**Why do authoritarian regimes make concessions when a Social Movement Campaign erupted? A case study from China**

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**Abstract:**

How do authoritarian regimes react to social movements? This study contributes to the field of contentious politics in authoritarian regimes by shifting the focus from individual protest events to larger campaigns. we expect that two factors drive the regime’s response: the perceived level of threat by the regime, and the level of support garnered by the campaign. Highly threatening campaigns are sufficient and will lead to state repression of the campaign, but low-threat campaigns that enjoy high popular support can lead to state concessions. Using China as an example, we use a most-similar systems design to test these expectations by examining four cases: the Veteran Movement (2016-2018), Jasic Movement (2018-2019), Equal Education Right Campaign (2010-2014), and Falun Gong Movement (1992-2002). In line with existing work, we find authoritarian states work to maintain regime legitimacy and are likely to offer concessions rather than only repress in certain circumstances. A social movement campaign usually has some level of organization, can last longer, has a broader requirement for the government to respond, and is likely to have a bigger impact on society than a single protest event. We should pay more attention to social movement campaigns in authoritarian regimes due to their potential for authoritarian regimes to transition to democratic regimes (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011).

**Key words:** Social Movement Campaign; Concession; Repression; China; Contentious Politics; domestic media

**Introduction:**

In the last two decades, Social Movements regularly erupted in Democratic counties, from Occupy Wallstreet Movement to MeToo Movement, the Black Lives Matter Movement, the Peoples Climate Movement*,* and so on. Does Social Movement happen in authoritarian regimes? The answer is Yes, though they are relatively rare; for example, the Tian’anmen Movement that happened in 1989 almost brought down the communist regime in China. In the last two decades or so, much research has been done on contentious politics or protests in authoritarian regimes (O’Brien & Li, 2006; Cai, 2010; Chen, 2012; Hurst, 2009; Weiss, 2014; Fu, 2018; Elfstrom, 2021; Mertha, 2008; Li, 2019b). Still, few research has been done on Social Movements or Social Movement campaigns in authoritarian regimes, especially social movement campaigns that happened in China[[1]](#footnote-1).

China is a perfect case to study contentious politics because its the world's biggest and strongest authoritarian regime; this study will add to the literature on contentious politics in China and authoritarian regimes in general. Many studies on this area focus on the level of the protests (Cai, 2010; Li, 2019; Chen, 2012) or a single social movement campaign level (Zhou, 2018; Chan, 2020; Pun, 2021; O'Brien and Diamant, 2015), but few have compared multiple social movement campaigns in a single study and see under what conditions a social movement campaign will lead the government to concession, and under what conditions, a social movement campaign will lead to repression. Our study will fill this literature gap. After the China Communist Party (CCP) won the bloody civil war against the Kuomintang (KMT) and founded the People’s Republic of China (PRC), this nation has experienced dramatic changes in the last seven decades or so. Moreover, it can be divided into two periods: the frenetic Mao era and the reform era after Deng Xiaoping became the paramount leader and initiated the reform and opening up policy which is largely effective today[[2]](#footnote-2). So, the time period of this study will only focus on after China entered the reform and opening up era, which is after late 1970s and early1980s when Deng became the supreme leader of the CCP.

We argue that similar to a protest, if a social movement campaign is perceived as high-threat to the regime, and whether or not it can garner a high level of social support, it will likely be repressed by the regime. The higher that campaign can garner from society, the more severe the repression will be. If a social movement campaign is perceived as a low-threat to the regime, it is more likely to be accommodated by the regime; the higher the level of support, the higher the likelihood of that campaign leading to a major policy concession from the government; Thirdly, we also expect the government more likely to adopt the combination of repression and accommodation strategy when a social movement campaign erupted and than pure concession and pure repression, a more sophisticated strategy than many of the previous literature suggest.

This paper will proceed as follows: the second section introduces some of the key concepts in this article, i.e., social movement campaigns, protests, etc. The third section will review the literature on the factors affecting why a protest in an authoritarian regime succeeds or fails or why the authoritarian regime decides to repress some types of protests but not others. Based on those theories, we will derive some hypotheses on what are the factors that affect how an authoritarian regime reacts to a social movement campaign. The fourth section illustrates the research design of this article. We adopt the Most Similar System design to test our hypotheses. Then, followed by four case studies, what are those social movement campaigns about? What are the outcomes of those social movement campaigns? Next, based on those detailed descriptions of those cases, we will test whether those cases can substantiate our hypotheses. The last section is the conclusion, providing some suggestions on where future studies should focus.

**Concepts**

What are Social Movements, and what are Social Movement Campaigns? Tilly and Tarrow (2015:11) define a Social Movement as "a sustained ***campaign*** of claim-making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim, based on organizations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain these activities." Social Movement scholars define Social Movement Campaigns as "Temporally bounded and tragically linked series of events and interactions directed at common goals" (e.g., della Porta and Rucht, 2002:3). So, from the above authoritative definitions of social movement and social movement campaigns, a social movement usually contains multiple social movement campaigns in its lifetime. However, sometimes, a social movement may only have one short-lived campaign, especially in authoritarian regimes where the environment is not conducive to social movement, like the Jasic Movement (2018-2019) consists of only one campaign.

What is the relationship between protest and social movements or social movement campaigns? The extant literature sometimes did not differentiate those two concepts in their discussion of contentious politics. For example, in their article, Almen and Burell (2018) seem equated social movement with protest from reading the title of their article, which is “Social accountability as social movement outcome: Protests in a Chinese city.” Nevertheless, those two concepts are different. Loya and McLeod (2020) define social protest as “a form of political expression that seeks to bring about social or political change by influencing the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of the public or the policies of an organization or institution. Protests often take the form of overt public displays, demonstrations, and civil disobedience, but may also include covert activities such as petitions, boycotts/buycotts, lobbying, and various online activities.” In a seminal study, Cai (2010:31) define collective action (a concept very similar to protests but not the same) as collective petitions, protests or demonstrations (including strikes and riots), confrontations with the police, officials, or the business, and attacks on state agencies. So, a social movement or a social movement campaign is larger than a protest. For example, a protest can be organized by one or some organizations, or it can be unorganized and erupt spontaneously, like the Weng’an Incident that happened in Guizhou province in 2008. However, a social movement or a social movement campaign is usually coordinated or organized by one or some organizations.

Following Pinckney’s (2016:78-79) steps, for a movement to be qualified to be a social movement or social movement campaign, there should be at least three physical events/protests happened, two events should happen within one year, and the movement should last at least six months[[3]](#footnote-3). The unit of analysis of this article is a social movement campaign. Although sometimes, a social movement campaign is the same as a social movement when there is only one campaign in that movement. In most cases, a social movement consists of multiple social movement campaigns, especially in Democratic countries. A social movement campaign in this article is defined as: a sequence of events meaningfully linked through common actors or goals; consisting of at least three distinct physical events (i.e., protest, collective action etc.); separated by less than a year; organized by one or some organizations; last at least six months; the goal of the campaign is non-maximalists[[4]](#footnote-4). One benefit of focusing on the social movement campaign level is that it is possible to define a social movement campaign as successful even though the overall out of that social movement is unsuccessful. **Figure 1** below displays a typical relationship between social movement, social movement campaign, and protest when a social movement contains multiple social movement campaigns.

Diagram

Description automatically generated

Figure 1: A graphic display of a typical relationship between social movement, social movement campaign, and protest

**Literature Review**

Scholars who study contentious politics have identified four government responses for contentious challenges, collective actions or a social movement: toleration, repression, concession and combined concession and repression (Franklin, 2009; Cai, 2010, p. 4). Many of the studies on China’s contentious politics, especially those looking at the outcomes of a contentious activity, have been focused on the level of protest level, not on the social movement campaign level (Cai, 2010; Tong and Lei, 2014; Yang, 2016; Tang and Cote, 2021). So, the question is to what extent those findings from factors affecting outcomes of protests in authoritarian regimes can travel to the sphere of social movement campaign level.

Following Franklin (2009)'s step, this article defines those three government response strategies after a protest or collective action happened as:

*"Repression means the use of coercion by political authorities of a country against inhabitants of that country. …. Governmental concessions refer to actions taken by governmental authorities in response to a political challenge that is consistent with the demands and goals of the challengers. Toleration refers to an absence of either repression or meaningful concessions." (Franklin, 2009:701).*

The fourth response strategy is the combination of concession and repression means that while the government meet some of the demands of the protesters, the government also represses (i.e., arrest) those protest leaders in that campaign in order to increase the cost of protesters for future contentious events.

