



**Critical Issues Confronting China:
Mobilizing Without the Masses**

Diana Fu, University of Toronto

April 11, 2018

Having a long standing interest in grassroots activism and various forms of civil society mobilization, Diana Fu, Assistant Professor of Asian Politics at the University of Toronto and an affiliate of the Asian Institute at the Munk School of Global Affairs, immersed herself in her field work during 2009-2011, and has come up with a framework to conceptualize how weak organizations can facilitate rights claiming under repression. She calls this particular type of contention "mobilizing without the masses."

Her rich field experiences in labor organizations in China form the basis for a fascinating political ethnography. She effectively uses this ethnography as a focal point to illuminate the larger issue about the relationship between popular contention, state power, and civil society in contemporary China.

Since it is dangerous for civil society to organize collective action in China, it is critical for NGOs to avoid mobilizing the masses. They must steer away from organizing the masses to take to the streets while still being effective at aiding participants in claiming their rights. Based on her fieldwork in China, Fu has found that organizations can bypass this risk by coaching workers to challenge the state one by one or in small groups. The organizations provide moral support as well as technical guidance on how and when to make a threat when their problems cannot be solved through legal means. An example in point is a female migrant worker who was injured on the job: her arm was badly damaged due to her work conditions. Unable to get any help from the local labor bureau, she became desperate and threatened the Bureau Chief that if her injury was not compensated, she would "take extreme measures." A week later, she received her compensation.

Behind this atomized contention - an individual confronting the state - is a disguised form of collective action in which activists inside NGOs provide tactical and moral coaching to workers. Fu perceives this dynamic of mobilizing without the masses as being situated between two other familiar dynamics of contention. One dynamic often seen in social movement societies is when an NGO serves as a mobilizing structure that amasses resources for collective action. The other dynamic, which often takes place in illiberal regimes, is James Scott's weapons of the weak, in which aggrieved individuals purposely do not form groups in order to avoid state attention. The

dynamic that Fu illustrates is somewhere in between these two forms—it is neither strictly collective nor individualized. Rather, individuals form groups in order to better contend as individuals. Hence, the purpose of forming an NGO is not to rally the crowds to take their issues to the streets but to coach citizens to challenge the state individually.

According to Fu, there were about 72 such labor organizations, with chapters in various cities, at the time of her field work. They formed two broad clusters in the Beijing area and the Pearl River Delta area respectively. The Beijing cluster tended to have more resources and contributed to the policy-making process. The Pearl River Delta cluster had roughly two subgroups, with one being more explosive than the other. One subgroup consisted of labor organizations founded by mainlanders. The other subgroup consisted of more people from Hong Kong, who were more engaged in collective bargaining. They tried to educate migrant workers about civil society and citizenship. They were more likely to be perceived as a threat to social stability and therefore were often harassed by state authorities.

Mobilizing without the masses is a response to a fragmented form of state control over civil society. Fu discusses three variations of the dynamic. One is what Fu calls "micro-collective action." An example of such action is a "flash protest" by a group of people, which just lasts long enough to get their message out but short enough for them not to be detained.

The second variation is atomized action, which is really a form of disguised collective action. These are actions by individuals who have been coached to use techniques from a repertoire of everyday tools, including verbal threats, possible media exposure, stalking factory bosses, individual sit-ins, and suicide shows. They learn to how to sensationalize their demand, when legal means do not work for them or take too long to address their grievances, while they make their actions appear as isolated and individualized actions without the backing of any group.

The third variation is what Fu calls "discursive action." Labor activists offer an alternative narrative to migrant workers, such as identifying them as "new proletarians" opposed to capitalist bosses, instead of "peasant workers" as they are commonly referred to, and as citizens of the country with due rights as rich people. These activists try to use moral persuasion to change a public discourse. Some labor organizations explicitly state, "The law is implemented in favor of the rich. We need to do things in our own way and from our perspective. We may need to use forceful means. We don't discourage using illegal methods to claim for your rights."

In conclusion, Fu underlines the increasing pertinence of mobilizing without the masses in today's China, not only in labor relations but also in other areas, as state repression is heightened under Xi Jinping's reign. Leaders of many labor organizations had been detained and charged by the end of 2015. Even atomized contention is in peril under consolidated state repression.