officials threatened them. For example, the nephew of the former provincial congress representative was said to have been beaten by thugs hired by the village officials (BM2, 2010/01/29; Petition Letter B, 2009/09/07).

It was not until August 2009 that collective action that targeted the corrupt village officials ensued in both Village A and Village B. Collective petitions were sent to different levels of authorities at the top of the village-level before public meetings were organized in mid-August 2009, which was viewed as the beginning of their long-term direct resistance against the village officials (BI1-5, 2010/01/27; Sun, 2010/01/27). To the resisters, the large assemblies at the beginning of their direct resistance had symbolic significance because of the size and the impact on the village officials (Ibid).

The first public meetings in both villages came all of a sudden from the authority's perspective, and they looked huge with crowds of people, part of which were onlookers (Video A, 2009/08/17; Video B, 2009/08/22). It was estimated that there were several hundred native villagers attending the public meeting in Village A and more than 1,500 protestors in Village B, about half of the total of adult native residents of the village (Ibid). Banners showing slogans were hanging up. Protesters in both villages demanded that the village committee make the financial and property records known to the public (Ibid).

Later on, when the public meetings were declared by the local authority as "disturbing social order" and repressed by the police (BM2, 2010/01/29), villagers sustained their direct action against the village officials in the form of a sit-in while at the same time continuing collective petitioning (BI1-5, 2010/01/29; Sun, 2010/01/27).

Mechanism of collective action

A question that arises here is why collective action did not happen in the two *chengzhongcun* until August 2009 despite the fact the villagers said they had

been convinced by some individual petitioners that the village officials were "corrupt" (Ibid). To answer this question we need to know the factors that led to the occurrence of direct collective action by the resisters.

Researchers sometimes see the collective action and movement theory as a "laundry list" that covers "items" of identifiable grievances, the perceived opportunity for success, the access of material, and organizational resources for mobilization and so on (Gould 2003, p235). Scholars who studied the Eastern European revolts of 1989 have found that both political opportunity and emotions, including people's discontents, grievances, and ideas, beliefs and ideologies, together with people's capacity to act collectively, were insufficient in the birth and growth of social movement until they followed the international influence, the "Gorbachev" factor (Oberschall 1996, p94). The Eastern European experience indicates that collective action in a different context has a different "laundry list".

What are the factors contributing to the rise of collective action in the context of *chengzhongcun* in China? Drawing on the political process model, this section will value the importance of the major factors that bring about collective action, including the opportunity for collective action, the rationality of protesters, the social network, and the cultural meanings and features of the resisters.

Opportunity and perception of opportunity

The political process approach emphasizes the importance of macro-political factors in the emergence of social movements (Diani & Eyerman 1992, p6). Political process theorists have thus constructed the concept of "political opportunity structure" (Ibid), which covers a group of macro-level variables such as the degree of openness or closure of the polity, the stability or instability of political alignments, the presence or absence of allies and support groups, divisions within the elite or its tolerance of protest, and the policy-making capacity of the government (Tarrow 1988, p429).

The reliability of these macro-level variables has been examined by scholars who study the collective action of different social groups. Cai (2002), who studies the collective action of laid-off workers in China, argues that workers usually go onto the streets when they think they will succeed, which is possible when the local authority faces constraints, a major factor of which is that local governments do not have the right to use force at will as long as the action of the workers is peaceful and is based on legitimate demands, which creates an opportunity for the workers to take direct action. O'Brien and Li (2006), who study contemporary peasant resistance, highlight the gap between the central government policies and actual execution of the policies at

the grass-roots level governments and they thus categorize the rural protests in China as "rightful resistance" to differ from James Scott's (1985) "everyday form of resistance" as well as political participation or social movement.

The findings of the emergence of collective action in contemporary China are without question referential to the case study in *chengzhongcun*. The contention of the *chengzhongcun* villagers fits into the category of rightful resistance as they have viewed the disparity between the state's consistent anti-corruption campaign and the suspected "corrupt officials" in their villages as an opportunity for collective action. Besides, the local authority in Guangzhou is certainly subject to the same constraints that Cai (2002) elaborated.

As O'Brien and Li (2006) indicate, resistance is a story of opportunity and how people perceive opportunity. In the case of *chengzhongcun*, one opportunity for villagers to contend with is the structural gap between the central government's request of probity and the "corruption reality" of village officials. *Chengzhongcun* villagers were very much persuaded by the media that the central government would take a hard-line stand against corruption (BM3, 2010/01/30; AW3, 2010/02/23). Since the beginning of 2009, a body of provincial-ministerial level officials accused of corruption, including some in Guangdong province, was punished by the central state, which was viewed by the media as the central party state's determination to combat corruption (Xinhua, 2009; Xinhua, 2009a). Many survey results show that the Chinese people have much more faith in the central government than in the local authority, and the perceived creditability of the local governments actually has a tendency of decreasing further and further (Wang, 2009). Most *chengzhongcun* villagers believed that the higher-level governments, especially the central government, would punish the "corrupt" village officials if the villagers could provide enough evidence. "The Communist Party is good, it's just that some people in the lower level (governments) are bad," said an old man participating in the sit-in in Village B (BM1, 2010/01/29).

But the opportunity in Village A and Village B had been open for a long time since the village officials were accused by some individual petitioners, and yet collective action did not occur until the *chengzhongcun* redevelopment plan was announced by the authority.

Rationality and social network

So, in the case of *chengzhongcun*, the opportunity was only taken as the precondition for collective action. The flare up of collective resistance in *chengzhongcun* needed a fuse. The fuse in Village A and Village B was the

chengzhongcun redevelopment plan and behind this it was rationality that motivated villagers to participate in collective resistance.

