

Organizational Involvement and Political Participation in China

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of organizational involvement on political participation in mainland China. The formal organizations in China today differ in the nature of organization and membership, which in turn lead to different effect on political participation. In contrast with the Communist Party and the “mass organizations,” the reemerging civic associations have more voluntary and active members. While providing similar benefits of vertical connections to official access and information as other formal organizations, they uniquely transcend the boundaries of the administrative or work units to bring together people with dissimilar background. Analysis of a nationwide survey data shows that involvement in the Party or mass organizations provides some advantages in participation through official channels, while the constraining effect on unconventional activities did not materialize. Involvement in civic associations significantly facilitates all types of political participation.

Past studies on political participation in both comparative and American politics have shown theoretically and empirically the importance of organizational involvement. On one hand, social organizations help to build up “social capital” such as social networks and interpersonal trust that enhance individuals’ capacity for collective political action (e.g. Putnam, 1995). On the other hand, involvement in social organizations fosters political and civic skills that facilitate participatory activities (e.g. Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978, p. 100; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995, pp. 309-310). Another form of organizational involvement, membership in political parties, has also been shown cross-nationally to promote political contacting and participation (Jennings, 1997, p. 369). Although the claim has been generally supported, the mechanism by which organizational involvement affects political participation depends critically on the nature of the organization and of its membership. “Simply being involved with nonpolitical institutions does not foster political activity. What counts is what happens there” (Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995, pp. 280-281). For instance, face-to-face organizations may have a very different impact on social capital than “checkbook” or passive organizations (Putnam, 1995).

In China, which has been undergoing revolutionary social, economic, and political transformations for decades, social organizations and political participation are interesting and significant topics worthy of analysis and research in their own right. The empirical literature on political participation in mainland China has proliferated in recent years, thanks to the newly available survey and field research opportunities. Those researches have largely exposed the myth of a politically mobilizable but otherwise apathetic and dormant populace. At the same time the economic liberalization since the late 1970s has loosened up regime grip on society enough such that the wide variety of formal organizations operating in China today, from a Leninist communist party to the Green Peace, can rarely be seen anywhere else. The explosive growth in social organizations in post-Mao China has generated widespread scholarly interest, although the research has so far been focusing on the macro-level relationship of those organizations with the party-state. The important theoretical and empirical question of whether the micro-level mechanisms among their members have behavioral consequences in political participation has been rarely explored (see, e.g. Shi, 1997, p. 243; Kuan & Lau, 2002, p. 311). In the words (but not the original meaning) of Putnam (1993), besides the social organizations’ “external” effects on the political system, we also need to study their “internal” effects on their members.

This paper examines the relationship between organizational involvement and political participation in the Chinese context. Both are subject to fundamentally different constraints and take on different forms than in liberal democracies. For instance, party membership here means membership in *the* Party, and the different acts of political participation are often not directly comparable to the activities frequently analyzed for democratic regimes. Those conceptual issues shall be further dealt with in later sections, yet I believe the study can still benefit from the insight of the theoretical and empirical relationship of organizational involvement contributing to political participation established in democracies. All those behavioral assumptions and causal mechanisms should not be completely wiped out in China. More specifically, as I shall expand later, those formal organizations that have more motivated and active members, those that better connect members both vertically and horizontally to official access, information, and people of divergent backgrounds across existing institutional boundaries, and those that provide better opportunities to develop civic skills, tend to promote wider political participation. In the Chinese context, the three main types of formal organizations that a citizen can be involved in are the Communist Party, mass organizations, and civic associations. They all have distinct membership

and organizational characteristics and should have very different impact on their members' political behavior. The study of that relationship has both practical significance for grassroots politics in China and comparative implications.

Compared with other variables (especially the usual sets of psychological or attitudinal measurements) that are theoretically relevant in explaining political participation, organizational involvement certainly has its advantages. It is better specified, easier to measure, and less susceptible to errors on the part of survey respondents such as cognitive or memory problems or nonrandom lies (Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995, p. 271). Especially in the Chinese context, where UNESCO estimated over 18 per cent of the adult population were illiterate in 1995 and considerations of "political correctness" or social desirability may systematically bias survey responses, the questions that are more fact-based give both the respondents and analysts more confidence than those that attempt to tap political attitudes, values, norms, or interests.

The statistical analysis in the latter part of this paper is based on a data set from a nationwide probability sample survey conducted by Tianjian Shi and the Social Survey Research Center of the People's University of China from September 1993 to June 1994 (Please see Chen & Shi, 2001, pp. 109-110; Kuan & Lau, 2002, p. 298 for a description of the sampling and interviewing process). While the survey was carried out a decade ago, the causal relationships revealed in it can still make invaluable contribution for both the study of political participation and that of civic associations.

The Organizational Gap in Participatory Activities

For the purpose of this paper political participation is broadly defined as "actions undertaken by ordinary citizens that are intended, directly or indirectly, to influence the selection of government personnel and/or the policy decisions they make" (Bennett and Bennett, 1986, p. 160). Political participation in China can still fit that definition but differs in important ways from that in liberal democracies. As Lieberthal (2004, p. xvi) points out, "the people of China still have not experienced meaningful, sustained political participation based on stable, autonomous institutions." Since the Party monopolizes all the legitimate channels of interest articulation and aggregation, any organized effort outside of the control of the party-state to influence government policy making is strictly prohibited. To the Party, some seemingly innocuous activities can become threatening if they are instigated or organized by political, social, or religious entities independent of the party-state, such as an unofficial labor union or a cult. On the other hand, the party-state has shown surprising degree of tolerance toward seemingly more destructive activities such as demonstrations or blocking traffic in which ordinary citizens voice their individual grievances. The key difference here apparently lies in the existence or absence of alternative mechanisms of interest articulation autonomous from Party control. Besides, even those demonstrations driven by individual grievances (e.g. unpaid pensions or unfair compensation for use of land) can be solved with relatively low cost by particularized favors, benefits, or compromises from the government before they can escalate into anything even close to regime-challenging or anti-system movements.

