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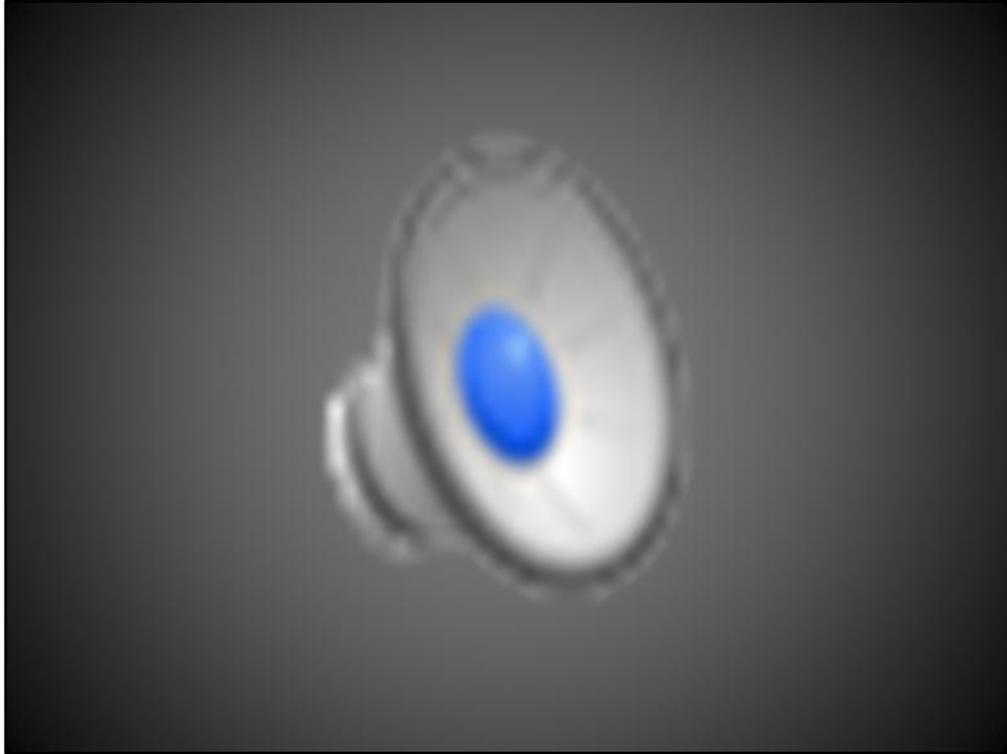
In the same neighborhood in Beijing, you'll see this – (note the juxtaposition of the call for innovation, and the soldiers marching in lockstep – it works as a metaphor for the government's desire



And this...



This – a little weird, having a sculpture of guys leveling guns while upscale shoppers stroll by...and sometimes this (play video)



And, interestingly, once in awhile, something like this...



And there are plenty of migrants, like this. More than half of China's population now lives in cities, and incomes have been rising as a result, both in cities and in the countryside –as migrants send home some of their earnings. At the same time, more than 40 percent of Beijing's 22 million people are migrants like this guy, who came from villages and small towns, and do the jobs middle-class urban dwellers don't want to do, yet don't have full urban rights, like access to health care and education for their kids in the place where they live.

This Beijing neighborhood, Sanlitun (SAAN-lee-twun), is a microcosm of how China is changing, and has changed, and where there's pressure for more change. In many countries, at this stage of development, civil society grows and becomes engaged in issues that matter to citizens. China has been no exception – although, under the government's watchful eye, growth has been uneven.



While hundreds of millions of Chinese have moved to cities and into the middle class, almost half the Chinese population still lives in the countryside, where – while life can still be a struggle...



...where roads can be bad and water scarce...



And where the best hope kids have is to do well in school so they can move to the city and have a better life. Over the past decade or so, a growing number of young urban Chinese have chosen to volunteer in rural schools or to otherwise help the rural poor...

What is Civil Society?

...and (why) does it matter in modern China?

Civil Society can be...

- A community of citizens linked by common interests and collective action (Oxford English Dictionary)
- Public space beyond the government, the family and the market, in which people can debate and take action.
- A sense of shared responsibility and stewardship, for a way of life people value.

