

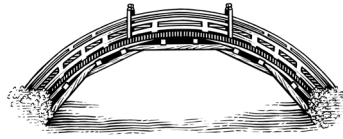
BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE

Lynette H. Ong's

*Outsourcing Repression:
Everyday State Power in Contemporary China*

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Manfred Elfstrom

Yao Li

Jean Christopher Mittelstaedt

Lynette H. Ong

China's Informal Tools of Grassroots Control

Manfred Elfstrom

At the time of writing, young Chinese are gathering in cities across China, as well as on university campuses around the world, to protest their country's harsh "zero-Covid" policy. And they are raising demands that are bracingly political, including calls for freedom of speech, for an end to concentration camps for Uighurs, and for Chinese leader Xi Jinping to step down.

With this historic upsurge seizing our attention, it is worth remembering that protests are actually extremely common in China but normally take a less overtly political form. Farmers clash with police over water pollution. Workers routinely strike over low wages. Homeowners demand compensation when city redevelopment projects threaten their apartments.

In her excellent new book, *Outsourcing Repression: Everyday State Power in Contemporary China*, Lynette H. Ong examines the "everyday state power" deployed to contain these instances of what James C. Scott has called "everyday resistance." Focusing on conflicts related to urbanization, in particular, Ong theorizes two approaches used by local authorities: handing violence off to thugs-for-hire in an effort at ensuring deniability, and relying on volunteer brokers with different degrees of independence from the state to use personal relationships to "mobilize the masses" into supporting, or at least acquiescing to, government plans. Although one of these approaches is coercive and the other is largely persuasive, they both involve exercising power "via society itself" (p. 5).

Ong's volume adds to a growing body of work that explores the great variety of Chinese actors either on the far fringes of the state or in a gray zone between state and society that help the government realize its objectives.¹ Anyone who has conducted research or done business or worked

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¹ This literature also includes Daniel Mattingly's recent book *The Art of Political Control in China* on how village civil society groups like lineage associations have facilitated the expropriation of farmers' land, Benjamin Read's and Jennifer Pan's research on city neighborhood committees, and scholarship by Timothy Hildebrandt and others on how nongovernmental organizations that work on environmental concerns, AIDS, and LBGTQIA+ issues have adapted to changing official priorities.

with civil society in China will recognize the importance of the particular actors Ong studies. Many scholars conducting fieldwork in the country will have suspected that they are being followed by hired muscle. And foreign investors and nonprofit managers will be familiar with the manner in which entrepreneurial individuals frequently step forward to act as brokers between them and the state, easing the experience for both these perplexed outsiders and officials alike.

It is thus strange that a book like *Outsourcing Repression* that focuses on thugs and brokers has not been written before. The likely reason for this oversight is that obtaining systematic data on “everyday state power” is incredibly difficult. Ong has expended considerable effort in assembling an impressive array of sources. She draws principally on fieldwork conducted in eight cities in China between 2011 and 2017, and her fieldwork does not take the form of one-off encounters but rather repeated interviews with people participating in the processes she describes: angry villagers, profit-oriented *huangniu* (“cattle”) who bargain for higher compensation for the villagers and thereby pacify them, property lawyers, and local officials. Ong balances this approach with quantitative analysis using an original dataset that she assembled of over two thousand cases of land seizures and demolitions between the mid-1990s and the second decade of the 21st century.

The quantitative analysis yields complicated results, but it shows that relying on arms-length coercers can often be beneficial for authorities. Ong finds that thugs are (unsurprisingly) more likely to disrupt, injure, and kill people with land or housing complaints, compared to state security forces (pp. 59–62). However, the participation of thugs in a conflict decreases the odds of protesting and petitioning by citizens significantly. If control variables are held at their means, the direct involvement of government officials, by contrast, increases protest. And the presence of officials also encourages the legal mobilization of aggrieved people (pp. 62–68).