Past studies of political participation in China have established that despite the constraints of a Leninist party-state Chinese citizens do engage in various activities regularly to try to influence government policies (e.g. Falkenheim, 1987, p. 4), especially during the stage of policy implementation. Shi (1997, p. 94) listed no fewer than 28 acts of political participation, and the 1993-94 survey includes 18 activities besides voting-related acts. Voting in mainland China is a complex political act that has been discussed extensively in other works and is beyond the scope

of this paper. Shi (1997, p. 125) found that “voting in Beijing is still not fully interchangeable with other political activities.” In a principal component analysis on the 1993-94 survey data, voting in unit/ village elections or People’s Congress elections does not share the same underlying factor as the other 18 activities do.

Table 1 lists all the 18 acts of political participation and the percentages of organizational members who had participated in each activity. For later analysis, “refuse to pay tax” will not be included. Among the eighteen it is actually the only illegal activity, which complicates interpretation of analysis, even though adding it would not change any of the empirical findings presented in this paper.

(Table 1 about here)

One contextual issue should be noted here that the survey was conducted in a presumably repressive political atmosphere, that is, less than 5 years after the crackdown on the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square and elsewhere, and the survey questions expressly asked about activities within the previous three years. Yet the percentages clearly show that political participation through various activities, including unconventional ones, was not as insignificant as one might expect.

Second, the survey data show unambiguous organizational gaps in political participation. For most of the activities, members of the Party, Youth League, trade union or women’s federations, or civic associations did participate at a higher rate than the general public. Whether those gaps can be explained away by other factors is an empirical question that will be answered later in the paper, but the difference that involvement in formal organizations can make is quite remarkable.

Third, members of the Party, the Youth League, trade union or women’s federation, or civic associations also participate in those activities at very different rates. The activeness of those members of the civic associations is especially prominent. Another somewhat surprising finding is that more than 40 per cent of the Party members never bothered to “express opinions directly to [grassroots] leader,” the most frequent act of political participation. In fact, 38 per cent of the Party members had never participated in any of the 18 activities, while the counterpart inactive proportion among the general public was 55 per cent. Given that many Party members hold active government positions, it may on the surface seem a tautology to discuss the impact of Party membership on political participation, but this survey shows that there is still quite a substantial discrepancy in between that begs explanation.

Formal Organizations in Mainland China Today

In the next sections, I shall focus on the key differences between the four kinds of formal organizations in mainland China in the reform era, namely, the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese Communist Youth League, the other “mass organizations,” and civic associations. The distinction between the latter two is a peculiarity in the Chinese official terminology. Following the Leninist tradition, social organizations in mainland China initially functioned as bidirectional “transmission belts” between the communist party and the masses, loyally carrying out Party lines and policies among their members while feeding information from the masses back to the Party according to the “mass line” (summarized as “from the masses to the masses” by Mao Zedong). The “transmission belt” mass organizations in mainland China therefore have been very specifically designated, funded, and staffed by the state. They include the eight “people’s groups [*renmin tuanti*]” that take part in the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference and 14 others that have been exempted by the State Council from the required registration at

government agencies of civil affairs. According to the Xinhua News Agency, there are nearly 200 national mass organizations that are fully funded and staffed by the government (Xinhua News Agency, 2005). A complete list of those organizations would be unnecessary here, but the three most prominent examples of mass organizations are the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, the All-China Women's Federation, and the Chinese Communist Youth League. Each of the mass organizations serves as the Party's extension into specific social sectors, and is the only peak national organization allowed to represent that sector. In this paper, those organizations will be termed "mass organizations" while other officially registered organizations will be called "civic associations" to avoid confusion.

Unlike the mass organizations, many of which date back to the 1920s, the overwhelming majority of the civic associations in mainland China today have been set up in the past two decades. There were virtually no active civic associations during the Cultural Revolution, but since the reforms started in the late 1970s they have mushroomed across mainland China in all specialties and sizes, such as environmental NGO's, homeowners associations, philatelist clubs, and pig-raisers associations. Official statistics from the Ministry of Civil Affairs show that the total number of registered civic associations increased from 116 thousand in 1991 to peak at 187 thousand in 1996, a growth of over 60 per cent in 5 years. After that the total number decreased annually to a low of 129 thousand in 2001 mostly as a result of the new regulations issued by the State Council in 1998 on the registration and management of social organizations and then the crackdown on the Falun Gong since 1999. As of 2004, that statistic has recovered to about 150 thousand, although unofficial estimates are much higher. In all, the growth in civic associations has been quite phenomenal, especially considering that only 30 years ago few existed. The 1993-94 national survey was conducted in the middle of a fast-growing period for civic associations. Over 26 thousand civic associations were newly approved in 1993, an all-time high, and there were a total of 175,687 officially registered civic associations in 1994. About 3 per cent of the national probability sample drawn in 1993 had joined a civic association.

The classification of those organizations is according to the terminology used by the Chinese party-state, but as I shall show it also makes sense in explaining the analytical distinctions between them. The next three sections will discuss their differences in membership induction, in organizational style, and in institutional constraint. The civic associations of mainland China today stand out as the organizations that are voluntary and bridge institutional boundaries. Their members are also less passive or constrained by official rules and standards of behavior.