Civil Society Can Include...

- Debate, sharing of information and ideas, and discussing shared concerns, in person, in the news media, or on the internet and social media.
- Forming non-government organizations or working individually to advocate for a cause, or provide assistance to those who need it.
- Working in professional groups – like China's Weiquan (civil rights) lawyers – to make sure laws are fairly upheld.
- Protests and citizen movements, calling for policy changes or reforms.

But the Chinese government has long had a complicated relationship with those it rules, and varying degrees of unease in letting ideas circulate that challenge those in power, much less letting groups form that might have the wherewithal to pressure political leaders.



Confucius himself at first had a hard time getting the ear of the emperor. Back in about 500 BC, he called for benevolent and ethical rule, but also for everyone in society to know their place, to play their role, and to respect the hierarchy. There wasn't much room in this vision for civil society, offering not just vertical connections but horizontal ones.



Back when these guys were carved, about 2,000 years ago – the emperor certainly didn't suffer criticism gladly. Emperor Qin Shi Huang Di ordered books burned, and was said to have buried alive hundreds of intellectuals who offered alternative views to his own.



The same emperor built the first version of the Great Wall – a line of defense, a way of keeping out challenges. His subjects built this at his command. They were subjects, not citizens, and their rights to organize independently, to serve as a check on abuse of power – didn't really exist. Trying to do any of that, in those days, could get you killed. For that matter, so could serving the emperor, since battles to expand territory were as common here as they were elsewhere in the world. A couple thousand years passed, with emperors both benevolent and oppressive, until the last dynasty ended in 1912.



...and Chinese began to test what it meant to be citizens, not subjects. In journalism, in film, in universities, and on the street – people began to express ideas and desires separate from those in power. This culminated in the May 4th Movement – which began as a protest by students at the terms of the Versailles Treaty ending World War I, because it gave Japan Chinese territory. But the Movement became much bigger than that. Students called for a Chinese Enlightenment – for democracy, science, and open-minded critical thinking. A young man who was at the time working as a newspaper clipper in the Peking University library later called this an inspiration that gave rise to the Communist Party.



And he should know. He brought it to power. On the path to power, he promised the poor and disenfranchised that he would champion them, and give them a better life, that all would be equal under Communism. And some of that did come to pass. Basic health care helped people live longer. Poor farmers and uneducated workers found themselves with considerably more of a voice than they'd had, relative to educated urban elites. With the latter, Mao purged his critics multiple times, often violently. In 1958, he compared himself to old Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi. He said in a speech to Party cadres: "He buried 460 scholars alive. We have buried 46,000 scholars alive." He seemed to consider this a good thing.



The leader who followed Mao, Deng Xiaoping, had other thoughts. He'd helped Mao carry out the anti-intellectual purge in the 1950s, silencing critics. But he'd also been purged by Mao three times. And he wanted to take the country in a different direction. He proclaimed a new era of "reform and opening up." The Party's control slowly started to ease, and while many restrictions remained in place, people began to test the new boundaries. The Democracy Wall went up in 1979 – and in case anyone was wondering if there were still limits, some prominent voices calling for democracy were silenced. Wei Jingsheng got a 15-year prison sentence. Still, in 1987, village elections started. Deng Xiaoping said national elections might come in 50 years.

Regulating Civil Society: 1984

“Every social organization shall be associated with a government line agency in its professional field, and shall be reviewed and supervised by the State Commission for the Restructuring of the Economic System.”

1984, Document # 25, issued by the Communist Party Central Committee & the State Council

The idea was to transfer at least some of the functions the government, and the Communist Party, had done under Mao's rule to the private sector – but in a way in which the government could retain some control and oversight. Still, the government began to step back. Chinese increasingly tested the limits of their new range of freedoms.



Talk about the impact of the Tiananmen protests, and crackdown, as a turning point in the evolution of civil society.