At the outset, we should be clear that *chengzhongcun* villagers were not so similar to the emotionally "frustrated" men in the study by Gurr (1970). They were rather rational. As members of *chengzhongcun* and shareholders of the *chengzhongcun* cooperation company that is in charge of the huge business attached to the collective land, the villagers had kept economic benefit at the center of their contention. Sun (2010/01/27) repeatedly reminded me that their collective action was an economic action rather than political, with the shareholders of the village company asking for the disclosure of the financial accounts and collective properties. He emphasized this just to emphasize that the local authority should not have suppressed their collective action by viewing it as a political act. But this showed that the villagers were motivated by economic benefits. Not only their collective action, but also their first spontaneous gatherings were triggered by villagers' economic considerations because people started to talk to each other, all concerned about the compensation from *chengzhongcun* redevelopment.

The rational nature of the *chengzhongcun* villagers was also shown in their collective decision to make local authority corruption instead of the redevelopment project as the target of their contention. Though collective action of the villagers emerged after the *chengzhongcun* redevelopment plan was announced and it was due to the fact that they were highly concerned about the compensation issues of the redevelopment plan, they did not focus their contention on higher compensation but on corruption. Many of them emphasized that they were not resisting the redevelopment plan but the "corrupt" village officials. They claimed that they would not talk about the redevelopment plan with the authority until the suspected village officials were thrown out of office and punished. At this point the *chengzhongcun* villagers were rather rational. They were very clear that the *chengzhongcun* redevelopment project was an administrative order from the municipal government that would be hard to resist. For many villagers, if the compensation was reasonable, they would not resist the redevelopment plan, though the best outcome for them was to keep their houses (BI1-5, 2010/01/25). However, the problem was that the redevelopment project would be directed by the village committee, in which they had no faith at all. "How can we feel at ease letting a corrupt village committee take care of the redevelopment project that is so important to all of us?" said Sun from Village A. Therefore, resisting the village officials accused of "corruption" naturally became their top priority (BM6, 2010/02/10). Moreover, combating

corruption in the village was a legitimate demand and they were confident that they could gain support from the upper-level authorities. They were even more confident that the municipal government would be concerned about their demands because the redevelopment plan would be hindered by their protests against the village officials (Ibid). The redevelopment plan was thus regarded by the villagers as the best but last chance to combat corruption in the village. Protesters in Village B said that if the community was redeveloped, all the "evidence" that could prove that the village officials were "corrupt" would disappear and they would never reclaim what they deserved in the past (Sun, 2010/01/27). Here, what they meant was the high economic benefits that were generated from the valuable collective properties in the *chengzhongcun*.

Scholars of both the political process theory and its origin, the resource mobilization theory, recognize the importance of rationality in bringing people onto the streets. But these structuralists in social movement are not like the economists studying collective action who believe rationality was the genuine explanation of collective resistance. They have said that collective action is not only influenced by economic considerations, but also by protesters' strong social attachments to others (Gould 2003, p238). They emphasize the importance of the social networks in the recruitment of the protesters but not so much value is given to the influence of people's rational thinking.

In the case of *chengzhongcun* resistance in Guangzhou, the social network, and the local traditions and culture embedded in the social network as well as protesters' shared identity as the "oppressed" *chengzhongcun* villagers were essential for the emergence of collective action, yet the contribution of self-interest or rationality should also be highlighted. It was rationality that spurred villagers to re-strengthen their contact with each other, reactivating a social network that had long been "hibernating".

Social network did play an essential role in the emergence of collective action. With an active social network, activists could effectively mobilize resources and acquire internal and external support, leading to people's confidence in achieving success if they act collectively.

That is why collective action by the villagers appeared soon after the *chengzhongcun* redevelopment plan was unveiled but not in the previous 20 years since the village officials were first accused of being "corrupt". In the previous 20 years, there was no such event like the redevelopment plan that touched upon the individual benefits of every villager (Sun, 2010/01/29). With no stimulators, the *chengzhongcun* villagers had no chances of re-

strengthening their social ties, which had been weakening as the villages developed from a former rural village into an urban community.

Why was the social network in *chengzhongcun* weakening during the process of urbanization? In the past, lineage/clan organizations played an important role in keeping a large number of villagers in one unit (Barker 1977, p509). But the lineage/clan organizations gradually lost their ability to unite villagers as urbanization expanded (Gao, 2005). The disaggregation of the lineage and clan is a result of the growth of occupational differentiation and the social/geographic mobility of the villagers, as villagers no longer depend on the clan properties for a livelihood (Barker 1977, p503-504). In the *chengzhongcun* studied in this thesis, a large part of the villagers' income comes from work outside and house rentals, and only a small part of their income comes from the shares they hold in the collective company operated by the village committee (BI1-5, 2010/01/27). Villagers with the most shares in the village company receive about CNY 12,000 each year, which the villagers complained was unacceptably low (Ibid). Although most of them work, they do not belong to the same working unit.

Civil groups in *chengzhongcun*, like the lion dance team and the dragon-boat team also used to play important roles in uniting villagers, especially the young people, but in recent decades as people are more integrated with the urban life, not many still care very much about these traditional activities (Sun, 2010/01/29).

Besides the degradation of the clan organizations and the civil groups, there are other factors that led to the weakening of the social ties among the *chengzhongcun* villagers. Many researchers would agree that the villagers' means of social exchange would alter along with the changes of the private space. Yan (2003, p127-132) believes that the changes to house layout and the villagers' increasing awareness of privacy have led to the decrease in communications among the villagers. However, He (2008) argues that the physical alteration of house only leads to a change in social exchange style, and communications among the villagers would change from house-based (taking private houses as social gathering places) to public space-based. What He (2008) indicates is that if there were enough public spaces in the villages, social exchange between the villagers would not decrease.