Differences in Membership Induction

Almost all the formal organizations in mainland China today maintains at least a façade of being "voluntary," but the actual style of membership induction in practice can be very different. The Chinese Communist Party and the Communist Youth League both require formal written application to join them, followed by a long and careful process of screening and approval on the part of the local organizations. Besides being the official mass organization of the youth, the Youth League also functions as a prep school for Party membership and is thus more politically oriented than the other mass organizations. In 2002, the Communist Party recruited 2.1 million new members and 1.3 million of them were Youth League members, 1 million of whom were specifically recommended to join the Party by the grassroots organizations of the League (Wang & Lu, 2003). Active recruitment of members is an important and regular work by the grassroots branches of the Party and the Youth League, as they strive to

co-opt the “advanced elements” into their ranks. In the reform era the Party has especially targeted the young and the highly educated for recruitment (Guo, 2005). The Communist Youth League monitors its rate of penetration into the youth sector, or those people between the age of 14 and 28 according to the League’s constitution. In 2002, the Communist Youth League’s 70 million members constitute 22.6 per cent of that age group in mainland China, slightly higher than the 21.4 per cent in 1998 (Wang & Lu, 2003).

The other two most prominent examples of mass organizations are the All-China Federation of Trade Unions and the All-China Women’s Federation. As they serve as the vital connection between the Party and the workers and women, respectively, those mass organizations are very eager to enlarge their membership base and to extend their coverage into the social sectors that they have the monopoly to represent. The Trade Union leadership, for instance, called for “quickening the pace of formation of trade unions ... and organizing employees into the trade union to the maximal degree” (Wang, 2003, p. 1). In that sense they can hardly be called “voluntary” associations. Employees of Party or government agencies or state-owned enterprises become members of those “people’s groups” almost automatically, and in recent years the mass organizations have also stepped up their efforts at establishing grassroots units and recruiting members in the private sector or foreign-invested enterprises. The membership of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions rose steadily from 51 million in 1979 to 99 million in 1989, hovered around 100 million until 1996, and then dropped to 87 million in 1999 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2003, p. 826), mostly due to the shrinking employment in state-owned enterprises since the late 1990s in the “change of ownership [*gaizhi*]” reforms. Through strenuous recruitment of employees in all sectors, the trade union boasts a total membership of 137 million in 2004 (Wang, 2005), 18 per cent of total employment, or over half of urban employment in mainland China. In the 1993-94 survey, 19.6 per cent of the respondents were members of the trade union or women’s federation.

Membership induction of the Party and the mass organizations reflects their specific political agenda of being either the “proletariat vanguard” or “transmission belt.” As the grassroots mass organizations endeavor to recruit members and deepen their penetration into various social sectors, their membership inevitably becomes passive. Other than the small number of grassroots leaders of the trade union or women’s federation, most ordinary members of mass organizations are not actively involved in their operation. Membership in the Party or the Youth League is associated with advantages in political advancement or even material gains, which however may seem distant to less politically ambitious members. The Party at the grassroots even has difficulty attracting members to attend obligatory meetings, and it has become quite common for Party branches to pay their members as an incentive for attendance (Quzhou Party Committee, 2004). Even though the Party or mass organizations may “offer many opportunities to acquire, or improve, organizational or communications skills in the context of activities” (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995, p. 310), without active involvement by members those opportunities do not translate into advantages in civic skills that would facilitate political participation.

In contrast to the Party and mass organizations, membership induction in civic associations is more voluntary and their members are more actively involved in the activities of the organization. The civic associations generally serve no specific political agenda and do not strive to be the monopoly organization of entire social sectors. There also exist political hurdles that prevent them from aggressively recruiting members among the mass public. Many of the civic associations are very specialized, attracting a limited number of self-selected members who

share common concerns or interest. Precisely because civic associations tend to have more selective, voluntary, motivated, and thus less passive members than the mass organizations, they can serve as a better training ground for their members' political and civic skills through active involvement, which in turn facilitate participation in the wider political processes. For instance, in a study of involvement in environmental NGO's in China today, Yang (2005, p. 62) concludes that "more importantly, environmental activities offer meaningful and even fun experiences for self-exploration and socializing, including training in leadership, skills in interpersonal relations and exposure to new horizons of life."

Differences in Organization

The Communist Party and the mass organizations all emphasize hierarchy and obedience, reflecting a Leninist abhorrence of a "bourgeois club" type organization. The Chinese Communist Party currently has 70 million card-carrying members, yet none of those can truthfully be called an "individual" member. According to Article 1 of the Party's constitution a precondition for Party membership is to be willing to take part in an organization within the Party. The over three million grassroots organizations of the Party mostly overlap with administrative or work units (*danwei*), and it is only in recent years in some cities that the Party has tried to organize according to office buildings or urban street committees.

The mass organizations are also organized at the grassroots along the lines of the work unit system. In any administrative unit (province, city, county or urban district, township or urban street committee, and even village) or any work unit of a reasonable size, the branches of all the major mass organizations would be present. The Trade Union has 1.7 million grassroots organizations, mostly in the enterprises. More recently it has established trade unions in 89 per cent of all the towns or townships and in 73 per cent of all the urban street committees of mainland China (Wang, 2003, p. 1). In the Youth League, 49 per cent of its 72 million members are students at the end of 2004 (Jiang, 2005), all of whom are organized by their schools, and another 15 million members are organized in villages in the countryside. The All-China Women's Federation is completely organized according to administrative or work units and does not even recruit individual members.

The close association of Party and mass organizations with the administrative or work unit (*danwei*) system has two important "internal effects" on their members' political participation. On one hand, Party members enjoy definite advantages in participation through official channels, since they have dual vertical connections with local decision makers both within and outside of the Party organization. Likewise, as the grassroots mass organizations are parallel (although maybe subordinate) to the management in the work units or administrative units, the mass organizations provide their members with numerous advantages that should facilitate political participation. The organizations themselves serve as one of the official channels for the party-state to hear mass concerns according to the "mass line" and their members should have more chances to utilize those channels than non-members. The top-down lines of communication in the mass organizations should also keep the members better informed about government policies and Party lines. Besides, local leaders of the mass organizations are often well connected with government officials and thus able to help the members to solve problems. Therefore, membership in the mass organizations can significantly promote political participation through officially sanctioned channels or cronyism.