Focusing on both the demand side and the recipient side (the government), Cai (2010) argues that if the protest is forceful (i.e., has many participants, gained domestic media support, caused causalities, etc.), and the cost of concession is low, the government will likely make concession; but, if the protest is not forceful, and the cost of making concession is high, the government will likely react with repression. So, in Cai’s theory, the forcefulness of a protest can play a big factor in deciding how the government reacts to a protest, and to increase the forcefulness of a protest, the domestic media can play an important role.

In authoritarian regimes, there are few channels for the government to collect information on whether or not the citizens are satisfied with the governance of the local government because, in authoritarian regimes, lower-level governments are more likely to exaggerate their success or achievement and underreport or do not report the problems that they are facing. China’s domestic media were commercialized in the early 2000s and more likely to report contentious events to attract more readers (Shirk, 2011). And the central government or local governments are more likely to use the domestic media’s coverage to measure the popularity of a particular policy and/or if there is malpractice by local government officials. So, if some domestic media support protesters’ stands and report the protest positively, it will signal support for those dissenters. A domestic media report on a protest can also spread the information on that event and put pressure on the local government, both for the audience of Chinese public who are aware of this event from the coverage of those domestic media and for the audience of upper-level government, especially central government because it is the central government that cares about the legitimacy of the regime in the eyes of its citizen (Cai, 2010; Mertha, 2008; Tang and Cote, 2021).

Consist with Cai (2010), Tang and Cote (2021), Almen and Burell (2018), and Mertha (2008) also found that domestic media could help the protesters to gain concessions from the local government if the domestic media sided with the protesters’ side and report their protests because the central government or provincial government will likely to intervene if the protests were reported by domestic media and if they do not take action they may risk of losing it legitimacy in the eyes of the Chinese public, and Almen and Burell coined this phenomenon as “social accountability” towards the citizens.

So, even though China is an authoritarian regime, the CCP closely controls all domestic media on what they can report and what they can not report as Almen and Burell (2018:718) had pointed out that “The last years of Hu Jintao’s rule (2002–2012) and the early years of Xi Jinping’s rule (from 2012) were a time when social media and the NGO sector played an increasingly important role as bottom-up political pressure mechanisms.” The same is true for domestic media, as many domestic media dare to pick up some contentious issues and report them to their readers (Tang & Cote, 2021). So, the political opportunity structure during those years (2009-2014) was relatively open, so some protests or social movement campaigns can be reported by domestic media.

Furthermore, it is not a new phenomenon that scholars have found that there is some level of accountability even in authoritarian regimes; in other words, even authoritarian leaders care about the legitimacy of the regime and will respond to some issues raised by the society, especially after domestic media have reported some of those issues (Heurlin, 2016; Cai, 2010; Li, 2019b; Almen & Burell, 2018). Also, if a social movement campaign or protest is covered by some of the domestic media positively, it shows that the level of support garnered by that campaign is high, and the government risks losing its legitimacy in the eyes of its citizen if it fails to address those issues appropriately.

On the other hand, political opportunity structure also matters. Yang (2016) found that environmental protests belong to an “open structure[[5]](#footnote-5) within the CCP regime and provide ‘issue opportunity structure’ for protesters to take advantage of and therefore are more likely to succeed compared to other ‘closed structures’ (i.e., separatist issue, freedom of speech, democracy issue, etc.) and ‘half-open structures’ (i.e., land protests, etc.).” Similarly, Li (2019a, 2019b) collected data from a Chinese-language US-based news media which covered protest events in China between 2001 and 2012. She found that if protesters are making regime-engaging claims (i.e., protesters making claims on economic, environmental, moderate political claims, etc.) and taking peaceful disruptive actions will likely be tolerated by the government (and possibly make concessions to protesters) (Franklin, 2009; Earl, 2003); On the other hand, if protesters are making regime-threatening claims on radical political claims, taking violent actions, and linked organizationally with other protests it will likely be repressed (Li, 2019a, pp. 328-329; Carey, 2010). So, in general, we would expect a social movement campaign is more likely to be repressed by an authoritarian regime compared to a one-shot protest because of the level of organization is much higher in the former case. In the same logic, Carey (2010:171) found that “The higher the perceived level of threat, the more likely it is that the government will respond with severe measures, such as widespread repression.” More specifically, if protesters engage in violent actions (i.e., riots, guerrilla attacks, etc.) and the level of organization is high, then the likelihood of repression by the government is high (Carey, 2010, p. 172). If a protest or social movement campaign is politically related (i.e., demanding freedom of speech, demanding political rights, union rights, freedom of religion, etc.), the perceived level of threat for the regime is high because those will threat its monopoly of control in that country or regime.

Based on the above literature and theories, we propose our first three hypotheses in below:

Hypothesis one: If a social movement campaign can garner a high level of support from society, the government will be more likely to make concessions to that campaign, and/or tolerate that campaign; on the other hand, if a social movement campaign can not garner enough societal support for its cause, the government will be less likely to make concession.

*Hypothesis two: If a social movement campaign is perceived as high-threat to the regime, the government will be more likely to adopt a repression strategy; On the other hand, if a social movement campaign is perceived as low-threat to the regime, the government will be less likely adopt repression strategy.*

*Hypothesis three: The higher level of support a high-threat social movement campaign can garner, the more severe repression it will get from the authoritarian regime because it poses more threat to that regime.*

Some scholars contend that repression and concession is the least favorable option for the government when facing challenges from its citizens. Franklin (2009:702) put, “repression and concession both carry potential long-term cost, but concession also carries short-term costs.” So, the government will only use this strategy when facing immense threats or internal conflict, or both. However, the Chinese government may operate under a different logic, and it may be the case that the Chinese government will prefer using repression and concession over only repression or only concession. Analyzing labor unrest in China in the Hu Jintao era, Elfstorm (2019:873) also finds that “authoritarian states……can proceed along two tracks at once: repressive and responsive.” The logic is that by making concessions to protesters or a social movement campaign, the authority dissolved the short-term challenge of instability by meeting the demands and sending protesters back home, and it maintained its legitimacy in the eyes of the public by showing the face of responsiveness. And repression (i.e., arresting those protest leaders), the regime sends clear signals to potential and future protest leaders that it is risky to be a protest leader and increases the cost of initiating a future protest or social movement campaign. So, the audience for the concession is the general public and those ordinary protest participants, and the audience of the repression is potential and/or future protest or campaign leaders. And because the majority of social movement campaigns or protests in authoritarian regimes belong to the low-threat category (Li, 2019b), and for this type of campaign, the authoritarian regime will be more likely to adopt the combination of repression and concession strategy, especially for those high-profile campaigns.

Thus, we propose the fourth hypothesis:

*Hypothesis four: For high-profile (i.e., received positive domestic media coverage, has a large potential “constituency,” etc.) social movement campaigns, which are low-threat for the regime, the government will more likely adopt both concession and repression strategy than pure repression and pure concession.*

Using the findings identified from protest events in authoritarian regimes to analyze a more significant phenomenon –a social movement campaign level- we contribute to the literature by explicitly looking at a broader phenomenon. We find that the same logic applies to both protests and social movement campaigns. We should pay more attention to social movement campaigns because those events can significantly impact the trajectory of the authoritarian regime (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011) and could have a big impact on society in general, for example, how a social movement evolves and shifts its focus from non-politics to politics. **Table 1** below illustrates the relationship between the two key independent variables (the perceived level of threat by the regime and the level of support garnered by the social movement campaign) and the dependent variable—the four different outcomes/responses for a social movement campaign.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Level of support garnered by the campaign (i.e., whether domestic media reported the campaign positively) | Perceived level of threat (regime-threatening vs. non-regime-threatening) | |
| Low | High |
| Low | Concession and repression; Concession (minor); Toleration; | Repression (minor causalities) |
| High | Concession (major) and repression | Repression (severe causalities) |

Table 1: the relationship between the two key independent variable and the dependent variable—social movement campaign outcomes

**Research Design: Most Similar System Design**

To test those four hypotheses, we will use the Most Similar System Design (MSSD) (Mill, 1874). The MSSD is frequently used to distinguish sufficient variations in social movement outcomes (Useem & Goldstone, 2022; Tang & Cote, 2021).