Ong’s study of the Chinese government’s “infrastructural” power and the role of brokers involves content analysis of the language of central and municipal government regulations on land-taking and demolitions, in-depth interviews, and the study of correlations between different government actions and citizen reactions using the same data as the analysis of the thugs versus government officials. The statistics here suggest that “thought work” and financial rewards are most effective at winning compliance (pp. 124–27). But Ong’s interviews offer the most interesting observations. The people she speaks with tell fascinating stories of how communities are rallied to the side of development projects and then intense group pressure is brought to

bear on holdouts (pp. 133–42). Even more intriguing are her descriptions of the *huangniu* that set up shop right next to demolition offices and ply their bargaining services (pp. 147–52). For villagers and officials trying to reach (corrupt) compromises, these individuals play a strange but crucial role in providing information, building trust, and avoiding conflict.


Whether the “everyday state power” amounts to a conscious plan on the part of the Chinese government as a whole can be debated. In places, Ong suggests this is indeed the case, as when she writes about mobilizing the masses via brokers: “This ingenious state strategy...effectively amounts to outsourcing repression to society while reaping the benefits of successful implementation” (p. 139). But does this really represent an “ingenious state strategy” or, instead, spontaneous innovation by local officials, or even a set of tactics shared horizontally and confidentially by subnational governments without Beijing’s approval? The book’s analysis of regulations shows a clear difference in the professed priorities of the different levels of the state, with the center prioritizing persuasion (p. 121). And in the conclusion, Ong discusses at length Xi Jinping’s anti-mafia campaign that has targeted thugs-for-hire along with other criminals (pp. 176–79). As in so many areas of Chinese politics, the interests of people at the lower rungs of government may diverge sharply from those of their superiors.

The book also notes that “everyday state power” does not always function as intended by even local authorities. In particular, the principal-agent relationship between officials and thugs can break down and the thugs may then begin to set the terms. Or lawless agents can simply go too far. If Ong’s statistics show an advantage for authorities by relying on ruffians to strong-arm villagers, her case studies tend to capture the backlash this tactic can draw at times. For instance, in Shanghai, she shows how when an arson attack resulted in the deaths of an elderly couple, locals that were resisting the razing of their property hardened their struggle (pp. 78–80). In Kunming, thugs enraged villagers enough that the latter attacked the former with fire and bricks, resulting in multiple injuries and arrests (pp. 80–87). Even if on average nonstate violence serves local governments, one wonders whether big flare-ups like these—whatever their number—outweigh the gains accrued to political elites.

Stories like those in Ong’s book also indicate that while using violent and nonviolent nonstate agents may be integral to how the Chinese state functions at its lower levels at present, it is not necessarily a stable form of rule. Indeed, in the final section of the book, she discusses how reliance on thugs-for-hire persisted in South Korea after democratization but was

reduced, and the relationship between these elements and authorities became more remote, while in democratic India, violent *goondas* and upper-caste brokers have ended up “so powerful that the state must concede certain authorities in exchange for their...support and capacity to facilitate bargaining with society” (p. 167–68). Such comparative cases suggest that either nonstate agents will become further marginalized or that they will succeed in boxing in the state.

Authorities are combating the current wave of Covid-related unrest in China using massive deployments of security personnel as well as high-tech tools, such as surveillance of conversations on apps and tracking phone locations. In a recent article in *Foreign Policy*, Ong suggests that the regime is being forced to move beyond its dependence on “trusted social actors” to maintain control and crack down on the urban middle class in a more direct manner.²

If China is entering an era of sharper, more politicized contention—something that is by no means certain but seems quite possible—then it will bear watching how the government’s response evolves. *Outsourcing Repression* offers essential insights in this regard. The book may not tell us how exactly authorities will act going forward, but it expertly captures the trade-offs of the decisions they will be forced to make, both for themselves and for their citizens. 

² Lynette H. Ong, “China’s Massive Protests Are the End of a Once-Trusted Governance Model,” *Foreign Policy*, November 28, 2022  <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/28/china-protests-end-governance-model-mobilizing-masses>.

Exposing Repression Behind the Scenes

Yao Li

In the post–Cold War era, incumbents in authoritarian regimes have increased their toolkit for repression. In addition to blatant, forceful forms of repression (such as making mass arrests and shooting protesters), less visible, more sophisticated means of coercion have become vital components of a regime’s repertoire to stifle unrest. Joining a burgeoning literature on authoritarian repression, Lynette H. Ong’s book *Outsourcing Repression: Everyday State Power in Contemporary China* presents a rigorous account of how the Chinese state takes advantage of nonstate actors to impose violent and nonviolent methods of social control. In particular, the book elaborates on how authorities hire private agents (e.g., thugs and gangsters) and rely on grassroots brokers (including local elders and members of urban residents’ committees) to neutralize social protests against land appropriation and housing demolition in urban and rural China. *Outsourcing Repression* is highly relevant for anyone seeking to understand state repression, urbanization, and Chinese politics.