All those participatory advantages come with membership and should not depend on how actively the members are involved, but often it is the grassroots Party or mass organization

leaders who most frequently benefit from it. When I interviewed individual Party cadres in Hubei province about participatory activities in the winter of 2000, one of the first things that almost every one mentioned was the difference between “Party members with positions (*youzhi*)” and those without (“*wuzhi*”). According to the 1993-94 survey data, 56 per cent of the non-Party members and 49 per cent of the ordinary (“*wuzhi*”) Party members never participated in any of the 18 activities while 71 per cent of grassroots Party leaders had done at least one. It is unclear whether the advantages in official access and information flow that the Party and mass organizations provide are actually realized by the ordinary members.

Moreover, because the grassroots Party or mass organizations are mostly encapsulated into local administrative or work units, involvement in the former hardly adds any extra interaction between people than their workplace connections, especially considering that many members are passive in the organizations. In other words, due to the hierarchical and compartmentized nature of the Party and mass organizations, organizational involvement per se does not significantly increase social connectedness and social cohesion beyond the confines of the work units or administrative units. Green and Brock (2005), for instance, argue that interpersonal interaction beyond formal organizations may be just as important in building social capital as organizational membership.

The civic associations in contemporary China also provide their members with vertical connections with potential protective patrons (Shi, 1997, p. 244), which helps political participation through official channels and cronyism. They also connect their members horizontally with other citizens who share similar interest or concerns. The latter connection is especially important and sets the civic associations apart from either the Communist Party or the mass organizations, in which the vertical “top-down” relationship is instead emphasized to control the association between people in the same social sector. The horizontal connection institutionalized in the civic associations, no matter how autonomous they are from the party-state, is precious in a non-plural society where few such links exist legitimately beyond the schools and the work unit (*danwei*) system. Unlike the Party or mass organizations, many of the emerging civic associations in mainland China transcend boundaries of administrative or work units and bring together people with dissimilar social or employment background. For example, business or commercial associations in China are organized not only by industry, but also by the scale of the enterprises (Nevitt, 1996, p. 27). Indeed according to the survey data civic association members have a much wider variance in age, years of education, and income than Party members or mass organization members, with the only exception of the variance in years of education (Please see Table 2 for the actual statistics). Through formal or informal interactions with other members communicational and organizational skills are fostered. In the context of China, the need for civic associations to negotiate with the state effectively further necessitates the cultivation of such skills among their members (Saich, 2000, p. 137; Zhang & Baum, 2004). Those formal and informal access, information, social capital, and civic skills prepare association members well as important resources for political participation when the need rises.

(Table 2 about here)

Differences in Institutional Constraint

Lastly, the Party and the mass organizations also exert strong constraint on political participation by their members, especially those through unconventional means. Party members are required and compelled by strict Party discipline to “maintain a high-degree alignment with

the Party Center in ideology and action” (People’s Daily, every month). The core content of the Party discipline is the so called “four obeys”: individual Party members obey Party organizations, the minority obeys the majority, the lower levels obey the upper levels, and all Party organizations and members obey the Party Center. Party members, for example, can not take part in collective visits to higher authorities (*jiti shangfang*).

As the Party’s “transmission belt” to various social sectors the mass organizations have the political obligation to control and contain the activities of their members, especially those collective actions that are potentially disruptive or destabilizing (Chen, 2003). The close association of mass organizations with the administrative or work unit system also makes it easier for the authorities to locate and to punish the perpetrators if acts of participation go awry. Therefore, mass organizations can also depress political participation by their members, at least for those activities that are not sanctioned by the party-state. From the Party’s perspective it may even be preferable for most mass organization members to remain passive.

The institutional constraint on members of civic associations is more complicated. Unlike the Party or mass organizations, most of the constraint does not come from the civic associations themselves, but from their macro-level relationship with the party-state. Many of the civic associations have deviated to various degrees away from the “transmission belt” model and are generally not intended to fulfill the “mass line” function prescribed by the party-state. A general scholarly consensus has emerged that there is a wide variation in the degree of autonomy of those associations from the party-state. The existing literature on this new type of organizations has focused on their relationship with the party-state and their potential for political change (e.g. Pei, 1998; Saich, 2000). However, when we study their impact on individual political participation, the emphasis should not be the “external” effect on the political system but rather their “internal” effect on their members’ behavior. There is no denying that these civic associations are under great constraint and scrutiny by the party-state, or that “Chinese citizens have not had the day in, day out opportunity to develop skills in the organization of autonomous groups and associations as vehicles for political participation” (Lieberthal, 2004, p. xvii). The fact that these civic associations are to various extents dependent on or even “embedded” in the state is not surprising, and indeed it would be foolish for them not to be so in such a system (Saich, 2000). Their macro-level functions or relationship with the party-state, however, should not prevent them from serving at the micro-level as a significant catalyst for political participation by their members. Some recent literature on western civil society has also argued that associations do not have to be independent of the state or strictly non-partisan to produce the benevolent effects conducive to political participation. Foley and Edwards (1996, p. 42), for instance, pointed out, “Putnam fails to note that most of this [Emilia-Romagna] region's sports clubs, choral societies, cooperatives, and cultural associations had been organized by and for two major political parties, the Communists and the Christian Democrats.”