Given our stringent definition of a social movement campaign and time period limitation, there are not many cases that fit into our category. Although it may be difficult to exhaust all the qualified cases that happened in China in the last four decades or so because that will necessitate in-depth readings of all the relevant literature in the field, which may be a time-consuming endeavor, here are some campaigns[[6]](#footnote-6) that come to our minds based on the current definition of a social movement campaign: The New Citizen Movement (2009-2013) (phase one—the Equal Education Right Campaign for migrant workers' children, hence force, the EERC and phase two—Wealth Disclosure Campaign); the Jasic Movement (2018-2019); the Veteran Movement (2016-2018); the Substitute Teacher Movement (2008-2018); the Falun Gong Movement (1992 - 2002); Human Right Lawyer Movement (2013-2015); MeToo Movement (2017 to date), etc.[[7]](#footnote-7) Among those cases, here we will focus on four cases represent the four quadrants in Table 1. For the upper-left quadrant, it is the Veteran Movement (2016-2018); for the upper-right quadrant, it is the Jasic Movement; for the bottom-left quadrant, it is the EERC (2010-2014); and for the bottom-right quadrant, it is the Falun Gong Movement (1992 to 2002)[[8]](#footnote-8).

Those cases are similar in the sense that they all meet the definition of a social movement campaign that we described in the first section: they all are “a sequence of events meaningfully linked through common actors or goals; consisting of at least three distinct physical events; separated by less than a year; organized by one or some organizations; last at least six months; the goal of the campaign is non-maximalists.” Besides that, they all adopted non-violence as their main protest strategy, and they all happened within the time period of the last four decades in China.

**Table 2** below shows where those above-mentioned social movements or social movement campaigns are located in the four quadrants of Table 1, and those boldened cases will be the cases that will be described in great detail in the next section of this paper.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Level of support garnered by the campaign | Perceived level of threat | |
| Low | High |
| Low | **The Veteran Movement;** the Substitute Teacher Movement; MeToo Movement; | **Jasic Movement**; Wealth Disclosure Campaign (New Citizen Movement -phase two); Human Right Lawyer Movement; |
| High | **Equal Education Right Campaign (New Citizen Movement-phase one);** | **Falun Gong Movement;** |

Table 2: some illustrative cases that meet the requirement of the definition of a social movement or social movement campaign in this article

Given the sensitive nature of those cases in China, this study will mainly rely on second-hand materials (i.e., academic studies, online information, media reports, activists' accounts or reports, etc.) to reconstruct some of the most famous social movements or social movement campaigns in China in the last four decades or so.

**Case Studies**

**The Veteran Movement (2016-2018)[[9]](#footnote-9)**

The veteran issue has been a salient issue for a long time in the last few decades, as O’Brien and Diamant (2015) and Diamant and O’Brien (2015) had recorded in previous studies. In the past few decades, the PLA (People’s Liberation Army) has been modernizing itself, so it has cut its size several times. Its size has downgraded from 4.1 million in 1985 to fewer than 2.4 million by 2012 (O’Brien and Diamant, 2015:567). After another round of downsizing in 2015, the PLA currently has a population of around 2 million (Meng and Jiao, 2019). By 2017, according to the authority, there were 57 million veterans in China, and its size will increase by several dozen hundred thousand each year (Dong, 2017). But those veterans had different fates after they were demobilized: some entered the local officialdom and became local public servants, which is pretty stable, while some joined local SOEs, many of which later were privatized, and were laid off by the new managers in those private companies. Because when they are demobilized from the army, they usually receive a one-time-off compensation for their service to the army, and most of them will be allocated with a job, whether in the private or public sector. But if they choose to enter the private sector, they will lose their cadre status (Chang, 2019). Also, as O’Brien and Diamant mentioned in their article, not everyone has the same level of fortune after they go back from their hometowns after they are demobilized. For those who were laid off from those former local SOEs, even if they could receive some pension benefit from the government after they reached the retirement age because their working time was reduced because of their shortened work years, so their pension was relatively lower, and it could not maintain a decent level of living for the majority of them.

Many of them count themselves used to be insiders of the regime, they sacrificed their youth for the country, and many of them are CCP members. So, they experienced a huge psychological gap when they reflected on their service to the country and their miserable financial situation when they found themselves no longer having a stable job, especially when they compare their unfortunate situation compared to those who chose to be a public servant after the demobilization, or receiving a meager pension after they reached the retirement age. Those were the reasons why they went to protests.

So, through the years, many veterans have had trouble maintaining their status or living a decent life after their demonization, especially those who participated in the Vietnam war (which happened in February to March 1979) or the Korean War and those who were demobilized during various times[[10]](#footnote-10). So, throughout the years, veterans were one of the regular forces who petitioned before different levels of government or went to protest in front of different levels of government compound. But unlike those other movements, it was difficult to pinpoint whether is there was a specific organization that was coordinating those protests; what we know from some evidence, either from expert observations, and from official accounts (or accusations), and some anecdotes that there was indeed some level of organization or coordination among those protest events, especially from the period of 2016 to 2018 (Wang, 2018; Xiong and Ni, 2019; Diamant and O’Brien, 2015; Chenzhou Civil Affair Bureau, 2021).

We coded that there was a Veteran Movement going on in China between 2016 and 2018 because during this period, there were some of the most influential veteran protests happened in China, which reached a level never seen before and have not happened again after that period even though small-scale protests and petitions have been a regular phenomenon until today (Mulvenon, 2018; Chang, 2019; Buckley, 2018). On October 11st, 2016, about one thousand veterans from all over China came to the Ministry of National Defense (the August 1st Building) in Beijing to protest; the members were mainly ex-officers who were demobilized from 1993 to 2000. And their demands were: to improve the welfare or benefits of those who engaged in wars for the RPC; clarify what it means to have engaged in warfare; clarify the ranking principles or criteria for those who qualified to receive preferential treatment; prevent local governments from impeding veterans to engage in petitions or repress veterans; lastly, create a national organization which can represent those veterans who participated in warfare or a national veteran organization. The central government accepted those requests and sent them back to their hometowns (Chang, 2019:77). In the following year, an even larger protest happened in Beijing. On February 22nd, 2017, over ten thousand veterans from all over the country came to the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection to protest. Their requests include fulfilling their employment arrangements by the local governments and investigating those corruption behaviors by those local officials who are in charge of their job arrangement or allocation. The central government also agreed to those requests and sent them back home (Chang, 2019; Mulvenon, 2018; Qiao, 2017).

Some high-profile protests or events happened in 2018 in multiple provinces. On May 22nd, 2018, more than 1,000 veterans gathered in Luoding, Guangdong, to protest the beating of 60-year-old Liu Tianrong, who had planned to travel to Beijing to protest the treatment of veterans (Chan, 2018). This protest followed the famous protest that happened in Zhenjiang, Jiangsu province, between June 20th to 24th, 2018, where several hundreds of veterans from many provinces came to Zhenjiang to join their comrades there to protest for better pension, and better employment opportunities and later a fight between veterans and local police erupted; and dozens were injured although it was not clear which sides initiated this violence (Buckley, 2018; Xiong and Ni, 2019; Chan, 2018). Similar events happened in Luohe, Henan province, one month earlier (Buckley, 2018; Chan, 2018). And again, in October 2018, another protest happened in Pingdu, Shandong province, where hundreds of veterans from many provinces clashed with the police and some protesters were injured (Ye, 2018). Similar events also happened in Chengdu, Sichuan province, Shijiazhuang, Hebei province, and provinces like Yunnan, Inner Mongolia, Guangdong, etc. (Ye, 2018). The government retaliated with repression, and it brought to trial and sentenced nineteen protesters who participated in the protests at Zhenjiang and Pingdu just several months later after the protest in Pingdu ended (Xiong and Ni, 2019). And it accused those people were using their status as veterans and causing trouble for the local governments. The government accused them of profiting from attracting more veterans to join a protest that happened elsewhere in the country in order to make money (Xiong and Ni, 2019).

The outcome of those protests was that the central government set up a new ministerial-level agency— the Ministry of Veteran Affairs of the PRC[[11]](#footnote-11), in April 2018 to deal with veteran affairs specifically. Veterans did not put too much hope on this new agency as those events transpired after this new department was created in 2018 and after. But this move by the central government is an important symbol that the central government has finally prioritized the veteran affairs and put more effort and resources into dealing with this issue even though there was no fast solution to this accumulated problem that had existed for many years. And in November 2020, the National People's Congress (NPC) Standing Committee passed the <Veterans Support Law of the PRC>, which is another important gesture from the central government to emphasize the importance of properly dealing with the veteran issues systemically throughout this country.