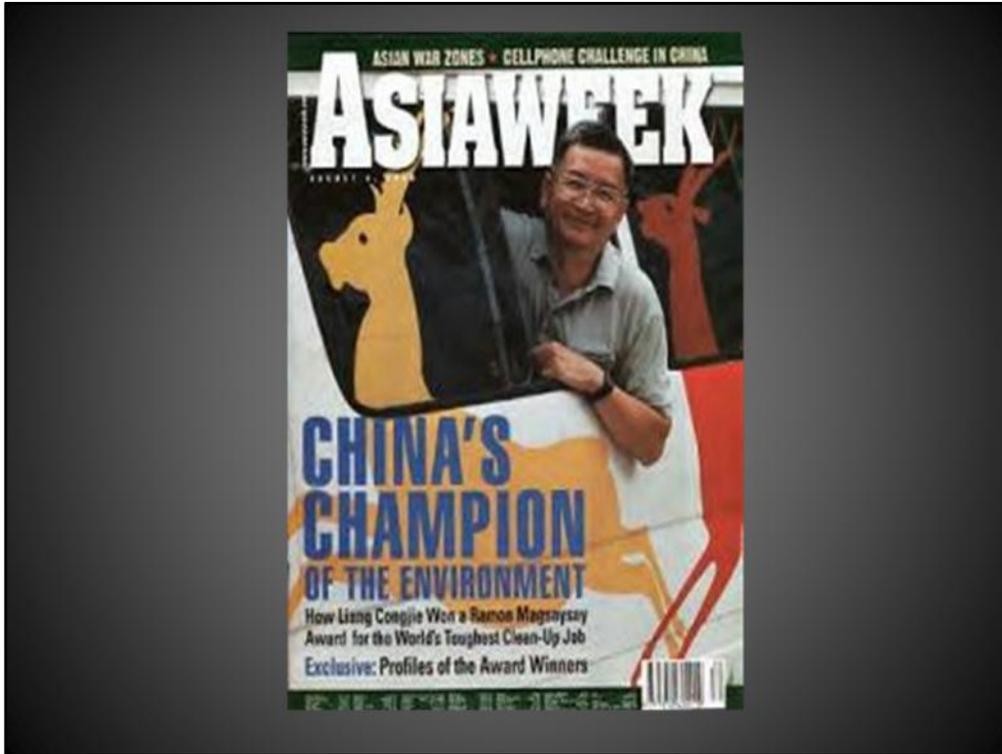


In the aftermath of the Tiananmen protests, China's leaders enacted a new Patriotic Education curriculum, aimed at instilling a sense of shared indignation at what is called the century of humiliation at the hands of foreign powers, and shared purpose in helping make China a great global power again. If the Tiananmen protests were sparked in part by too much individualism, independent thought and perhaps even admiration of Western democracy, Patriotic Education was meant to counterbalance that. So did the mandatory military training that Chinese students get upon entering university.

Regulating Civil Society: 1990s

China begins to embrace the internet. Official at 1996 National People's Congress says it will bring the country more benefits than harm.

- Chinese state-run media journalists, spurred by market reforms, start to experiment with investigative reporting.
- Foreign foundations and NGOs do rule of law training for Chinese officials, lawyers and judges.



And this guy, Liang Congjie, started China's first environmental NGO in 1994. Now, there are an estimated 500,000 NGOs and social organizations in China – and the government welcomes many of them – such as those that provide social services or community centers for the elderly and disabled.

1998: “Regulations on the Registration and Management of Social Organizations”

- Article 1: “These regulations protect citizens’ freedom of association (and) the lawful rights and interests of social organizations.”
- Article 2: “Social organizations (are) non-profit organizations voluntarily created by Chinese citizens to achieve the collective desires of members.”

The first half of 1998 seemed particularly relaxed. Some even called it a “Beijing Spring.” This happened to fall between President Jiang Zemin’s visit to the United States in late 1997, and President Clinton’s extended state visit to China in June 1998. After that, there was a new wave of arrest of pro-democracy activists and other vocal critics of Party policies. This dynamic – some progress toward expanding space for civil society, then either a tap or slam on the brakes, persisted over the next dozen years of rapid economic growth.