Regarding violent acts carried out by thugs-for-hire, Ong describes these thugs’ typical profile and the conditions under which they operate. She argues that such everyday repression is a lower-cost strategy that can minimize the likelihood of social protest and violent backlash—as long as any violence remains low-intensity, severe casualties or significant confrontations do not result, and no overt government complicity is involved. Yet, once any of these conditions fails to be satisfied, thugs-for-hire are no longer a low-cost repressive measure but a liability to the hiring authority. This paves the way for the state to increasingly turn to brokers and nonviolent tactics to resolve conflicts in demolition projects.

These brokers are classified into three types (political, social, and economic), depending on the sources of their brokerage—whether their power or legitimacy stems from their state or quasi-state status, their social capital, or their role in bridging information asymmetry between state and society.

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Correspondingly, these brokers play varying roles in mobilizing the masses, extracting compliance, and lowering the cost of state repression. For instance, with the help of social capital and emotional mobilization, social brokers employ persuasion to neutralize resistance to demolitions; in this sense, the brokers' social standing helps legitimate their actions and decrease the chance of backlash. Economic brokers (or *huangniu*), by contrast, bridge negotiations between the state and disgruntled residents by facilitating the matching of residents' demands with supplies of special favors by officials. These brokers expedite reaching a deal between the two parties in which official compensation is higher than that mandated by government policy or what residents are normally granted.

Through nearly ten years of multi-site field research in China, spanning from the last year of the Hu-Wen era to the Xi administration, Ong has captured regional and temporal variations in state repressive actions and contention in the country. As she illustrates, incidents of forced evictions by thuggish violence have waned over time and become less prevalent in urban areas than in rural ones. In parallel, the frequency of persuasion and other nonviolent tactics being deployed has taken on increased prominence since 2011, and they are more prevalent in metropolitan areas than in smaller inland cities. Revealing changes across region and time indeed contribute to a dynamic and sophisticated narrative of state repression in demolitions. That said, the picture would be even more complicated by a systematic examination of social factors that may impact the deployment of outsourced repression and strategies for mobilizing the masses. These factors could include types of communities, forms of resistance (i.e., collective vs. individualized resistance), social groups with different resources, and the role of media and public attention. For instance, are inhabitants on the margins of urban areas more likely to be victims of everyday repression and be forcefully evicted by thugs-for-hire than those in urban centers? Do the resources and capital that citizens possess affect the state's choice of repression tactics? Does media or public attention help reduce the use of outsourced repression but boost that of persuasion or other nonviolent tactics?

As outsourcing repression and mobilizing the masses have come to the fore in land appropriation and housing demolitions, it would have been fascinating to know what agency citizens have and their reactions to the state's strategy. Have some disgruntled residents designed tactics and made efforts to counter outsourced repressive acts? Have they seen opportunities and even taken advantage of the brokers? Ong discusses that some residents

turn to the economic brokers to reach illegal agreements with local officials to obtain extra compensation—payouts higher than what the government initially budgeted. As a result, the government becomes the loser. While the book treats the state’s use of economic brokers as a form of “repression,” could citizens navigating the broker game and thereby achieving higher payouts be interpreted as a tactical reaction or even “resistance” (or a “weapon of the weak,” to use James C. Scott’s term) to state policy?

Beyond land grabs and housing demolitions, Ong extends her findings on the state’s strong mobilization capacity of political and social brokers to explain China’s successful handling of the Covid-19 pandemic as of 2021. The book was completed in 2021 when China’s Covid-19 policies were claimed as a victory. Nonetheless, things quickly turned sour in 2022 when acute and enormous problems were exposed in the lockdowns in Shanghai, Xi’an, Urumqi, among other places in China. Although of course the author could not foretell the future, it would have been interesting in this sense to see a discussion about the limits of relying on political and social brokers in building the state’s mobilizational capacity.