Even though from 2016 to 2018, many veterans joined their comrades and protested at various levels of government, from the county level up to the national level, no single domestic media have positively reported those events, so the support they received from society is relatively low. And since this issue is a largely economic-related issue, and their problems can be solved through economic means, the perceived level of threat for the central government is relatively low. Yet, because of the sheer number of those protests’ participants, and many veterans are CCP members themselves, those factors made the government take this matter seriously, and the central government finally made some concrete concessions—such as creating the Ministry of Veteran Affairs and the passing of the <Veterans Support Law of the PRC>. Although those measures are largely symbolic and could not solve their specific demands, it shows that the central and local governments finally started to face this issue seriously and prioritized it in their daily work. So, it can be counted as a major concession from the central government. However, at the same time, the government also applied the strategy of repression as dozens of protest leaders throughout the country were sentenced to years of prison. The government adopted the concession and repression strategy.

**The Jasic Movement (2018-2019)**

There were 285 million migrant workers in China by the end of 2020, which accounts for about one-third of all its workforce (Wei, 2021). Many migrant workers work at manufacturing factories in some Eastern provinces such as Guangdong, Zhejiang, Jiangsu etc. (Lee, 2007; Elfstorm, 2021). Although the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) has 303 million members, and about 140 million are migrant workers (CCTV, 2018), the ACFTU is not independent from the government. In fact, it is part of the CCP apparatus as its leaders are directly appointed by the CCP Organization Department and enjoy a ministerial level of status. So, the ACFTU and its provincial branches could not lend much help to those who they represented if there is a conflict happened between the workers and the employer because it often sides with the employer side since they are the powerful ones and can contribute to local taxes and create jobs for local citizens. So, creating a truly independent labor union has been a dream for many who work on this issue (i.e., labor-related NGOs, etc.), but that dream has never succeeded in China. In the last two decades or so, civil society in China has been trying to help migrant workers to fight for their rights and improve their welfare. There were some successes and some failures (Fu, 2018; Li, 2019b; Elfstrom, 2021; Gallagher, 2017). For example, the 2014 Guangzhou University Town sanitation workers dispute was one of several successful campaigns to protect the rights and improve the pay and working conditions of sanitation workers in the Pearl River Delta (China Labour Bulletin, 2020).

Some labor rights-focused NGOs in Guangdong province took actions to achieve that goal (to create an independent union). Shenzhen is one of China’s most developed cities, with a population of about seventeen million by the end of 2021 and has the third-largest GDP in 2021 of all China’s cities. Shenzhen also has a large population of migrant workers, with over two-thirds of its population not having the local hukou (Shenzhen Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Some of them work for manufacturing factories such as Foxconn, where iPhones and Mac computers are made.

Some labor NGOs selected the Shenzhen Jasic Technology Co. Ltd. as a company and sent some activists to work there[[12]](#footnote-12) to familiarize the situation in that company and learn about the grievances that existed among its one-thousand-strong workforce. Like many manufacturing factories in China, there were some issues that existed in that company, i.e., some punishment schemes that would deduct employees’ salary if they violated some strict unreasonable policies which is not popular among those who work there (Qingdaogong, 2020:10). The first stage of the Jasic Movement began in April 2018 and lasted until July 2018, when activists started to initiate their campaigns in that company cautiously. Their next move was to collect signatures from workers who supported forming an independent union, and by July 12, they had collected 89 signatures among those 1000 migrant workers working there[[13]](#footnote-13). The company finally realized something was going on within the company, and they decided to fire seven activists on July 18, 2018.

On July 20, those seven activists came to the entrance of the Jasic company and requested to restore their status as Jasic employees. A clash happened between those activists, the company’s personnel, and the police. Seven activists were taken to the local police station after the clash. On that day, nineteen Jasic employees went to the local police station to protest and demanding the release of those seven activists. Under pressure, the police released those activists. But on July 22, those activists and several dozens of Jasic employees went to the police station again and protested outside of the station, asking for compensation for workers’ loss and disciplining those police officers who beat activists on July 20, etc. Their protest drew several hundred bystanders to stop and watch their protest. In the following days, activists and workers continued their protests at the Jacis company and the police station and had several demands for those two sides. They also started an online campaign to solicit public support from netizens throughout the country by spreading information online (i.e., social media accounts, etc.). Those activists’ appeals drew support from Maoist[[14]](#footnote-14) activists in China in a few days, and they collected over one thousand online signatures as of support from Maoist and other netizens.

The local police started the first wave of arrests on July 27, when they arrested 29 activists and protesters for criminal charges. From here, the Jasic Movement spiralled "out of hands" as other forces joined their cause in fighting for an independent union for those migrant workers at the Jasic company—students who joined Maoist or Marist Studies Associations in elite universities throughout China[[15]](#footnote-15). On July 28, a website called "Jasic Workers Support Group" was set up, and it played a major in the second phase of this movement—an online workers and students solidarity activism campaign (Tan, 2019), which drew international media's attention and those who care about this issue.

The Maoist activists joined the force through online support (i.e., spreading information, making videos expressing their support for this movement, etc.) or came to Shenzhen to protest. On August 6, 2018, Maoists from all over the country came to a public square close to the Yanziling police station[[16]](#footnote-16) and held a protest event supporting the Jasic Movement and supporting those arrested ten days earlier. And the online campaign spread further as more Marxism Study Associations joined this movement, including Marxism Associations from Peking University, Beijing Language and Culture University, Renmin University of China, Nanjing University, and a few dozens of other universities (Chan, 2020). They all requested the government to release those who arrested in the first wave of this campaign. But the government did not relent; on the contrary, its second wave of repression was carried out on August 24, 2018, when police in both Shenzhen and Beijing simultaneously arrested 60-70 students and workers, NGOs employees, who expressed their support for this movement in-person (Qingdaogong, 2020). On the same day, the Xinhua News Agency published an article and accused the NGO behind this movement—the migrant workers’ center for receiving financial support from foreign labor NGOs in Hong Kong, especially the Worker Empowerment (*laodongli*). (Xinhua News Agency, 2018). Other domestic media, like <Southern Metropolis Daily>, <Global Times>, <Guangming Daily>, etc., also criticized this movement (Qingdaogong, 2020).

During the second wave of arrest, a prominent Peking University alumna, Yue Xin, was also arrested. The second wave of repression sparked even more online backlash from supporters of this movement. On September 2, 2018, the Jasic Workers Support Group published a letter signed by Ngai Pun (a famous sociologist from the Hong Kong University), Shen Mengyu (another prominent student leader who graduated from Sen Yat-sen University) and other twenty-two activists to protest for the harsh action of the government[[17]](#footnote-17). With both online and offline protests persisted, the government carried out the third wave of repression started in November 2018 until January 2019 with the targets were activists from those leftist student associations, those associated with the Qingying Social Work Center in Shenzhen, and the general public who supported this movement in-person, etc. At the same time, a campaign by the government to reform or close those Student Organizations among several dozen universities in China that participated in this movement by expressing their support either online or through in-person means (Chan, 2020). The outcome was that many were either shut down or reorganized by their universities, and few survived this wave of repression. Many students who participated in this movement were either suspended from their universities or expelled. The fourth wave of arrest and repression happened in January 2019, with the government arresting more labor NGO employees and other activists or workers who expressed support for this movement (Qingdaogong, 2020). According to a source, by July 2019, after one year this movement started, the Chinese government had arrested 137 people related to this movement (China Labor Crackdown Concern Group, 2019).

It has been a rare alliance between China’s workers and students since the Tian’anmen Movement in 1989 (Chan, 2020; Pun, 2021). This movement was the first time China’s university students took to the street to protest for a political cause[[18]](#footnote-18) for the first time since the Tian’anmen Movement. The outcome is not ambiguous—the CCP regime cracked down on this movement without hesitation, as we saw above. And after more than a decade of hard-working, the progress made by many of those labor NGOs had been wiped out by the CCP regime. A cold Winter had fallen on those who work to improve millions of China’s migrant workers’ situation.