But *chengzhongcun* is a different case from the rural villages that Yan (2003) and He (2008) study. Demographic change is instead taken as the most important factor in the decrease in communication among the villagers. In a sense, *chengzhongcun* are no longer villages but urban communities comprised of a large number of migrants (tenants) and a comparatively smaller number

of native villagers (landlords) (BI1-5, 2010/01/27). Compared with other social groups like the rural villagers and the urban workers, *chengzhongcun* villagers are less connected with each other because they have fewer public places and social occasions for intercommunication. The public places like parks and some open-air playgrounds in the *chengzhongcun* are usually occupied by the "other residents" (*Waidiren*, migrants). There are public places only open for native villages like the cultural rooms and clan halls where some old people gather and play cards/mah-jong and indoor sports like ping-pong but usually there are less than ten people in one place. Most of the native villages work during the daytime (some in the village, many others work in the city) and stay inside their buildings because of their sense of insecurity outdoors during the night. "We seldom go out at night. It's a disordered place with different kinds of people. Besides, the streets in the village are so narrow and dark and you may get robbed at night," said the women from Village B (BI1-5, 2010/01/29). Gradually, the *chengzhongcun* villagers become alienated from each other. They seldom invite each other to happy family events like birthday dinner parties, unlike the rural villagers (Ibid). Some activists in Village A even said they did not contact each other much until they started collective resistance together, though they live pretty close to each other (AM1 and AW1, 2010/02/08).

The time for rejuvenating the social network in *chengzhongcun* was finally ripe in August 2009 when the municipal government announced the plan to rebuild both villages which aroused attention from all "rational" villagers.

Strategic frame and constructed identity of resisters

The political process theorists also emphasize the importance of cultural elements embedded in the social network to the emergence of collective resistance. Setting the cultural meanings of the collective action and the identity of the resisters in the strategic framing process, and a process of consensus formation among the resisters is important in mobilizing and integrating people (Tarrow 1994, p119).

Slogans, songs, and graffiti, the three important forms of symbolic communication especially in authoritarian systems (Tarrow 1994, p119), retained their popularity in the case of *chengzhongcun* resistance. Anti-corruption was explicitly expressed and delivered in their symbols. There were three main themes in their strategic framing, including denouncing the village officials, showing their grievance, and displaying their requests.

The strategic frame had a practical sense as almost all of the protesters who talked to me had naturally covered all the three main themes. Despite some old men and women emphasizing that they were not well educated and thus

might not be able to express themselves well, they all had a fluent tongue and spoke clearly about the whole story. For example, when they were trying to gain external support by showing how "corrupt" the village officials were and how severely they were "plundered", they talked about the "two huge contrasts". The first contrast was the expected rich *chengzhongcun* and the low income of the villagers from the village company, while the second was the "wealthy" village officials and the "poor" villagers.

The symbols had the functions of strengthening the recognition and solidarity of the protesters, showing an image of the "oppressed" villagers to attract external support, and emphasizing the legitimacy of their demands.

Constructing the image as weak to gain public support is a strategy adopted by many grass-roots protesters in China. Stories about peasant workers threatening their bosses with death to claim back their salaries were often seen in the media (Dong 2008). The logic behind these cases is to utilize or construct the identity of being the weak party for the purpose of winning wide social support (Ibid), because sympathizing and helping the weak is the Chinese tradition. The soul of *Dao* (virtue) in Daoism, of *Ren* (humaneness) in Confucianism, and of *Bo'ai* (universal love) in Mohism lets the poor and the weak acquire more benefits and the unfortunate to have more happiness but does not allow the strong to grow stronger (Hu 2007).

Local cultural features and mobilization

Mobilization of collective action in *chengzhongcun* involves several players, including the organizers/activists, the potential participants, and the external supporters like the media and the higher-level authorities. The role of organizers/activists was central in the mobilization process. Empirical observations and interviews with activists, ordinary protesters, and journalists showed that there was no formal organization directing the mobilization. There was just a small group of people who were more active in leading the other villagers. In both villages, the activists were usually those who knew more about the "inside stories" of the village officials (BM2, 2010/01/30; AW1, 2010/02/22).

Although the organization of the collective action was rather informal, activists managed to mobilize the majority of the villagers to join the public meetings at the initial stage of their contention because of the re-activated social network. The rejuvenation of the network, which was based on kinship and the villagers sharing the same living space was extremely important to the occurrence of collective action in *chengzhongcun*, as it not only facilitated the fast and effective communication of information needed for mobilization, like the "evidence" that can prove the village officials "guilty", but also brought

the villagers back to an environment whereby the traditional cultural norms could control the behavior of people.

As I have mentioned earlier, the villagers were originally motivated to gather and discuss with each other economic considerations, and the "free-rider" problem that Olson (1965) discovered would have occurred if there was no such social network embedded in the Cantonese clan tradition and culture.

The clan tradition and culture greatly value individual and family reputation in the village. An example in Village B can show how important reputation was to a person and a family in the village. When a village official was accused face-to-face by a group of villagers of being "corruptive", he said to one member of the group, who was the son of a former village official, "Your father was a village official for more than 20 years. To the question whether the village officials are corrupt, you will get the answer if you go back home and ask your father. He knows how the village committee and village company work." These sentences were recalled by the village officials in a confrontational meeting with the former village official, which was recorded in a DVD video by the villagers (Video B, 2009/08/22). But the villagers insisted that he had mentioned that if they (the current village officials) were corrupt, the former village official would have been "more corruptive" (BW3, 2010/01/30). The illogical and unclear reply of the official was viewed by the present audience as an accusation against the former villager official. His words were circulated among the villagers in one night. The former village official had to speak in the public meeting the next day to defend himself and call for an examination and publicization of the salary and property records of all former and present village officials, including himself (Video B, 2009/08/22).

The example also showed how fast information could circulate and reach every villager when the social network was re-constructed in *chengzhongcun*. The performance of every adult villager or family in the collective resistance against their opposition, the village officials, was under the close examination of the group.