Citizens became increasingly aware of the cost to their health and quality of life from decades of putting economic growth first. This started with the US embassy in Beijing putting its own pollution monitoring equipment on the roof, and then tweeting about it hourly. The Chinese government at first protested, then started issuing more accurate readings itself. Later – just this year -- Under the Dome, a documentary made by a Chinese television journalist, went viral on the Chinese internet in February 2015, with 300,000 views within a week of being posted. Then the authorities ordered it taken down.



Chinese journalists grew bolder, more investigative, and more effective...taking advantage of a loosening of restrictions before the Olympics. At the same time, ever more Chinese were online, reading, exposing official misconduct, complaining, and exchanging ideas. And for a time, the government appeared to evolve with this. For the decade of the Hu Jintao administration (2002-2012), the government paid attention to public sentiment online, and often responded to citizen complaints. Some journalists and other vocal critics were still arrested, but a new space for civil society was opening up.



So when the Sichuan earthquake hit in May 2008, killing some 88,000 people...



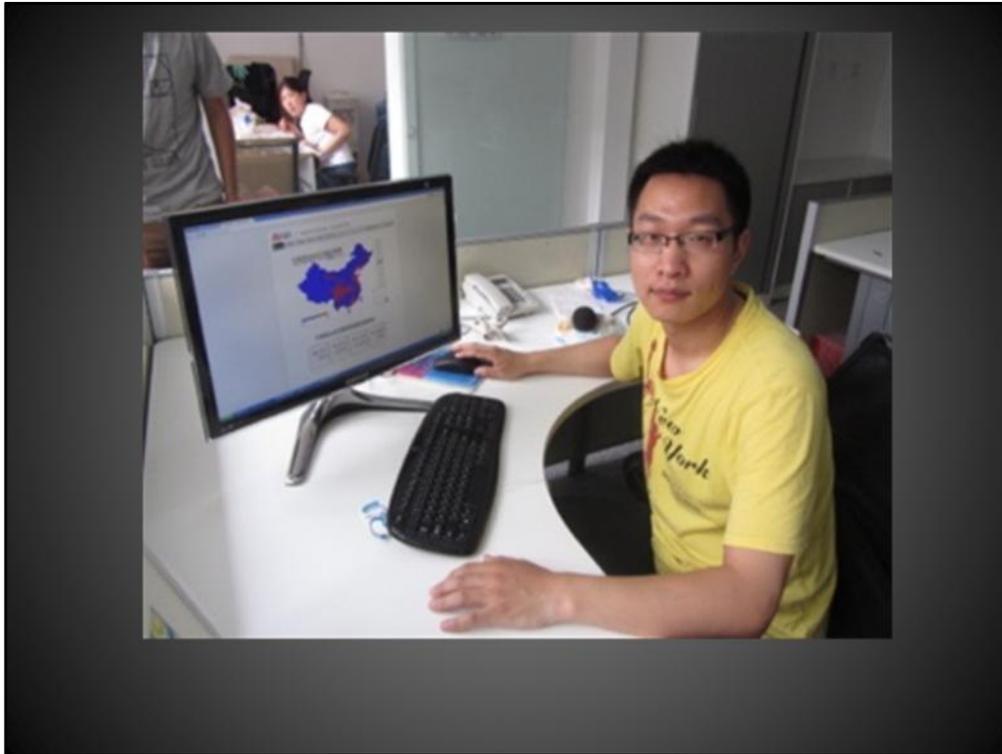
...not only did the government and People's Liberation Army relief workers go to the scene...



So did many thousand volunteers – private individuals who just wanted to help. While volunteerism and philanthropy had already slowly been on the rise in the years previous, this gave such impulses a boost. Growing numbers of young Chinese, in particular, continued to look for ways to make a difference.



For instance, Wu Heng, as a university student in Shanghai, started a food safety website, collecting information and blowing the whistle on food companies vendors and restaurants who were selling contaminated, fake or otherwise unsafe food.





Many other young Chinese were volunteers for the Olympics,



It's ironic that Ai Weiwei both designed the iconic Bird's Nest Stadium, then repudiated the Olympics and the human cost of putting it on. He also gathered the names and contact details of parents who had lost children in schools that collapsed in the Sichuan earthquake, because of shoddy construction. His activism on that issue led to him being beaten up by police when he was visiting Sichuan in 2009, suffering a head injury that required surgery. Ai Weiwei was also constantly online, sending out photos, thoughts, comments and criticisms. The advent of Weibo – something like Twitter – in 2009 allowed millions more Chinese to do the same. There was a dark side – vigilante-like ganging up on people, even sharing their personal information and then stalking them at their homes.