This movement is a rare phenomenon in the PRC’s history because the target of this movement is to create a real independent union in the country, a request that clearly has political implications. Also, the participants of this movement matter; on the one hand, it was those Maoist students who studied at some of the most famous universities in this country; on the other hand, it was those who belonged to millions of migrant workers. The combination of those two important forces causes fear for the CCP. After all, the CCP started the revolution one hundred years ago as some intellectuals joined forces with workers who worked in major cities in the early 1920s and started the revolution. Besides, the CCP also learned its lesson from the Tian’anmen Movement in 1989. So, the perceived level of threat for this movement is high for the central government. Furthermore, because no domestic media ever covered this movement in a positive light throughout the process of the campaign, the support it garnered from society was low. So, in the end, the central government decided to repress this movement— about one hundred activists were arrested, and many were sentenced to imprisonment, though compared to the Falun Gong Movement, which will discuss later in this article, the level of repression is comparatively low in this campaign.

**Equal Education Right Campaign (New Citizen Movement-phase one) (2010-2014)[[19]](#footnote-19)**

The New Citizen Movement was led by a prominent lawyer and young legal scholar Dr. Xu Zhiyong who became famous because of the Sun Zhigang Incident[[20]](#footnote-20) and the role he played in the abolition of the “Custody and Repatriation” policy in China by the Hu-Wen administration in 2003. During this incident, Dr. Xu and his other two former cohorts at the Peking Law School sent a letter to the Standing Committee of the NPC demanding them to check the constitutionality of the “Custody and Repatriation” policy which was issued by the State Council in 1982. Their action immediately drew domestic media’s attention and was widely covered by domestic media, which put a lot of pressure on the Hu-Wen administration, which came to power in the previous year. The Hu-Wen administration, still suffering from the impact of the ill-management of the SARS crisis at that time, wanted to send a positive signal to society. So, under domestic pressure, the Hu-Wen administration soon decided to abolish the notorious “Custody and Repatriation” policy two months after the death of Sun Zhigang (Xu, 2017:33-47). Dr. Xu, a Ph.D. degree holder in law from one of China’s most prestigious Universities, became famous in the human rights lawyer circle and was actively involved in several high-profile cases after the Sun Zhigang case in 2003. He registered a company called the Open Constitution Initiative (OCI hereafter) (*gongmeng*) in October 2003 in Beijing since, at that time, the Chinese government did not allow citizens to register NGOs freely, together with Teng Biao, one of the other two doctors who signed that letter sent to the SCNPC a couple of months earlier. Dr. Xu was elected as a delegate to the people’s congress at the Haidian district, Beijing city, in 2003, and he was re-elected again in 2006.

He went to Yale University to receive legal training for a half year in 2004 (Xu, 2017:133-142). After his training was finished, he returned to China and continued his work in the civil society area. Their organization involved many human rights-related cases where Dr. Xu and his organization helped those among the vulnerable groups within the society, but most of the time, they worked on a case-by-case basis and have not engaged in a large-scale social movement during that period. Their activities drew the Chinese government’s attention, and they took some action against Dr. Xu and his organization[[21]](#footnote-21). In July 2009, the government clamped down on the OCI and detained Dr. Xu. The government charged Dr. Xu with taxes evasion. But the public supported Dr. Xu with donations to pay off those so-called taxes evasion. One month later, Dr. Xu was released by the government without charges (Xu, 2017).

Dr. Xu renamed OGI to Citizen (*gongmin*)[[22]](#footnote-22) in March 2010 and continued their work on human rights protection. This time, they picked up a collective issue—migrant workers’ Children’s education rights in the cities where those migrant workers work and live. Because of the existence of the *hukou* system[[23]](#footnote-23), many migrant workers’ children could not attend public schools in big cities to receive the compulsory education[[24]](#footnote-24), do not mention to participate in the *gaokao* (college entrance exam) there[[25]](#footnote-25). It was a salient issue for many parents who were working and living in Beijing, so they reached out to Dr. Xu and his new organization.

        An office for equal education campaign was established at OGI in 2010 (Zhou, 2018). They recruited 50 volunteers who were migrant-worker parents through online channels. Each month, they organized those migrant-workers parents to petition in front of the Ministry of Education (in the later phase) and/or at the education bureau of the municipal government of Beijing (in the early phase). They also sought support from law experts, such as Professor Zhang Qianfan at the Peking University to provide legal advice and public opinion support (Zhou, 2018:492). Next, they drafted a “non-governmental proposal” (minjian fang’an) for reforming China’s college enrollment system and posted it online.

  In 2012, the campaign entered a new phase. Dr. Xu encouraged campaign participants to lobby members of the NPC before the convention of that year's "two meetings" [[26]](#footnote-26) (*lianghui*), and 60 of them submitted the proposal at the annual plenary secession of the congress (Zhou, 2018). Lastly, they also sought support from the general public as they dispatched volunteers and activists onto Beijing's Street and asked citizens to support their cause by signing on the proposal, and by March, they had collected 100,000 signatures from the general public to support their proposal, which seeks to "provide equal education opportunities for children of all taxpayers, regardless of their *hukou* location, wealth, and socio-economic status." (Zhou, 2018:493).

This movement drew domestic media’s attention and support as many reported this issue. From 2011, major activists from the movement were invited to participate in some national-level TV talk shows, such as the Tiger Talk (*Yihu yixi tan*) on the Phoenix Television and the Dialogue (*duihua*) on CCTV, to express their opinions on China’s education system. Those shows produced sympathy for this campaign from the general public and promoted the visibility of this issue in society. Domestic media, both controlled by the government or market-oriented outlets, supported this issue (Ye and Chen, 2011; Li, 2011; Lan, 2011), although not everyone was happy about allowing migrant workers’ children to attend *gaokao* in Beijing (or other big cities) (Guangming Net, 2012). But the general public seems in favor of allowing those migrant children to attend the *gaokao* in the cities where their parents work, as many portal websites have created webpage supporting this policy (see Tencent Review, 2012).

During the 2012 annual meeting of the NPC, the minister of the Education Department of the central government, Yuan Guiren, disclosed to journalists that his department is considering the feasibility of relaxing the *hukou* restriction in school enrolment. By the end of 2012, almost all the provinces and municipalities in China had published their policies on allowing migrant workers' children to attend *gaokao* in the cities where their parents work. However, two cities (Beijing and Shanghai) still put up some stringent requirements for migrant-workers parents in order to allow their children to participate in *gaokao* in those cities (China Broadcast Net, 2012). Although parents who participated in this campaign in Beijing did not get what they had asked for from the municipal government's decisions, the majority of provinces got positive policies changes. Those migrant workers working and living in those places can have their children attend the *gaokao* in the same city where their parents work (Ma, 2014). So, we code this as a major concession by the central government and local government to this campaign (Xu, 2017). After all, it is very difficult to imagine if all provinces have made the same decisions to allow migrant workers' children to attend the *gaokao* where their parents work, considering the CCP regime's authoritarian nature.

        This campaign was a rare case where a social movement campaign managed to win a major public policy change by the central government. Moreover, it happened at a time when the political opportunity structure was relatively open, as many domestic media still could report some sensitive issues. Furthermore, because of Dr. Xu’s contribution to the abolishing of the “Custody and Repatriation” system in 2003, he built a close relationship with many of the domestic media outlets in China. Those connections helped Dr. Xu to push for EERC for migrant workers’ children, and many domestic media were on their side and covered this issue positively. So, the support this campaign garnered from society is high. And because this issue is not political-related, so the perceived level of threat for the central government is low. In the end, when facing pressure from this campaign and the domestic media, the central government chose to make major concessions and decided to let migrant workers’ children study at regular high schools and participate in the gaokao in those big cities where their parents live except in Beijing and Shanghai.

**The Falun Gong Movement (1992 to 2002)**

Falun Gong is a derivative of Qigong, a traditional Chinese practice and exercise. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, there was a Qigong boom within China, especially in the 1980s and 1990s (Ownby, 2008). Among those Qigong organizations is Falun Gong, which was founded in 1992 by Li Hongzhi in Changchun, Jilin province. Since then, Li started to give lectures to his followers, who needed to buy a ticket in order to listen to Li’s speech. As Li became famous, he gave lectures throughout the country starting at the end of 1992. He published China Falun Gong in April 1993 and later revised it in December 1993. However, what made him very famous was the publication of the Zhuan falun, the equivalent of the bible for Falun Gong practitioners, in 1995, and it became a best seller one year later. The Falun Gong built a strong network within the country. By July 1999, according to Chinese government’s sources, Li had built a network consisting of 28,263 base-level practice centers (liangongdian)[[27]](#footnote-27), 1,900 training stations (fudaozhan), charged with training those who manage the practice centers, and 39 main stations (zongzhan), which coordinated the network under Li’s order (Ownby, 2008, p. 87). In the beginning, Falun Gong built a close relationship with the Chinese Public Security authority, as he gave lectures twice at the Public Security University in 1994 (Ownby, 2008) and donated the income to the Public Security authority for a philanthropic cause. It was quite popular within China, and some estimate its followers had grown to about 70 million by 1999 (Khan, 1999), and its adherents came from a wide range of social backgrounds, including government officials, university professors, businessmen, housewives, college students and peasants.