Methods and Findings

The main differences between the Party, Youth League, other mass organizations, and civic associations and their probable impact on political participation are summarized in Table 3. Involvement in various types of formal organizations has different “internal effect” on their members’ political participation. Civic associations accrue social connectedness, both vertical and horizontal, that transcends the confines of workplace. The Party, mass organizations, and civic associations may all direct information flow, provide official access, build social capital, and hone political and civic skills, but it is the latter that are best able to translate those into

advantages in political participation by their members due to the nature of their organization and membership.

(Table 3 about here)

As a preliminary empirical test of the above theoretical arguments, we can look at the correlations between organizational involvement and some measures of social capital (social network and interpersonal trust) and external efficacy, both are important predictors of political participation. The grassroots leaders of the Party, the Youth League, and other mass organizations are more actively and deeply involved than ordinary members, and so involvement in those organizations are measured by a three-point scale of the respondent's status within each organization. Leaders are scored as 2, ordinary members scored as 1, and non-members are scored as 0. I can not construct similar variable for civic associations as the survey data does not provide any information on civic association leaders, and so involvement in civic associations is a dichotomous variable where members are coded as 1 and non-members as 0. Unfortunately there is no direct measure of civic skills in the survey data that would allow us to analyze their relationship with associational membership. It should be emphasized also that it is impossible to establish causal directions here and that none of the other relevant factors such as age and education have been controlled for, but a look at the correlations can still be suggestive.

(Table 4 about here)

Table 4 shows the Tau-c correlation coefficients between organizational involvement and measures of social network, external efficacy, and interpersonal trust. Tau-c is a measure of association between two discrete ordered variables that varies between -1 and 1. It is not PRE (proportionate reduction in error) and tends to be small especially when many pairs of cases have the same value on at least one of the two ordinal variables. Generally speaking, involvement in all kinds of formal organizations appears to contribute to better social network and higher external efficacy. Civic associations do not seem to have an advantage here. However, we should also bear in mind that most of the measures of social network and of external efficacy here are locally oriented and do not transcend institutional boundaries. Involvement in the Party and mass organizations overlaps with workplace connections in administrative or work units, and as aforementioned they enjoy definite benefits in official access and information channels. Civic association members, besides those advantages, are uniquely positioned to gain from the "bridging" social capital that cut across economic and political cleavages. If their advantages do not emerge here they should appear in a regression analysis of political participation, a task we now turn to.

Apparently, to explore the effects of organizational involvement on political participation, we need to combine those various participatory activities into theoretically meaningful and statistically manageable measures. From the discussion in the previous sections it is clear that by disaggregating political participation into participation through official channels, through cronyism, and through unconventional means we can better gauge the differentiated effects of organizational involvement. The hypothesized relationships between the four types of organizational involvement and three categories of political participation are summarized in Table 3.

The first dependent variable, "participation through official channels," is an additive index of nine variables of participatory activities (listed in the Appendix) that are all officially sanctioned, such as direct contact or complaining through the bureaucracy, People's Congresses, or newspapers. The second dependent variable is the sum of three variables of "cronyism" activities, those that employ personal connections (*guanxi*) for special favors. On one hand those

activities are officially prohibited by the party-state and apparently should not be categorized as “officially sanctioned channels.” However, the lower-level leaders may find a cronyism relationship materially and politically rewarding in a patron-client network, therefore it is not obvious that those activities are completely “officially unsanctioned.” The third dependent variable is the sum of five variables of “troublesome” activities in the eyes of the authorities, such as carrying out a work slowdown, organizing colleagues to resist, or harassing the leader at his or her home. Those are apparently neither sanctioned nor encouraged by the state. Some of those, such as starting a lawsuit, is legitimate, yet from the perspective of the state could still be potentially disruptive or destabilizing. Therefore, this category is labeled “participation through unconventional means.”

It would be ideal to conduct a theory-blind factor analysis to help determine the dimensionality of the activities. However, as is clear from the frequencies of observations presented in Table 1, most of the activities are very rare events. Only a minority of the acts had been each carried out by more than 3 per cent of the respondents, which would leave very little variance to be explained by the underlying components.

The three regression equations include the same set of explanatory variables. The key explanatory variables here are involvement in the four kinds of formal organizations, the Communist Party, the Youth League, other mass organizations, and civic associations. Those are the same variables that were used in the correlation analysis presented in Table 4.

It should be noted here that membership in the various types of formal organizations does overlap. However, as shown in Table 5, actual survey data has clearly disproved the conventionally held belief of a widespread overlap especially between the Party and mass organizations. For example, given the tight control of mass organizations by the Communist Party, one might expect Party members to dominate the leadership of mass organizations, but the 1993-94 survey data shows that only about one third of mass organization leaders were Party members. For ordinary members, the proportion was even lower. To see whether overlapping membership would cause serious collinearity between variables of organizational involvement, Table 5 also shows the correlations between them, and the highest value is 0.2. Besides, the diagnostic statistics of collinearity for the regression models, such as the variance inflation factor, were far below the even most stringent cut-off values ever used in the literature.

(Table 5 about here)

There is another potential problem that the relationship between Party or Youth League membership and political participation may be endogenous. More specifically, the Party and to a much lesser degree the Youth League maintain strict screening criteria, which can include a citizen’s political participation, especially those through official channels (Bian, Shu, & Logan, 2001, p. 812). If Party membership is partially explained by political participation, the estimate of regression coefficients can become inconsistent. Since the cross-sectional data set contains no information on the time of induction into the Party, we can not directly deal with the problem through statistical procedures. Fortunately the survey question on political participation only asked about activities in the previous three years, and most of the Party members in the sample should have already been recruited more than three years before. We can find some support from two other surveys conducted in mainland China also in the early 1990s. In a four-county survey (Eldersveld et al., 1990) conducted in 1990, 91.3 per cent of the Party members joined the Party before 1987. In another survey (Logan & Bian, 1993) carried out in two Chinese cities in 1993, 91.7 per cent of the Party members had been inducted before 1990. Those studies do not represent all of China, but at least we can proceed with some empirically founded confidence

that the overwhelming majority of the Party members in the 1993-94 survey had joined the Party before 1990, that is, before they took part in those activities analyzed here.