The reputation that an adult villager and a family gained or kept during the resistance process had thus become an incentive that could overcome the "free-rider" problem. Courageous protesters, especially the activists, were highly valued by the villagers while those who did not contribute or help were gossiped about. For example, Sun (2010/01/27) had expressed his admiration and respect for the organizers of the collective action in Village A, while the women in Village B had gossiped that a co-villager who worked as a journalist for a local TV station should have used her network in the media to disclose

the "dark side" of the local authority (BI1-5, 2010/01/27). Villagers had reiterated that it was everyone's responsibility to participate in the collective resistance to fight for their rights (BI1-5, 2010/01/25; BW5, 2010/02/05). If not all of the adults in one family were able to participate in the collective resistance, at least one should represent the family. Otherwise, the family might be scorned by the other villagers. BW6 (2010/02/05) in Village B, an old woman whose family was defined as having "bad elements" (*chengfen buhao*) during the Cultural Revolution, said that her family had been very cautious in participating in any activities against the authority and her sons never came out in favor of the resistance. However, though BW6 was nervous of being punished by the authority again, she still participated in the collective action because she had to represent her family.

Activists had made good use of villagers' appreciation to mobilize them. In the open-air public meetings, activists in Village B called on villagers to be courageous and fight to the end. One of them said none of the activists were "afraid of getting into trouble", which gained applause from the audience (Video B1, 2009/08/21). By saying "if you are afraid, go home!" (Ibid), the activist was sending a message that the cowards would be taunted. The sense of identity of the villagers as the "severely oppressed" in the expected "rich *chengzhongcun*" had been strengthened in the consensus formation process and during the direct actions in which agitated activists had denounced the local authority and publicly blamed it for their "poor situation" (Ibid).

Activists had also used the social network and their constructed image as the weak party to mobilize external supporters. Former villagers who were expected to have some network (*guanxi*) with the higher-level authorities were asked to facilitate their petitioning (BM2, 2010/01/30). Villagers who worked in the media sector had helped to inform journalists to go to the public meetings and sit-ins (AM1, 2010/02/08). In their petition letters and their representation of the story to the journalists, activists had highlighted their "poor" situation under the "corrupt" village committee in the hope of gaining more concern and support, although journalists said that the villagers might have been exaggerating their economic situation to underscore the "corruption" of the village officials (Jia, 2010/02/25).

State and *chengzhongcun* collective action

To succeed in their resistance, villagers need to gain external support, including the support from the media, which would finally attract public

support and the support from the higher-level governments. In this section we will see if the villagers succeeded in gaining external support. The attitude and action of the higher-level authorities and the media usually have great impact on the behavior of the local authority, which in turn has impact on the organization of collective resistance. So at the end of this section we will also see how the local authority reacted.

The "silent" media

Though the villagers were hoping their direct resistance could be exposed to the media and then gain popular support and attention from the higher-level authorities, the process turned out to be much more difficult than they thought. As we have mentioned in the previous section, the activists in both villages had contacted the media and the journalists did make a presence, but the villagers were surprised to find that not even one word about their assembly was mentioned in the TV and radio news programs and local newspapers (BI1-5, 2010/01/25; Sun, 2010/01/27). There were only two pieces of e-news about the first assembly in Village A on the internet written by journalists from two different local newspapers. One of the two pieces of news was even accompanied by a video clip by the press photographer, but they only appeared on the news portals of the two newspapers. One of the two journalists, Jia (2010/02/25), explained why her news story about the first direct action by Village A villagers appeared on the internet but was "*qiangbi*" (literally means shot dead, a synonym used by Chinese journalists to replace "banned") by newspaper editors. She said the news story was published on the news portal of the newspaper because the e-news always came out much faster than the news in the newspaper and the news story had already been posted on the internet before the ban from the publicity department of the government to the direct action by Village A villagers was handed down.

In China, governmental control over media reports about collective actions was rather tight, though no detailed guidelines about what kinds of social events were forbidden for news coverage were made. The 2010 report of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) on press freedom in China said that the loosening of local and foreign media during the period up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics had been ceased in early 2009 when the Chinese authorities started to re-exert control on the media. A list of media-related orders from the Chinese authorities in 2009 covered bans on reports from public protests against the authorities and social riots to the photos of a topless actress on a Caribbean beach (IFJ, 2010).

Journalists in Guangzhou said the ban from the governmental propaganda departments was mainly event-oriented, which means that only when one event happened did they started to make decisions about whether or not it was allowed to be reported (Jia, 2010/02/25). Usually the journalists are informed about the event much faster than the governmental departments, so the media are actually playing for time with the authority, which means publishing the news story before the ban arrives (Ibid).

The case in *chengzhongcun* indicates that the media control department in Guangzhou actually responded rather quickly. Journalists and government officials had indicated that the authority in Guangzhou had improved the mechanism of emergency management as it was preparing for the 16th Asian Games to be held in the city in November 2010 (Xi, 2010/02/25; Li, 2010/02/23). Thus, the propaganda department had certainly tightened media control and improved the responsive system. So it was not surprising to see that nothing about the *chengzhongcun* villagers' act of resistance appeared in the newspapers and the TV/radio news programs. A journalist from the press in Beijing was quoted by a villager in Village A as saying that even media outside Guangdong province had restrictions in reporting *chongzhongcun* resistance in Guangzhou (AW3, 2010/02/23). Jia and Xi (2010/02/25) explained that it was probably because the authorities of Guangdong Province had applied for a nation-wide media ban from the central propaganda department in order to "build a harmonious atmosphere of public opinion for the coming Asian Games".

Meanwhile, villagers saw that many of their web forum posts on the internet were deleted by the web forum administrators, who were believed by the villagers to have sustained pressure from the authority. The IFJ report stated that, starting from 2009, the Chinese authority had focused especially on controlling information on the internet, which has been an increasingly popular means for social expression and organization (IFJ 2010, p31). An anonymous journalist working in mainland China was quoted in the report saying that online news and information that did not fit in with propaganda would be filtered (Ibid).