However, Li Hongzhi made some changes to the nature of Falun Gong in 1994, replacing physical training with ideology as its chief object (Li, 2019b, p. 131). He argued that the purpose of practicing Falun Gong was to purify one’s heart and achieve spiritual salvation. His writings emphasize himself and depict himself as the omniscient and omnipotent savior of the entire universe (Ownby, 2008). In the beginning, the government did not intervene this spiritual movement; in fact, it even provided some protection to this movement because of the close connection Li had built with high-ranking officials at the Ministry of Public Security and the Beijing Public Security Bureau in the mid-1990s. However, not all were happy with the spread of this movement within that country, and more and more criticism was aired within domestic media and some academic spheres. On the other hand, the Falun Gong followers staged around 300 peaceful demonstrations between June 1996 and April 1999, demanding apologies from the media and academic institutions (Ownby, 2008, p. 169).

For example, on June 17, 1996, the Guangming Daily, a major mouthpiece of the CCP and whose readers are mainly intellectuals, published an article that ridiculed Li Hongzhi as a “swindler,” denounced Zhuan falun as propagating feudal superstition, and called for a thorough criticism of the spiritual group (Li, 2019b, p. 131). About two dozen other domestic media also publicized articles criticizing Falun Gong and its master following this article in the Guangming Daily. Those articles triggered protests by Li’s followers, and many went to those outlets’ offices to protest. However, the central government decided not to intervene at that time. The government issued a “three-nots” policy on media reporting about spiritual groups like Falun Gong: media should not be for it, not be against it, and not label it good or bad (Li, 2019b:132).

        The turning point for the central government’s attitude towards Falun Gong happened on April 25, 1999, when about 10,000 Falun Gong practitioners from around the country quietly gathered outside of the Zhongnanhai, the headquarter of the CCP regime, and surrounded this compound. This dramatic event awakened the CCP central leader, especially then CCP general secretary Jiang Zemin, who compared this event to threatening the survival of the CCP regime as what happened on June 4, 1989, at Tian’anmen Square. The Politburo Standing Committee of the CCP held a meeting and discussed how to deal with the situation and finally decided to treat the Falun Gong as its top domestic security threat and decided to initiate a national campaign to eradicate this spiritual movement that had existed for seven years in China (Li, 2019b, p. 130; Junker, 2014; Ownby, 2008, p. 175). Thus, on June 10, 1999, the first institution effort in the campaign was taken with the creation of the powerful 610 Office within the Ministry of Public Security, responsible for Jiang himself (Ownby, 2008, p. 175).

        On 19 July 1999, Jiang announced, at a secret high‐level government meeting, his intention to eradicate Falun Gong, and on the following day, arrests of Falun Gong practitioners began, accompanied by confiscation of Falun Gong paraphernalia. At the same time, the CCP initiated a propaganda campaign to denounce and “reveal the true face” of Falun Gong and the damage it had caused to its adherents. Many practitioners were arrested or sent to re-education through labor facilities or camps. The master of this spiritual movement possibly had predicted the crackdown of this movement, had started to travel overseas to expand its followers base since 1995 and has many followers in countries like the US, Canada, Australis, Japan, Taiwan etc. So, he escaped this crackdown and continued this spiritual movement overseas. Some of his followers in China continue to practice Falun Gong after the national crackdown, but many have to do it secretly to survive. By 2002, the government had declared victory against the struggle. However, even today, there is still Falun Gong practitioner exist in China even though the exact number is unknown, and the government still treat Falun Gong as one of its major domestic security challenges and stringent measures is taken to deal with this challenge[[28]](#footnote-28) (Noakes & Ford, 2015).

        As a quasi-religious organization, the Falun Gong organization enjoyed a relatively friendly environment in its early development, partly because its founder built a close relationship with high-level officials at the Ministry of Public Security and Beijing Public Security Bureau and partly because it was mainly a spiritual movement. However, after 1994, its founder started to emphasize the ideology front of this movement, so it colluded with the dominant position of the communist ideology of the CCP in Chinese society. However, in the beginning, the CCP still had not decided to crack down on this movement and stayed ambivalent on how to deal with this movement. Nevertheless, at that time, as the Falun Gong movement grew stronger and stronger within Chinese society, many domestic media and the academic sphere started to become critical of this spiritual movement, and some attacked this movement, describing it as “superstitious” and “anti-science.” Moreover, many Falun Gong believers engaged in many political-related events[[29]](#footnote-29); as from 1996 to 1999, the Falun Gong staged 300 peaceful protests in this country against those media organizations and other organizations that published critical opinions of their organization. However, the true watershed of this movement happened on April 25, 1999, when more than 10,000 Falun Gong practitioners from many provinces quietly gathered outside of the Zhongnanhai, which caught the central government by surprise, who by then realized how powerful the Falun Gong has become and decided to crack down this movement nationwide relentlessly. Li Hongzhi went overseas in exile, but the regime arrested some of its senior leaders. Those who remained loyal to the Falun Gong faced cruel penalties, such as expulsion from their work units and study institutions, and some were sentenced to prison, and many were dead (Noakes & Ford, 2015). So, in this case, because after 1994, the Falun Gong movement started to involve in political-related issues (i.e., building a cult around Li Hongzhi, engaging in protests, etc.), so the perceived level of threat for the regime is high, especially after the siege at the Zhongnanhai. So, even though it enjoyed broad support within China, as shown by its estimated 70 million to 100 million believers in China by 1999[[30]](#footnote-30), the CCP decided to eradicate this movement and initiated a nationwide crackdown. So, the response strategy after the 4.25 event was repression, and it caused severe causalities for those Falun Gong practitioners.

**Testing the theory: why do authoritarian regimes make concessions to a social movement campaign?**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Level of support garnered by the campaign (i.e., whether domestic media reported the campaign positively) | Perceived level of threat (regime-threatening vs. non-regime-threatening) | |
| Low | High |
| Low | Concession and repression; Concession (minor); Toleration; | Repression (minor causalities) |
| High | Concession (major) and repression | Repression (severe causalities) |

Table 1: the relationship between the two key independent variable and the dependent variable—social movement campaign outcomes

Above is the Table 1 again. After analyzing those four cases in great detail, let us see if our cases can substantiate our hypotheses. For the first hypothesis, let us compare the Veteran Movement (2016-2018) and the EERC (New Citizen Movement-phase one) (2010-2014). Both campaigns are non-political-related issues, so the perceived level of threat for the central government is low (or, in Li’s words, they are regime-engaging issues). However, the difference between those two campaigns was the level of support they garnered from society, especially whether they received positive domestic media coverage. For the Veteran Movement, although thousands of participants joined their protests each time they protested, no domestic media covered those protests positively; it may be because, at that time, the political opportunity structure that existed during the 2010-2014 period had closed as Xi Jinping has consolidated his power and changed the media environment in China by that time; or because those protest leaders do not have a close relationship with those domestic media outlets because of their inexperience of being a protest leader and organizer. So, even though the protests were forceful, to use Cai (2010)’s term, the outcome of this movement is kind of mixed. It is true that the central government answered part of their demands, such as setting up the Ministry of Veteran Affairs in 2018 and passing the < Veterans Support Law of the PRC > in 2020; many of the substantive problems facing many veterans have not been solved yet. And the government also arrested many protest leaders or those who engaged in violent behaviors during the protests after those protests ended. So, when facing a social movement challenged by many veterans, the central government adopted a combination of concession and repression strategy. However, for less forceful social movement campaigns, such as the Substitute Teacher Movement or the largely online movement—the MeToo Movement, the government adopted a toleration strategy or made some minor concessions.