Besides organizational involvement, the regression equations also include some demographic variables: age, gender, urban residency, and years of education. The dummy variables for different age groups are used to capture the possible nonlinear relationship between age and participation.

The third group of explanatory variables concerns personal grievances, which is one of the most important motivations for political action. It should play an especially important role in political participation in post-Mao China, where citizens are no longer mobilized or even forced to be involved in politics. The particularized forms of political participation nowadays, such as personal contacting and other activities, are clearly directed at solving personal or local problems. The question on political participation in the 1993-94 survey specifically asks:

“People sometimes run into personal or family problems where they need the leaders’ help, or they may disagree with a certain policy, or be dissatisfied with unfairness in the way a policy is applied. Or they may encounter cases of abuse of power by particular leader. When these things happen people may try to find ways to solve the problem. In the past three years did you use any of the following methods to express your views or resolve a problem you had encountered?”

Four variables are used to capture grievances, namely, family economic improvement, perception of cadre corruption, satisfaction with job, and relationship with supervisor. Shi (1997, p. 245) has found that current economic situation and political persecution interactively provoke adversarial activities. However, a priori citizens with personal grievances should not restrict themselves only to that category of actions, so the variables of grievances are included in all three regression equations.

Lastly, three variables measure the amount of information available to an individual, which should lower the cost of political participation. The first one is the average frequency of accessing radio, TV, and newspaper (see Appendix), and the second is a dichotomous variable derived from the question: “Last month, did you hear anything through the ‘grapevine’ [*xiaodao xiaoxi*] concerning economy, politics, or society?” The third variable measures how often the respondent talks about politics with others, ranging from 0 (“never”) to 3 (“often”), which should however also indicate his or her interest in politics. In a sense it might even be a more accurate indicator and more meaningful to compare across individuals than a self-reported degree of interest in politics is.

Table 4 has clearly demonstrated significant correlations between involvement in various formal organizations and social network, external efficacy, and interpersonal trust. Social network and trust are also often used to measure social capital. Theoretically the causal direction is clearly from organizational involvement to social capital, and it would seem that a two-stage least squares regression should be used. However, two factors led me to use simple ordinary least squares regression. First, social capital may lead to organizational involvement. Individuals may be more active in an organization because they brought social capital with them. If that’s the case, there could be collinearity in the regression, but dropping the measures of social capital and efficacy did not substantially affect the results. Second, some of the mechanisms through which organizational involvement facilitate political participation, such as political and civic skills and requests for action, are unobservable in the survey data. Therefore involvements are simply used as independent variables in the regression on political participation.

The regression results are shown in Table 6.

(Table 6 about here)

The regressions clearly demonstrate that organizational involvement does make a difference, partially confirming the organizational gaps in political participation shown in Table 1. However, it is the significant differences between various formal organizations and the three types of participatory activities that are more important and more intriguing. Involvement in the Party or the Youth League affects political participation through official channels in the expected direction, although in the latter case the coefficient is not statistically significant. Involvement in the Party or the League provides more opportunities of cronyism, although their members are also repeatedly admonished not to engage in such activities, and the regression result suggests that those opposite effects have probably cancelled each other out for Party members but not in the Youth League. What is more interesting is that the hypothesized deterrence or coercive effects of Party or League involvement on unconventional political participation never materialize. On the contrary, the coefficients even show a small but significant positive effect on participation through unconventional means, which suggests that those organizations are less effective in constraining activities than they are intended to be. One probable explanation is that the Party or League membership can be counted on as an additional shield in case of trouble. Even if legal action is brought on the perpetrator, expulsion from the Party or League normally leads to a less severe criminal or administrative punishment. Another possible reason is that the young people in the League may have other ways of connecting to each other than what is observable from this survey data that promote participatory actions.

The benefits in official access and information associated with involvement in the mass organizations do translate into a positive impact on participation through official channels, although the effect seems to be relatively small and actually not significant at the $p < 0.01$ level. The analysis here also suggests that involvement in mass organizations does not significantly promote or restrain cronyism or unconventional participation.

The only type of formal organization that has consistently significant and positive “internal effect” across all three kinds of participation is civic associations. Admittedly the members of civic associations in contemporary China do have more need for political action because of the sometimes precarious status of their organizations and the necessary informal negotiations with the Party-state (Saich, 2000), but that is certainly far from the whole story. Being “embedded” to various degrees in the Party state brings about vertical connections similar to those that benefit the Party or mass organizations. More importantly, compared with other organizations civic associations are distinct in their transcending the work unit system and bringing together people with divergent background. There is no denying that both the workplace and organizations promote social interaction, but it is the civic associations that are better able to add to what is already happening in the workplace and to stimulate political participation.

Most of the interaction terms have negative coefficient, and only the interaction between mass organizations and civic associations is consistently significant across all three regression equations. That indicates being concurrent members does not add to the combined effects from respective memberships and can even subtract from the additive impacts of mass organizations and of civic associations.