The "unresponsive" higher-level governments

When the villagers saw that the village officials emerged unscathed from their waves of resistance, they carried on petitioning. They claimed that they had appealed up to the central level authorities. But there had been no sign of

intervention from the higher-level authorities up to the end of February 2010 when fieldwork for this study ended.

Petitioners did receive replies from the district level authority but they were all upset with the responses. In Village B, the petitioners first received a reply from the street community office. In the letter, the street-level authority stated that the reply was made in response to the villagers' appeal to the Municipal Bureau for Letters and Calls, which had forwarded their letter to the district level authority for investigation and response (Reply to Petition B, 2009/12/24). All of the accusations of the villagers to the village officials were denied in the reply and the villagers re-appealed to the district level authority, which sent an investigation group to the village to receive villagers' complaints and reports (BM2, 2010/01/30). There was also an investigation group in Village A but the activists criticized this action, stating that the group was sent just for show.

"They asked us to write down complaints and accusations and we did…but when we asked them for a copy of the records of complaints later, they refused and we thought that they might have destroyed all the information collected" (AW1, 2010/02/08).

The final reply of the investigation group again denied all the accusations of the villagers, who were very disappointed and their distrust of the street and district levels of government increased (Ibid).

An official who worked in the provincial public security department in Guangdong had explained why the municipal level authority handed the villagers' petition down to the district level and then the street level government, by saying that the municipal authority might have seen that they were lacking in evidence or confidence to prove that the accused officials were corrupt, otherwise they would have set up an independent investigation group to go into the case (Li, 2010/02/23).

The "repressive" local state

According to Cai (2008, p24), the government's responses to popular resistance are either concessions or suppression, or a combination of the two. The local authorities that make immediate concession when facing direct resistance worry about the intervention from higher-level authorities or the central government (Cai 2008, p26) and so the village officials are very likely to repress the protesters when they fail to receive support from the higher-level or central authorities (O'Brien & Li, 2006). Cai (2008, p27) also points out

that suppression is usually an option for the local government when concessions are hard to make. These findings were in accordance with the facts in the two Guangzhou *chengzhongcun*, as there was no sign of interventions from the upper-level authorities after a series of assemblies and petitions by the villagers. Admitting corruption as a concession was impossible, so the local authority had to use suppression before the resistance escalated into a riot, which would certainly be followed by intervention from higher-level authorities because rioting is viewed by the higher-level authorities as the local authority's failure to maintain social stability (Cai 2008, p27).

Of course, direct resistance would not necessarily turn into violent actions, especially when the *chengzhongcun* villagers were rational protesters. But to the village officials, the risk was high as villagers had shown their determination in the assemblies and the big assemblies had gradually evolved into regular daily sit-down strikes in the following months.

So suppressions came. Villagers in Village A said a large group of policemen came in (some said it was actually too big for a peaceful assembly in the village) and expelled protesters. "They took a picture of every villager but they did not allow villagers with cameras to take pictures or film the scene," Sun (2010/01/27) complained. Since the assemblies and sit-down strikes in both villages were peaceful, the police did not use force on the scenes, although some villagers in Village A were taken away as they had had physical conflicts with the policemen who were expelling resisters.

Actually, the police are strictly controlled in the use of equipment and weapons according to the directive on the settlement of social unrest issued by the Ministry of Public Security in 2002, which was quoted by Cai (2008, p28). Instead of violent suppression, the local police in Guangzhou punished selected participants.

Starting from October 2009, two months after the direct resistance begun, activists and some villagers were caught and detained by the police one after another (AM1, 2010/02/08; BM5, 2010/02/10; BM6, 2010/0210). An activist who was detained and bailed for a pending trial described the police action as terrifying, with dozens of armed policemen surrounding his house (AM1, 2010/02/08). More residents in Village B were caught and taken away when they were walking back home alone. "They never caught people when they were with other villagers," BM1 (2010/01/27) said. Villagers caught were charged with "disrupting public order" (BM3, 2010/01/30). Many of them were released in one month, while some in Village A were officially arrested and imprisoned (AM1, 2010/02/08).

According to Cai (Ibid), local governments in China commonly use legal punishment when they are dealing with resisters because the existing law and regulations view most instances of collective action as illegal. Some grass-roots officials even resort to illegal methods by hiring thugs to attack activists (Cai, Ibid). Villagers in Village B had accused the village officials of hiring thugs to beat the nephew of an activist (the former congress representative mentioned earlier) ten years ago (Petition Letter B, 2009/09/07). This time, when they saw dozens of "ferocious" bodyguards hired by the village officials strolling around and monitoring their movements at the sit-in site, they were all frightened to varying extents, though no resister had reported that s/he was attacked (BM2, 2010/01/27).

Sustaining collective action

When external support was absent and the local authority had taken some repressive measures, the opportunity for the emergence of collective action seemed to have reduced. Yet the villagers managed to sustain their collective resistance in the form of daily sit-ins and collective petitions. Why was collective action still possible when the local state's repression had increased their cost in gaining the "public good"? As rational resisters, why did the villagers not free ride when the risks of being caught were so high? What had the villagers done to sustain their resistance? Answers to these questions will be provided in this section.

Reviewing the opportunity

The success of *chengzhongcun* villagers' resistance depended very much on the support of the higher-level authorities. When the higher-level governments turned out to be "unresponsive", resisters started to feel that the opportunity for success was dwindling (Sun, 2010/01/29).

They firmly believed that there was a strong screen around the official circle protecting the accused village officials (BM2, 2010/01/30; AW2, 2010/02/08). They believed that the "disappointing" replies to their petition that denied all their accusations showed that the accused village officials had the strong backing of the street community office and the district government (Ibid). This, together with the media ban to their resistance as well as the absence of intervention from higher-level authorities, protesters said, were all because of an official protective network that originated from one high-

ranking official in the municipal government, who used to be the head of the town and then the district that governed both Village A and Village B (Ibid). In their petition letters, villagers accused this high-ranking official of creating the strongest screen for the village officials because he had gained a lot of economic benefits from the village officials when he was serving as the superior of the heads of both villages (Petition Letter B, 2010/09/07).