However, for the more influential Equal Education Right Campaign led by Dr. Xu and his organization, the outcome was more positive as the central government and many provincial-level governments made significant concessions and accepted their demand to let migrant workers' children study and take the gaokao at the cities where their parents are living and working except the two largest cities in China—Beijing and Shanghai[[31]](#footnote-31). We argue that because the level of support this campaign garnered from society is high (measured by whether the domestic media covered this campaign positively), the central government finally decided to adopt the concession strategy because, as many scholars have pointed out, even authoritarian leaders care about its legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens (Heurlin, 2016; Cai, 2010; Mertha, 2008; Almen& Burell, 2018). However, why did domestic media cover this issue in the first place? It might be because, during that time (2010-2014), the political opportunity structure was still open, making it easier for domestic media to report on sensitive issues. It also might be because through those previous campaigns or involvement of some of those high-profile civil society-related cases (i.e., the Sun Zhigang case and the abolishment of the "Custody and Repatriation" policy etc.), Dr. Xu had built a close relationship with many of those domestic media outlets so that he could capitalize that previous social capital from his earlier engagement in the progress of China's civil society (Staggenborg & Lecomte, 2009). So, those two cases substantiated our first hypothesis.

Then, let us compare the Veteran Movement, the EERC on the one hand, the Jasic Movement and the Falun Gong Movement on the other. What differentiates those two categories is that the first pair are non-political-related issues; therefore, the perceived level of threat for the central government is low, while the other pair of movements are perceived as regime-threatening or perceived level of threat as high because they both are political-related campaigns. The Jasic Movement is demanding something beyond the CCP regime's tolerance—a real independent labor union for those migrant workers. If the government conceded on this issue, it would threaten its monopoly of power within China's society, so the regime decided to repress this movement once it came to the surface. For the Falun Gong Movement, although this movement enjoyed some years of peaceful environment in its first few years of development once it displayed its organizational potential by gathering 10,000 Falun Gong practitioners outside of the CCP headquarter and eschewing all the police forces' surveillance, then, it awakened the CCP central elites, and they made a decision to crack down this powerful nationwide movement and organization by June 1999, and this movement can only operate overseas or underground in China (Junker, 2014; Noakes & Ford, 2015). Moreover, for those two non-political-related campaigns, because their perceived level of threat is low for the central government, so the government decided to make concessions at different levels to those two movements or campaigns (a major concession for the EERC and a combination of concession with repression for the Veteran Movement). Hence, our second hypothesis is supported.

For the third hypothesis, let us turn to the EERC and the Falun Gong Movement. For those two campaigns or movements both received a high level of support from society: for the EERC this campaign received positive domestic media coverage, and for the Falun Gong Movement, it also received some domestic media positive coverage in its earlier stage of development, but its high level of support is mainly demonstrated by the number of followers that it had built through those years of its existence as 70 million people is a significant proportion of the society; therefore, its level of support from the society is high. However, the difference between those two campaigns is whether the central government perceived them as regime-threatening or not. For the EERC, the regime perceived that campaign as non-threatening and therefore made a major concession to this campaign[[32]](#footnote-32). However, for the Falun Gong Movement, because the central government was worried about the organization potential of this organization and perceived it as competing with the ideology domination within China with the cultivation of Li Hongzhi’s cult within his believers, the perceived level of threat to the regime this case is high. So, in the end, the CCP regime chose to crack down on this movement without mercy and caused one of the major human rights abuses in China in the PRC’s history. Therefore, our third hypothesis is supported.

For the fourth hypothesis, although we do not have enough cases to test this important hypothesis thoroughly, we can look at the Veteran Movement and other similar movements, such as the MeToo Movement in China or the Wukan protest[[33]](#footnote-33). For the Veteran Movement, waves of protests waged by thousands of veterans throughout the country and at various levels of government between 2016 to 2018 made the government prioritize the veteran issues during their daily work. Finally, the central government set up a new ministry-level organization—the Ministry of Veteran Affairs to solve this issue and the passing of the <Veterans Support Law of the PRC> by the NPC standing committee in 2020. Those signal that the government has made a major or partial concession to this big movement. However, on the other hand, dozens of protest leaders, or those accused of engaging in "violence" during the protests, were arrested and sentenced to prison for several years. It is a typical story in China. Moreover, the same logic applied to the Wukan protest. After several waves of protests at the end of 2011, the provincial government negotiated with protest leaders and made a deal. Some of the accused corrupted village officials were arrested, and villagers were allowed to hold a democratic village election, which caught national domestic media's attention. After the election, some of the protest leaders were elected as the new village-level cadres. So, on the one hand, the provincial government seems to have made some serious concessions to the villagers, as those positive events suggest. However, on the other hand, the villagers' primary concern—to get their lands back was not met even though those new villager officials were elected. Moreover, the government gradually rolled out repression, as the newly elected village party secretary was later accused of corruption and sentenced to prison, and several other activists were forced to exile to other countries. The village's problem is still not resolved after the protests happened ten years ago (Tang, 2020, pp. 14-16). So, although we do not have enough evidence to support the fourth hypothesis definitely, the detailed case study of the Veteran Movement and many other similar protests or campaigns suggest that it is very likely the CCP regime preferred to adopt the repression and concession to other strategies such as only making concessions, or only repression as Franklin (2009:702) suggested in his article. So, we partially provide evidence to support our fourth hypothesis, and more research is needed to find out whether our fourth hypothesis is true in China.

**Conclusion**

This article shifted the focus from protests in authoritarian regimes to a higher level—the social movement campaign level. Compared to a single protest, a social movement campaign has a much bigger impact on a country’s citizen’s life; for example, a social movement campaign can demand a national government to change one of its national-level public policies, which could affect many people’s lives. Through analyzing four in-depth case studies which are qualified as our stringent definition of a social movement campaign, we find that two major factors affect the outcome of that social movement campaign or the response strategy of the central government when facing a social movement challenge from its citizens: one is the perceived level of threat for the central government, and the other the level of support that a social movement can garner from the society. If the campaign issue is non-political-related issues (i.e., economic-related issues, welfare issues, etc.), the perceived level of threat is low (or, in Li (2019b)’s terminology, regime-engaging issues), then the central government is more likely to adopt concession or concession with repression strategy; Yet, if the campaign issue is political-related issues (i.e., advocating freedom, independent union, etc.,), the central government will more likely to treat that campaign as regime-threatening (or the perceived level of threat is high), then, it will be more likely to adopt the repression strategy when facing a such challenge. The Falun Gong case illustrates this theory clearly.

Next, how the regime reacts to a social movement campaign challenge also depends on the level of support that the campaign can garner from society. If that campaign can garner a high level of support from society (i.e., the domestic media reported that campaign positively), the central government, which cares about its legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens, will choose to make major, if not all, concessions to the campaigns' demands. So, our study concurs with those who argue that the CCP regime cares about its legitimacy and adopts some social accountability schemes even though there are no meaningful elections held in that country (Li, 2019b; Heurlin, 2016; Mertha, 2008; Almen & Burell, 2018). It also consists of those who emphasize domestic media's role in the outcomes of protests or social movements (Tang & Cote, 2021; Cai, 2010; Mertha, 2008). However, it also has something to do with the political opportunity structure in a regime. As China has almost closed all the opportunities for average citizens to air their grievances domestically and all the domestic media are in tight control under the CCP regime now compared to 10 years ago, we are not sure if the domestic media can still play such a role in today's environment, or some other media channel will replace them[[34]](#footnote-34).

Our article also suggests that the CCP regime, when facing challenges from a social movement campaign that is a low-threat to the regime, the government will be more likely to adopt a combination of repression and concession than some scholars had earlier contended (Franklin, 2009). However, more cases should be included in order to get a more definitive answer to this debate. This study highlights that authoritarian regimes have more choices (i.e., concession and repression) to choose from when facing dissent than previous scholars suggest (Moore, 2000).

This study is mainly qualitative, and future studies should consider a more quantitative-orientated study to test whether our theory can stand the testing of more complete data, such as what the effort made by Chenoweth and her colleagues in the NAVCO 3.0 dataset by including event-day level data (Chenoweth et al., 2018). The problem with their data is that, in China’s case, it only includes five years of event-day data (1991-1992 and 2010-2012). So, future studies should collect more comprehensive data and do quantitative analysis. Another direction is to do comparative studies: compare China’s cases to other authoritarian regimes and see if the same logic can be applied to those different environments or regimes. Our study can also be strengthened if we include all the qualified social movement campaign cases during the reform and opening-up era; it is also worthy of pursuing in future studies. Our study contributed to the field of contentious politics by shifting the focus from the protest level to the social movement campaign level. We got different results on factors affecting the outcome of a social movement campaign in a powerful authoritarian regime—China. However, they are not totally different from theories derived from focusing on protests.