In addition to China, Ong shows that her thesis of outsourcing repression also applies to other countries. This is exemplified in the United States’ contracting of private security companies to fight the “war on terror,” which included torturing and extracting confessions from prisoners. Moreover, violent, criminalized demolitions were seen in South Korea during its high-growth, authoritarian era and are still seen in India today, though variations exist between these cases and China’s. In this sense, the book has demonstrated that democracy does not negate the state’s desire to outsource violence or mobilization.

To sum up, this informative and empirically rich book convincingly elaborates on how and why the Chinese state takes advantage of third parties in coercing and mobilizing the masses to enforce the state’s agenda. *Outsourcing Repression* offers much of interest to scholars and practitioners involved with social movements, development, civil society, and authoritarian politics. ◆

Puppets or Agents? “Thugs-for-Hire” and Brokers between State and Society

Jean Christopher Mittelstaedt

It is difficult to read Lynette H. Ong’s *Outsourcing Repression: Everyday State Power in Contemporary China* and not be constantly reminded of China’s pandemic response, in which the Chinese party-state implemented often harsh and controversial lockdowns. The local nature of the lockdowns, however, allowed the top leadership to distance itself from excesses, with Xi Jinping early in the pandemic even blaming “some localities” for misimplementation and “criminal acts.”¹ But this tactic is not only a privilege of the central government. The local party-state also deploys third-party agents to shield itself from blame for oftentimes crude implementation and to enhance its capacity. *Outsourcing Repression*, based on Ong’s fieldwork conducted before the Covid-19 outbreak, exposes these mechanisms used by the local party-states and reveals deeper underlying structures in their operations. The book, therefore, is timely, examining how the government can marshal third-party agents to implement often unpopular policies and exact compliance from the citizenry.

In the book, Ong distinguishes between “thugs-for-hire” and “brokers” that together constitute “everyday state power” (p. 3), which she defines as “the state’s exercise of power *through* society, or via society itself” (p. 5). As she notes, the categories are “conceptually distinct and by and large mutually exclusive” (p. 99). Thugs-for-hire use violent coercion (p. 31) to impose the party-state’s will, thereby representing the “stick” that, in the ideal case, lends plausible deniability to the state. “Brokers,” on the other hand, are largely nonviolent (p. 99), use emotional mobilization to persuade and psychologically coerce participants, and are “legitimizing vehicles of state repression” (p. 33). Their success hinges on “legitimacy, or legitimation by the actor who persuades” (p. 36). While this might augment state

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¹ Xi Jinping, “Quanmian tigao yifa fangkong yifa zhili nengli jianquan guojia gonggong weisheng yingji guanli tixi” [Comprehensively Enhance the Ability for Law-Based Pandemic Prevention and Control Work and Law-Based Governance, Improve the National Public Health Emergency Management System] (speech at the Twelfth Meeting of the Central Comprehensively Deepening Reform Committee on February 14, 2020), reprinted in *Quishi*, May 2020 ≈ http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2020-02/29/c_1125641632.htm.

power and capacity, these mechanisms also have the potential to subvert and undermine it, for example if a local government becomes too closely associated with hired thugs or the thugs grow “too powerful” (p. 86).

Outsourcing Repression has several notable strengths. First, it is based on a thorough, empirical study involving 237 interviews conducted over a decade in both China and India. This provides a wealth of data for the book’s detailed and compelling case studies. Second, the book makes significant theoretical contributions to the debate on the relationship between state and society and offers valuable insights into state capacity. Last, the book is a valuable addition to the field of comparative politics, with a final chapter comparing the findings on China with the cases of South Korea and India. Overall, the book’s framework and conclusions are thought-provoking and will stimulate discussions on the changing roles of third-party agents between the state and the public.

If I were to pinpoint any missed opportunities—or better, perhaps—follow-up questions that would require some elaboration, they would be the following. First, from an institutional perspective, the party does not seem to play a massive role. While Ong writes that “an overwhelming majority of, but not all, political brokers are grassroots party cadres or members of the rank and file” (p. 28), it would be interesting to delve deeper into the role of the party’s institutions in this dynamic. Does the difference between party and state disappear at the grassroots level, with both being subsumed under the concept of “local leaders” who use brokers and thugs to exert their influence? How does the strengthening of the party under Xi Jinping affect the type of brokers being used and what are the consequences of the party’s increased leverage over its own members? However, this is only a relatively minor point. A second, more important, issue is that while the focus is on third-party actors, they are mostly seen as being wedged in between the state, who manipulates and puppeteers them (very much as the front cover suggests), and the people at the receiving end. This approach ignores the agency of these actors and their potential for dynamic relationships with the state. It would have been valuable to explore these agents as conscious actors in the state-society dynamic, rather than merely as subordinated to the party-state.