There were other points that made villagers strongly believe the existence of a screen protecting the village officials. For example, villagers in Village A said it was beyond the powers of a village Party secretary to mobilize so many policemen to suppress the resistance (Sun, 2010/01/27); while those in Village B said that the wife of a village official had aggressively claimed that the villagers would never succeed in petitioning as they even had "people in the central government" and "if anyone could make him (her husband) be found guilty (*gaodao ta*)", she would "crawl all over the village" (Website Forum, 2009/08/22).

As villagers believed that the district level and street community level governments were protecting the wrongdoers in their villages, they had no faith in them at all. The hardline posture of the village officials had also given the villagers an impression that they were confident with their screen and the assistance from the police. Many villagers believed that the local police had been bought over to suppress them. For example, villagers in Village A said they saw village officials hosting a dinner for the local police in a restaurant near the village (AW3, 2010/02/23), while those in Village B described how a flower basket with the name of the local police station appeared on the opening ceremony of the project on their "last piece of collective land", which indicated the "close relations" between the police and the village committee (BM2, 2010/01/27).

Yet villagers believed that the absence of direct response from the higher-level authorities at the time being did not mean that the opportunity for success was closed (AW3, 2010/02/23). Many still had faith in the provincial and central level governments. Not only had they sent petitions to the higher-level authorities, but they also contacted some former co-villagers who worked and lived in Beijing and had close relations with some central government officials (BM2, 2010/01/27). Activists had also tried to attract attention from the overseas media, including those in Hong Kong, with the hope of arousing intervention from the higher-level authorities (Sun, 2010/01/29).

Labor division among protesters

Up until then, the villagers realized that the local authority was too strong for them (BM2, 2010/01/30) and the cost of beating them had grown as the risk of punishment by the authority increased. But collective action in both villages continued in the forms of a daily sit-in and on-going collective petitioning. What kept the villagers in line despite the high risk of being caught by the police?

The cultural straits we discussed in the first section continued to play an important role in curbing the free-rider problem. The reputation of being a responsible and courageous resister under the repression of the authority was even more appreciated by the villagers. Activists, most of whom were caught, were admired by the villagers. In order to protect the activists who continued to work actively behind the scenes, all the protesters refused to share any information about the activists or organizers with the outsiders by saying that they admired their contribution and so they wanted to protect them (Sun, 2010/01/27).

Previous studies have shown that increased repression actually leads to an increase of mobilization and action (Goldstone & Tilly 2001, p181). In some cases, the repression of the authorities led to distress and anger among the population, bringing "more opposition supporters", increasing the "perceived threat of the status quo", and thus resulting in people's willingness to "bear greater costs" to achieve their goals of resistance (Ibid, p190). In the case of *chenghongcun*, villagers' morale, which was labeled with the Chinese term of "*qi*" by Ying (2007), grew, indicating the potential of upgraded mobilization. The villagers' identity as the "oppressed" was stronger since the local authority took repressive measures. Their distaste for the local authority grew and they felt that they should be more united to resist the "evil" village officials (BM2, 2010/01/27).

Therefore, most villagers chose not to free ride, yet they were still rational thinkers. The risk of being caught was high. If they were caught, the cost of participating in the collective action would increase. But to different villagers, the cost was different. Some would lose more than others if they were caught. These rational considerations had led to the emergence of labor division among the protesters.

Discovering labor division among protesters

An obvious and interesting matter one could notice in the sit-ins and collective petitions after the repression of the authority came about was that most of the participants were middle-aged and old villagers ranging from 40

to 75 years old. Among the middle-aged and old participants, there were more women than men, while there were a greater number of young and male participants in the earlier assemblies and sit-ins before the police started to catch protesters.

At first consideration, one may explain that when the resistance of the villagers turned into persistent sit-ins, most young and male villagers had to work during the daytime and so they could not join the resistance all the time, while the older villagers were retired and most female villagers were housewives and so had more time to spend in resistance. Many young villagers in Village B did mention that they did not go because they were busy with their jobs or housework (BI1-5, 2010/01/25). But even during the weekends, there were just a few young villagers who appeared at the sit-ins. Further talks with the resisters revealed one more reasonable clue, which was the fact that young and male villagers were more concerned about the risks of being caught by the police than their old and female counterparts (BI1-5, 2010/01/27; Sun, 2010/01/27).

Villagers had a perception that young and male resisters were more likely to be caught, though this was in fact not true as some old men in their 60s and early 70s had been caught by the police. The perception of the villagers might be formed on the basis that none of those senior resisters and very few of the female resisters were caught by the police. Sit-down strikers in Village B said that the police was planning to detain one old resister but when they knew that the old man was already in his late 70s, they gave up the idea but caught his son instead (BM2, 2010/01/27). Villagers explained that the police worried that the old man would die in the police station or the detention centre but in order to punish him, the police detained his son even though the young man seldom participated in the sit-down strikes (Ibid).

Another reason why villagers thought that younger and male resisters were more likely to be caught might be the fact that the young and male villagers were more active and agitated in resistance. Video of the assemblies in both villages also showed that the young and male villagers were doing more organization work like leading villagers to call out slogans, giving enlivened speeches, and filming the event. As the police caught resisters, according to the video and pictures they photographed on the site, those agitated young and male protesters were usually caught because they were regarded as activists and organizers.