There are other interesting findings from the analyses. For instance, everything else being equal female participation through official channels lags behind males, which parallels the finding in the Chinese countryside by Jennings (1998, p. 962) and reflects the traditional role assigned to women in China. However, the gender gap disappears in cronyism or unconventional participation. Also, in Table 4 interpersonal trust correlates only with involvement in the Party or

League, and in Table 6 it is negatively associated with cronyism. The impact of social trust on political participation and how organizational involvement influences that mechanism in the context of mainland China is a very interesting subject yet an extensive discussion would be beyond the scope of this paper.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to the growing literature on political participation and organizational involvement by looking specifically at the “internal effect” of formal organizations on participatory activities. First of all, there clearly exist organizational gaps in political participation in mainland China. However, when other factors are controlled for, involvement in civic associations is the only consistently significant correlate of political participation across the board. The Party-state’s constraints at the macro-level on the civic associations are not translated into constraints on the activities of individual members in pursuing their interest. It seems that, besides focusing on the debates over whether those associations constitute civil society or social corporatism in contemporary China, we should also pay some attention to their participatory consequences. Involvement in civic associations tends to be more selective and active, and by transcending the boundaries of the administrative or work unit system they nurture interaction between people from diverse social economic background and thus can lower the cost of and provide resources for political participation.

At the time when the 1993-94 survey was conducted, most of the civic associations had been in operation for barely a decade, but the data analyses demonstrate that these young and severely constrained organizations were already playing an important role in fostering participatory activities. Today after a decade of development, Chinese civic associations have definitely grown more numerous, more mature, and more visible in all aspects of social, economic, and even political life. It is unclear (and indeed unlikely) that they are now directly involved at the organizational level in the growing number of protests in urban and rural areas, although there is anecdotal evidence that some of them, such as the homeowners associations, do seem to play a role. The findings here suggest that members of civic associations tend to be more active in all types of participatory acts, regardless of the systematic impact of those organizations on politics. For instance, under a Leninist regime the many environmental NGOs in mainland China can never form a legitimate Green Party, but they can greatly facilitate their members’ involvement in the wider political process that may or may not be through those environmental groups. It should also be qualified that the rising role of civic association members especially in low politics will not in itself necessarily lead to greater democracy. According to the findings here their members are already more active in cronyism and it is not clear whether or how much they can gain from democratization or greater rule of law. The potential benefit of a civil society may still depend on future reforms of the political and legal system in China.

Appendix

Dependent Variables

Participation through official channels is the sum of the following variables, each ranging from 0 (“never”) to 4 (“often”).

1. express opinions directly to a [grassroots] leader;
2. ask other leaders in the same unit to intervene;
3. complain to the higher authorities through the bureaucratic hierarchy;
4. complain through various political organizations;
5. complain through deputies to the People's Congress;
6. complain through the trade union or farmers' association;
7. write letter to appropriate government office;
8. write letter to newspaper;
9. report the problem to a complaint bureau at some level.

Participation through cronyism is the sum of the following variables, each ranging from 0 (“never”) to 4 (“often”).

1. seek help from those who could persuade the [grassroots] leader;
2. seek help from the official's friends;
3. send gift or invite leader to dinner.

Participation through unconventional means is the sum of the following variables, each ranging from 0 (“never”) to 4 (“often”).

1. carry out a work slowdown;
2. organize colleagues to resist;
3. harass the leader at his or her home;
4. sue the person in court;
5. demonstration or sit-in;

Explanatory Variables

Media exposure is the average frequency of the following activities, each ranging from 0 (“never”) to 3 (“almost every day”).

1. listen to news broadcast on domestic radio last week;
2. listen to news broadcast on foreign radio last week;
3. watch television news last week;
4. read newspaper last week.

External efficacy is the average of the following variables, each ranging from 1 (“strongly agree”) to 4 (“strongly disagree”).

1. In our unit/ village people like me have no say.
2. Leaders in our unit/ village don't care about what people like me think.
3. People like me have no say in government decision making.
4. My connections are not as good as others' so it's hard for me to succeed.

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Table 1: Organizational Gap in Political Participation

Percentage of respondents who had “occasionally,” “sometimes,” or “often” participated in each activity	Whole sample	Members of			
		Communist Party	Youth League	Trade union or women’s federation	Civic association
Total N	3296	226	411	642	103
express opinions to leader	39.9%	57.1%	42.8%	49.2%	71.8%
ask other leader to intervene	15.1%	26.7%	19.3%	20.0%	38.8%
ask who can persuade leader	11.8%	18.1%	20.2%	16.0%	25.2%
through hierarchy	12.7%	33.3%	14.4%	15.3%	25.2%
through organizations	2.3%	10.2%	5.1%	2.8%	7.8%
through deputies to congress	2.7%	11.1%	2.2%	2.6%	8.7%
through trade union/ association	2.6%	8.0%	2.9%	8.4%	7.8%
write to government office	3.7%	6.6%	4.9%	5.8%	9.7%
write letter to newspaper	0.8%	1.3%	2.7%	2.0%	6.9%
report to complaint bureau	1.3%	3.1%	1.0%	1.6%	1.9%
help from official's friends	5.9%	8.0%	11.9%	6.1%	11.8%
carry out a work slowdown	2.2%	3.1%	5.6%	2.2%	5.9%
organize colleagues to resist	3.6%	5.8%	7.5%	4.0%	11.7%
harass the leader at home	1.4%	2.6%	1.5%	1.7%	3.9%
sue the person in court	1.3%	1.8%	0.5%	1.1%	1.0%
demonstration or sit-in	0.2%	0.9%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%
refuse to pay tax	2.0%	1.3%	1.5%	0.3%	4.9%
gifts or invite to dinner	4.1%	5.3%	9.0%	4.7%	14.7%

Note: Please see the Appendix for fuller descriptions of the activities.

Data source: Shi, Tianjian et al., the mainland portion of the Project on Political Participation and Political Culture in Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, 1993-94. N = 3296, weighted.

Table 2: Standard Deviations of Age, Education, and Income within Different Organizations

Members of	N	Standard deviation of		
		Age (year)	Education (year)	Income (yuan)
Communist Party	226	13	4.5	5898
Youth League	411	3	2.4	5985
Mass organizations	642	14	4.1	8049
Civic associations	103	16	4.3	9967

Data source: Shi, Tianjian et al., the mainland portion of the Project on Political Participation and Political Culture in Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, 1993-94. N = 3296, weighted.