But far more often, Weibo allowed people to share ideas, draw attention to abuses of power, and cultivate a sense of humor, and satire, and coded language, that usually managed to stay a step ahead of the censors.



One internet meme was “Grass Mud Horse” – a homonym, in Chinese, for a term unrepeatable in polite company, which Chinese netizens – a term they called themselves – used in defiance against what many considered the absurdity of censorship. These Grass Mud Horses made it all the way to Hong Kong...



...where civil society, and peaceful protests, have been part of the way of life for decades. This one, in 2012, was against the idea that Hong Kong children would be subjected to the same sort of patriotic education that Mainland Chinese students were getting. Hong Kong youth increasingly had a separate sense of identity from the Mainland – one based in the fact that Hong Kong has more freedoms and space for civil society.



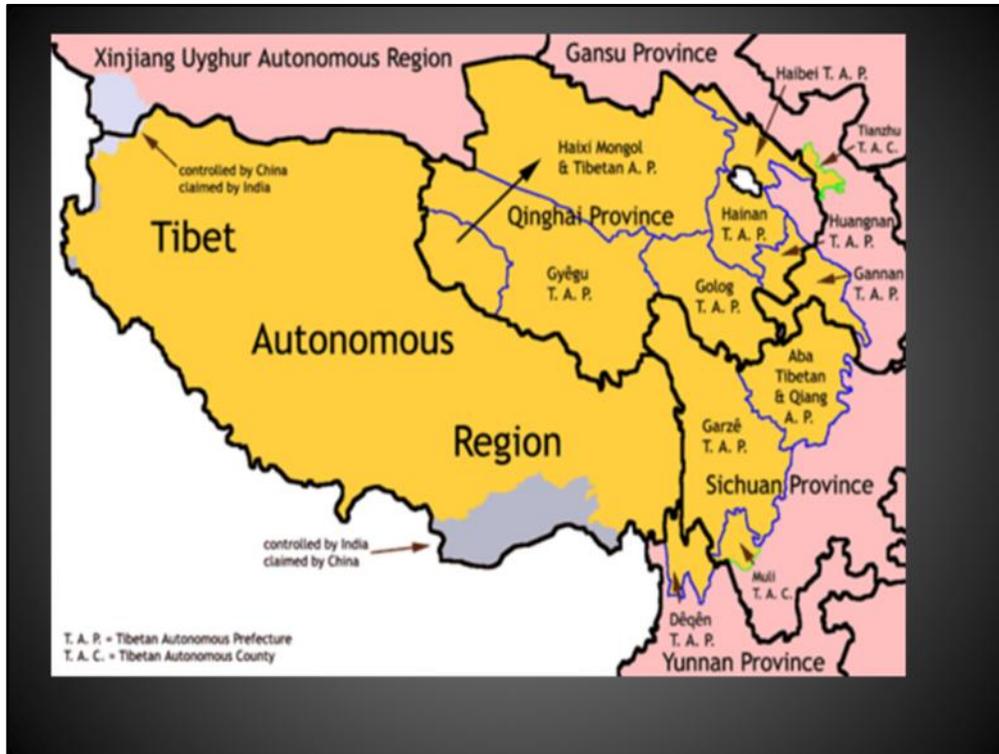
For instance, you wouldn't find this on a Mainland Chinese street – protesters allowed to call for the release of pro-democracy activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo. He is serving an 11-year prison sentence, issued in 2009, for coauthoring “Charter '08” – a petition calling for multi-party democracy, rule of law, and respect for civil rights in China.



And then came the high-speed train crash in the summer of 2011. The hi-speed train was supposed to be a symbol of China's rapid economic growth, and ascent to becoming one of the world's biggest and most influential economies. But the project was rife with corruption, and the urge to speed it along led to cutting corners, which in turn contributed to a crash that killed 40 people. The outcry online was immense. The Minister for Railways was fired, expelled from the Party and, eventually received a death sentence with reprieve, for corruption. From one angle, this would appear to be the government being responsive to an engaged public. And to an extent it was. But the government was also uncomfortable with how much power netizens were showing they had.