It was also the fact that more young and male villagers were involved in the organization of the assemblies. Villagers in Village B had revealed that the eruption of the assemblies originated from the discussions and investigations

of the young men in the dragon-boat team in the village (BM2, 2010/01/27). Sit-down strikers also mentioned that the more educated young villagers prepared a lot of material for resistance, including the petition letters, slogans, banners, and uniform hats (BW5, 2010/02/08). The younger generations were also very active in information dissemination and contesting on the internet, which was new to the older generations.

To sum up, the fact that more young and male resisters were caught because they were active in organizing resistance as well as the villagers' perception that the police tended to take away younger and male villagers led to the result that more middle-aged and senior and female villagers engaged in sit-down strikes while younger and male villagers hid behind the scenes to do the organization and mobilization work.

Calculating the loss

The labor division of the villagers indicated that the villagers were still rational protesters who tried to reduce the cost of participating in the collective action to the least amount.

As family reputation in the village was so important, every family should have members participating in the collective action. Then a family would decide who should be participating in the direct actions and who should stay behind the scenes.

Considering the risk of being caught is high, especially for the younger and male family members, a family would of course let the older and female members participate in the sit-ins and collective petitioning while keeping the younger and male counterparts safe. Moreover, the younger and male family members were viewed as the backbone and the future of a family. If the police caught them, the risk of losing their present jobs and the opportunities of having a better future was very high. On the contrary, the older and female villagers in sit-down strikes were mostly retired or jobless people who were less concerned about how the consequences of being caught would affect their personal development and family responsibilities. For example, BM4 (2010/01/30), a retired man in his 60s was once caught and detained for 20 days, but he continued to participate in the daily sit-ins, and said he was never afraid of being caught again.

"The policeman who caught me asked why I still dared to come when he saw me here again (on the sit-down strike site). I said 'of course I come. I have to fight for my rights. Even if you hold your gun to my head, I would come. We are not afraid because we have done nothing illegal'" (BM4, 2010/01/30).

The old man was not afraid but the younger male villagers were. None of the young men who had been caught once, as well as those who had not, came out again. Both sons of BW6, who worked in the public sector in the city, had never participated in the resistance (BW6, 2010/02/08). This indicated that not only the past miserable family history (being punished by the authority during the Cultural Revolution) had dragged her sons back, but also their current jobs. Fear of losing their jobs, the present good life, and, more importantly, a promising future was what the young villagers were afraid of the most.

Therefore, more old and female villagers were seen participating in the collective action since the local authority took repressive measures, because they had less to lose than the young and male villagers. But, as all villagers claimed, resisting for their rights was the responsibility of everybody, and even the young villagers who did not participate in the sit-down strikes still played an important role behind the scenes in transmitting information and providing suggestions and ideas in resistance. For example, BW6 had called her son and asked whether or not it was acceptable to take me home and give me a copy of the "material" (*cailiao*) they had.

Acting as rational protesters

The rational nature of the *chengzhongcun* resisters was also seen in their tactics and behavior in the resistance. By acting cautiously, they were trying to reduce the risk of being caught.

First of all, organization of the collective action was becoming more concealed as activists realized that the authority would punish those who were suspected of being protest leaders. In the direct action, most of the activists who were active in the assemblies and sit-down strikes were caught and detained, though none of them denied that they were the leaders. Not only had the activists themselves denied that they were the organizers, the participants in the direct resistance had also refused to admit that their direct action was organized.

Activists had also used information and communication technologies to organize resistance because they could avoid being identified by the authority. Resisters said they had their own closed-ended web forum and QQ (online instant messenger) membership group (BI1-5, 2010/01/25) and they used mobile phones a lot to communicate with each other.

Secondly, as activists and people who appeared to be more active in direct resistance were caught, villagers were more cautious when they participated in

the sit-ins, especially when the police came to photograph them and broadcast a recording that stated the regulations for assembly. Many of them had taken some protective measures when the police was there. Women usually used their hats or umbrellas to cover their faces while some men tried to avoid the camera lens of the police. They had also tried not to "overreact" before the Chinese New Year (CNY) because it would be "too bad" if they were kept in the police detention center during the CNY (BW5, 2010/02/08).

Thirdly, sit-down strikers had developed consensus and disciplines and they could complete collective action without much leadership, as they did before. In Village B resisters were present from about 9 am to 11 am, when they returned home for lunch and came back at about 2 pm and stayed there until 5 pm. Not everyone came on time but they usually left together by marching in lines in the direction of the village committee building, where they waved their hands and hailed to the very old sit-down strikers who could not walk further than the village committee building, which was much nearer to their homes than the construction site. Sometimes they could be easily mobilized for a collective petitioning without an organizer. For example, one day when the sit-down strikers in Village B were marching back to the village committee building, a man who lived nearby, who happened to know their stories, joined the line and suggested that they go to the province's People's Congress for petitioning. Villagers close to the man thought it was a good idea and they decided right away that they would go in the afternoon. The decision was spread among the resisters and about 30 of them went to petition in the afternoon. This happened just as Cai (2008, p38) says – that sometimes a strong consensus among the resisters is enough to mobilize them "as long as information dissemination is possible".

Conclusions

This thesis focuses on the resistance of *chengzhongcun* villagers in Guangzhou, China to the village officials accused of corruption. It aims to explore the factors that contribute to the emergence and persistence of collective action in *chengzhongcun*.

Existing literatures on the emergence of collective action or social movements contain debates on which factors are more important in bringing about collective action. For example, rational choice theorists highly value the significance of rationality of the protesters, while scholars supporting the political process theory value the importance of the political opportunity for

collective action, the social networks of the potential participants, and the strategic framing of the collective action rather than the rationality of the individuals.

This case study draws on the political process model to examine the factors that contribute to the emergence and persistence of collective action in *chengzhongcun*. While the structural opportunity was the precondition for the emergence of collective action in *chengzhongcun*, the rational nature of the villagers was crucial in triggering collective action as it had spurred villagers who were very much concerned about their economic benefits in the c*hengzhongcun* redevelopment process to converge, leading to the rejuvenation of the social network that had long been weakening.