Table 3: Differences between Formal Organizations

	Communist Party	Youth League	Mass Organizations	Civic Associations
Membership induction	application and recruitment	application and recruitment	automatic on employment	voluntary
Member involvement	active	active	passive	active
Organization	hierarchical and compartmentized	hierarchical and compartmentized	hierarchical and compartmentized	spanning and bridging
Constraint on activities	strong	strong	strong	weak
Hypothesized impact on political participation				
Official channels	positive	positive	positive	positive
Cronyism	unclear	unclear	unclear	positive
Unconventional means	negative	negative	negative	positive

Table 4: Correlations with Organizational Involvement

Kendall's tau-c statistic (standard error in parentheses)	Involvement in			
	Communist Party	Communist Youth League	Mass organizations	civic associations
I have good relations and know what's going on in my locality/ unit.	0.026** (0.007)	-0.002 (0.009)	0.028* (0.011)	0.017* (0.007)
In our unit/ village people like me have no say	-0.065** (0.008)	-0.036** (0.009)	-0.033** (0.011)	-0.018** (0.007)
Leaders in our unit/ village don't care about what people like me think.	-0.043** (0.008)	-0.030** (0.009)	-0.021 (0.011)	-0.024** (0.007)
People like me have no say in government decision making.	-0.042** (0.007)	-0.033** (0.010)	-0.029* (0.011)	-0.017* (0.007)
My connections are not as good as others' so it's hard for me to succeed.	-0.027** (0.007)	-0.096** (0.010)	-0.054** (0.011)	-0.032** (0.007)
Generally speaking most people can be trusted	0.025** (0.009)	0.043** (0.012)	-0.004 (0.014)	0.005 (0.006)

Note: * indicates $p < 0.05$ and ** indicates $p < 0.01$.

Data source: Shi, Tianjian et al., the mainland portion of the Project on Political Participation and Political Culture in Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, 1993-94. N = 3296, weighted.

Table 5: Overlap and Correlation between Organizational Involvements

percentages within each of the row categories		Communist Party		Youth League	
		leaders	members	leaders	members
Mass organization	leaders	23.5%	11.3%	8.6%	2.6%
	members	5.5%	6.5%	6.3%	15.4%
Civic association members		14.7%	6.9%	12.6%	9.7%
Correlation between variables of organizational involvement		Communist Party	Youth League	Mass organizations	Civic associations
Communist Party		1.000			
Youth League		-0.091	1.000		
Mass organizations		0.224	0.108	1.000	
Civic associations		0.117	0.079	0.146	1.000

Data source: Shi, Tianjian et al., the mainland portion of the Project on Political Participation and Political Culture in Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, 1993-94. N = 3296, weighted.

Table 6: Multivariate Analyses of Political Participation

Participatory activities	Official channels		Cronyism		Unconventional means	
	Coefficient.	S. E.	Coefficient.	S. E.	Coefficient.	S. E.
Involvement in the Party	1.013**	0.153	0.080	0.066	0.109**	0.040
Involvement in the Youth League	0.135	0.125	0.117*	0.054	0.103**	0.033
Involvement in mass org.	0.307*	0.127	-0.016	0.055	-0.043	0.033
Involvement in civic association	1.899**	0.364	1.042**	0.157	0.349**	0.095
Party * mass organization	-0.202	0.148	0.022	0.064	-0.083*	0.039
Party * civic association	-0.503	0.373	-0.105	0.161	-0.023	0.097
Mass organization * civic assoc.	-0.917*	0.385	-0.835**	0.166	-0.258*	0.100
Social network	0.067	0.096	0.050	0.041	0.029	0.025
External efficacy	-0.069	0.151	-0.120	0.065	-0.023	0.039
Interpersonal trust	-0.043	0.103	-0.090*	0.044	0.022	0.027
Age below 21	-0.876**	0.213	-0.101	0.092	-0.142*	0.056
Age 21-29	-0.222	0.161	0.122	0.070	-0.006	0.042
Age 30-39	-0.056	0.161	0.121	0.070	-0.035	0.042
Age 40-49	base		base		base	
Age 50-59	0.001	0.203	0.020	0.088	-0.085	0.053
Age 60-69	0.261	0.238	0.156	0.103	-0.065	0.062
Age above 69	-0.076	0.383	0.004	0.165	0.002	0.100
Female	-0.218*	0.106	0.053	0.046	-0.021	0.028
Size of town	-0.187**	0.070	-0.042	0.030	-0.014	0.018
Education by years	0.016	0.018	0.003	0.008	0.007	0.005
Economic improvement	-0.196*	0.081	-0.018	0.035	-0.064**	0.021
Perceived corruption	0.071	0.061	0.053*	0.026	0.059**	0.016
Satisfaction with job	-0.174*	0.080	-0.098**	0.034	-0.089**	0.021
Relationship with supervisor	-0.451**	0.107	0.006	0.046	-0.091**	0.028
Media exposure	0.118	0.097	0.063	0.042	0.027	0.025
Heard gossips	0.393**	0.117	0.208**	0.051	0.028	0.031
Talked about politics	0.236**	0.066	0.155**	0.028	0.061**	0.017
(constant)	3.882**	0.521	0.670**	0.225	0.873**	0.136
R square	0.12		0.09		0.08	

Note: “*” in the name of explanatory variables indicates interaction terms. All coefficients are unstandardized, with * indicating $p < 0.05$ and ** $p < 0.01$.

Data source: Shi, Tianjian et al., the mainland portion of the Project on Political Participation and Political Culture in Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, 1993-94. N = 3296, weighted.