The particular government that was in power at the time was the second term under President and Party Chief Hu Jintao, but it had a harder edge, when dealing with dissent. Part of that was personality-driven – new members of the administration, including current president Xi Jinping, then as vice-president, who saw preservation of ‘national stability’ and unchallenged Communist Party rule to be a critical task.

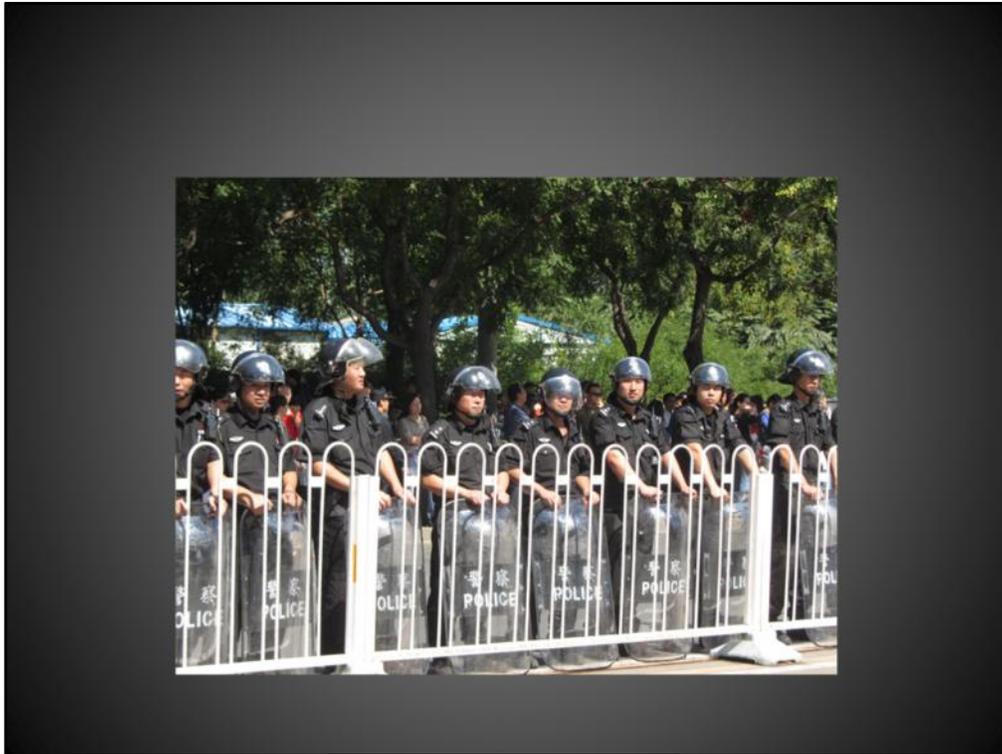


Concern for stability had escalated among China's leaders when rioting in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa in March 2008 became a more widespread uprising among Tibetan communities in Western China. Military police presence sharply increased, and stayed high. The same happened when riots broke out in the Xinjiang capital the next year. In both of these areas, ethnic minorities that had, before Communist Party rule, formed the vast majority of the population in their region, were upset about the deliberate policy of moving Han Chinese in to "settle" the area, dilute the population and take the best jobs.