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1. Exceptions include Pun (2021), Zhou (2018), O’Brian and Diamant (2015), Chan (2020), etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Some scholars argue that China is in a third era, the Xi era, which has reversed much of the reforming and opening-up policy that was initiated under Deng’s watch. We argue that in many instances, the current Chinese government is still following the reform and opening up policy and has not fully closed its society like what happened during the Mao era. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The six-month threshold is a bit arbitrary, but here what we want to emphasize is that a social movement campaign usually lasts longer than a protest and has a higher level of organization than most protests occurred in authoritarian regimes. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Throughout the People’s Republic of China (PRC)’s history, there have been a few maximalist campaigns; the most famous ones include the Tian’anmen Movement in 1989, the 08 Charter Movement, the 2019 protest in Hong Kong, the 2008 3·14 protest in Tibet, and the 2009 7·5 Incident in Urumqi, Xinjiang. The outcome of those campaigns is the same, failure; otherwise, the CCP regime would be collapsed by now. So, the focus of this article is those non-maximalist campaigns. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It means that the domestic media is allowed to report those issues more freely compared to closed-structure (i.e., freedom of speech and Tibetan independence, etc.), which are not allowed to report by those domestic media. See (Yang, 2016:2908). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. At the end of this writing, China witnessed a new wave of protests throughout the country triggered by the stringent COVID lockdown—the biggest protest ever seen after the Tian’anmen Movement in 1989, some even demanding the CCP and Xi Jinping to step down. This movement was called the A4 movement, and it caused the sudden reversal of the stringent COVID policy by the central government at the end of 2022, and caused many deaths related to this virus. See (Thornton, 2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. As mentioned, this is not an exhaustive list of all the social movement campaigns that happened in China in the last four decades. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Falun Gong Movement is not treated as a maximalist movement because it was not in the NAVCO dataset, and its target seems to be to achieve religious freedom in China instead of overthrowing the CCP regime, so it is not coded as a maximalist movement. Also, Ownby (2008) questions the conclusion that the Falun Gong wants to overthrow the CCP regime and build a theocracy in China. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. According to our hypothesis/theory, this movement/campaign received a low level of support from the perspective of the negative domestic media report. However, because this movement's "constituency" is so many (over thirty million veterans in China), the central government made a major concession to this campaign. So, in a sense, it does not fit our theory very well. However, because we mainly rely on secondary sources as our data source, it would be difficult to find a campaign that fits this quadrant (low support; low-threat). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. One of the first author’s close relatives joined the army for about ten years before being demobilized in the late 1990s; he worked as a security guard at a county-level government branch with a minimum wage in the early 2000s. Later, he decided to go to big cities to work as security personnel, which could provide more financial support for the family. In his later years, he was hired by the county government to work as urban management officer/personnel with a low-income level. He was not happy with his situation. And his experience was typical with those who went to Beijing or other places to protest or petition. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Following the founding of the Ministry of Veteran Affairs at the central level, provinces, prefectures, counties, townships, and village levels, all created veteran affairs service centers (Chang, 2019). There are 26 ministerial-level organizations in China under the administration of the State Council of the PRC. It is a rare phenomenon to create a new ministerial-level agency under the State Council when the central government has been trying to downsize its organizations in the last two decades or so. So, it was a major symbolic success for those veterans who protested at various levels of government throughout those years, even though their substantive problem may not be solved in the short term. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For example, He Pengchao, a founder of a prominent labor NGO—the Qingying Social Work Center, admitted that his organization selected the Jasic company to send some activists to prepare their workers’ rights campaign in a possibility forced confession from the government (He, 2019; Qingdaogong, 2020: 10). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. According to China’s labor union regulation, it should have support from its workers to create a new labor union within a company. An English version of China’s Trade Union Law can be found here: <http://www.lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?id=22786&lib=law>. (Accessed on April 24, 2022.) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. On Maoists’ influence and status in today’s China, see Ma (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In China's universities, almost every university has a Marist Study Association or Maoist Study Association. In the last ten years or so, many of those Marist Study Associations had developed a strong network and an "independent force" relatively free of the government's control, see Qingdaogong (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The Jasic company is under the Yanziling police station’s jurisdiction. So, it became one of the main targets of this movement. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Files that collected by the author, but no longer available on the internet. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Other than a secessionist cause (i.e., protests that happened in Xinjiang or Hong Kong, etc.) or patriotism reasons (Weiss, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For a comparatively comprehensive introduction to the New Citizen Movement and its history, see Pils (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. On the significance of the Sun Zhigang Incident in China’s progress in the realm of civil society and the role played by Dr. Xu Zhiyong and other legal scholars in the process of the Sun Zhigang case, see Hand (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The direct trigger of the clampdown is most likely that they published a report on the causes of the Tibet riot in 2008 and provided some recommendations for the government, see Pils (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Because people still prefer to call it OGI after they changed their name (see, Zhou, 2018), so we will still use OGI as its name. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The *hukou* system is a household registration system, and it divides between an urban and rural *hukou*, where urban *hukou* holders can enjoy better welfare programs provided by the city government, and rural *hukou* holders have much worse welfare programs, and they cannot access to the welfare programs or public-good resources(i.e., access to public school for their children, access to health care system in the cities, etc.) at the city area even though they work and live there for many years if they could not get an urban *hukou*, which is difficult to achieve for many migrant workers. Now, China has a floating population of 376 million, the majority of which are migrant workers (Feng, 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. China’s compulsory education is from grade one to grade nine. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Attending gaokao in different provinces has a big impact on whether or not a student will be likely admitted by an elite university (usually means a university that belongs to the “985 Project” or “211 Project”). Students who live in Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and other less-populous provinces are much easy to be admitted by elite universities compared to those who live in Shandong, Henan, Hebei and other populous provinces. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The "two meetings" mean the annual NPC & CPPCC (Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference) National Committee annual sessions, which are usually held every March in Beijing.. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. In the late 1990s, a practice center was created at the first author’s home village—a small village in North China. Many practitioners, most middle-aged or older women, went to the practice center (a villager’s home) to practice Falun Gong together every week. They bought Li Hongzhi’s portrait, the Zhuan falun book, and CDs from the Falun Gong organization. This practice center existed for several months before it was shut down by the government. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. The 610 Office at the national level was absorbed into the CCP Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission and the Ministry of Public Security in 2018 and no longer exists independently. However, according to some news sources, at the local level (i.e., county level), there are still 610 Offices that exist today (See Piao, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. But as some scholars pointed out, it was questionable to conclude that the target of the Falun Gong movement was to build a theocracy in China and to overthrow the CCP regime (see Ownby, 2008:179). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. In the early period of this movement, some domestic media outlets also positively reported Falun Gong and this movement (see Ownby, 2008:87). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. At Beijing and Shanghai, the municipalities' government also made some minor concessions to this campaign as those migrant workers' children were allowed to attend vocational high schools in those cities, but not regular high schools, and they are allowed to attend the vocational college entrance exams at Beijing and Shanghai, and if they passed the admission line, they are allowed to attend vocational colleges in those large cities, but they can not attend regular universities in China (China Broadcast Net, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. After the OGI won the EERC campaign, Dr. Xu and his colleagues decided to shift the focus of their campaign to a more radical target, for example, demanding the CCP central elites (Politburo Standing Committee members) to disclose their wealth and assets to the whole society—the Wealth Disclosure Campaign, and other radical campaigns like “civic dinner” events, which caused the regime to arrest Dr. Xu and he was sentenced to four years in prison in 2014. He was released in July 2017 after serving three years and a half sentence. He was arrested again in early 2020 for criticizing President Xi Jinping and his COVID policy, although the final sentence has not been issued yet so far, see (Lau & Rui, 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. As noted in the first section of this article, the Wukan protest would not qualify as a social movement campaign in this article because its target is the local government, but on the other hand, land protests is a national issue, so to some extent, it is kind of "boundary-spanning" (O'Brien & Li, 2006) of the social movement campaign in this article. Besides, village election is also a national issue which was part of the story of the Wukan protest. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Like during the current wave of protests, overseas social media played an important role in collecting and disseminating information to the world on what is happening inside China, as no domestic media dared to report those protests that happened in dozens of cities in China. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)