The cultural elements embedded in the re-activated social network of the villagers, their concern with an individual or a family's reputation in the village and their identity as the "oppressed poor" in the "rich *chengzhongcun*" had strengthened their solidarity, which helped to overcome the free-rider problem and made collective action possible.

Political process theorists believe that the cultural norms have helped to keep people in line, while the rational choice theorists think that resisters' decision to participate in collective action was still a result of their rational calculation. In the case of *chengzhongcun*, although the villagers are rational, when the social network in *chengzhongcun* was rejuvenated and a cultural framework was constructed, villagers began to be constrained by the local cultural norms.

Assemblies and sit-ins were thus organized, which cornered the local authority into resorting to suppression by punishing some active protesters. Meanwhile, the resisters' efforts in attracting media attention and interventions from higher-level authorities were in vain due to the tightened media control of the authority and the lack of evidence needed for charging the accused village officials respectively.

The hard-line posture of the local authority towards the resisters and the absence of media support and higher-level authority intervention led to villagers' perception of the existence of a protective screen for the village officials. For the villagers, the opportunity for success seemed to have reduced but the structural opening was still not fully closed, which indicated space for further contention.

The importance of rational considerations and cultural norms of the villagers in bringing collective action was furthered proven in the latter half of this case study, which looked at how the c*hengzhongcun* villagers sustained their resistance despite the repression of the local state. In spite of the cost of

resistance, which increased as a result of the suppression from the local authority, c*hengzhongcun* villagers managed to sustain their collective resistance in the way of labor division. Younger and male villagers chose to stay behind the scenes to organize collective action while older and female villagers continued to engage in the direct actions against the village officials.

The labor division was actually a result of the combined effect of villagers' rational considerations and cultural features. On one hand, the cultural norms continued to keep villagers united and most chose not to free ride but took on the responsibility that an individual or a family should bear. On the other hand, the rational nature of the villagers required them to try their best to reduce the cost of resistance. As the younger and male villagers are usually the breadwinners and backbone of the family, they tended not to engage in the direct resistance but made their contribution behind the scenes, because if the police caught them they would lose a lot and their family would be greatly impacted. While the older and female villagers are usually retired and housewives who are not considered to be as financially important as their younger and male counterparts, they participated more in the direct resistance.

To reduce the cost, the villagers had also acted rationally and become more disciplined in the resistance.

In brief, what this study wants to emphasize is the fact that *chengzhongcun* villagers have been constrained by both rationality and local culture in their collective resistance. This finding is actually in accordance with those of many other scholars who study the collective action of other social groups in China. For example, Liu (2009) believes that the Chinese rural peasants have been more influenced by the external economic society and become more rational, while at the same time a lot of the rural customs and traditions they preserve have framed their actions. *Chengzhongcun* villagers are certainly more integrated into the urban life than the rural peasants and they must be rather rational. Meanwhile, although many of the local cultural features had lost their importance in the urbanization process of *chengzhongcun*, their influence came back once the social network in which these cultural features were embedded was rejuvenated.

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Interviews

AM1, interview with male activist AM1 in Village A, Guangzhou, notes taken during interview, February 8, 2010.

AW1, interviews with female activist AW1 in Village A, Guangzhou, notes taken during interviews, February 8, 2010 & February 22, 2010.

AW2, interview with female activist AW2 in Village A, Guangzhou, notes taken after interview, February 8, 2010.

AW3, interview with female activist AW3 in Village A, Guangzhou, notes taken after interview, February 23, 2010.

BM1, interviews with male protester BM1 in Village B, Guangzhou, notes taken after interviews, January 27, 2010 & January 29, 2010.

BM2, interviews with male protester BM2 in Village B, Guangzhou, notes taken after interviews, January 29, 2010 & January 30, 2010.

BM3, interview with male protester BM3 in Village B, Guangzhou, notes taken after interview, January 30, 2010.

BM4, interview with male protester BM4 in Village B, Guangzhou, notes taken after interview, January 30, 2010.

BM5, interview with male protester BM5 in Village B, Guangzhou, notes taken after interview, February 10, 2010.

BM6, interview with male protester BM6 in Village B, Guangzhou, notes taken after interview, February 10, 2010.

BI1-5, focus interviews with five female informants in Village B, Guangzhou, notes taken during interviews, January 25, 2010, January 27, 2010 & January 29, 2010.

BW3, interview with female protester BW3 in Village B, Guangzhou, notes taken after interview, January 30, 2010.

BW4, interview with female protester BW4 in Village B, Guangzhou, notes taken after interview, February 3, 2010.

BW5, interviews with female protester BW5 in Village B, Guangzhou, notes taken after interview, February 5, 2010 & February 8, 2010.

BW6, interviews with female protester BW6 in Village B, Guangzhou, notes taken after interview, February 5, 2010 & February 8, 2010.

Sun, interviews with male informant Sun in Village A, Guangzhou, notes taken during interviews, January 27, 2010 & January 29, 2010.

Jia, interview with local female journalist Jia in Guangzhou, notes taken during interview, February 25, 2010.

Xi, interview with local male journalist Xi in Guangzhou, notes taken during interview, February 25, 2010.

Li, interview with former official in the public security department of Guangdong, notes taken after interview, February 23, 2010.

Videos

Video A, video showing the assembly in Village A, Guangzhou, organized by villagers on August 17, 2009.

Video B, video showing the public meeting in Village B, Guangzhou, organized by villagers on August 22, 2009.

Video B1, video showing the assembly in Village B, Guangzhou, organized by villagers on August 21, 2009.

Printed and online materials

Petition Letter B, petition letter written by activists in Village B, submitted on September 7, 2009.

Reply to Petition B, street-level government reply to Petition Letter B, handed down on December 24, 2009.

Website Forum, online forum started and maintained by *chengzhongcun* protesters, posted on August 22, 2009.