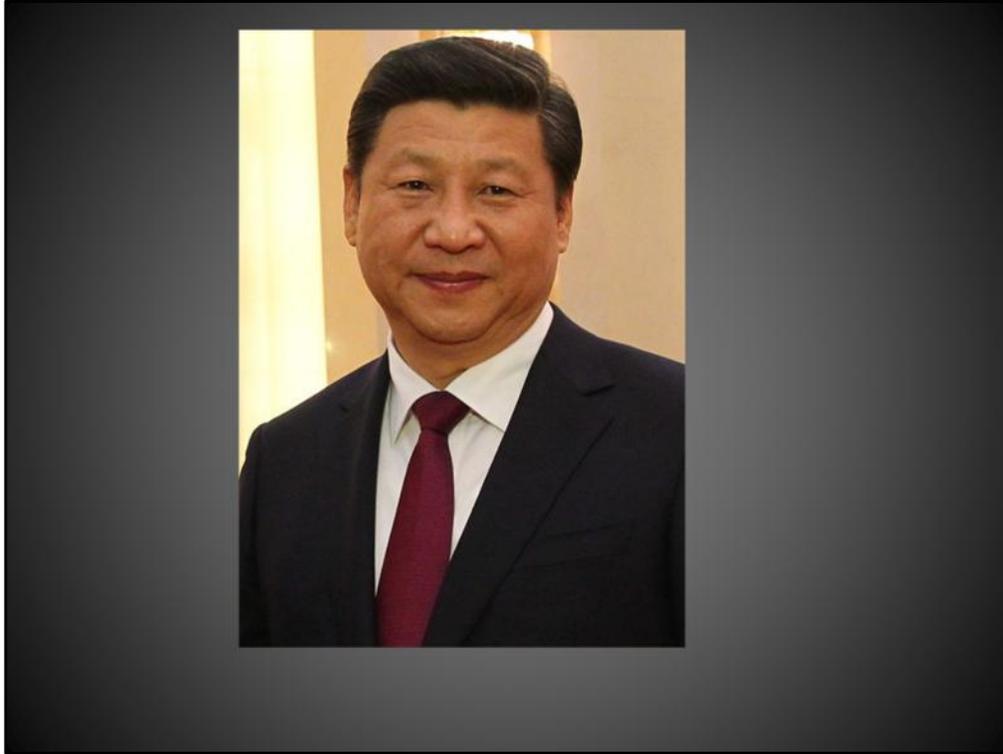




Foreign NGOs have also played a role in setting an example and encouraging the growth of Chinese home-grown activism. But – the government has long been suspicious of foreign NGO, and Chinese NGOs that receive foreign funding. After the “Color Revolutions” that brought down Communist governments in former Soviet Republics, in which US-funded environmental NGOs played a leading role, the Chinese government in 2005 ordered audits of Chinese NGOs that received foreign – and especially American – funding. And now, in 2015, new proposed foreign NGO laws would make such activities much less likely, since foreign NGOs and social organizations (loosely defined) would have to be registered under a government entity, and would need to seek permission from police for all activities.



The number of public protests in China has grown sharply over the past two decades of rapid economic growth. Police have learned to avoid excessive use of force in most cases. Police used to release figures each year, but stopped as the numbers kept rising steeply. The last estimate, in 2010, put the number of demonstrations over the previous year at 160,000, many of them related to land rights and pollution. Lawyers and NGOs supporting such people called for a more independent and transparent legal system, and a freer news media, to let social problems be aired, addressed and settled.



Xi Jinping, as president, has taken a different approach. He questions the very premise that civil society plays a constructive role. He prefers a top-down approach to tackling problems, and has shown little patience for criticism, or alternative views.

Regulating (Civil) Society: 2013

- Document No. 9....came out in summer 2013 from the top leadership.
- Warned of 'Western' ideas, called "perils" to the Party's continued rule, including:
 - Democracy
 - Rule of Law
 - Media independence
 - Civil Society
- "Constitutionalism" (The idea that no one, including government and Party leaders, is above the law).



A group of Chinese lawyers over the past decade have tried to help such people. They call themselves the Weiquan Movement – Public Interest lawyers, and they would take on cases of the dispossessed, of people calling foul on abuses of power. This man, Teng Biao, is one of them. Their ‘radical’ idea was to operate within China’s written constitution. Teng Biao is one of many who,, over the past five years, have been abducted, threatened and tortured by China’s public security apparatus. In July 2015, more than 190 of these lawyers and members of their staff were detained or questioned.