Third, the state-society framing of the issue at hand has significant consequences for the actions of third-party agents. In particular, their actions fall on the spectrum of repression and resistance. While the case is relatively clear-cut with thugs (whose main function is coercion), the same is not necessarily true for brokers. As Ong writes, the function of brokers

for the state is to “enable the state to govern more effectively, implement challenging policies, and resolve conflicts via proxy” (p. 99). While it is certainly true that “persuasion can have the intended and actual effect of coerced consent” (p. 36), and that “behind-the-scenes arm-twisting and psychological pressure, though invisible, are substantively coercive” (p. 114), their repressive function seems to be mostly derived from the context in which they are deployed—aiding housing demolitions—rather than inherently coercive (as thugs seem to be). In other words, depending on the shifting aims of the party-state, brokers—along with volunteers, local governments, and other agents—could also be used to support the broadening of participation or the provision of services. Although some may dismiss initiatives such as grassroots legislative contact points or the rhetoric of “whole-process people’s democracy” as empty, Michael Lipsky’s contention that “what to some are the highest reaches of the welfare state are to others the furthest extension of social control” seems applicable here.² In light of this, framing the role of brokers as necessarily repressive within the state-society relationship may be a bit far-fetched. Instead, their function perhaps may be more accurately understood as a complex and potentially contested aspect of the broader state-society dynamic.

A fourth point worth mentioning is the need for further elaboration on the relationship between third-party actors and the state. While Ong does an excellent job explaining the role of these actors in repressing the people and mobilizing the masses, it remains somewhat unclear how they are integrated with the local party-state. The use of third-party agents, as Ong notes, can be a double-edged sword that, if used improperly, can undermine the local government. But it is not entirely clear how the party-state tries to address this potential problem. Are they being embedded in the party-state’s regulatory framework? What processes and coordinating mechanisms are in place to handle them? The setup would then also impact what and how brokers are deployed.

Lastly, the use of thugs-for-hire and brokers in China raises questions about their role in social governance. These actors are often used to carry out tasks that may be considered controversial or illegal, and their position within the political system appears to be constantly shifting based on the local government’s goals, resource availability, and their own agency. This poses questions about their role in different contexts. For example, their

² Michael Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2010), 11.

involvement in housing demolitions may require a different approach than their involvement in propagating the results of a party congress or providing public services. Their position may be conflicted, variable, and highly dynamic, and their actions may require constant recalibration and repositioning based on the party's assessments of the situation, shifting aims and foci, and the scarcity of resources. As Ong argued in a recent *Foreign Policy* essay, China's "zero-Covid" policy and recent protests "signal the end of the governance model that has served China so well for decades," and the Chinese Communist Party will "have to rely on outright coercive measures, if not brute force, to crack down on dissent."³ However, scaling back the use of thugs-for-hire and brokers and their repressive functions does not necessarily mean their future irrelevance, rather it might suggest their re-evaluation and rearrangement. Accordingly, because these actors are a mechanism of social governance, the local party-state can redeploy them to achieve other aims (whatever they may be). The decline of this model then raises questions about the model's very existence and whether it is not better understood as a blending of various actors that are deployed in different ways to achieve often conflicting and paradoxical goals.

Based on the wealth of evidence presented, I believe Ong's arguments could have been more comprehensive by challenging the artificial and often unhelpful state-versus-society framework. But regardless of these (hopefully not too unfair) points mentioned, it is clear that *Outsourcing Repression* is an extremely valuable contribution to the field. Ong provides a thorough examination of the ways in which the Chinese state uses third-party actors to carry out repression and offers insights into the implications of this phenomenon for both state and society. As such, the book is a must-read for anyone interested in repression, the intersection of state and society, policy implementation, and Chinese politics in general. ♦

³ Lynette H. Ong, "China's Massive Protests Are the End of a Once-Trusted Governance Model," *Foreign Policy*, November 28, 2022 ≈ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/28/china-protests-end-governance-model-mobilizing-masses>.