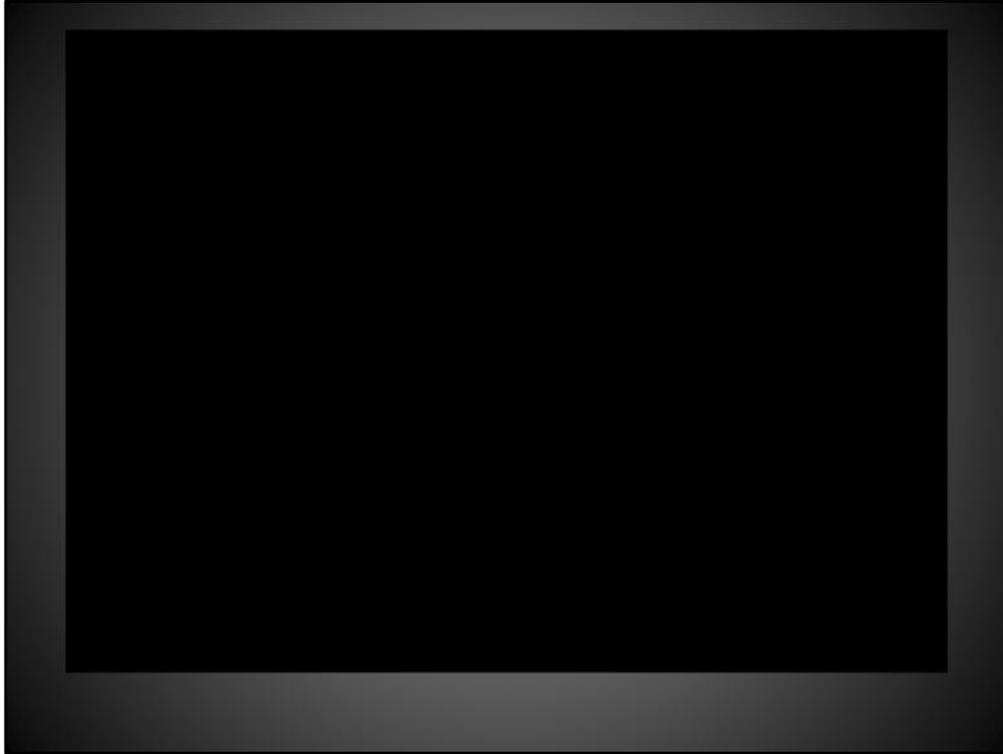
In Hong Kong, protesters called for the release of one of the civil rights lawyers detained earlier, Xu Zhiyong. China's leaders these days see such protests less as a dialogue, an airing of citizens' views to which they should respond, and more as an affront and a challenge that needs to be silenced.



Even these feminists, demonstrating here to draw attention to domestic violence, were detained in March 2015 for “disturbing public order” and “picking quarrels.” They’d occupied a men’s room, saying there needed to be more public toilets for women.



What the Party does condone these days is demonstrations of nationalism. This was a demonstration outside the Japanese embassy in September 2012, protesting Japan's claim of sovereignty over a contested island chain, which China also claims but which Japan has long controlled. The protest itself was controlled. A few hundred people with matching signs were allowed to march up and down in front of the embassy, while thousands of spectators gathered, but weren't allowed to join. Motorized carts brought plastic bottles of water for the demonstrators to throw at the embassy. Police cleared the way for the demonstrators, and tried to stop journalists from talking to anyone other than the demonstrators. A single message was supposed to go out from this protest – the Chinese people speaking as one, supporting the Chinese Dream of China rising in the world, and claiming what it sees as its own. Many Chinese are proud of their country, and support Xi Jinping's crackdown on corruption. Many don't mind the curtailing of nascent civil rights. But China contains many people, with many different ideas – and in the modern era, they've increasingly started moving together around shared interests and concerns, while also moving independently.



A metaphor for this is a scene found at dusk in many a public park in China. This gained popularity as the era of Reform & Opening Up gained steam, and people could shake off the conformity of the Mao years. Some, in this park in Chengdu, take it a step further. They roll out a red carpet, and let anyone who wants to express themselves strut their stuff. The government recently said that all this public dancing needs to be controlled and regulated. It came up with 12 “model dance routines” – which the state-run news media said would promote “healthy, watchable, scientific and wide-ranging” dancing. But that’s not going to make the desire for self-expression, or connection with others, go away – not on the dance floor, and not in China’s evolving civil society.