Author's Response: A New Research Agenda on Blurring State-Society Boundaries and "Reimagining State Power" in China?

Lynette H. Ong

The three review essays written for this roundtable by Manfred Elfstrom, Yao Li, and Jean Christopher Mittelstaedt, respectively, suggest that the primary objective I have undertaken in this book project has been met. My main goal with *Outsourcing Repression: Everyday State Power in Contemporary China* was to stimulate a debate in China studies and the discipline at large about the outsized role of nonstate actors in state pursuits that has been hitherto generally neglected in the received wisdom. From my vantage point, states' outsourcing of repression to nonstate actors has obvious implications for how we think about state-society relations and state power, how a state imposes its will on society, and how society resists state encroachment. My hope is that this signals the beginning of a new research agenda on blurring state-society boundaries and "reimagining state power."

Let me first summarize the common threads of the reviews, before turning to the reviewers' different perspectives. The reviewers make three major points that highlight the strengths of the book. First, they note the book's empirical richness, which involved 237 interviews conducted over a decade in both China and India. In Elfstrom's words, the "fieldwork does not take the form of one-off encounters but rather repeated interviews with people participating in the processes [Ong] describes: angry villagers, profit-oriented *huangniu* ('cattle') ... property lawyers, and local officials." In a sense, the empirical phenomena I described in the book are nothing new; they have long been in existence. It is, however, the assembling of systematic data to document the everyday roles of nonstate actors, both violent and nonviolent, routinely mobilized by the Chinese state for its pursuits that was the most challenging. I triangulated data from three different sources: qualitative interviews from field research, an original event dataset containing more than two thousand observations, and content analysis of government policy documents. Collectively, the data span from

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the mid-1990s (capturing protest events) through to 2019, just before the Covid-19 pandemic. The writing took place in 2020, which allowed me to incorporate some observations about China's experience, especially its earlier success, in handling the public health crisis that arose with the Covid-19 pandemic.

Second, the reviewers commend the book's theoretical contributions to the debate on state-society relations and state power. State use of thugs-for-hire and mobilization of grassroots brokers who apply "thought work" are effective in eliciting citizens' compliance while minimizing the costs of backlash. Mobilization of these nonstate actors allows the state to augment its "everyday state power," as demonstrated in the case study descriptions of the influential brokers and community members rallied to apply intense social pressure on citizens who oppose housing demolition projects and to convince these individuals to concede to state edicts. The same could be said about the profit-oriented economic broker who mediates conflicts between the state and aggrieved citizens to ultimately produce compliance with the state, albeit through corrupt transactions.

Third, the reviewers similarly note the book's insights on comparative politics by bringing into dialogue the functions of nonstate actors in the implementation of everyday state policies in China and other country contexts, such as in India and pre- and post-democratized South Korea, which are explored in the comparative chapter. The comparative country cases suggest that the book's arguments and findings are not restricted to autocracies. Democracies can similarly mobilize violent and nonviolent nonstate actors to facilitate the implementation of challenging policies, subject to some conditions.

The reviewers agree less on how the arguments could be clarified and the book improved, and I will address their critiques in turn. All three reviewers probe the agency of the nonstate actors—whether they always follow state instructions or if they can act of their own volition. This is an important question that has bearing on the validity of the arguments and the extent to which such arguments apply in other country contexts. Rather than "ignoring" nonstate agency, as Mittelstaedt suggests, I tackled it head-on in chapter 1, where I lay out the scope conditions. The arguments hinge on the complicity of the proxies or nonstate actors that depend on (a) the power of the state over these nonstate actors, which determines the degree to which the state can mobilize them and dictate their behavior (i.e., the tightness of the principal-agent relationship), and (b) normative beliefs held by the nonstate actors that they are genuinely

contributing to the public good when they participate as state proxies. Both scope conditions are largely met in China. In other words, the proxies do have considerable agency of their own, but they are more likely to follow the state's diktats in China than in other countries.

Thugs-for-hire, who are untrained violent agents, may have the propensity to deploy excessive and undisciplined violence on their subjects. In chapter 3, I illustrate that, on average, the deployment of thugs is less likely to provoke citizen backlash compared to government officials or the police. However, as the detailed case studies in chapter 4 demonstrate, when excessive violence is applied—violence above and beyond what is necessary to get the job done—and results in serious casualties such as deaths, government accountability ensues. In other words, agency problems can become an issue, but they happen only occasionally because of the sheer strength of the state. In China, agency problems are the exception rather than the norm. Problems of gangsterism and gangsters' collusive relations with local governments have increased in severity over the past two decades, however, which prompted President Xi Jinping to launch the “Sweeping Black” campaign in 2013 to root out corrupt officials.

As for the grassroots brokers, particularly community volunteers, they too have their own agency. The case studies in chapter 6 illustrate the conditions under which their brokerage breaks down and subsequently causes resistance and backlash. When grassroots brokers no longer buy into government policies (e.g., such as when a demolition project does not serve the community's interests), and when trust breaks down between the brokers and their communities (such as when the brokers have selfishly leveraged their power to benefit their own family and friends), citizens will challenge their authority and refuse to comply.

In recent articles in *Foreign Policy* and the *Economist*, I documented the government's mobilization of grassroots brokers, including neighborhood committees and community volunteers—like in the book's cases of housing demolition—to implement the stringent “zero-Covid” policy.¹ This whole-of-society approach in battling the Covid-19 virus for three years provides ample illustration of the prowess of “everyday state power”—a policy outcome that no country in the world was able to duplicate. However, when

¹ Lynette H. Ong, “China's Massive Protests Are the End of a Once-Trusted Governance Model,” *Foreign Policy*, November 28, 2022 \approx <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/28/china-protests-end-governance-model-mobilizing-masses>; and Lynette H. Ong, “The Chinese Government Exercises Control through Local Busybodies, Explains Lynette H. Ong,” *Economist*, December 2, 2022 \approx <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2022/12/01/the-chinese-government-exercises-control-through-local-busybodies-explains-lynette-h-ong>.

zero-Covid became increasingly unreasonable and even preposterous, infringing on people's capacity to lead normal lives, people began to resist, prompting local authorities to hire nonstate muscle power in the form of untrained unemployed individuals and "security guards," alongside the deployment of trusted brokers and community workers. The hired muscle started using violence against community members under lockdown, some of which was captured and circulated on social media. As trust between the society and the grassroots implementers became strained, some urban residents refused to bow to the zero-Covid policies, and protests broke out across major cities (precipitated by the apartment fire in Urumqi that caused unnecessary deaths among those under lockdown).

Citing Michael Lipsky, Mittelstaedt points out, quite rightly, that the actions of grassroots brokers range from coercion to public-service provision, and that the state is not merely "outsourcing repression" when it mobilizes community workers and volunteers to persuade the citizenry to comply with its policies. I agree. Though the book has framed the state's function of mobilizing the masses as one of repression, as the administration of the ambitious zero-Covid in scale and scope has illustrated, "outsourcing repression" can also be perceived as "outsourcing governance" to the effect of mobilizing society to govern itself.

Li asks why economic brokers are necessarily framed as a tool of repression rather than as part of a tactical strategy by citizens to bargain for more compensation. She also suggests the incorporation of more contextual variables in evaluating the effectiveness of "outsourcing repression," such as types of communities, forms of resistance, and different social groups with diverse resource endowments. It suffices to say that these are all fantastic suggestions that could be well-tackled in a book about citizen resistance, a body of knowledge to which she and Elfstrom have expertly contributed. But a book that deals with state repression has limited space for such exploration. That said, I have contrasted the degree of citizen resistance across geographical space—from metropolitan centers, urban peripheries, and rural areas—and concluded that those in the metropolitan centers and their fringes have considerably more capacity to organize resistance compared to rural peasants.

On the "silent" treatment of the party that Mittelstaedt raises, I intentionally used the state (instead of the party) as a unit of analysis in the book, primarily for the purpose of cross-country comparison. If I had focused on the Chinese Communist Party and its apparatus, it would have been more challenging to extend the analysis both to countries that

have been governed by various political parties and to those that have democratized over time. Lastly, the mobilization of nonstate actors is a persistent feature of the party's strategy, but these actors are not embedded in its regulatory framework—hence “outsourcing repression.” 